

Lorenzo Ghiberti (Medieval/Renaissance)

B: ca. 1378-1381,
Pelago, Tuscany, Italy

D: 1 December, 1455;
Florence, Tuscany, Italy

Ghiberti was trained as a goldsmith by his stepfather, who was the main father figure in his life.

In 1401, the city fathers of Florence decided to offer a contest to make a pair of doors for the Florence Cathedral to match the pair made seventy-four years earlier by Giotto's friend, Andrea Pisano (ca 1290-1348)



Seven artists entered the competition to make the baptistry doors, two of whom had profound impact on Ghiberti's life and the art world: Filippo Brunelleschi, who became Ghiberti's main rival, and Donatello the sculptor, who would work for both men from time to time.

During the year Ghiberti made his panel, he would often hail judges, fellow guild members, even complete strangers down in the streets, and ask them to come and give their opinion of his entry piece. He re-made it several times based on their recommendations. Others, like Brunelleschi, worked in secret and revealed their panels only at the competition.

Ghiberti wrote the first artist autobiography: in it, he claimed he won the Florence competition for the door unanimously. Other sources declare it was a tie between himself and Brunelleschi—the first time of many when this would happen. Both of their entries still exist, and people and scholars still debate whose is better!

The doors were supposed to take ten years to complete (three years longer than Pisano's.). They took twenty, and were hung in 1424. Ghiberti was promptly given the commission for another set of doors.

These new doors, called by Michelangelo "The Doors of Paradise" were so new, they created a new form of art—they are one of the first true Renaissance pieces of art.

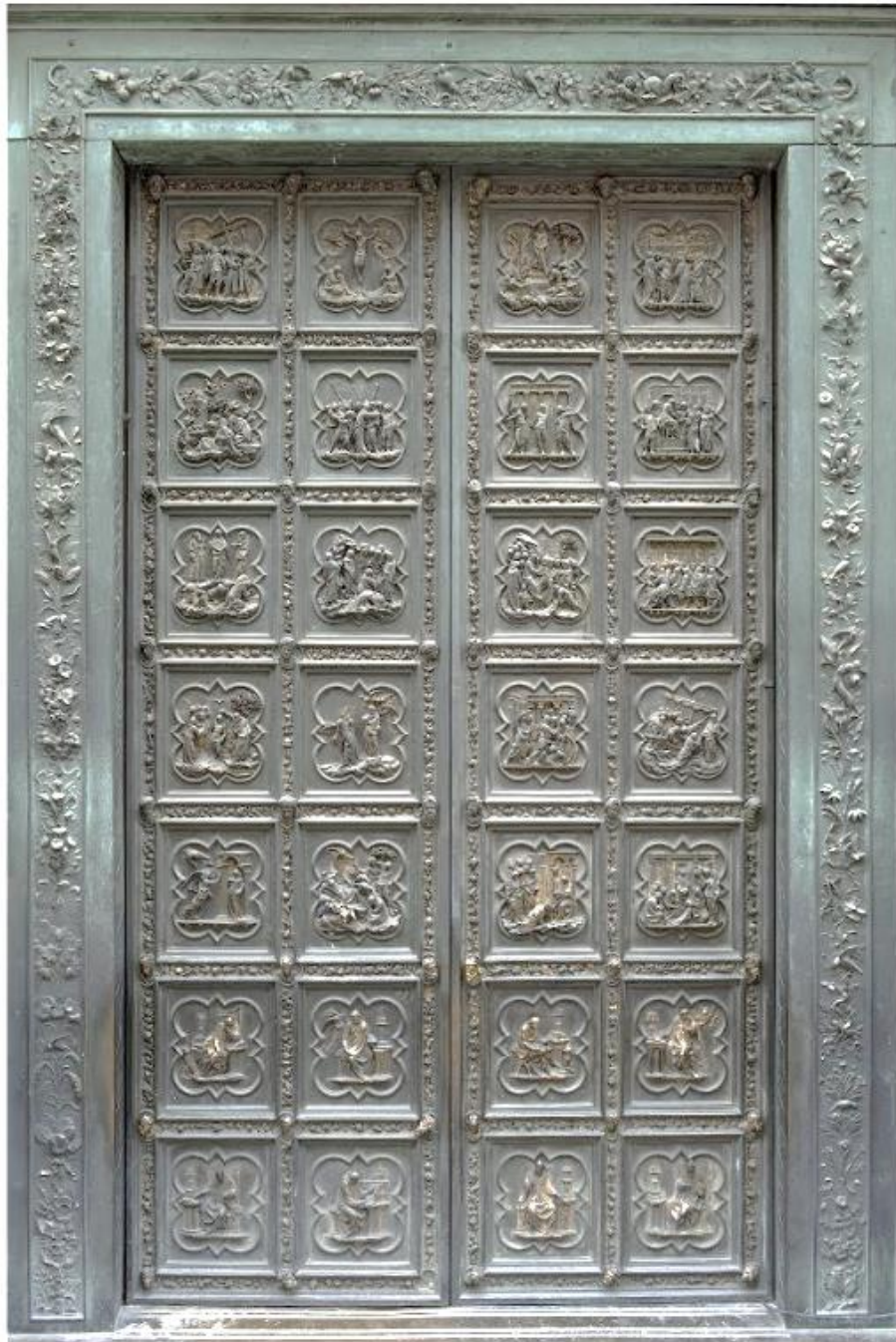


South Doors of Florence's San Lorenzo Baptistery; cast bronze with gold gilding

Andrea Pisano (c 1290-1348);, Florence, Italy

These doors, which depict the life of Florence's Patron Saint, John the Baptist, were supposed to be one of a pair, but economic crashes, war, and the Black Death intervened. Originally, they were hung on the east side, facing the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, which was under construction. These were the doors Ghiberti was supposed to match.

Over a hundred years and one move to the south later, Ghiberti's son, Vittorio Ghiberti (1418-1496) was hired to build a frame for Pisano's doors. That was completed between 1453-1462.



North Doors of the Florence's San Lorenzo Baptistery; cast Bronze with Gold Gilding

Lorenzo Ghiberti (1381 – 1455); Florence, Italy

It took Ghiberti, his father, and their team twenty years to finish these doors. These doors, known as “The Doors of the Cross” depict the life of Christ. (The original plan had been to depict the Genesis Patriarchs). These doors were considered so breathtaking when they were unveiled, Pisano’s doors were moved to the south, these doors were installed in the east, and were only opened once a year, with great ceremony, on Easter Sunday.



East Doors of Florence's San Lorenzo Baptistery "The Doors of Paradise"

Lorenzo Ghiberti (1381 – 1455)

Ghiberti was simply given the commission for a final set of doors, to be set in the northern niche. Rather than making them match, Ghiberti used Brunelleschi's new visual mathematical perspective to create ten large multi-scene narratives out of the Old Testament, from Creation to Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. These doors were so incredible, Ghiberti's previous set of East doors were removed and set in the north, and these were put in their place. The current set in the baptistery is a replica; the original, damaged in the Arno Floods of 1966, are now in the Opera Del Duomo Museum in Florence.

Ghiberti vs. Brunelleschi

These two men would be rivals their whole professional lives. The 1401-1403 door competition was the first time they went head to head. While Ghiberti ultimately won this round, part of the reason was his competition panel, (see below) was 15.5 pounds (7 kilos) lighter than Brunelleschi's. (See competition panels, front and back, below) Multiply that by the twenty-eight panels in the door set, and you have a savings of 434 pounds (196 Kilos) of bronze over the lifetime of the door project.

But whose is better? Lots of people still ask that question. What do you think?

Ghiberti

Brunelleschi





“The Adoration of the Magi” (completed 1424)

Lorenzo Ghiberti (d. 1455)

Cast Bronze, detail of the north doors of San Lorenzo Baptistery, Florence, Italy

Compare this composition to Giotto’s “Adoration of the Magi”. How are they similar or different? What do you notice?

In the first set of doors, Ghiberti showed one action per panel. This would change with the “Gates of Paradise”.



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“Cain and Abel” (1924-1452) (Genesis 4:1-16)

Lorenzo Ghiberti (d. 1455)

Cast Bronze, gilded gold, detail of “Doors of Paradise” San Lorenzo Baptistry, Florence, Italy

“in the Second Panel, Adam and Eve beget Cain and Abel, who appear as small children. [upper left corner] Then, there is [shown] how Cain and Abel offered [their] sacrifices. Cain sacrificed the worst and vilest thing he had. Abel sacrificed the best and noblest. Abel’s sacrifice was entirely acceptable to God, Cain’s quite the opposite. There is [shown] how Cain slew Abel in enmy. In that scene, Abel is watching the animals and Cain is tilling the soil. There is also shown how God appeared to Cain and demanded the brother he had slain. Thus, in each panel are scenes in four stories.

-Lorenzo Ghiberti, describing this panel in his autobiography, *Commentarii*.



Abraham and Isaac (1424-1453) (Genesis 18: 1-15 and Genesis 22: 1-19)
Lorenzo Ghiberti, (d. 1455)
Cast Bronze and Gilded Gold; “Doors of Paradise”; San Lorenzo Baptistry, Florence

Each of Ghiberti’s reliefs in the Door of Paradise was a series of events in a story in a single picture. This type of image is called Narrative, or Narrative image, which, in Ghiberti’s native Italian, would be called *“istoria”*. What English word do we have that sounds similar?

Thirty years separate the competition piece Ghiberti and Brunelleschi did with this panel. In it, we see two major scenes: To the left, the three angels tell Abraham, while eating the meal Sarah prepared, that within a year, they will be parents of Isaac, while Sarah listens in. In the upper right corner, Abraham’s hand is stilled by an angel while a ram waits in the bushes. Their servants sit below, unaware of the drama above them. Some scholars say that Ghiberti borrowed some elements of the sacrifice scene from Brunelleschi’s panel. What do you think?



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This panel, the “Jacob and Esau” Panel, is considered the most complex and intricate of all the Gates of Paradise panels. The action is roughly clockwise, starting in the upper right-hand corner, with God announcing to a very pregnant Rebekah about the twins in her womb. In the left hall, in the background, a very pregnant Rebekah is beginning her labor with the twins. The four women in the foreground are traditionally believed to be her attendants. In the central hall, middle ground, (partially obscured by the foreground figures), Esau, famished from hunting and dropping his bow on the floor, sells his birthright for a bowl of stew. This scene can only be clearly seen from an angle (*see page 10*). In the central foreground, blind Isaac tells Esau to hunt for him, so he can give Esau his blessing. Interestingly, the pair of hounds at Esau’s feet are identical with one exception: one is smooth, one is hairy, like the twins themselves! In the right-hand hall, middle ground, Rebekah plots with Isaac, who is holding a lamb, about how to get the blessing, while Esau leaves the home to hunt. In the right foreground, Jacob, having successfully tricked his blind father, steals Esau’s blessing while Rebekah watches. (Whole narrative: Genesis 25: 19-34 and Genesis 27: 1 -40)

This panel also demonstrates correct single point perspective, a technique Ghiberti likely learned from Brunelleschi, who developed it in the years following the competition for the doors.



Photo: Blog "The Mr. Hunter Wall" Blog <http://themrhunterwall.blogspot.com/2011/04/>

In this image of the original panel Ghiberti created (in the Opera del Duomo Museum in Florence,) you can more clearly see Jacob, the younger twin, extending the bowl of porridge to Esau, behind the large figures of Isaac and Esau in the foreground. It also shows how far out some of these figures extend from the background—note how flat pregnant Rebekah is compared to the figures in front of her!

Another note: some scholars believe the four women in front may actually be Esau's Canaanite and Hittite wives, the ones which Rebekah disliked, and the excuse she gave Isaac for sending Jacob away to her brother Laban (Genesis 27: 41 – Genesis 28: 9). If so, these figures belong with the "Isaac asking Esau to go hunting for him scene".

Vocabulary:

Relief (n)

A form of sculpture where the carved figures are incorporated into a standing wall or door. Frequently, but not always, the relief figures were carved *in-situ* (in position) in the wall or door, for example, Egyptian temple and tomb reliefs. Ghiberti's doors would be an exemption to this rule as they were created in his workshop and mounted after their completion. There are three main categories of Relief in such sculptures:

Bas-Relief (Pronounced Bah-REE-Leef) (n)

A French term from the Italian *Basso-Relievo*, both of which mean "Low-Relief". A Bas-Relief sculpture is one where the figures protrude only slightly from the background of the relief. Most of the backdrop Lorenzo Ghiberti's Doors of Paradise are examples of 'bas-Relief'

High-Relief (n)

From the Italian *Alto-rilievo*, a relief where the sculpture is undercut—the back finished as well as the front, and is carved up and away from the background. High reliefs are almost full sculptures protruding from a wall. Ghiberti's head on the first page is an example of high-relief, as are some of his foreground figures on the Gates of Paradise.

Middle Relief (n)

From the Italian *mezzo-rilievo*, a relief where the characters protrude out of the background of the wall, but are not undercut—their backs are still "submerged" in the wall. Whether something is "middle relief" as opposed to "bas" or "high" relief is sometimes a judgement call by the person labeling. Many cultures in Asia use Middle Relief figures in their carved walls.

There are also two other forms of "Relief" in the art and history world: **Sunken Relief**, which was seen in Ancient Egypt where the figures were carved into the background, "sinking" them past the background, which remains raised. **Counter-Relief** happened in small items like signet rings and seals, where the relief was carved into a surface (like a sunken relief) but in reverse, so that when the ring or seal was flipped into a puddle of wax or wet clay, the image would appear correctly.

Etymology: "Relief" is a 17th century English word which descended from the French word "relief", from the Italian "rilievo" and ultimately the Latin verb *rilevare*, which means "to Raise". Bas and Basso mean low (think of the musical term "bass", like "string bass" or "bass singer"), *mezzo* means "middle" and "alto" means tall. Look for these words in science as well as art.



The sculptor, and the painter also, should be trained in these liberal arts: grammar, geometry, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, perspective, history, anatomy, theory of design, arithmetic.

--Lorenzo Ghiberti
(ca. 1378-1455)

