HOMAGE TO THE FLORENTINE TONDO

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HOMAGE TO THE FLORENTINE TONDO

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Art History
Hunter College of the City of New York

2017

Thesis Sponsor:

May 9, 2017
Date

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May 9, 2017
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tondo: Origin, Form, Meaning and Placement</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marian Devotion</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renaissance Women</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am honored and privileged to have Professor Loh as my thesis Advisor. Her never ending encouragement and support, along with her generosity in sharing her wealth of knowledge brought me to the finish line. I am forever in her debt. I would also like to thank Professor Hahn, my Second Reader, for all her time and effort and valuable input. A huge thank you goes to Professor Avcioglu and the administration at Hunter for providing me the opportunity for re-admittance into the graduate program. Finally, many thanks to my cheering squad: all my family and dear friends for their continuous love and support. You helped make it happen.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Andrea della Robbia; *Madonna and Child with Cherubim*; about 1485; glazed terracotta in painted tabernacle frame; 95.2 x 88.3 x 14.6 cm.

Figure 2. *Greek Bronze Mirror Case with Ideal Female*; c. 350 B.C.; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Figure 3. *Greek Vase Painting of a Woman Priestess in Sacrifice*; approx. 400’s B.C.; Toledo Museum of Art.

Figure 4. *Turan and Atunis on an Engraved Mirror*; mid-fourth century; bronze; Leningrad, Hermitage.

Figure 5. Lorenzo Ghiberti; *Assumption of the Virgin*; early fifteenth century; stained glass; facade; Cathedral, Florence.

Figure 6. Niccolo Fiorentino; *Portrait Medal of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni* (obverse) and *Three Graces* (reverse); c. 1486; cast bronze; diameter 77 mm.

Figure 7. Workshop of Sandro Botticelli; *The Virgin and Child with Saint John and an Angel*; ca. 1490; The National Gallery, London; tempera on wood; 84.5 x 84.5 cm.

Figure 8. Leon Battista Alberti; *Rose Window*; 1456-70; Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Figure 9. Filippo Brunelleschi; *Duomo with Oculi*; 1419-46; Cathedral (Santa Maria del Fiore). Florence.

Figure 10. Circular Church Plan; A sketch of the Church of Holy Sepulcher and its surroundings as given in a manuscript by Adamnan; ninth century.

Figure 11. Luca della Robbia; *Stemma of the Arte dei Medici e Speziali*; 1455-1465; Orsanmichele, Florence; enameled terracotta; diameter 180 cm.

Figure 12. Bernardo Rossellino; *The Bruni Monument*; 1444-6/7; S. Croce, Florence; marble; height 715 cm.

Figure 13. Bernardo Rossellino; *Virgin and Child*; 1444-6/7; S. Croce, Florence; marble roundel.

Figure 14. Fra Filippo Lippi; *The Virgin Annunciata* (Bartolini Tondo); ca. 1452; Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence; oil on panel; diameter 135 cm.

Figure 15. Giorlamo Savonarola; *Predica dell’ arte del Bene morire*; 1496: British Library, London; woodcut.
Figure 16.  Plan of House Belonging to the Gaddi Family of Florence; Palazzo Gaddi, Florence; c. 1560; Uffizi.

Figure 17. Luca della Robbia, Madonna and Child; c. 1440; Florence; polychromed and gilded stucco and wood; diameter 37 cm.

Figure 18. Table of four phases in the development of Florentine image cults (Black= Marian cults; Gray= Crucifix cults) (1292-1398) (1399-1493), (1494-1530) and (1531-1599). Note highest black bar during 1494-1530.

Figure 19. Donatello; Pazzi Madonna; c. 1417-20; Staatliche Museen, Skulpturensammlung Berlin; low relief marble, broken and restored in several parts; 75 x 70 cm.

Figure 20. Michelangelo; Madonna of the Stairs (Madonna della Scala); c. 1489-1492; Casa Buonarroti, Florence; marble relief; 55.5 x 40 cm.

Figure 21. Donatello; The Virgin and Child with Four Angels (Chellini Madonna); probably Padua; c. before 1456; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; circular relief with a recessed frame and integral mold at the back; bronze, partially gilt, gilding abraded; diameter 28.5 cm, 8mm thick, 4.25 kg.

Figure 22. After Donatello; Virgin and Child (Piot Madonna); c. 1460; pigmented stucco in tabernacle frame; Collection Sir Harold Acton, Florence.

Figure 23. Michelangelo; Virgin and Child with St John (Tondo Taddei); ca. 1502; Royal Academy of Arts, London; marble relief; diameter 109 cm.

Figure 24. Michelangelo; Virgin and Child with St John (Tondo Pitti); ca. 1503; Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence; marble relief; 85.5 x 82 cm.

Figure 25. Domenico Ghirlandaio; Birth of John the Baptist; Fresco of a domestic setting; 1486-90; Tornabuoni Chapel, S. Maria Novella, Florence.

Figure 26. Giovanni di Ser Giovanni; Cassone of The Adimari-Ricasoli Wedding in 1420, Spalliera panel; 1450; Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence.

Figure 27. Fra Filippo Lippi; Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement; 1436-8; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; tempera on panel; h 64.1 cm, w. 41.9 cm.

Figure 28. Giovanni di ser Giovanni (Lo Scheggia); Childbirth tray (the “Medici-Tornabuoni tray”) with The Triumph of Fame on one side and Medici emblems on the other; 1448-9; tempera on panel; diameter 92.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 29. Luca della Robbia; Cappuccini Madonna; (1475-1480), glazed terracotta; Bargello; Florence.
Figure 30. Sandro Botticelli; Madonnina del Magnificat; 1482; Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; tempera on wood; diameter 1.15.

Figure 31. Sandro Botticelli; Madonna of the Pomegranate; 1487. Uffizi, Florence.

Figure 32. Francesco Botticini; Adoration of the Child; ca. 1490; diam. 123 cm; oil on panel; Florence, Pitti Palace, Galleria Palatina.

Figure 33. Jacopo da Sellaio (Jacopo di Arcangelo); Adoration of the Child with St. John; ca. 1490; diam. 99 cm; oil on panel; Florence, Pitti Palace, Galleria Palatina.

Figure 34. Michelangelo; The Holy Family with St John (Tondo Doni); ca. 1504-1506; Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; tempera on wood; wooden carved frame; diameter 120 cm.

Figure 35. Raphael; The Madonna della Seggiola; (Madonna of the Chair); c. 1513-1514; Galleria Palatina, Florence; oil on wood panel; diameter 71 cm.

Figure 36. Fra Mattia (Marco) Della Robbia; Design and contract for a tondo of the Virgin and Child (recto); Sketches and notes for a tondo of the Virgin and Child (verso); 1524.

Figure 37. Giovanni Bellini; Madonna and Child; late 1480’s; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; oil on wood; 35 x 28 in. (88.9 x 71.1 cm)
INTRODUCTION

What became of the Florentine *tondo*? The tondo is a circular painting or relief carving, a format which became extremely popular in Florence beginning in the 1430s. There were numerous tondi with devotional imagery created and placed in churches and homes. Their popularity flourished mainly in domestic settings during the time period of 1480-1515, and brought much attention to the art form.

Most tondi featured the Madonna and Child. For instance, the *Madonna and Child with Cherubim* by Andrea della Robbia incorporates both sculpture and paint and includes a circular form within a tabernacle frame that was popular during the Renaissance as a private devotional altarpiece (Figure 1). In the recent exhibition catalog *Della Robbia: Sculpting with Color in Renaissance Florence*, the curator Marietta Cambareri, remarked that the circular form of tondi can suggest a round window, recalling praise for Mary in hymns and sermons as the window of heaven, and also evoke the idea of the mirror, which makes the sacred image both a model of behavior and a mirror of life.¹ One senses that this tondo is a special object on account of the decorative designs, gilding and rosettes encompassing the tabernacle frame. The white glaze painted on the Madonna and Child and the surrounding angels provides a shining illumination to the delicate expressions of the figures. The rich blue background interspersed with white wave-like brush strokes, gives the appearance of the figures floating on clouds and evokes a heavenly quality to the overall work.

What was the function of the tondo and why was the Madonna and Child imagery so popular? Was it based on the patron’s request to use the Madonna and Child as the focus for devotional purposes or did a patriarchal society dictate the popular theme and use? Is it possible

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that imagery along with the circular format, color and glaze played significant roles? The obvious response would be the religious motives for the use of the Madonna and Child. However, we should also consider the form and imagery from feminist perspectives. I will explore the history and culture of the late fifteenth century to determine a possible link to the importance Marian devotion and gender played in the use of the Madonna and Child tondi.

Did the presence of the Madonna and Child within a circle fulfill a particular function? In this regard, we might think of the tondo itself to be like a *hortus conclusus* (an enclosure, walled or fenced). The circular form becomes an enclosure for the Virgin Mary. Symbolically, the Virgin Mary cloistered in her heavenly realm and the fifteenth-century woman restricted to her home were both separated from the outside world. However, the confined woman could communicate with the fenced-in Mary and be transferred to the spiritual realm. A fine example is the *Chellini Madonna* behind a balustrade, which will be discussed later in Chapter 2 (Figure 21). ²

Many prominent artists left their mark on the tondo. Donatello and his followers were especially invested in the Madonna and Child theme. ³ Luca della Robbia and his workshop mass-produced a variety of Madonna and Child tondi. ⁴ Michelangelo, in a span of a couple of years, created three tondi all of which included the Madonna and Child. ⁵ Raphael also won enormous popularity as a painter of Madonnas. ⁶ That should be testimony enough of their popularity. However, as quickly as the tondo surfaced, within one hundred years its popularity disappeared. Why was the tondo such a phenomenon and then seem to fade into oblivion in the

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² Roberta Olson, “Lost and Partially Found: The Tondo, a Significant Florentine Art Form, in Documents of the Renaissance,” *Artibus et Historiae* 14, no. 27 (1993), 50, Key text in Chapter 2.
⁴ Cambareri, *Della Robbia*, Key text in Chapter 1.
⁵ Paul Barolsky, “Michelangelo’s Doni Tondo and the Worshipful Beholder,” *Notes in History of Art* 22, no. 3 (Spring 2003), Key text in Chapter 3.
early sixteenth century? This question and many others will be considered through exploration of the development, purpose, popularity, and disappearance of the tondo.

The tondo has not received major attention in literature with the exception of Der Tondo, Ursprung, Bedeutung und Geschichte des Italienischen Runbildes in Relief und Malerei by Moritz Hauptmann in 1936 and the comprehensive The Florentine Tondo written by Roberta Olson in 2000. Hauptmann sought to focus on the study of the origin of the composition of the tondo and the artists who have produced them. Olson stated specific cultural, social, intellectual, and religious trends in Florence encouraged the flourishing of the art form, and when these trends ceased to exist as dominating forces, the popularity of the tondo declined. For example, the family and political life were transformed by the great transition from medieval feudal society to the early modern state, resulting in the restructuring of the relation of the sexes to one of female dependency and male domination, along with the establishment of chastity (sexual relations solely for procreation) as the female norm.

Family status and identity became very important, with women treated as ornaments in a visual display culture. There was also a fascination with antiquity and the circular form; and a move towards privatization of the devotional image, which accompanied the freeing from ecclesiastical control of the religious experience and a growing cultural pluralism. The cult of Virgin and the growing interest in promoting lay piety converged in a desire to humanize the Madonna and Child through the development of images and devotional practices. The tondo,

8 A. Scharf, Review of Der Tondo, Ursprung, Bedeutung und Geschichte des Italienischen Runbildes in Relief und Malerei, By Moritz Hauptmann, Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs 71, no 417 (December 1937), 294.
9 Olson, The Florentine Tondo, 1.
11 Olson, The Florentine Tondo, 3.
therefore, expanded from churches to becoming one of the popular objects on display in a Renaissance domestic setting.

I will revisit the Florentine Tondo, and while reinforcing Olson’s thesis, I will expand on her theories as well. I will explore critiques presented previously by reviewers. For example, in Guy Callan’s article, “A Divine Circle,” he noted that in Olson’s study there was no real effort to touch on ‘newer approaches,’ notably that of feminism. I will delve deeper into the role of women in Renaissance Italy from a social context and the specific role played by the Virgin Mary as a role model not only in art but in the daily lives of women. To the fifteenth-century Renaissance female the tondo may have appeared as a talismanic tool with the Virgin Mary’s powerful presence capable of providing comfort, guidance and inspiration. By uncovering a dual meaning of the imagery and form from both religious and gender perspectives, I will situate tondi in relation to the importance of women in the Renaissance family, along with the significance of Marian devotion in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. To support my arguments, I will focus on both the sculpted and painted tondi of a few specific artists and their distinctive works. I will also briefly introduce in Chapter 2 the development of the square and rectangular formats created by Donatello (Figure 19) and Michelangelo (Figure 20) that predate their circular tondi.

Although the tondo in art history today tends to be overlooked as a significant art form, one cannot ignore the fact that almost every household could be found to have one on display. That alone should be evidence of the importance of the tondo, however, the tondo tends to get dismissed instead as a “decorative” ornament hung simply in the home and nothing more. Olson surmised that many scholars considered the tondo as a lesser work since examples were cranked

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14 Anna Jolly, Madonnas by Donatello and His Circle (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 1998), Key text in Chapter 2.
15 Cambareri, Della Robbia, 89.
out to satisfy market demand. Unfortunately, it seems that the tondo may have become such a common household commodity that it no longer was thought worthy of serious scholarly consideration. It would be simplistic to argue that our basic desire is to be surrounded by beauty and that it would only be natural to have the tondo as a decorative enhancement in the home. Let us consider, therefore, that their demand was based also on specific cultural, spiritual, and symbolic meanings.

In this regard, the circular form and placement of the tondo are especially important. The combination of the form and the Madonna and Child imagery performed a distinct function in the domestic setting and articulated a cultural meaning which appealed to fifteenth-century Italian families, a popularity, however, that may have come to an end as the values changed over time.

This study will start with the origin of the tondo and focus on classical ideals of beauty and perfection to determine how Greek mirror cases, Etruscan mirrors, along with portrait medals contributed to the development of the Renaissance tondo. It will then explore the representation of women as objects of adornment and how society’s expectation of beauty as a significant asset to the family status affected their identity in what Patricia Simons in “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture” described as a “display culture.” By re-examining domestic interiors and inventories in fifteenth-century Florence, this thesis will chart the progression of the tondo in relation to the importance of marriage, childbirth and motherhood.

16 Olson, The Florentine Tondo, 2.
18 In Chapter 3, some key texts related to the history of fifteenth-century women e.g. Klapisch-Zuber and Musacchio.
Building on Olson’s observations, I will re-examine the significance of the tondo. As Olson stated in 2000, “The time is now ripe for a synthetic re-evaluation of the fascinating and important tondo phenomenon and its imagery, collating material that has come to light over the years with new evidence and ideas…If it stimulates further research and thought, it will have served its purpose.”19 With inspiration from Olson, this thesis seeks to reveal the importance of the tondo and the relevance of the Madonna and Child imagery during the Renaissance by situating this particular art form within social, cultural, and aesthetic concerns that are at once Christian and feminist, that address iconography and materiality, and that look at form and function in relation to beauty and use.

TONDO: ORIGIN, FORM, MEANING AND PLACEMENT

Before fully considering the tondo on its own merits, we need to place it in a historical framework. From where did the tondo originate and from what possible forms did it develop? ‘Tondo,’ the Italian word meaning round, sphere or circle, is loosely applied to roundels, medallions, and, in fact, to any circular art form. According to Moritz Hauptmann, the tondo derived from two basic forms: the medallion and the glory. In his review of Hauptmann’s Der Tondo, A. Scharf noted that the chief sources recognized as the basis of the tondo are the medallion, which boasts a long history since classic days, and the Gloria, already known in pre-Christian times. Roberta Olson, in contrast to Hauptmann, traced the conceptual roots of the tondo ultimately back to Greek ideals and to that culture’s exploration of perfect geometric forms.

It is well known that during the Renaissance artists returned to nature and classical forms: for instance, Michelangelo paid homage to the classical form in his Pitti and Doni Tondi. Let us consider the portrait tondo as a first example.

The idea of the portrait tondo, whether funerary or otherwise, emerges in the fourth century B.C. with votive mirrors, that is, mirror cases in bronze or in terra cotta, which were regularly placed by the Greeks in tombs. Found in a tomb which included bracelets, earrings and other golden jewelry, there was a bronze mirror case, ca. 350 B.C, which featured a relief of an idealized female head, possible a deity, wearing a headdress (Figure 2). One notices the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{20}}\text{Olson, } \textit{The Florentine Tondo}, 2.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{22}}\text{A. Scharf, Review of } \textit{Der Tondo, Ursprung, Bedeutung und Geschichte des Italienischen Runbildes in Relief und Malerei}, by Moritz Hauptmann, } \textit{Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs} 71, no. 417 (December 1937), 294.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{23}}\text{Olson, } \textit{The Florentine Tondo}, 7.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{24}}\text{Rona Goffen, “Mary’s Motherhood According to Leonardo and Michelangelo,” } \textit{Artibus et Historiae} 20 (1999), Key text in Chapter 2.\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{26}}\text{Vermeule III, “A Greek Theme and its Survivals,” 366 & 368.}\]
classical element in her Greek nose and facial profile; and that the decorative headdress, along with the jewelry, were included as possible enhancements to her beauty in the tomb. Classical elements are also evident in the tondo depicted on the *Greek Vase Painting of a Woman Priestess in Sacrifice*, approx. 400s B.C. (Figure 3). In this example we see a full-body standing female figure in profile adorned in elegant Grecian attire and wearing earrings and a headdress. Surrounded by a simple geometric patterned border, the Priestess appears before an altar as a powerful intercessor, totally in charge, as she performs her ritual of pouring a libation into a fountain. Liquid offerings were commonly used to reinforce prayer.27 Steve Coates noted that in *Portrait of a Priestess* by Joan Breton Connelly, the author examines women enjoying all the influence, prestige, honor, and respect that ancient priesthoods entailed; and in the religious arena, Greek women assumed roles equal to those of men.28 Since religion was embedded in all aspects of life, the learning of rituals cannot be separated from it and all girls and maidens of the right status were groomed for these responsibilities as part of their preparations for life.29 The freedom of these ancient holy women is contrary to the restrictions placed on actual fifteenth-century Renaissance women in the domestic sphere. However, these two ancient examples show the importance of beauty to a woman’s identity as a powerful intercessor on behalf of mortal, everyday women.

There was a progressive separation of mirror design from vase painting which began late in the fifth century B.C. through to the last third of the fourth century B.C. Etruscan mirrors became one of the primary authentic pictorial arts of the Late Classical and Hellenistic periods.

which has survived in significant quantities.  

30 Early in the fourth century B.C. a new kind of three-figure group appears which consists of a seated or smaller figure on either side, again in profile, turned towards the middle figure, which often represents a deity standing between them, more or less frontally.  

31 The *Turan and Atunis on an Engraved Mirror* from the mid-fourth century B.C. (Figure 4) is a complete synthesis of both the mirror case and the vase painting in the two previous images (Figure 2 & 3). The female in classic profile is standing upright, but she is now flanked on one side by a female attendant and on the other by a young boy. Her commanding presence exudes power. Instead of a simple patterned rim, the border is now decoratively embellished with angelic spirits and animals. *Turan* (Aphrodite), upright and richly adorned, embraces *Atunis* (Adonis): the lover is a young boy, the goddess tall and maternal; this theme was a favorite Etruscan version of Greek myths which pair mortals with deities.  

32 One notes in all of the images presented the prevalence of the female deity and the theme of her divine power.

Artists were inspired by the past but were they also influenced by the culture of their own in the fifteenth century? The Medici were known to stress Florence’s Etruscan past as part of their own history and as an element in shaping of their political identity.  

33 Otto Brendel observed in *Etruscan Art* that a Mother and Child statue from Chianciano, 400 B.C., now in the *Museo Archeologico*, Florence, depicts a mother holding her child in her heavy hands as the child sleeps in her lap, gazing in a void before her, comparing her to the gloomy ancestress of Michelangelo’s sadly prophetic Madonna at Bruges.

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33 Cambareri, *Della Robbia*, 23.
Although Brendel references a Madonna and Child statue, the elements of monumentality and detachment are also reminiscent of Michelangelo’s Madonna in the sculpted *Pitti Tondo*, c. 1503 (Figure 24), which will be reviewed in Chapter 3. Both female figures appear massive with broad shoulders and large hands, as each support their child and vacantly stare off in the distance. However, that is basically where the similarities end. The Etruscan Madonna is wearing a long gown and a tightly braided headpiece, along with her sandaled feet which are firmly planted on the ground. She is seated upright facing frontal on a throne flanked on each side by sphinx, vacantly staring out at the viewer with her pursed lips and tight jaw. The Etruscan female is an awesome figure to be reckoned with. On the other hand, Michelangelo’s Madonna is femininely seated sideways on a box-like stone structure. Although she is also expressionless, gazing off into the distance, there is a humanistic quality to her overall demeanor caused by her body gently leaning towards her child, the soft curls peeking out from under her decorative headdress and the delicate drapery folds in her garment. Could Michelangelo have been influenced by his Etruscan predecessors when creating his tondo? Olson stated that objects such as Greek and Etruscan mirrors may have inspired Renaissance artists’ interest in round compositions; and it was precisely during the fifteenth century that Etruscan artifacts began to be discovered and appreciated by Florentine humanists.  

Much of the finest Etruscan artifacts were unearthed from burial cemeteries, such as a flat, circular bronze bottle with geometric ornamental design from Bisenzio, early seventh century B.C. and a bronze circular lamp used to light a tomb from Cortona in the mid fifth century B.C.  

Religious images were utilized in churches as teaching tools so that those who were illiterate might be able to interpret the pictures seen on the walls. In justification of the need for

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images in churches, Saint Bonaventure claimed “we have images not only so that the illiterate might read the sacraments of the faith in sculptures and in pictures, as in books, but that the people may be excited when they see these images and so by seeing them might remember the virtuous deeds of the saints.”  

David Freedberg in *The Power of Images* asserted that even the educated have similar connections and responses to images as the illiterate. In the early-fifteenth century we begin to see roundels with Madonna and Child images in cathedrals, used as training tools to educate the illiterate and parishioners about the benevolent role of the Madonna. The image of the Virgin Mary would gaze at the viewer from every wall, chapel, and niche.

For instance, the stained glass roundel of the *Assumption of the Virgin* (Figure 5) designed by Lorenzo Ghiberti (1404), on the façade of the Santa Maria del Fiore Cathedral in Florence is an innovative work of Renaissance design that creates a sense of depth and celestial space provided by the placement of the angels and astonishing decorative border. As Intercessor, this mature seated Mary is front and center, hands clasped in prayer, surrounded by angels, with a vision of Christ above and two angels holding a crown above Mary’s head. The rich blue background and intricately designed colorful border give a compelling presentation and a cause of celebration and invitation to the parishioners. Viewed from the outside, the parishioner would observe the subdued colors of the back of the stained glass design, which would lure the parishioner seeking salvation into the church. Once inside, the viewer would be captured by the vibrant glistening colors created by the sunlight shining through and illuminating the details of the composition, providing an overall stimulating effect.

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38 Ibid, 42.
One notices the seated Virgin Mary is not in profile like the three classical deities previously reviewed (Figures 2-4). In fifteenth-century Florence however, the female figure is recognizably the Virgin Mary. The ornate border in the Assumption of the Virgin is reminiscent of the simple geometric border in the Greek Vase Painting (Figure 3) and the decoratively embellished border in the Turan and Atunis Engraved Mirror (Figure 4). In all three images, the borders enclose the figures like a circular frame, not only complementing the figures with their own decorative narrative, but at the same time reinforcing the composition by forcing the viewer to look at the composition. The border of the Greek Vase Painting has a simple geometric design which draws focus on the main activity of the female deity pouring a libation. The border of the Turan and Atunis Engraved Mirror is embellished with angelic spirits surrounding the figures, while a nude figure flanked by an animal on each side guards his pouring of a libation. The Assumption of the Virgin goes one step further with a decorative border of saints and flowers and then another framing of the Virgin by the surrounding angels in the composition, emphasizing her significance.

The narrative in Ghiberti’s Assumption of the Virgin has progressed, however, in its symbolic complexity compared to the previous classical examples. What was the next step in the development of the Renaissance tondo? The progression from mirror cases, tondo narratives displayed on Greek vase paintings, Etruscan mirrors to stained glass windows indicates a pattern of women depicted as divine intercessors associated with this specific geometric form. Olson stated that the most significant and direct ancient prototype for the Renaissance tondo is the Roman shield or clypeus, with the circle referring here to the disk of the sun as well as to a round portrait of a god or an important person (an imago clipeato). Sometimes the clypeus also bore an inscription. For these reasons, it is often cited as a model for both tondi and medals. Let us

40 Olson, The Florentine Tondo, 10.
consider now the proximity of these two Renaissance forms.

Luke Syson noted in his article “Consorts, Mistresses and Exemplary Women: The Female Medallic Portrait in Fifteenth-Century Italy,” that nothing at all has been written on medals from the point of view of gender and a study seeking to redress the balance should consider three areas: first the expected behavior of women in fifteenth-century Italy; second the conventions of portraying women; and third the functions and expectations of the medal and of women and indirectly of men as well. The cast bronze Portrait Medal of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni (obverse) and Three Graces (reverse) from 1486 by Niccolo Fiorentino presents elements relevant to all the three areas concerning gender mentioned by Syson (Figure 6). The medal was executed, almost certainly, in 1486, at the time of Giovanna’s marriage to Lorenzo Tornabuoni and celebrates Giovanna’s manifold virtues in its triple portrayal of her on the reverse as the Three Graces – Chastity, Beauty and Love. An idealized portrayal of an actual historical woman is captured with her intricate styled hair and exquisite necklace. Both her outer and inner selves are celebrated in the portrayal of her beautiful persona and virtuous qualities displayed. Syson stated that medallic portraits displayed women as exemplary images and the sitter’s proclaimed virtues were thus commemorated. Beauty and virtue were crucial to a woman’s identity in fifteenth-century Florence and often portrayed in these circular forms.

A devotional tondo of The Virgin and Child with Saint John and an Angel (Figure 7) painted by a Follower of Sandro Botticelli in 1490 has similar elements of beauty and virtue as the portrayal of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni in the portrait medal previously discussed. Like Botticelli, this artist imitates the same style, as he portrays the Virgin Mary as a virtuous

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43 Syson, “Consorts, Mistresses and Exemplary Women,” 53.
beautiful mother absorbed in thoughtful reflection. This maternal Madonna, breast feeding her Child, is flanked by angels, with one praying and the other clutching a white garment, symbolizing purity. The tondo has a finely gilded border, which highlights the three figures adorned with delicate halos; giving a divine quality to the overall composition. Although the Madonna is wearing the traditional apparel of red dress and blue cloak of the Virgin Mary, there is richness to her patterned dress and decoratively trimmed cloak and delicate lacey veil framing her porcelain face. The Child, supported by his Mother, is swathed in a blanket of the same patterned fabric as the trimming on the cloak. All these enhancements contribute to the idealized creation of a virtuous beautiful Madonna. There are similarities in the divine portrayal of this painted Virgin and Ghiberti’s stained glass *Assumption of the Virgin* (Figure 5), both of whom are surrounded by angels, both in somber contemplation as they face the viewer. The paint and also the stained glass create a two dimensional effect to the overall compositions. However, there is a difference when the Ghiberti’s Virgin is compared to Michelangelo’s sculpted monochromatic *Taddei and Pitti Tondi* (Figures 23 & 24, which will be reviewed in Chapter 3). The monochrome sculpted Madonna in Michelangelo’s tondi is three-dimensional, created by the high-relief carving, which have a dramatic effect by bringing the figures closer to the viewer. Although Ghiberti’s stained glass Madonna is luminous caused by the glistening glass created by the contrasting colors, the effect is two-dimensional and appears flat.

What role did form and meaning of the circle play in the significance of the tondo? Rudolf Arnheim proclaimed in *The Power of the Center*, that the circular shape in the history of art has served two quite different functions: first, it represented the superhuman, which is radically detached from the realm of earthly gravity, and second, it also adapted well to playful decoration
by evoking a “floating world,” unencumbered by the burden of human existence. Like the dome of Florence cathedral, the circle invoked the heavens above. J.E. Cirlot was quick to notice the many aspects of a symbolic form one may observe when viewing a work of art: one may note the overall geometric beauty; the constructional technique; its period styling, bearing in mind the geographical and historical implications and/or; the implicit or explicit cultural and religious values that produce the symbolic meaning of the form. By considering all these aspects, the viewer’s appreciation and understanding of the art form deepens. Beyond the geometric concision of the circular shape, one can delve deeper into the use of the form itself to reveal a vocabulary of symbols. The actual shape of the artwork, therefore, presents a compositional challenge to the artist that contributes to the overall message of the narrative.

If the observer looks at the tondo, concentrating strictly on the form itself, he/she immediately sees a circle, a universal form clearly recognizable by all. However, one should realize that the circle can also conjure many different ideas and meanings specific to a given time and place. Olson noted that the circle became a shorthand indication of divine status and heavenly abode; and stated that a tondo’s circular format, therefore symbolized heaven for its fifteenth and sixteenth-century Florentine beholder. George Ferguson noted that “The circle as a sign and symbol in Christian art has been universally accepted as the symbol of eternity and never-ending existence and as the monogram of God; it represents not only the perfection of God but the everlasting God.” In the Book of Wisdom (Wis 7:22-29), Wisdom is God’s companion, sharing his throne; she is his perfect image and mirror. Like the circle, the Virgin Mary was

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46 Olson, The Florentine Tondo, 35.
feminine perfection personified. She was an ideal figure of the church, which is also thought of as “mother” and mystical “bride.” All these interpretations hold a common theme of perfection and sacredness, which provide a key function for the circular format from a religious perspective.

In early-fifteenth century Florence, Heaven’s perfection was expressed through the circle. Olson acknowledged that the vision of heaven was one of the fundamental artistic expressions of Church thought and appeared in the architecture which flourished in the fifteenth-century Florence. Similar to Ghiberti’s stained glass Assumption of the Virgin at Santa Maria del Fiore, one can also see the circular trend in the Rose Window at Santa Maria Novella in Florence, built from 1456-70 by Leon Battista Alberti (Figure 8). Although it does not depict the Virgin in its circular space, her presence would have been suggested as the rose portal through which salvation could be attained. The Rose window is placed high above the door and appears as the focal point of the façade. Evidence of the prevalence of the circle appears in much of the architecture of the time, such as the circular windows, known as oculi, the Dome located on the Santa Maria del Fiore Cathedral in Florence (Figure 9), and Alberti’s rose window on that cathedral (discussed above). Il Duomo, the architectural masterpiece built from 1419-46 by Filippo Brunelleschi, was not only a testament to Renaissance spiritual enthusiasm, artistic leadership, and technological virtu, it was a very visible measure of Florence’s wealth, power, and leadership in Italy and Europe. The circle now appears to reflect civic Florentine identity. Alberti on viewing Brunelleschi’s great dome prefaced his architectural treatise, De re aedificatoria, with amazement and delight:

50 Timothy Verdon, Picturing Mary (New York: Scala Arts, 2014), 11.
52 Olson, The Florentine Tondo, 35 & 36.
Who could be hard or envious enough to fail to praise the architect on seeing here such a large structure, rising above the skies, ample to cover with its shadow all the Tuscan people, and constructed without the aid of centering or great quantity of wood?\(^{54}\)

It has been noted from a religious perspective, the circular form may also be viewed symbolically, as an allusion to the circular Jerusalem.\(^ {55}\) For example, a sketch of the Church of Holy Sepulcher and its surroundings, as given in a manuscript by Adamnan in the ninth century, is a fine example of a circular church plan in Jerusalem (Figure 10). As confirmed by Olson, although the majority of tondi were not hung in churches, their round shape declared their sanctity.\(^ {56}\) We should, therefore, look at the circular format in respect to the tondo and bear in mind that the artist was mobilizing the circular form as a religious reference as well as an idealized geometric shape.

The overall meaning and significance of the tondo is accentuated when the viewer takes into consideration the form itself, but one should also also put thought into the representation of the subject matter within this perfect, celestial frame. Taken as a whole, together they can provide valuable insight into the appeal of the tondo. If the viewer deems the form as adding value to the subject matter, it can be an added feature to assist in the interpretation of the composition. The form’s uniqueness catches the eye of the observer and, like a magnet, draws the viewer into the composition. Like eyeing a target, the viewer’s eyes zero into the center of the circle and examines the subject matter. For example, Arnheim confirmed that the tondo became a favorite format for reliefs and paintings in fifteenth-century Florence and defined the center where everything converges.\(^ {57}\) Arnheim also observed that in the late fifteenth century, it becomes evident that the circular format accepts only tranquil subjects of ideal beauty and does best when


\(^{56}\) Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, 227.

\(^{57}\) Arnheim, *The Power of the Center*, 122.
it renounces any detailed background.\textsuperscript{58} For example, in the *Madonna and Child with Cherubim* by Andrea della Robbia (Figure 1), the only background in the composition is the rich blue color, which contrasts beautifully with the white glazed Maddona, Child and Cherubim, pushing them forward and emphasizing their presence. The viewer is forced to focus on the figures and their overall beauty.

Within the tondo, there is not much room for a background, which forces the viewer to concentrate on the center of the form and the image itself. The limits of the circular format tend to reinforce the strength of the composition, and the viewer’s attention to the overall subject matter. Arnheim stated “It was no accident that the tondi came into fashion in the fifteenth century, at a time when paintings were no longer exclusively commissioned for particular places but produced for any place a customer wished to put them. The advent of the framed picture marked the emancipation of paintings as mobile art objects, and the tondo expressed this detachment from place and time most radically.”\textsuperscript{59}

Where could a tondo be found in fifteenth-century Florence? Tondi were sometimes found in public settings, such as churches, but also placed in a domestic setting. As previously noted, the circular form was placed in cathedrals and on walls of buildings. On the exterior architecture, not only could one observe a dome, a rose window and oculi, but now a tondo could be found on the facade of buildings. For example, the *Stemma of the Arte dei Medici e Speziali* designed by Luca della Robbia from 1455 to 1465, is situated on the façade of Orsanmichele in Florence (Figure 11). The tondo is placed in a prominent position high up on the south face of the guilds’ church of Orsanmichele, where Florentines, walking on the main street leading from the town’s civic center of Piazza della Signoria to the cathedral would be able to look up and see

\textsuperscript{58} Arnheim, *The Power of the Center*, 122
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 115 & 117.
the Madonna smiling down on them and the Child gesturing in blessing. What a wonderful sight for a passerby to be welcomed by the Madonna and Child as they go about their daily business in the city. The seated Madonna is gently holding the standing Child on her lap as they gaze out at the people below. Flanked by lilies, the colorfully painted figures are enclosed in a white glazed arched-structure with a rich blue background invoking the heavens. Lilies in their purity are a common symbol of Mary, as well as an emblem of the city of Florence. All these elements of color, symbolic images and placement give religious overtones and significant meaning to the composition. Made of terracotta and painted glaze, the figures have a long-lasting quality, as if they are here for eternity. Recognized as an ideal and durable medium for use in outdoor spaces, Della Robbia’s durable sculpture soon had a strong presence throughout the city both outside and inside.

In the transition from public exteriors to church interiors, circular reliefs with themes of evangelists and virtues were surfacing on both ceilings and walls. The popular trend of the Madonna and Child tondi were at this point also displayed on humanist tombs. For instance, the sculptural image of the Virgin and Child was employed on The Bruni Monument located in Santa Croce, Florence, designed by Bernardo Rossellino around 1444 to commemorate the death of Leonardo Bruni, a renowned scholar and State Chancellor of Florence (Figure 12). In his will Bruni had specified a simple burial in Santa Croce, “without pomp,” with a pure marble tombstone in a place suited to his status. However, the pomp, the ritual, and the imagery attending his death were essential to memorializing his life and the tomb with its effigy of Bruni

60 Cambareri, Della Robbia, 47.
61 Ibid, 32.
62 Cambareri, Della Robbia, 47.
sealed the memorial for posterity.\textsuperscript{64} Rossellino’s *Virgin and Child* marble tondo, which was placed in the lunette above the tomb, was one of the first times the Virgin and Child image appears in a completely circular frame in a public space in Florence, consistent with the geometrical purity of early Renaissance architecture (Figure 13).\textsuperscript{65} To have the tondo as part of a tomb to commemorate a prestigious individual is testimony to the value and importance of the tondo and repolarized the form in Florentine funerary monuments. Similar to the Madonna and Child in *Stemma of the Arte dei Medici e Speziali* (Figure 11) watching over the Florentine citizen in the streets, Rossellino’s *Virgin and Child* is now situated high above the tomb in the lunette, keeping vigil by watching over Bruni’s tomb in death and praying for his soul.

Frequently of a religious nature, tondi were often placed in private homes to be used as devotional images.\textsuperscript{66} In the privacy of one’s home, the viewer could connect with the image on a daily basis. The *Regola del governo di cura famigliare*, a popular handbook written in 1403 by the eminent Florentine reformer, the Dominican Fra Giovanni Dominici, advised that “One decorates the home with paintings and sculptures of the Madonna with the Child in her arms, holding a little bird or a pomegranate. Good also are images of Jesus nursing or asleep in the lap of the Madonna.”\textsuperscript{67} A fine example is *The Virgin Annunciate* (Bartolini Tondo) by Fra Filippo Lippi (1452), one of the first images of Mary painted in the tondo form in Florentine art in the mid-fifteenth century (Figure 14).\textsuperscript{68} The detailed tondo has a threelfold composition: in the far background we see the promise of Mary’s arrival, in the middle her birth, and in the foreground

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure13.png}
\caption{Figure 13: *Virgin and Child* tondo by Rossellino.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure14.png}
\caption{Figure 14: *Virgin Annunciate* by Fra Filippo Lippi.}
\end{figure}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{rubin} Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, 36.
\bibitem{dupre2} Dupre, *Full of Grace*, 98.
\end{thebibliography}
her destiny fulfilled, as she presents her son to the world. The Virgin Mary is shown looking out at the viewer, as she supports her Child on her lap and they both hold together a pomegranate in their hands. Although the Virgin Mary has a faint halo above her head, she is a modern fifteenth-century female in contemporary dress and sophisticated hair style. Like a snapshot, the painted tondo provides a glimpse of activity similar to a natural Renaissance domestic setting. Geraldine A. Johnson noted in “Art or Artifact? Madonna and Child Reliefs in the Early Renaissance” that in the first half of the fifteenth century, Lippi, along with many other Florentine artists, began depicting the Virgin and Child with an increasingly sophisticated naturalism, which encompassed greater accuracy and specificity of setting than had previously been shown.

In Christian art, the pomegranate had many symbolic meanings: 1) as a rule the pomegranate alludes to the Church because of the inner unity of countless seeds in one and the same fruit, 2) or it can signify the hope of immortality or 3) because of its many seeds, it was also a symbol of fertility. One could understand why the pomegranate was used often to convey fertility and hope of immortality. At least twenty per cent of the deaths of young, married women in early Renaissance Florence were birth-related and there was a similar mortality rate among newborns and young children. A woman could pray to the Virgin and request that she have a successful pregnancy and birth. To encourage humility and devotion, Dominici urged that domestic devotional objects be made of simple, not expensive, materials for

69 Dupre, Full of Grace, 98.
71 Ferguson, Signs & Symbols in Christian Art, 37.
fear that precious materials might diminish true piety.\textsuperscript{73} For young female children being raised with the Madonna and Child image in the household aimed at educating and promoting virtue, they may have been seen as examples to emulate.\textsuperscript{74} For young male children, it offered an idealization of how they would relate to women. One understands there were many reasons why the Madonna and Child were displayed in the household, but why the obsession? The Medici inventory of 1492, for instance, lists a devotional image for each bedroom.\textsuperscript{75}

A fine example depicting the placement of a devotional tondo in a domestic setting is \textit{Predica dell’arte del ben morire} (Sermon on the Art of Dying Well), a woodcut designed by Girolamo Savonarola in 1496 to 1497 (Figure 15). Olson stated that this woodcut illustration contains one of only a few fifteenth-century depictions known to her of an independent tondo \textit{in situ} in a domestic interior.\textsuperscript{76} This illustration depicts a sick man lying on his \textit{lettuccio} (daybed) with Death at the door and devils hoping to grab his soul, as his wife and doctor stand by watching the event.\textsuperscript{77} A large Madonna and Child tondo situated on the wall, however, protects him as he is aided by the angels above, who have come through the window.\textsuperscript{78} In his sermon on the “Art of Dying Well” delivered on 2 November 1496 (Feast of All Souls), Savonarola urged his Florentine followers to keep a series of images of death and dying in their \textit{camera}, to encourage them to contemplate their own end and prepare themselves for it.\textsuperscript{79} Savonarola describes a man who is ill but putting off making his confession, while his wife and doctor encourage him not to think about death, reflecting the integration of moral instruction and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} Ibid, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Anna Jolly, \textit{Madonnas by Donatello and His Circle} (Frankfurt: Peter Lang GmbH, 1998), 13.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Olson, \textit{The Florentine Tondo}, 79.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Donal Cooper, “Devotion,” In \textit{At Home in Renaissance Italy} (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 195.
\end{itemize}
devotional imagery in a dynamic new visual culture.\footnote{Donal Cooper, “Devotion,” In At Home in Renaissance Italy, 195 & 196.} The woodcut was designed to guide devotional practice and also people’s lives.\footnote{Peta Motture and Luke Syson, “Art in the Casa,” in At Home in Renaissance Italy (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 273 & 274.} An image of the Madonna and Child, however, achieves this aim in a much more pleasant way.

The Plan of a House Belonging to the Gaddi Family of Florence drafted by Aristotile da Sangallo; Palazzo Gaddi, Florence; c.1560; Uffizi is an excellent drawing of a rich household (Figure 16). The lowest story is a basement; the house is entered from the right under an overhanging bay on a bracket; a vestibule leads through into an open courtyard (cortile—note the projecting tiled roof at second-floor level), with a doorway, stairs and a fountain, beyond which is an open loggia behind columns. Upstairs, the main room (sala) is in front, with the kitchen (cucina) above it; the bedrooms (camere) are at the back.\footnote{Margaret Aston, ed., The Panorama of the Renaissance, 188.} While there aren’t any more fifteenth-century tondi detailed in this sixteenth-century drawing, one can imagine their presence in the camera, as illustrated previously in Savonarola’s woodcut (Figure 15). By da Sangallo’s time in the late sixteenth-century, the circular form favored nearly one hundred years earlier had been replaced by newer forms of portable art works. The next chapter will consider some of the reasons for this change in tastes.
The Virgin Mary has been considered the most revered woman in all of history. Rona Goffen stated in “Mary’s Motherhood According to Leonardo and Michelangelo” that the subject of the Mother and Child was one of the most familiar Christian images and also one of the oldest. An early surviving example from the fourth century B.C. is the Madonna and Child fresco on the wall of the Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, which was named for a Christian noblewoman.

Marina Warner noted in Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary, that Mary is mother and virgin; since the sixth century B.C., when the Akathistos hymn hailed her as the one creature in whom all opposites are reconciled, her virgin motherhood has been the chief sign of her supernatural nature. Warner also stated that the Virgin is an inevitable expression of the archetype of the Great Mother and the symbol of the ideal woman, who has been held up as an example to women. One can understand then, as Olson noted, that the vast majority of tondi represented devotional subjects, primarily of the Madonna and Child.

In “Art or Artifact? Madonna and Child Reliefs in the early Renaissance,” Geraldine A. Johnson noted that a recent estimate suggested that nearly a thousand fifteenth-century Marian reliefs survive to this day. Why was the Madonna and Child such a popular theme for the tondo? Giorgio Cracco has argued that the popularity of Marian images was conditioned by a crisis in the quattro- and cinquecento ecclesiastical institutions in which the clergy, frequently

86 Ibid, 335.
87 Olson, The Florentine Tondo, 2.
absent from the churches, failed in its response to the spiritual needs of the population, whereas the Madonna offered a more direct access; she belonged to the people rather than to the institutions and could communicate directly with the lay people.\footnote{Erik Thuno and Gerhard Wolf, eds. “The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance” (lecture, Danish Academy, Rome, Italy, 31 May-2 June 2003), 52-53.} George H. Tavard, author of The Thousand Faces of Mary, sees only one way of interpreting the Marian devotion phenomenon: Mary has been treated in folk piety as a mirror of the attributes of God, and especially of the divine attributes of immensity or ubiquity and of healing power.\footnote{George H. Tavard, The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 248.}

One of the most common among the devotional representations of the Virgin Mary emphasized the more maternal aspect of the mother-child relationship (Mater Amabilis).\footnote{Hall, Hall’s Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art, 324.} In this iconographic tradition, Mary is shown half-length, wearing her traditional colors, the red robe under a blue cloak, and supporting the Child in her arms in a number of conventionalized postures.\footnote{Ibid, 329.} The Madonna and Child with Cherubim by Andrea della Robbia (1485) (Figure 1, previously discussed in the Introduction), is a fine example of this kind of maternal representation of the Virgin Mary. She is shown half-length, holding her Child closely to her body, with their heads touching. The proximity of the two bodies suggest that this is a loving mother, one whom a fifteenth-century woman could feel comfortable connecting to and wanting to emulate.

In observing an early image of a Madonna and Child tondo, created by Luca Della Robbia in 1440 (Figure 17), Sir John Pope-Hennessy noted that the polychromed and gilded stucco sculpture with wood frame shows the Virgin and Child in a circular concave field, and represented a strikingly progressive solution of the geometry of the tondo form.\footnote{Charles Avery, Andrew Butterfield and Ulrich Middeldorf. Early Renaissance Reliefs (New York: Salander-O’Reilly Galleries, 2001), 24.} Besides the
advanced interpretation of form, the circular composition imposes an intimate connection between a mother and child. The Madonna’s and Child’s gilded hair further highlights their touching foreheads as they gaze adoringly into each other’s eyes. This is both an iconographical formula as well as a compositional necessity. Mary, shown in half-length, supports the Divine Child in her arms and gently holds his foot in her hand as the Child tenderly clutches Mary’s veil. One senses their closeness and unbreakable bond. The imagery emphasizes the humanity of Mary and their eye-contact reinforces the connection between all mothers and their children. The composition illustrates their loving relationship. A young fifteenth-century Florentine woman could view the image of a mother and child and could easily find a connection. Some viewers could relate to being a mother, an expectant mother or as one hoping of someday becoming a mother. Even if childless, a viewer could relate to having once been the child to such a mother.

The Virgin and Child image could be viewed not only as a devotional object but also as a teaching tool or a social role model on motherhood for Renaissance women from which the viewer would seek spiritual guidance and inspiration. In addition, it was also an educational tool for children. Fra Giovanni Dominici, for instance, stressed the moral aspects that these devotional works had in the education of children, and he explained that images found in the home should have beneficial effects specifically on them. 94 Most scholars agree that devotional images can be interpreted as theoretical models for the quattrocento viewer in which they do not simply reflect an interest in childhood or familial love during this time, but played an active role in modeling ideal social behavior within the family. 95 Allison Lee Palmer suggested additional reasons for the widespread popularity of the Virgin and Child images, that has to do with how

these visual images helped to construct and confirm family identity through a confluence of religious, social and economic terms.\textsuperscript{96} For instance, in a patriarchal society whereby family status was tied to the family identity and lineage, an image of a virtuous Mother and Child would reinforce the family’s values. In a visual display culture, the beautiful Virgin Mary would be an image for the Renaissance female to emulate. The Virgin and Child images were generalized styles of iconic subjects and made from materials that were affordable to the patrician class and had standard compositions that mirrored the repetition of simple prayers, such as the \textit{Ave Maria}.\textsuperscript{97} The daily \textit{Office of the Virgin} became increasingly common, with the \textit{Ave Maria} joining the \textit{Pater Noster} and the \textit{Credo} as one of the key prayers to be taught to the laity.\textsuperscript{98}

One should therefore, reflect on a possible role model the Virgin Mary played for women in a patriarchal society and how the image was not only a devotional picture, but also a social commentary of the time. Images of the Virgin and Child became humanized in their depiction, so that the observer could establish a personal and emotional relationship with them.\textsuperscript{99} How did women identify with the Virgin Mary and what did the image mean to women on an individual level in the everyday life of Renaissance Italy? Did Renaissance women relate to the Virgin Mary personally and try to emulate her?

The image of Mary seemed to have a power and presence which transformed the viewer. Mary was the human link between heaven and earth with which the viewer could have an intimate connection. Warner noted the sixth century \textit{Akathistos} hymn hails Mary as Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28:12) on which he saw the angels of the Lord ascending and descending

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{98} Johnson, “Art or Artifact?,” 1.
\textsuperscript{99} Richard A. Goldthwaite, \textit{Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy 1300-1600} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 140.
between heaven and earth, for Mary is the ladder that Christ used to descend to earth and that man can use to ascend to heaven. Mary was recognized by Christians not only as the Mother of God, but as an Intercessor to God in Heaven. The most consistent theme in the theology of the Virgin’s intercession, however, is her motherhood. Goldthwaite noted in Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy 1300-1600 that the practice of intercession in favor of departed loved ones or for the sake of one’s own future opened up the floodgates to soaring demand for religious images by rich Italians to demonstrate their wealth and status in a public religious space. These objects made up a realm of material culture organized around religious practices and expanded rapidly within the private domestic world, outside the confines of liturgical space. The viewer could concentrate on the image of Mary and request that she intercede on their behalf. The face of the Virgin Mary was seen as the one through which to view the face of Jesus Christ, through which in turn the face of God was visible. As stated in the Hail Mary prayer, “Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee,” God selected Mary as the woman to become the mother of Jesus and thus designated as his chosen one.

Mary was not only inspirational, but considered to have a divine presence and power accessible to the average worshipper. For fifteenth-century Florentines, images of the Virgin Mary possessed an iconic power capable of changing their lives. After all, the period from 1450 to 1536 was the high point of recorded visions of the Virgin Mary in Italy. For example,

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100 Warner, Alone of All Her Sex, 286.
101 Ibid.
102 Goldthwaite, Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy 1300-1600, 128.
103 Ibid, 129.
the *Stemma of the Arte dei Medici e Speziali*, (Figure 11, previously mentioned in Chapter 1), was placed in a prominent position high up on the façade of the guilds’ church of Orsanmichele, where Florentines walking on the main street on a daily basis would continuously see the presence of the Virgin Mary. They physically had to look up to her and spiritually they looked up to her as a role model of who they wanted to be. If they were a fifteenth-century Florentine woman with limited access to the streets, the Madonna and Child tondo placed in their home would provide the same benefit. They could immerse themselves in a spiritual exercise of self-reflection in order to elevate themselves to a higher realm and connect with the Virgin Mary.

The Virgin Mary would be a constant reminder of her divine power and ability to transform their world. By concentrating on the Virgin’s attributes, they could cultivate their own sense of self. As David Morgan’s *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* suggests, we are left in the realm of “material things” and the “aesthetics of everyday life;” popular religious images contribute to the construction of reality and people use images to make and maintain their worlds. The Madonna and Child tondo seemed the perfect fit in a visual culture for Renaissance women confined to the home. The imagery fostered devotion in every woman from every class. As confirmed by Emile Male, a common vision cut across class and educational lines, and its chief heroine was Mary. Through a ritual of prayer and contemplation, one might hope to enter a heavenly place and interact with the Divine; the Divine became accessible to ordinary mortals through art.

Image cults were particularly sensitive to regime changes and new image cults were dedicated to the Virgin Mary. This phase of new cults occurred during the turbulent years after

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1494, when Medici hegemony in communal Florence began to break down and terminated with the fall of the second Republic government after the Siege of Florence in 1530. The Table of Four Phases in the Development of Florentine Image Cults created by author Megan Holmes was coded as follows: Black = Marian cults; Gray = Crucifix cults; for the periods (1292-1398), (1399-1493), (1494-1530) and (1531-1599), and clearly depicts when Marian devotion was prevalent (Figure 18). Note the highest number of Florentine Marian cults is from 1494-1530, when two Republican governments rise following the execution of Savonarola, the messianic Dominican preacher and reformer, who was intimately associated with the profound upheavals, that shook Florence in the last decade of the fifteenth century. My thesis findings of the flourishing of the Madonna and Child tondi during the period 1480-1515 coincides with the proliferation of new Marian cults reflected in the table.

Although the image of the Virgin Mary was easily recognizable, one can imagine that the tondi featuring her may have held other meanings and could be interpreted differently by each viewer. Freedberg advised that the representation of an image is often considered to be miraculous because it deceives us not into thinking it is reality, but because it is something other than what it represents. From a social perspective, a female viewer may have identified with the Virgin Mary. For example, The Virgin Annunciate by Fra Filippo Lippi (Figure 14), which was previously discussed in Chapter 1, depicts the Virgin Mary in decorative contemporary attire and her hair in a braided upsweep entwined with ribbon. Although she is wearing the standard colors of the Virgin Mary, she is not a traditional Mary, but a contemporary female that a fifteenth-century woman could identify with. Viewing the background depicting normal

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112 Holmes, The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence, 43.
113 Ibid.
maternal activity, such as women tending to a child’s needs, Mary cradling her child, guests arriving to celebrate the birth, and a child tugging at his mother’s dress; the Renaissance female could relate and feel at home in this typical domestic setting. Images could invite penetration into the holy realm, involving the viewer in an intimate and private psychological experience.\footnote{Goldthwaite, \textit{Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy 1300-1600}, 143.} Having the Madonna and Child tondo in the household, the Renaissance woman could encounter the image on a daily basis, look beyond the imagery and be lifted spiritually into a higher realm. She could approach the tondo and by the emotional impact of engagement with the Virgin Mary be transformed by self-projection into a transcendent realm.\footnote{George H. Tavard, \textit{The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary} (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), 58.} With the sight of Mary in the perfect circular form, the tondo became the threshold between the visible and invisible world. The Renaissance female would be familiar with the human aspects of the Virgin Mary which were illustrated in the \textit{Synoptic Gospels} of the \textit{New Testament}: the humility of the handmaid and her concern for her son.\footnote{Ibid, 59.} The female viewer could call upon Mary for help when she was in doubt or despair, by reciting the scriptural first part of the familiar \textit{Ave Maria} in the works of Severus of Antioch, with the understanding that Mary would not abandon her.\footnote{Tavard, \textit{The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary}, 59.}

Of course, in Renaissance Florence, the Madonna and Child imagery was created not only in the circular form. Prominent artists presented the composition in other formats, such as the square and rectangle. For example, Donatello used the square format in his monochromatic marble composition of the \textit{Pazzi Madonna} (1417-20), when he introduced the ‘rilievo schiacciato’ (very low relief) technique, which is accepted by most scholars as the autograph
Again, one notices the physical closeness and emotional bond between the Madonna and Child, nose to nose, with eyes penetrating each other. The Madonna appears in classic profile and larger than life, as her half-length figure fills the composition and her head protrudes over the marble frame, as if she were breaking out of the pictorial space and entering our space. She is a powerful, masculine Madonna, with her massive hands embracing and supporting the Child. With Donatello’s use of *rilievo schiacciato*, there is a deepening expressionistic language in which the spectator had no other choice but to respond emotionally with a sense of tenderness and warmth by the close unity of the Mother and Child. By having the monumental Madonna overlapping the frame, there is close proximity to the viewer, giving an immediate connection, as the Virgin Mary is now in our world and amongst us. The tactile gestures and distinct facial expressions convey an intimacy and dramatic intensity to the figures, resulting in a deeply felt emotion of love for the composition.

Donatello’s imagination and the powerful influence on his contemporaries are confirmed by W. von Bode, who stated, “The development of Madonna representations is a yardstick for the development of the entire Italian Renaissance.” Donatello’s influence in Michelangelo’s *Madonna of the Stairs* (Madonna della Scala) (Figure 20) is noticeable even though the latter dates to ca. 1489-92. This is probably Michelangelo’s earliest surviving sculpture of the Madonna and Child. It is indebted to Donatello, as Vasari recorded, by its carving mode, ‘*rilievo schiacciato,*’ as well as some stylistic and compositional elements, such as the Virgin’s Grecian profile, reminiscent of the *Pazzi Madonna*. However, that is basically where the resemblance ends. The *Madonna della Scala* is a rectangle, while the *Pazzi Madonna*

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120 Jolly, *Madonnas by Donatello and His Circle*, 85.
121 James Beck, “Recent Donatello Exhibitions in Italy and the United States,” Notes in the History of Art 5, no. 3 (Spring 1986), 3.
122 Jolly, *Madonnas by Donatello and His Circle*, 87.
123 Ibid, 189.
is a square. Along with the Madonna and Child, Michelangelo’s composition includes several putti and a staircase, while there is no background in Donatello’s composition. Whereas there is close intimacy and a passionate bond between the Madonna and Child in the *Pazzi Madonna*, there is a definite detachment between the nursing Mother and Child in the *Madonna della Scala*. Looking away from her sleeping Child, Michelangelo’s Madonna lacks emotional attachment. She has the Child positioned on her lap, but is not actually holding him in her arms.

Michelangelo experimented (without much success) with the rectangular form in the *Madonna della Scala*, but ended up abandoning that format. In the early sixteenth century, he moved to the circle and had great success in creating the sculpted *Taddei* and *Pitti Tondi*, along with the painted *Doni Tondo*, which will be discussed shortly.

Donatello’s innovative style is also evident in *The Virgin and Child with Four Angels* (*Chellini Madonna*) bronze sculptured tondo created in 1456, which is the only Madonna relief by Donatello that can be dated reasonably securely (Figure 21). At the Assumption, Mary becomes Queen of Heaven and the crown she wears on her head is the token of her triumph. The railing is unique among Donatello’s Madonnas and parallels in sculpture or painting are hard to find. This is a crowned and haloed Madonna, flanked by angels on each side. Head to head, the Madonna tenderly leans down and cradles her Child, while a balustrade (railing) functions like a fence (*hortus conclusus*), confining the figures in the composition. This is also a loving and attentive mother, connecting with her child. The Madonna’s elbow, deliberately leaning on the balustrade, emphasizes the significance of the railing, while her arm and hand, clearly prominent, acts as a protector of the Child. One can delve deeper into the possible symbolic

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124 Roberta Olson, “Lost and Partially Found: The Tondo, a Significant Florentine Art Form, in Documents of the Renaissance,” *Artibus et Historiae* 14, no. 27 (1993), 50.
125 Warner, Alone in Her Sex, 103.
meanings of the composition. On a spiritual level, the railing serves as a barrier separating the Madonna from the real world and the viewer from the heavenly world. From a social perspective, one can interpret the scene as accentuating a patriarchal society, with the balustrade emphasizing the restrictions of a fifteenth-century Renaissance woman confined to her home. According to Christiane Klapisch-Zuber in *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, the values were those of lineage; the children born of a couple belonged to the father and to his kinship group and ultimately minimized female roles and female contributions to the family group.127

In *Virgin and Child*, c. 1460, by a Donatello follower, the Virgin and Child pigmented stucco tondo is enclosed in a tabernacle frame (Figure 22), emphasizing that this is a devotional object used for religious purposes. The tabernacle, as the visible storage place for the host, underwent an artistic evolution in fifteenth-century Florence as it moved from seclusion in the sacristy to a noticeable monument on the side wall in the church and then to a central place on the altar.128 Like the tabernacle in the church, the tabernacle frame houses the *Virgin and Child* (Piot Madonna) tondo and reinforces the Virgin Mary as the Blessed Mother, and symbolically the portal for Christ. The Madonna is in another world with her eyes closed and her hands clasped in prayer. The stucco background gives the setting a heavenly feel which is conducive to prayer and contemplation. Similarities to Donatello are clearly evident by the emotional expression of the solemn Madonna, who in her private moment is focusing all her prayers on the well-being of the Child. Once again, Marian devotion and the importance of family are reinforced by the interaction of the Madonna and Child.

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128 Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy 1300-1600*, 79.
Approximately thirty years later, Michelangelo continued to explore the Madonna and Child theme by creating two marble sculpted tondi within two years. In the *Virgin and Child with St John (Tondo Taddei)*, ca. 1502, a young John the Baptist is now depicted beside the Madonna and Child (Figure 23). As the patron saint of Florence, St. John the Baptist is nearly always present in tondi as a toddler or an adolescent: he served as an *exemplum* for youths of the city.\(^{129}\) Michelangelo filled the entire surface of the tondo with the three figures. There is playful activity in the composition by the Child running from a bird held in John the Baptist’s hand. The frightened emotion of the Child is evident as he clings to his Mother’s arm. This rendition differs from the *Madonna della Scala*, as the classical tradition is nearly absent in her profile. She is now a more gentle Madonna, conveyed by the delicate drapery folds and humanistic quality to the slight smile on her gentle face and Michelangelo’s more successful handling of the female form. Although the detachment is still evident by the lack of engagement from the Virgin Mary as she looks away from her frightened Child as he clings to her, in this Madonna and Child tondo, one gets the sense of a real family with children at play.

In Michelangelo’s *Virgin and Child with St John (Tondo Pitti)*, ca. 1503, the inspiration from antiquity resurfaces in the classical elements of the Virgin’s slight profile, aquiline nose and ancient headpiece (Figure 24). Included in the composition is again John the Baptist, but in this tondo, he is faintly depicted, appearing like a vision, behind the Madonna. There is a similar detachment to this Madonna, but one senses from the faraway expression in her eyes, that she is lost in contemplation, while her Child is smiling and playfully leaning beside her. The tondo, carved in higher relief, results in a strong powerful presence of the Madonna. With her head extended over the border of the tondo, the Madonna appears ready to leap out of the setting into our space. Michelangelo has continued in the classical tradition, but there is now a more realistic

\(^{129}\) Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, 4.
quality to the composition by the natural pose of the Virgin as she leans towards her Child and gently supports him with her left hand under his armpit, as he playfully leans on the book she is holding in her right hand.

Why did Michelangelo create two sculpted tondi using the same Madonna and Child theme? One could surmise that since they both were commissioned by patrons, Taddeo Taddei and Bartolommeo Pitti, respectively, that the patrons requested the specific subject matter. Their similar choice in imagery is testimony of the pervasive fascination with the Madonna and Child theme even as it is about to fall out of fashion. One recognizes the importance of family and Marian devotion and how they are intertwined into the cultural values of early sixteenth-century Renaissance society.

Although the Madonna and Child images imply that the primary function of the fifteenth-century reliefs were an aid to Marian devotion and the achievement of ever-higher levels of contemplation, Geraldine Johnson suggested they may also have played an important role in addressing quattrocento concerns about birth and marriage. In the domestic setting, the spiritual authority of the Madonna and Child images fused with patriarchal authority to create a new type of private, family-centered piety that reveals a great social and economic investment in women and children in order to cultivate family solidarity, honor and future prosperity – the construction of the identity of the Renaissance family. In Chapter 3, we will address the parallel roles of the Virgin Mary and the fifteenth-century Renaissance woman, along with the importance of the social structures of marriage, childbirth and family in the domestic setting. In order to provide a broader social context against which the appreciation of tondi can be placed.

130 In Chapter 3, some key texts related to the history of fifteenth-century women. e.g. Johnson, Klapisch-Zuber and Musacchio.
RENAISSANCE WOMEN

What was a woman’s role in Renaissance society during the quattrocento? The importance of women was centered around the family and on their roles as wives and mothers.¹³² According to Joan Kelly, there was no “rebirth” for women during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Due to the consolidation of genuine states, Italian society was reorganized along modern lines which opened the possibilities for social and cultural expression which affected fifteenth-century Renaissance women adversely.¹³³ As a matter of fact, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber in *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, stated that the establishment of patrilineality in urban clans from the twelfth century onward resulted to a decline in the legal and social status of women.¹³⁴ Children born of a couple belonged to the father and to his kinship group with the male not only acquiring rights over a woman’s descendants, but over her dowry and herself, as well.¹³⁵

In her study on Florentine portraits, Patricia Simons observed that a fifteenth-century woman was an adorned “Other” who was defined into existence when she entered patriarchal discourse primarily as an object of exchange and was made into an object in a framed ‘mirror’ rather than portrayed in her ‘true’ or ‘real’ nature; she was an object on display.¹³⁶ The woman’s social role was not only her physical appearance but who Renaissance society dictated she should be. Gender roles were well defined with married females centered on nurturing and

¹³⁵ Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 215.
protecting children, along with household duties.\textsuperscript{137} As a married woman, she was a means to have children and continue the male lineage; and for her husband to have a wealthier life. She was told this is who you are and not encouraged to find her unique individual self. How then did a fifteenth-century woman find an outlet for her sense of self? With limited options, who was she to turn to? As a Renaissance daughter, wife or mother, she could reach out to someone she idolized and aspired to be: the Virgin Mary. Looking at the tondo as a spiritual, social and talismanic tool, the woman could contemplate who she was to be in the image of the Virgin. The fifteenth-century Renaissance women were provided with ideal models of behavior which conformed to specific set of rules, with obedience being the main requirement, first towards her parents, then towards her husband and then after obedience; after obedience, the greatest quality was chastity.\textsuperscript{138} The average age of marriage was around seventeen for girls, with only 14.8% of men married at twenty, 48.5% of all men married at twenty five and only 3/4 of all men were married at thirty three.\textsuperscript{139} Questioning her identity and purpose, the fifteenth-century woman could look to the Virgin Mary for comfort and guidance in order to realize her place in society at large and with her family. With the Virgin Mary as her model, she could become the woman she was expected to be.

James Jarves emphasized the universal significance of the Virgin and Child: “It should not be forgotten in viewing the frequency of the Madonna as a motif in sacred art, that she has always represented in Christianity the type of the perfect woman; combining the beauty, grace, loveliness and intellect of all the classical types of womanly attributes and perfect, with the love,
purity, chastity and spirituality in their highest functions...it is one that must ever be dear to the hearts of all those who have mothers, sisters, wives or daughters to respect and adore.”

The nucleus of an Italian Renaissance house in the fifteenth century, whatever its size and importance, was the camera. It was the setting for many important events in a woman’s life, such as the celebration of marriage and childbirth. The bedroom of a wealthy Florentine was the heart of the household; it was not only a private place for sleeping, but also a room where one could receive relatives and friends and where the most expensive items of furniture were commissioned. On the occasion of marriage, the camera was often furnished with objects incorporating messages intended to educate and inspire the bride as well as to promote fertility. Once pregnant, women were encouraged to contemplate beautiful images, which were often present in the bedroom, such as depictions of the Virgin and Child, in order to have a healthy well-formed baby. It was thought that holy figures were present to guide and to express the piety of the household, and also to represent their welcome protection of the family.

In the domestic setting, the spiritual authority of these devotional images was fused with patriarchal authority to create a new type of private, family-centered piety that revealed a great social and economic investment in women and children in order to cultivate family solidarity, honor, and future prosperity. For example, The Virgin Annunciate (Bartolini Tondo) by Fra Filippo Lippi (Figure 14), there is a prominence of women in the background participating in the

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142 Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity, 27.
143 Currie, Inside the Renaissance House, 52.
144 Ibid, 55.
maternal duties and celebrating the new birth. Women and children of the household could contemplate and emulate the Virgin Mary’s holy virtues and encourage simple piety.\textsuperscript{147} For children being raised with Madonna and Child images aimed at educating and promoting virtue, the images could be seen as examples to emulate.\textsuperscript{148}

In addition to the Madonna and Child images in the home, the women could find other instructional narratives in churches, such as monumental confinement scenes which idealized the events in the bedchamber following the birth and were important evidence of the maternal tasks for tending to the new mother and child; and the celebration surrounding childbirth in fifteenth-century Italy.\textsuperscript{149} By situating these events in a contemporary setting, the artists created strong paradigms for female behavior; and comfort and reassurance to the apprehensive mother to be.\textsuperscript{150} The \textit{camera} portrayed in the fresco of the \textit{Birth of John the Baptist} by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1486 to 1490) in the Tornabuoni Chapel at Santa Maria Novella, Florence, illustrates the celebration ritual of the birth of John the Baptist in a domestic setting (Figure 25). Saint Elizabeth, the new mother, situated on a \textit{lettiera} (bed) with a decorative headboard and a rich red coverlet, is not only physically raised as if seated on a throne, but also symbolically elevated to a higher social stature with the birth of her child. The mother wearing a blue gown and adorned in a white headdress that appears like a veil, has a hint of a golden halo above her head. This attire is reminiscent of the apparel worn by Elizabeth’s cousin, the Virgin Mary. It should be noted that in the Christian Church, blue was the traditional color of the Virgin and was used on days commemorating events in her life.\textsuperscript{151} The new mother receives a procession of three well-

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid, 17.
\textsuperscript{149} Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 125.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{151} Ferguson, \textit{Signs & Symbols in Christian Art}, 151.
dressed visitors who appear here in contemporary fashions that would have appealed to the fifteenth century viewer. Several women tend to her needs and that of her child in the foreground. In celebration of the birth, a woman rushes in carrying a *descho da parto* (birth salver) on her head, laden with an array of fruits. One observes the prominence of women and the absence of men in the *camera*. This fresco confirms the mother’s fulfillment of her role in the family with the celebration of the male birth, which was a vital element to Renaissance family values and lineage. Birth was an event highly valued, especially due to the high mortality rate of children. One in ten Florentine women died in childbirth and many babies died before reaching their first birthday.\(^{152}\) The plague struck Italy at least a dozen times between 1348-1600 and killed one-third and one-half of the population with Florence dropping from 120,000 inhabitants in 1338 to 37,000 in 1441.\(^{153}\) Also in Florence, in 17.4% of cases, putting a child out to nurse ended in the death of the child.\(^{154}\)

It was commonly acknowledged that possessions could contribute to a Renaissance family’s reputation and social standing.\(^{155}\) Beautifully crafted objects helped establish a woman’s identity, marked events, celebrated unions, emphasized family identity, and taught important lessons regarding accepted and expected behavior.\(^{156}\) Trousseau inventories would contain a number of secular items, particularly *cassoni* (wedding chests), portraiture, mirrors, *deschi da parto* (birth salvers), along with devotional images, such as the Madonna and Child tondi.

\(^{154}\) Kaplisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, 151.  
Historians have established that members of Renaissance patrician lineages were preoccupied with marriages as strategic alliances and as family investments.\textsuperscript{157} The expectations of Renaissance society and ideals which the newly-married couple should aspire, such as marriage, growth of the family and continuation of male lineage, were reinforced by the largely instructional narrative paintings which decorated the furniture of their bedroom.\textsuperscript{158} The choice of subjects was guided by the belief that images could be used as \textit{exempla}, a moral model for ideal behavior.\textsuperscript{159} Cassone, portrait and \textit{descho da parto} in particular, showcase and reinforce the importance these particular possessions were to the social identity of a Renaissance family.

The \textit{cassoni} were expensive and lavishly decorated chests paid by the groom and served not only a decorative and celebratory function, but as an example of the moral qualities desired from both partners.\textsuperscript{160} A painted \textit{cassone} by Giovanni di Ser Giovanni (Lo Scheggia), c. 1450, commemorates the Adimari-Ricasoli Wedding in 1420 (Figure 26).\textsuperscript{161} The composition moving from left to right across the horizontal register details the marriage celebration, depicting the elegantly dressed bride, groom and procession of guests, along with musicians and dancers. A \textit{cassone} was often exhibited during the procession that accompanied the bride to her new home and therefore depicted subjects appropriate for this public function: legendary heroes, stories emphasizing love, virtues and cautionary tales reminding husbands of their authority over their wives, along with coats of arms.\textsuperscript{162} In the \textit{cassone} by Lo Scheggia, the importance of the marriage celebration is accentuated by the colorful striped canopy covering the outdoor scene.

\textsuperscript{157} Cristelle L. Baskins, \textit{Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.
\textsuperscript{158} Tinagli, \textit{Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity}, 21.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, 22-23.
\textsuperscript{161} Andrea Bayer, ed. \textit{Art and Love in Renaissance Italy} (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 289.
\textsuperscript{162} Claudio Paolini, “Chests,” In \textit{At Home in Renaissance Italy}, 120.
and the rich textured tapestries in the background. This *cassone* panel can be considered an idealized snapshot of a perfect marriage reception made for all the public to admire and emulate. Through the marriage narrative, the bride and groom are announcing to fifteenth-century society their combined family status as one entity, which was extremely important to the fifteenth-century Renaissance culture. A meager wedding celebration reflected poorly on the families involved, so as a result, families paid enormous amounts of money to indicate their social standing.\textsuperscript{163} This wealthy public display of the wedding ritual illustrates not only the union of both families, but their social status.

Prior to the Council of Trent which redefined matrimony as one of the seven sacred sacraments, the marriage ceremony was not a strict religious ritual in the modern sense but reflected the transfer of the woman to her husband and the families’ financial or political needs.\textsuperscript{164} Marriage was not a private act between two individuals, but was considered a public event.\textsuperscript{165} It was seen as the very basis of identity, civic morality and the existence and growth of the Renaissance family.\textsuperscript{166} It was an alliance of families and not individuals.\textsuperscript{167}

Renaissance culture in the fifteenth century was a “display culture,” where authority, respect, and moral and political influence were gained through the visibility of those signs which spoke of nobility and *magnificenza*, and therefore of virtue in the public domain.\textsuperscript{168} The *camera*, however, was suggested as the place for secluded, religious, visualizing contemplation,

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\item \textsuperscript{163} Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{164} Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985), 212.
\item \textsuperscript{165} Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity*, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{166} Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, 21 & 48.
\item \textsuperscript{167} Barbara B. Diefendorf, “Family Culture, Renaissance Culture,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 40, no.4 (Winter 1987), 669.
\item \textsuperscript{168} Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, 51.
\end{itemize}
especially for fifteenth-century women.\footnote{Luke Syson, “Representing Domestic Interiors,” in \textit{At Home in Renaissance Italy} (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 98.} For example, the \textit{Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement} (Figure 27), tempera on panel by Fra Filippo Lippi, (1436 to 1438), is a telling depiction of how the patriarchal society of fifteenth-century Florence placed restrictions on a married woman within a domestic setting. It is one of the first surviving Italian portrait with an interior setting, the first with a landscape background and the first double portrait in Italian art.\footnote{Andrea Bayer, ed. \textit{Art and Love in Renaissance Italy}, 255.}

A century ago, Joseph Breck, then an assistant curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, identified the couple in the double portrait as the Florentine-born Angiola di Bernardo Sapiti and her husband, Lorenzo di Rinieri Scolari.\footnote{Katalin Prajda, “The Coat of Arms in Fra Filippo Lippi’s Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement,” \textit{Metropolitan Museum Journal} 48 (2013), 73.} Breck made this identification based on the placement of the coat of arms under the male’s hands, the portrait’s probable date, and the Scolari genealogy.\footnote{Ibid.}

As an ornament, the woman is elegantly dressed in a velvet gown with pleats and belt, wearing an ornate headdress and adorned with a jeweled broach and pearls, a symbol of purity and wealth. She is an image of beauty. It should be noted that beauty for its own sake was important: women in windows were critical assets to their fathers’ and husbands’ public image.\footnote{Musacchio, \textit{Art, Marriage, \\& Family in the Florentine Renaissance} Palace, 162.} Women in windows were a common sight in fifteenth-century Florence.\footnote{Diane Wolfthal, “The Woman in the Window: Licit and Illicit Sexual Desire in Renaissance Italy,” Allison Levy, ed. Ashgate, 4.} A woman confined to her home could look out the window and be noticed by a passerby. Her status would be observed by her beauty and elegant attire. As custodian of the home, the importance of the woman is emphasized by her commanding presence. She is larger than life, while the man outside is reduced in size and seemingly his role diminished, as he cautiously gazes through the

\footnote{Luke Syson, “Representing Domestic Interiors,” in \textit{At Home in Renaissance Italy} (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 98.}
\footnote{Andrea Bayer, ed. \textit{Art and Love in Renaissance Italy}, 255.}
\footnote{Katalin Prajda, “The Coat of Arms in Fra Filippo Lippi’s Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement,” \textit{Metropolitan Museum Journal} 48 (2013), 73.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Musacchio, \textit{Art, Marriage, \\& Family in the Florentine Renaissance} Palace, 162.}
\footnote{Diane Wolfthal, “The Woman in the Window: Licit and Illicit Sexual Desire in Renaissance Italy,” Allison Levy, ed. Ashgate, 4.}
window. According to Jansen, the windows in the picture divide the image into two worlds: the interior with the female the central figure and the exterior with the male subordinate to her.\(^\text{175}\)

In reality, however, the man is actually in command, with one hand holding a coat of arms and his delicate fingers of his other hand possibly gesturing instructions to the woman. Perhaps the man is in charge, while the woman seemingly stands upright like a soldier awaiting orders. While the man’s distinctive hand gesture located prominently on the coat of arms, has been characterized as “authoritative” and “gesticulating,” Jansen recognized them as *Hornern* (horned hands), a symbol of infidelity, or cuckoldry; but then dismissed his assumption as inappropriate for a marriage portrait.\(^\text{176}\) J. Russell Sale noted that the man’s right hand does resemble the ancient *mano cornuta* or horn-handed gesture depicted in Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art as an emblem of fertility.\(^\text{177}\) One can conclude that there can be multiple interpretations for his hand gestures. It is interesting to note that the man and woman are not making eye contact. What could actually be the source of their disconnection is thought provoking. Scholars have given various explanations for the couple’s spatial and psychological independence, such as Christina Nelson’s suggestion that the figures’ non-meeting eyes allude to unrequited desire.\(^\text{178}\) Could the reason for their lack of eye contact be due to their differences in gender, age or status in the family? All these critical elements highlight their inequalities.

The window on the right side of the confined woman is partially obscured and depicts a narrow tree-lined path to the outside world. The view can be interpreted as an ideal setting of an inviting landscape; while in reality, it would be inaccessible to a fifteenth-century woman.

\(^\text{175}\) Prajda, “The Coat of Arms in Fra Filippo Lippi’s Portrait,” 74.
\(^\text{177}\) Sale, “Protecting Fertility in Fra Filippo Lippi’s Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement,” 67 & 68.
\(^\text{178}\) Ibid, 66.
restricted to the home. If looked at as an allegorical landscape, it highlights the patriarchal society and limitations placed on Renaissance woman in her home. According to Katalin Prajda, landed property was an index of the wealth of Florentine families and the detailed view outside the window in the portrait may actually refer to one of the Scolari estates. As observed by Grangier de Liverdes, “in Florence, women were more enclosed than in any other part of Italy; they see the world only from small openings in their windows.”

Why was a Renaissance woman confined to the home in the fifteenth century? Drawing from Alberti’s *Della Famiglia* and Alberti’s treatise on architecture, Mark Wigley identified the perceived threat to the family that is posed by a woman’s appearance in the “public” realm and pointed out that space engenders: whereas the enclosed woman is “feminine,” the woman in public is “more dangerously feminine” because she and her sexuality are mobile. Alberti believed that one function of domestic architecture was to protect a husband’s genealogical claims and honor by isolating his wife from all other men. Giannozzo stated that there were two things that fix a woman’s identity (the home or her husband); she still interacts with individuals who are not members of the family; and this exposure to the “public” make her and the family vulnerable to humiliation. Paolo da Certaldo warned young women to emulate the Virgin Mary and stay locked up in a hidden and honest place to protect their chastity and reputation. Alberti in *Della Famiglia* writes that a wife should be good, chaste and fruitful, and that “one should never cease praying to God that he may keep one’s wife faithful, tranquil

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183 Weddle, “Women’s Place in the Family and the Convent,” 66.
and loving,” adding that next to total celibacy, the worse fate for a family is a dishonored woman. As long as a Florentine woman remained in the private realm, protected from the view of outsiders, the risk of damage to reputation and, thereby, the loss of family status were diminished. The Renaissance woman’s identity is tied, therefore, first and foremost to the home and the status of the family.

After the imagery on cassoni and portraits we might also consider deschi da parto (birth salvers) which were popular from the late 1300s to the mid-1500s. They served a functional as well as a decorative purpose, whereby guests would bring food and delicacies to a new mother to celebrate the birth of the child and then the birth salver would later be hung on the wall for display. The tempera on panel Childbirth Tray (“Medici-Tornabuoni Tray”) by Giovanni di ser Giovanni (Lo Scheggia), 1448 to 1449, depicts the Triumph of Fame on one side and the Medici and Tornabuoni Emblems on the reverse; and marks the birth of Lorenzo di Piero de’ Medici, heir to the Medici dynasty (Figure 28). It is one of the best preserved and most extravagant painted birth tray to survive from the Renaissance. The Triumph of Fame features a female depicted as a winged allegorical figure of Fame standing atop an orb. She is surrounded by worshipful knights who do her honor as she holds a sword and supports Cupid, with his bow and arrow; all constituting “symbols of victory through arms and love.” Numerous winged trumpets announce her presence and signify that fame is spread wide. The reverse of the Medici-Tornabuoni Tray is made up of a diamond ring, three feathers, and a scroll

185 Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity, 24.
186 Weddle, “Women’s Place in the Family and the Convent,” 70.
187 Thornton, The Italian Renaissance Interior 1400-1600, 252
188 Musacchio, “Conception and Birth,” in At Home in Renaissance Italy, 132.
189 Musacchio. The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, 73.
191 Ibid.
with the motto Semper or “Always.” Near the top are two coats of arms; on the left are the eight red palle, or balls, of the Medici, and on the right is the rampant lion of the Tornabuoni. The three white, green and red feathers passing through a ring are the impresa (emblem) of Lorenzo de’ Medici (1448 to 1492). Not only was the Medici-Tornabuoni Tray a celebration of the birth of Lorenzo de’ Medici but also the coat of arms on the reverse side commemorated the continuation of the Medici lineage. This tray was certainly a special commission, but numerous birth objects were also produced for the open market to meet demand from all levels of Renaissance society.

Why were birth trays important to the average Renaissance family? According to best estimates, it seems that at least 20% of deaths of young, married women were birth-related and there was a similar mortality rate among newborns and young children. The city of Florence exemplified the catastrophic decline in population, dropping from 120,000 inhabitants in 1338 to 37,000 in 1441. Allison Palmer confirmed that Lo Scheggia’s descho da parto demonstrates an image not only of fertility, but also of economic prosperity through the male line. Any devotional object that provided protection and mediation for the expectant mother was desirable and stimulated the imagination of the fifteenth-century woman and encouraged her to fulfill the maternal role prescribed to her by society. This was especially important for grand Florentine families such as the Medici and Tornabuoni. With the high mortality rate of children, one

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193 Andrea Bayer, ed. Art and Love in Renaissance Italy, 154.
194 Musacchio. The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy, 76.
195 Ibid.
196 Musacchio. The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy. 77.
197 Musacchio, “Conception and Birth,” in At Home in Renaissance Italy, 132.
198 Ibid, 135.
199 Musacchio, “Conception and Birth,” in At Home in Renaissance Italy, 135.
201 Musacchio, “Conception and Birth,” in At Home in Renaissance Italy, 135.
considers that *Fame* could symbolize the Renaissance mother celebrating the victory of childbirth.

In an overwhelmingly Christian society demonstrable piety was an essential element of social respectability and of public prestige, whether at church, in the street or at home.\textsuperscript{202} Along with secular objects, such as cassoni, portraits and deschi da parto, devotional items, such as the Madonna and Child tondi, were displayed in the Renaissance home. The reliefs could be found in arguably almost every bedchamber in fifteenth-century Italy, with the demand for large quantities often achieved by series-production methods involving the uses of moulds.\textsuperscript{203} Specific colored glazes were used to enhance the composition on the inexpensive terracotta, stucco and clay material.

We previously acknowledged in Chapter 2 that Luca della Robbia created one of the earliest surviving Madonna and Child tondi. Olson noted that he produced numerous tondi and other works whose ceramic surface ensured lasting color without the expense of less brightly colored inlaid stone.\textsuperscript{204} They most often were encircled by festive garland frames, symbolizing the flourishing and/or fecundity of the institution or family.\textsuperscript{205} While Luca della Robbia’s garland typically contain fruits, pinecones and flowers interspersed with lush greenery conveying symbolic meanings, Ghiberti’s garland in the *Assumption of the Virgin* (Figure 5), contain saintly figures, along with flowers and ornamental designs. Although both garlands are colorful, Della Robbia’s garlands tend to have a natural earthy effect produced by the glazed terracotta and subject matter, while Ghiberti’s garland has an illuminating spiritual effect created by the contrasting colors of the glistening glass. Both garlands have lasting beauty, but one notices that

\textsuperscript{202} Donal Cooper, “Devotion,” in *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, 190.
\textsuperscript{203} Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior 1400-1600*, 109.
\textsuperscript{204} Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, 145.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid.
the different media (terracotta vs. glass) produces distinct colorful and spatial effects (three dimension vs. two dimension).

Luca della Robbia developed his permanent, lustrous tin-glazing technique in the 1430s; with the reasons why he developed this method being either aesthetic or economic.\textsuperscript{206} Particular qualities of brilliant glaze used in the Della Robbia workshop became a means for communicating morals and virtues appropriate to the context of female subjects in Italian Renaissance artwork.\textsuperscript{207} For example, Luca (or Andrea) della Robbia used bright colored glaze to complete his composition in the terracotta \textit{Madonna and Child with Two Angels (Cappuccini Madonna)} from 1475 to 1480 (Figure 29). The half-length Madonna and standing Child are flanked on each side by praying angels. All the figures are painted in white glaze and have bright yellow haloes behind their heads. The yellow may have been chosen to emulate gilding, while the white glaze of the figures highlights their purity and holiness.\textsuperscript{208} While the angels hover in the bright blue background, which contains broad wavy brush strokes, the Madonna’s half-length body appears immersed in a floating cloud, like a heavenly realm. The entire composition is bordered by a decorative colorful garland frame consisting of lush greenery dispersed within delicate white and yellow flowers. The repetitive use of white and yellow glaze on the figures, halos and flowers, reinforce the divine holiness to the overall composition.

One observes the simple detail and human quality to the composition by the Child’s sweet gestures, as he clings to his Mother’s veil and has his fingers in his mouth; while his Mother solemnly looks out at the viewer, as she tenderly holds her Child’s foot. There is a gentle quality to the religious tone of this devotional tondo. One could imagine a woman in the fifteenth

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid, 8.
\textsuperscript{208} Marietta Cambareri, \textit{Della Robbia: Sculpting with Color in Renaissance Florence} (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications, 2016), 18 & 32.
century having an emotional connection to the virtuous Madonna, who she aspired to be and who at the same time could relate to the loving bond between worried mother and playful child. With the enhancement of the illustrious white glaze suggesting chastity and of the modesty, the female viewer could reflect on her own virtues and beauty.\textsuperscript{209}

Most recent studies of fifteenth-century Italian family life have stressed the dual nature of the concept of the Renaissance family, which referred to the household and to lineage.\textsuperscript{210} There was a more intensive social cohesion within the family, which represented an ideal and created the perfect setting for the family’s retreat into domesticity; and also symbolized its aspirations for dynastic continuity and prestige.\textsuperscript{211} The family dual role of a patriarchal structure and its power resulted in the collective identity of the family bond.\textsuperscript{212} Renaissance culture was permeated with family culture.

Olson noted that the largest number of Renaissance tondi displayed in the home belonged to the painted devotional variety and became pervasive in the 1480s.\textsuperscript{213} In \textit{Painting & Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy}, Michael Baxandall stated that the painter was a professional visualizer of the holy stories and that each of his pious viewers practiced spiritual exercises that demanded a high level of visualization.\textsuperscript{214} Images in fifteenth-century Italy represented a complex culture of the time. The importance of a set of values, including civic morality as well as the appropriate behavior and appearance of female beauty guided the individual.\textsuperscript{215}

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\textsuperscript{210} Diefendorf, “Family Culture, Renaissance Culture,” 662.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid, 663.
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid, 667.
\textsuperscript{213} Olson, \textit{The Florentine Tondo}, 166.
\textsuperscript{215} Tinagli, \textit{Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity}, 187.
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Renaissance artists in the fifteenth century began to create painted tondi which provided a
different effect than sculpture. Botticelli was an artist known for his depiction of delicate beauty
in his Madonnas. In Christian art, the sublimity of visual beauty was used as a symbol of Divine
splendor. Beauty played a prominent role in the social values and ideal portrayal of women in
Renaissance culture. A fine example of a painted tondo in the 1480’s is the *Madonna of the
Magnificat* by Sandro Botticelli (Figure 30). The title derives from the opening words of the
Virgin’s song of exaltation, *Magnificant anima mea Dominum* (My soul doth glorify the Lord),
which the Virgin is writing in the book before her. There are two angels holding a delicate
golden crown over Mary’s head, while three other angels are up front by her side. Mary appears
in the forefront, elegantly dressed in a navy velvet cloak draped over her red gown and colorful
patterned shawl. With her eyes cast downward, she watches her Son, as one of her large hands
grasps him and a pomegranate (symbol of immortality/fertility). As he looks up at her tenderly,
he has one hand resting on her arm and the other grasping the pomegranate. With Mary’s other
hand, she is writing in a book. The book, a common accessory in Renaissance painting, is
traditionally the book of Wisdom and marks the Virgin as the “*Mater Sapientiae,*” the Mother of
Wisdom. Although the figures cover most of the background, one catches a glimpse of a
landscape showing an earthly civilization and a heavenly blue sky above. Mary, beautiful with
porcelain skin, is not of the real world where life thrives. *Madonna of the Magnificat* is a striking
religious portrayal of the Virgin Mary depicted as the *Queen of Heaven.*

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Luciano Berti noted that the figures in the *Madonna of the Magnificat* are designed to emphasize the circular form, and the representation has both rich beauty and persuasive tenderness. There is peaceful harmony to the circular composition created by the crown held in the out-stretched arms, the surrounding angels, the Madonna’s slightly curved body and the bent arm supporting the Child. Mother and Child are enveloped in a circle within a circular form, which stresses their important relationship. Not only is there a loving bond, but the Mother is portrayed as a protector and instructor to the Child. The overall emphasis in the composition is one of a blessed loving scene of a beautiful Mother and Child. One begins to sense the correlation between the Madonna and Child and the fifteenth-century mother hoping to become a mother. The emotional response of the viewer to the composition and the meaning it conveyed about the importance of family values becomes intertwined.

Approximately five years later, Botticelli painted a similar Madonna and Child theme in *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (1487), containing symbolic religious elements (Figure 31). However, instead of wearing a crown, there is a yellow sphere-like cloud shining golden rays down on Mary, who has a translucent halo over her head, illuminating her beautiful porcelain face, giving her a heavenly aura. One observes the beauty portrayed by the radiant elements. In this narrative, however, a stronger presence is felt by the figures covering most of the background. Mary is facing front and center, surrounded by six preoccupied angels, who are either gazing off in the distance, reading prayer books or holding lilies. As the viewer’s eyes follow the cloud to Madonna’s head, down to her curls, to the clustered group of angels, to her luxurious cloak enveloping the relaxed Child supported in her arms, one notices the central focus is the embrace of the Madonna and Child. Looking off into the distance, there is sadness in the Mother’s face, as if reflecting on the Child she cradles in her arms. While they both hold the

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pomegranate, one senses its importance and recognizes the re-occurring symbol of immortality and fertility. Again, Botticelli portrays a virtuous beautiful mother absorbed in thoughtful reflection. The contemplation of examples, images and stories illustrating the virtuous conduct and the comparison of their behavior to one’s own, were exercises familiar from childhood. \(^{220}\) A parallel comparison could be made whereby the family was considered of utmost importance and the ongoing prayer was to have a successful birth and healthy child.

Other artists were inclined to imitate the repeated elements of Botticelli. The underlying symbols, the delicate expression and beauty of the Madonna, give a humanistic quality to the narrative. Olson stated that Francesco Botticini, was one of the first painters responsible for a substantial number of tondi and painted his justifiably most celebrated example the *Adoration of the Child* (*Hortus Conclusus’ Tondo*), ca. 1490, during the apogee of the circular form (Figure 32).\(^{221}\) The tondo has many symbolic elements which provide complexity to the composition. The landscape background shows an idyllic town highlighted by five towering Cyprus trees, colorful rose bushes, mountains off in the horizon. Italian Renaissance painting sometimes used landscape background to reinforce a moral allegory, whereas good and evil – virtues and vices personified are respectively portrayed; it may be used to differentiate between the sacred and the secular.\(^{222}\) Mary is depicted as the *Madonna Adoring the Christ Child*, kneeling before the infant Christ in worship and adoration.\(^{223}\) With her eyes closed, kneeling in prayer over her Child, Mary is surrounded by five angels and a young John the Baptist. All are enclosed in a fenced in area displaying beautiful red, white and pink roses cascading over and through the fence. The


\(^{221}\) Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, 179.

\(^{222}\) Hall, Hall’s *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art*, 186.

\(^{223}\) Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, 95.
rose is symbolic of Mary’s virginity and Christ’s Passion; and the five angels and five Cyprus trees reference the rosary.224

The idea of an enclosure, walled or fenced, the *hortus conclusus*, was used as the symbol of the Immaculate Conception.225 Although there is a decorative stone base encompassing the fenced enclosure, the top portion has delicate spindles resulting in open spaces revealing the flourishing roses which border the *hortus conclusus*. The setting gives the impression that although Mary is secure in her sacred domain, she still has a view of the earthly realm behind her. The viewer in turn has access to her and through contemplation and visualization can pass into the emotional sphere.

Jacopo da Sellaio (Jacopo di Arcangelo) also followed in the tradition of Botticelli’s style in *Adoration of the Child with St. John*, ca. 1490 (Figure 33). Again Mary is portrayed kneeling before the Infant Christ as the *Madonna Adoring the Christ Child*, with eyes closed and hands clasped deep in prayer. A young John the Baptist is also present, but the angels are absent. There is an enticing landscape setting, but this time Mary’s head is against a blue sky background, as if in the heavenly realm. The Child looks like an actual infant as he playfully reaches out to his praying Mother. As previously noted, fifteenth-century woman could look to Mary as their Intercessor and pray to her for a successful birth, as a high child mortality rate was a growing concern. The theme of the Holy Family, therefore, is an even more socially charged topic for a tondo.

The following two tondi are the culmination of the portrayal of the Madonna and Child theme by prominent artists during the early sixteenth century. *The Holy Family with St John* (*Tondo Doni*), 1504 to 1506, is arguably the only documented and securely attributed

224 Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, 179.
independent panel painting by Michelangelo in a tondo format (Figure 34).\textsuperscript{226} When the merchant, Agnolo di Francesco Doni married Maddalena Strozzi in January 1504, he commemorated their hope for children by commissioning Michelangelo’s tondo.\textsuperscript{227} The tondo’s original carved, gilded, and polychrome frame is decorated with crescent moons of the Strozzi coat of arms, honoring the family of Doni’s wife, Maddalena.\textsuperscript{228} The \textit{Holy Family} subject, alludes to the couple’s establishing a new family of their own.\textsuperscript{229}

The \textit{Doni Tondo} depicts Mary, Joseph and Christ front and center, with a young John the Baptist gazing at them behind a low stone wall in the middle ground. In the far background is a group of nude figures leaning or sitting on a large stony ledge, which has a tiny plant whose flower is similar to a cornflower, symbolizing Heaven and its hyssop leaves, symbolizing penitence and humility, or baptism.\textsuperscript{230} Behind them is a glimpse of a landscape containing a mountain and water off in the distance.

Even though Joseph appears here as the father figure, the primary figure is still the mother. Strong and masculine, Mary is the prominent figure in the composition and centered in front of Joseph. By making Mary’s body too powerful for a normal sixteenth-century woman, Michelangelo spiritualizes her, masculinizing her face and physique in order to image her \textit{spiritual} virility, that is, her \textit{virtu}.\textsuperscript{231} Believing (with most of his contemporaries) that the male was superior to the female, Michelangelo, as Goffen argued, intended to honor Mary by making

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\textsuperscript{226} Olson, “Lost and Partially Found,” 31.
\textsuperscript{227} Goffen, “Mary’s Motherhood According to Leonardo and Michelangelo,” 55.
\textsuperscript{229} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{231} Goffen, \textit{Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian}, 166.
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her more male. In devotional images, the sixteenth-century Renaissance norm remained the female ideal embodied by the Madonna, but Michelangelo abandoned this tradition, masculinizing Mary in part to elevate her above Renaissance society’s oppression of women and to shield her from dangerous and inappropriate female sexuality. This surprising twist offered female viewers a different kind of heroine in Mary.

Illuminated by the light and dark shadows of her drapery folds, Mary’s figure is visible in its entirety, with attention given to her special role in salvation. Her bare muscular arms are noticeable as she lifts Christ over her right shoulder and presents him to Joseph. Mother and Child are gazing at each other, while Joseph watches the Child. In the Doni Tondo, Joseph is given the high position as head of the family, his head dominating over Mary’s. Symbolically, Mary has given her Child to Joseph and in turn to God. The colors of Mary’s red gown and blue cloak are the only similarities to the traditional garments worn by the Virgin Mary. This Mary is contemporary in her dress and turban which covers her hair. She is seated barefoot on the dry ground, while Joseph, also barefoot, is sitting behind her on the stone wall. Seated on the ground, Mary is the Virgin of Humility, conveying the idea of a direct relationship between Mary and the ground below, with the contrast between the green grass under Mary (salvation) and the parched earth (damnation) around her, symbolically conveying the idea of salvation as opposed to damnation. The nudes are considered the sinners, who wait for their cleansing and purification of sin by the water, their salvation.

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The painting is exceptional for its sculptural quality, formed by the light and dark shadows created by the colorful drapery folds in Mary and Joseph’s garments, resulting in a three-dimensional quality to the composition. Michelangelo employed the kind of color change modeling favored by earlier masters – cangianti – and the sharp, even brittle, contours that belie the softening effects of atmosphere.\textsuperscript{238} He united his figures by entwining them and abandoned the pyramid for a more rectangular, block-like formation.\textsuperscript{239} Although painted, the tondo is said to resemble a polychrome sculpture, “a free-standing sculptural group, a group at least as deep as it is wide.”\textsuperscript{240}

Yael Even in “The Heroine as Hero in Michelangelo’s Art,” observed that the \textit{Doni} Madonna, earthy and course, bares her muscular, naked shoulders – an unprecedented taboo – and activates the entire scene.\textsuperscript{241} Michelangelo’s women assumed heroic roles traditionally allowed to male characters; and were a manifestation of a patriarchal outlook rooted in his classical heritage.\textsuperscript{242} Charles de Tolnay observed that she lifts her child with the assurance of a Greek amphora bearer; while Robert Liebert pointed out that Mary reveals her musculature.\textsuperscript{243} The \textit{Doni Tondo} is a symbol of masculinity and power, as it celebrates the Child’s infancy and epitomizes the ideas of courage and victory conventionally appropriated by noble men.\textsuperscript{244}

As observed by Paul Barolsky, Michelangelo conveys meaning through the gestures and physiognomies of his figures. In \textit{Lives of the Artists}, Vasari draws our attention to the Virgin kneeling down with the Child in her arms whom she holds out towards Joseph, who receives

\textsuperscript{239} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{240} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{241} Yael Even, “The Heroine as Hero in Michelangelo’s Art,” \textit{Woman’s Art Journal} 11, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1990), 31.
\textsuperscript{242} Even, “The Heroine as Hero in Michelangelo’s Art,” 29.
\textsuperscript{243} \textit{Ibid.}, 31.
\textsuperscript{244} \textit{Ibid.}
him. Barolsky also noted from the 1568 edition of the *Lives*, that Vasari suggested as Mary turns to look upon Jesus, she “holds her eyes fixed on the supreme beauty of the Child;” beauty here is for Vasari an emanation of spiritual perfection, a manifestation of Divinity; and indicates how such art calls upon the prayerful beholder similarly to concentrate the intellect in contemplation of divinity in all its beauty – of beauty in the fullness of its divinity. Barolsky concluded that a devotional image was a deeply felt, prayerful expression of reverence that sought to inspire in the worshipful beholder emotions of love and reverence wordlessly visible in the work of art itself.

Arnheim in *The Power of the Center* observed that the center of the composition is Mary’s abdomen, the womb from which the story arose. The emphasis is on their respective roles, with Mary passing her Child, son of God, to Joseph. This narrative can be correlated to a sixteenth-century woman in a patriarchal society and her role to successfully continue the male lineage in her family. The focus on Mary’s abdomen stresses the importance of fertility and childbirth, which was crucial to the growth of a Renaissance family. From a social identity perspective, a married woman in the sixteenth century could envision her own situation in the *Doni Tondo* and connect to Mary as the virtuous Mother of Christ, someone she aspired to be.

Michelangelo’s masculine approach in his portrayal of the Madonna in the *Doni Tondo* differs dramatically from the Botticelli images of the beautiful, idealized, gentle, delicate Madonnas in the fifteenth-century tondi previously discussed (Figures 30 and 31). There is also a striking difference in Michelangelo’s sculptured tondi (Figure 23 and 24) compared to the *Doni Tondo*. For instance, in the *Doni Tondo*, there is active engagement as the Madonna looks up at

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247 Ibid
the Child as she passes him to Joseph. However, in both the *Pitti Tondo* and *Taddei Tondo*, there is an emotional contemplation in both Madonnas as they look away from their Child.

Similar to Michelangelo’s *Doni Tondo*, the *Madonna della Sedia* (Madonna of the Chair) by Raphael (1513 to 1514) is a definite departure from other Madonnas we have seen (Figure 35). Raphael has created a woman of the people rather than the Queen of Heaven.²⁴⁹ The Madonna looks like an actual woman on account of her contemporary apparel, casual pose and a confident facial expression. Although there is a hint of a halo and the standard red and blue garments worn by the Virgin Mary, this Madonna is like no other; seated on a chair distinguished by its painted spindle, she is dressed in a colorful patterned fringed shawl, along with a turban loosely tied on her head. Marco Albertario noted that the turban follows a fashion widespread among Roman noblewomen.²⁵⁰ Seated in profile, the Madonna blatantly stares directly at the viewer, as she tenderly hugs her chubby Child, while a young John the Baptist prays by their side. There is a close intimacy and unity conveyed by the tactile contact of the Mother and Child’s heads touching and their bodies leaning in to each other. To combine the intimacy of a genre group with the hieratic tradition of a direct contact with the beholder was a daring stroke.²⁵¹ Gombrich stated that no one but an artist could take a simple circle and bring it into perfect unison with the group of Mother and Child, an embodiment of organic unity.²⁵²

Rona Goffen noted in “Icon and Vision: Giovanni Bellini’s Half-Length Madonnas,” that like Bellini, Raphael rejected ancient prototypes and explored new means of presenting the mother and child readily understood in natural and human terms.²⁵³ William Zimmer noted in

²⁵² Ibid, 79.
“The Tondo,” that Raphael’s *Madonna of the Chair* is the ideal tondo, for the shape suits the theme of eternal rebirth and works visually because of the way the child enfolds himself into the turbaned Madonna, mimicking a circle and on the back of the chair is planted a perfect ornament, a gold ball, so that we cannot miss the point that the spherical is supreme.254

In popular appeal, the *Madonna della Sedia* became the embodiment of an Italian Madonna.255 Many sensitive critics have felt the inevitable appeal of the protective gesture of the Mother to the Child.256 One could conceive a connection between the Madonna and a sixteenth-century mother, who undoubtedly could relate to her earthy image, not only as a woman but as an affectionate mother, whom she hoped to emulate.

In both tondi, Michelangelo and Raphael painted an organic unity, but at the same time, unique portrayals of their Madonna images. In the *Doni Tondo*, Michelangelo reveals her powerful masculinity, while Raphael shows her directness in the *Madonna of the Chair*. What does this say to the possibilities of the role of the early sixteenth-century Renaissance woman, whose portrayal is not only virtuous and beautiful but now beginning to be portrayed as strong and powerful?

As we end our journey of exploration of the tondo, there is a historical record which memorializes the essence of the circular form. The *Design and Contract for a Tondo of the Virgin and Child (recto); Sketches and Notes for a Tondo of the Virgin and Child (verso)* by Fra Mattia (Marco) Della Robbia, 1524, is a remarkable example, as it not only contains the only secure drawings by any member of the three generation Della Robbia workshop, but it is also a rare example for Renaissance drawings that survive together with a contract for a work of art

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256 Ibid, 79.
(Figure 36).\textsuperscript{257} It also provides insight into the process of commissioning sculpture in the Italian Renaissance (Figure 36).\textsuperscript{258} An inscription in Italian identifies the size of the tondo and the figures to be included: “The Madonna, the son, St. John the Baptist, a nun of St. Sixtus.” The nun is to hold a scroll with a quotation from Juvenal’s \textit{Satires: sit mens sana in corpore sano} (“let there be a healthy mind in a healthy body”).\textsuperscript{259}

On the surface, the Madonna and Child tondo was a devotional object used for religious purposes by the laity in Florence from the fifteenth through early sixteenth centuries. However, there was a talismanic function that could not be denied. The Madonna and Child tondo not only gave comfort, guidance and inspiration to Renaissance women in a patriarchal society, the tondo also validated Florentine family identity and values. One cannot underestimate the power the tondo possessed in influencing the Renaissance family.

\textsuperscript{258} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{259} Cole, ed. \textit{Donatello, Michelangelo, Cellini: Sculptors’ Drawings from Renaissance Italy}, 170.
CONCLUSION

The Madonna and Child tondo was an integral part of the story that unfolded in the social and spiritual lives of Renaissance women. One needed to look behind the scenes to find the more functional meaning of the form and imagery in order to reveal a deeper symbolic significance of the tondo in everyday use. Although there were limitations that a patriarchal society imposed on fifteenth-century women, the tondo with Mary as the main focus was not only a conduit, but offered the image of the Virgin as a muse, guide, mentor and an inspiration. Each individual had a personal experience with the tondo and an intimate connection with the Virgin Mary. Many prominent artists, such as Donatello, Botticelli, Michelangelo and Raphael left their mark on the tondo and with their imagery and symbolism were able to assist in the dialogue between the fifteenth-century Florentine women and the Virgin Mary.

The tondo and Renaissance women could have each been considered a paradox. The tondo was popular amongst collectors, but considered by subsequent art historians to be commonplace and of no real value in the art world; women were displayed as decorative ornaments, but were also crucial figures in maintaining the longevity of families in Renaissance society. Women were also powerful in the role they played as custodians of the home, yet often powerless as daughters, wives and mothers in a patriarchal society. Family identity played a key role, not only in the social structure, but in the interpretation of the Madonna and Child imagery.

Olson noted that the tondo was one of several art forms embodying what Goldthwaite has defined as the culture’s obsession with women and children and the education of the latter (“the merchant pedagogy”). Tondi not only flooded the Florentine market as part of the idealization of domestic life and the celebration of family relationships, but further reflected the humanism of

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the quattrocento and its adulation of the circular form.\textsuperscript{261} However, the historical bias against the sculpted tondi emerged in the sixteenth century when terracotta was no longer considered appropriate for finished works of art, when Vasari and Michelangelo considered marble a worthier medium than clay and when new forms of painting replaced older painted devotional images of the Virgin.\textsuperscript{262} For instance, there was a rise of new Virgin and Child oil panels by Giovanni Bellini and his extensive workshop in the late fifteenth century, when the public began to show interest in panel paintings. While Botticelli’s painted tondi were admired for complex narratives containing allegorical landscapes and beautiful Virgin Marys with solemn expressions, Bellini conveyed a more positive expression in his Virgin Marys, presenting a more inviting style which appealed to a broader audience.\textsuperscript{263} W.R. Valentiner in “Giovanni Bellini’s Madonna and Child” noted that Bellini had a rare ability of expressing deep human feeling in art by the combined expression of great beauty and deep sentiment.\textsuperscript{264} The public gravitated to Bellini’s images of the Virgin Mary, increasing his popularity, resulting in the diminishing interest in the tondi.

A fine example showcasing Bellini’s popular style is \textit{Madonna and Child} (Figure 37), an oil panel from the late 1480’s situated at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The brilliant orange curtain draped behind the Virgin accentuates her rich blue, hooded cloak, which contrasts beautifully with the soft drapery folds of the underlying white veil gently framing her sweet face. One can understand the public’s appeal for Bellini’s panel painting, by the mesmerizing vibrant colors that draw the viewer in to the composition.

\textsuperscript{261} Olson, “Lost and Partially Found,” 51.
\textsuperscript{262} Miller, “A Material Distinction: Fifteenth-Century Tin-Glazed Terracotta Portraits in Italy,” 8 & 17.
\textsuperscript{264} Ibid, 18.
Besides the increased interest in panel painting, there were other reasons for the diminished interest in the Madonna and Child tondo. For example, the role of the Virgin Mary was challenged by the Reformation in the early sixteenth century. According to Olson, the tondo flourished until around 1520-25, when for a variety of complex reasons, including the religious unrest of the Reformation and the onset of Mannerism it lost the vital cultural connotations it had held for Florentines during the Renaissance. By 1530, the main lines of the controversy about images as idolatrous and sinful were firmly drawn. Also, in the late sixteenth century, in the wake of the pastoral reforms of the Council of Trent (1545-63) the clergy would reassert their authority over holy images, relics, the sacraments and sacred space. The consequence of these events was the diminishing interest in the Madonna and Child tondi. My thesis findings confirm this result and are reflected in Megan Holmes’s table of Marian Cult images during 1531-1599 (Figure 18). This period coincided with the establishment of the Medici dukedom and an increase in female enclosure in the city, as well as changes in devotional practices encouraged by the Council of Trent.

The tondo deserves to hold a special place in the history of Renaissance art. This circular form was previously thought of as a display piece hung simply on the wall of every home. The tondo actually provided cultural insight into the thoughts and ideals of the Renaissance society in the late fifteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries. Not only does the tondo tell us about religious history, its context also conveys the importance of the family in late fifteenth-century Florence.

The Florentine tondo still holds value today, as it is a historical record of a specific period in time. In 2016, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in conjunction with the National Gallery of

265 Hall, Hall’s Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art, 323.
266 Olson, “Lost and Partially Found,” 52.
269 Holmes, The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence, 42 & 43.
Art in London held a successful exhibit “Della Robbia-Sculpting with Color in Renaissance Florence” featuring many of the works created by the Della Robbia family spanning approximately one hundred years from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries. It was the first known exhibit in the United States dedicated solely to three generations of the Della Robbia family. As Bruce Cole noted, the Della Robbia artists are often ignored because they are considered mere decorative ceramists, but the recent exhibit proves that they are among the most accomplished sculptors of the Florentine Renaissance.270 One could look at the Della Robbia tondi as simple compositions, but it was that simplicity that made them incredibly popular. The recent exhibit adds credibility to the simple art form and is testimony in itself that there is interest and value in the tondo today that will continue to endure for years to come.

The popularity of the tondo gives validation to this important art form. One realizes the circular form along with the imagery is essential to understanding the overall meaning of the composition. The tondo provided a pictorial history and valuable insight into the fifteenth-century women’s roles and identity in a patriarchal society. One should consider the tondo not simply as a work of art but as a complex circular form containing meanings on multiple levels. What may have been considered minor art by a few critics, the tondo should now be given its due.

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Figure 1: Andrea della Robbia; *Madonna and Child with Cherubim*; about 1485; glazed terracotta in painted tabernacle frame; 95.2 x 88.3 x 14.6 cm.
Figure 2: *Greek Bronze Mirror Case with Ideal Female; c. 350 B.C.; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.*

Figure 3: *Greek Vase Painting of a Woman Priestess in Sacrifice; approx. 400’s B.C.; Toledo Museum of Art.*
Figure 4: Turan and Atunis on an Engraved Mirror; mid-fourth century; bronze; Leningrad, Hermitage.

Figure 5: Lorenzo Ghiberti; Assumption of the Virgin; early fifteenth century; stained glass; facade; Cathedral, Florence.
Figure 6: Niccolo Fiorentino; *Portrait Medal of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni* (obverse) and *Three Graces* (reverse); c. 1486; cast bronze; diameter 77 mm.
Figure 7: Workshop of Sandro Botticelli; *The Virgin and Child with Saint John and an Angel*; ca. 1490; The National Gallery, London; tempera on wood; 84.5 x 84.5 cm.
Figure 8: Leon Battista Alberti; *Rose Window*; 1456-70; Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Figure 9: Filippo Brunelleschi; *Duomo with Oculi*; 1419-46; Cathedral (Santa Maria del Fiore), Florence.
Figure 10: Circular Church Plan; A sketch of the Church of Holy Sepulcher and its surroundings as given in a manuscript by Adamnan; ninth century.
Figure 11: Luca della Robbia; *Stemma of the Arte dei Medici e Speziali*; 1455-1465; Orsanmichele, Florence; enameled terracotta; diameter 180 cm.
Figure 12: Bernardo Rossellino; *The Bruni Monument*; 1444-6/7; S. Croce, Florence; marble; height 715 cm.

Figure 13: Bernardo Rossellino; *Virgin and Child*; 1444-6/7; S. Croce, Florence; marble roundel.
Figure 14: Fra Filippo Lippi; *The Virgin Annunciate* (Bartolini Tondo); ca. 1452; Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence; oil on panel; diameter 135 cm.
Figure 15: Girolamo Savonarola; *Predica dell’ arte del Bene morire*; 1496: British Library, London; woodcut.
Figure 16: Plan of House Belonging to the Gaddi Family of Florence; Palazzo Gaddi, Florence; c. 1560; Uffizi.
Figure 17: Luca della Robbia, *Madonna and Child*; c. 1440; Florence; polychromed and gilded stucco and wood; diameter 37 cm.
Figure 18: *Table of four phases in the development of Florentine image cults* (Black= Marian cults; Gray= Crucifix cults) (1292-1398) (1399-1493), (1494-1530) and (1531-1599). Note highest black bar during 1494-1530.
Figure 19: Donatello; *Pazzi Madonna*; c. 1417-20; Staatliche Museen, Skulpturensammlung Berlin; low relief marble, broken and restored in several parts; 75 x 70 cm.

Figure 20: Michelangelo; *Madonna of the Stairs (Madonna della Scala)*; c. 1489-1492; Casa Buonarroti, Florence; marble relief; 55.5 x 40 cm.
Figure 21: Donatello; *The Virgin and Child with Four Angels (Chellini Madonna)*; probably Padua; c. before 1456; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; circular relief with a recessed frame and integral mold at the back; bronze, partially gilt, gilding abraded; diameter 28.5 cm, 8mm thick, 4.25 kg.

Figure 22: After Donatello; *Virgin and Child (Piot Madonna)*; c. 1460; pigmented stucco in tabernacle frame; Collection Sir Harold Acton, Florence.
Figure 23: Michelangelo; *Virgin and Child with St John (Tondo Taddei)*; ca. 1502; Royal Academy of Arts, London; marble relief; diameter 109 cm.

Figure 24: Michelangelo; *Virgin and Child with St John (Tondo Pitti)*; ca. 1503; Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence; marble relief; 85.5 x 82 cm.
Figure 25: Domenico Ghirlandaio; Birth of John the Baptist; Fresco of a domestic setting; 1486-90; Tornabuoni Chapel, S. Maria Novella, Florence.

Figure 26: Giovanni di Ser Giovanni; Cassone of The Adimari-Ricasoli Wedding in 1420, Spalliera panel; 1450; Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence.
Figure 27: Fra Filippo Lippi; *Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement*; 1436-8; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; tempera on panel; h 64.1 cm, w. 41.9 cm.
Figure 28: Giovanni di ser Giovanni (Lo Scheggia); *Childbirth tray (the “Medici-Tornabuoni tray”) with The Triumph of Fame on one side and Medici emblems on the other; 1448-9; tempera on panel; diameter 92.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Figure 29: Luca della Robbia; *Cappuccini Madonna*; (1475-1480), glazed terracotta; Bargello; Florence.
Figure 30: Sandro Botticelli; *Madonna del Magnificat*; 1482; Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; tempera on wood; diameter 1.15.

Figure 31: Sandro Botticelli; *Madonna of the Pomegranate*; 1487. Uffizi, Florence.
Figure 32: Francesco Botticini; *Adoration of the Child*; ca. 1490; diam. 123 cm; oil on panel; Florence, Pitti Palace, Galleria Palatina.

Figure 33: Jacopo da Sellaio (Jacopo di Arcangelo); *Adoration of the Child with St. John*; ca. 1490; diam. 99 cm; oil on panel; Florence, Pitti Palace, Galleria Palatina.
Figure 34: Michelangelo; *The Holy Family with St John (Tondo Doni)*; ca. 1504-1506; Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; tempera on wood; wooden carved frame; diameter 120 cm.

Figure 35: Raphael; *The Madonna della Seggiola*; (Madonna of the Chair); c. 1513-1514; Galleria Palatina, Florence; oil on wood panel; diameter 71 cm.
Figure 36: Fra Mattia (Marco) della Robbia; Design and contract for a tondo of the Virgin and Child (recto); Sketches and notes for a tondo of the Virgin and Child (verso); 1524.
Figure 37: Giovanni Bellini; *Madonna and Child*; late 1480’s; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; oil on wood; 35 x 28 in. (88.9 x 71.1 cm)