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**Interpreting the biblical story of Peter's miraculous healings in the streets of Jerusalem, Masaccio projects the Apostle's healing ministry onto his culture and into a fifteenth-century Florentine alley.**

*Masaccio (1401-1428). PETER HEALING WITH HIS SHADOW, 1425-28. Fresco, 7'7" x 5'4". Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

# Peter's Shadow

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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**M**asaccio is sometimes called the founder of Renaissance painting, for during his short life of only twenty-seven years his innovative art moved the entire city of Florence into a rebirth of classical culture. He used one-point linear perspective to depict a realistic sense of depth on a two-dimensional wall or panel. His figures were three dimensional with individual personalities evident through their facial features, gestures, and emotions.

Masaccio worked on the Brancacci family chapel alongside Masolino (c. 1383–1435?), who may have been his teacher. Pietro Brancacci (d. 1366/7) had founded the chapel, but it was owned by his nephew Felice Brancacci when the two artists began painting a cycle of biblical stories about Peter on its walls. This iconographic program of the chapel frescos may be in honor of the founding father's patron saint.

Masaccio and Masolino worked separately on the fresco scenes but attribution issues remain. Both artists did major rectangular scenes on the side walls and smaller, vertical panels on the center wall of the chapel. Because Masolino was called to work in Hungary and Masaccio to Pisa before the decorations were completed, Filippino Lippi finished the fresco cycle decades later, in the early 1480s.

When the chapel was restored in the 1980s and the grime was removed from its frescos, colors reminiscent of Giotto (d. 1337) were revealed. Masaccio and Masolino respected the fourteenth-century master and his ability to produce beautiful fresco cycles in Padua and Assisi. Renaissance artists felt tradition and method were very important, so they respected and admired the work of their predecessors. Thus it was that Michelangelo came to the Brancacci chapel to study the manner in which Masaccio painted gesture, drapery, and lifelike figures in motion.<sup>†</sup>

*Peter Healing with His Shadow* depicts a very rare subject in the history of art. Perhaps it is so unusual because prior to Masaccio's knowledge of light, depth, and perspective depicting shadows was not possible. Now that cast shadows could be painted and the program was from the life of Peter, it seemed natural to include this healing miracle. The composition is vertical because this image decorates the left-side wall by the cove for the chapel organ.

The event depicted in this fresco is based loosely on a summary in Acts 5:12-16 of Peter's miraculous healings in the streets of Jerusalem:

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles...so that [the people] even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

The artist, however, projects the story into a fifteenth-century Florentine alley. On the left side of the painting we can see the rusticated walls and overhanging back rooms of a Renaissance palazzo.

As Peter walks toward the two lame men on the side of the street, he does not seem to notice them. Nevertheless, the power of Peter's presence heals the men as his shadow is cast over them. The erect and almost regal body position and facial expression of the older man is a stark contrast to the younger kneeling man who has lost the use of his legs entirely and lies across the dirty alleyway. Some art historians believe the younger man may be a self-portrait of the artist. We know little about the personal life of Masaccio, but if the artist is depicting himself through this younger man's illness and weakness, we may assume that this is a sign of his modesty in respect to painting the acts of the Apostle Peter, the first Bishop of Rome.

In antiquity illness was often a precursor to death. Weakened individuals might be shunned for fear of pollution or abandoned because they were unable to contribute to the community. Masaccio has created a compelling visual narrative of the healing power of the apostles. It continues to call viewers to care for one another's health through the community of the apostolic church.

#### **NOTE**

† In the Brancacci Chapel, Michelangelo much admired Masaccio's depiction of Jesus paying the temple tax (Matthew 17:24-27). In this most famous visual retelling of the story, Peter appears three times as an older, bearded man with heavy layered robes and a majestic stance. First, he stands at Christ's side as the tax collector arrives; then he bends over a lake and takes the coin from the fish's mouth; and in a third scene that was favored by Michelangelo, he gives the coin to the tax collector.

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**HEIDI J. HORNİK**

*is Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.*