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Copying, adaptation and invention in the Tempietto of the Volto Santo in Lucca

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Abstract

This essay considers the role of copying in the architectural oeuvre of the Lucchese sculptor-architect Matteo Civitali (1436-1501), analysing his singular approach to the appropriation of elements from his chosen models. In doing so, it considers first the shrine of San Regolo and the tomb of Pietro Noceto in Lucca Cathedral, arguing that Civitali relied heavily on single – usually celebrated – works in designing his projects, often taking both composition and individual details from the same source, while at the same time managing to inject them with a degree of invention, so that high degrees of copying and invention can be found in the same design. It goes on to contend that he used the same procedure in the Tempietto del Volto Santo, a small octagonal structure also housed in the cathedral, identifying the source for its composition and detailing as being a portal in the Casa Porcari in Rome, which is partly antique and partly fifteenth-century in date. In discussing these works, the essay reflects on the problems involved in discussing copying in the context of classical architecture.

Keywords

Copying, Matteo Civitali, Lucca Cathedral, Tempietto of the Volto Santo

Copying is a problematic concept, especially when applied to works of art and architecture. It implies the creation of a facsimile, but completely identical copies can only exist in theory rather than in practice. Even when an artwork or building seems outwardly to replicate the original on which it was based, it nevertheless differs in various ways, in its size, materials, quality of craftsmanship, setting and even function. Such observations present historians with a problem: since 'pure' copying is impossible to achieve, how should the discussion and study of artistic copying be framed? One possible solution is to consider copying as a relative process, which can be read by the historian in terms of degrees of replication. Thus it can be seen as a sliding scale, with 'pure' invention at one end and something approaching 'pure' copying at the other. Such a scale would embrace the varying degrees of appropriation employed by

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artists and architects, as well as the different forms of copying they employ, such as the borrowing of ornamental details or of more abstract compositional elements.

When working in the idiom of classical architecture, fifteenth-century architects derived most of their repertory of forms from classical antiquity and therefore copying or appropriation became a fundamental part of their practice. They relied on their sources to various degrees: some borrowed from a wide range of models, adapting and composing them to create highly original works; others relied more heavily on single models both in terms of composition and detail, producing designs that were derivative and more akin to replication. That said, most architects working in Italy in the fifteenth century fall somewhere between these two extremes. One designer whose approach to borrowing could be read as being overly dependent on his sources is Matteo Civitali (1436-1501).[1] But as will be shown any charge of plagiarism would be grossly unfair as he always manages, despite this heavy reliance on his sources, to invest his designs with a significant degree of originality. One example of this combination of extreme borrowing and invention is the tempietto he designed in Lucca Cathedral, known as the Tempietto of the Volto Santo (Fig. 1). In order to understand fully Civitali's approach in designing this structure, it is necessary to begin by saying a few words about Matteo Civitali and by considering the relationship between copying and invention in some of his other works.

1. *Copying and borrowing in Matteo Civitali's architectural frameworks*

Matteo Civitali was seen in his own day primarily as a sculptor rather than as an architect, as is illustrated by Giorgio Vasari, who described him as "scultore lucchese" in his Life of Jacopo della Quercia (Vasari 1906, vol. II, p. 119). Yet, he had a broad familiarity with classical architecture, since he had to be able to design the architecturally conceived framing – *kleinarchitektur* – that was a required element in wall tombs, altars, eucharistic tabernacles and shrines.[2] In this respect he was no different to other major fifteenth-century sculptors working in central Italy. He employed an extensive range of architectural forms in designing many of his

[1] For the modern literature on Matteo Civitali see principally Petrucci (1980); Harms (1995); Filieri (2004); d'Aniello, Filieri (2011).

[2] For the term 'Kleinarchitektur' and a discussion of scale in Renaissance architecture see Payne (2009).

1. Matteo Civitali, Tempietto of the Volto Santo, Lucca Cathedral (1482-1484).

major projects such as the early shrine of Santi Pellegrino e Bianco in San Pellegrino in Alpe (1475), the tombs of Pietro Noceto (1472) and Domenico Bertini (c. 1479-80) in Lucca Cathedral, the shrine to San Regolo in the same church (c. 1486) and the Eucharistic tabernacle from Santi Giovanni e Reparata (1496; now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London).[3] The forms he employed for these works were heavily reliant on celebrated precedents, often to a degree that could be construed as 'copying'. He seems to have begun by choosing an appropriate compositional model, or having one chosen for him by a patron, before going on to subject it to adaptation, modifying it according to the needs of the commission. One consequence of this procedure is that his sources are easily identifiable. By way of example, he closely modelled the composition for the lower parts of the shrine-tomb of San Regolo in Lucca Cathedral (completed by 1484-5) on the tomb of Baldassare Cossa, Anti-Pope John XXIII, designed by Donatello and Michelozzo in Florence Baptistery in the 1420s (Donati 2011, pp 247-290). In doing so, he appropriated a wide range of features from this source. From the lowest register he took the dado, the three shell-headed niches and the four pilasters framing them, the architrave that supports the four great brackets and the projecting platform on which the sarcophagus rests. This part of the scheme is compositionally highly derivative, in contrast to the upper part of the shrine, which is less obviously taken from a particular source. Despite the obvious dependence on a single well-known source, the design is at the same time highly inventive since the three statues in their niches have been transformed conceptually into an altarpiece and the dado has been modified to incorporate a predella.

This practice of choosing a principal compositional model and then adapting it to a greater or lesser extent is also seen in his tomb monument for Pietro Noceto (1472) in Lucca Cathedral (Caglioti 2011, pp. 22-38; Donati 2011, pp. 133-163). Basing it on the tomb of Carlo Marsuppini (c. 1453-64) in S. Croce, Florence, designed by Desiderio da Settignano, he appropriated much of the composition, including the dado supporting the sarcophagus and effigy and the arched aedicule with two square-sectioned, fluted Corinthian columns carrying an entablature and a highly decorated, coffered arch. He imitated other compositional features too, such as the placement of two figures on top of the entablature and the insertion of a round relief of the Madonna and Child into the lunette. His

[3] For the tombs of Pietro Noceto and Domenico Bertini as well as the shrine of San Regolo, all in Lucca Cathedral, see the essays by Donati (2011a), Donati (2011b), Donati (2011c), Donati (2011ad). For the shrine of San Pellegrino, see Procacci (1931).

choice of the Marsuppini monument as his starting point rather than the similar tomb designed by Bernardo Rossellino for Leonardo Bruni is suggested by the fact that he 'copied' much of the detailing. The capitals of the square-sectioned columns are almost identical in design, having palmette decoration at the bottom of the bell as well as volutes rising from scrolls at the centre of the capital that sprout subsidiary fronds that curl back to support the centrally located floret. Equally close is the frieze, which has alternating types of palmette – one with the leaves curling inwards and the other with them fanning outwards. Even the shafts of the square-sectioned columns are the same, bearing an elaborate form of double fluting, although it should be pointed out that the same details appear in the earlier Bruni tomb. Thus, in the Noceto tomb, both composition and much of the detailing were inspired by one precedent. That said, it should be noted, however, that he did borrow elements from elsewhere. The three framed panels he used as the backdrop come from the Bruni tomb as do the bases of the square-sectioned columns, though lightly modified in terms of surface ornament; while the coffering under the arch and the design of the sarcophagus both derive from the tomb of the Cardinal of Portugal in San Miniato, Florence, by Antonio Rossellino (Caglioti 2011, pp. 22-38; Donati 2011, pp. 133-163); and the guilloche decoration in the archivolt was inspired by Mino da Fiesole's tomb of Bernardo Giugni in the Badia Florence (c.1466-68) Caglioti 2011, pp. 30-31). None of the details has been replicated exactly, each being slightly modified in the design process, but the closeness of the design to its principal model illustrates Civitali's design practice extremely well, highlighting the complex relationship between copying, adaptation and invention.

The extent to which the tomb of Pietro Noceto was modelled on one Florentine model, presupposes the existence of a copy drawing on which Matteo Civitali relied when preparing his own designs. Such is the range of features borrowed from the Marsuppini tomb in terms of composition and detail that we can exclude the hypothesis he was relying on memory alone. He must have had at his disposal one or more detailed drawings of it. What this drawing – or drawings – looked like cannot be determined; perhaps he had one detailed drawing that was large enough to include such details as the capitals and frieze, or alternatively several drawings that included a compositional sketch and other studies of individual details. Sadly, no drawings by Matteo Civitali survive and so this suggestion must remain hypothetical, but the high degree of similarity between his architec-

tural designs and the prototypes on which he relied suggest that drawings played an important mediatory role. He may even have had his own collection of drawings that he could use as sources of inspiration for new designs; and this would not be surprising since the making of copy drawings was a fundamental part of workshop practice for all fifteenth-century artists, whether they were predominantly painters, sculptors, goldsmiths or architects. In fact, it was a fundamental part of their education. Cennino Cennini famously makes it clear in his treatise that this was how artists learned to draw and he recommended starting by copying drawings that were easy to imitate before progressing to hone their skills by choosing more difficult subjects, also advising that the aspiring artist should seek to copy only those works that had been produced by the hands of the great masters (Ames Lewis 1981, pp. 15-16). Although Cennini was talking about painters, it is reasonable to suggest that sculptors and goldsmiths would have been trained in similar ways as they needed to develop drawing skills. Architects too should be included in this list as many were originally trained as painters, sculptors or goldsmiths before being approached to design works of architecture (Goldthwaite 1980, pp. 351-396). Civitali, too, was trained not only as a sculptor but as a painter since a document of 5 July 1466 describes him as 'sculptor, painter and designer', and he is documented as having produced painted altarpieces (Guy 2009, p. 9).[4] In the light of what is known about fifteenth-century studio practice, it is highly likely that he would have developed his drawing skills through making copy drawings, even though there is no documentary record of him doing so.

An artistic education was not just about acquiring manual dexterity and a knowledge of the capabilities and limitations of different media, it was also about acquiring a broad knowledge of forms, whether figurative or decorative. Part of the educational purpose of copying was to embed visual ideas in an artist's memory. Cennini does not mention the types of subject artists should copy, but it is likely that for fifteenth-century artists part of the learning process would have included architectural forms and detailing, since a knowledge of them was becoming increasingly important with the advent of a revival of interest in ancient Roman architecture, requiring painters, sculptors and architects

[4] See Archivio di Stato di Lucca, Notari, parte I, n. 574, prot. 1460/69 (Ser Giovanni Pietro Franciotti), fol. 20: "Tommaso di Simo, Cittadino lucchese, mette il figlio con il maestro Matteo di Giovanni da Civitale, scultore, pittore e disegnatore in Lucca per imparare l'arte."

to use a classical repertory of forms convincingly and appropriately. These forms might sometimes have been copied directly from the antiquities themselves, but probably most of the time they would have copied from drawings made previously by the master, or from drawings that the master himself had copied, which in turn may themselves have been copies; and this process can result in copies becoming increasingly debased to the extent that the point that the origin is sometimes difficult to discern. Learning about architecture was, of course, not necessarily limited to the earliest stages of artists' careers as is demonstrated by Michelangelo, who at about the age of forty copied over one hundred architectural drawings from the Codex Coner, a book of architectural drawings mostly of antique subjects drawn in 1513/14 by Bernardo della Volpaia, at least in part to familiarize himself more thoroughly with ancient Roman architecture, more often than not details of entablatures, capitals and bases (Agosti & Farinella 1987). In doing so he was learning about architectural form as a prelude to designing such Florentine structures as the façade of San Lorenzo (1516) and the New Sacristy (1519-), but at the same time he was collecting models that could at some future point be employed in preparing and inspiring his own designs.

2. *Tempietto of the Volto Santo, Lucca Cathedral*

Although the sources employed by Civitali in designing the works discussed above were – in being so readily recognisable – identified long ago, those associated with one of his more renowned designs have eluded scholars. The structure in question is the sumptuous Tempietto of The Volto Santo in Lucca Cathedral (1482-84), a structure erected to house an ancient, over life-size, miracle-working crucifix known as the Volto Santo or Holy Face (Donati 2011, pp. 215-246).[5] According to tradition, this crucifix had been carved by Nicodemus from life soon after Christ's death before being brought to Lucca where it became Lucca's most prized relic. During the Middle Ages it was housed in a chapel inside the cathedral, but the form of the chapel and even its precise location and orientation are not known. The earliest reference to a desire to rebuild the Volto Santo's housing appears in the will of Domenico Bertini drawn up on

[5] Donati (2011d) provides a full earlier bibliography.

18 July 1477. In it, Bertini, an apostolic abbreviator at the papal court from 1448 during the pontificate of Nicholas V (r. 1447-55) and later a diplomat under Pius II (1458-1464), expressed the wish to spend 1000 ducats from the sale of his house in Rome for the purpose of adorning or rebuilding it.[6] Whether any drawings were prepared at around this time is not known, but nothing was accomplished at that moment. There followed a gap of about five years before the project is again referred to in documents. On 19 January 1482, Domenico Bertini drew up a contract with Matteo Civitali for a new chapel which was to have been square in plan with arches on three sides framed by fluted pilasters carrying an entablature, and it was to have been capped inside by a vault and outside by a tall canopy. As far as can be determined from the description in the surviving contract, it would probably have resembled Brunelleschi's Barbadori chapel. But this project was quickly abandoned and replaced with a new scheme recorded in a contract drawn up just one month later on 22 February 1482, and it was this second project that was built.It is octagonal in plan rather than square, and of its eight sides, the three bays facing east are blind, providing a backdrop for the Volto Santo, while the other five bays are open, allowing pilgrims sight of the sculpture, but filled with ironwork grilles to protect the precious contents from theft or desecration. Raised above the level of the church floor by a single step, it is accessed by three doors, one opposite the miracle-working image and two on the cross axis. Its elevation consists of a low wall on which rest eight fluted Composite columns marking the corners of the structure and framing the arches that fills the bays, which support an entablature, eight shell-filled lunettes and a hemispherical dome divided into eight sections by ribs.

Various structures have been advanced as possible models for the structure, some conceptual, some formal. Among the conceptual ones, is the suggestion that it derived its octagonal form from traditions in representing the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Petrucci 1980, p. 31). Indeed, an allusion to the Holy Sepulchre would be appropriate as the church in Jerusalem was believed to house the site of Christ's crucifixion and his sepulchre. Another Christological model that is both conceptual and formal is the free-standing Eucharistic tabernacle, which had become increasingly popular from the middle of the fifteenth century (Donati 2011, p. 230). Although generally hexagonal rather than octago-

[6] For Domenico Bertini, see above all Caglioti (2011); for the document see also Paoli (1986); Harms (1995), p. 71 and Donati (2011c), p. 220.

nal, such tabernacles have many of the same components, a basement wall, arched sides filled with grilles, a dome with ribs and imitation fish-scale tiles. Surviving examples can be seen in the churches of San Domenico in Siena (1475) and the Collegiata in San Gimignano (after 1475) both by the workshop of Benedetto da Maiano.[7] There is certainly some value in this suggestion as the Tempietto of the Volto Santo was conceived as a ciborium on a large scale and is after all Christological in its associations (Bule 2001, p. 90). Other sources proposed have been largely formal in nature, one being the ancient Roman temple of Vesta as it appears in a relief in St John Lateran in Rome (Petrucci 1980, p. 32), another being Benedetto da Maiano's pulpit in S. Croce, Florence (Pope Hennessy 1986, p. 292). But, unlike the shrine of San Regolo or the Tomb of Pietro Noceto, no specific or principal formal source has yet been convincingly advanced as a model, and none accords with the approach found in the tomb of Pietro Noceto of copying a single model as well as many of its details.

However, a model does exist that fulfils these criteria. It is a doorway in the courtyard of the Casa di Stefano Porcari in Rome, which is composed partly of antique elements and partly of fifteenth-century ones (Fig. 2). The cornice of the door (Fig. 3) is antique and it has the same profile as the one running around the Tempietto in Lucca (Fig. 4), employing precisely the same sequence of mouldings: (from the top) cyma recta, corona, cyma recta, ovolo, dentils and cyma reversa. In addition, it also has some of the same surface decorations. The corona is fluted, with tiny cabling inserted at the bottom of each flute, and the lower cyma recta bears several ranks of overlapping scales running upwards rather than downwards. It is more highly embellished than Civitali's tempietto, which omits the dolphins with intertwined tails on the top cyma and the leaves with hanging acorns on the cyma reversa at the bottom, but what is interesting is that the Civitali's process of adaptation has involved only omission, not addition, presumably intended to balance the extent of surface ornament across the whole design and to avoid overloading one part of it. This process of adaptation, of lightly modifying his source, certainly follows Civitali's normal practice, as seen in the tomb of Pietro Noceto.

[7] Harms (1986) believed that the Tempietto was based on Civitali's Eucharistic tabernacle now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London which has now been shown to date from 1496 and so the Tempietto inspired the tabernacle rather than vice versa.

2. Portal in the courtyard of the Casa Porcari, Rome.

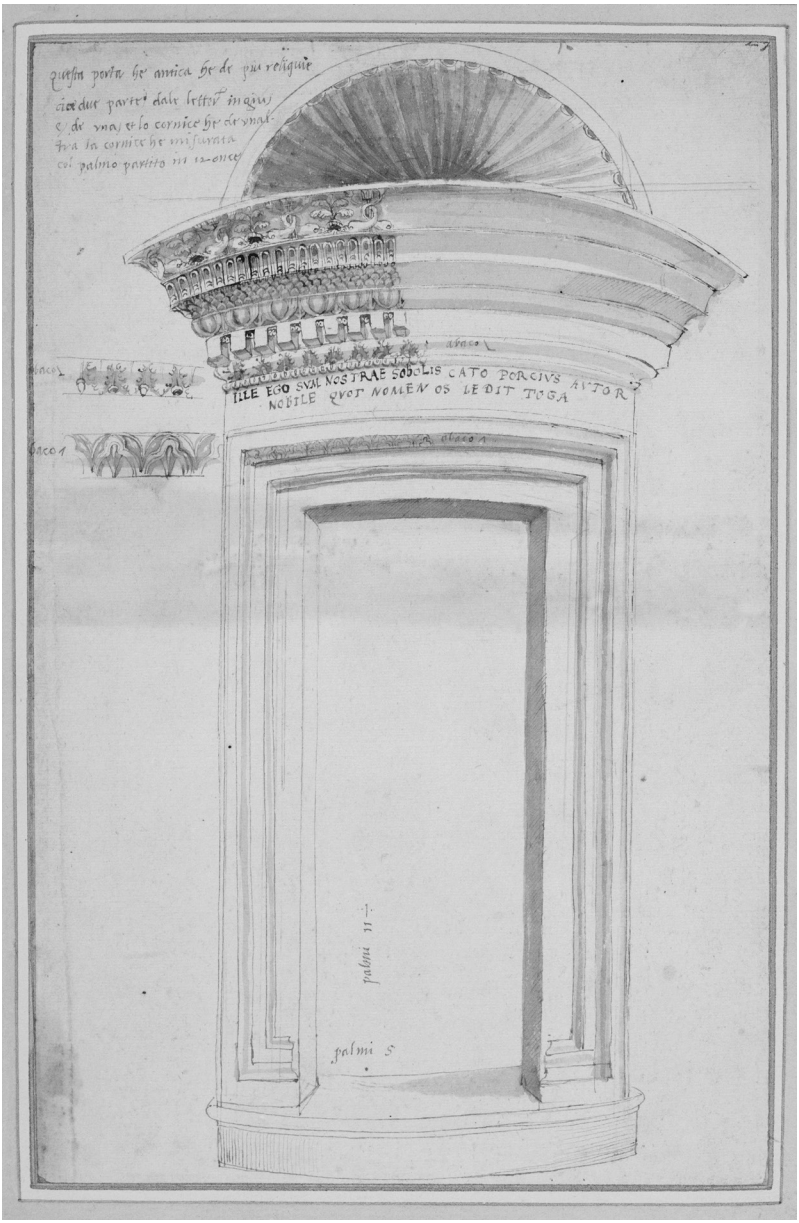
3. Entablature of the Casa Porcari portal.

4. Matteo Civitali, Entablature of the Tempietto of the Volto Santo, Lucca Cathedral (1482-1484).

The architrave of the Casa Porcari door, unlike the cornice, is fifteenth century in date rather than ancient, a difference that has been pointed out by Ian Campbell, who noted that the motif of the door's architrave turning inwards at floor level was not an antique feature but one invented in the fifteenth century (Campbell 2004, 1, pp. 195-197). Sallustio Peruzzi, too, realised this by adding the word 'moderna' next to the architrave in a drawing in the Uffizi (GDSU 106Av) (Bartoli 1914-22, 6, p. 122). Even though the architrave was not part of the original ancient Roman design, Civitali nevertheless incorporated it into his design for the Tempietto, using it for the architraves of both the entablature and arches. He gave it, like the door in Rome, two fascias, each capped by a cyma reversa moulding. Moreover, the cyma reversa mouldings imitate the Roman door in their surface decoration, copying the Lesbian decoration from the upper cyma moulding and the descending leaf decoration from the lower one. But once again there is some omission as he ignores the acorns present in the source.

From this analysis alone it would appear conclusive that Civitali used this Roman portal was the model for much of the Tempietto's detailing, but any residual doubts are completely dispelled when we turn to early drawings of the portal, such as that by Pirro Ligorio in Windsor (Fig. 5) (Campbell 2004, 1, pp. 195-197).[8] This drawing shows that the door as composed in the fifteenth century had an additional component: a lunette filled with a scallop shell that has now disappeared. This now-lost feature was also appropriated by Civitali, becoming a distinctive element of his design for the Tempietto. In the process of borrowing and adaptation it was given a frame that takes the form of an architrave adorned with Lesbian cyma decoration, chosen to make it cohere with the other architraves. What is beginning to emerge from this discussion is that Civitali borrowed not only details from the portal but also much of the composition. The idea of a framed opening with a full entablature capped by a shell-like lunette, is very close to one side of the Tempietto. Civitali, therefore, took this composition and repeated it eight times to form an octagon, and adapted it by adding a dome and other components. But what still remains to be determined is why this portal may have appealed to him as a model. One distinctive feature of the portal that has not yet been mentioned is that the Roman door is gently convex in plan, bulging out towards the viewer. Being a fragment from a curved structure, it could easily have been imagined by fifteenth-century artists and

[8] Windsor Castle, RL 10797, *Ancient Roman Architecture*, fol. 10.



5. Pirro Ligorio, Drawing of the Casa Porcari Portal (Windsor Castle, RL 10797, *Ancient Roman Architecture*, fol. 10).

architects as having once been part of a centralised building that was circular in plan. While that may in itself have been enough of a stimulus, it is worth noting that this hypothetical ancient structure would have been similar in size to the Tempietto del Volto Santo. The curvature of the cornice indicates that the structure would have had a diameter of 4.16 metres, close in size to the Tempietto in Lucca which is 4.54 metres wide.[9] Perhaps these characteristics of the Casa Porcari door led him to choose it as a model.

In summary, several features of this part-ancient and part-modern door seem to have been a source of inspiration for Matteo Civitali: the composition, the profile of the mouldings, and some of their surface adornments. He then went on to modify the source in a highly imaginative way to suit the needs of the commission, transforming the doorway into an octagonal tempietto. In doing so, he followed a procedure similar to that used earlier for the shrine of San Regolo and the Tomb of Pietro Noceto. Yet there are differences in approach, chief among which is that the principal model was Roman rather than Florentine. This new observation would tend to reinforce Francesca Petrucci's argument that Matteo Civitali borrowed from Roman sources and did not rely exclusively on Florentine ones. That said, it is worth reflecting on how Matteo Civitali came to know of this Roman portal. There is no evidence that he ever went to Rome and rarely did he ever borrow directly from ancient Roman sources, from which it might be inferred that he came across the door not at first-hand but through copy drawings, perhaps produced by his Florentine contemporaries.

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[9] The width of the Casa Porcari opening at its front edge is 85.1 cms. This dimension is the chord of a circle, of which the sagitta is 4.39 cms. Using the formula $r = (s^2 + l^2)/2s$, where r is the radius, s is the sagitta and l is half the length of the chord, the diameter of a circular structure would be 416 cms. The diameter of the Tempietto del Volto Santo given here as 454 cms is based on the measurement of one of its faces, which measures 188 cms: Donati (2011d), p. 215.

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