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William R. Levin

*Centre College, Danville Kentucky, [william.levin@centre.edu](mailto:william.levin@centre.edu)*

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# The Date of the *Allegory of Mercy* at the Misericordia in Florence...Again: Some Clarifications Regarding the Historical Setting

*William R. Levin*



**N**ot long ago, I came upon an article offering several arguments, grounded in close visual inspection, solid research, and historical context, for challenging an aspect of previous scholarship on a late-medieval artwork of

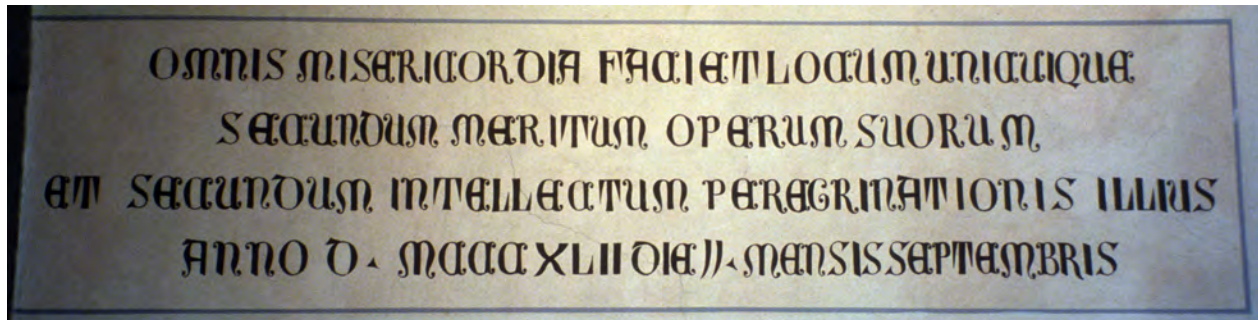
capital importance—namely, its date of execution. Initially, while those arguments might have seemed compelling, upon deeper reflection, they emerge as insufficiently persuasive to alter prevailing opinion. This rebuttal to that article endeavors to set the record straight

**Figure 1.** Former Headquarters of the Confraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia (now the Museo del Bigallo), Florence, 13th-18th centuries. Photo: William R. Levin.





**Figure 2.** Circle of Bernardo Daddi (ca. 1290-1348), *Allegory of Mercy*, fresco, Museo del Bigallo (former headquarters of the Confraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia, Sala dell'Udienza), Florence, 1342. Photo: Museo del Bigallo / HIP / Art Resource, NY.



regarding the frescoed *Allegory of Mercy*, painted by an artist in the circle of Bernardo Daddi, a leading fourteenth-century Florentine master who probably learned his trade from the great Giotto. A second purpose of this study is to offer a template of sorts—guidelines—for why, how, and in what manner one might respond to scholarship that poses new or revised interpretations for works of art that at first appear credible but ultimately prove unconvincing.

### The Disputed Date in Earlier Literature

The *Allegory of Mercy*, painstakingly restored from 2012 to 2014, adorns one wall of a ground-floor chamber inside what is now the Museo del Bigallo in Florence, but which originally was the headquarters of the Compagnia di Santa Maria della Misericordia—the Company, or Confraternity, of Saint Mary of Mercy (figs. 1 and 2).<sup>1</sup> Probably founded during the thirteenth century, the Misericordia was a major provider of charitable assistance to individuals affiliated with it and to others in need, a role that continues today in the ambulance service it offers, and in its staffing of medical clinics dispersed throughout the city. Given the building’s central location—across the street from the renowned

baptistry of Florence and diagonally opposite the city’s cathedral and bell tower—the *Allegory* was a fully public work of art until 1777, when, alongside other alterations, a new façade sealed off the edifice’s previously open entryway. Continuously visible from the street up until this point, the fresco thus reminded and instructed not only confraternity members gathered within, but also passers-by outside, about the importance of charity toward others in need, of performing the works of mercy enunciated by Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46, as essential to earning one’s place in Heaven through God’s grace.

That spiritually reciprocal arrangement informs the *Allegory*, dominated by a monumental figure labeled “Misericordia Dom[ini]” on her miter, personifying the Lord’s Mercy. Apposite biblical passages inscribed in Latin clarify that message, some of them paired with miniature representations of the works of mercy occupying eight of the roundels that cascade down the front of her mantle. She receives the homage of variously attired male and female supplicants praying at her sides, embodying Florentines from all sectors of society seeking and benefiting from divine favor, among whom are included perhaps persons affiliated with the Misericordia

**Figure 3.** Circle of Bernardo Daddi (ca. 1290-1348), Inscription below *Allegory of Mercy*, fresco, Museo del Bigallo (former headquarters of the Confraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia, Sala dell’Udienza), Florence, 1342. Photo: William R. Levin.

Confraternity who act on their neighbors’ behalf. The protagonist of the fresco hovers protectively over a compressed view of Florence with recognizable landmarks of the late-medieval metropolis. It is one of the earliest surviving semi-realistic cityscapes in Western art. Written on its encircling wall are the words “Civitas Florenti[a]e”—the Commonwealth, or Citizenry, of Florence. In this way, the fresco also expresses another motive for philanthropic action, clearly related to the first but less personal and more fully grounded in the temporal world: to ensure the well-being and prosperity of the entire community.

I have discussed at length the *Allegory of Mercy* and its societal ramifications in several studies beginning in 1983, joined subsequently by other scholars whose writings have enhanced our understanding of the fresco.<sup>2</sup> One of the issues addressed has been the matter of its date.<sup>3</sup> Below the cityscape is a repainted four-line Latin inscription with another biblical verse that, utilizing Roman numerals, concludes with the date 2 September 1342, presumably marking the





**Figure 4, above.** Circle of Bernardo Daddi (ca. 1290-1348), *Allegory of Mercy* (detail: cityscape), fresco, Museo del Bigallo (former headquarters of the Confraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia, Sala dell'Udienza), Florence, 1342. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.



**Figure 5, left.** Circle of Bernardo Daddi (ca. 1290-1348), *Allegory of Mercy* (detail: cityscape, featuring Palazzo Vecchio and fortification-wall portal), fresco, Museo del Bigallo (former headquarters of the Confraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia, Sala dell'Udienza), Florence, 1342. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

fresco's year of execution (fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> Yet this date, first cited by Stefano Rosselli in his 1657 register of Florentine tombs and burial markers, anticipates by a decade that of a contradictory report appearing in Ferdinando Leopoldo Del Migliore's 1684 documentary history of Florentine buildings, recording the date as 1352. In 1779, two years after the above-mentioned restructuring project, historian Placido Landini published the fresco's four-line inscription (with minor errors), and he followed Del Migliore, restating the 1352 date. Subsequently, historians from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, beginning with the meticulous Luigi Passerini in 1853, saw and noted the year written on the wall as 1342 yet agreed with Landini's reading—i.e., 1352—speculating that the earlier date resulted from an inaccurate, albeit unrecorded, restoration of the inscription. Certain architectural historians, ignoring implications to the contrary of a seventeenth-century summary of a lost Misericordia document published early in the twentieth century, likewise concurred.<sup>5</sup>

In 1969, however, architectural historian Howard Saalman brought that document to bear in a more discerning manner, affirming that 1342 could have been the year that the *Allegory of Mercy* was painted. Saalman's interpretation of the text reinforced his previous observations regarding the appearance of buildings in the fresco's urban panorama whose construction histories were certain.<sup>6</sup> Notably, the incomplete cathedral façade and bell tower allowed him to determine that the cityscape shows Florence as it was in the early 1340s (fig. 4).

Agreeing with Saalman's analysis, in 1977, art historian Hanna Kiel's comments on the *Allegory* further supported 1342 as the correct date. She cited earlier research indicating that the long, full robes worn by supplicants flanking the central figure in the painting were popular in Florence prior to the regime, lasting from August 1342 to August 1343, of a certain Walter of Brienne and whose retainers, dependents of the House of Anjou with its close ties to the French monarchy, introduced garments shorter and tighter in cut. Only then—immediately, it seems—did this new style, not in evidence in the painting, begin to supplant the earlier fashion among Florentines.<sup>7</sup> Kiel also reproduced an engraving of the *Allegory* from 1762 that includes the inscription below it, an image that Landini may have consulted before publishing his transcription. Unlike Landini's 1779 rendition of the text, the engraving presents the date in accord with the actual inscription, as 1342. More recent authors have endorsed the opinion of Saalman and Kiel, agreeing on 1342 as the year of execution for the fresco.<sup>8</sup>

### Reconsidering the *Allegory's* Date: Point and Counterpoint

That agreement held until the publication in 2015 of the article alluded to at the beginning of this essay, in which attentive researcher Vittoria Camelliti resurrected the 1352 date for the painting, providing four sensibly posed but eminently debatable arguments.<sup>9</sup> Focusing mostly on well-chosen details within the *Allegory of Mercy*, her

essay is imbued with reason and logic throughout, but the facts deployed in every case call for additional analysis, each leading to an alternative conclusion. It is convenient, here, to begin with her third point, relating to clothing styles of the era.<sup>10</sup> Chronicler Giovanni Villani (ca. 1276-1348) is the textual source of information on the change in style noted by Kiel, particularly among young Florentines, in the wake of the controversial yearlong, and ultimately despised, administration of Walter of Brienne (ca. 1304-1356). Raised at the court of the House of Anjou in its capital at Naples and married into the Angevin royal family, Brienne was a French nobleman who claimed Duke of Athens as his title for dynastic reasons pertaining to his own family. He came to Florence by invitation in 1342 to arrest the chaos wracking Tuscan state finances in that era, largely the result of the government's military adventurism, subsidies furnished to its alliance partners, and lax policies on taxation and collection of fines.

Camelliti averred that the modest, loose-fitting robes seen in the *Allegory of Mercy*, traditional in style and favored by Villani, suit the fresco's solemnly religious and moralizing content (fig. 2). Indeed, while acknowledging that a newer, more opulent style, including ostentatious elements decried by Villani, emerged with regularity in Florentine art only in the mid-1350s, Camelliti emphasized that when such attire occasionally did appear earlier, during the 1340s and early 1350s, it seemingly possessed negative connotations that in the *Allegory* would have been inappropriate. As

for the few tentatively innovative clothing details and ornate decorative patterns that do occur in the fresco, none of them especially conspicuous, she noted their presence in Tuscan art already in the second half of the 1330s, in nearby Siena and Poppi, and then in Pisa. Thus, whereas her remarks concerning dress may be sound in themselves, none of them precludes the possibility of dating the fresco prior to 1352.

A second argument by Camelliti favoring 1352 as the date for the *Allegory of Mercy* addressed a detail within the cityscape: the bell suspended inside the opening atop the tower of Palazzo Vecchio, the principal seat of the Florentine government designed in 1299 by Arnolfo di Cambio (figs. 4 and 5).<sup>11</sup> Villani and, later in the century, the chronicler Marchionne di Coppo Stefani (1336-1385), wrote that the actual bell was hoisted into place in December 1344, ostensibly bolstering Camelliti's dating. Previously, it had hung below, among the crenellations enclosing the rooftop terrace of the building where, upon its relocation, a second bell intended as a municipal fire alarm, transferred from the Castello di Vernia in the countryside, quickly replaced it. A covering of some sort shielded both bells in their turn, erected or restored in 1332 according to a contemporary source referred to by Camelliti, and indeed, an open, domical canopy left of center at terrace-level protecting the second (alarm) bell is visible, now barely so, in the *Allegory*. Admittedly, the fresco has suffered here, yet Camelliti was oddly silent regarding this canopy and, it seems, the two people standing before it.





**Figure 6, left.** Circle of Andrea Orcagna (ca. 1308-1368), *Expulsion of the Duke of Athens*, fresco, Palazzo Vecchio (from the Stinche Prison), Florence, ca. 1345. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

**Figure 7, below.** Circle of Andrea Orcagna (ca. 1308-1368), *Expulsion of the Duke of Athens* (detail: Palazzo Vecchio and drapery), fresco, Palazzo Vecchio (from the Stinche Prison), Florence, ca. 1345. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.



Certainly, construction of Palazzo Vecchio's tower projected by Arnolfo di Cambio proceeded with the idea of accommodating a bell at its summit. Camelliti cited documents of 1304 and 1318 establishing that the first bell formerly had been atop the older "Torre della Vacca," the Foraboschi family tower whose substructure Arnolfo incorporated into his loftier construction. Possibly, Camelliti observed, extrapolating from another passage in Villani's chronicle, that bell was lowered to the terrace in 1322 to allow Arnolfo's design to advance. There it remained until December 1344, when Arnolfo's tower for Palazzo Vecchio was finished and the bell could return to the elevated position that it had once occupied, though now at a height even farther off the ground. Camelliti's facts are correct yet lend themselves to a different interpretation. With a bell atop the tower of Palazzo Vecchio a foregone conclusion, the bell pictured there in the *Allegory of Mercy* was likely included at the time of the fresco's execution—presumably, that is, in

1342—in anticipation of the actual bell’s relocation to the tower in late 1344. Alternatively, that detail may be an addition painted *a secco* after completion of the fresco in 1342 once the first bell and, likewise, the second bell beneath the canopy at terrace-level, were in place two years and three months later.<sup>12</sup>

Camelliti’s claim concerning the bell in the tower and its implications for the date of the Misericordia fresco went further, introducing into her discussion a well-known fragmentary painting emanating from the circle of Andrea Orcagna, a younger contemporary of Bernardo Daddi. Though silent regarding the domical canopy in the *Allegory*, in the case of the Orcagnesque *Expulsion of the Duke of Athens*, she posited that the wooden hut with a broad sloping roof rising above the terrace-level battlements of Palazzo Vecchio represents the shelter mentioned in 1332 that, for perhaps more than two decades, ca. 1322-44, covered the first bell (figs. 6 and 7). Like the canopy in the *Allegory of Mercy*, this structure appears to the left of the axis of the building, as pictured in the *Expulsion*, its roof partially obscured by the outstretched left hand of the enthroned figure of Saint Anne. Having perceived no bell in the tower of the building, Camelliti dated this fresco, originally located in Florence’s infamous Stinche Prison, and now lodged in Palazzo Vecchio itself, to 1343-44—prior, that is, to December 1344.

Conceivably, her chronology may be correct, with the (unmentioned) canopy pictured in the Misericordia painting replacing the hut with pitched roof seen in the *Expulsion* in or soon after December 1344, when

the second bell was substituted for the first. Yet reversing that chronology, it is equally possible that, dating the *Allegory* instead to 1342, the *Expulsion*’s hut replaced the *Allegory*’s domical canopy, likewise in December 1344. Dating the *Expulsion* slightly later, to ca. 1345, as recently proposed by art historian George Bent, increases the plausibility of the latter interpretation, an explanation further enhanced by the fact that, disputing Camelliti’s assertion, there does appear to be, or to have been, something in the tower opening in the *Expulsion*.<sup>13</sup> Most likely, it is, or was, a bell, although this remains uncertain due to damage to the fresco in that spot.

In dating the *Allegory of Mercy* to 1352, Camelliti’s initial point began by calling attention to the four tiny heraldic shields on the fortification-wall portal of the cityscape that she correctly identified, if a bit too succinctly (figs. 4 and 5).<sup>14</sup> Left to right, they symbolize: the Florentine people by a red cross on a silver field; Florence itself guided by the Guelph Party as a red lily—the city’s famous *giglio*, though actually a flamboyantly blooming iris, *giaggiolo* in Italian—silhouetted against a silver ground; the Guelph-aligned Church and papacy as two silver keys crossed on a red field; and the long-ago-unified communities of Florence and Fiesole by red and silver fields divided vertically. While neglecting the Guelph political component in this listing, Camelliti did note the presence of the same four *scudi* on the drapery behind the enthroned Saint Anne in the *Expulsion of the Duke of Athens* (figs. 6 and 7). In the case of both works, she remarked

on the lack of a crest signifying the House of Anjou. This omission, she asserted, furnished proof that the *Allegory* must postdate the banishment from Florence of Walter of Brienne—metaphorically visualized in the *Expulsion*—in the summer of 1343 after a year of despotic rule, and consequently as evidence of an ostensible rupture with the city’s by-then traditional south-Italian ally in Angevin Naples, the sovereign polity that Brienne represented. Again, Camelliti’s discussion made no mention of that dynasty’s Guelph partisanship, whose other major players were the Church and Florence itself.

To validate her conclusion, however, the scholar cited the nine shields decorating a Florentine gateway pictured in one illumination of the celebrated Biadaiolo Manuscript, preserved in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, and generally dated by historians to the early 1330s, when the Florentine-Angevin alliance was indisputably intact (fig. 8). There, amid differing numbers of three of the four devices seen in the *Allegory of Mercy*, a trio of coats of arms identified with the House of Anjou also appears. Two of these display a single gold *fleur-de-lys* (i.e., a lily, simpler in profile than the Florentine *giglio*) on a blue field, symbolizing the Capetian royal house of France from which the House of Anjou—a cadet line—descended. The largest one bears several *fleurs-de-lys*, with a three-pronged red “rake” label (*rastrello* in Italian) added along its upper edge. This latter feature, specific to the Angevins, is what differentiates their heraldry from that of their “senior” relatives within the House of Capet. Yet Camelliti failed to





**Figure 8, left.** Anonymous miniaturist, *Food Distribution in Time of Famine*, Libro del Biadaiolo, fol. 58, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, ca. 1330-35. Height: 385 mm. (15.15 in.); width: 270 mm. (10.62 in.). Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

**Figure 9, below.** Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, western façade and bell tower, 1299-1344. Photo: William R. Levin.



explain the curious absence, in the miniature, of the fourth *scudo* found in the Misericordia fresco, the papal crest, denoting a principal—and truly the pivotal—member of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Guelph alliance in Italy, that is, the Church. Conceivably, simply the limited space available for such emblems may have determined which ones to introduce into any given situation, including the *Allegory*, alongside a certain lack of consistency in the choice and number of which insignia germane to that setting “should” be present. Or perhaps the Misericordia Company wished to pare the focus, stressing the relevance of the fresco—the principal visual expression of the group’s charitable mission—to Florence proper, the community that it served. Here again, too, it is possible that the four





shields in the *Allegory*, or any one of them, are additions or modifications made *a secco* sometime following completion of the fresco.<sup>35</sup>

More pointedly belying Camelliti's conclusion in this regard, the main (western) façade of the actual Palazzo Vecchio features a parade of twenty escutcheons within squares beneath the protruding arches, or machicolations, supporting the

aforementioned terrace, all painted in 1343 just after the fall of Brienne, and restored in 1792. Nine crests line up left to right, then repeat in the same order, and end with the opening pair appearing a third time (figs. 9 and 10). The first four emblems are the same, in slightly different sequence, as those in the *Allegory*'s cityscape. Three others within each succession of

**Figure 10.** Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, detail of upper western façade displaying coats of arms, 1343. Photo: William R. Levin.

the nine shields further proclaim Florence's Guelph sympathies while announcing its alliance with the House of Anjou. They are as follows: the sixth shows a red eagle clutching a green dragon on a silver ground, with a gold (originally red?) lily



above its beak; the eighth presents gold *fleurs-de-lys* scattered on a blue field, with a four-pronged red “rake” label across the top; and the ninth displays black (originally red?) and gold horizontal stripes, separated vertically from a blue field sprinkled with gold *fleurs-de-lys*. Specifically, the sixth and eighth blazons signal the Guelph partisanship and French lineage, respectively, of King Charles I of Naples (r. 1266-1285), the Count of Anjou and younger brother of the sainted King Louis IX of France who established Angevin rule in the south of Italy. The ninth represents King Robert the Wise (r. 1309-1343), Charles’s grandson, indicating his paternal French roots and the Hungarian origin of his mother.<sup>16</sup> Both Charles I and Robert temporarily held nominal positions of power in Florence. The gold-on-blue *fleur-de-lys* pattern with a four-pronged red “rake” label also fills the arches of Palazzo Vecchio above all twenty devices.

Clearly, Brienne’s ouster immediately preceding these decorations did not harm the Florentine-Angevin partnership any more than did the earlier unpopularity of both Charles and Robert—and then of Robert’s son Charles, Duke of Calabria, who likewise held office in the city—that eventually ended their own respective appointments to positions of authority in Florence.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, while alluding to certain political aspects of that bond, historian David Abulafia recounted in some detail its ongoing, far-reaching economic aspects. The Kingdom of Naples provided Florentine banker-merchants with much-needed wheat, barley, beans, oil, wine, livestock, and a



**Figure 11.** Jacopo di Cione (ca. 1325-ca. 1399), *Heraldic Schematization of the Corporate Culture of Florence*, fresco, Palace of the Guild of Judges and Notaries, Sala dell’Udienza, Florence, 1366-68. Photo: © Ghigo G. Roli / Art Resource, NY.

source of leather, conceding to them tax benefits, and allowing Florentines to dominate southern export markets for those products to other regions as well. The Angevin lords also granted their Florentine associates high administrative offices and land ownership. In return, Florentines tendered monetary loans to the House of Anjou to conduct its various military ventures and to fund certain cultural initiatives, finding in the south a sizeable market for their indispensable, lucrative industry in finished woolen cloth.<sup>18</sup>

Subsequently there were strains in the relationship, with responsibility falling on both parties. Yet several other works of art from the later fourteenth century utilizing heraldry confirm the steadiness and continuity of the Florentine-Angevin connection. In 1366-68, Jacopo di Cione, a younger

brother of Andrea Orcagna, painted a diagram of concentric circles symbolizing Florence’s corporate culture on the ceiling of the audience chamber in the guildhall of Judges and Notaries (*Arte dei Giudici e Notai*), one of the city’s seven major guilds (fig. 11).<sup>19</sup> Within the innermost circle, the eagle clutching a dragon and the Florentine lily reappear, carrying Angevin and Guelph connotations, complemented by the cross of the Florentine people and the bipartite shield of Florence and Fiesole. Some years later, this design resurfaced in a now-detached ceiling fresco originally at the





**Figure 12.** Jacopo di Cione (ca. 1325-ca. 1399), with Simone di Lapo and Niccholaus (Niccolò di Tommaso?), *Coronation of the Virgin* (*Zecca Coronation*), tempera and gold leaf on panel, Galleria dell'Accademia di Belle Arti, Florence, 1372-73. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

much-refurbished residence of the influential Silk Guild (*Arte della Seta*), or possibly at that of the Physicians and Pharmacists Guild (*Arte dei Medici e Speziali*), both also among Florence's seven major trade associations.<sup>20</sup> In the latter case, however, allusions to the alliance partners are more direct, with the added presence of the crossed keys of the Church and papacy at the very center, and with the surrounding blue ceiling strewn with gold *fleurs-de-lys*, here, ingeniously embellished by a multipronged red "rake" encircling the entire diagram at its outer edge to denote the House of Anjou. By extension, the Guelph Party takes its place here, too.

The Florentine Mint's *Coronation of the Virgin Altarpiece*, the so-called *Zecca Coronation*, completed in 1373 by the same Jacopo di Cione more than a year after its commission to and probable design by two other painters, offers a further example (fig. 12). Executed for the offices of one of the city's most important institutions, the base of this panel presents a series of nine escutcheons pertaining to the communal power structure, rather than the customary predella of saintly narrative scenes. Left to right, the five in the center include the Florentine Guelph red lily, the Angevin gold-on-blue *fleur-de-lys* pattern with a four-pronged red "rake" label, the crossed silver



keys of the Church and papacy, the amalgamated arms of the extended House of Anjou, and the Guelph red eagle clutching a green dragon.<sup>21</sup>

A final such commission of the fourteenth century signaled the stability of the alliance more publicly than any since the painted crests of Palazzo Vecchio nearly a half-century earlier. In 1390, the office of the Opera del Duomo—the entity that oversaw construction and upkeep of the cathedral of Florence, located across the street from it to the northeast—ordered a half-dozen large, evenly spaced stone shields that are still present along the building’s angled façade above the second-floor windows (fig. 13). The Opera carried on with its work under the patronage of the Guild of Woolen Cloth Manufacturers (*Arte della Lana*), another of the seven major trade groups of Florence. All six devices, surely once brightly painted, are among the nine *scudi* emblazoned on Palazzo Vecchio. Four of them trumpet the city’s bond with the Angevin dynasts in Naples as well as their mutual attachments to the Church and the Guelph cause: namely, the eagle clutching a dragon, the crossed keys, the scattered *fleurs-de-lys* with a three-pronged “rake” motif, and the Florentine lily (fig. 14).<sup>22</sup>

Like the other such displays of the era, these emblems on the former headquarters of the Opera del Duomo indicate that the unfortunate but fleeting Brienne episode of 1342-43 did not interrupt, let alone destroy, the traditional Florentine-Angevin rapport. Rather, the relationship continued to manifest through heraldic means, on commission by

the communal government and by some of the city’s most prominent and formidable institutions, thereby providing another basis for refuting Camelliti’s 1352 date for the *Allegory of Mercy*. Whatever the reason for the nonappearance therein of an Angevin coat of arms—spatial limitations, the vagaries of choice, a localized target audience, after-the-fact alterations, or something else—its absence from that fresco’s cityscape almost certainly lacked the derogatory intent she assigned to it.

To be sure, within the persistently unstable atmosphere of Italian power politics of that era, the reciprocally advantageous ties linking Florence and Angevin Naples were wavering by the end of the fourteenth century. The relationship declined for compounded internal and external reasons, obstacles both financial and political affecting each party in tandem with problems simultaneously weighing upon France and a schism-weakened papacy, time-honored Guelph allies of the Tuscan metropolis and the southern kingdom. With its historical basis shaken, the liaison reached a low point early in the next century when the insatiably ambitious Ladislaus, then occupying the Neapolitan throne as leader of an ascendant branch of the House of Anjou (r. 1386-1414), attempted to subdue Florence, Rome, and all of central Italy.<sup>23</sup> Yet in 1416, in the aftermath of Ladislaus’s sudden death ending the threat, the Florentine government made a striking decision, signifying that it was eager to heal the uncharacteristic breach in its connection to Naples. Complementing alterations made to Donatello’s early marble statue of David, transforming the biblical hero

from a prophet into the victor over an evil Goliath, and the sculpture’s subsequent transport from a cathedral workshop to a second-floor council chamber in Palazzo Vecchio, lilies on a blue field (“*gigli nel campo azurro*”) were painted on the wall behind it.<sup>24</sup> The intention behind the refurbishment and new placement of the marble was unquestionably political: to symbolize Florentine steadfastness and its preservation of freedom from such would-be oppressors as Ladislaus. Just as surely, the intention behind the backdrop provided for the figure must have been to signal the restoration of the Florentine-Angevin alliance after its momentary rift.

That said, however, the general instability triggered by Ladislaus’s aspirations, far more than the temporary enmity between Florence and Naples that he had engendered, proved a harbinger of things to come, eventually ensnaring all of Italy. Dynastic rivalries and an unruly nobility in Angevin Naples, along with continuing uncertainties in post-schism papal Rome, prevented both from playing significant roles in the volatile Italian political equation prior to the midpoint of the fifteenth century. Then, throughout the second half of that century, beleaguered by mostly petty rivalries and competing commercial interests among all five of its principal states—once more including Naples and Rome, joining Florence, Venice, and Milan—the peninsula suffered at the hands of an ever-changing series of coalitions, power blocs that nonetheless saw Florence and Naples mostly in unison while opposing one another only intermittently. Historical



**Figure 13, top.** Former Offices of the Opera del Duomo, Piazza del Duomo, Florence, 1388ff. Photo: William R. Levin.

**Figure 14.** Former Offices of the Opera del Duomo, Piazza del Duomo, Florence, 1388ff., detail of upper façade displaying third and fourth coats of arms (of six total, read left to right), signifying the papacy and the House of Anjou, 1390. Photo: William R. Levin.



developments corroborated by heraldic evidence from that era reveal that the ancient alliance retained its relevance and value for both, a resilient pairing that survived the transformation in leadership of Tuscany effected by Cosimo de' Medici in 1434, the Aragonese takeover of the southern kingdom in 1442, and the waning significance of the Guelph cause as well as diminished authority of the Guelph Party everywhere.

An overview of the tense situation in Italy during the later fifteenth century would underscore—by way of its durability, and despite occasional differences and even short periods of conflict—the depth of the relationship linking Florence and Naples over the preceding two hundred years, since well before the mid-fourteenth-century creation of the *Allegory of Mercy*. Surprisingly, information in that regard is somewhat dispersed and not easy to come by. Yet even with a modicum of clarity in hand concerning political developments, such an account would extend chronologically beyond the period taken up in this study, well past events with direct bearing on the matter of the shields represented—and not represented—in the *Allegory*, and their immediate ramifications for dating the fresco. Readers may wish to consult the capsule description, provided in a postscript to this article, of the historical setting in Italy after 1450 emphasizing the constancy of the Florentine-Neapolitan connection, with an extended discussion of heraldic ornamentation inside Palazzo Vecchio testifying to it, and with concluding remarks on the retrospective implications of such

a decorative scheme for dating the *Allegory of Mercy* to 1342.

Turning back to the fourteenth century, Vittoria Camelliti further justified the 1352 date for the fresco by conjuring an event far more catastrophic than the 1343 rebellion against the overbearing Walter of Brienne, namely, the Black Death of 1348. In a city recently rocked by the specter of mass mortality, she held that the *Allegory of Mercy* expressed the Misericordia Confraternity's desire following the pandemic—regarded as the result of God's displeasure with humankind's evil ways—to promote peace and stability in Florence among the survivors through performance of the works of mercy, ultimately, the keys to salvation.<sup>25</sup> Though hardly incorrect, this viewpoint again minimizes, even ignores, a larger, often overlooked historical picture, in this case the city's own mounting troubles during the decades preceding the Black Death, as discussed at length by various scholars.<sup>26</sup> They have noted the bitter, enduring class frictions dividing the old aristocracy (*magnati*) and their wealthy bourgeois colleagues (*popolani grassi*), the artisan middle classes (*artigiani*), and the disenfranchised and restive proletariat (*popolo minuto*), observing, too, how the first group continued to commit violent crimes with impunity as they always had done. These socioeconomic antagonisms reflected long-festering contests for political power between the greater and lesser guilds (*arti maggiori, arti minori*), and found voice in the contempt of longtime city residents for immigrants from outlying villages and rural

areas, in turn echoing a general discord between urban and country populations over administrative and taxation policies. Governmental opposition to the wealth and traditional privileges—proprietary, jurisdictional, and inquisitorial—of an often-uncooperative local clergy was an equally constant theme.

Problems of an external nature did nothing to diminish these domestic woes. Fiercely resisting Florentine mercantile and political expansionism within Tuscany—so damaging financially, as intimated earlier—were the Ghibelline polities of Pisa, Lucca, and Milan, a fraught situation magnified by the memory of imperial invasions in 1312-13 and 1327-29. Aggravating matters, animosities lingered between the triumphant Black Guelph faction ruling Florence and the families of exiled White Guelphs who had found refuge in rival Ghibelline strongholds. The unremitting tensions that resulted sometimes devolved into open warfare and occasional defeat, exemplified by decisive Pisan victories over Florence in October 1341 and July 1342. Foreign mercenaries hired by Florence to fight its battles all too often transformed into aggressive marauders, a growing menace especially in rural districts. The normal costs of war augmented by the bribes demanded by those combatants-turned-brigands, plus the expenses incurred over many decades in building perhaps Europe's most imposing municipal fortification wall, were crushing. Exacerbating this problem—intensified during the 1330s by the flattening of a previously expanding economy—were continually escalating state revenue policies

emphasizing indirect taxes (*gabelle*) detrimental to persons least able to afford them, which proved stubbornly insufficient regardless. Meanwhile, wealthier Florentines, enriched by commerce, profited from earnings on investment in the public treasury at rates so high that half of the tax levies collected, supplemented by forced loans (*prestanze*), were required just to pay the interest.

Cash-flow difficulties continued to multiply. Since the thirteenth century, those same affluent banker-merchants of Florence had benefited greatly as financiers of the city's Guelph associates in Naples, the papacy, and an international array of high ecclesiastics, all seeking to forestall their common Ghibelline enemies, but as hinted above, such preferential relationships hinged on the Florentine regime's regular subsidies to those allies. With its debilitating level of indebtedness, however, in autumn 1340, spring 1341, and winter 1342, the government necessarily informed its coalition partners of its inability to contribute further. Paralleling this dilemma in the private sector, since the late 1200s, Florentine companies had bankrolled the Plantagenet monarchs of England in exchange for favored commercial status. But King Edward III's default on his realm's enormous debts in May 1339, at the outset of the Hundred Years' War, initiated a rapid, unparalleled succession of financial collapses that further undermined the Florentine economy, with suddenly insolvent banking houses unable to reimburse depositors, foreign and domestic. Add to these

systemic issues a litany of closely spaced natural disasters always threatening to repeat: devastating fires in 1331 and 1332; the Arno River flood of November 1333, carrying off some three hundred human lives as well as buildings, bridges, mills, livestock, and basic supplies; famines in 1328-29, 1339, and 1340 that necessitated slow, risky, and expensive importations of foodstuffs; and common diseases precipitated and/or worsened by poor sanitary conditions, including typhoid and tuberculosis, that crested in 1340 with what may have been an influenza epidemic.<sup>27</sup> The concurrence of these various tribulations—especially in the dozen years preceding and, then, on into the traumatic decade of the 1340s—is stunning.

Taking this longer and fuller view, the Black Death of 1348, while undeniably horrific, was in fact but one more in a series of largely unpredictable natural misfortunes that gripped Florence during these years, all transpiring against a broader background, long underway, of societal challenges owed squarely to human shortcomings. As such, history suggests that a date of 1342 for the *Allegory of Mercy*, with its message of hope for communal tranquility, steadiness, and security, and the possibility of salvation—recalling Vittoria Camelliti's understanding of the fresco—is entirely reasonable. Indeed, George Bent recognized this when noting the close correlation between the painting's inscribed date, September 2, 1342, and the mandate given to the desperate city's illusory savior, Walter of Brienne, named military commander-in-chief of

Florence on August 1, then *signore* initially for a one-year term on September 7, and finally its lifetime sire on the following day (fig. 3).<sup>28</sup> This glimpse at the destructive trends and calamitous events characterizing the early decades of the fourteenth century in Florentine history, therefore, leads to the same conclusion as do the preceding challenges to Camelliti's analyses of features within the *Allegory of Mercy*: clothing style and details, the bell in the Palazzo Vecchio tower, and the shields on the city gateway. Together, they argue for maintaining 1342 as the correct date of the fresco.

### A Framework for Scholarly Debate

Whether or not readers find convincing the foregoing arguments and their interpretive outcome, they may recall that this essay was conceived with a second purpose in mind: a didactic one. Why, how, and with what tone should a writer respond to another scholar's evaluation of a work of art that conflicts with, even contradicts, the writer's own essay and assessment of that artwork?

Whereas an implausible opinion or judgment may hardly be worth a refutation in the public forum, the significance of the question as to why a writer might respond increases in direct proportion to what is at stake, the persuasiveness of the other scholar's reasoning, and the implications of any deductions proceeding from it. In the case at issue here, the disputed date of execution of the Misericordia Company's *Allegory of Mercy*, the need for accuracy is considerable. This was an image commissioned



by a leading civil institution during a convulsive era in the history of Florence, on conspicuous display and available to all in the ecclesiastical center of the city, and with enormous doctrinal and sociological relevance. For cultural reasons of every sort, therefore, precision concerning the fresco's chronological placement—or as close to precision as possible—seems mandatory. Despite harboring certain doubts, grounded chiefly in an unduly narrow interpretation of the political situation and the unacknowledged role of other profoundly unsettling recent events, I view Vittoria Camelliti's explications of several well-chosen, telling details within the painting, and her appraisal of information pertinent to them, as not only sensible but compelling enough in their presentation to warrant open contestation resulting from further analysis. Indeed, acknowledgment of the strengths of another scholar's argumentation that together produce a tentatively credible conclusion is essential to underscoring why a reply is worthwhile.

From there, it is a matter of examining the evidence and inferences put forward by that scholar to determine if they stand up to closer scrutiny, and if not, clarifying why they should be amended or rebuffed, and supplying cogent rationales to the contrary. Ascertaining first, of course, that all assertions made by the scholar have factual bases, do the particulars regarding each lend themselves to logical reinterpretation without stretching beyond belief a revised perception? Has the scholar accounted for all aspects and

implications of the data collected in arriving at the proposed conclusion, or are there "loose ends" that do not quite mesh with the rest of the testimony provided? Likewise important, do additional pieces of information exist—documentary, textual, and/or visual—perhaps joined by well-reasoned opinions expressed in published studies by other researchers, that might alter the scholar's elucidation of the facts presented? Affirmative answers to these questions legitimize a challenge to the scholar's reading and simultaneously function as guideposts for how to mount that challenge: first by explaining why the evidence offered by the scholar is debatable, inconsistent, incomplete, or even flawed; and then by furnishing attestations and argumentation in support of a different explanation.

There is, too, the matter of tone that a writer should adopt when countering the analyses and findings of an earlier study. Constructive criticism must always be the rule in academic debate. The intellect and character of the scholar whose research and opinions are under review deserve the same high degree of respect as that which the writer in turn desires to receive. Also imperative in fashioning a thesis, the writer must give credit where credit is due regarding the relevant research, observations, and convictions of previous authors, including those of the contested scholar. Camelliti's article itself is exemplary in this way, revealing within her text proper and in notes appended to the text her debt to earlier scholarship. Lastly, combining elements of these two tenets—and germane to the present

author's rebuttal of Camelliti's analyses—is a point worth repeating. On those occasions when the writer agrees in essence with the other scholar's position on a particular matter but finds reason to adapt that stance to substantiate a contrasting view, it is incumbent upon the writer to recognize unreservedly and in a considerate way the content and merit of the disputed scholar's interpretation, even while distinguishing the new reading from the old one.

### **Postscript: Florence and Naples in the Later Fifteenth Century**

While it is difficult to perceive any patterns in the frequently shifting alliances among the major political entities in Italy during the second half of the fifteenth century, one relatively constant factor in that morass was the tie forged during the previous two centuries between Florence and Naples.<sup>29</sup> The steadfastness of their constructive partnership through that later period reflects backward, including the middle years of the fourteenth century, reinforcing the argument that the absence of an Angevin crest on the cityscape portal in the Misericordia's *Allegory of Mercy* fresco—for whatever reason—is immaterial to the question of its date.

To be sure, owing to the competing concerns of Florence and Venice regarding the question of Sforza command over the Duchy of Milan, Florence and Naples—at peace with one another following the demise of Ladislaus in 1416—engaged in hostilities again from 1450 to 1454. The former aligned with Milan (and France), while the latter was coaxed

into a compact with Venice. That situation concluded with the Peace of Lodi embracing all combatants on the peninsula. As a result, early in 1468, Florence under Cosimo de' Medici's son Piero, joined by Milan and now Naples, successfully confronted a band of mercenaries and anti-Medicean Florentine exiles led by Bartolomeo Colleone in the brief, aptly named Colleonic War. By 1474, however, new alliances had formed, pitting Florence, Milan, and Venice against a revived and aggressively expansion-minded papacy in Rome, which then called upon Naples for support. Pope Sixtus IV's deep involvement in a 1478 conspiracy against Cosimo de' Medici's grandson Lorenzo drew Florence briefly into battle once more with Sixtus's Neapolitan ally. This encounter—the Pazzi War, named after a family prominent among Florentine enemies of the Medici—ended with Lorenzo's dramatic, though eminently sensible, peace mission to Naples, lasting from December 1479 to March 1480, and the pope's willingness, in December 1480, to settle with Florence during a standoff against a looming Ottoman force.

Détente between Florence and Naples was thus reestablished. Consequently, when Sixtus's aggressive nature resurfaced, precipitating the Ferrarese War of 1482-84, Florence, Naples, and Milan replicated their united front from the Colleonic War, defending a smaller Ferrara in opposition to Rome and Venice, until Rome reconciled with its erstwhile enemies over the pope's sudden but well-founded fear of Venice. In 1485-86, following the Treaty of Bagnolo terminating the Ferrarese

conflict, Naples and Rome, the latter now under Pope Innocent VIII, were again at war with one another, a clash that did not officially end until 1492. Lorenzo de' Medici, who died in that year, commendably steered Florence away from that dispute while studiously maintaining his city's renewed accord with Naples alongside its bond with Milan. It seems clear, therefore, that despite the vicissitudes of fifteenth-century Italian politics, and even the replacement of the Angevins by the Aragonese in the south, leaders in both Florence and Naples understood that it was to their mutual advantage, and did their best, to retain their long-established rapport.

Simultaneously, although loyalties that once united adherents to the Guelph cause had become progressively less meaningful, Lorenzo, like his father and grandfather before him, anxiously nurtured Florence's longstanding political and commercial ties to an increasingly meddlesome France. Indeed, in 1465, King Louis XI of France had permitted the Medici family to substitute for one of the six red balls on its coat of arms a sphere with the venerable emblem of the House of Capet, gold *fleurs-de-lys* on a blue field, to validate and reward the commitment of both Florence and the Medici to his realm. Yet Lorenzo and his forebears were engaged in a delicate balancing act. For in 1328 the French crown along with—even earlier, in 1290—the County of Anjou had passed from the Capetians and Angevins, respectively, to their Valois relatives, giving successive later-fifteenth-century Valois monarchs in Paris, including Louis

XI, a vague albeit justifiable claim as well to the throne of Aragonese Naples formerly occupied by their distant Angevin kinsmen. In addition, a yet more remote family relationship through the Orléans branch of the Valois family encouraged French kings to eye the Duchy of Milan as theirs.

The disastrous ensuing events are well-known and upended Lorenzo de' Medici's carefully constructed political equilibrium. An escalating personal dispute between the rulers in Naples and Milan culminated, in 1494, with the latter inviting a formidable French army under King Charles VIII, son of Louis XI, to invade the southern kingdom. In Florence, joined by the papacy, the less-than-gifted son of the deceased Lorenzo, another Piero, lined up behind Naples as expected. As the intruders entered Tuscany, Piero suffered a failure of nerve and essentially signed his city over to the French, who briefly occupied it as Piero fled, soon to be replaced by the fiery Dominican monk Savonarola. Although the French force continued south, seizing Rome and then Naples the next year, a pan-European coalition led by the Aragonese sovereigns in Naples and Spain—from which a cowering Florence excluded itself—forced the invaders' retreat from Italy. For much of the sixteenth century, however, and to the detriment of nearly everyone on the peninsula, the bloody contest for dominion over Florence and all of Italy continued between the Aragonese, by then united through marriage with the Habsburgs, and their French adversaries in the extended Valois line.





The council chamber known as the Sala dei Gigli, the Room of the Lilies, on the second floor of Palazzo Vecchio, is the site of the heraldic evidence from the later fifteenth century alluded to in the main text of this article. It testifies to the long continuance of the Florentine-Angevin connection, even decades after the direct line of the original House of Anjou dating to the 1260s no longer ruled in Naples, and in

fact had become extinct. Archival documents of the 1480s make it clear that all four walls of the Sala dei Gigli were to bear figural paintings.<sup>30</sup> Records also suggest that these paintings, commissioned to a team of leading artists, were to replace a Famous Men (*uomini famosi*) fresco cycle from ca. 1385, a literary theme of the fourteenth century that had once adorned a smaller adjacent assembly room, and that had been

**Figure 15.** Bernardo di Stefano Rosselli (1450-1526), portion of the southern wall of the Sala dei Gigli decorated with *fleurs-de-lys* and red “rake” label, fresco, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, 1489-90. Photo: William R. Levin.

among the earliest of such programs in Italian art. The new series in Palazzo Vecchio was to signal the virtues of Medicean governance of Florence, particularly those of the current head of the family, Lorenzo.

Officials evidently made the decision in short order to condense this second Famous Men cycle onto one surface only, the eastern wall of the room, which Domenico Ghirlandaio painted in 1482-83 with possible assistance of his brothers. Simultaneously—and suddenly—mention of the other three walls and of Ghirlandaio’s collaborators on the project disappeared from the records, leaving the rest of the room unadorned, a condition fully remedied only years later. When work resumed, decorations for the ceiling came first, executed in two campaigns: the application to it of deep, ornately defined hexagonal coffers, each containing a rosette from which radiate six *fleurs-de-lys*, all modeled in high relief, with the flat interstices painted blue as a background (1483-86); and then the gilding of all projecting surfaces (1488-90).<sup>31</sup>

Once the gilding process was underway, officials took up the matter of the three bare walls of the Sala dei Gigli. In continuity with the design chosen for the ceiling, they commissioned Bernardo di Stefano Rosselli to fresco the northern, southern, and western walls with scattered gold *fleurs-de-lys* on a blue field—thus giving the room its common name—a task likewise completed in 1490. Beyond question, the mural backdrop provided for Donatello’s marble *David* housed in this chamber since 1416, as mentioned in the main body of this study, informed Rosselli’s larger decorative scheme. Art historian Melinda Hegarty proposed that, in the 1480s, administrators chose this pattern to express the role of France and the French monarchy, long symbolized by lilies on a blue field,

as protector of Florentine liberty; as an indication that Lorenzo de’Medici’s stewardship of Florence marked the return to a Golden Age; and as a symbol of his family’s dynastic succession.<sup>32</sup> One or more of her suggestions may be sound, but another explanation—or an additional one—seems just as likely.

Atop each portion of the council room’s three walls exhibiting the *fleur-de-lys* pattern, divided one from another on each wall by fictive raised pilasters festooned with *grotteschi* motifs, is a five-pronged red “rake” label seldom noted by scholars and mentioned only in passing by Hegarty (fig. 15). Recall that this is the feature added to the French royal coat of arms identifying not the Capetian monarchy proper but the original House of Anjou in Naples that sprang directly from it, founded in 1266 by King Charles I. (Whether or not the 1416 wall painting behind Donatello’s *David* included this element, though probable, is unknown.<sup>33</sup>) Charles I ruled over both the County of Anjou and his south-Italian realm, as did his son and successor Charles II (r. 1285-1309) for several years until, in 1290, a family marriage led to a separation of the two regions, with Anjou passing to the Valois family that later, in 1328, ascended to the throne of France. The County of Anjou—both the territory and the title associated with it—was incorporated into the crown from 1328 to 1360, after which the province, now a duchy, was conferred upon a cadet line of the Valois family. Then, in 1480, a covetous King Louis XI, representing the main branch of the French royal family, again joined

the two in his person. It is notable, however, that heraldry associated with Louis XI eschews the once-familiar Angevin “rake” label, favoring instead the regal *fleur-de-lys* alone.<sup>34</sup> In Palazzo Vecchio, therefore, the implication is clear, that by displaying both components of the badge that formerly signified Angevin rule in southern Italy—gold lilies and the distinctive red pronged design on a blue ground—the northern, southern, and western wall frescoes of the Sala dei Gigli proclaimed and reaffirmed the time-honored political and commercial ties binding Florence specifically to Naples, not France, in the very seat of Medicean power.

While this connection, in the 1480s, admittedly may have had a somewhat nostalgic flavor reminiscent of the fourteenth-century state of affairs, looking past the dynastic change of 1442 that had occurred in the south and those rare moments of reciprocal animosity reported above, the two states’ close relationship survived three-quarters of a century of general peninsular upheaval and radical shifts in policy. To reiterate events of the 1480s that characterize their cordiality toward one another, consider Lorenzo de’Medici’s intrepid reconciliation with his fleetingly incompatible Aragonese foes to end the Pazzi War, their alliance during the Ferrarese conflict, and his cautious neutrality in the bellicose quarrel arising between Naples and Rome. This shared history tends to confirm and add specificity to Hegarty’s hypothesis regarding the walls and ceiling of the Sala dei Gigli as signifying a Laurentian return to a former Golden Age. It does something else as well.



The familiar Angevin device blanketing the late-fifteenth-century walls of the Sala dei Gigli further substantiates my conclusion—borne out by the examples, presented earlier, of such heraldry from the fourteenth century—that the Angevin crest “missing” from the cityscape portal in the *Allegory of Mercy* was not, as Vittoria Camelliti proposed in dating the fresco to 1352, a belated indication of disapproval on the part of Florence and the Misericordia, tainting by omission a disgraced foreign-born autocrat. Nor did its exclusion from the painting announce divisive and enduring acrimonies yet to come. The uprising against Walter of Brienne and his forcible exile from Florence in 1343 must be seen as an ephemeral event without bearing on the already protracted friendship and mutual dependence existing between that city and Brienne’s adopted hometown of Naples. Viewed in this light, the absence from the *Allegory* of an Angevin emblem was surely a choice, the reason, or reasons, for which are unknown. As noted in the main section of this essay, it may have been determined by an insufficiency of space within the fresco’s representational field, a simple lack of consistency and uniformity with respect to other artworks on the part of the patron and artist in selecting from among a variety of potentially appropriate heraldic shields, a calculated appeal to a primarily local audience, or an alteration sometime—perhaps years—later to what might originally have been there.

**William R. Levin**, professor emeritus at Centre College, holds degrees from Northwestern University and the University of Michigan. His research centers on the concept of charity and the artistic patrimony of Italian late-medieval and Renaissance philanthropic organizations. He regards images of neighborly love as manifestations of societal changes then sweeping Western Europe.

### Endnotes

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1. Friends of Florence, an American-based foundation, funded a restoration of the fresco and sponsored a film summarizing the entire process, narrated in Italian and lasting thirteen minutes and forty seconds, that is available online at <http://www.adottaunoperadarte.it/il-restauro-della-madonna-della-misericordia-al->

[museo-del-bigallo](http://www.adottaunoperadarte.it/museo-del-bigallo) (accessed 10 July 2023). Conservation, expertly undertaken in 2012-14 by Lidia Cinelli after a series of physical, chemical, and stratigraphic analyses, included a cleaning of the surface through both physical and chemical means to remove accumulated grime and areas of paint applied during earlier restorations, followed by a consolidation of the plaster wall support and infilling of areas of paint loss. The most notable revelations from the restoration are the moat, no longer in actual existence, seen in the foreground at the base of the wall surrounding the crowded cityscape; a minute figure also in the foreground, referred to in the film as a pilgrim, about to enter the city through the gateway, identified in the film as the Porta di San Gallo; and farther back, a portion of the Arno River flowing through the metropolis. In addition, according to film narration, old reports that the fresco had been detached from the wall sometime in the past were proved false.

2. For bibliography containing the fullest discussions of the *Allegory of Mercy* by the author and others see most recently William R. Levin, “The Bigallo Triptych: A Document of Confraternal Charity in Fourteenth-Century Florence,” *Confraternitas* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 59 nn. 13-14; William R. Levin, “Art as Confraternal Documentation: Homeless Children and the Florentine Misericordia in the Trecento,” in *A Companion to Medieval and Early Modern Confraternities*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto, vol. 83 (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2019), 444 n. 17; William R. Levin, “‘Sepellire imorti poueri et miserabili’: La Settima opera di carità e la Misericordia fiorentina nei suoi primi anni di formazione,” *Iconocrazia: Potere delle Immagini / Immagini del Potere* 17 (2020), n. 3, <http://www.iconocrazia.it/sepellire-imorti-poueri-et-miserabili-la-settima-opera-di-carita-e-la-misericordia-fiorentina-nei-suoi-primi-anni-di-formazione/> (accessed 10 July 2023); and William R. Levin, “Indications for a Franciscan Role in the Philanthropic Activities of the Early Florentine Misericordia,” *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 49, no. 1 (2023): 18 note 22.

3. For a comprehensive discussion on the historiography of the dating, see William R. Levin, *The Allegory of Mercy at the Misericordia in Florence: Historiography, Context, Iconography, and*

*the Documentation of Confraternal Charity in the Trecento* (Dallas, Lanham, Boulder, New York, and Oxford: University Press of America, 2004), 16-19 and accompanying notes, including bibliographical references. See also notes 5-8 below for bibliography.

4. The verse in the Gothic-lettered inscription preceding the date, from the apocryphal Old Testament, is Ecclesiasticus 16:15. Occupying the first three lines of the inscription, it buttresses the theme of the fresco. The entire inscription, including the date, reads thus:

OMNIS MISERICORDIA FACIET  
LOCUM UNICUIQUE  
SECUNDUM MERITUM OPERUM  
SUORUM  
ET SECUNDUM INTELLECTUM  
PEREGRINATIONIS ILLIUS  
ANNO D. MCCCXLII DIE II MENSIS  
SEPTEMBRIS

In the Vulgate version of the Bible, the final word of the verse is “IPSIUS,” not the erroneous “ILLIUS” of the inscription. The authoritative 1609 translation of the Vulgate by the English College at Douay renders the passage thus: “All mercy shall make a place for every man according to the merit of his works, and according to the wisdom of his sojournment,” that is, in keeping with the Lord’s perception of each man’s earthly pilgrimage.

5. Stefano Rosselli gave the date of the fresco as 1342 in vol. 3 of his *Sepoltuario fiorentino* of 1657 (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence, MS. 2.4.536, fol. 1012). Historians concurring on the 1352 dating include Ferdinando Leopoldo Del Migliore, *Firenze città nobilissima* (Florence: Nella Stamp[eria] Della Stella, 1684), 80; Placido Landini, *Istoria dell’oratorio e della Venerabile Arciconfraternita di Santa Maria della Misericordia della città di Firenze* (Florence, 1779; reprint edition with notes by Pietro Pillori, Florence: Cartoleria Peratoner, 1843), 38; Luigi Passerini, *Storia degli stabilimenti di beneficenza e d’istruzione elementare gratuita della città di Firenze* (Florence: Tipografia Le Monnier, 1853), 452-53; Giovanni Poggi in idem, I(gino) B(envenuto) Supino, and Corrado Ricci, “La Compagnia del Bigallo,” *Rivista d’arte* 2 (1904): 206; Paul Perdrizet, *La Vierge de Miséricorde: Étude d’un thème iconographique* (Paris: Albert Fontemoing, Éditeur, 1908), 150; Margherita Sichi, *Un’Istituzione di beneficenza fiorentina: Il Bigallo* (Naples: Officina Arti Grafiche,

1927), 103-4 n. 2; and Cesare Torricelli, *La Misericordia di Firenze: Note storiche* (Florence: Arciconfraternita della Misericordia, 1940), 179 n. 1. Oddly, the date 1342 for the fresco appears in the frontispiece engraving and on p. ix in vol. 10 (1762) of Giuseppe Richa, *Notizie storiche delle chiese fiorentine*, 10 vols. (Florence: Nella Stamperia di Pietro Gaetano Viviani, 1757-62), whereas on p. 294 of vol. 7 (1758) it is given as 1352. Architectural historians also dating the fresco to 1352 include Walter and Elisabeth Valentiner Paatz, *Die Kirchen von Florenz: Ein kunstgeschichtliches Handbuch*, 6 vols., Frankfurter wissenschaftliche Beiträge: Kulturwissenschaftliche Reihe, 4 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1940-54), vol. 1 (1940), 390 nn. 34-35; and Gunther and Christel Thiem, *Toskanische Fassaden-Dekoration in Sgraffito und Fresko: 14. bis 17. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Verlag F. Bruckmann, 1964), 135-36.

6. Howard Saalman, “Santa Maria del Fiore: 1294-1418,” *The Art Bulletin* 46 (1964): 472, 472 n. 6; drawing upon Peter Metz, “Die florentiner Domfassade des Arnolfo di Cambio,” *Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 59 (1938): 122-24 and accompanying notes; and Howard Saalman, *The Bigallo: The Oratory and Residence of the Compagnia del Bigallo e della Misericordia in Florence*, Monographs on Archaeology and the Fine Arts sponsored by the Archaeological Institute of America and the College Art Association of America, ed. Anne Coffin Hanson, vol. 19 (New York: New York University Press for the College Art Association of America, 1969), 9-10, 9-10 n. 24, 44 (doc. 1), and fig. 13. The seventeenth-century summary of the Misericordia document utilized by Saalman, which describes the company’s purchase of property in 1321/22 to house its offices, is in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, catalogued as Carte Stroziane (old classification), MS. Magliabecchiano, classe 37, numero 300, fol. 132.

7. Hanna Kiel, *Il Museo del Bigallo a Firenze*, Gallerie e Musei di Firenze, ed. Ugo Procacci (Milan: Electa Editrice, 1977), 118-19 (cat. no. 3) and pls. 17-21; drawing upon Luciano Bellosi, *Il Buffalmacco e il trionfo della morte* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1974), 60 n. 65.

8. See note 5 above for the 1762 engraving. Recent authors favoring the 1342 dating of the *Allegory of Mercy* include, for example, Ludovica Sebegondi, “Ofanotrofo del Bigallo: Schede,” in Francesca Carrara,

Ludovica Sebegondi, and Ulisse Tramonti, *Gli Istituti di beneficenza a Firenze: Storia e architettura* (Florence: Alinea Editrice, 1999), 29 and figs. on pp. 30, 177; Phillip Joseph Earenfight, “The Residence and Loggia della Misericordia (Il Bigallo): Art and Architecture of Confraternal Piety, Charity, and Virtue in Late Medieval Florence,” Ph.D. diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1999, chap. 4, esp. pp. 138-40, and fig. 20; and George Bent, *Public Painting and Visual Culture in Early Republican Florence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 88-93, esp. 88 and 92, pl. XI, and figs. 32-34.

9. Vittoria Camelliti, “La Misericordia Domini del Museo del Bigallo: Un Unicum iconografico della pittura fiorentina dopo la Peste Nera,” *Studi di storia dell’arte* 26 (2015): 51-66, with abundant references in the endnotes. Camelliti’s dating of 1352 was accepted by Federico Botana in “The Frescoes of the *Allegory of Divine Mercy* and the *Story of Tobit and Tobias* in the Bigallo: New Viewpoints,” in *Politiche di misericordia tra teoria e prassi: Confraternite, ospedali e Monti di Pietà (XIII-XVI secolo)*, ed. Pietro Delcorno (Bologna: Società Editrice Il Mulino, 2018), 97-117.

10. Camelliti, “La Misericordia Domini,” 57-62 and accompanying notes, including bibliographical references.

11. *Ibid.*, 54-56 and accompanying notes, including bibliographical references.

12. There is no reference in the film chronicling the *Allegory*’s restoration, signaled in note 1 above, to the bells or canopy of Palazzo Vecchio appearing in the cityscape. My request to Friends of Florence, which funded the restoration and sponsored the film, for an official written report of the conservation campaign went unanswered.

13. Bent, *Public Painting*, caption beneath pl. XVII; for discussion see pp. 114-21. The fresco is currently located in a room of Palazzo Vecchio reserved for official use and not open to the public.

14. Camelliti, “La Misericordia Domini,” 54 and accompanying notes, including bibliographical references.

15. See note 1 above regarding the recent restoration of the fresco. Just as the Palazzo Vecchio bells and canopy depicted in the *Allegory* escape mention (see note 12 above), the Friends of Florence film makes no reference to the four shields pictured on the cityscape portal.



16. Useful here are two illustrated online sources: Chris Dobson, “The Heraldry of Florence 1: The Heraldry of the Palazzo Vecchio,” <https://renaissancedissident.com/heraldry-of-florence-1-palazzo-vecchio.html> (accessed 10 July 2023); and Alessandro Benedetti, “Curiosità su Firenze: Gli Stemmi sulla facciata di Palazzo Vecchio,” published March 2011, <https://curiositasufirenze.wordpress.com/2012/03/11/gli-stemmi-sulla-facciata-di-palazzo-vecchio/> (accessed 10 July 2023). The red and silver fields of the emblem on the *Allegory of Mercy*’s cityscape portal representing the unified communities of Florence and Fiesole are reversed on the façade of Palazzo Vecchio, likely an alteration without significance. The sixth shield (minus the tiny lily) is that of Pope Clement IV, who in 1265 lent his personal emblem along with money and other aid to the Guelphs of Florence in their common struggle, led by the future king of Naples Charles I of Anjou, against the Ghibellines. Of the remaining two insignia, the fifth in the sequence, with the word *LIBERTAS* written in gold diagonally across a blue field, refers to the priors, the *priori della libertà*, who headed the communal government of Florence instituted by the guilds in 1282; while the seventh, a white lily on a red field, portrays the original symbol of the city itself. The latter came to be associated with the local Ghibelline bloc, hence the reverse color scheme adopted by the victorious Guelph Party. Not mentioned in either online source—and seldom elsewhere as well—are the pair of crests that briefly extend this presentation of heraldry onto both the northern and southern flanks of Palazzo Vecchio, wrapping around the corners of the façade. In each case—left and right, respectively—the two coats of arms preserve and continue without interruption the order of the shields displayed on the façade. While ascertaining their date has proved elusive, twenty-two painted shields beneath protruding arches resembling—and likely contemporaneous with—those of Palazzo Vecchio’s façade adorn the far-earlier Torre Volognana, integrated into the nearby Bargello (the Palazzo del Podestà) during its mid-thirteenth-century construction. Six on each of the tower’s longer northern and southern sides, five on each shorter side, form a continuous, four-part alternating sequence beginning with the Angevin *fleurs-de-lys* and “rake” label, followed by the cross of the Florentine people, again the Angevin *fleurs-de-lys* and

“rake” label, and the Florentine Guelph communal lily. The Bargello functioned as headquarters of the city official charged with preserving the rule of law (the *podestà*), as a courthouse, and as a prison.

17. Commencing during his successful 1265-68 campaign to end imperial hegemony in the south of Italy, Charles I served simultaneously as papal vicar in Tuscany from 1267 to 1278 and as *podestà* of Florence from 1267 to 1280, though his rule over the city was largely absentee. Far more engaged in establishing a personal empire with substantial holdings in Europe and the Mediterranean basin and making numerous enemies in the process, both of his administrative positions in Florence ended in dismissal. While still a prince, Charles’s grandson Robert came to Florence with an army in 1305 as *signore* of the city to lead the Black Guelphs in their struggle against their erstwhile White brethren in neighboring Pistoia. He returned as a king in 1312-13, again with a legion, to counter successfully the invasion of Tuscany by the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII. From 1313 until 1321, again as *signore* of Florence, Robert retained a mostly distant hand in the city’s politics, but his popularity faded dramatically beginning in 1315 as Florentines became increasingly suspicious regarding his interest in establishing peace between Guelphs and Ghibellines in Tuscany. His term of office was not renewed. Charles of Calabria, Robert’s son, arrived from Naples with troops in 1326 at the invitation of Florence to oppose a Ghibelline force commanded by Castruccio Castracane of Lucca and bolstered the following year by an army led by Ludwig of Bavaria on his way to Rome to be crowned emperor. As *signore* of Florence, Charles wielded considerable influence within the government, but lost support by repeatedly levying burdensome direct taxes to subsidize his Tuscan military campaign and by spending copiously on revelry. Locally, the Ghibelline threat receded by late in 1327, and following his recall to Naples—to the relief of most Florentines—to defend the capital from Ludwig, Charles died suddenly in 1328. In each of these cases, once the immediate enemy danger had passed, the government and people of Florence encouraged and welcomed, whether straightaway or eventually, their Angevin ally’s departure. See the references named in note 26 below for fuller discussions of these persons and events.

18. David Abulafia, “Southern Italy and the Florentine Economy, 1265-1370,” *The Economic History Review*, n. s., 34, no. 3 (August 1981): 377-88, with references in the notes to earlier studies furnishing more detailed information upon which Abulafia’s synthesizing argument rests. The political factors uniting Florence and Naples included not merely their common allegiance to the Guelph cause but specifically the focus that the dominant Black Guelph faction in Florence placed on the south-Italian mainland ruled by the Angevins, as distinct from Ghibelline and Florentine White Guelph interests concentrated more locally on north-central Italy as well as on Aragonese Sicily. With the spring 1282 rebellion known as the Sicilian Vespers, the island had freed itself from Angevin control, replacing the latter in late summer with the interlopers from eastern Spain who had dynastic ties to the Holy Roman Empire and its Ghibelline supporters. Especially notable among the Florentines awarded high office in Naples and landed estates elsewhere in the south was Niccolò Acciaiuoli (1310-1365), appointed Grand Seneschal—i.e., chief administrator—of the kingdom in 1348 by Queen Joanna I (r. 1343-1382).

19. Giovanni Fanelli, *Firenze, Le Città nella storia d’Italia*, ed. Cesare De Seta (Rome and Bari: Giuseppe Laterza e Figli, 1980), 54 and fig. 21; Anna Pomierny Wąsińska, “Florence and its Signs: A Late Mediaeval Diagram of the City,” *Nova Heraldica: Medieval and Early Modern Heraldry from the Perspective of Cultural History* (a Hypotheses.org blog), published 14 September 2016, <https://heraldica.hypotheses.org/4880> (accessed 10 July 2023); and Bent, *Public Painting*, 146-47, 150-51, and fig. 50.

20. Anna Pomierny Wąsińska, “Florence and its Signs, part 2: The Heraldic Diagram of another Florentine Guild and the Bossolo,” *Heraldica Nova: Medieval and Early Modern Heraldry from the Perspective of Cultural History* (a Hypotheses.org blog), published 12 December 2016, <https://heraldica.hypotheses.org/5000> (accessed 10 July 2023). The ceiling fresco spent decades separated from its original guildhall setting, about which there seems to be some question, prior to its restoration and return (?) to the audience hall in the Palace of the Silk Guild, a heavily renovated edifice that now serves as a newspaper and periodical library.

21. Bent, *Public Painting*, 121-33, esp. 131, pl. XVIII, figs. 42-43, unnumbered figure

on p. 104, and accompanying notes, including bibliographical references. Today the *Zecca Coronation* is in the Galleria dell'Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence. Bent described the papal shield, third in line, as representing specifically the "Bishopric See of Florence," the ecclesiastical entity that acted on behalf of the Holy See at the local level. The fourth emblem, that of the extended House of Anjou, is divided vertically in thirds, with—left to right—red and gold horizontal stripes symbolizing the Kingdom of Hungary (recall the device on the façade of Palazzo Vecchio representing Robert of Anjou, whose mother was a Hungarian princess); three gold *fleurs-de-lys* arrayed vertically on a blue field signifying the Kingdom of Naples and its descent from the royal line of France; and the right half of a silver double-eagle on a red field denoting the Kingdom of Albania, precariously but stubbornly claimed by members of the family; above and spanning the entire width of the shield are three gold crowns set horizontally. To the left of the central group of five *scudi* appear, left and then right, the crest of the Alberti family with crossed silver chains on a blue field, and that of the Guild of International Woolen Cloth Merchants (*Arte di Calimala*, one of the city's seven major guilds) represented by a gold eagle on a red field clutching a bale of cloth. To the right of the central group, symmetrical with the pair just described, and therefore right and then left, are the insignia of the Davanzati family with a gold lion rampant on a blue field, and that of the Bankers Guild (*Arte del Cambio*, another of Florence's major trade organizations) indicated by gold coins dispersed over a red field. By statute, one delegate from each of these two guilds co-chaired the Mint's board of directors. A member of the Alberti clan representing the cloth merchants and one from the Davanzati speaking for the bankers served as superintendents of the Mint when the completed *Zecca Coronation* arrived at its offices.

22. Fanelli, *Firenze*, 46-52. No traces of the presumed pigments remain. The four crests named in the text are the first, third, fourth, and fifth in left-to-right order on the former Opera del Duomo façade. The remaining two coats of arms display the cross of the Florentine people and the word *LIBERTAS* signifying the *priori della libertà*, respectively the second and sixth shields. The building faces the northern tribune (transept) of the cathedral on a street

formerly known as via delle Fondamenta. Today, the three entrances of the building bear the addresses Piazza del Duomo 3, 4, and 5, each of them providing access to office suites and private apartments.

23. Gene Brucker, *The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), esp. 231-47, 288-89, 368-95 regarding Ladislaus. See also the first two references cited in note 26 below.

24. H[orst] W. Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 3-7, esp. 3; Nicolai Rubinstein, "Classical Themes in the Decoration of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 50 (1987): 36, 37 n. 60, 41 n. 100; and Melinda Hegarty, "Laurentian Patronage in the Palazzo Vecchio: The Frescoes of the Sala dei Gigli," *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 2 (June 1996): 279 n. 171 (interpreting the patterned wall decoration of 1416 somewhat differently than here).

25. Camelliti, "La Misericordia Domini," 62.

26. For the various historical currents and events recapitulated here see the following standard sources: Ferdinand Schevill, *Medieval and Renaissance Florence*, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936; New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, Harper Torchbooks, 1963); Marvin B. Becker, *Florence in Transition*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, 1968); Benedetto Croce, *History of the Kingdom of Naples*, trans. Frances Frenaye, ed. and intro. H. Stuart Hughes, *Classic European Historians*, ed. Leonard Krieger (Bari: Giuseppe Laterza e Figli, 1925 [in Italian]; Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970 [based on the 6th Italian ed., 1965]); and J. K. Hyde, *Society and Politics in Medieval Italy: The Evolution of the Civil Life, 1000-1350*, *New Studies in Medieval History*, ed. Denis Bethell (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).

27. Additionally, David Abulafia ("Southern Italy and the Florentine Economy," 385) alluded to famines in Florence that occurred in 1323, 1333, and 1335. Clearly, the possibility of food shortages was an unremitting challenge.

28. Bent, *Public Painting*, 92-93.

29. For the following historical synopsis see, for example, the always entertaining and remarkably thorough Schevill, *Medieval and Renaissance Florence*, vol. 2 passim.

30. For this information on the Sala dei Gigli decorations see Rubinstein, "Classical Themes"; and Hegarty, "Laurentian Patronage." Besides Ghirlandaio, commissions for these frescoes that went unfulfilled were allotted to Botticelli, Perugino and Biagio Tucci, and Piero del Pollaiuolo (later replaced by Filippino Lippi). The two articles complement one another in various ways but differ on some points, among them the specific message intended by the Famous Men cycle of 1482-83 on the eastern wall of the Sala dei Gigli. Rubinstein (pp. 37-38, 41) held that Florentine power and patriotism is the concept emphasized, while Hegarty (pp. 273-75, 279, 281) insisted that the lesson imparted is one of Florentine liberty and its defense. In addition, while Rubinstein (pp. 32-33, 32 n. 29, 36) noted that, according to documents, there already existed two council rooms, one larger than the other, on the second floor of Palazzo Vecchio for which in 1469 officials ordered a "restoration and adornment," Hegarty (pp. 265, 265 n. 6, 271, 279 n. 171) seemed to waver between this interpretation and an older view that the two rooms were "created" from one earlier large hall.

31. Hegarty, "Laurentian Patronage," 277-78.

32. *Ibid.*, 278-80, 279 n. 171.

33. Only a thorough scientific analysis of the wall or the discovery of a heretofore overlooked document can solve this riddle.

34. A selection of images displaying Louis XI's coat of arms is available at [https://www.google.com/search?source=univ&tbm=isch&q=Louis+XI+of+France+coat+of+arms&hl=en&fpr=K9gN1WEQZ4khlM%252Coz9nFEANO63OiM%252C\\_%253B6yivOaOuKc7PcM%252Coofkh8eLOGq5IM%252C\\_%253BM1KkqCnpNLeLpM%252CxCxGooUG4Ss1UsfM%252C\\_%253Bw52ONCoxKdZPTM%252C4N7Zryuc9oDlBm%252C\\_%253Buz2\\_hJcnCaCbaM%252C4lsySmrLm1MgiM%252C\\_%253BcIkDEUWeJpQT8M%252Ccmdgn4-1AQkcQPM%252C\\_%253Bzin7ZRQvVx53fM%252CNxQ3oKvcAuqogM%252C\\_%253BSZ6siyxjDiPgvM%252CY5a5k3fT-B5WeM%252C\\_%253Bz7lL7EPwn4xZKM%252Cek-FBhEdnXZyIM%252C\\_%253BxRMozKPl1VmaYM%252CU-aQPTbBhZFxiM%252C\\_%253BAl4\\_-kTXklMcB6xLhStEjzXP7Rk\\_Ec95Hw&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwihRkycyffzAhVAQjABHRw5AY8QjJkEegQIAhAC&biw=1920&bih=969&dpr=1](https://www.google.com/search?source=univ&tbm=isch&q=Louis+XI+of+France+coat+of+arms&hl=en&fpr=K9gN1WEQZ4khlM%252Coz9nFEANO63OiM%252C_%253B6yivOaOuKc7PcM%252Coofkh8eLOGq5IM%252C_%253BM1KkqCnpNLeLpM%252CxCxGooUG4Ss1UsfM%252C_%253Bw52ONCoxKdZPTM%252C4N7Zryuc9oDlBm%252C_%253Buz2_hJcnCaCbaM%252C4lsySmrLm1MgiM%252C_%253BcIkDEUWeJpQT8M%252Ccmdgn4-1AQkcQPM%252C_%253Bzin7ZRQvVx53fM%252CNxQ3oKvcAuqogM%252C_%253BSZ6siyxjDiPgvM%252CY5a5k3fT-B5WeM%252C_%253Bz7lL7EPwn4xZKM%252Cek-FBhEdnXZyIM%252C_%253BxRMozKPl1VmaYM%252CU-aQPTbBhZFxiM%252C_%253BAl4_-kTXklMcB6xLhStEjzXP7Rk_Ec95Hw&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwihRkycyffzAhVAQjABHRw5AY8QjJkEegQIAhAC&biw=1920&bih=969&dpr=1) (accessed 10 July 2023).