

Lasse Hodne

Masaccio's Skeleton and the Petrarchan Concept of Time

Masaccio's famous fresco in Santa Maria Novella, painted in the 1420s, is known to students of art history as the first example in the Renaissance of an almost perfect use of central perspective. Numerous studies have been dedicated to the investigation of Masaccio's perspectival method. However, in this article I shall instead focus on some aspects of the fresco's iconography.

The fresco consists of two parts. In the upper zone we see the three persons of the Trinity along with St. John the Evangelist, the Virgin Mary, and two donors. This motif has often been referred to as a *Gnadenstuhl*. The lower depicts a fictive tomb and a skeleton accompanied by an inscription. The skeleton has normally been interpreted as an image of Death – a view that seems to be confirmed by the finding of 15th century tombs under the floor next to the painting. If the presence of the Crucified among the persons of the Trinity in the upper part refers to Salvation, it is natural to interpret the whole as a representation of the Christian concept of Salvation through the sacrificial death of Christ.

In my view, there is a tendency to overlook a second aspect, which is just as important as that of Death, namely Time. Indeed, the temporal dimension is indicated by the symbol of Death itself, the skeleton, who turns to the spectator with the words "I was once what you are, and such as I am you will be."

This phrase is taken from a literary genre, that of the *Three living and the three dead*. After a brief look on this tradition, the article then proceeds to discuss what could be the relation between the main motif in the upper zone – the *Trinity* – and the idea of Time. Since Antiquity 'time' has been conceived as consisting of three modalities: past, present, and future. In the theology of Augustine, the fusion of the modalities of time into one entity is 'eternity', and eternity, in turn, is God. Hence, the image of the triune God contains within itself the phases of time.

We know that the idea of a connection between 'time' and the triune God was discussed by the members of the Platonic Academy in Florence, and it is also likely that the artists of the Late Medieval and Renaissance periods was familiar with it. This we may deduce from, among other things, the illustrations of Petrarch's *Trionfi*. The two final of Petrarch's triumphs are, precisely, Time and Eternity, and of special interest is the way in which the various schools depicted Eternity. With few exceptions, timelessness is represented in the shape of the Trinity; indeed the Florentine illustrators of the 15th century preferred to represent the Trinity in the shape of a *Gnadenstuhl*, exactly like Masaccio's painting. If, then, the *Trinity* in the Petrarchan illustrations represents Eternity, is it not natural to conclude that the identical image in Masaccio's fresco alludes to the same concept? We then have a contrast between Death (the skeleton) and Eternity which highlights Time, just as much as Salvation, as the fresco's main subject.