

# ARNOLFO WHO?

by Lucy Gordan

With the painter Cimabue, sculptor-architect Arnolfo di Cambio laid the artistic foundations of the Italian Renaissance

When I first suggested an art essay about the upcoming Arnolfo di Cambio exhibitions, staff reaction at *Inside the Vatican* was: "Who is he and what does he have to do with the Vatican?" That caught me off-guard. I hadn't yet done enough research to reparatee, but now I know the answers.

Although the Tuscan-born medieval architect and sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio (born in Colle Val d'Elsa, near Siena, in about 1240; died in Florence in about 1305) is not a household word, many of his artworks will be familiar to *Inside the Vatican* readers.

First and foremost is the statue of St. Peter in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The statue is located at the end of the nave to the right of the Baldacchino of Bernini which rises above the Basilica's high altar (see photo, right). Long thought to be a late Roman work, it is now attributed to Arnolfo di Cambio.

Arnolfo also designed and sculpted the Tomb of



St. Boniface in St. Peter's Basilica. Pope Boniface VIII (died 1303) commissioned the tomb in 1296 as his funeral monument.

Elsewhere in Rome are his *cibori* or baldachins in Santa Cecilia (1283) and St. Paul Outside-the-Walls (1284), the tomb of Cardinal Riccardo degli Annibaldi, a close friend of Pope Gregory IX, in St. John Lateran (c. 1290); his creche in St. Mary Major (1285-1291), and possible sculptures in the Ara Coeli.

With the exception of a monument dedicated to his Roman patron Charles of Anjou, now in Rome's Capitoline Museums, these well-known Roman sculptures are among Arnolfo di Cambio's mature works.

In his younger years, this cosmopolitan artist, though he traveled to Rome on occasion, developed his skills as an apprentice in the workshop of Nicola Pisano (1265-68). There he worked on the Arca di San Domenico, or Ark of St. Dominic, in the Church of San Domenico in Bologna, and in Siena, where he sculpted



the pulpit in the cathedral before following his mentor to Perugia.

On display until January 8, 2006, in Perugia and in Orvieto, is a two-site exhibition, "*Arnolfo di Cambio: Una Rinascita di Umbria Medievale*" or "Arnolfo di Cambio: The Rebirth of Medieval Umbria," to celebrate the 700th anniversary of Arnolfo di Cambio's death in about 1305, although the exact date of this event is unknown.

Why Perugia and Orvieto? Already 800 years ago, just before the Avignon papacies of the 1300s, the Popes spent their "summer" vacations away from the heat of Rome. During his 19-year papacy, Innocent III (1198-1216) spent 14 "summers" (from April through August, and sometimes through October and November) in

Umbria. In the 33 years after him, 11 Popes reigned; only one, Gregory X, lasted as long as 10 years. In brief, of the 19 Popes who reigned during the 13th century, 11 lived far from the Eternal City for at least half of their papacies. Besides Innocent III, three others — Urban IV, Martin IV, and Benedict XI



— died in Perugia. Six of them (all French-born) — Urban IV, Clement IV, Innocent V, Nicholas III, Martin IV, and Clement V — never even entered Rome. Thus a "ring" of "papal cities" — temporary residences of His Holiness — encircled Rome, at the time reduced in population to a mere 35,000 souls (during the Empire the Colosseum could seat 55,000 spectators): Anagni, Ferentino, Segni, Rieti, Tivoli, Viterbo, Todi, Narni, Assisi, Perugia, and Orvieto. Wherever the Pope resided, so did the Curia, about 600-fold, and in tow, of course, the best artists of the times.

Arnolfo left his artistic mark on Perugia and Orvieto. In Perugia, where his mentor Nicola Pisano and Pisano's son Giovanni designed the Fontana Maggiore, still today



Various sculptures from Arnolfo di Cambio's numerous Italian funeral monuments. He was one of the greatest sculptors of his age





the city's most beautiful fountain, Arnolfo, who had begun to work independently, followed suit with his Fontana Minore, also called "*La Fontana delle Assetate*" or "Fountain of the Thirsty" built in 1281 and dismantled in 1301 for lack of water. Several of its "lost" decorations have recently been discovered in private collections and one of the highlights of the Perugia exhibition is a partial "reconstruction" of Arnolfo's fountain.

Others are his bronze griffin and lion (1274), the emblems of Perugia and the first bronze statues since antiquity, which once crowned Arnolfo's fountain and, after the fountain was dismantled, installed over the entrance to Perugia's Palazzo dei Priori, Umbria's finest public building; a Duccio *Madonna and Child*, and Giotto's *Allegorical Figure* on loan from the National Museum in Budapest.

On display in Orvieto are two monumental statues of Pope Boniface VIII, each sculpted in just two months during 1297 (two months was a remarkably fast time to sculpt a statue for that period) and several sculptures believed to have once belonged to the tomb of French Cardinal De Braye (c. 1282).

In fact, this funerary monument in Orvieto's Church of San Domenico is Arnolfo's only signed work. These two tomb monuments, together with one for Pope Adrian V in Viterbo, became the models for Gothic funerary art and led to Arnolfo's recognition as the foremost architect of his era.

In his later years, Arnolfo di



Above, one of the first great *Madonna and Child* paintings of the Italian Renaissance, by Duccio of Buoninsegna, a contemporary of Arnolfo, today in Perugia in the Galleria Nazionale. Below and right, other works by Arnolfo







Cambio spent most of his time in Florence.

Here he worked on the city's most important monuments: the Franciscan church of Santa Croce, the Baptistry, the Palazzo of the Comune (now Palazzo Vecchio), and, above all, he was in charge of the construction of the new cathedral.

In fact, Santa Maria del Fiore established the fame of Arnolfo to such an extent that the city government granted him a tax exemption (this was considered a very great honor).

From December 21 to April 21, 2006, appropriately at the Museo dell'Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore or the Cathedral Museum, Florence is once again honoring this artistic genius. "*Arnolfo alle origini del rinascimento fiorentino*" or "Arnolfo, at the origins of the Florentine Renaissance," is the first monographic exhibition ever of his sculptures.

The exhibition includes over 90 works, that is, almost all the works of Arnolfo that are conserved in Florence or which it has been possible to transport from abroad, including the marble and wood *Annunciation* from London's Victoria and Albert Museum.

Its uniqueness lies in the first reassemblage of many of Arnolfo's Florentine works, now dispersed in public and private collections worldwide, as well as the recomposition of the lost facade of Santa Maria del Fiore, Arnolfo's unfinished masterpiece, dismembered and dispersed at the end of the 16th century.

Also on display are Florentine sculptures, paintings, and gold and silverware from the late 13th century designed to provide an overview of the general artistic context during Arnolfo's lifetime.

The exhibition also illustrates the influence of Arnolfo, who laid the foundations of the Renaissance, on the painter Giotto, his first disciple. It took another century before his fellow-sculptors, Brunelleschi and Donatello, were inspired by his ideas. ●