



The Ospedale degli Innocenti, the hospital for abandoned children in Renaissance Florence, is more than an aesthetically beautiful building. It is a milestone institution of Italian hospitality and Christian love.

Protecting the Innocents

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The Ospedale degli Innocenti, one of the most famous buildings in Florence, demonstrates the hospitality toward orphaned children in fifteenth-century Italy. This foundling hospital is named in memory of “the Innocents,” the children of Bethlehem massacred by King Herod when he had been tricked by the wise men (Matthew 2:16-18). It is on the not-to-be-missed list for tourists to Florence because the portico is one of the first works of Renaissance architecture.

Filippo Brunelleschi, creator of the dome on the Florentine Cathedral, or Duomo, designed the structure on a modular, geometric system using the square and the circle. This style would be replicated in palace architecture commissioned by the Medici and the Rucellai families, among others. For the triangular areas between the arches, sculptor Andrea della Robbia fashioned beautiful medallions with glazed terracotta reliefs depicting swaddled infants.

The initial funding for the hospital came from a charitable bequest made by the philanthropist Francesco di Marco Datini, from the nearby town of Prato. Datini entrusted one thousand florins to the Arte della Seta (the silk guild) in 1419, deliberately selecting the civic guild instead of a church or religious order. The guild officers were good stewards of the donation and raised thousands of florins for the Innocenti. They supervised the construction of the building and administration of the hospital. The Innocenti opened in 1445 and admitted sixty-two infants.¹

Unlike other Florentine hospitals that accepted some children along with the sick and poor, the Innocenti was totally devoted to newborns and foundlings from the countryside as well as the city. Its construction demonstrated the city’s commitment to the welfare of children who were abandoned by their parents for a variety of reasons, including war, high grain prices, destitution, or illness. Females were abandoned more frequently because their poor parents could not afford a dowry.

Although most Western art history courses consider the structure of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, a thorough study of its civic function was neglected until Philip Gavitt’s *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence* (1990). Gavitt investigates unpublished hospital documents, wills, private account books, and municipal legislation. He considers these newly discov-

ered archival documents in light of humanist writings of the day – Leon Battista Alberti’s *Della famiglia* (1435-1444) and Matteo Palmieri’s *Della vita civile* (1429). He concludes that the children in the Innocenti were not victims of brutality and abandoned knowingly by their parents. Even if the “child-centered culture” he describes is somewhat sentimental, he refutes the theory that childhood as a social institution did not develop until the eighteenth century among the nobility and bourgeoisie.²

The care of the children required a large and varied staff that included a prior, prioress, chaplains, servants, doorkeepers, cooks, doctors, accountants, lawyers, notaries, and wet nurses. Also involved were *commessi*, or married couples, who vowed to serve the institution and its children for life and to transfer their property to it.

Too often when art historians study a painting, sculpture, or building for its aesthetic value, we neglect to consider its cultural function. But the Ospedale degli Innocenti does not let us off the hook: it is truly a milestone institution of Italian hospitality and Christian love. Today, as a preschool day care center, it continues to serve the youngest Florentine citizens.

NOTES

1 All factual information on the Ospedale degli Innocenti is from Philip Gavitt, *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence: The Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410-1536* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1990).

2 Julius Kirshner, Review of *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence: The Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410-1536* by Philip Gavitt, in *Italica*, 69:4 (Winter, 1992), 534.



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