Giorgio Vasari’s Celestial Utopia of Whimsy and Joy: Constellations, Zodiac Signs, and Grotesques

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This study elaborates on the decoration of the ceiling in the refectory of the former Monteoliveto monastery in Naples, today part of the church of Sant’Anna dei Lombardi. It consists of three parts: an explanation of the ceiling design with its geometrical configurations of circles, octagons, hexagons, ovals, and squares; an iconographical analysis solely focusing on the ceiling decoration, which consists of grotesques, constellations, and zodiac signs; and a discussion of some of the literary and visual sources employed in the decoration. The Florentine Mannerist painter Giorgio Vasari, aided by several assistants, renovated and painted the ceilings between 1544 and 1545. Don Giammateo d’Anversa, the Abbot General of the Monteolivetan Order in Naples, composed the iconographical program with the assistance of insightful suggestions from the Florentine Monteolivetan prior Don Miniato Pitti, who was Vasari’s patron and friend as well. This oversight inspired Vasari to paint a celestial utopia of hilarity and whimsicality on the Neapolitan ceiling, thus leavening the other imagery, which combined both religious and secular representations of moral virtues and divine laws.

Keywords: constellations, zodiac signs, grotesques, Neoplatonism, harmony of the spheres, refectory, geometrical configurations, celestial utopia, whimsicality, and laughter

Introduction

In 1544, Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), a Florentine Mannerist painter, received a contract from the Monteolivetan Order of Naples to decorate the ceiling of the refectory of their monastery dedicated to Our Lady of Monteoliveto (Santa Maria di Monteoliveto, now called Sant’Anna dei Lombardi (see Figure 1) (Frey, 1923; Frede, 1967; Celano, 1952). ¹ The commission originated from the priors Don Miniato Pitti of Florence and Don Ippolito of Milan, both members of the Olivetan Order (Masetti, 1974),² and guests of Don Giammateo d’Anversa, Abbot General of the Monteolivetan Order in Naples. They convinced the Neapolitan abbot to sponsor Vasari to modernize the refectory (cenacolo), originally built during the reign of King Alfonso I of Portugal (1109-1185).

¹ See Frey, 1923, pp. 135-137, and Ricordo 145 and II, pp. 861-62, for documentation on the commission. In 1408, Guarello Origlia, from the Durazzeschi legacy, had arranged with the abbot of the Olivetan Order for the donation of a convent and a church in honor of the Blessed Virgin of Monteoliveto to be located in Ampurro, a region with rich vegetable gardens. See Frede, 1967, p. 516. In 1412, Pope Boniface IX allowed the construction of the church of Santa Maria di Monteoliveto (p. 484). In 1581, the name was changed to Sant’ Anna dei Lombardi. See Celano, 1952, p. 956.
² Masetti questions how Vasari obtained the Neapolitan commission through Don Miniato Pitti.
In his *Notizie del bello dell’ antico e del curioso della città di Napoli*, the humanist and an religious historian, Carlo Celano (1623-1693) explained how Abbot Chioccia of the Monteolivetan Order was the supervisor in charge of overseeing the renovation of the refectory while Vasari and his assistants were assigned to paint and embellish the structure of the Gothic ceiling (Celano, 1952). In his autobiography, Vasari clearly described the commission of the refectory.

When I arrived I felt inclined to refuse the work, as the building is Gothic, low and dark, so that I feared the work could bring me little credit, considering it hopeless without a great profusion of ornament. As numerous figures would confuse the spectator, I decided to cover the vaulting with stucco, and get rid of the old-fashioned awkward sections by making rich compartments in the modern style. I was able to carve my squares, ovals and octagons. This stucco-work was
The first in the modern style to be made in Naples. The vaulting was divided into three parts: one for Faith, the second for Religion and the third for Eternity. Each of these is accompanied by eight Virtues, to show the monks eating there what is required of them. I enriched the spaces of the vaulting with grotesques, forming a framework for the forty-eight celestial images. Having thus improved the proportions of the refectory, I did six oil paintings, three of each at the end of the room. (Frey, 1923, pp. 135-137, 861-862)³

The Neapolitan Monteoliveto iconographical program was mostly composed by Don Miniato Pitti, who assisted Vasari in later commissions dealing with cosmological imagery (Rosen, 2003, 2009; Vasari, 1973; Bettarini & Barocchi, 1996-1999).⁴ At the entrance of the refectory, there is a small fresco painting with the coat of arms of the Monteoliveto Order, composed of a golden cartouche containing an emblem of the order. The emblematic design consists of three golden mountains forming a triangle, the red cross of the Benedictine Order placed on the highest mountain, and two olive branches projecting from the other two mountains (see Figure 2).

Two legends are associated with this imagery. One is related to Giovanni (Bernard) Tolomei (1272-1348), a professor of law and philosophy in Siena, who became blind and whose vision was miraculously restored by the appearance of Our Lady of Monteoliveto, who showed him “a ladder on which monks in white habits

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3 The correspondence between Vasari, Don Miniato, and Don Ippolito on this commission is extensive. See Frey, 1923, pp. 861-862.

ascended, helped by angels, and awaited by Jesus and Mary”.\(^5\) After this religious experience, Tolomei with two other Sienese friends—Francesco Patrizi (1275-1328), a noble senator, and Ambrogio di Nino Piccolomini (1287-1355), a noble merchant—formed a penitential hermitic confraternity outside of Siena in Monteoliveto in 1313, characterized by manual labor, prayer, and silence; hence, the creation of the Monteoliveto brotherhood (Bowksy, 1981).\(^6\) They adopted the “Rule of Saint Benedict” and with the assistance of the Benedictine Guido di Petromala (1306-1327), bishop of Arezzo, were granted permission in 1319 to form the new order, the Monteoliveto Order, and to wear the white monastic habit of the Benedictines. At this time, Tolomei officially acquired the name of Bernard (Jameson, 1892).

The second legend recounts that Our Lady of Monteoliveto appeared to the bishop of Arezzo around early 1300 along with the image of three mountains, showing a cross at the top of the mountain in the center and olive branches on the sides of the other two mountains. In the bishop’s vision, Our Lady of Monteoliveto placed her hands over the “Rule of Saint Benedict” and asked to follow her.\(^7\) The symbolism of the three mountains with olive branches is associated with three specific events in the life of Christ: His agony and passion in the garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives (Acts 1, pp. 9-12); his weeping over (flevit super illam) Jerusalem from Mount of Olives (Luke 19, p. 41); and his ascension to heaven from the Mount of Olives (Luke 24). The placement of the cross at the top of one of these mountains alludes to Christ’s crucifixion and victorious resurrection.

The structure of the ceiling in the Neapolitan refectory consisted of a groined vault divided into three sections. Each area was covered in a horror vacuii manner, with a background of celestial images of grotesque (grotteschi) decorations, zodiac signs and constellations, and a foreground of populated religious personifications, including the theological and cardinal virtues and Gifts of the Holy Spirit—a collection of maniera conceits depicted with a Vasarian tour de force. What is unique about the decoration of this ceiling is the fusion of Christian imagery with ancient pagan motifs in a monastic refectory.

### Ceiling Geometrical Design

The complex geometrical configuration of the ceiling reveals the symbolic layers of meanings associated with both the physical and metaphysical realms. The overall design of the vaulted ceiling is composed of three large circles or wheels, containing geometrical patterns of ovals, octagons, hexagons, rectangles, squares, and triangles.

In the ceiling configuration, each large circle includes two inverted triangles forming a square. In the center of the circle, there is an octagon. Eight radii spring from the octagon, with four connecting diagonally to four ovals and four connecting horizontally to four rectangles.

In each section, at the center of the circle in the ceiling, there is a dominant religious personification associated with the Theological Virtues of Religion (Charity) above the altar, Eternity (Hope) in the center, and Faith at the entrance (see Figures 3, 4, and 5). These dominant religious images, set in the center of the octagonal shape in the center of the section, are in a pivotal position, creating a radius formed of a Greek cross and a Saint Andrew cross. Thus, these central religious personifications or theological virtues are surrounded

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by 12 personifications of virtues, arranged compositionally so as to create two types of crosses: Each of the three sets of virtues is contained in four rectangles arranged to form the shape of the first cross—a Greek cross—in which are depicted Charity, Silence, Science, Reflection, Justice, Courage, Liberality, Vigilance, Peace, Obedience, Modesty, and Abundance. The other three sets of virtues are placed in four oval shapes (ovati) that form the second cross—the Saint Andrew cross—featuring Poverty, Goodness, Concord, Instruction, Wisdom, Providence, Fortitude, Fear of God, Prudence, Chastity, Hope, and Patience. Located at the center of the intersections of these two crosses, each religious personification forms a rotating radius that, in turn, forms an imaginary wheel, a celestial rotation—a Trinitarian design.

*Figure 3.* Giorgio Vasari, Religion, ceiling det. Refectory (Old Sacristy), 1545. Sant’Anna dei Lombardi, Naples (Photo: Luciano e Marco Pedicini, Naples).
Figure 4. Giorgio Vasari, Eternity, ceiling det. Refectory (Old Sacristy), 1545. Sant’Anna dei Lombardi, Naples (Photo: Luciano e Marco Pedicini, Naples).
In addition, each circle is composed of four large concentric triangles that connect to the center, where an octagonal shape dominates. Each of these large triangles contains two radial ovals (ovati) and one central rectangle, framed at top by two small circles and below by two small hexagons. The smaller circles and hexagons contain constellations and zodiac signs, while their backgrounds are filled with grotesques. These small geometrical configurations add significance to the planetary rotation formed on the ceiling.

In painting, this ceiling Vasari was assisted by other painters, namely Giambattista (Bagnacavallo of Bologna), Gianpaolo Cungi, Giulio Manzoni, and Stefano Veltro. Later, Raffaello delle Colle joined the group in Naples in January 1545. In addition to these assistants, Vasari also employed Spanish artists living in Naples, including Gaspare Becena, Pedro Ruviale (Roviale), and Bizzera (Vita, 1938). Vasari’s close collaborator and dear friend Cristoforo Gherardi (1508-1556) was unable to assist as he had done at the previous Monteolivetan refectory of Saint Michael in Bologna in 1538 (Cheney, 1993; 2018). Although it is tempting to try to identify the participation of each assistant in the decorations, as was possible to do for the Monteoliveto Bolognese refectory with Gherardi and Vasari, this is problematic in the Monteolivetan Neapolitan commission. This is perhaps because there were too many assistants, of whom few were trained artists, plus Vasari’s tendency to touching up areas for aesthetic unity; also, the ceiling has undergone several restorations over time. Furthermore, the well-populated decoration of constellations, zodiac signs, and grotesques vary in quality and

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8 Cheney, 2018, for another collaboration between Gherardi and Vasari and the grotesque decorations in the walls.
style, making any attribution to a specific painter questionable. For example, in the large circles where Religion and Faith reside, the small circles around them containing some constellations and zodiac signs are decorated with green garlands or festoons, while some hexagons also containing constellations and zodiac signs are embellished with red-like color frames (compare Figures 3 and 5). In the large circle where Eternity resides, the color schema is reversed: The frames of the hexagons are a green color while the small circle frames are light red (see Figure 4).

Iconography of the Ceiling Decoration

The Constellations and Zodiac Signs

Vasari wrote in his autobiography that he had “enriched the spaces of the vaulting with grotesques, forming a framework for the 48 celestial images” (see Figure 1). These 48 celestial images contain planetary constellations and zodiac signs. When first examining the celestial images on the ceiling, it appears that Vasari displayed them haphazardly in each section. After careful scrutiny, though one observes that he/she has actually laid out a complex geometrical and symbolic program. First, three circles are formed in the ceiling; in the center of each, an octagon contains the theological virtues (Religion, Eternity, and Faith). Two, each circle contains a particular grouping of planetary constellations and zodiac signs. Three, the constellations and zodiac signs in each circle relate in meaning to the central figure. Four, the images in the three circles relate iconographically to the personifications of the virtue adjacent or opposite to them. Five, the cosmic celestial images in each circle (the small circles and hexagons) and the personifications of virtues in rectangles and ovati associate directly with the central figure in the octagon.

When viewing the Neapolitan ceiling and focusing on the first large circle, there are two small wheels in the section above the altar where Religion governs (see Figure 3). The first small wheel is created by the constellations and zodiac signs arranged in a clockwise movement in the circles, including the constellations of Perseus, Cygnus, Hercules, Crown Australis, Auriga (The Charioteer), Ophiuchus (The Great Hunter), Cassiopeia, and Cepheus. The second small wheel is formed by a hexagon, which also contain constellations in a clockwise movement, representing Tetum or Sagitta, Aquila (the Eagle), Lyra, Ursa major, Ursa minor, Anguis (Snake or Serpent), Hydra, and Draco (the Dragon). It is interesting to observe that no zodiac signs appear in this circle or section of the ceiling.

In the second large circle and central section of the ceiling, Eternity rules (see Figure 4). The two wheels are a combination of zodiac signs and constellations. The first small wheel consists of encircled constellations and zodiac signs in clockwise movement: the zodiac signs of Gemini, Leo, and Taurus; the constellations of Andromeda and Pegasus; and the zodiac signs of Aries, Virgo, and Scorpio. The second small wheel is also composed of hexagons and holds the zodiac signs of Capricorn, Cancer, and Sagittarius; the constellations of Equuleus (Little Horse), Delphinus, Triangle (Triangulum); and the zodiac signs of Libra and Aquarius. It is of note that the zodiac sign of Pisces does not appear in this central circle of the Neapolitan ceiling.

Faith administers the third large circle in the third section of the ceiling (see Figure 5). Two small wheels also surround this virtue. The first small wheel encircles clockwise the constellations of Cup (Crater), Canis minor, Crown Borealis, Centaurus, Argus, Orion, Canis major, and Lepus. The second small wheel contains hexagons, which include the constellations of the zodiac sign of Pisces, and the constellations of Ara, Pisces

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9 Vasari-Milanesi, VII, pp. 674-675.
Astrinus (Piscis Nothus), Eridanus, Corvus (Avis), Cetus, Lupus, and Boötes.

Thus, Vasari’s depiction of 48 celestial images in a compositional design of rotating wheels alludes to the Ptolemaic cosmological system (Goodwin, 1993). He visually implies the diurnal movement of the spheres as well as the definition of the spherical cosmos bound by fixed stars, which are catalogued in 48 constellations—12 zodiac signs, 21 northern constellations, and 15 southern constellations (Rosen, 1968-1973; Sesti, 1987; Keaton, 1991; Gettings, 1987; Lachièze-Rey and Luminet, 1998; Edwards, 1998; Condos, 1997; Hard, 1983). However, Vasari dispersed the constellations and zodiac signs throughout the ceiling in geometrical configurations of small circles and hexagons, but did not group them sequentially as planetary families or groups. Namely, these are the Perseus family (Perseus, Andromeda, Cassiopeia, Cetus, Cepheus, Pegasus, and Auriga), the Hercules family (Hercules, Sagitta, Aquila, Lyra, Cygnus, Hydra, Crater, Corvus, Ophiuchus, Serpens, Centaurus, Lupus, Corona Australis, and Ara), the Orion family (Orion, Canis Major, Canis Minor, Lepus, Monoceros), the Zodiac family (Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpius, Sagittarius, Capricornus, Aquarius, Pisces), and the Ursa Major family (Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, Draco, Canes Venatici, Boötes, and Corona Borealis). If he had organized them in their family groups, Vasari would not have included the constellations of Argus, Delphinus, Eridanus, and Triangle (Edwards, 1998; Caroti, 1983; Cheney, 1993).

Iconographically, Vasari connected these geometrical patterns with general symbolic meanings but not in a systematic manner. He was more concerned with the overall harmonious design when integrating the geometrical shapes on the ceiling due to the physical structure of the old ceiling being Gothic. The oval (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994), octagon (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994), and hexagon are forms associated with circular composition, while triangles and rectangles connect with the shape of the square (Cirlot, 1962; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). The circle alludes to the traditional notion of the infinite and the square with the finite, thus signifying the realm of the celestial or metaphysical with the circle, and the realm of nature or the physical with the square (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994; Cirlot, 1962).

From these geometrical designs—a circle and two crosses—and their symbolic connections through radial, axial, and diagonal movements, three significant manifestations are implied: (1) the dominant religious personifications in the center oversee and bestow four gifts; (2) these four gifts are represented in the personifications of the virtues in the rectangular shapes, creating a Greek cross; and (3) the personifications of the infinite and the finite, as seen in the representation of the Virtues, Religion, Eternity and Faith. See Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994, pp. 431-432, on Plato’s Timaeus; pp. 7-9, on Pliny the Elder, Pythagorean planet-tones.

11 See Cheney, 1993, pp. 48-126, I identify and discussed in detail Vasari’s visual sources from Hyginus’s Astronomica for the constellation and zodiac signs.

12 An ovoid shape usually associated with the symbolism of the circle or of the shape of the egg signifies the “see of spiritual life”. See Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994, p. 341 as Vasari depicted the virtues in the oval shape: Charity, Fortitude, Prudence, Hope and others on the ceiling.

13 A Christian symbol of eternal life or rebirth as seen depicted in the center of the large circles in the section of the ceiling with Religion, Eternity and Faith. See Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994, p. 711.

14 In Roman mythology, Jupiter was associated with a red oval shape while Saturn with a hexagonal shape, e.g., in the ceiling, the constellations of Triangle and Hercules, and the zodiac signs of Sagittarius and Pisces. These shapes, oval and hexagon, are fluctuations of a circular form. See https://imperiumadinfinitum.wordpress.com/2017/06/07/the-meaning-of-the-hexagon/ (accessed December 4, 2018).

15 See Edwards, 1973, pp. 292-293, the triangle and the rectangle partake of the symbolism of the square, which is a symbol of order and created universe, e.g., in the ceiling depiction of Justice and Vigilance.

16 See Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1994, pp. 429-430, for the complex traditional symbolism of the circle, cross, sphere, square, rectangles, and triangles.
virtues in the ovati, forming a Saint Andrew cross, are qualities required in order to obtain the four gifts granted by the dominant religious images, Religion, Eternity, and Faith. Hence, the circle is a symbol of “primordial unity with the Heavens” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994).

The complex symbolism of the crosses alludes to the Tree of Life (Cirlot, 1962; Cooper, 1987). The crosses represent the world axis, with the center of the axis relating to the center of the cosmos. The crosses function as the primary bridge between the celestial and earthly worlds. The Greek cross signifies the primordial direction for reaching the celestial world. The Saint Andrew cross represents the unity between the two worlds (Cirlot, 1962; Cooper, 1987). Hence, these crosses pave the way for faithful souls to achieve the Divine. The circular motion alludes to the wheel rotation of the universe; it is not by accident that the three wheels refer to the concept of the Trinity and God’s creation of the cosmos.

Mindful of these geometrical and programmatic schemes, it becomes clear how these virtues correlate and interrelate with each other in each section and with the overall program of the ceiling. In the overall design and iconography, Vasari created a macrocosm as well as, within each section, a microcosm of the Monteoliveto monastic aspiration of how to achieve the good life on Earth and eternal salvation in heaven (Trinkaus, 1986; Caroti, 1983).

The iconography of the program is based on ancient and Biblical references. The imagery of the grotesques, constellations, and zodiac signs has been prefigurations of physical and metaphysical realms from antiquity into Christianity. The theological and cardinal virtues and the virtues or Gifts of the Holy Spirit are connected with divine manifestations of grace in Christianity and the unchanging cyclical motion of the Heavens, representing the macrocosm, while the constellations and zodiac signs allude to the mutability of the cosmos. Their circular planetary rotation is annual and harmonious, representing the microcosm (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994). The fusion of these two cosmic realms makes this ceiling decoration extraordinary.

The Grotesques

In his vita, Vasari further explained the embellishment of the architectural design with the insertion of the grotesques: “[I] enriched the spaces of the vaulting with grotesques, forming a framework for the forty-eight celestial images” (see Figures 1, 3, 4, and 5). In his ricordo, Vasari also noted in March of 1545 that: “All the grotesques are finished ([Sono] finite tutte le grottesche)”. By the end of June 1545, the Neapolitan commission was complete. The grotteschi decorations formed the background for the personification of virtues in the rectangles and ovati and the “framework” for 24 circles and 24 hexagons. Although it appears that Vasari haphazardly painted the grotesques in the background of the compartments containing small circles and hexagons, visually there is a harmony and balance of design, as would be expected of a painter of Vasari’s reputation at this point in his career. He balanced the grotesque decoration by repeating similar whimsical designs in the background area of each pair of small circles that frame an oval or rectangular shape with the depiction of a virtue (see Figure 6). He repeated the same format of design in the second small circles with hexagons. However, the background of the grotesque design found in each area of the small circles differs from the grotesques found in the background area of the hexagon circles. The grotesque designs found in the backgrounds of these geometrical compartments are not repeated. Each pair of circles or hexagons differs throughout in the decoration of the grotesques (see Figures 3, 4, and 5).

17 Vasari-Milanesi, VII, pp. 674-75; and Vasari-Bettarini-Barocchi, VI, pp. 344-385.
The grotesques are depicted in non-geometrical areas, contrasting with the geometrical housing of the constellations and zodiac signs. The asymmetry of the grotesques is a counterpoint to the planetary imagery displayed in the circles and hexagons. The grotesques are designed to visually embrace and support the astral figures as well as the virtues on the ceiling. The whimsical overall design of the grotesques is a contrast to the harmonious balance of visible or implied geometrical configurations of the virtues and planetary forms depicted on the ceiling. In his celestial utopia, Vasari composed a virtual ascending movement from the human natural realm of chaos, humor, and joy captured in the grotesques, where there are no rules, to the somber metaphysical realm of the constellations and zodiac signs governed by cyclical laws. The movement is further lifted into the orderly celestial sphere of the virtues, both theological and cardinal, and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, where the divine rules abide. Hence, Vasari created a ceiling populated with a world of fantasy. This creative and imaginative realm is part of the artistic furor (furor artisticus) that Vasari reveals throughout his artistic career (Cheney, 2017).

The grotesque decorations consist of numerous classical and Italian Renaissance motifs composed of natural and artificial imagery, all emphasizing ambiguity—equilibrium or precariousness (Dacos, 1969; Steil, 1988; Acidini, 1999; Zamperini, 2007; Vezzosi, 2010; Conticelli & Luca, 2018; Acciarino, 2019). Hence, the unfolding formation of the wonders of the world is shown in images of birds, griffons, sphinxes, phoenix, swans, winged horses, serpents, dragons, plants, baskets of flowers and fruits, flowers, sheaves, garlands, creepers, jars, urns, vessels, shrubs, vines, evergreens, caducei, masks, trophies, rosettes, putti, twins, sowers,
fertility gods and goddesses, bows, shields, brackets, swords, lances, cups and chalices, nude caryatids and female forms, niches, lanterns, theatrical curtains, veils, jewels, and medals (see Figures 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11).
Figure 8. Giorgio Vasari, Ara, Lupus, and Grotesque Decoration, ceiling det. Refectory (Old Sacristy), 1545. Sant’Anna dei Lombardi, Naples (Photo: Luciano e Marco Pedicini, Naples).
Figure 9. Giorgio Vasari, Virgo, Libra, and Grotesque Decoration, ceiling det. Refectory (Old Sacristy), 1545. Sant’Anna dei Lombardi, Naples (Photo: Luciano e Marco Pedicini, Naples).
Figure 10. Giorgio Vasari, Pegasus, Delphinus, and Grotesque Decoration, ceiling det. Refectory (Old Sacristy), 1545. Sant’Anna dei Lombardi, Naples (Photo: Luciano e Marco Pedicini, Naples).
One of the major compositional differences between Vasari’s work in the Monteolivetan refectories in Bologna and Naples occurs with the programs and types of decorations. In the Bolognese San Michele in Bosco, the decoration appears in a frieze format along the walls—–with repetitive rectangular shapes containing ovati and vedute, whereas at Neapolitan Sant’Anna dei Lombardi the frescoed decoration is painted on the groined vault ceiling (compare Figures 12 and 1). Hence, the viewer’s perspective and visual approach to the imagery is different, moving from a horizontal and terrestrial participation in Bologna to a vertical and celestial vision in Naples. The Bolognese program visualizes the history of the Monteolivetan Order and apocalyptic themes, while the Neapolitan program focuses on a Christian and pagan utopia.
In summary, Vasari’s *invenzione capricciosa* (whimsical invention) includes the merging of religious imagery with secular representations, the interplay of the sacred with the profane, spirituality and reality, and the macrocosm versus the microcosm in the realm of a 16th century individual. Vasari’s refectories, decorated in the *maniera* style, represent a departure from the traditional depiction of *cenacoli* by including unusual religious themes in the Monteolivetan refectories: from the Old and the New Testaments or pagan and Christian (both refectories), apocalyptic revelations (Bolognese refectory) and the personifications of virtues (Neapolitan refectory), as well as by composing inventive secular themes, such as the astrological representations of zodiac signs and constellations (Neapolitan refectory), landscape (*vedute*) scenes (Bolognese refectory), and in particular, grotesque ornamentations (both refectories).

On the Neapolitan ceiling, the decoration of the grotesques functions to augment the intentionality of the iconographical program. The grotesques surround the astral constellations and zodiac signs. Their construct is unique, combining a variety of amusing, capricious, erratic, and incongruous forms from exotic flora and fauna, classical elements, and mythical figures to theatrical stage settings. The sketchy quality of their design contrasts with the highly defined compositions of the other designs on the ceiling (virtues, celestial figures, and constellations), but their vibrancy of color harmonizes with the rest of the ceiling composition. The grotesque area forms the background for the placement of the constellations and zodiac signs. Some of the grotesque imagery surrounds the constellations, while others engage in the geometrical design of the constellations and zodiac signs. While the constellations are confined within geometrical patterns, the grotesque decorations...
challenge that constriction in being designed as floating and freely-moving forms in the painted space. Their joyous depictions partake of the metaphysical connection with the astral constellations and celestial or divine imagery.

The grotesques’ playful actions and fanciful depiction provoke in the viewer a humorous response, a sense of delight, a Neoplatonic “gracious laughter” (Boyle, 1999, p. 712). Vasari composed on this ceiling a celestial sphere where there are several areas of divine and human interactions for the individual to experience. From the Christian perspective, there is the depiction of the Theological virtues (Religion, Eternity, and Faith), while the pagan view reflects the divinity of the constellations; thus, the human soul or psyche is guided by both metaphysical realms. The moral and cardinal virtues surrounding the theological virtues, along with the zodiac signs partaking of the constellations’ sphere, influence the individual’s ethical behavior and physical nature. Vasari’s metaphysical passage from the joy of artistic creativity to the invention of fantasy is expressed though a sense of delight (Cast, 2009).

Vasari, with the assistance of other artists, continued developing and embellishing the application of grotesques as an artistic capriccio and intellectual conceit in other sacred and secular painted programs in Arezzo, Cortona, Florence, Naples, and Rome from 1540 until his death in 1574.

Sources for Vasari’s Iconography

Scientific-Astronomical

The 16th century humanists and theologians perceive no contradiction between astrology and science. As part of divine law, God creates and rules the universe, which is controlled by heavenly bodies that, in turn, affect all earthly things as part of natural law. Scholars accepted as a scientific fact the notion of physical causality between the universe and the individual, between macrocosm and microcosm. In L’eta nuova, Eugenio Garin views Renaissance astrology as the study of moving spheres, between heaven and earth, between a person and the cosmos, where the powers of the here and now and beyond create these astral forms (Garin, 1969).

Vasari’s planetary images represent a maniera iconography and derive from at least four sources: scientific-astronomical, biblical, philosophical, and emblematic-visual. The assimilation of ancient and recent scientific developments, for example, derives from three sources: the writings of Manilius, Ptolemy, and Copernicus; the reprinted editions of Agrippa, De occulta philosophia (1530), and Angelus’ Astrolabium planum (1488); and newly printed books of the time on astrology and celestial maps or constellation configurations, including the Farnese Globe of Pope Paul III (25 CE), Albrecht Dürer’s Celestial Map for Emperor Maximilian (1515), Hyginus’s Astronomy (1517), and Luca Gauricus’s Tractatus astrologicus (1525).

Under the guidance of the Neapolitan abbot Don Giammateo and Florentine prior Don Miniato, Vasari undoubtedly visualized the astronomical visions of Michael Scotus (1175-1232), a medieval astronomer and physician in the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II (1197-1250), King of Sicily and Naples. Under the auspices of the King, Scotus received a commission to write several books, including Astronomia, an astrological text containing illustrations of the constellations, and Liber introductorius and Liber particularis, both of which are texts on astrology and astronomy that include images of the signs of the zodiac of the
From 1450 until 1550, Renaissance humanists, with their new interest in mythological correctness, became fascinated with ancient Greco-Roman and Arabic-Islamic astronomical manuscripts, particularly with the Aratean-Hyginian tradition of constellations. Astronomical manuscripts were often obtained from Sicily, especially Michael Scotus’s *Astronomia* (Lippincott, 2018; Hyginus, 1485; Lippincott, 2011). This text became the major source for the study of the constellations because it incorporated the classical and Arabic knowledge of the constellations (Savage-Smith, 1992). For artists, the visual interest in the revival of classical antiquity and its myths stimulated them to apply the classical canon in their imagery as well as to study and copy the imagery of the constellations depicted in the astronomical texts (Savage-Smith, 1992).

Vasari unveiled, in the geometric pattern of small circles and hexagons, the Aratean-Hyginian constellations as instruments of the planetary cosmos (see Figures 1, 3, 4, and 5) (Sesti, 1987). He painted a unified vision of a divine cosmos or a celestial utopia on his Neapolitan ceiling as a manifestation of God’s will to the monks of the monastery through the intermediation of the celestial bodies and the personification of virtues.

Another significant astronomical source was Albrecht Dürer’s (1471-1528) *Celestial Map* (1515). With the assistance of Austrian cartographer Johannes Stabius (1450-1522) and German astronomer Conrad Heinfogel (1450-1517), Dürer, a German Renaissance artist and engraver, scientifically reproduced a celestial map containing *Imagines coeli septentrionales*, the northern star chart planisphere, and *Imagines coeli meridionales*, the southern star chart planisphere (see Figures 13 and 14). The accurate rendition of map derives from a careful study of the Arabic-Islamic globes, and includes both the northern and southern constellations and stars (Savage-Smith, 1992).

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18 For some of Michael Scotus’s writing, see Michael Scotus’s *Astronomia et Liber Particularis*, a copy is at the Bodleian Library in Oxford (Bibl. Bodl. MSS. Canon Misc. 555); and Michael Scotus’s *De Alchimia* (CXXV, pp. 88 et seq) at the Corpus Christi Chapel in Oxford. Michael Scotus’s *De Sphæra*, a translation of the Arabic work of Alpetrongi made in 1217, is at the Sorbonne in Paris (MSS. Paris, Ancien Fonds, 7399). Ackermann observed that the revived interest in astrology in Western Europe during the late Middle Ages is due to the introduction of Arab-Islamic philosophy and science into Sicily and Spain.

Figure 13. Albrecht Dürer, *The Northern Star Chart Planisphere*, 151, woodcut (Source: commons.wikimedia.org).
Vasari’s awareness of these scientific sources came not only from his contact with the theologians of the Monteolivetan Order (Don Miniato Pitti, Don Ippolito of Milan, and Don Giammateo d’Anversa) but also from interaction with his Florentine and Roman humanist friends (Giambattista Adriani, Pietro Aretino, Vincenzo Borghini, Annibale Caro, and Paolo Giovio) (Passignant, 2007, 2009; Carrera, 2018; Pierguidi, 2011; Cast, 2013; Cheney, 2007, 2012).

Biblical

As a Christian and a painter of Biblical themes, and assisted by the literary and spiritual guidance of the Monteolivetani monks, Vasari was enlightened about the visualization of the Biblical references required in the program. Modern commentaries by E. Walter Maunder in The Astronomy of the Bible assist in decoding some of the Biblical meanings in Vasari’s decorations. Maunder noted that the constellations were mapped out during the Mesopotamian era, circa 2700 BCE (Maunder, 2002; Pinces, 1902; Edwards, 1998).  

Historical evidence can be found in The Epic of Gilgamesh, which narrates cosmic myths in twelve tablets. In the 11th tablet of the

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20 Maunder, 2002, p. 176, discussed the polemic surrounding the influences for The Epic of Gilgamesh, proposing that Genesis is the major source.
Epic of Gilgamesh, the legend of the flood is connected with the 11th sign of the zodiac, Aquarius, a watery constellation. In Genesis, the story of the flood parallels the epic legend of the deluge.

In attempting to assess the earliest references to the constellations of the zodiac, Maunder suggested that ancient Jewish sages, like Solomon, Joseph, Jacob, Amos, and Isaiah, observed the stars and studied the structure of the universe. This can be seen in Solomon’s Book of Wisdom in the Apocrypha, for example, where Solomon utters:

For God Himself gave me an unerring knowledge of the things that are not known - the constitution of the world, and the operation of the elements; the beginning and end and the middle of times, the alternations of the solstices and the changes of seasons, the circuits of years and the positions of constellations of stars. (Maunder, 2002, p. 18)

And in the Book of Joseph, Joseph recalls his second dream:

Behold, I have dreamt a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon, and the eleven stars (constellation) made obesiance to me. (Maunder, 2002, p.180)

The presence of Orion as an astronomical phenomenon is mentioned four times in association with the Pleiades in the Bible, twice in the Book of Job, once in the prophecy of Amos, and once in the prophecy of Isaiah. The constellation of Orion is referred to in ancient Hebrew as the evening star of “the fool” (Maunder, 2002, p. 221). “For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light” (p. 222). And “Seek Him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night” (p. 228).

Furthermore, Maunder posited that in the first nine chapters of Genesis in the Old Testament, some of the constellations are mentioned, in particular, the six southern constellations, “which were seen during the nights of spring” (Maunder, 2002, pp. 157-158). The Bible mentions the great Ship, the Raven’s outstretched body (Aquila), and the Centaur offering an animal in the Altar (Ara) in a cloud of smoke (Milky Way). In the cloud, a bow is seen suggesting the bow of Sagittarius (The Archer). According to the Bible, when God set His covenant with Noah, He said: “I do set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between Me and the earth)” (Maunder, 2002, p. 158).

In the midnight constellations of spring, there are five constellations: Ophiuchus, the Serpent Holder, a scorpion on his heel, Hercules, the Kneeler, the Dragon (Draco), recalling the words spoken by God to the serpent in the garden of Eden: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; I shall bruise thy head and thou shall bruise his heel”. These references in the early chapters of Genesis relate to God’s promise of the Deliverer: [The] “seed of the woman” shall bruise the serpent’s head and the promise of the “Bow set in the cloud,” the pledge that the world should not again be destroyed by a flood” (Maunder, 2002, pp. 158-159).

In the midnight constellation of winter, two constellations are connected with Genesis: the constellations of the Virgin (Virgo) carrying a bright star in her head, and the water snake (Hydra), who stands at her feet. In the Book of Ezekiel, some of Ezekiel’s passages (8:1; 1:28) as well as in John’s Apocalypse (Revelations, 1:9-11), make reference to the river Chebar (the Hydra) and four living creatures (Ezekiel, 1L1-14 and 10:12, and Revelations, 6, pp. 1-8). The living creatures are the lion, the calf, the face of man, and the flying eagle, alluding to the four Evangelists, and to the constellations of Leo (the lion), Taurus (the bull or calf), Aquarius (a man), and Aquila (flying eagle) (Maunder, 2002). The humanist Monteolivetan monks, Don Giammateo d’Anversa and in particular Don Miniato Pitti, who composed the program, were knowledgeable about these
Biblical references to astronomy because of their monastic training and Christian religious traditions of incorporating planetary signs with Biblical imagery, as represented in the mosaic floor in the nave of the Otranto Cathedral in Puglia (Cheney, 2016).

**Neoplatonic**

For Vasari, the extraordinary trajectory of the sun’s ecliptic passage through the zodiac forming a ring of constellations each year as the Earth orbits the sun, reveals God’s divine power, as these cosmological associations portray the control of nature and art. Vasari, however, emphasized the difference between the realm of nature and the realm of art. The realm of nature is one of realism with nature, while the realm of art is of idealism; the realm of nature is actual, general and real, whereas the realm of art is artificial, selective, and superior to nature. The artist experiences nature, but creates art, as Vasari’s *celestial utopia* on the Neapolitan ceiling reveals his artistic sagacity. The Renaissance cyclical evolution connected with the Renaissance Neoplatonic theory of microcosm and macrocosm proclaims the myth of eternal life as visualized on the ceiling (Kaske & Clarke, 1989; Robb, 1968; Moore, 1982; Kristeller, 1964; Allen, 1984).

In his writings, the Renaissance Neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino epitomized the microcosm and macrocosm theory. His cosmological theory relies on the writings of classical philosophers, such as Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Aristotle. Most of all, Ficino was influenced by Plato’s theory of the four elements—air, fire, earth, and water—as astrological symbols in relationship to nature (*Timaeus*, 56-59). He wrote, for example:

> Every spirit, since it is naturally rather fiery, and light and volatile like air, is also like light, and therefore similar to colors and vocal airs and odors and movements of the soul. For that reason, spirit can be move quickly and formed through these things. (Ficino, 1576; Allen & Hawkins, 2001-2006; Walker, 1986, pp. 341-342; Kaske, 1986, pp. 372, 376; Thorndike, 1923-1958, p. 572; Bullard, 1990, pp. 687-708)\(^{21}\)

Incorporating Renaissance Neoplatonic allusions, Vasari created a unified vision of the universe on his ceiling where God manifests His mediation of the celestial bodies and the personifications of virtues (Nam, 1956).\(^{22}\) The heavenly bodies—constellations, zodiacal signs, and planetary symbols—in each section of the ceiling integrate with the meaning of divine intervention. These cosmological representations portray the control of the stars over Nature. The zodiacal signs and constellations allude to relationships in the universe and to cyclic and seasonal transformations—the wheel of life. The rotating movements of the heavenly bodies have the power to directly influence the course of events on Earth, including all human activities from affairs of the state to bodily health (Trottein, 1993). Vasari knew how to subordinate to the laws of Nature as well as to the laws of God.

**Emblematic and Visual**

During the 16th century, artists consulted emblematic and mythological manuals as a source for their visual conceits. This was probably another major source of influence for Vasari in conceptualizing the imagery in the Neapolitan ceiling. With a moral overtone, these manuals contain verbal and visual representations of virtues, vices, passions, and temperaments, revealing a Neoplatonic philosophy (Praz, 1947/1964; Boas, 1950; 21 Ficino also ranked the planets according to their degree of moisture, e.g., Mercury is the most, followed by Venus. 22 Fitting with Renaissance Neoplatonism, Vasari created a theological and cosmological analogy between God the Creator (God the Maker or God the Architect) and himself—an artist who creates, invents, and imitates because he is in *entoheos* (a Greek word for “filled with God”).
Russell, 1981). The most important of these are The Domus Aurea (The Golden House of Nero, 64 CE, see Figures 15 and 16), Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica* (1505), Andrea Alciato’s *Emblemata* (1531), Lelio Gregorio Giraldi’s *De Deis Gentium* (1548), Natale Conti’s *Mythologiae* (1551), Pierio Valeriano’s *Hieroglyphica* (1556), Paolo Giovio’s *Dialogo dell’Imprese Militari et Amorose* (1556), and Vincenzo Cartari’s *Imagini delli Dei de gl’Antichi* (1557) (Seznec, 1961; Praz, 1947/1964; Mulryan, 2012).

*Figure 15.* Domus Aurea (The Golden House of Nero), 64 CE, fresco ceiling det. Rome (Source: commons.wikimedia.org).

23 Russell defined the importance of Alciato’s book on Cinquecento art and literature: “(It) served as a manual to train readers in a particular approach to artistic artifacts. It taught them to participate actively in the moralizing of visual art, and it showed them how to fragment texts—mainly poetic or dramatic texts; it would appear—into short passages that they could summarize into titular paroemia”, p. 549.

24 When visiting the Domus Aurea in 1507, Nicoletto da Modena (1490-1569) carved his name on a wall and copied in engravings many of the grotesques, e.g., Victoria and Albert Museum in London, no. E.180-1885. His grotesque prints were soon published and circulated among artists and humanists.
In mingling the southern and northern constellations on the ceiling, Vasari appropriated Dürer’s planisphere without adhering to astronomical accuracy. He also adjusted his imagery to fit his artistic scheme. Following Don Miniato and the classical tradition on the harmony of the celestial motion and the sound of the stars, Vasari was emulating the Pythagorean notion of astral movements linked to musical tones as well as the Ptolemaic comparison of intervals in the musical tone system with the circular movements of the constellations and the zodiac signs. Hence, planets and stars move according to mathematical rules creating a musical harmony (musica universalis) or music of the spheres (see Figure 18) (Godwin, 1993; Seznec, 1961; Miller, 1968). While the grotesque decorations formed a visual chorus, a melody of vibrant colors and whimsical movements—a dance—that accompanies the sounds of the ancient stars—constellations and zodiac signs. Thus, Vasari was composing a visual musical utopia.
These emblematic and mythographic texts were compilations of antique mythology, Egyptian pictorial writing arbitrarily interpreted, Biblical motifs, and medieval Christian allegory, with all sorts of recondite meanings being assigned to human expressions and actions, to animals, plants, prescribed colors, and all objects natural and artificial which were their symbolic attributes. (Ripa, 1603, Introduction). They were illustrated with images derived from ancient and Medieval mythographies, hieroglyphs, and numismatic reproductions. This type of visual record contained traditional moral overtones deriving from ancient and medieval philosophical texts. These manuals, in turn, served as “recipe books” for 16th century humanists and artists, a kind of figurative encyclopedia or “dictionary-album for easy consultation when time is lacking to read text and reference in their entirety” (Ripa, 1603, p. 260; Praz, 1947/1964, pp. 289-296). Since these manuals were well-known to 16th century artists and literati, they freely borrowed or copied information directly from them without acknowledging the original source.

Figure 17. Franchinus Gaffurius, The Music of the Spheres (Practica musicae), 1496, engraving (Source: commons.wikimedia.org).
In his art and writings, Vasari appropriated visual and moral concepts from these manuals, manifesting his appreciation of emblematic manuals. The most significant influence in the visualization of the refectory’s iconography are the many decorative cycles in Italy, particularly in Florence, depicting constellations and zodiac signs, e.g., the exterior and pavement of San Miniato al Monte in Florence (1207), another Monteolivetan monastery (see Figure 18); the floor of the Baptistry of St. John in Florence (ninth to 11th centuries) containing the masterful palindrome engi rolor te sol cicloes el rolor inge (the sun runs in a circle without beginning or end); and Brunelleschi’s cupolas of the Old Sacristy in S. Lorenzo for the Medici family (1426) and Pazzi Chapel (1430s), containing the natal horoscope of the patrons (Seznec, 1961; Gandolfi, 2018; Dahl & Gauvin, 2000; Sesti, 1987). During his travels, Vasari studied as well the zodiac horologia in

25 For imagery outside of Florence, Vasari recalled Niccolo Mireto and Stefano di Ferrara’s Salone in the Palazzo della Ragione at Padua (1420); Cosimo Tura and Francesco Cossa’s Salone dei Mesi in Palazzo Schifanoia at Ferrara (1470s); Peruzzi’s and Agostino Chigi’s horoscope ceiling at the Villa Farnesina in Rome (1511); and Raphael’s planets in the Chigi Funerary Chapel at S. Maria del Popolo in Rome (1515).
Bergamo, Bologna, Cremona, Modena, Padua, and Venice (Bruton, 1979). Thus Vasari followed the conventional scheme in constructing the zodiacal portion of the ceiling, as illustrated in astrological manuscripts of the Renaissance and in mythographic texts of the 16th century, as well as in the artistic decoration of the Renaissance.

**Conclusion**

Vasari’s visual cosmic invention includes the merging of religious imagery with secular representations (Cheney, 2006; 2018). The constellations, zodiac signs, and planetary symbols in each section of the ceiling do not integrate with the personifications of virtue in any particular manner. These cosmological representations portray the influence of the stars on nature. The zodiac signs and constellations allude to relationships in the universe as well as to cyclical and seasonal transformations—the wheel of life—and the archetypes of the universe. The monks are guided by ancient and Biblical references (zodiac signs and constellations) and New Testament imagery (personifications of the theological and cardinal virtues and Gifts of the Holy Spirit) and will thus comprehend how to subordinate themselves to the divine laws.

In the Neapolitan ceiling, the grotesques produced a sense of laughter. This type of human joy provides for the individual another means of achieving spirituality. This grotesque imagery lifts with humor the mind and soul of the individual to a Ptolemaic sphere and a Neoplatonic realm, a Vasarian conceit of joy and musical delight. While the metaphysical levels of the constellations and zodiac signs guide human destiny, human whimsicality is raised to another realm, the realm of spiritual realm, and the realm of the soul. In the highest realm, the individual is imparted with grace and wisdom through the virtues. The individual spirit is guided by faith, religion, and hope, providing the believer (the monks eating in the refectory) with a bond with God’s universal cosmos.

Hence, Vasari created an unprecedented visual heavenly utopia in a Renaissance monastic refectory. He conceived an imaginary divine cosmos, where each geometrical shape and iconographical significance in the section of the ceiling is a microcosm of a macrocosm. In Christian terms, since eternal times, these astral forms are subordinated to the moral and ethical construction of God’s world. Vasari visualized the ancient conception of the universe for the Monteolivetan monks as a prefiguration of the New Testament, with zodiac signs, constellations, and grotesques to pave their way to a Christian life with joy and music. Thus, Vasari visualized a harmonious celestial utopia.

**References**


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26 In his house at Arezzo, Vasari conceived another type of planetary ceiling for his studio, the Chamber of Fortune.


