

Umbrian Frescos Reborn

THE RENAISSANCE MURALS OF PIEVE DI SAN BRIZIO

Eight kilometers outside Spoleto, along the old road to Todi, lies the ancient Pieve di San Brizio, a diminutive parish church dedicated to a Syrian-Christian who took refuge in the city to avoid Roman persecution, sometime in the third century. San Brizio would later serve as the first bishop of Spoleto; many believe the pieve to have been built atop his oratory. Within the church is a rare suite of frescos—some of the finest known examples of Renaissance Umbrian painting—that only recently came to light during a restoration carried out in the wake of the 1997 earthquake.

Built on a basilica plan with three naves, the Pieve di San Brizio assumed its present form sometime in the mid-twelfth century. However, numerous Paleochristian elements were incorporated into the church, including two altar frontals, masonry blocks with Roman carvings—no doubt spoils from an ancient building—a fragment of an ancient cross embedded in the façade, and a sarcophagus found in the crypt, all of which date to the sixth century A.D.

Over time, a number of modifications were made to the sanctuary. The exterior of the pieve's tripartite apse was fortified and incorporated into the town wall during the Guelph-Ghibelline struggles of the fourteenth century, which pitted supporters of the papacy against those of the Holy Roman Emperor. A 38-meter-tall campanile was added sometime in the fifteenth century. As in the church, Roman elements were incorporated into the bell tower, including a sarcophagus frontal thought to have some connection to the saint, which was embedded in its base. The graceful portal, or *pietra caciolfra*, was added in 1541; an inscription above it reads, *Aediles sumptibus Operae, MDXLI*.

PHOTOS: ARCHIVIO FOTOGRAFICO, SPOLETO

The interior of the church is simple, its columns made of exposed stone with plain capitals. The uppermost part of the church is believed to have been rebuilt after an earthquake in 1767, when an additional bay extended the presbytery. Terracotta pavement was laid throughout the nave in an intricate cosmatesque design sometime around 1541.

The 1997 earthquake proved a devastating blow to the pieve, which sustained extensive structural damage as well as damage to its interior finishes. Following the earthquake, emergency repairs were undertaken to stabilize the church. Work on the bell tower was completed in 1999; work on the pieve finished in 2000.

As conservators began cleaning and repairing the interior, they were delighted by what they saw. Beneath layers of damaged whitewash were the remains of a cycle of frescos, executed primarily in *buon fresco*, that had once graced much of the interior—the most splendid of which was a rendering of the *Last Supper*, painted by Jacopo Siculo in 1541.

Although some of the images had come to light in the late nineteenth century, these paintings were found in poor condition, heavily damaged by a brutal cleaning a century ago.

Realizing the value of the paintings, Don Ernesto Brognoli, San Brizio's parish priest and the driving force behind the restoration of the pieve, contacted Rolando Ramaccini and Bruno Bruni, principals in a local firm, Cooperativa Beni Culturali Spoleto, which specializes in a host of conservation problems.

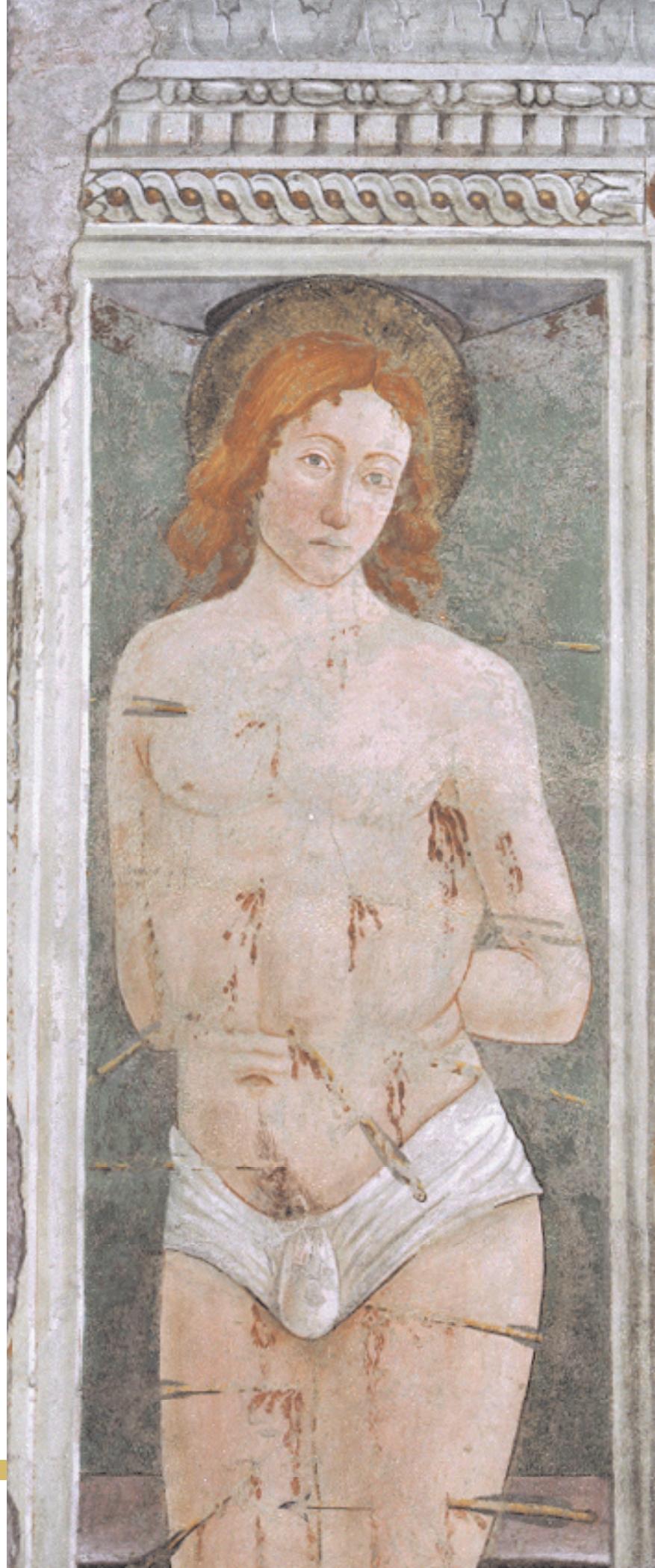
The church is notably humid due to rising damp. The layers of preparatory intonaco have separated from the masonry, and the final intonaco in turn has separated from its underlying support in many areas; the paint layer itself was not well adhered and displayed numerous losses due to flaking and mechanical damage to the pictorial surface. Apart from the images completely or partially obscured with repaint, the exposed paintings were covered with centuries of soot sealed under opaque calcium deposits. Ramaccini and Bruni would handle the conservation of the frescos, while art historian Bruno Toscano of the University of Rome, an expert in Umbrian painting, would attempt to identify the artists who painted the murals and determine the dates of their execution.

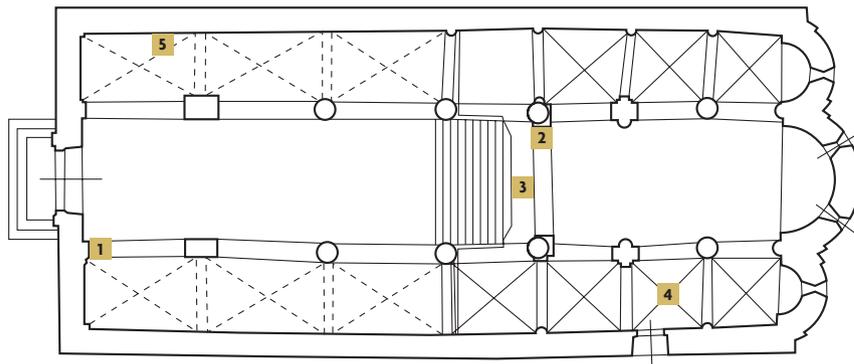
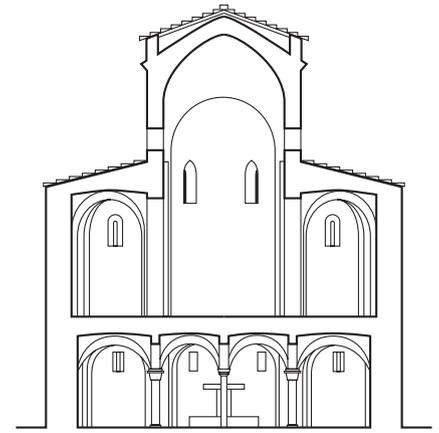
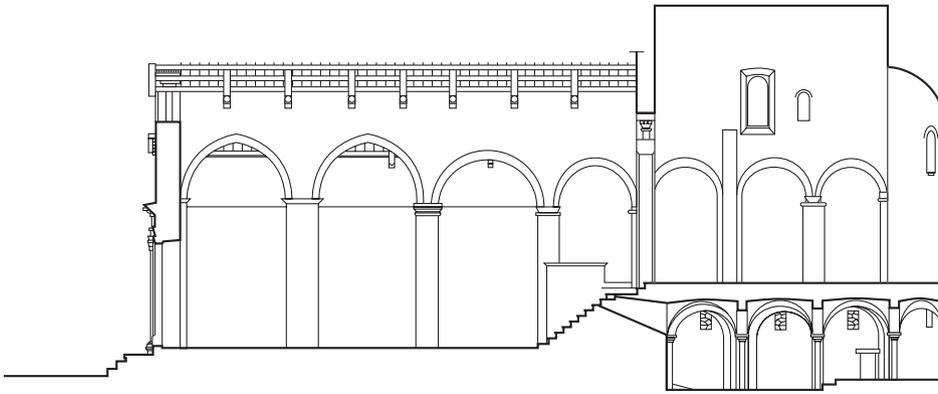
According to Toscano, a rendering of four archangels on the last cross vault on the right, which had been completely obscured by whitewash, is the earliest of the paintings in the pieve. Thought to be of an early-fifteenth-century date, the painting has been attributed to the Maestro di Eggi. Unfortunately, a large crack, quite possibly the result of an earthquake centuries ago, runs across the cross vault, marring three of the four figures. The azurite background, as usual, was applied *a secco* and has all but perished.

After the cleaning and various phases of consolidation of the support and paint layers, the missing intonaco was replaced by new material consisting of traditional lime and sand, with the addition of ground stone of different particle size to simulate the texture of the original intonaco.

THE LOWER PORTION OF THIS PAINTING OF SAN SEBASTIAN, ATTRIBUTED TO BERNARDINO CAMPILIO AND EXECUTED IN BUON FRESCO, HAD BEEN SEVERELY DAMAGED BY RISING DAMP, RESULTING IN TOTAL PAINT LOSS. THE UPPER PORTION, HOWEVER, WOULD HAVE BEEN IN EXCELLENT CONDITION HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR A HARSH CLEANING IN THE PAST. THE LUMINOSITY OF THE IMAGE AND THE INTENSITY OF THE GREEN BACKGROUND HAVE BEEN ENHANCED BY CLEANING. SMALL AREAS OF PAINT LOSS WERE FILLED IN NEUTRAL TONES.

THE NUMBER BY EACH FRESCO IDENTIFIES ITS LOCATION ON THE SITE PLAN ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE.





BUILT ON A BASILICA PLAN WITH THREE NAVES, THE PIEVE DI SAN BRIZIO ATTAINED ITS PRESENT FORM SOMETIME IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY. THE LOCATIONS OF THE RECENTLY RESTORED FRESCOS ARE NOTED ON THE DRAWING.

A 1541 RENDERING OF THE LAST SUPPER BY JACOPO SICULO, BELOW, GRACES THE ARCH LEADING INTO THE PRESBYTERY. THE UPPER PORTION OF THE COMPOSITION WAS DESTROYED WHEN THE CEILING WAS LOWERED, FOLLOWING THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1767. THE BIFORA, OR DOUBLE-ARCHED OPENING, NOW EXPOSED, ONCE HAD BEEN FILLED TO ACCOMMODATE SICULO'S PAINTING.

Large areas of paint loss were filled slightly below the level of the original and integrated with watercolor. Smaller damaged areas were matched semi-mimetically with *tratteggio*.

The adjacent bay depicts the four evangelists. This, too, had been hidden under layers of whitewash and had sustained severe damage through the center of the cross vault sometime in antiquity. However, the painting is rather well preserved, with all four evangelists and their symbols legible. The painted frame, of a stamped, geometric design, differs from that on the cross vault bearing the four archangels. Toscano believes the paintings of the evangelists to have been done by a follower of the Maestro di Eggi, a few years after the archangels were painted. Yellow underdrawing on the intonaco, typical of the period, is still visible in some areas and the halos bear simple punching. Again, large areas of paint loss were filled slightly under the level of the original intonaco and retouching was carried out in watercolor.

On the left side of the presbytery, the paintings in the cross vaults are less well-preserved. A rendering of the four evangelists, of which only traces remain, including the head of an ox—the symbol of St. Luke—appears to be of the same period as its counterpart on the other side of the pieve—the pattern on the painted frame identical. Toscano believes it may have been damaged shortly after its execution and was “redone” on the other side of the sanctuary, which would explain why the evangelists appear twice. Since so little of the original remained, the new intonaco was brought up to the same level as the old and toned to match it in color.

Contemporary with the paintings in the cross vaults are frescos depicting St. Anthony, Abbot, and St. James, and an adjacent *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, also thought to be the work of the Maestro di Eggi. Located on the left wall of the nave, the two saints were originally full-length. It is thought that the fifteenth-century floor must have been lower to accommodate their full height. Modern decorative painting that covered part of the image was cleared and the surfaces cleaned. Under a large





A FIGURE OF ST. PAUL, WHICH GRACES THE INSIDE OF THE ARCH LEADING TO THE PRESBYTERY, IS BELIEVED TO BE THE WORK OF JACOPO SICULO. THE GREEN BACKGROUND WAS EXECUTED IN MALACHITE, APPLIED A SECCO.

loss involving the lower part of the figure of St. James, a layer of original plaster was found and retained. The retouching was done with neutral tones. Although the *Madonna and Child* is badly damaged, the quality of painting is exceptional.

An image of San Brizio on the right wall of the nave may have been done by the same follower of Maestro di Eggi responsible for the four evangelists. Along the lower left edge, signs of an adjacent fresco are visible. Again, previous scraping of the overpaint has damaged the painting, and the azurite background, applied *a secco*, is worn. The frame, the cloth of honor, and the saints' robes are quite well preserved. A scarcely legible inscription along the bottom reads, "*hoc opus fecit f... MCCCCXXX...*" The surface was cleaned of encrusted dirt and the remains of old whitewash. Only small fills were necessary. A minimal amount of mimetic restoration was done on the head to establish the structure of the beard and collar. Other abrasions were toned with neutral colors.

Within the church are a number of works believed to be by Bernardino Campilio, an accomplished local artist working in a modern tradition. Among these are a rendering of the *Madonna and Child Enthroned* on the right wall of the nave. The fresco is well preserved, although abraded in places due to harsh cleaning. The azurite used for the mantle has mostly flaked off, revealing gray underpainting. The yellow ochre preparation of the halo remains, although the metal foil no longer exists. The integration was done mainly with neutral tones, although the large loss to the right side of the frame was imitated in order not to disturb the composition. The fine state of preservation, the quality, and its position make a strong impression.

On the adjacent wall, another image of the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with St. Anthony, Abbot, and St. John*, dated 1478, appears to have been executed by the same artist, as the frames and style of painting are nearly identical. Prior to the restoration, most of the fresco was still covered with whitewash; drips of dirt and soot that had run down the wall attested the extreme damp of the structure and the damage it has provoked. Three *giornate* are visible, one for each figure, while a fourth one was used for the well-preserved dedication and date at the base. The inscription identifying St. John appears to have been added later, *a secco*, since it runs over a join. Most of the azurite has gone, leaving the grayish preparation. The halos are deeply inscribed and traces of the original gilded tin leaf remain. Oddly, the halo of the child is applied over the painted passage and is therefore not punched, but only painted and leafed. The painting is not as well preserved as its companion, having suffered from abrasion, especially the child. A wide crack runs diagonally across the left-hand part. Fortunately, all the heads survive. The large fill is toned intonaco. A piece of original plaster below the painting was left, while more recent repairs were removed, exposing the masonry wall.

To the right of the *Madonna and Child Enthroned with St. Anthony, Abbot, and St. John* is a depiction of St. Sebastian that appears to be part of the same suite of murals authored by Campilio. Executed in buon fresco, the lower half of the image is completely missing.

A fragmentary image of a seated Madonna and Child, attributed to the circle of Bernardino Campilio, had also been previously exposed on





the masonry column to the left of the stairs leading to the presbytery. Overpaint had been roughly scraped off in the past, leaving numerous abrasions on the upper portion of the fresco. The halo, which is punched, had been covered with gilded tin, traces of which remain. The painting was cleaned, remaining overpaint and an old repair removed. The loss in the center was filled with an intonaco, toned and textured to match the original, which is exposed in the lower part of the dress. Abrasions were toned with neutral colors.

Several paintings of slightly later date, due to overlapping intonaco, appear to be the work of Jacopo Zambolino, including a second image of St. Sebastian. The lower part has suffered from the early scraping and mainly from rising damp, which is still a problem in the church. Some passages were covered with whitewash and were recovered during the cleaning, mainly the legs of the saint. Small losses were filled and the retouching done with neutral tones. In the lower part of the paintings along this wall, fills were toned rather than glazed with watercolors, which would be affected by the damp.

Also attributed to this artist is an adjacent painting of San Brizio with a Martyr. It appears to have been done on two applications of intonaco, the joins visible in the decorative border. The straight lines were snapped. Apart from the large loss to the lower right section of the martyr saint, it is in excellent condition with vivid colors. The punched halos originally had laminated foil. The losses consist of local, mechanically caused damages, filled where necessary, and retouched with neutral tones. The patch of plaster filling the loss in the lower right corner was removed and a decision was made, based on the position of the loss, to leave the masonry exposed.

Perhaps the finest painting in the pieve is that of the *Last Supper*, rendered by Jacopo Siculo in 1541.

AMONG THE EARLIEST WORKS IN THE PIEVE DI SAN BRIZIO—SHOWN BEFORE AND AFTER RESTORATION— IS A POORLY PRESERVED PAINTING OF THE MADONNA AND CHILD. BELIEVED TO BE OF MID-FIFTEENTH-CENTURY DATE, BOTH HAVE BEEN ATTRIBUTED TO THE MAESTRO DI EGGI.





A RENDERING OF FOUR EVANGELISTS, WHICH GRACES ONE OF THE PIEVE'S CROSS VAULTS, WAS MARRED BY A LARGE CRACK, POSSIBLY THE RESULT OF AN EARTHQUAKE CENTURIES AGO. THE CRACK WAS STABILIZED AND FILLED DURING THE RESTORATION. THE PAINTING HAS BEEN ATTRIBUTED TO A FOLLOWER OF THE MAESTRO DI EGGI.

The fresco had been partially uncovered in the past. A double-arched opening, or *bifora*, part of the original church plan and now exposed, had been filled in to accommodate Siculo's composition. The background scenery in the painting, perhaps depicting a loggia or window, was lost when the ceiling of the entire structure was lowered, following the 1767 earthquake. Removal of layers of whitewash revealed many details of the composition, including the elaborately patterned floor and flanking columns, and much of the two lovely sibyls. To our surprise, *tromp l'oeil* marble and grape vines, and a tondo bearing the monogram of Christ, also came to light on the arch itself.

A full-length figure of St. Paul, also by Jacopo Siculo, was visible inside the arch on the right before the restoration. It is in true fresco and had survived in good condition, except for scrapes left by an inexperienced cleaner in the past. It simply needed a careful cleaning to remove centuries of soot and conservative retouching with neutral tones to emphasize the well-rendered folds of his red mantle. His head, hands, and feet were well preserved. The green background and dress, probably in malachite applied *a secco*, were, however, considerably worn. An image of St. Peter, of which only a portion of the head has survived, graces the opposite side of the arch and is believed to be by Siculo as well.

Together, these paintings constitute a glorious corpus of previously unknown Umbrian works. That they were brought back to life is due in large part to a WMF grant, underwritten by the Kapiolani and Filippo Marignoli Fund.

—Dianne Modestini

