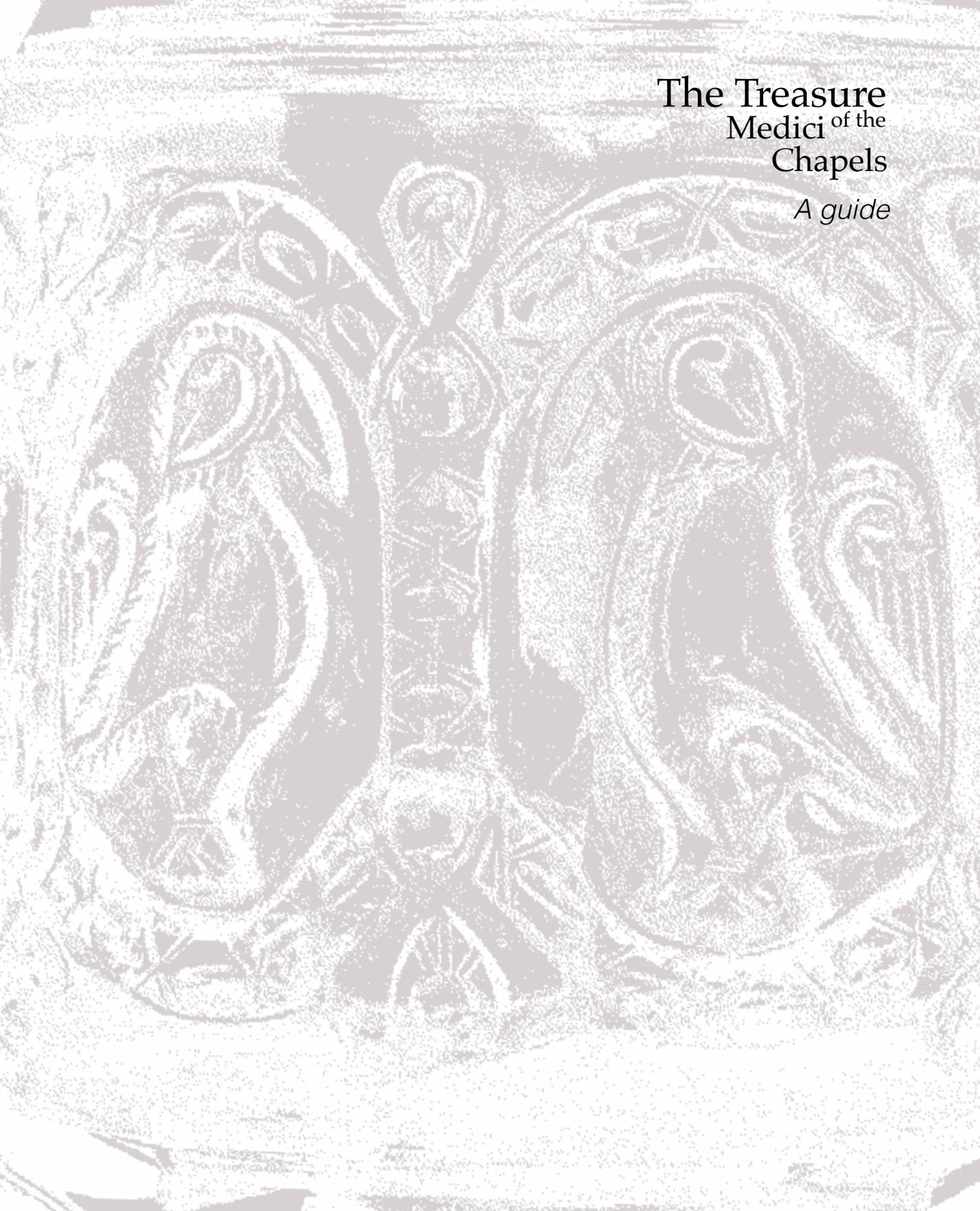


The Treasure  
Medici of the  
Chapels

*A guide*





Monica Bietti    Elisabetta Nardinocchi

# The Treasure Medici of the Chapels

## *A guide*

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“For if the dress of a father, or his ring, or anything he wore, be precious to his children, in proportion to the love they bore him, with how much more reason ought we to care for the bodies of those we love, which they wore far more closely and intimately than any clothing! For the body is not an extraneous ornament or aid, but a part of man’s very nature.”  
(Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Book I, 13, tr. Marcus Dods, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh)

The “Treasure of San Lorenzo” is one of the significant collections in the Museum of the Medici Chapels which is known primarily for Michelangelo’s New Sacristy – the last of the great master’s architectural and sculptural achievements in Florence, and for the Chapel of the Princes, the Medici family mausoleum clad in fine marbles and rare semiprecious stones and part of the Basilica of San Lorenzo.

The Treasure is also the most tangible bond with the Basilica from where it was moved for reasons related to its security, to allow it to be admired by a vaster public, and for “financial yield”. The agreement for the move was signed on 6 June 1945. Displaying these valuable and beautiful reliquaries in the Museum of the Medici Chapels, objects which, up to then, had only been shown on certain religious occasions and in two, landmark exhibitions (1933 and 1939) takes on a special meaning in relation to the date of the agreement, a little more than one month after the end of the war, and slightly less than one year after the liberation of Florence. That symbolic document also marks the birth of a new cultural climate. It was the first of many steps that led to the reopening of the city’s museums after the enormous tragedy of the Second World War.

The Medici family began collecting relics of saints and commissioning splendid jars, vases and containers made of rare and valuable materials: glass, rock crystal, enamel, and precious metals in the fifteenth century. And they donated these small masterpieces of sculpture and jewellers’ arts to the Basilica of San Lorenzo up to the eighteenth century.

This book tells the story of the Treasure of San Lorenzo from several standpoints, and it will acquaint Italian and foreign visitors with these unique objects whose significance may not be known to all. It covers the history of the reasons for displaying the reliquaries in a state museum and analyzes the different settings that were created and changed over the years. It delves into the roots of the veneration of relics and religious ties between the reliquaries and their contents, and the several patrons who augmented the original Medici collection and commissioned the remarkable vessels. Lastly, the book explains the reasons why the collection is the way we see it today: how the reliquaries were scattered, how and when they were moved and, why and how they were exchanged with others.

There are detailed descriptions of some of the masterpieces, along with a complete listing of all the reliquaries, as well as images of the items comprising the treasure, followed by a cross-referenced table that makes the book easy to read and consult. The brief, specific bibliography at the end can be a helpful tool for those who want to learn more about the reliquaries described in this book.

I am grateful to Maddalena Winspeare for her continued interest in the publication of the Italian and English editions of the book, and to Monica Bietti, the expert in charge of the Museum of the Medici Chapels and meticulous scholar who worked on this project with Elisabetta Nardinocchi. Together, they have produced a book that is easy to read, full of information and historical-artistic “news”. And, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Monsignor Marco Domenico Viola for his constant attention and care of the Basilica’s sacred heritage, with the hope that we may have further opportunities to share interests and goals.

*Paola D’Agostino*  
Director, Musei del Bargello

For a moment or two, I tried to identify with one of the many tourists who, coming from different cultural or religious backgrounds, is awed by the beauty of these objects yet, at the same time, is disconcerted by what is inside all of this splendour.

I can readily comprehend the effort one must make to understand, if not accept, the reasons that prompted the Church to conserve the relics, the remains of many saints humiliated by death, and to consider them a precious treasure.

Going beyond the abuses and excesses which were certainly not lacking and which, the Council of Nicaea in 787 censured aiming for a more appropriate and restrained veneration of the saints, there is another risk for the believer. The relic refers back to physicality, to the bodily dimension of the person, a corporeity which, since the first Easter – the fulcrum of the Christian faith – had already been redeemed and saved from its frailty and transience.

This is why Christianity cannot prescind from the sacredness of the body, which through baptism becomes the “temple of the Holy Ghost” (I Cor. 6:15–20), and thereby destined for the “resurrection of the flesh for life everlasting”.

Although the pagans built elaborate tombs for the deceased, they did not venerate them. Christians, however, from the very beginning honoured not only the bodies of their dead, but also the sepulchres – especially of the martyrs.

Without going as far as the exaggerated displays of the relics as had occurred in the past, I do believe that their presence is – especially today – a healthy provocation.

We are living in a culture that exalts care of the body, almost making it into an idol to modify, to stimulate beyond its natural limitations, reducing it to sensory experiences. A body we do not want to see marked by wrinkles of time, for an eternal youth and then quickly reduce it to ashes to scatter on a mountain or in the ocean according to a pantheist sensitivity. Death is being privatized, and expropriated from its place in memory: this is unacceptable in the Christian view of life.

On the other hand, our era has so little respect for the human body that it ignores the frailties of the old and the sick, and shows very little solidarity towards “the bodies” debilitated by poverty.

The relics, however, tell me that there is indeed a “place” for remembering the communion that ties us to those who have gone beyond this life. They remind us that we are not alone, but are helped by a multitude of friends who accompany us through time which, like a river flowing towards the sea, is guided and supported by its banks.

I must, however, add that the relics have no effect in and of themselves, they are not talismans. It is the prayer which accompanies their veneration that produces a gift. Venerating a relic – a saint – means venerating the mercy of God that was fulfilled in the life of a brother or sister.

The healthy materiality of Christianity, the only religion that has dared to put the human body into the mystery of God is the answer to the ancient and new Gnosticisms that reduce everything to pure spiritualism. By venerating the relics the believer undergoes a personal experience with the saint, an experience that is unique and often decisive for his – or her – life choices.

Lastly, I want to emphasize that the Church does recommend conserving and venerating saints’ remains without, however, making this a fundamental element of the faith.

This introduction certainly has no pretences of being exhaustive, its only aim is to add some food for reflection and thought to this artistic-historical guide.

Knowledge of Christian anthropology can convey the sense and meaning of the relics so that we do not trivialize this complex phenomenon with a contemptuous smile, or simply stare in embarrassed silence.

*Monsignor Marco Domenico Viola*  
Mitred Prior of the Basilica of San Lorenzo

## The Treasure of San Lorenzo in the Museum of the Medici Chapels

*Monica Bietti*

On 6 June 1945, Giovanni Poggi, Soprintendente alle Gallerie, in his position as the Ministry of Education's representative at the Opera Medicea Laurenziana, successfully concluded a project that involved many different organizations: the Basilica of San Lorenzo with the prior, Giovanni Rosselli; the Chapter of the Basilica; the Opera Medicea Laurenziana; the Ministry of Education; and the Gallerie Fiorentine. The agreement, that was long in the making, led to a document which allowed the possibility of "exhibiting the reliquaries which are most interesting from the artistic standpoint as well as other sacred objects belonging to the Basilica of San Lorenzo" in the Museum of the Medici Chapels. The museum was open to the public for many years and always drew countless visitors attracted by Michelangelo and the majesty of the Chapel of the Princes, an unequalled masterpiece of semiprecious stones.

On the one hand, this new entity was able to fulfil both conservation and exhibition needs allowing access to a rare and priceless treasure, and on the other it brought parts of the heritage which had been scattered at the time of the unification of Italy to the Opera Medicea Laurenziana that had been established in 1907. We can compare the Opera Medicea Laurenziana to a sort of "property

manager" the one who has to deal with leaky roofs, clogged gutters, common areas, relations with adjacent properties as well as major repairs and the best possible utilization of the property. From that time on, the "Opera" could count on the income from ticket sales for viewing the reliquaries displayed in the Museum of the Medici Chapels, in turn, those moneys made it possible to keep the museum open longer.

The story I am telling in this book starts at the beginning of the twentieth century and continues up to the present, with all the problems, decisions about the settings, and more thorough studies of this treasure with its immense religious, historical, artistic and cultural value.

Early in the twentieth century "the fine reliquaries donated by Clement VII" were in terrible condition", so cleaning and restorations were entrusted to the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, a decision which may have been partly motivated by a project Giovanni Poggi had in mind. After some incidents which had raised concerns about the protection of the art in the basilica, he must have deemed it essential to safeguard a fragile heritage of enormous historical, artistic, and monetary (because of the precious materials) value, fulfilling two needs which we today define as protection and promotion. This most probably led to the idea of displaying the Treasure of San Lorenzo (up to then kept in the cupboards of the chapel of Saints Cosmas and Damian) in locked cases in the Museum of the Medici Chapels, which is part of the basilica. The documents in the Opera Medicea Laurenziana archives reveal how long it took to accept this display hypothesis which, from the early 1910s finally began to take form around 1927. The difficulties originally mentioned by the prior, that is the papal bull of 1532 dictating precise rules for exhibiting the vases which Pope Clement VII had donated to the basilica, were only overcome after the decision was made to build an altar inside the Chapel of the Princes, restoring the religious character that the chapel had lost following the unification of Italy. The "two sacristies adjacent to the Chapel of the Princes" were selected for the exhibition and were fitted with new display cases designed by Giuseppe Castellucci, one of the period's most famous architects, and definitely the person who could combine the elegant and functional style needed for the display vitrines in that unique setting. Castellucci's plans (which are not in the archives of the Opera) were carried out and

completed by Guido Morozzi, who took over as the architect for the Soprintendenza and Opera in 1944.

From the surviving documents we learn of Poggi's personal involvement in the construction of the reliquary cabinets for the two sacristies which were completed and opened to the public one year apart in the late 1930s.

The official transfer document is dated 6 June 1945. Monsignor Giovanni Rosselli delivered the items to Giovanni Poggi with three basic conditions:

1. To return the reliquaries and other objects needed for religious services upon a simple request from the Chapter of the Basilica of San Lorenzo or from the Most Reverend Mitred Prior, at any time, as long as the caretaker of the Medici Chapels is given one day's notice.
2. Every year to equally divide the income from the admission tickets, minus expenses, between the Chapter of San Lorenzo and the Opera Medicea Laurenziana;
3. To allow the Chapter of San Lorenzo to hold the procession on the Sunday during the Octave of All Saints, the day on which, according to the ancient custom, the sacred relics are displayed.<sup>1</sup>

A document discovered during our current research describes the display criteria for the cases (figs. 1–2) which have survived more or less intact with just few modifications for conservation reasons as we shall explain below. In addition to the list attached to



Figs. 1–2 - The document describing the 1945 arrangement of the reliquaries in the display cases designed by Giuseppe Castellucci, Florence, archives of the Museum of the Medici Chapels

the document, there is also a diagram of the two sacristies showing the arrangement of the ninety-six reliquaries on the shelves. The “snapshot” of the setup we can deduce from these lists is complemented by instructions for the use of keys to each of the exhibition rooms – practically vaults – to protect this priceless treasure.

The ninety-six pieces were arranged in two rows. The oldest, part of the gift from Clement VII, were placed in the left sacristy (south side). The large vitrine contained Lorenzo the Magnificent's vases, some reliquaries donated by Clement VII and the crosier of Leo X; the small one held “one mitre and two infulae”. Opposite the entrance were vases and cases from various periods, nearly all were made of rock crystal, but some were also decorated with gilded figures and semiprecious stones forming a most striking and beautiful display. The case beneath the window held reliquaries with silver figures as well as some older glass vases that did not fit into the larger vitrine on the other side of the room.

The sacristy to the right (north side) was arranged at a later date. The large cabinet contained reliquaries dating from the second half of the sixteenth century, as well as semiprecious stone masterpieces and wooden shrines with painted and metal ornaments in a triumph of shapes and colours. Facing the entrance, there were pairs of glass and silver vases, as well as others made of semiprecious stones, all related to the grand dukes', and duchesses', devotions,





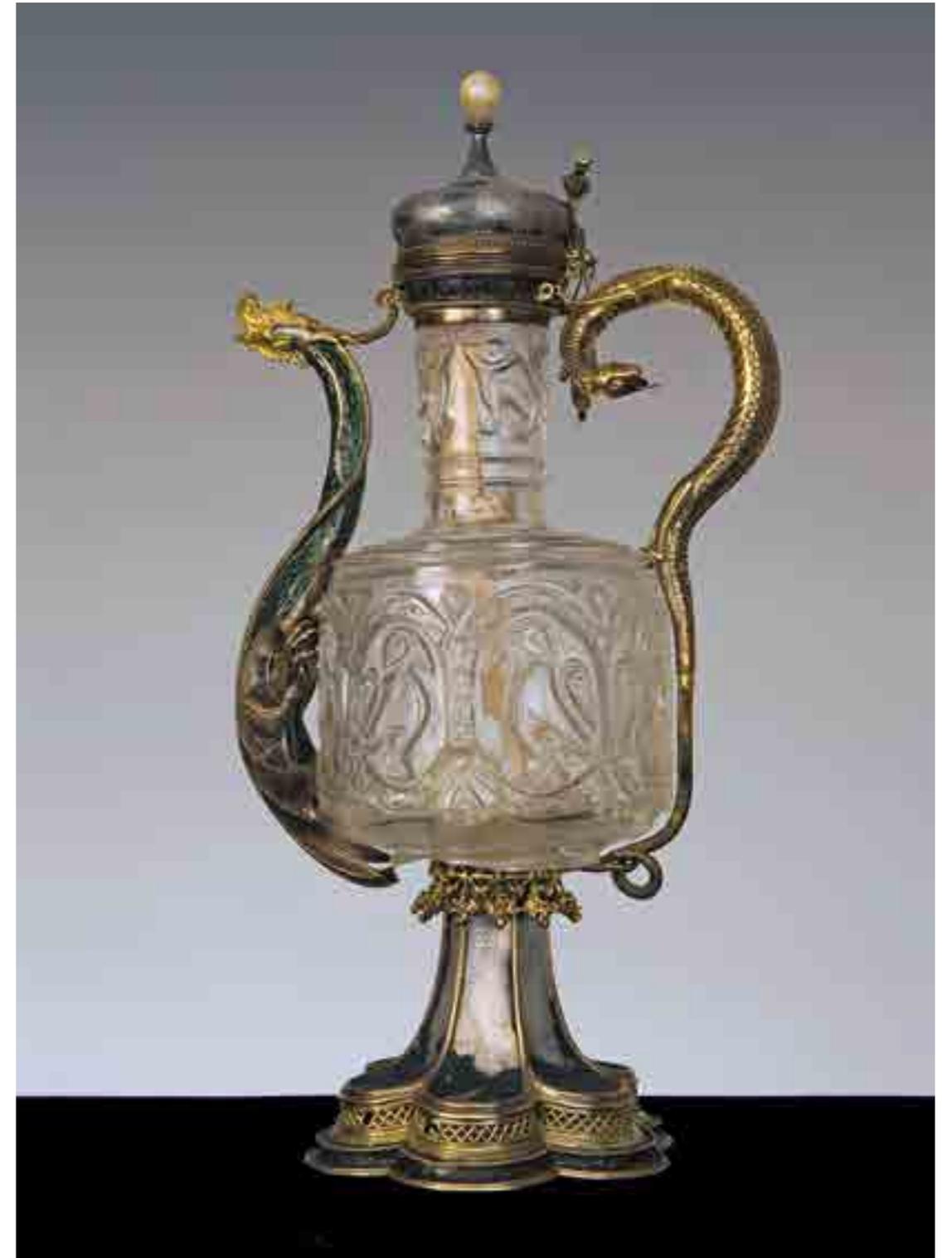
THE RELIQUARIES  
*Catalogue Entries*

Elisabetta Nardinocchi

### *Reliquary of Saint Erina*

Fatimid workshop (vase), Venetian workshop (mount)  
10<sup>th</sup> century (vase), third quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (mount)  
Carved rock crystal; repoussé, chased, gilded, and cast silver;  
translucent enamel; h. 29 cm  
Inv. 1945, no. 3 (cat. no. 1)

Originally, this reliquary, a gift to the basilica from Pope Clement VII in 1532, contained relics of Saint Mary Magdalen and Saint Christina. As in other cases, the reliquary was obtained from an antique rock crystal bottle from the Fatimid period (tenth century). The gilded and enamelled silver mount (that speaks to its original shape and function) is attributable to a Venetian workshop. As to the dragon- and serpent-shaped parts, given the technique and design, we cannot rule out the possibility that they are sixteenth-century additions. In fact, the dragon with its asymmetrical lines and dynamic torsion could not be explained in any other way.





### *Reliquary of Saint Anastasia*

Sassanid (?) art (vase), Florentine workshop (mount)  
10<sup>th</sup> century (vase), 1486–1492 (mount)  
Carved and engraved rock crystal; repoussé, chased, engraved,  
gilded and cast silver; opaque enamel; h. 37.3 cm  
Inv. 1945, no. 49 (cat. no. 2)



As evident from the engraving “LAV.R.MED” on the body of the vase, this rock crystal piece came from the treasure of Lorenzo the Magnificent. The inventory of Lorenzo’s assets drawn up at the time of his death in 1492, estimates its value at the considerable sum of eight hundred gold florins. It was transformed into a reliquary and donated to the Basilica of San Lorenzo by Pope Clement VII in 1532. Originally, it held the relics of the wonder-working Saints Cosmas and Damian who were particularly venerated by the Medici family. These were replaced with the relic of Saint Anastasia in 1785, when the transfer of some semiprecious stone vases to the Galleria degli Uffizi led to the rearrangement of holy relics which remained in the basilica. The origins of the elegant crystal jar are still uncertain, some scholars have attributed it to a tenth-century Sassanid workshop, and others to twelfth-century Sicilian craftsmen. However, the mount was definitely made by a Florentine artist: there are two punches, one of the Silk Guild which was used starting from 1486–1487, and a lower case Gothic letter “d” in a star-shaped field which has been traced to the workshop of the goldsmiths Deo and Domenico Dei.

