

PAOLO UCCELLO



SAN
ROMANO
THE ART OF
WAR

CHRIS DOBSON

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For 'zio' Giancarlo, even though it's an eBook.

Cover: PAOLO UCCELLO Panel traditionally known as *The Battle of San Romano* and dated to about 1438-40. Egg tempera with walnut oil and linseed oil on poplar. National Gallery, London. © 2013. Copyright The National Gallery, London/Scala, Florence.

Detail showing the *condottiere* Niccolò da Tolentino, Captain General of the Florentine forces.

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*E naturalmente grazie infinite a tutti a
La Galleria e Le Vofpi e l'Uva...*

Introduction

For decades, debate has surrounded three great paintings executed on wooden panels by the Florentine artist Paolo Uccello, assumed to have been painted as a group, and together traditionally known as *The Battle of San Romano*. The recent discovery of important documents in Florentine archives has shed much new light on their history, but even this has failed to bring agreement as to what they actually depict and when they were painted, and today they hang in three of the greatest art museums in the world, still collectively bearing their traditional name. But that is not the name they were given when they were commissioned nearly six centuries ago, and hidden within the symbolism and geometry of these three paintings lies a story of murder, political intrigue and daylight robbery that reads like a ‘who’s-who’ of the Golden Age of the Florentine Renaissance, and it comes as no surprise that the most prominent name on that list is the most famous family in Florentine history: the Medici.

The paintings were commissioned at a time when Florence was the centre of an unprecedented artistic revolution that would affect all Europe, yet this was also a city that was fighting for her very survival in a disastrous war against old enemies, and riven by a bitter internal struggle between powerful families seeking political dominance. All of this is reflected within the paintings themselves, and as we shall see, an important key to unlocking the layers of meaning within the paintings is the very armour and equipment of Uccello’s mounted warriors. It is often forgotten that arms and armour are themselves forms of art, and were certainly considered as such by the warriors who commissioned and used them. No self-respecting Renaissance Prince would have thought of going into battle in anything less than the finest armour that he could afford, which had to be of the latest fashion, naturally. The weapons he

used to subdue his enemies were also works of art, beautiful and terrible in equal measure, and even the way a warrior was trained to use them was an art which had a basis in common with painting: geometry. Armed and armoured by artists of staggering skill, and mounted upon beautiful horses, the warriors who inspired the ‘San Romano’ panels were themselves living, breathing - and killing - works of art.

So naturally the political and military background to the commissioning of these paintings is very important in attempting to understand what they represent, but to get an even clearer picture we still need to know something about Paolo Uccello and his work, so in this book we are going to look at how he actually created his pictures, and the original appearance and form of the panels, all put into the context of the art of early 15th Century Florence. Looking at the paintings in this way, the inclusion of some elements in their composition takes on a new importance, as does the deliberate omission of others. But before we can examine the panels themselves, we need to begin with the events on the battlefield that led to their creation.

We are at war...



Fig 1. ANONYMOUS Arms of the Visconti Family, Milan, first half of the 15th Century. Marble. Museo Bardini, Florence. Photo: author.

ONE: **WAR**

“You create war, you lead us into war, you suckle those nourished by war. Florence has never been without war, and never will be, until you cut off the heads of four of your leading citizens every year.”

Giovanni di Iacopo Morelli on the Luccan War, Florence, 1430.

Political background

Since the 1390s, Florence had been involved in series of conflicts with the powerful city-state of Milan, the ‘old enemy’. The absolute rulers of Milan were the Visconti family (Fig 1), who had been pursuing an aggressive policy of expansion southwards into Tuscany, using consummate diplomatic skill to forge links with the local rivals to Florence: Pisa, Lucca and Siena. In response, Florence, hardly an innocent party in the conflict, consolidated her position by increasing the amount of territory she controlled, taking Pisa in 1406. By 1427 the area under Florentine dominion covered some 4,200 square miles, with a population of around 260,000. Florence had secured an alliance with Venice against Milan in 1425, and in 1427, the Venetian army inflicted a decisive defeat on the Milanese at the battle of Maclodio.

In the early 15th Century Florence was a republic, although in practice the city was an oligarchy, with power resting in the hands of a small number of prominent families. By the late 1420s, the strain of incessant war with Milan had created an atmosphere of crisis and civic unrest, which polarized the unstable political situation around



Fig 2. BENOZZO GOZZOLI *The Procession of the Magi*, 1459. *Fresco*. Chapel, *Palazzo Medici-Riccardi*, Florence. © 2013. Photo Scala, Florence.

The rider centre-right wearing a dark blue gown and a red hat, mounted on a mule with blue and gold harness is thought to be Cosimo de' Medici. This fresco is in the *palazzo* in Fig 14.

two factions: that led by the Albizzi and Peruzzi, old Guelph¹ families and supporters of the oligarchy, and that of Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464, Fig 2), with more support amongst the *Minuto Popolo*, or common people. This was a struggle for total political supremacy that could only cause the destruction of republican ideals.

In 1429, Rinaldo di Messer Maso degli Albizzi (1370-1442), the head of the Albizzi faction, drove Florence into war with Lucca. This was a popular move at home, since Lucca was an ancient enemy and rival in the silk trade, but Cosimo de' Medici doubted the wisdom of this course. He agreed to serve as a member of the Ten of War², but his doubts were soon justified. Florence found herself embroiled in a disastrous, drawn-out conflict with an enemy who was being backed by her old archenemy: Milan.

Condottieri: "men of name"

The nature of Milan's backing for Lucca was the loan of a famous mercenary Captain, the *condottiere* Francesco Sforza (1401-66). It was quite usual in Medieval and early Renaissance Italy to make use of such *condottieri*, named after their *condotte*, the contracts that stated the terms and duration of their employment, and the number and type of troops in their companies. In Florence, the street close to the *Palazzo Vecchio* where these contracts were drawn up, became known as the *Via della Condotta*, and various Italian *condotte* have survived to the present day. States might have

¹ The Guelph and Ghibelline parties first arose in the early 13th Century. Their allegiances reflected a wider international power-struggle taking place in Italy at the time, between the Papacy (supported by the Guelphs) and the Holy Roman Emperors (supported by the Ghibellines). The Guelphs attempted to suppress the political power of the mercantile guilds and the *Minuto Popolo*.

² Part of the Florentine government: it was a temporarily elected council with responsibility for raising and equipping armies, and the waging of war. See also note 4.

had their own militia to provide infantry to defend their cities' walls and do some limited campaigning, but the backbone of armies were paid professional mercenaries. These private armies were divided into 'lances'³ of cavalry, and infantry. This was also true for countries north of the Alps, but Florence and other Republics in Italy no longer had the resources of feudal retinues to draw upon, and so naturally it was easier to spend their considerable mercantile wealth to simply employ the best professionals available. In fact, after the death of Sir John Hawkwood (c.1320-94), the greatest *condottiere* of his age and ultimately Captain General of Florence (Fig 3), the Florentines suffered perennial problems in securing and then retaining the services of the best *condottieri*. Almost inevitably however, in a period of continual warfare many *condottieri* often found themselves fighting for the very states they had previously been fighting against, and so they gained an unsavoury reputation for a lack of loyalty, fighting for the highest bidder. They were accused of being loath to risk their valuable troops in pitched battles, preferring instead to conduct warfare as a sort of bloodless game of chess. This reputation is both unfair and untrue, and has been influenced to a great extent by the writings of the Florentine politician and diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), who had a serious political axe to grind, and was perfectly happy to distort the truth to suit his own agenda, which favoured standing forces made up of citizen militia. In fact *condottieri* fought both decisive and bloody pitched battles - as we shall see - in which Captains regularly ran the risks of being wounded or killed. Ironically, they were sometimes more at risk from their own employers, who either distrusted them if they lost an engagement, or feared them if they were too successful. As well they might: some Princes chose to hire themselves out as *condottieri*, but some ambitious *condottieri* of humbler birth had their eyes set on acquiring lands of their own to rule over.

³ A lance was not just the weapon used by a mounted warrior. The term was also used to describe an administrative unit of cavalry: a heavily-armoured man-at-arms, his more lightly-armoured squire, and a page, who would act as a servant for the man-at-arms and take care of the horses.

Pages 12-30 are not available in this preview.



Fig 15: MICHELOZZO DI BARTOLOMEO *Palazzo Medici* (now *Palazzo Medici-Riccardi*), Florence, after 1444-1450s. Photo: author. The three ‘San Romano’ panels are documented as being here after the death of Lorenzo ‘Il Magnifico’, leading scholars to believe that Cosimo de’ Medici commissioned them.

TWO: ART

“Paolo Uccello would have been the most delightful and inventive genius in the history of painting from Giotto’s day to the present, if he had spent as much time working on human figures and animals as he lost on problems of perspective....”

Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*

New Discoveries

Until recently it was thought that the three ‘San Romano’ panels were commissioned around the mid 15th Century by Cosimo de’Medici for one of the two family *palazzi* in the Via Larga (in the mid 15th Century the family moved from an old *palazzo* to a new one designed by Michelozzo), since they appear in an inventory of items in the *Palazzo Medici* (Fig 15), drawn up after the death in 1492 of his grandson Lorenzo ‘*Il Magnifico*’ (the Magnificent):

“in the great room on the ground floor, known as the ‘camera di Lorenzo’. [...] Six pictures in gilded frames above the said ‘spalliera’ and above the ‘lettucio’, of 42 braccia in length and 3½ braccia in height, paintings, that is three are of the rout of San Romano and one of battles and dragons and lions, and one of the story of Paris, by the hand of Pagholo Uccello and one by the hand of Francesco di Pesello, within [which is] a hunt. [Valued at] 300 florins.”¹⁴

¹⁴ *“e nella chamera grande terrene, detta la chamera di Lorenzo. [...] Sei quadri chorniciati atorno e messi d’oro sopra la detta spalliera et sopra al lettucio di br.42 lunghi et alti br.iii½, dipinti, c[i]oè tre della Rotta di San Romano e uno di battaglie e draghi et leoni et uno della storia di Paris, di mano di Pagholo Uccello e uno di mano di Francesco di Pesello, entrovei una chaccia. f.300”* ASF, Archivio Mediceo Avanti il Principato, 165, c.6v.

However, in 1999 Outi Merosali published a document recording the proceedings of a commission set up in 1495 to assess the financial claims of hundreds of Florentine citizens against the Medici family, mostly concerning unpaid debts, but also to consider cases of property that had been illegally seized. This document somewhat complicated the situation, since it offered another family as the potential patrons of these three panels, and a completely different explanation for how they might have come to be in the hands of Lorenzo ‘*Il Magnifico*’. It is also brought to light an episode that demonstrates that Lorenzo could be utterly unscrupulous when it came to having his way.

Two years after the death of Lorenzo, his son Piero had succeeded in making himself and the Medici regime extremely unpopular with his arrogant behaviour and his moves to centralize the control of political power, rather than working with the co-operation of the other great Florentine families, as his forebears had done. In addition, the political situation generally in the Italian States had been destabilised when a massive French army led by King Charles VIII had entered Italy to reassert his claim to the throne of Naples. In the face of French aggression, Piero immediately gave in to all Charles’ demands. This led to the collapse of the Medici regime, and Piero was charged with treachery. He and his family fled from the city on the night of the 8th of November, 1494. The *Signoria* decreed that the Medici should be exiled from Florence forever. In the following political vacuum, the *Signoria* temporarily assigned the college of the *Sindaci* (auditors) to look into the financial affairs of Lorenzo’s heirs, and among other things, to ensure the restitution of property that had been illegally seized by the Medici.

The part of the document that concerns the ‘San Romano’ panels is a minuted account of an official complaint made against Lorenzo *Il Magnifico* by Damiano Bartolini.¹⁵ It was written by Giovanni di Francesco Manetti, notary to the *Sindaci*, It states:

¹⁵ ASF, Carte strozziane, 1, fol. 43r-44r.

Pages 34-46 are not available in this preview.



Fig 22: LORENZO MONACO *The Coronation of the Virgin*, dated February 1413 (detail). Tempera on panel. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. © 2013. Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali.

The Artist: Paolo Uccello

Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) was properly called Paolo di Dono. He was the son of a Barber-Surgeon from Pratovecchio and Antonia di Giovanni di Castello del Beccuto, who came from a noble family of Perugian origin, which had moved to Florence. Paolo was orphaned quite early on, and although there is no documentation of his childhood, it would seem that he was taken care of by his mother's family, who also apparently supported his artistic education (in particular, one Deo di Deo del Beccuto). In 1407, at the age of 10, Paolo was apprenticed to the artist and sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455), and in 1407 he is documented as assisting the work on the north doors of the Baptistery of San Giovanni:

“Paolo di Dono, workshop garzone [shop or errand boy], at 5 florins per annum, then at 7 florins. He had in total 20.10 florins.”

Ghiberti's workshop was the most important studio in Florence, and there he was trained in an elegant and sophisticated style that today is known as the International Gothic. This style represented the mainstream in many aspects of the arts from about 1375-1425. In painting, striking effects were achieved with the application of gold and silver leaf, and great attention was paid to fine detail (Fig 22). While there he also mixed with artists like Masolino (1383-1447, and the sculptor Donatello (1386-1466), and Paolo and Donatello were to become firm life-long friends. In 1412 he makes a second appearance in Ghiberti's accounts, and the improvement in his rate of pay shows us that his status had changed considerably:

“Paolo di Dono at 25 florins a year. He received in total 31.1.7 florins.”

In 1414 Paolo was admitted to the *Compagnia di San Luca* (Saint Luke, the patron saint of painters), confirming his status as an independent Master at that point, although he continued to work in

Ghiberti's studio. On the 15th of October 1415 he joined the influential *Arte dei Medici e dei Speziali* (the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries), the Guild to which all great Florentine painters of the period. Paolo finally left Ghiberti's studio in 1416. The parting seems to have been amicable, and with Ghiberti's approval.

Little is known of Paolo's early independent career, but in 1425, we do know that he went to Venice to work in the art of mosaic. A local specialist had died, and the Venetian Senate decided to approach a Florentine Master for work at Saint Mark's cathedral. The choice of Paolo was probably based on the personal recommendation of Ghiberti, who was in Venice during the winter of 1424-25, and Paolo may already have had some experience from restoration of the mosaics in Florence's Baptistery (Fig 25). He spent five years in Venice, and when he returned to Florence in 1430 he was now a 'Master of Mosaic'. His one identifiable work during this period, "*a figure of Saint Peter in a certain corner of the façade*" of Saint Marks, is now lost, and frustratingly, no other works there from this crucial part of his career can be identified with certainty.

It was now 1430, the Luccan War was under way, Paolo was back in Florence, and beginning that fertile phase of his career to which the 'San Romano' panels belong.

Wooden Tapestries?

There is no escaping the fact that in style the 'San Romano' panels are very reminiscent of a series of tapestries, and this similarity would have been much more obvious when they were new. This is probably no accident. As we have seen, in the previous century, wealthy Italian patrons had the walls of their homes decorated with *frescoes*²⁸, and sometimes these were painted in direct imitation of

²⁸ *Fresco* literally means 'fresh': paints were applied directly onto a freshly-plastered wall or ceiling whilst the plaster was still wet. When it dried, the colours became sealed into the surface.



Fig 23. ANONYMOUS *Hercules Opening the Olympic Games*, Belgium, possibly Tournai, circa 1465-70. Tapestry: silk, wool. Burrell Collection, Glasgow. Photo © Glasgow Museums Collection.

Pages 51-66 are not available in this preview.

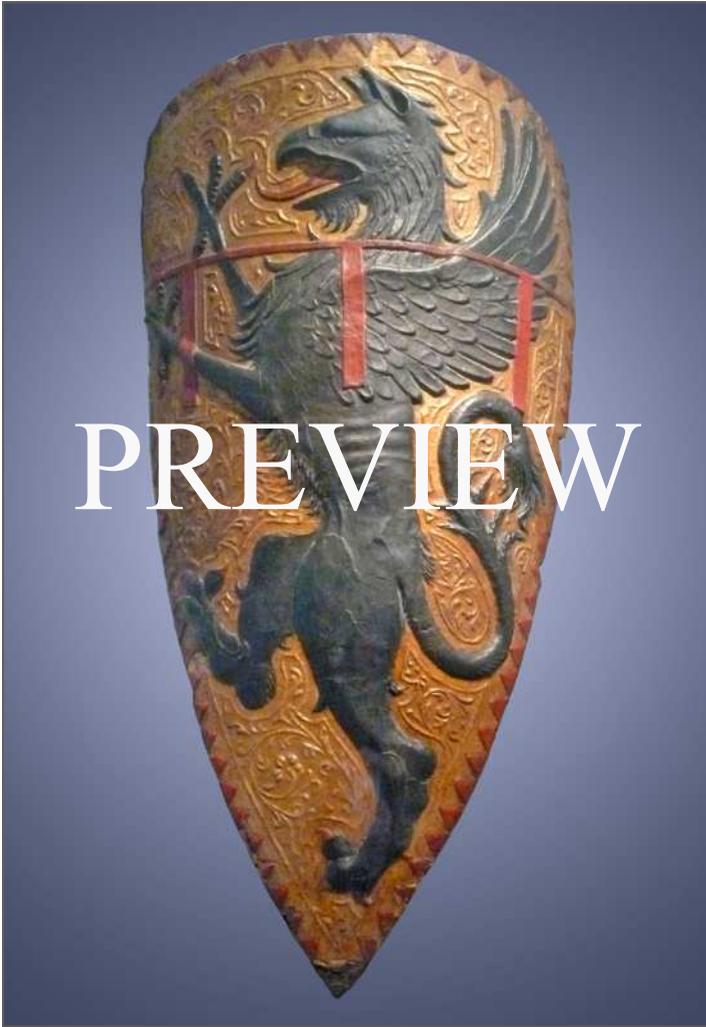


Fig 35. ANONYMOUS Shield Bearing the Arms of the Villani Family, Florence, circa late 14th – mid 15th Century. Egg tempera, gilding, gesso, wood. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: author.
The Villani were merchants; this shield would have been displayed within their home or used in parades or special occasions, such as tournaments.

THREE: *ARMS*

*“All furnish’d, all in arms;
All plum’d like estridges that wing the wind;
Bating like eagles having lately bath’d;
Glittering in golden coats like images;
As full of spirit as the month of May;
As glorious as the sun at midsummer.”*
William Shakespeare, *Henry IV*.

Family Honour

The three panels under discussion are depictions of battle in the 15th century, and so naturally the armour and weapons of the day are featured heavily. That was (and still is) after all, one of the great pleasures of viewing these pictures, to see all the details of the *“scenes of soldiers of the period on horseback”* as Vasari put it. Arms and armour were the common currency of daily life in Renaissance Florence, and from inventories we find that the *palazzi* of the wealthy contained large amounts of both, for the personal use of the owners of the *palazzi*, and for their retainers. Arms were also an expression of family pride and honour, and the heraldry of these powerful families (and individuals within them) was prominently displayed upon them, both within the home, and outside, when the owners used them in parades, tournaments and war. Shields (real or as artistic depictions, Figs 17 and 35) decorated the rooms of these *palazzi*, while on the exteriors stone shields were mounted, originally brightly painted, silvered and gilded, to leave the general public in no doubt as to who lived within (Figs 15, 43 and 77). The Medici inventories taken over the course of the 15th Century show a



Fig 36. VARIOUS MASTERS (see text P.72). The 'Avant' armour, Milan, comprehensively mid 15th Century. Steel, leather, textiles. Photo © Glasgow Museums.

steadily growing quantity of arms and armour owned by the family, and by the time of the death of Lorenzo *Il Magnifico*, the *palazzo* designed by Michelozzo (Fig 15) was full of fine armour and weapons, not confined to an armoury, but to be found in rooms throughout the entire building. The inventories describe pieces of extraordinary quality, and whilst the finest examples of both arms and armour were also collectors' items, we should not fall into the trap of thinking that these pieces were only used for tournaments, parade, or to be admired displayed in an opulent *palazzo*: for the professional warrior, going to war was his whole *raison d'être*, and precisely when he should don his finest armour and carry his best weapons, all made by the highly-specialised artisans of the Guilds of Armourers and Swordsmiths.

The Arms Industry

Florence liked to style herself as David to Milan's Goliath, but it was the Florentines' bad luck that at the time of the Battle of San Romano this particular Goliath was the biggest producer and exporter of arms and armour in the world, which made equipping Milan's armies with the best munitions very easy. From the earliest times, this "*old enemy*" of Florence had been a centre for the production of arms; the great Medieval and Renaissance arms industry of Milan was a continuation of an ancient iron and steel-working tradition dating back past the days of the Romans to the Celtic swordsmiths and mail makers of the 1st Millenium BC. The Via Spadari (the Street of the Swordsmiths) is first documented in 1066, and by the 14th Century, there were over one hundred mail makers working in the city (Fig 45). By the time plate armour had fully developed at the end of the 14th Century, Lombard armour was justly famous. In 1378 the merchant Francesco di Marco Datini, a native of Prato and dealer in armour and weapons wrote: "*Milan is a fine city, and at the head of our trade*". In the 15th Century, we find the names of armourers and swordsmiths in the documents of all

Pages 71-96 are not available in this preview.



Fig 49. PAOLO UCCELLO Panel traditionally known as *The Battle of San Romano (the intervention of Michelotto Attendolo)* and dated to about 1438-40 (detail). Egg tempera on panel. Louvre, Paris. © 2013. Photo Scala, Florence.

FOUR: *FAME*

“There is no greater pain than to remember the happy time in misery...”

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*.
Inferno, Canto V.

Realistic Details

A lot of ink has been spilt about whether the ‘San Romano’ panels are a realistic depiction of warriors in battle, and even whether San Romano itself was much of a battle, or just a small skirmish with no real casualties suffered by either side: more a vast chivalric tournament than warfare.

This is nonsense. Tolentino was seeking a decisive victory for the Medici regime, San Romano was both decisive and bloody, and won at no small risk to Tolentino himself. Are these panels a realistic depiction of warriors and battle? Certainly: we have already seen that apart from Paolo’s apparently intentional misalignment of the mail worn by the warriors, and his reluctance to let mail, and horse armour and caparisons interfere with his composition, he included many accurate details of contemporary arms and armour. So much so in fact, that the panels themselves assist us in the study of arms and armour, always allowing for the prism of curvature and volume through which Paolo regarded armour and weapons. He was, after all, living amongst armourers when he left Ghiberti’s studio, so he would have seen the products of the Armourers and Swordsmiths all around him on a daily basis.

I have already spoken about the evolution of armour, and a nice touch in the Paris panel is the inclusion of an obsolete piece of



Fig. 50. MASTER 'P' Breastplate. Milan, circa 1400. Ex-collection RT Gwynn. Photo: author. This breastplate was originally extended by plates riveted on either side under the arms. The crossbowman in Fig. 48 is wearing a breastplate just like this, incorporated into an up to date cuirass by the addition of an outer breast and fauld. The four staples in front of the right armpit were for mounting a lance rest.

equipment that has been brought up to date. There is a crossbowman standing amongst the static horsemen on the right of the panel (Fig. 49), and he is getting ready to use the hook attached to his belt to span his weapon. This in itself is a nice detail, but strangely for an infantryman, his breastplate has the staples on it which would have been used to mount the rest for a lance, a weapon only used by mounted troops. Closer inspection shows that the breastplate also has a very old-fashioned, 'V'-shaped stop rib riveted on at the neck: this is a very old breastplate like the one in Fig. 50, which has been 'recycled' for a foot soldier.

Sallets and Mazzocchi

Apart from being used by Commanders, these open helmets were also in widespread use by lighter cavalry and infantry. An interesting feature on some of the sallets in the London/Florence painting is that they have hinged nasals fixed to their brows (Figs 30, 32, 51 and 52). There is only one Italian sallet which survives complete with its nasal (in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), but various sallets do survive with groups of rivet holes on their brows, which can only have been intended to attach this type of face defence. I know of no other depictions of these curious nasals in Florentine art of this period, the only other examples being two helmets (a sallet and a skull-cap, or *cervelliera*) in two separate canvasses of the 'Saint Ursula' cycle by the Venetian artist Vittore Carpaccio, painted in 1490 and 1493.

They are an inelegant (if effective) solution to the problem of protecting the face against a slashing blow, and even if they were applied at the time the helmet was made, rather than being applied later, they still have the feel of an afterthought. Fig 51 shows a sallet from the Wallace Collection with a reconstruction by the author of the nasal based on the example in New York. From the lack of corresponding evidence from other Tuscan art, it is very difficult to know exactly how widespread their use was, but I would suspect



Fig 51. ANONYMOUS Sallet, Italian, circa 1430-40. Steel. Wallace Collection, London. © By kind permission of the Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.
The nasal is a reconstruction by the author.

that they were removed from sallets at the end of the century, as firearms became more widespread, and the infantry that used them - arquebusiers - needed more open helmets. Many sallets had the area around the face cut back at this time. Paolo shows these helmets from various angles (Figs 52 and 54), but the nasals are always shown as being far more curved than the New York example. As



Fig 52. PAOLO UCCELLO Panel traditionally known as *The Battle of San Romano* and dated to about 1438-40. Egg tempera with walnut oil and linseed oil on poplar. National Gallery, London. © 2013. Copyright The National Gallery, London/Scala, Florence. Detail showing the trumpeters of Tolentino's company, who wear sallets (one fitted with a hinged nasal).

with the forms of the armour, one gets the impression that Paolo is exaggerating curvature to enhance the movement and volume of his figures.

Some of the sallets in the panels are adorned with *mazzocchi* (Figs 49, 53, 54 and 59). These were light wicker frameworks covered with parti-coloured cloth, and their use was purely ornamental, rather than having any defensive value. Paolo made studies of them from many different angles. Some soldiers decorated their helmets by simply tying colourful scarves around them (Fig 54).



Fig 59. PAOLO UCCELLO Panel traditionally known as *The Battle of San Romano* and dated to about 1438-40. Egg tempera with walnut oil and linseed oil on poplar. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. © 2013. Photo Scala, Florence - courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali.

Detail showing a Florentine man-at-arms using a warhammer of the kind shown in Fig 58. It is a moment of extreme tension: the warrior is fully extended upwards in his stirrups, and all the tension is about to be released as his arm is brought down, and he strikes the *Duchesco* rider in front of him on the skull of the helmet. The *Duchesco* is identifiable from the black and white chequered *mazzocco* on his crimson velvet-covered sallet.

Pages 104-172 are not available in this preview.