



Built at the close of the fourteenth century, the Chapel of San Blas in the Cathedral of Toledo, Spain, is a great treasure of Gothic art. Commissioned as a funerary monument by the then archbishop of Toledo, Pedro Tenorio (1328-1399), the chapel is built on a square plan and crowned by an octagonal dome—its eight facets inspired by the design of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which was erected atop what was believed to be the tomb of Christ. Within the chapel is an extraordinary cycle of frescoes painted in quintessential Florentine tradition, quite possibly the work of artists Gherardo di Jacopo Starnina and Niccolò di Antonio, both of whom were active in Toledo and Valencia between 1393 and 1401. In 1395, according to church records, Starnina and Antonio were paid the final installment on an altarpiece depicting the Passion of Christ, which had been commissioned for the Capilla del Salvador (Chapel of the Savior), also within the Toledo Cathedral. The Spaniard Rodriguez de Toledo, whose signature appears on one of the scenes in the Chapel of San Blas, participated in their



Toledo's Gothic Treasure

by JOSÉ MÉNDEZ

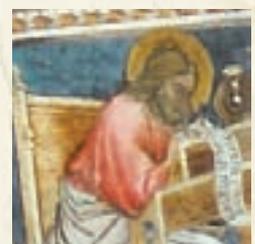
AN EXTRAORDINARY MURAL CYCLE IS REVEALED AFTER A YEAR-LONG RESTORATION

execution. Until recently, however, the murals were barely discernible, obscured by centuries of soot and salts wrought by rising damp, and damaged by earlier attempts to restore them.

The fresco cycle comprises 14 discrete scenes. The narrative, which begins on the chapel's west wall and continues clockwise around the room, commences with representations of the apostles John and Luke and a depiction of the Annunciation. The latter shows an impressive use of perspective. The Virgin and the archangel Gabriel are in the foreground, while in the background a succession of rooms creates an illusion of depth. This scene, one of the most beautiful of the chapel, suggests the work of a master of miniature art, for it shows an exquisite craftsmanship in the details, such as a *Book of Hours*—which traces the genealogy of the Virgin to the house of David—which is depicted laying on the table with a Star of David on its cover. In the background is a rendering of a building with Moorish arches. Collectively, the imagery is representative of the three religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, which coexisted in the city of Toledo from the Middle Ages onward.

The chapel's north wall is adorned with a scene of the Crucifixion that echoes the style of a similar scene in the National San Matteo Museum in Pisa, which was painted in the manner of Antonio Veneziano, with whom Starnina is thought to have apprenticed. Depictions of the Nativity, Christ before Caiaphas, the Entombment, and the Descent into Limbo complete the decoration of the north wall, although only fragments remain of the latter two scenes. Photographs taken of the paintings in the 1920s reveal a much more conventional artistic style compared to that used to render the Crucifixion and Annunciation.

Only faint traces remain of the scenes that once graced the chapel's east wall—namely a rendering of the Ascension of Christ. Although barely visible, the





A DEPICTION OF THE ANNUNCIATION ON THE WEST WALL, SHOWN BEFORE AND AFTER RESTORATION, IS AMONG THE MOST BEAUTIFUL SCENES IN THE CHAPEL. THE SUCCESSION OF ROOMS RENDERED IN THE BACKGROUND GIVES THE PAINTING AN EXQUISITE SENSE OF DEPTH.

mural is exceptional for the skill with which the garments were painted and the foreshortening technique in the faces turned towards heaven. Images of the apostles Mark and Matthew writing the Holy Gospels have since been lost, although they are known from photographs taken nearly a century ago.

The southern wall features scenes of the Resurrection, the Last Judgement, Pentecost, and Jesus sitting on the right hand of God. According to experts, the scene of Pentecost is enigmatic in that it is witnessed from the outside by a group of Jews, among whom is one dressed in a red garment that draws the eye. Could it be a self-portrait of one of the painters who worked in the chapel—Gherardo di Jacopo Starnina, Rodríguez de Toledo, or Niccolò di Antonio?

The paintings that completed the lower register of the chapel have especially suffered the consequences of extreme dampness and earlier attempts to arrest water infiltration. Of the scene of the Last Judgment that covered the western wall, only the central section and a depiction of a group of the blessed marching towards salvation have survived. We know from the writings of Father Blas Ortiz, who published a study on the churches of Toledo in 1549, that the frescoes also included a depiction of the Damned burning in “sulphuric and eternal flames.” The lower registers of the north and west walls are decorated with scenes from the lives of St. Antonio Abbot and St. Blas, respectively. Above the arch, which serves as entrance to the chapel, are scenes of the lives of St. Peter and St. Paul.

Since its construction, the Chapel of San Blas has been damaged primarily from water seeping in through the chamber’s north wall. A stonemason was hired in 1456 to carry out emergency repairs. Further “restorations” were carried out in the fifteenth and again in the sixteenth century, at which time it seems some of the sacristy furniture had also been damaged by water. In 1719, it was decided that the chapel should be completely repainted. In order to allow for better re-plastering, paintings on the north wall were chipped away. None of these repairs, however, addressed the problem of poor drainage.

In the late 1770s, further damage was in large part arrested when a sewer parallel to the north wall was leveled and repaired. No further work was done until 1924, when the dean of the cathedral, Julio Polo Benito, had the plaster covering the interior portions of the walls removed, which revealed the remains of mural paintings and the signature of the artist Rodríguez de Toledo. Efforts to preserve the paintings themselves, however, resulted in further damage to the frescoes.

By 2000, centuries of exposure to moisture compounded by failed attempts to restore the frescoes had left the extraordinary work of art in a sorry state. At that time, those in charge of the cathedral commissioned a study to determine if the frescoes could be restored, and, if so, the most appropriate techniques to be used.

On December 10, 2003, a joint Spanish-Italian team consisting of Antonio



IN A 1791 ATTEMPT TO REPAIR THE CHAPEL’S MASONRY, THE FRESCOES, FAR LEFT, WERE CHIPPED AWAY SO THAT THE WALLS COULD BE REPLASTERED. THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PLASTER LAYER WAS SUBSEQUENTLY REMOVED IN 1924. A FRAGMENTARY SCENE OF THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST, LEFT, SURVIVES ON THE CHAPEL’S EAST WALL.

BURIAL OF SAN BLAS
ON THE EAST WALL



Painted Splendor of San Blas

by DIANE COLE AHL

UNVEILING A MASTERPIECE OF SPANISH GOTHIC ART

Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Toledo was among the most cosmopolitan cities in Europe, reflecting the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic legacies of its citizens and its contacts with diverse cultures. Toledo was the official center of the Church in Spain, the *Iglesia Primada*. Its archbishop, appointed by the pope, was the highest ecclesiastical authority in the land. The archbishop's church was the magnificent cathedral, whose foundation, according to legend, could be traced to the fourth century.

Of all the city's archbishops, few were more illustrious than Pedro Tenorio (1328–1399). Famous for his charity and piety, he built the north cloister of the cathedral, created its library, and donated many relics to augment its sanctity. Tenorio also commissioned the Chapel of San Blas around 1393 to house his own tomb.

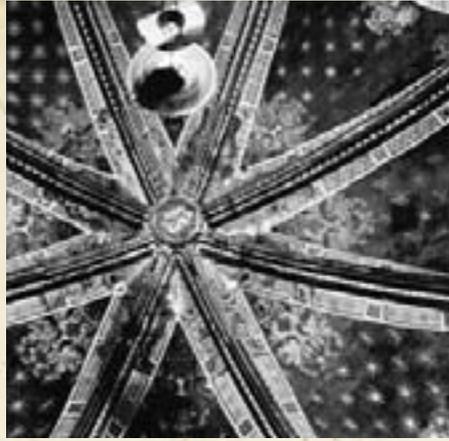
Painted under his guidance, the splendid frescoes adorning the chapel walls were the work of as many as three artists of the Late Medieval to Early Renaissance period. Critics have suggested that the murals were intended to illustrate the Apostles' Creed. We might also propose that the frescoes' themes had special resonance for the site and its patron. Ranging from the Annunciation and Nativity through the Crucifixion and Last Judgment, they correspond to the Church feasts (holy days) that Tenorio, as archbishop, was required to celebrate personally. Of equal significance, they relate to the cathedral's most precious relics, which included remnants of Christ's swaddling clothes, wood from the Cross, and filaments from the Holy Shroud.

Although the signature of Rodríguez of Toledo—about whom little is known—was visible up until a few decades ago on a scene entitled the Martyrdom of St. Blaise (*S. Blas*) on the west wall, it is clear from distinct differences in painting styles throughout the mural cycle that he was not the author of all the murals, which some have attributed to Gherardo di Jacopo Starnina, a late fourteenth-century Florentine painter and one of the most important artists of the International Style. Starnina is known to have completed an altarpiece (now lost) for the Chapel of the Savior in 1395.

Although little is known about Starnina's early life, he joined the Florentine confraternity of Saint Luke—the brotherhood of painters—in 1387, and entered the painters' guild a year later. By 1393, Starnina had journeyed to Spain, painting frescoes and retablos in both Toledo, and in Valencia, where he lived between 1395 and 1401. Soon after, he returned to Tuscany, where he lived until his death ca. 1413, having completed major works during that time in Florence and Empoli.

Starnina's paintings reveal a masterful command of perspective, rich and luminous colors, and intensely characterized figures with rhythmic, calligraphic drapery, some of which seems evident in San Blas murals. Yet, until recently, the poor condition of the frescoes precluded discussion of their authorship. Following the successful restoration of these expressive narratives, we can now appraise the mastery of those who painted them, and perhaps once and for all settle the question of Starnina's role in their creation. ■

MUCH OF THE DAMAGE AT SAN BLAS IS QUITE RECENT AS EVIDENCED BY PHOTOS OF THE CENTRAL VAULT TAKEN IN 1960 AND 2001, RIGHT. THE VAULT AS LOOKS TODAY, FACING PAGE. A GENERAL VIEW OF THE NEWLY RESTORED EAST AND SOUTH WALLS, BELOW.



Sánchez Barriga and Sabino Giovannoni, working under the supervision of architect Jaime Castañón, embarked on a year-long restoration campaign, which was underwritten by World Monuments Fund-Spain, the Spanish electrical company Iberdrola, and the Fundación Cultura y Deporte from the Junta de Castilla La Mancha.

The murals were carefully cleaned, consolidated, and reattached to their original plaster ground. In the conservation process, the team was able to discern a number of techniques that had been used to render the paintings. These include the *giornate* (patches of plaster indicating each day's work), outlines scored in the plaster, and the use of tempera to embellish the surface of the fresco.

Analysis of the paintings also revealed details of the various attempts to restore the frescoes, which had been repainted, plastered over, and in places covered with animal glues in an effort to consolidate the pigments. Efforts to prevent further water infiltration through the north wall, which is now seven meters below street level, will be carried out in the near future.

In addition to restoring the paintings, conservators also cleaned and consolidated the carved sarcophagi of Don Pedro Tenorio, for whom the chapel was built, and his nephew Don Vicente Arias. The work of the most famous sculptor of the time, Ferran González, the fine alabaster sculptures were once covered in gold and brightly painted plaster, lost during earlier attempts at restoration. Even though stripped of their polychrome, the statues are nonetheless radiant in their beauty.

Today, thanks to international support and expert restoration work, the city of Toledo has recouped one of its greatest artistic and cultural treasures, the Chapel of San Blas. ■

