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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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THE BATTLE OF SAN ROMANO

by Uccello

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THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION

The following chapters are a study of the Battle of San Romano paintings. The study begins with the history of the battle itself, and a visual description of the paintings. The purpose of the latter is to outline the visual strengths of the work, and to form a connection between the spectacle of the paintings themselves, and the words used in describing them.

Next the paintings are placed in their context, and there is reference to a variety of works. These are chosen to give examples of some of the forms of the International Gothic Style or of naturalism, since these were important influences in Uccello's time.

Following this, perspective is considered. This was an area of particular interest to Uccello. Examples of the mathematical workings of perspective are included, while the final section is concerned with the content of the works. This part reviews the works in the light of the information gathered in the previous parts.

Paolo Uccello served his apprenticeship in the fifteenth century under the Florentine sculptor Ghiberti, in whose workshop Donatello also studied. Uccello later worked in Venice and Padua, as well as in his native Florence. His activities ranged from tempera painting to fresco and mosaic work. He also prepared cartoons for stained glass windows.

CHAPTER I

In order to begin an exploration of the Battle of San Romano, first of all the visual spectacle of the paintings themselves must be examined. To do this it will be necessary to consider the historical basis of the battle, as well as taking account of the display of horses and men presented in the paintings. The Battle of San Romano consists of three panels. The first of these, from left to right, measures 182 x 317 cm., the second or central panel measures 182 x 323 cm., and the third or right-hand panel measures 180 x 316 cm. The paintings are executed in tempera on wood, and first come to light in an inventory of the contents of the Palazzo Medici, which was taken in the year 1492. They were listed as furnishings from the bedroom of Lorenzo de Medici. The inventory indicates that the paintings were set between gilded pilasters or in gilded frames. The paintings were executed around the year 1456. It is possible that prior to the date of the inventory the room which housed the paintings had a function other than that of a bed-chamber. They appear for a second time in an inventory of the contents of the Palazzo taken in 1578.

It is difficult to discover the subsequent history of the paintings. One reached the Uffizi Gallery in Florence between 1769 and 1784, and the other two were acquired from the Giraldi family by Lombardi and Baldi between 1844 and 1848. One of these two appeared in the Campana collection and was purchased for the Musee Napoleon III in 1863. The other was purchased with the Lombardi-Baldi collection in 1857 for the National Gallery in London.

The paintings of the Battle of San Romano commemorate a battle which took place on June 1, 1432 between the Florentines and the Sienese. Since April 1432 Florentine lands had been subjected to raids by Sienese forces under the Condottiere Bernardino della Carda, who was at that time in alliance with the Duke of Milan. The Florentines, having suffered a number of defeats, decided to replace the commander of troops Micheletto Allendoli da Cotignola with one Niccolo Maurucci da Tolentino, a man of repute as a condottiere or commander. Cotignola was given a lower position as Governatore of a subsidiary force.

Tolentino enjoyed success in his new position. In the battle which forms the subject-matter of the paintings in question he pursued the Sienese enemy so fiercely that he and his men became isolated from the main body of the Florentine forces. He and his troops were then surprised by some more Sienese led by Bernardino della Carda. This happened in the Arno valley near the tower of San Romano.

Though military code at the time would have allowed Tolentino to capitulate, he decided to fight on even with such a small company. They resisted for eight hours, and were eventually relieved by Cotignola and his troops, who crossed the Arno and attacked the Sienese rear, saving the day and winning the battle.

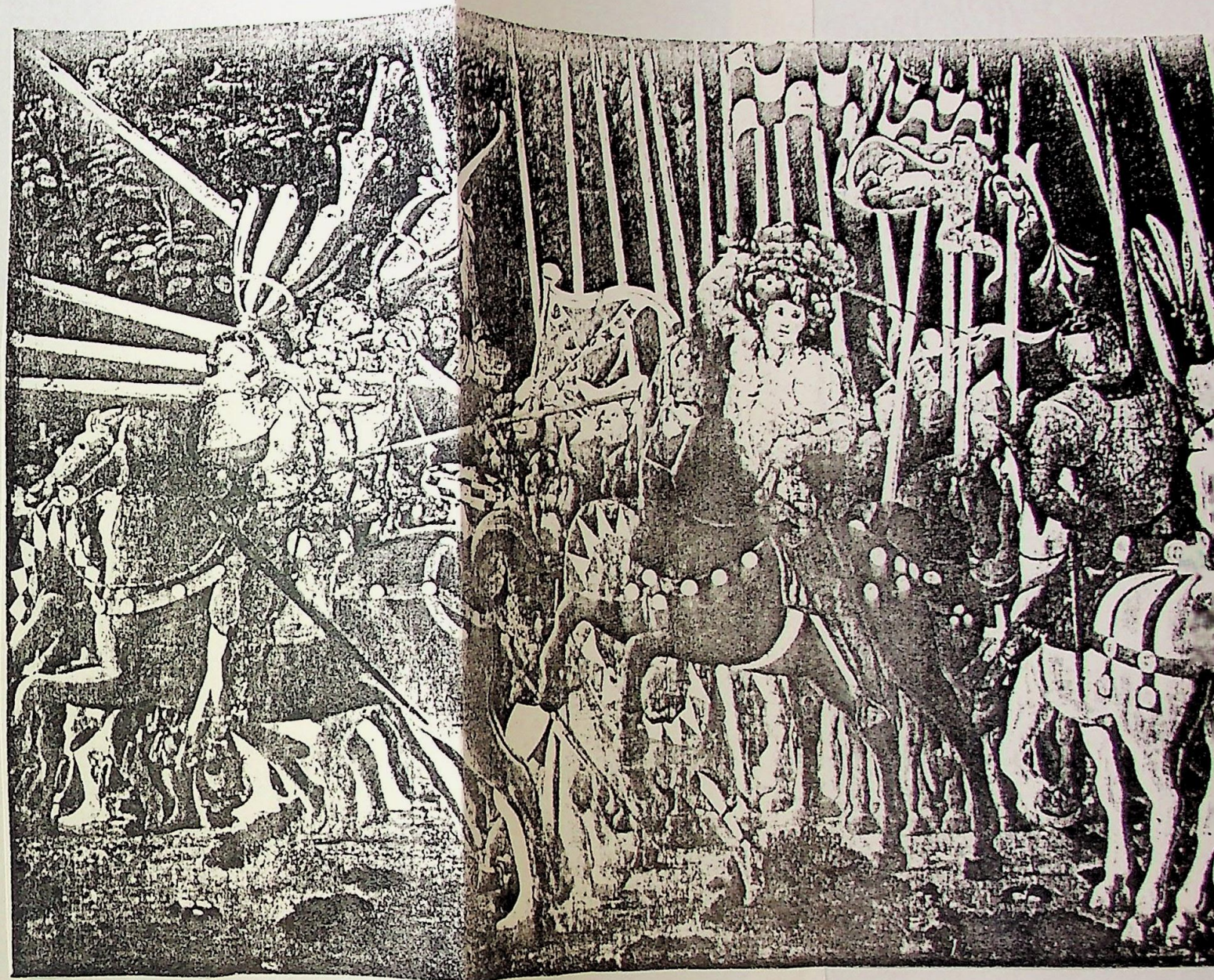
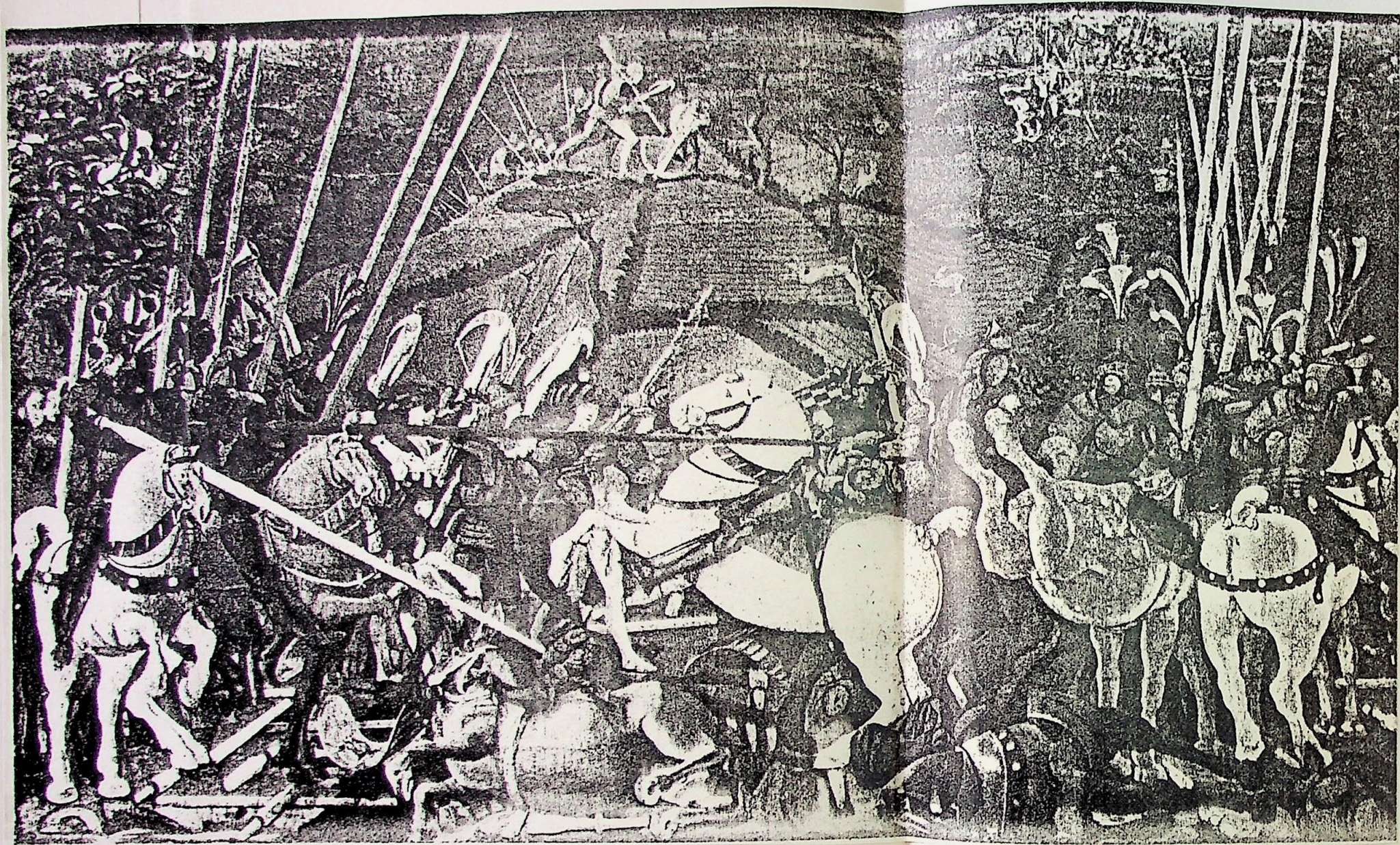
It is necessary when considering a work such as this to take account of its age and the effects of time. Not only are present-day perceptions of paintings, their subjects, and their forms very different from the perceptions of Uccello's contemporaries - time has also affected the physical nature of the works. Colours fade or darken with age, just

as meaning and content grow more dim and obscure. The treatment a painting receives at the hands of its various owners also takes its toll. For example, the three paintings arrived in London, Paris, and Florence respectively. The painting in London was severely overcleaned, to such an extent that the modelling of the horses has been partially removed. This has made a difference to the visual impact of the painting. The horses look exceedingly unnatural, and the painting appears to have been done in numerous flat areas.

The painting in the Louvre, which features Cotignola and his troops, has the remains of silvered armour on some of the horsemen. Bright silvered armour must have been a prominent feature of the works when new. Its inclusion would have significantly influenced perception of the paintings. The Uffizi example shows signs of early cleaning, but Uccello's colouristic intentions are much less evident than they are on the London panel. However, the horses in the Uffizi panel appear quite naturalistic and dramatic, unlike the bubble-like horses in the London panel. Consideration of the effects of time, as shown in these examples, will allow the works to be judged in a fairer and better-informed light.

Though the paintings do not form a continuous narrative, they must nevertheless have been painted with consideration towards one another. This may be seen in the balance achieved between the visual spectacle of all three paintings, though each possesses its own separately conceived composition. In the left panel the figure of Tolentino faces right towards the centre panel. The soldier slightly ahead of him, deeper within the picture-space, lunges strongly forward with his lance.





The lances of the troops behind the Condottiere descend in leaning sequence towards the right. The trumpets also reflect the soldier's movement to the right. All of Tolentino's forces move in that direction and are opposed by the strong figure of the Sienese soldier. He is mounted on a pale-toned charger advancing towards the left. This figure can be seen as representing the leading guard of the Sienese attack.

The central panel contains the most destructive and exciting part of the action. It is tightly packed with battling figures, and it is hard to distinguish one side from the other of the battling forces. Della Carda is seen being knocked from his horse, following the fate of his fellow soldier in the foreground, who has already been unhorsed. Della Carda and his horse form the upper part of a triangular composition in this panel. The triangular form can be traced through the pale-toned charger's foreleg to the head of the horse on the ground, and from the white horse's neck to his rump, through to another horse lying behind him. The point of the triangle is also reflected in the shape of the hedges bordering the fields in the background of the painting.

The right-hand panel shows Cotignola advancing towards the left on the rearguard of the Sienese. Towards the left of the painting one Florentine soldier leads the attack. This figure looks as if he might charge right out of the picture-frame. Again lances are used to indicate direction of movement in the painting. These work in conjunction with the horses. Cotignola glances back at his men, urging them forward while his charger leaps to the left.

The decorative scheme of the visual layout has many features worthy of note. Tolentino and Cotignola both appear arrayed in ceremonial clothes of a kind which would never have been worn in battle. A number of soldiers also appear wearing elaborate head-dresses, and horses too wear fancy, coloured trappings instead of battle-gear.

There is a strong sense of pattern evident in the artist's placement of lances. Gorgeous fruit and flowers glow from the dark leafy hedge. Even the landscape beyond the hedge has its occupants, who serve to decorate that area of the picture-space, as well as to provide additional information to the narrative. Weapons are frequently treated as objects of beauty in themselves, and even men and horses are treated as beautiful geometric forms, as well as being men and horses.

The three paintings between them contain something like twenty-four horses and a greater number of men. But it is notable that comparatively few Sienese troops are depicted. There is just one outstanding Sienese horseman in the left panel. Again, while della Carda is the main figure in the centre painting, the Sienese forces are in fact concentrated in a knot on the right side of this painting. The panel on the right is concerned only with Cotignola and his men, and no Sienese are shown in this painting. Throughout the three paintings the action is all concerned with the defeat of the Sienese, as is evident in the centre panel in which their horses and their leader suffer a total defeat.

The fact that the three paintings do not form a continuous narrative is a matter which deserves some attention.

If the battle had been painted as a continuous whole on three panels the work might possibly have been more imposing. But because the paintings each have separate compositions some interesting questions arise.

By separately illustrating the high points of the battle Uccello has overcome limits which would have come into effect had he painted the battle as a unitary whole. The action would be less effective had the artist painted, say, a greater number of soldiers from a greater distance. The figures as they are actually shown in the paintings involve the viewer in the action because they are seen close-up. It is thus easy to imagine the many other troops who would have been in the battle.

The three events shown in the paintings would have probably taken place at different times. But because the paintings are composed separately the events can be seen simultaneously. At the same time the three martial scenes form a harmonious spectacle of the battle. They also inform the viewer of how the manoeuvres which finally trapped the Sienese between the two Florentine forces were implemented.

To elaborate, the left panel can be taken as showing Tolentino rallying his men in desperate defence against the Sienese force. The latter is being led into the picture-frame by the figure on the right, the body of followers being in the imagination of the viewer. But another way of seeing this painting is as a depiction of Tolentino attacking instead of defending. He can be seen to be advancing towards Cotignola on the third panel, the Sienese being crushed meanwhile between the two Florentine forces.

The central panel taken in isolation shows the strength of the Florentines on the left, and the defeat and retreat of the Sienese on the right. Again, this painting also suggests a greater number of Florentines coming behind those shown coming from the left. Also imagination would have it that many more Sienese have retreated already to the right. When taken in the context of the group of paintings the Sienese are still suffering defeat, but this defeat looks all the more complete because there is no escape-route visible.

The panel on the right shows Florentine soldiers grouped in an orderly fashion, lances erect as they move from the right. Led by Cotignola they are just beginning to charge. The ground beneath their feet is clear of debris, unlike the ground in the other two paintings, where it is littered with armour and broken lances. This clear ground also indicates that these men are fresh to the battle, and have not yet reached an area much affected by the battle.

The three main subjects shown could be separate events in both a temporal and a spatial sense. But all three viewed together still provide an excellent spectacle of the course the real battle took. The artist has not attempted to represent the entire battle, but this means that there is room for the imagination and subjectivity of the spectator to provide the unspecified information. Detailed accounts of the most important action are given, and the whole work is so contrived that it draws the onlooker right into the battle.



Detail of Fig. 2.



Detail of Fig. 3.

CHAPTER II

To further the exploration of the three panels of the Battle of San Romano it is necessary to place the work in the context of its time. How had painting developed before Uccello's time, and what were his contemporaries painting? From what kind of tradition did Uccello emerge, and did he distinguish himself in any way? Some of these questions may be answered by examining elements which influenced art of that period, and by comparing the Battle with the work of Uccello's contemporaries, and also with earlier work, and important work from elsewhere in Europe. By these means insights can be gained into Uccello's forms and methods.

Discussion of work from various regions as it stands in relation to the Battle will help to show developments of style. It will also highlight other works which occupy prominent positions with regard to the International Gothic tradition, and are therefore relevant to an examination of the Battle.

The International Gothic Style prevailed in Europe in Uccello's time. From around 1400 it expressed a conglomerate of the features of work from various regions. The spread of ideas had come about partly as a result of the increase of trade. Another factor in the development of this sophisticated style was the growth of fashionable life in the expanding cities of the time.

Systematic court-patronage in France and Italy gave art an assured position. Under its fosterage all manner of artwork, even everyday objects and sometimes buildings, became more ornate and refined and ingenious in their making. The exotic was always in demand, which meant that artists from distant regions became aware of each other's works and ideas.

They borrowed forms and techniques from one another to satisfy the demands of their patrons for the unusual, and also to satisfy their own curiosity at the strange foreign works.

As a result of the interchange of ideas, artists throughout Europe showed certain common features in their work. Figures were frequently elongated and slender and ethereal. Their hands and features were fine and delicately painted or sculpted. They tended to be schematized rather than naturalistic. This decorative trend was followed for the majority of subjects.

Artists made drawings from nature of various subjects, including many kinds of animals and plants. But the information they gathered was not used to create optically accurate representations of individual subjects. Rather they used the information to build visual representations of the idea of figure, plant or creature.

Between 1407 and 1415 Ghiberti's workshop in Florence was a major stronghold of the International Gothic Style.¹ Uccello served his apprenticeship with Ghiberti, and must have received a good grounding in the methods and ideas of this style. He would have perhaps helped his master in the casting of figures, or with designs for bronzework.

But other influences existed in the work of Donatello and Masaccio. Uccello would also have known Brunelleschi's work, and that of Gentile da Fabriano and Masaccio. These two represent very different kinds of work, though they were exact contemporaries. Fabriano's work is a fine example of the International Gothic Style, while Masaccio's ranks among the finest of naturalistic works of the Renaissance.

¹John Pope-Hennessy, The Complete Works of Paolo Uccello, p.2

The time in which Uccello painted the Battle of San Romano was subject to a variety of influences. The panels combine various elements of these. Uccello's forms are three-dimensional, in keeping with discoveries in perspective. But they are not lifelike. The paintings abound with detail, and are decoratively designed according to International Gothic traditions. But the decorative forms are placed within the confines of true picture-space. This is evident in the foreground area of all three panels especially. By these means Uccello combined the various influences at work in his time.

To gain a better understanding of the environment in which the Battle was painted, it is rewarding to pay closer attention to influences. These are to be found in International Gothic Style and naturalism for the most part, and a brief study of the background of both reveals a good deal of interesting information. Naturalism and the International Gothic Style can best be examined by taking examples of outstanding artists and their works. Examples discussed here may be either artists who have had an influence on art, or may be those who provide fine illustrations of International Gothic Style or of naturalism. Works discussed may range over a broad area, from those which are at the heart of one or the other of the above-mentioned streams, to those which reside at their fringes.

There is a strong sense of unreality or unearthliness in the Battle of San Romano. This is a feature inherited from the International Gothic tradition, and Uccello's horses had figures are painted in the dramatic, elegant poses of the style. The rigour with which their exact forms are worked

out makes their action seem suspended, as if they were frozen in space. The extreme clarity of detail and delicate appearance of forms also brings the work a step away from reality by exaggeration.

Gothic carvings are of interest at this point for two reasons. First there is the fact that they were precursors to the mode of representing the figure in the International Gothic Style. Secondly, these carvings were intended to be representations of the heavenly come to Earth. The second reason listed here touches upon the thinking which lies behind the outward forms of the carvings.

Figures adorning the tall Gothic churches were carved in slender elongated form for more than one reason. They blended harmoniously with the structure of the churches, and slenderness of form lent itself readily to elegance and grace. Figures which might often be viewed from below would appear short and squat if they were not carved in an elongated form.

But whatever the reasons, the carved figures were as beautiful, delicate, slender and spiritual as real angels come to Earth. This association helps in understanding the outlook of the artists. To some extent this idealized and spiritual attitude would have had some influence on Uccello's depictions of men. His figures, though involved in battle, are always beautiful and graceful in their movements, and where these are visible, their faces appear serene and delicate.

Two celebrated precursors of Uccello were Giotto and Duccio. These two great masters demonstrate the early part of the development of both the naturalistic and International

Gothic traditions. Giotto, a Florentine himself, created a feeling of real space in his work. This is especially evident in his fresco of Faith, in the Capella dell'Arena in Padua. This work was completed around 1306, and looks like a carved statue in a niche. It is modelled in light and shade.

This work demonstrates a relationship between sculpture and painting, which also exists in the Battle of San Romano. Uccello was apprenticed to Ghiberti the sculptor, and this medium has had its effect in Uccello's treatment of horses in the Battle. Artists trying to discover a relationship between sculpture and painting found a model for this in Giotto's work.

Duccio of Siena worked from within a Byzantine tradition. He and his followers developed stylized forms for their subjects, but figures in these works may be found involved in everyday pursuits. An example of this is to be found in a painting by Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi of the Annunciation. This work was painted in 1333 for an altar in Siena Cathedral, and in it the Virgin appears to have been surprised at her reading by the angel.

The works of Giotto and Duccio in the context of a discussion of the Battle of San Romano are perhaps not directly relevant, but they provide examples of different extremes in painting. In Giotto's work the roots of naturalism can be seen, while Duccio breathes new life into Byzantine forms, which aided in the formation of the International Gothic Style.

In the fourteenth century there was no clear separation between naturalistic and decorative work. Uccello's Battle also combines these features, and displays the fact that they

contain separate elements. The three panels are decoratively painted, showing very beautiful detail from nature. The flowers and fruit, dogs and small animals in the background, and the elegant tails and fetlocks of the horses are all fine examples of the skills of International Gothic painters. But then it is strange to see that these delicate details are parts of figures and creatures shown in real pictorial space.

Fabriano is an outstanding painter of the International Gothic Style. Uccello would have known his work and perhaps would have looked to it as a model for his own since Fabriano was by a number of years the older man. His painting of the Adoration of the Magi is a superbly rich, decorative painting. It is like a celebration of the most exotic collection of creatures and kings imaginable. The richness and variety of nature and mankind is arrayed before the Christ-child. Perhaps the artist had an idea of this type in mind as he made the work.

The church began to frown upon the elaborate costumes and strange animals that artists put into their works. They considered these details frivolous and vain. This opinion had its effect in the shift towards the more severe style of the Renaissance.

Uccello's paintings share with Fabriano's Adoration of the Magi the feeling of a celebration of the splendid and the lush. This effect is in part achieved through decoration, the use of which was developed in illustration.

By its nature, an illustration is intended for close and intimate study. It has to represent an idea, which is probably to be found nearby in the text of the manuscript. The aim of representing an idea instead of a visual form is an

abstract one, and illustrations developed stylized, decorative imagery suitable to representing ideas. They had to be as informative as the text, in their own way, as well as fulfilling the function of decorating a manuscript, and were often packed with detail which leaked slowly to the viewer.

An illustration by the Limbourg brothers from a book of Hours painted for the Duke of Berry in about 1410 is worth noting, since its subject is a group of horse riders. There is an attempt at creating a feeling of space by placing the figures against a wall of trees, beyond which rises a castle in the distance. By comparison to the Limbourg brothers' horses, Uccello's look fierce and wild. The strong contrast of one horse posed against another creates a jarring effect suitable to the subject of a battle.

When Uccello's Battle is judged by the standards of the International Gothic Style, or compared with another work in this style, it must rate highly. His horses are very fine battle-chargers, and the whole battle is suitably painted. Had Uccello not been thought an excellent artist, he would never have secured the commission from the Medici family to paint the battle.

An important contemporary of Uccello's was the Netherlandish painter Jan Van Eyck. Uccello may have known of him as there is evidence that Italians were aware of Northern artists.² A Florentine artist, Giovanni Santi, wrote a poem listing great artists of his time. In it he mentions Jan

² Michael Baxandall, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy, p. 114.

Van Eyck, Rogier Van der Weyden, Fabriano, Fra Angelico, Pisanello, and many others, among them Paolo Uccello. Van Eyck's painting The Righteous Judges and the Knights of Christ is a good work for comparison to the Battle of San Romano, with its subject of mounted horsemen. It is a fine example of Van Eyck's mastery of the rendering of surfaces. Armour, hair, and earth are painted so well that the eye is entirely deceived and its textures are almost possible to touch. This is the direction in which Van Eyck took the International Style.

Uccello, on the other hand, actually silvered his horsemen's armour. This practice was in keeping with earlier or Byzantine tradition, when anything which was supposed to be golden was actually painted with powdered gold.

But fashions shifted during the course of the fifteenth century. The use of gold in painting began to be considered over-ostentatious,³ and it became praiseworthy to represent glamour with ordinary colours. Skilful craftsmanship acquired a new status. The movement towards more subtle types of display is evident even in an anecdote about flashy dress!⁴

There are some interesting points to note about the use of colour generally in Uccello's time. Some colours which today would not be considered necessarily special, were special in those days. For instance, after gold and silver, ultramarine was the most expensive colour.⁵ This colour was made from powdered lapis-lazuli imported from the Levant. There was also a red made from silver and sulphur.

Although cheaper substitutes existed, for important commissions the patron would usually specify the qualities of colours to be used.

³ Ibid., p.14. ⁴ Ibid., p.15. ⁵ Ibid., p.11.

Quite a few of the Florentine troops in the Battle of San Romano are adorned with blue trappings, and in the centre panel a number of the soldiers' geometrical hats are painted partly blue. Uccello frequently drew 'mazzocchi', the ring-shaped geometric forms evident under the guise of headgear throughout the paintings. In the Battle he has drawn attention to their presence by colouring them with the best pigment, but he also made many studies in perspective which use the 'mazzocchio' as their basis.

Colour throughout the works is strong and vivid. They must have been particularly striking when first completed, with soldiers in silver armour making war, and carrying red and yellow lances as they battle back and forth before the dark leafy hedge with its glowing fruit. The area beyond the hedge is painted in earth colours and greens and other neutral tones. It recedes somewhat as an effect of this colouring. As there is no horizon in the works to create an effect of distance, quite a lot depends on the use of colour. Uccello's strong colours were criticized in another of his works by Vasari, who thought they should be more naturalistic and less decoratively employed.⁶

The disintegration of the International Gothic Style was under way even in Uccello's time, but this was a very gradual process, and this style existed alongside the naturalistic style for a great many years. Uccello was aware of the work of his naturalist counterparts, and adopted some of their methods. His composition shows some naturalist influence, but he has formalized it to suit his own style.

Uccello would have known of the architectural achievements of Brunelleschi, the designer of the great dome of
⁶ John Pope-Hennessy, The Complete Works of Paolo Uccello, p.10

Florence Cathedral, who is also credited with the invention of perspective. This great artist played an active part in bringing ideas from the classical era back to the fore. Developments of the theory of perspective, especially those coming from one who had made such achievements in engineering, had a strong influence. Uccello realized the importance of the developments, and it is worth noting that single-vanishing-point perspective was consistently used in Western painting until comparatively recent times.

Uccello would have known works of Pisanello, Donatello, and Masaccio. Pisanello was an artist who worked in the International Gothic Style. His drawings show how artists of that style researched their paintings, and one of them was for a time mistakenly thought to be Uccello's work. It is easy to imagine that the sketch of a horse could be a preparatory drawing for one of the horses in the Battle.

Donatello was a sculptor and Masaccio was a painter. These two artists were part of the new naturalistic trend. Donatello's St. George, of the church of Or San Michele, Florence, stands firmly planted, feet apart, and wears a determined expression on his face. Masaccio's wall-painting of The Holy Trinity, the Virgin, St. John, and the donors, in the Sta Maria Novella, Florence, shows the crucified Christ hanging battered and bruised in an alcove remarkably painted in perspective. This work is reminiscent to some extent of Giotto's Faith in a niche. There is nothing decorative about these works, in which all other-worldliness is disregarded as these artists break with tradition.

Between the work of Masaccio and Uccello there is a great

difference not only in the completed paintings, but also in their respective ideas before the paintings are approached. In naturalistic painting figures were painted to show physical qualities, or to depict individual characters. But International Gothic figures were built from collected information, put together to form an idealized detailed figure. An artist had to start from one premise or the other, as the ideas forming the basis of each are fundamentally different.

Taken in the general context of their time, the paintings of the Battle of San Romano are very fine works. As examples of the International Gothic Style, and compared with other works in that style, they are strong paintings. But Uccello shows in the Battle that he is not simply content to paint in the manner he was taught in Ghiberti's workshop. He is interested in the work of his contemporaries, and is particularly interested in perspective.

But Uccello does not become so enamoured with single-vanishing-point perspective that his use of it becomes slavish. Proof of this can be found in the Battle, where he uses single-vanishing-point perspective in the foregrounds, but in the backgrounds. These are almost abstract areas. Fields are treated as interesting geometrical shapes, and the figures inhabiting this region are often out of proportion to their surroundings. An artist who so thoroughly explored perspective and its uses could not have accidentally painted such a background. Rather this is evidence of Uccello's readiness to put techniques to his own use, and avoid being ruled by them.

He is almost like a modern painter in this - he takes

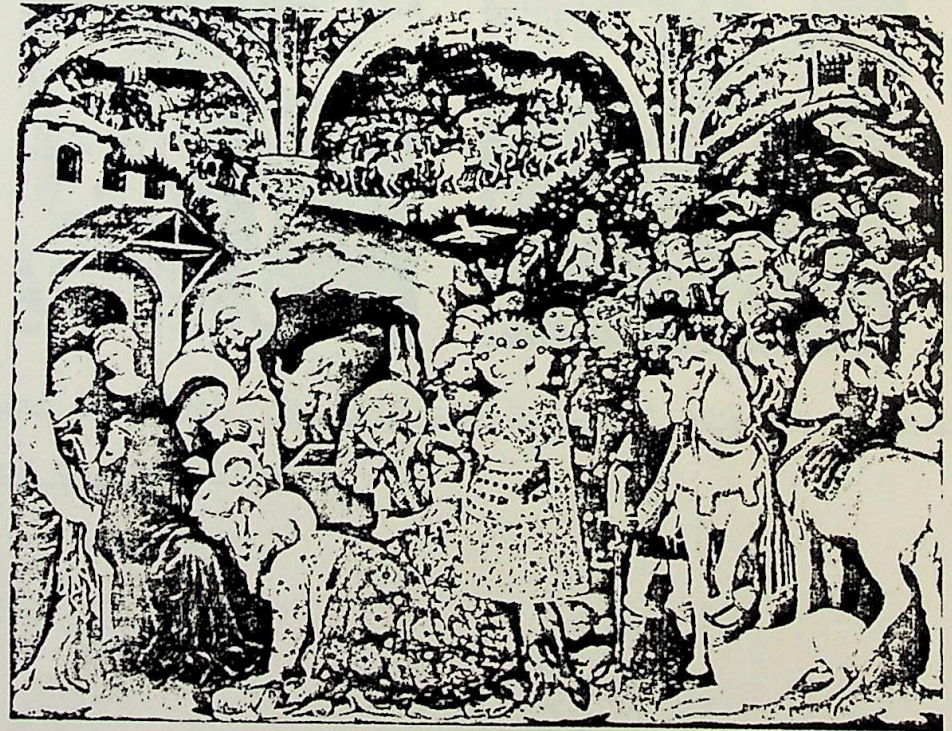
from old and new ideas as he wishes, making techniques work for him, and changing when he wants from given rules. His interest in figures and horses seems almost formal. They are seen as three-dimensional objects in space just as much as they are seen as living creatures or individual men.

Uccello influenced a number of other artists, including Leonardo who made drawings of his horses.⁷ This may be an influence of the Battle in particular. Another painter, from the sixteenth century, who took example from Uccello's horses was Beccafumi.⁸

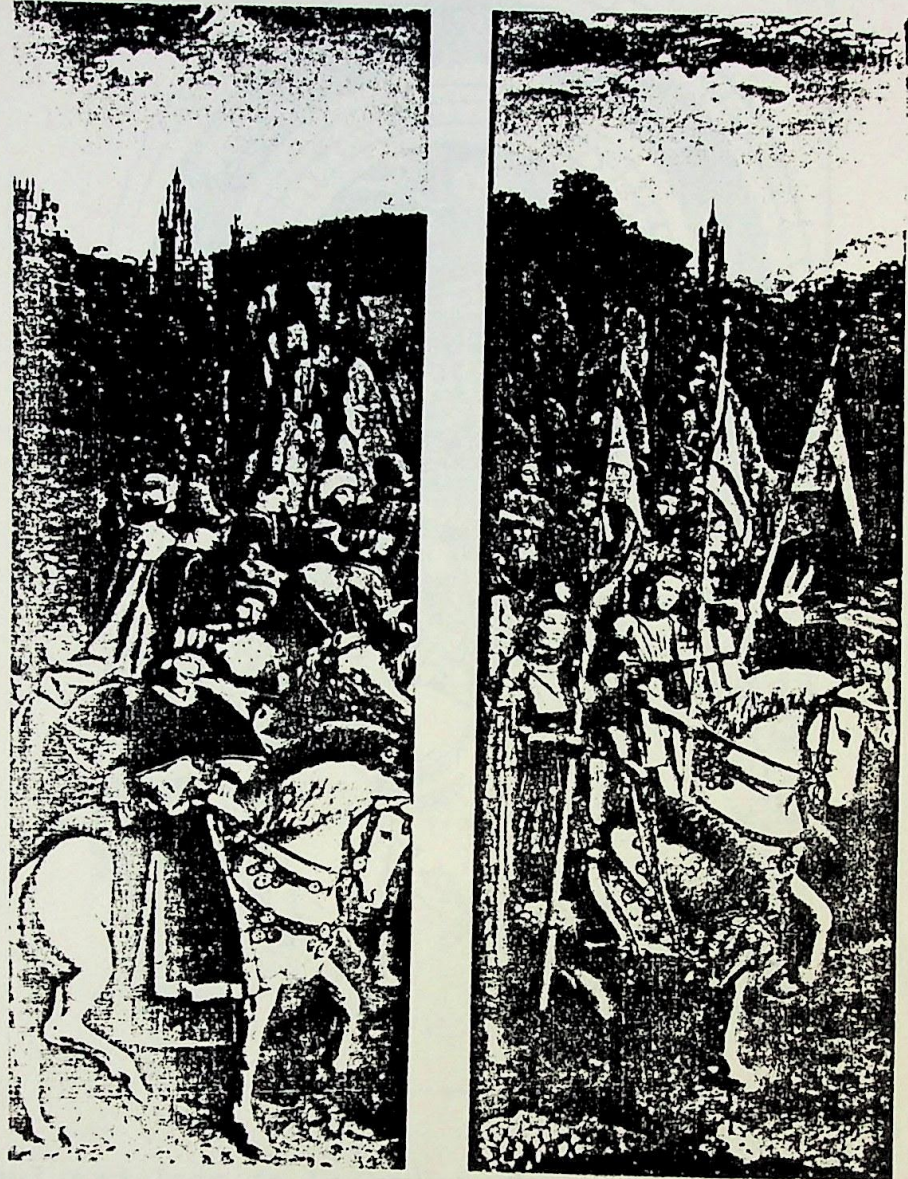
⁷ Ibid., p.22. ⁸ Ibid.



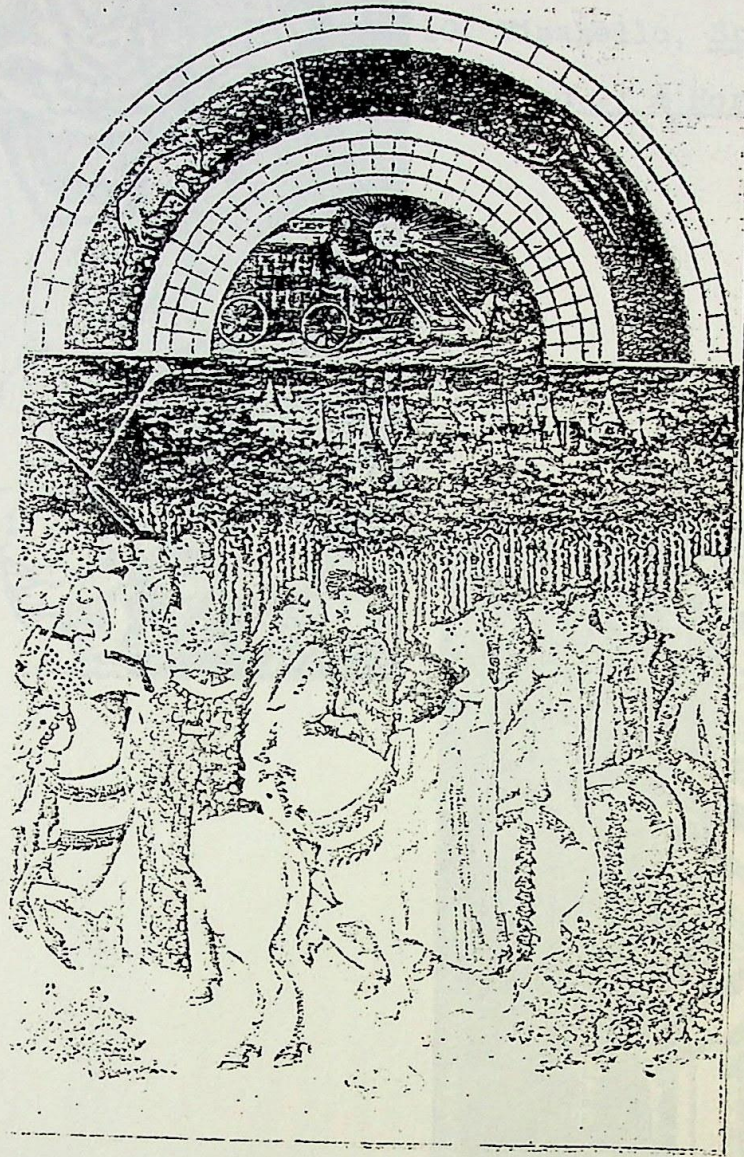
6. Simone Martini, Lippo Memmi, The Annunciation, 1333.



7. Gentile da Fabriano, The Adoration of the Magi, 1423.



8. Jan Van Eyck, The Righteous Judges and the Knights of Christ, 1432.

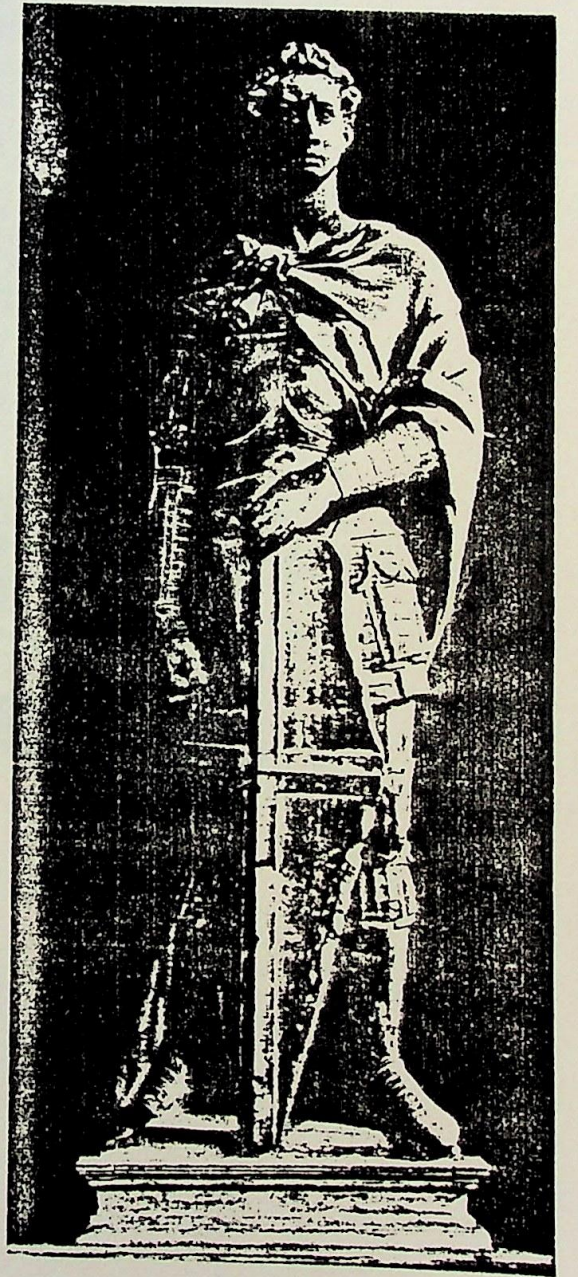


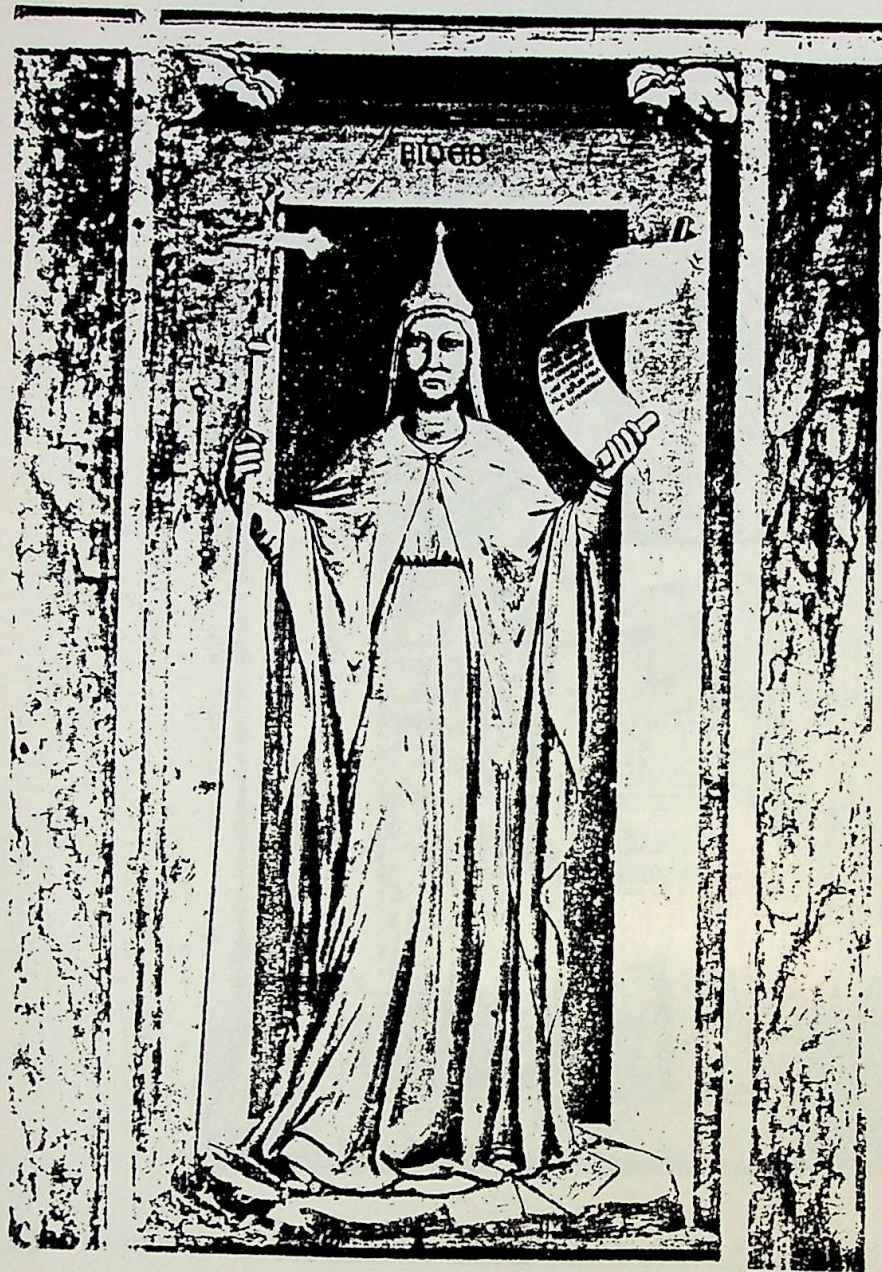
9. Paul and Jean de Limbourg, May, page from a Book of Hours, painted for the Duke of Berry, 1410.



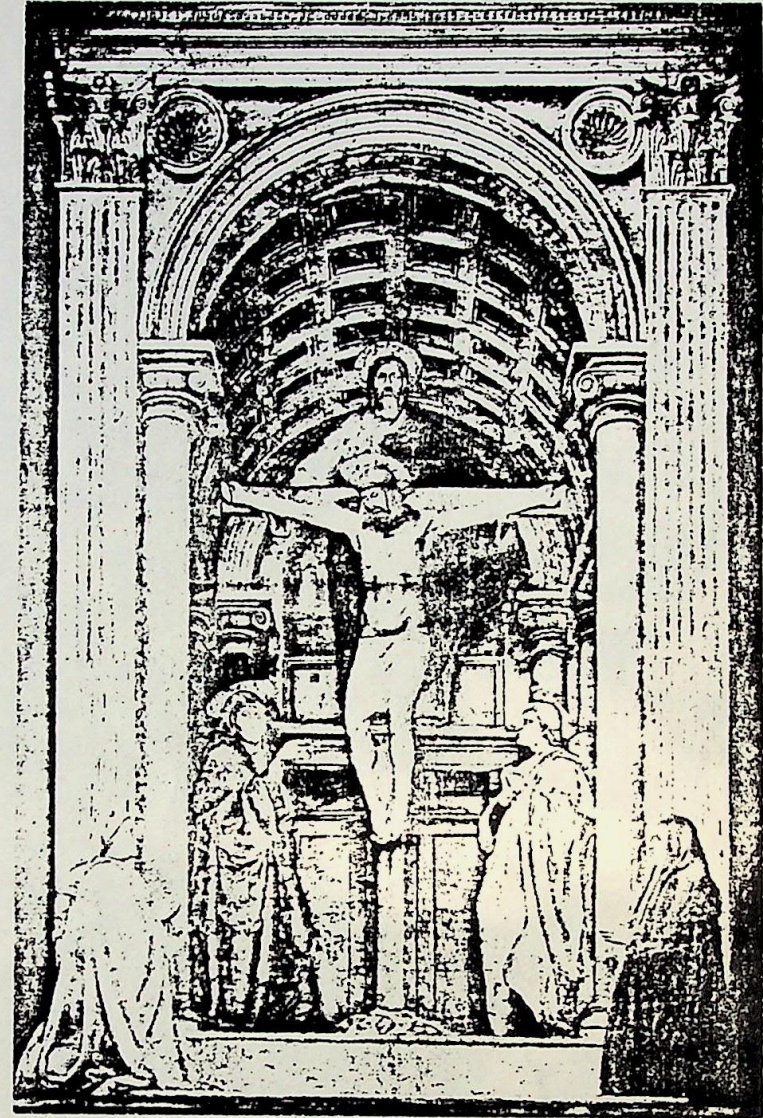
10. Pisanello, Studies of the
Head of a Horse, 1430.

11. Donatello, St. George,
1416.





12. Giotto, Faith, 1306.



13. Masaccio, The Trinity with the Virgin and St. John,
1425.



14. Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, detail of Fig. 1.

CHAPTER III

It is impossible to approach any work by Paolo Uccello without also considering the matter of perspective. This also applies to the Battle of San Romano. It has been said that Uccello's interest in perspective was excessive.⁹ While this is probably not strictly true, he did consider that it was an extremely important discovery. It is prominently featured in the Battle, and it is because of its use that these paintings appear to be so different from other works of the International Gothic Style.

Subjects of any kind when represented in perspective take on a new life. They are different from strictly two-dimensional images in that they invite the imagination to also perceive their subjects as being three-dimensional. It is thus possible to appreciate these in two ways - firstly as images dividing a flat surface into areas, and secondly as natural round forms, or subjects in real space.

Uccello has transformed the methods of the International Gothic Style by his use of perspective in the Battle of San Romano. Figures and horses typical of the style appear to be in real space. He has adapted the methods of the style to the making of three-dimensional illusions. This move is a radical one, as it brings two very different methods of image making into contact - International Gothic and naturalism.

One method represents figures and any subject matter as unearthly, spiritual material, while the other tackles them as objects to be shown in controlled space.

In the Battle, Uccello maintains control over both of these methods, allowing neither to become subservient. The foreground is designed in perspective, but backgrounds use

⁹ Ibid., p.29

it very loosely if at all. Men and horses are replete with fine detail, but their forms are rounded. They look like statues, especially the horses, but still they have a spiritual presence normally associated with International Gothic works. This feeling is even inherent in their very definitely rounded forms. They are like the perfectly formed creatures of dreams, and would fit easily into works of the Decadent era at the end of the nineteenth century.

Uccello's use of strict perspective in conjunction with International Gothic forms is an area worthy of exploration, and it reveals something of Uccello's mind on painting. He has achieved something quite different from the achievements of his contemporaries. Instead of being led by the possibilities of perspective to representation of a naturalistic kind, Uccello has continued to work from within the International Gothic tradition, while incorporating perspective into his works.

There is a logic to this development which can be discovered by noting the more common forms of the International Gothic Style and uses of perspective. Much of the work of the International Gothic Style has tended towards the revelation of the spirit in a glory of natural detail. This tendency can be seen in works of Fabriano, and Van Eyck to some extent also. On the other hand, perspective which is a mathematical discipline, has lent itself to the calculation of the physical. It is usually aligned with naturalistic representation, such as that in the works of Mantegna and Masaccio.

But Uccello has approached perspective through an International Gothic process as an abstract or spiritual

discipline. He has synthesized International Gothic forms with the laws of perspective into an almost tangible dream-world. Perspective has been approached as a form of beauty in itself, which the artist has quite literally represented through the placement of objects on the battlefield. He also refers to it constantly throughout the paintings by the inclusion of many geometric forms which are obviously painted in perspective. However, the paintings are not strictly conceived in perspective. This is practically abandoned in the background area, where its absence serves to emphasize its use in the foreground.

Theories of perspective, or at least of the representation of pictorial space, were a preoccupation of artists for a long time. Brunelleschi was the main instigator of the theory which so delighted Uccello. This theory, perfected by Brunelleschi's followers, says that

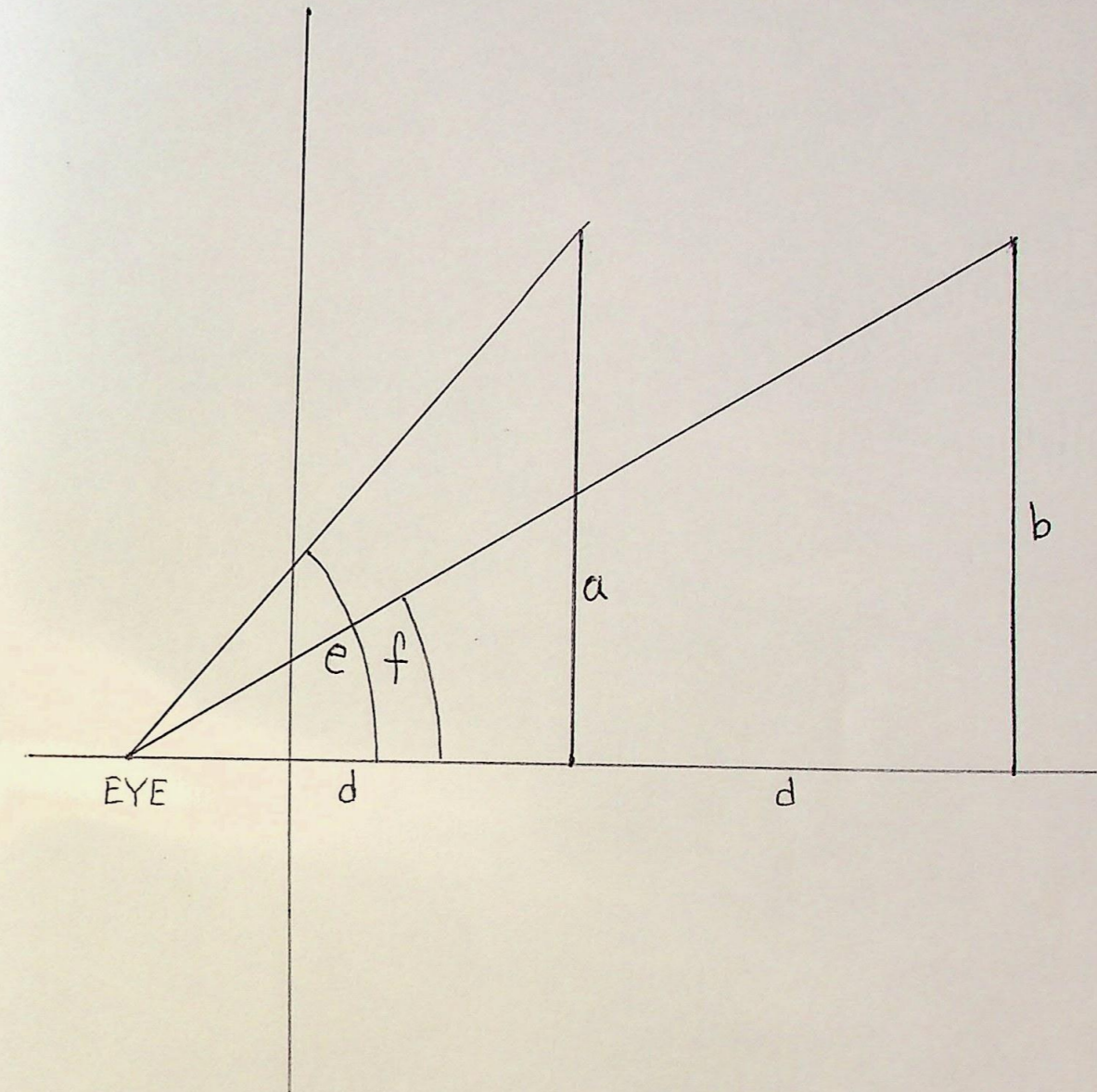
"magnitudes objectively equal appear inversely proportional to their distances from the eye. If two vertical lines, a and b , are seen at distances d and $2d$ respectively, b will appear in the perspective image, precisely half as long as a ."¹⁰

This theory was to become a mainstay of much Renaissance art. But it was greatly at variance with the optics of the Classical Era. This theory was that the

"apparent magnitudes are not inversely proportional to the distances, but directly proportional to the visual angles e and f , so that, (since f exceeds $\frac{e}{2}$) the apparent magnitude of b will exceed $\frac{a}{2}$."¹¹

The diagram shows the difference between the Angle Axiom and the Distance Axiom in determining perspective diminution. The two titles above refer respectively to the Classical and Renaissance theories of perspective.

¹⁰ Erwin Panofsky, Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art, p.128-9. ¹¹ Ibid.



In the Renaissance theory b will appear half the size of a , but in the Classical theory b will appear to be more than half the size of a . The relative sizes of a and b in the latter theory are determined by the sizes of angles e and f .

According to modern optics the Classical theory is in fact more accurate than the Renaissance theory. Classical optics considered our field of vision to resemble a sphere, and this has since been shown to be closer to physiological and psychological reality than Brunelleschi's theory.¹²

To broaden the present discussion of the development of perspective, it is notable that it was an area of experiment for artists since the twelfth century. Even before that time there was a good deal of interest in pictorial space. Some artists used multiple vanishing points in their pictures for compositional effect. Later, there were painters who became so concerned with the idea of creating genuine optical illusion by the use of single-vanishing-point perspective that they erected great screens before their paintings, with peep-holes through which the work might be viewed. This kind of perspective is only properly effective if viewed through one eye positioned exactly opposite the vanishing-point.

While this information shows the extent of interest shown in perspective, it also shows that Uccello's interest was moderate enough to avoid some of the more extreme solutions resorted to by other artists, such as the building of screens.

¹² Ibid.

Another artist from the later part of the Renaissance who became very interested in perspective was Leonardo da Vinci. He believed that single-vanishing-point perspective was inaccurate, since a human being sees with two eyes. This seemed to indicate that there should be two vanishing-points, but the artist knew that this was not the answer. The lines of vision from each eye converge, and besides, a human being does not look only straight ahead, but also glances around and upwards and downwards. Leonardo concluded that paintings would have to be done on concave surfaces according to a very complex theory of perspective which he tried to perfect. He probably realized that this method was far too unwieldly to become commonplace practise, but it is interesting to note that he had arrived back at the idea that the field of vision was more like a sphere than a plane.

Uccello's drawings indicate how he thought about the armoured figures, the horses and objects which form the subject-matter of the Battle of San Romano. One perspective drawing of a chalice and two of mazzochi survive in the Uffizi in Florence. These many-faceted drawings demonstrate how Uccello reduced objects to transparent structure-grids in perspective. Mazzochi are used in the paintings as forms for the headgear of many soldiers.

Uccello hoped to gain an understanding of the nature of form through his perspective drawings, in which the back, the front, and the optical pattern of the object can all be seen simultaneously. In the Battle it is possible to see from all of its forms that Uccello may have envisaged the horses, men, and objects as structure-grids prior to painting them.

There is an interesting idea 'happening' within the

paintings. Perspective is used to improve the optical illusion of three-dimensional objects in space, and these same objects are painted so that they indicate the workings of perspective. Uccello could have deliberately been demonstrating this idea. The almost metaphysical feeling of it resembles the spiritual leanings of the International Gothic tradition.

Perspective was an important factor in the unfolding of the Renaissance. Developed first as continuous picture space by Giotto and Duccio,¹³ it was later worked up to a precise set of rules by Brunelleschi. But before Renaissance times, continuous and infinite picture-space was already manifest in the works of Giotto and Duccio, and their followers. This was coming about as a result of a fusion between the

"High-Mediaeval sense of solidity and coherence, nurtured by architecture and sculpture"¹⁴ and the remains which had been preserved, partly in Byzantine painting, of

"the illusionistic tradition established in Graeco-Roman painting."¹⁵

This fusion serves firstly to show a part of the roots of perspective as they developed from the more primitive form of picture-space. It secondly shows a co-ordination of ideas from various sources such as architecture, sculpture, Byzantine works, and ideas from different times in history. This kind of co-ordination was happening more and more leading up to the Renaissance.

In the true perspective image

"infinity is implied or rather, visually symbolised -

¹³ Ibid., p.133. ¹⁴ Ibid. ¹⁵ Ibid.

by the fact that any set of objectively parallel lines, regardless of location and direction, converges towards one single vanishing point."¹⁶

Likewise

"continuity is implied, or rather, visually symbolised - by the fact that every point in the perspective image is... uniquely determined by three co-ordinates, and that while a series of objectively equal and equidistant magnitudes, if succeeding each other in depth, is transformed into a series of diminishing magnitudes separated by diminishing intervals, this very diminution is a constant one which can be expressed by a recursive formula."¹⁷

This information may be seen as the demonstration of the functions of perspective in implying or visually symbolizing infinity and continuity within the confines of a painting.

The discovery of the laws of perspective must have been a boon to Churchmen. The Church had always had problems in connection with paintings or frescoes of religious scenes. People sometimes thought the images of the Blessed were actually the Saints themselves. The Church did not approve of this kind of idolatry. But on the other hand, images of holy scenes served to educate the populace. With the advent of the set of rules of perspective, the illusion of space and reality in works of art could be explained logically, reducing the likelihood of the occurrence of idolatry.

An indirect effect of perspective, also commendable in the Church's view, was that it helped move painting in the direction of naturalism. The Church disapproved of over-decorative art, and the naturalistic works were generally of a more austere appearance. So it was possible to avoid the use of frivolous decoration (although still it was not always avoided).

¹⁶ Ibid., p.126. ¹⁷ Ibid., p.127

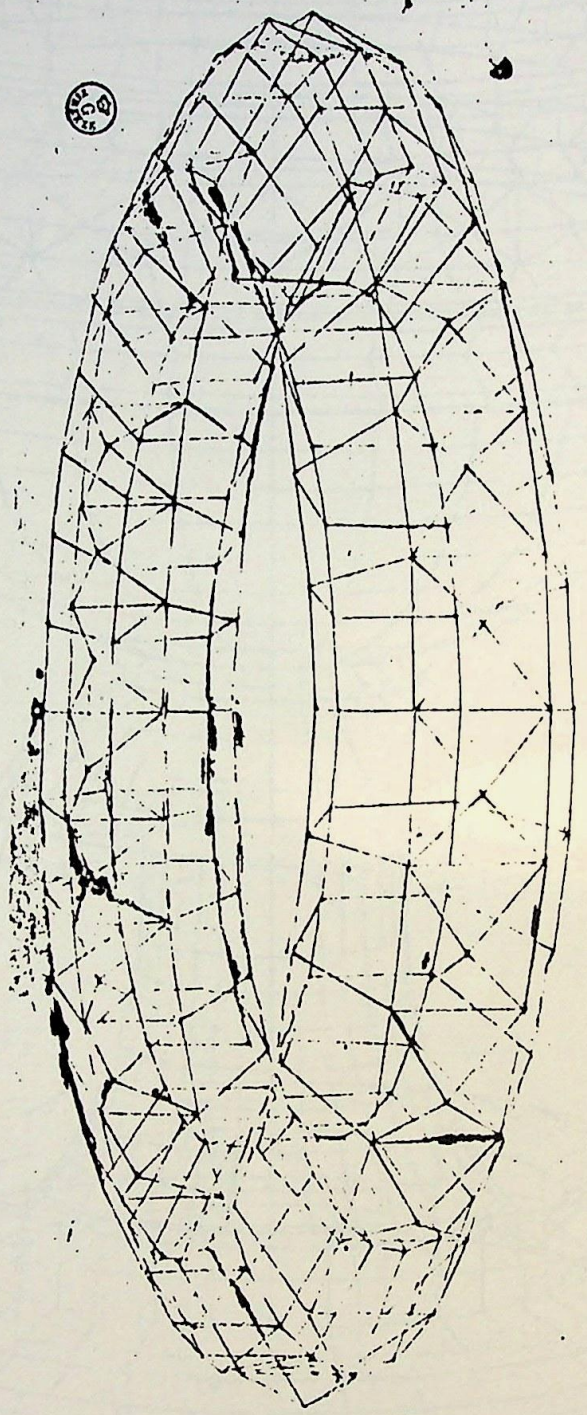
A quotation from Renaissance times shows the general attitude of artists towards perspective and its use. This would also be representative of Uccello's attitude, to some degree.

"What the painters nowadays call perspective (prospettiva).....is that part of the science of Perspective which is in practice the good and systematic diminution or enlargement, as it appears to men's eyes, of objects that are respectively remote or close at hand - of buildings, plains, mountains, and landscapes of every kind - and of the figures and other things at each point, to the size they seem to be from a distance, corresponding with their greater or lesser remoteness."¹⁸

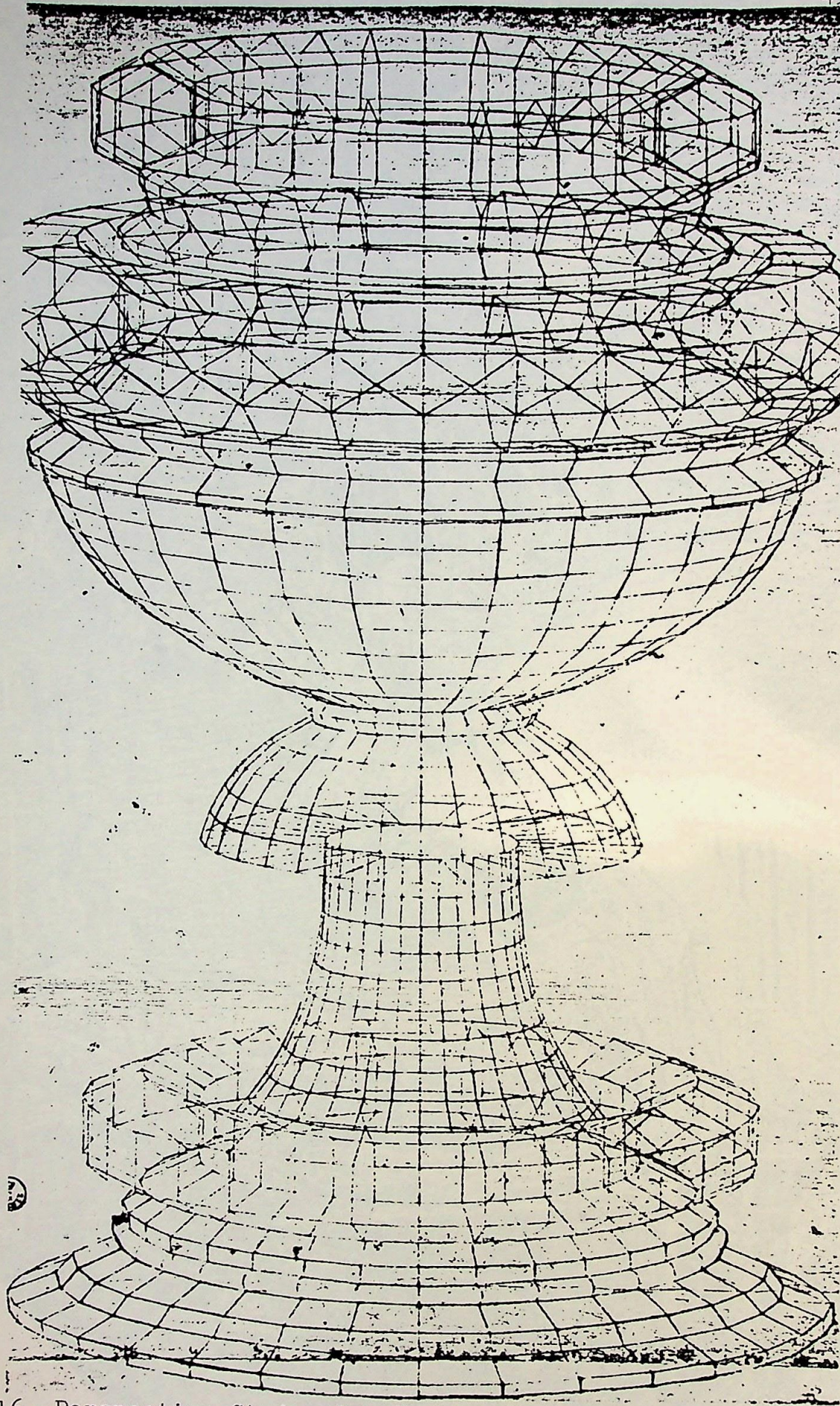
Uccello used perspective to expand the scope of his own painting. A work such as the Flood, in the S. Maria Novella in Florence, shows a complete working knowledge of perspective. Objects extend so far back into the picture-space that there actually exists a pictorial impression of infinity, and in this case it is not just 'visually symbolised'. His use of perspective in this work must finally dispel any idea that Uccello simply failed to make full use of perspective in the Battle of San Romano. The different treatment of the background must have been intentional.

To conclude, Uccello's use of perspective is formal and logical. This abstract mode of thought carries through into his treatment of subject-matter, and is counterbalanced by departure from strict format in the background, and in the variation of the size of figures and helmets relative to one another. Hence there are two aspects to his use of perspective - firstly it is formally used in the creation of picture space, and secondly it aids in the representation and development of the spiritual/abstract in the Battle of San Romano.

¹⁸ Michael Baxandall, Painting and Experience in 15th Century Italy, p.124.



15. Perspective Study of a Mazzocchio.



16. Perspective Study of a Chalice.

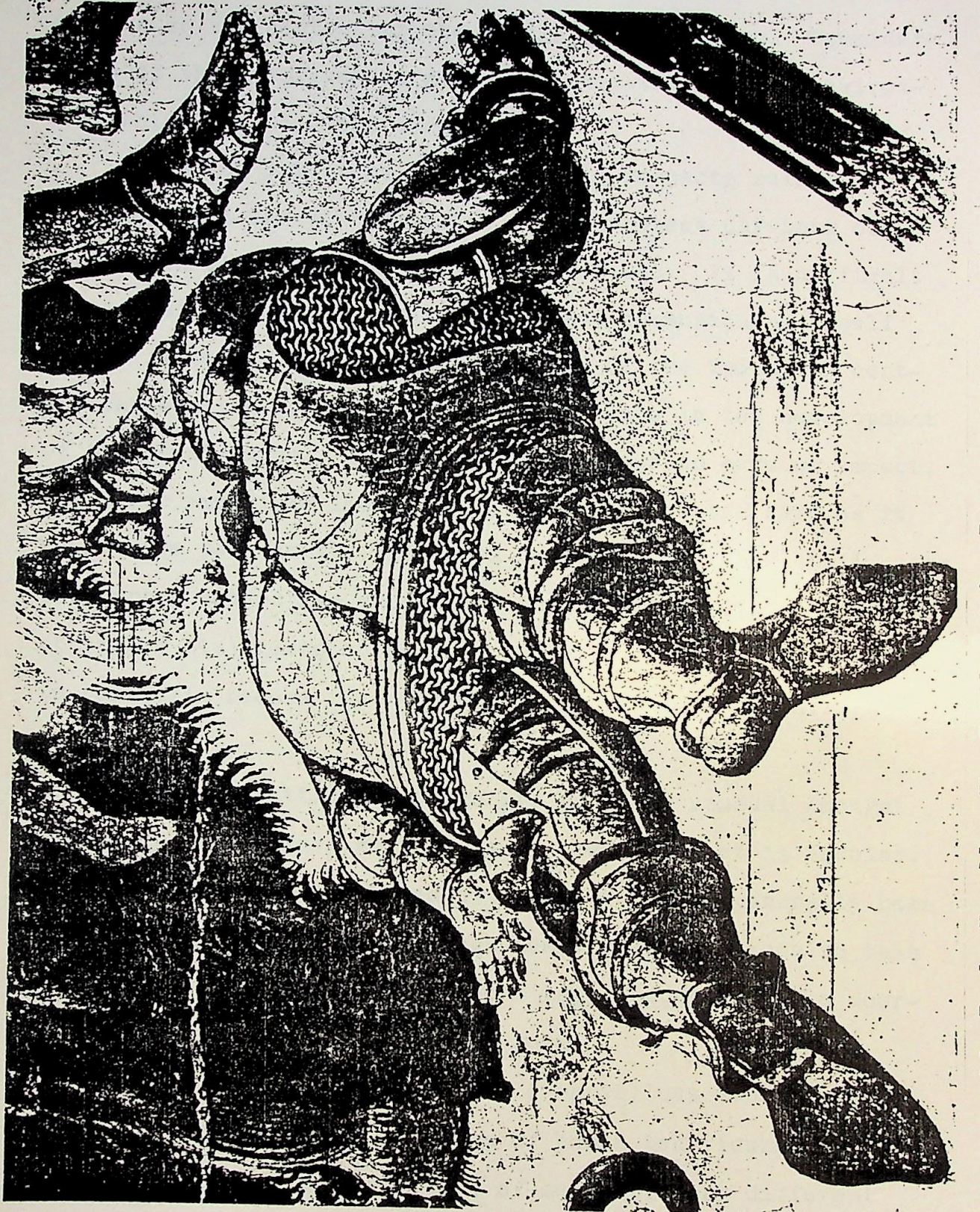


17. Paolo Uccello, Detail of The Flood and The Recession of the Flood.



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18. Diagram of The Flood and The Recession of The Flood.



19. Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, detail of Fig. 1.

CHAPTER IV

Influences of history, of traditional modes of representation, and of perspective in this case, have all had their effects on the content of the Battle of San Romano. Consideration of these influences gives an indication of the environment which produced the works.

Today the paintings are in certain respects relics of the past, and the vantage-point of the present day both obscures and clarifies the paintings' content. It is difficult to understand how the Battle would have communicated itself in the fifteenth century, but a viewer of the twentieth century can see the works occupying their place in the development of the Renaissance. The paintings continue to make an impact, but their immediate impact today is no longer the same as it would have been in the fifteenth century. The work still triggers a subjective impression in its viewers, and so it continues its existence as an art-object, but it is possible to partially reconstruct the milieu to which the paintings belong.

Uccello's Battle paintings are slightly unusual amongst surviving Renaissance works because their subject is secular. Religious works commissioned by the Church have generally been more carefully treated, although there are exceptions to this rule, as in the case of Leonardo's Last Supper, where a doorway was made through part of the work.

Battle as a subject provides a marvellous vehicle for the depiction of a wide spectrum of human behaviour. But because it is such a broad type of subject, very different views can be accommodated within its confines. This is so even before any consideration is given to the influence of the styles of particular times or places.

There are, of course, very great differences in style between Uccello's Battle and Leonardo's Battle of Anghiari, a cartoon now lost which represented a furious fight for a standard between the Florentines and the Milanese. Differences in style such as this have already been discussed. The processes of selecting the characteristics which dominate each work are very different, and so the works cannot be compared in a competitive way. It would be senseless to try to prove that one was the better work because each set out to achieve a different set of objectives. But the immediate impact of one battle is entirely different to the other, subjectively.

The Battle of San Romano is generally a celebration of the glorious triumph of the Florentines over the Sieneese. It is concerned with displaying the Florentines to their best advantage, as well as fulfilling the function of a chronicle of the events of the battle. The narrative is of the utmost importance, and this is the main content of the work. Uccello has succeeded very well in portraying the important characters and the main events of the battle.

A work such as the Battle and most artworks of the time were produced under a set of circumstances that greatly determined the nature of the work. Young apprentices were rigorously trained in certain styles, and spent several years mastering techniques. This was one circumstance which influenced the later work of many artists. But when established artists received commissions there were quite a few conditions attached. Elaborate contracts were drawn up between patron and artist. Preliminary sketches of the proposed work were submitted for approval before commencement of the final

piece. It was at this stage that the patron would specify the qualities of materials to be used. These and other conditions all had an effect on the work. A patron had quite an active role in the arts.

It is interesting to consider some possible reasons for Uccello's being chosen to paint the Battle of San Romano by the Medici's. They may have found works of the International Gothic Style were more to their taste than the austere naturalistic works. The abundance of detail in the former style may have been an attraction. Men who were aware of the type of equipment used in the real battle would appreciate its' being reproduced in minute detail.

It is also possible that their choice was influenced by a part of the attitude which existed in Mediaeval times which considered it more fitting for holy persons to be depicted in an abstract, stylized manner. Positions of power, such as Kingships or Queenships, were thought to be God-given, semi-divine positions. Therefore it was likewise more fitting for noblefolk to be given stylized forms. The International Gothic Style was itself influenced and shaped by these considerations, as well as being a Court style.

There are three divisions discernable in the Battle. These are the main action of the battle, the grid-like 'stage' or foreground area in which the battle takes place, and the landscape beyond the decorative hedge, or background region. The impact of the battle is enhanced by the energetic forms Uccello has given his horses and men. It must be allowed that the forms are those of the International Gothic Style, and must be examined for their qualities within these limits.

In the left panel Tolentino is relatively still, acting as an anchor to the charging knight to his right, and holding in order the troops behind him. The charging Florentine leans into his lance, and is seated deep in his saddle with legs extended. Detail such as this is no mere decoration, and would have been of interest to viewers of the fifteenth century, some of whom might have received training in the arts of war.

The centre panel shows a pair of Florentines unhorsing the Sienese leader. These soldiers are convincingly portrayed, and it is possible to sense the force of pressure on the lances. The Sienese leader grips the pommel in an effort to maintain his seat, but the lance has obviously found its mark in the joinings of his armour. The horse is shown losing its balance. The white horse and the kicking horse to the right are strongly delineated, and have the solid muscular appearance of good battle-chargers.

The horses of the right-hand panel are perhaps the most exciting of all. The pair leaping to the left are convincingly painted, and look fierce, with tossing heads and bared teeth. All of these details add to the authenticity of the battle.

Throughout the Battle horses can be seen performing a kind of half-rearing motion. This was a feat that horses were trained to do. Footsoldiers could be trampled, or other horses overbalanced by a horse trained in this way. It is of general interest to note that horses in the military dressage-school of Vienna are still taught skills such as those mentioned, though these are only used for performance purposes.

The second division, the grid made visible on the battle-ground, quite literally forms a stage for the battle. This stage has the function of enclosing the viewer within the

battle-area. The broken lances which form the grid-pattern on the ground define the space. They invite the viewer to calculate the use of perspective in this area. The hedge forms the visible physical barrier at the back of the area, though this feature is most prominent in the left-hand panel.

Perspective also has its effect on the content of the paintings, and on their impact. Because the viewer is made aware of the confines of the foreground, the battle taking place within its limits seems all the more tightly packed. Perspective has also been Uccello's means of creating a new departure for the International Gothic Style, as can be seen from the forms of the horses and figures. It also forms a part of the content of the paintings in its own right. The broken lances on the ground are painted more for the sake of demonstrating a perspective-grid than for their own sake.

In the left-hand panel the grid is quite visible, the pink ground clearly showing up the lances. The vanishing-point is situated somewhere behind Tolentino and his horse. In the centre-panel the grid is obscured by the fallen horses, but having been given a clear view of it in the left panel, a viewer is made all the more aware of how the crowding hides it from view. The third panel does not use lances to spell out the grid, but tufts of grass on the ground hint at its presence. Also the column of horses advancing from the right and moving inwards in the picture-space pulls the space back.

When taken in relation to the background area of the paintings, the grid becomes even more pronounced. The background resembles a backdrop. This suggestion of a stage could be a deliberate intention of the artist. There is evidence that visual connections did exist between paintings

or frescoes and theatrical productions.¹⁹ Ceremonial dress of many soldiers adds to this effect.

The third part of the division, or background of the paintings, has its own functions. The landscape provides a relief from the other divisions. Earth colours recede behind the bright reds and blues and whites of the foreground. There is a relaxation from the use of strict perspective. This region is a catalogue of information about the kind of country in which the battle is taking place. Fields and crops are miniaturized to help show the area over which the battle is extended, and some of the figures occupying the fields are completely out of proportion to the landscape.

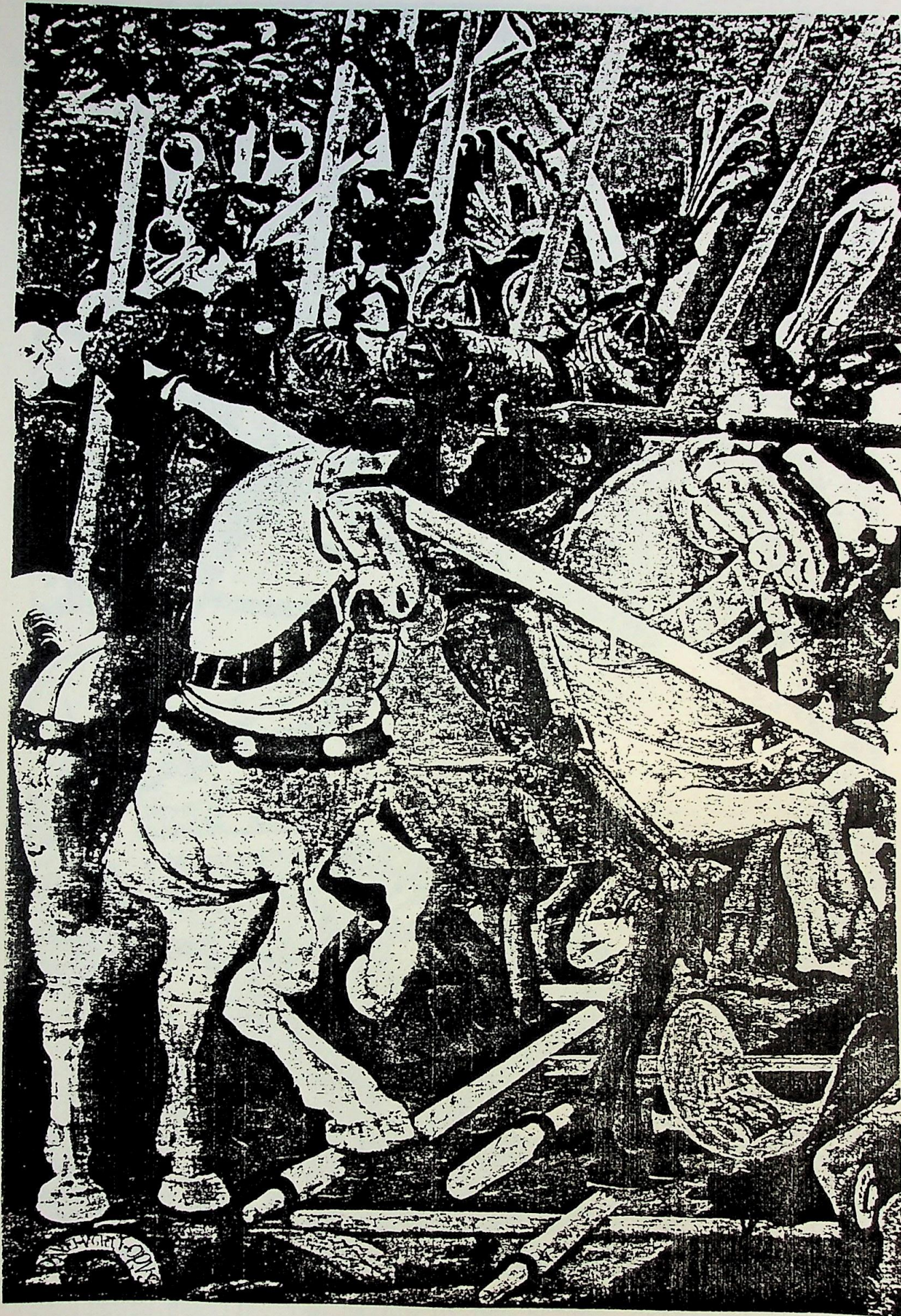
This region is a bizarre area where anything can happen. Soldiers' lances can be seen extending over the top of a rise where the landscape undulates weirdly, giving the effect that the earth is heaving. The background area seems to have been contrived in an effort to break every rule so carefully applied in the rest of the work.

A case has been made that Uccello was a naturalist overcome by an excessive interest in perspective, and hindered by an all-pervading decorative impulse.²⁰ But another case can be put forward that he was an artist who worked from within the International Gothic Style, who was receptive to the new discoveries of his time, and flexible enough to use them, or to adapt them for use.

In the Battle of San Romano Uccello must have been working within rather strict conditions to paint the battle in a certain manner. But he has produced not merely painted images

¹⁹ Ibid., p.71. ²⁰ John Pope-Hennessy, The Complete Works of Paolo Uccello, p.30.

which fulfil the requirements of his patrons, but very fine works of art. By his efforts with perspective he has transformed the usages of the International Gothic Style by giving it a new dimension, both literally and figuratively. The Battle of San Romano is a complex work, abounding in geometrical puzzles which interact with the natural forms. This work combines elements not normally associated with one another, which means that new tensions are set in action. These are resolved in the balance that exists between the geometric and figurative concerns in the work. Wherever a geometric form is found, it also has a figurative function, as in the mazzocchio hats. Again, wherever a man or horse is seen, he is also conceived as a collection of formal shapes. These paintings are meant to be enjoyed intellectually as well as for their figurative richness.



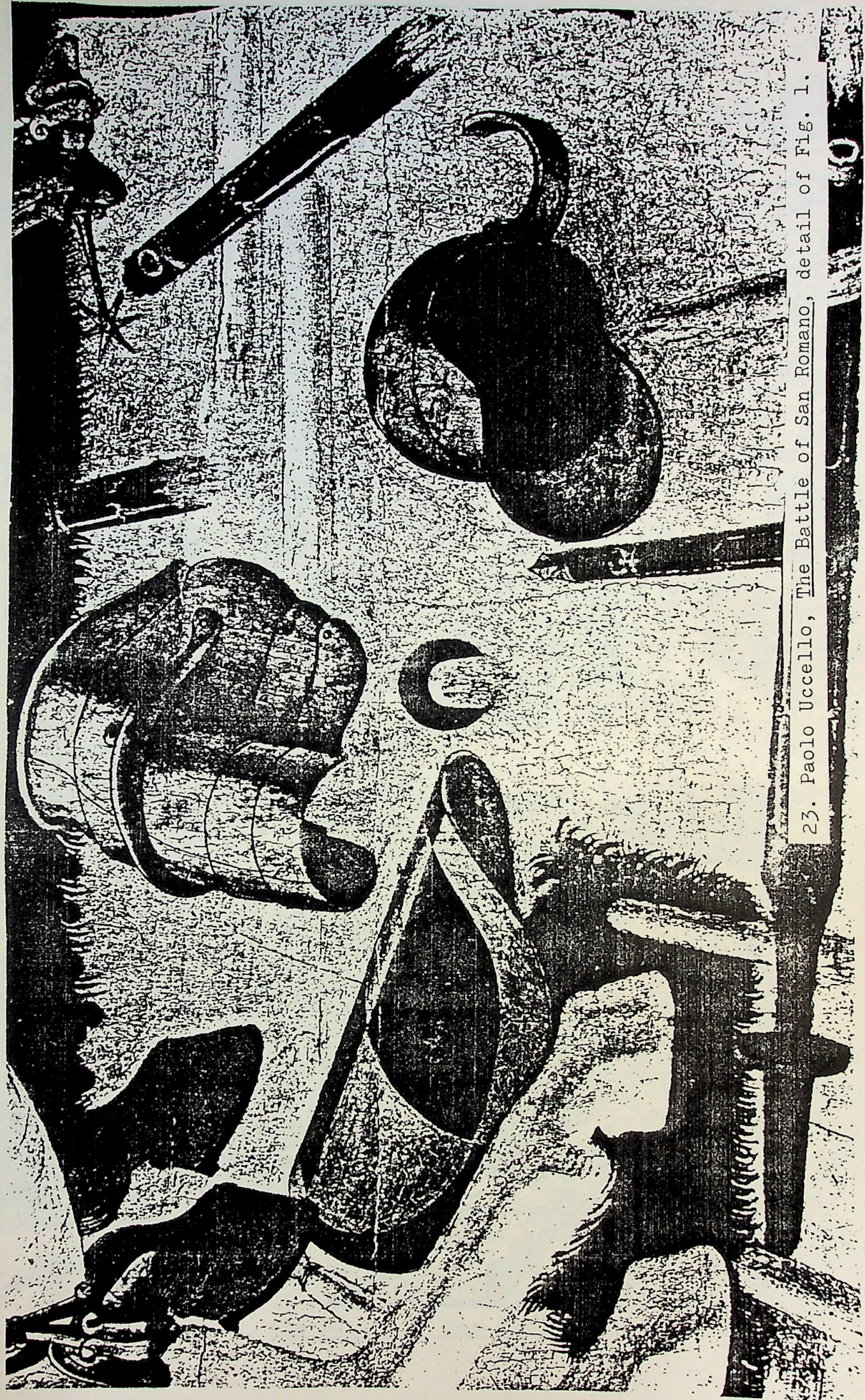
20. Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, detail of Fig. 2.



21. Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, detail of fig. 2.



22. Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, detail of Fig. 2.



23. Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, detail of Fig. 1.



24. Paolo Uccello, The Battle of San Romano, detail of Fig. 1.

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