The Fonte Gaia from Renaissance to Modern Times

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A History of Construction, Preservation, and Reconstruction in Siena

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Abbreviations

AD	Archivio Duprè, Fiesole
ASFP	Archivio della Fabbrica di San Petronio, Bologna
AISAS	Archivio dell'Istituto Statale d'Arte, Siena
AOMS	Archivio dell'Opera Metropolitana, Siena
ASC	Archivio Storico del Comune, Siena
ASS	Archivio di Stato, Siena
ASV	Archivio Segreto Vaticano
BCS	Biblioteca Comunale, Siena
Bicch.	Biccherna, Archivio di Stato, Siena
Concist. Delib.	Concistoro, Deliberazioni, Archivio di Stato, Siena
Cons. Gen. Delib.	Consiglio Generale, Deliberazioni, Archivio di Stato, Siena

Acknowledgments

Preface

When Jacopo della Quercia (*c.* 1374–1438) completed his Fonte Gaia for the city of Siena it secured his reputation as one of the preeminent Italian sculptors of the early Quattrocento. In his famous *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti* (*Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 1550 and revised and extended in 1568), Giorgio Vasari noted that the sculptor, following his completion of the Fonte Gaia, was 'no longer called Jacopo dalla Quercia, but *Jacopo dalla Fonte* [Jacopo of the Fountain] forever after'.¹ The sobriquet was an apt one, as the fountain's influence and innovation would define della Quercia's work and his legacy for centuries. The Fonte Gaia, above all others, positioned him alongside such figures as Donatello and Lorenzo Ghiberti. Beyond its initial impact the carving style and iconographic programme of the fountain left a lasting impression on contemporary and later artists in Tuscany and beyond, the most notable of whom was Michelangelo.²

Located in the Piazza del Campo in the heart of the city, the Fonte Gaia is a sculpted expression of local pride and civic ideals. With its roughly rectangular shape, closed on three sides, the fountain seems to open its arms toward the square and the seat of civic government, the Palazzo Pubblico. In its style and form the fountain was groundbreaking, and was very likely the first monumental public fountain of the Italian Renaissance. The sculptures that once adorned its lateral balustrades, often identified as Acca Larentia and Rhea Silvia, were among the first free-standing statues of the Renaissance.³ Beyond its aesthetic merit, the fountain was a significant feat of engineering, supplying precious water to the Sienese. Girolamo

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1   Vasari opens with: 'E poi che ho eletto Iacopo sopradetto per onorato principio di questa Seconda Parte, seguitando l'ordine delle maniere, verrò aprendo sempre colle Vite medesime la difficoltà di sì belle, difficili ed onoratissime arti.' Regarding della Quercia's name, Vasari wrote: 'Che non più Iacopo dalla Quercia, ma Iacopo dalla Fonte fu poi sempre chiamato.' Vasari, 1872, vol. II,, pp. 107 and 116. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are ours. The original spelling of all documents has been preserved.

2   Scholars often cite Jacopo della Quercia's formative influence on the art of Michelangelo. Charles de Tolnay, for example, wrote: 'In the art of della Quercia Michelangelo found a conception which could give him a new assurance in the pursuit of his own ideal.' De Tolnay, 1947, p. 83. See also Hartt, 1969, p. 23. Seymour, 1973, pp. 3–4. Beck and Fanti, 1964, pp. 349–54. Kriegbaum, 1942, p. 96. Carli, 1964, p. 7.

3   Beck, 1991, vol. I, p. 20. Seymour, 1973, p. 52. Pope-Hennessey recognized their Renaissance form, stating that the statues 'ultimately derive from the antique', although he placed the Fonte Gaia in his first volume on Italian Gothic sculpture. Pope-Hennessey, 1955, p. 173.
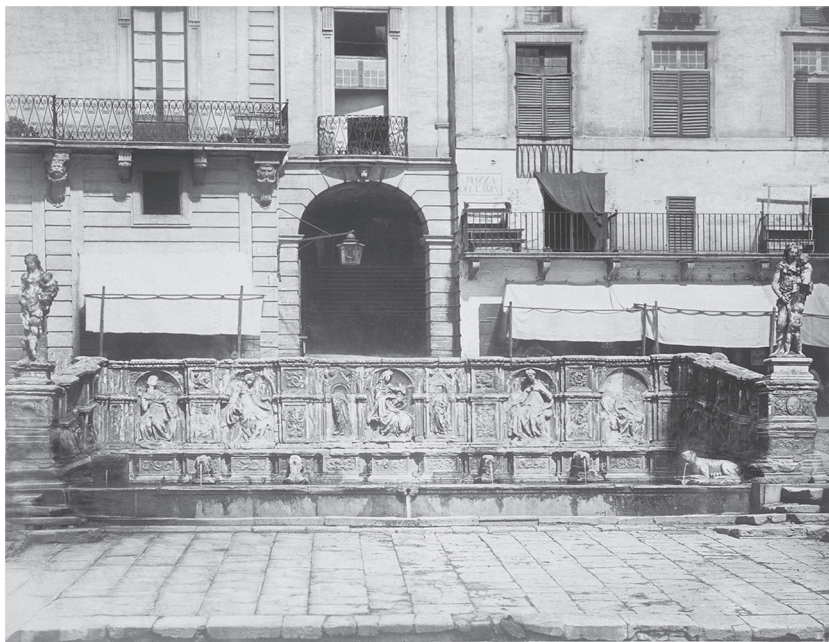
1. Jacopo della Quercia, Fonte Gaia, Piazza del Campo, Siena. (Archivi Alinari, Firenze)

Gigli, writing in the eighteenth century, went so far as to claim that the fountain's name derived from the gaiety ('gaia') felt by the citizens upon seeing the arrival of water in the Campo, something made possible only by the monument.[4]

Yet the fountain in its current iteration in Siena's Campo is not the original, fifteenth-century masterpiece completed in 1419 by Jacopo della Quercia; rather, it is a nineteenth-century reconstruction commissioned from Tito Sarrocchi (1824–1900) by a committee of leading Sienese citizens. Such a reconstruction was made necessary by the deterioration of the original Fonte Gaia, which was carved from an unusually porous local marble, *marmo senese della Montagnola*, that proved to be quite fragile. Years of exposure to the elements, the rigors of daily use, and occasional vandalization caused the fountain to disintegrate over time, ultimately leading

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4   'Nel 1345 venne per la prima volta l'acqua in Piazza e si fecero molte feste per otto dì, dandosi nome a quella Fontana di Fonte Gaja, la quale molti anni a resso, (come si dirà) fu adorata di bellissime statue, e rilievi dal célèbre nostro Scultore Jacopo della Quercia, ditto poi da quest'opera Jacomo della Fonte.' Gigli, 1723, vol. I, p. 265. Beck puts forth the idea that the name was given to the fountain because of the spirited movement of the water. Beck, vol. I, p. 67. For a discussion of interpretations of the origin of the name Gaia see Caciorgna, 2001–2002, p. 76.

2. Tito Sarrocchi, Fonte Gaia, Piazza del Campo, Siena. (author photo)

to its removal from the square in the nineteenth century. It was then that Jacopo della Quercia's dismembered fountain pieces were transferred to the Palazzo Pubblico, where they languished in dirty, fragmentary condition before finding a new home, in 1904, in the loggia of the same building.[5] Only with the recent conclusion of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure's (Workshop of Semi-Precious Stones) nearly 20-year restoration project has della Quercia's dismembered fountain been returned to some semblance of its former glory, although a sad reality is that much of the original work is irrevocably lost to us.[6]

A consequence of this history is that the modern reputation of della Quercia's Fonte Gaia – considered one of the major expressions of fifteenth-century Italian sculpture – has been largely shaped by Sarrocchi's version, which has long been considered a faithful copy of the original.

5   This was on the occasion of the 1904 exhibit organized by Corrado Ricci, *Mostra d'antica arte senese*. Ricci, 1904.

6   The project begun in 1990 was terminated in 2011. The documentary and photographic evidence pertaining to the first decade of the project is in the Archives of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence and all subsequent documentation (at the time of writing) is held by the restoration team of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena.

Yet a comparison with della Quercia's newly restored fountain at Siena's Museum of Santa Maria della Scala reveals that Sarrocchi's copy was far less faithful than has been assumed.[7] A reexamination of the physical and documentary evidence can thus shed new light on both della Quercia and Sarrocchi.

The present book demonstrates that Sarrocchi's fountain is stylistically a creative interpretation of della Quercia's fifteenth-century work, and that a true appreciation of the original fountain requires we look at other evidence. Sarrocchi, while generally adhering to the Fonte Gaia's iconographic programme, made important changes to the new fountain with respect to the original, both in the style of carving and in the complete omission of two freestanding statues and several border elements. While it is impossible to evaluate della Quercia's fountain as it once was, we believe that plaster casts Tito Sarrocchi made of the Fonte Gaia before he sculpted its replacement can provide valuable information on the original fountain. Thus far these plaster copies have been considered only as artisans' tools that aided in the mechanical reproduction of the fountain. Yet they are crucial to understanding the fountain's Renaissance design, as they preserve many figurative elements and details of the original sculptures that have since been lost. By examining the physical remains of della Quercia's original fountain, the plaster casts, and Sarrocchi's replacement we reevaluate the iconographic programme of the original fountain and outline the extent of its later transformations.

Just as interesting as della Quercia's fountain is the copy made by Sarrocchi, and his work forms a major subject of this study. In particular, we argue that Sarrocchi's 'copy' was heavily influenced by the art movement known as 'Purism' as well as by the prevailing restoration theories that circulated in mid-nineteenth-century Siena. Two critical figures emerge in this context: the Italian scholar and art historian Gaetano Milanesi and the French architect and theorist Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc. The former set the stage for a renewed interest in Jacopo della Quercia, thanks to his work on Vasari,[8]

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7   In March of 2011 della Quercia's restored fountain remnants were put on display in the museum of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena. Prior to this new exhibit only the two full-scale female statues (labelled Acca Larentia and Rhea Silvia) and two reliefs (The Expulsion of Adam and Eve and the Virtue Wisdom) were on display to the public. We would like to thank Enrico Toti, curator of the museum, for allowing access to study della Quercia's sculptures while in storage.

8   See the collection of articles published for the exhibition *Siena tra Purismo e Liberty* held in Siena's Palazzo Pubblico from 20 May to 30 October 1988. Sani and Crispolti, 1988. Gaetano Milanesi is renowned for his publication of nine volumes of Giorgio Vasari's *Vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* (1878–1885). See Petrioli, 2004.

while the latter codified stylistic restoration theories in the middle of the nineteenth century.[9] The unique intersection of Milanesi's intellectual power, the nineteenth-century art movement Purism, the incorporation of Siena into the emerging Italian state, and the changing notions of restoration all play important roles in the Fonte Gaia's nineteenth-century history, and form just a few of the considerations that this study explores. Doing so will highlight and clarify the interrelationship of both fountains and the cultural context that led to the replacement of the original. Our intention is to offer a more complete understanding of Jacopo della Quercia's Fonte Gaia and the sculptor's place in art history. Additionally, we examine – for the first time – Tito Sarrocchi's impact on our perception of della Quercia's beloved civic landmark.

Considering the monument's multifaceted history and its survival for roughly six centuries, we have organized our project into four chapters and subdivided each into smaller sections to further guide the reader. Chapter One introduces the city of Siena, its geographical position, foundation history, and government. We discuss the city's particular water engineering system – the *bottini* – and highlight the differences between this system and the more common form of the Roman aqueduct employed in other Italian cities. We also discuss extant medieval fountains that predate the Fonte Gaia in both Siena and Italy generally. In the second section of Chapter One, we introduce what is known about the patronage, plan, and design of the fourteenth-century Fonte Gaia. This is the fountain that existed on the square before della Quercia's fountain; for clarity we shall refer to it as the *first* Fonte Gaia. Careful study reveals that the first Fonte Gaia influenced the design of della Quercia's fifteenth-century fountain more than has hitherto been recognized.

Chapter Two begins by outlining the patronage, plan, and design of della Quercia's Fonte Gaia. We then address the iconographical questions posed by other scholars related to the Fonte Gaia sculptures, and propose a new interpretation of the fountain's programme. Our identification of the female figures, usually considered to be Acca Larentia and Rhea Silvia, as a possible reference to the maternal figure Gaia is related to then contemporary

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9   He noted: 'The term restoration and the thing itself are both modern. To restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair it, to rebuild it; it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness which may never have existed at any time.' Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879) was a French architect and theorist famous for his ideas on the restoration of medieval buildings, combining historical fact with creative interpretation – in opposition to the ideas later theorized by John Ruskin, who adamantly opposed Viollet-le-Duc's theories. Viollet-le-Duc, 1990, p. 195. See also Jokilehto, 1999, p. 151. Ruskin, 1989 [1880], p. 194.

debates regarding the foundation history of the city and della Quercia's relationship to the Sienese painter Taddeo di Bartolo (*c.* 1363–1422).

This book then moves to an examination of the activities from 1430 to 1830 that caused damage to della Quercia's fountain. Chapter Three, entitled 'A History of Disrepair', is a chronological record of the fountain's later vicissitudes, derived largely from archival sources. From this research, we draw conclusions about the condition of della Quercia's fountain and the use of both the fountain and the square over the period mentioned above.

Chapter Four is dedicated to the life of Tito Sarrocchi, the circumstances of the new Fonte Gaia's commission, and the perception of restoration in the nineteenth century. We discuss the art movement Purism and explain how this Renaissance Revival style contributed to the replacement of the fountain and its new design. Our intention is to locate the renewal of the fountain within the context of an elevated consciousness of cultural heritage influenced by the then fashionable trend of Renaissance Revival art.

Through this project, we raise questions that pertain to both della Quercia's original fountain and the copy by Sarrocchi. Why, for example, did Sarrocchi and his nineteenth-century patrons make certain decisions regarding alterations to the fountain's iconography, style, and location? Closely related is the question of what it meant, in the context of nineteenth-century Italian sculpture, to 'copy' the work of another artist, and of a famous Renaissance artist in particular. Was the result expected to be a facsimile of the original or was the spirit of the original enough for the patron? Just as important are some of the more practical considerations, such as those pertaining to the circumstances of this renovation. Was the impetus a matter of renewed local civic pride in light of the emerging national identity or were the planners more concerned with the fountain's state of conservation? To move further back, what was the impetus behind the original fountain, and what was the intended content of its visual programme? These and others are the questions raised by the two fountains, and they are what has guided our research and what forms the backbone of the current book.

1. Siena: Water and Power

Siena was founded upon a hilltop, approximately 65 kilometres east of the Tyrrhenian Sea and almost 320 metres above sea level in the Chiana mountain range. The city's origins have long been recognized to extend to the Middle Ages, though several earlier historians traced its foundation further back, to either an Etruscan or a Roman settlement.[1] It is only since the mid-1960s, with the discoveries made by archeologists in the area of Siena, that light has been shed on the early history of the city.

The general history of Etruscan cities in Tuscany has been relatively well established. Around the second half of the eighth century BCE the first nuclei were formed in Tarquinia, Cerveteri, Veio, Vulci, Bolsena, Chiusi, Roselle, Vetulonia, Populonia, Arezzo, Cortona, and Perugia. These cities were known as the *Dodecapoli* ('twelve capitals'). Several smaller centres were subsequently established, including Cosa, Talamone, Pistoia, Fiesole, Volterra, and Sovana. In the second half of the twentieth century the hypothesis that Siena was also founded by the Etruscans was strengthened by the discovery of archeological remains from the fifth to the fourth century BCE some 12 kilometres from the city (near the town of Murlo).[2] Because of the large size of one of the buildings (70 × 100 metres) archeologists have variously identified the structure as the Temple of Poggio Civitate or even the long-sought shrine known as Fanum Voltumnae, a political sanctuary that functioned as a meeting place and a site for religious ceremonies and games.[3] While debates regarding the nature and identification of the structure are ongoing, the discovery of an Etruscan presence so close to the modern city of Siena supports the proposal that it too was founded by that civilization. This is further confirmed by recent excavations within the city walls that have revealed the existence of two necropoli: the first at San Marco and the second at Campansi, where numerous Etruscan utensils dating from the last quarter of the fourth century BCE have come to light.[4]

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1   See Douglas, 1902, pp. 1–13.
2   Fusai, 1987, p. 13. Nielsen, 1987. Phillips, 1970, p. 242. Phillips, 1993. Nagy et al., 2008.
3   See Cristofani, 1975. Mazzeschi, 1976. De Puma and Small, 1994. Regarding Fanum Voltumnae, see Stopponi, 2007, who instead believes to have located the site of the sanctuary in Orvieto. Also see Pelosi and Fortunato, 1998. Ridgway, 1979.
4   Cantini, 2007. Barbagli and Iozzo, 2007. Fusai, 1987, pp. 15–16.