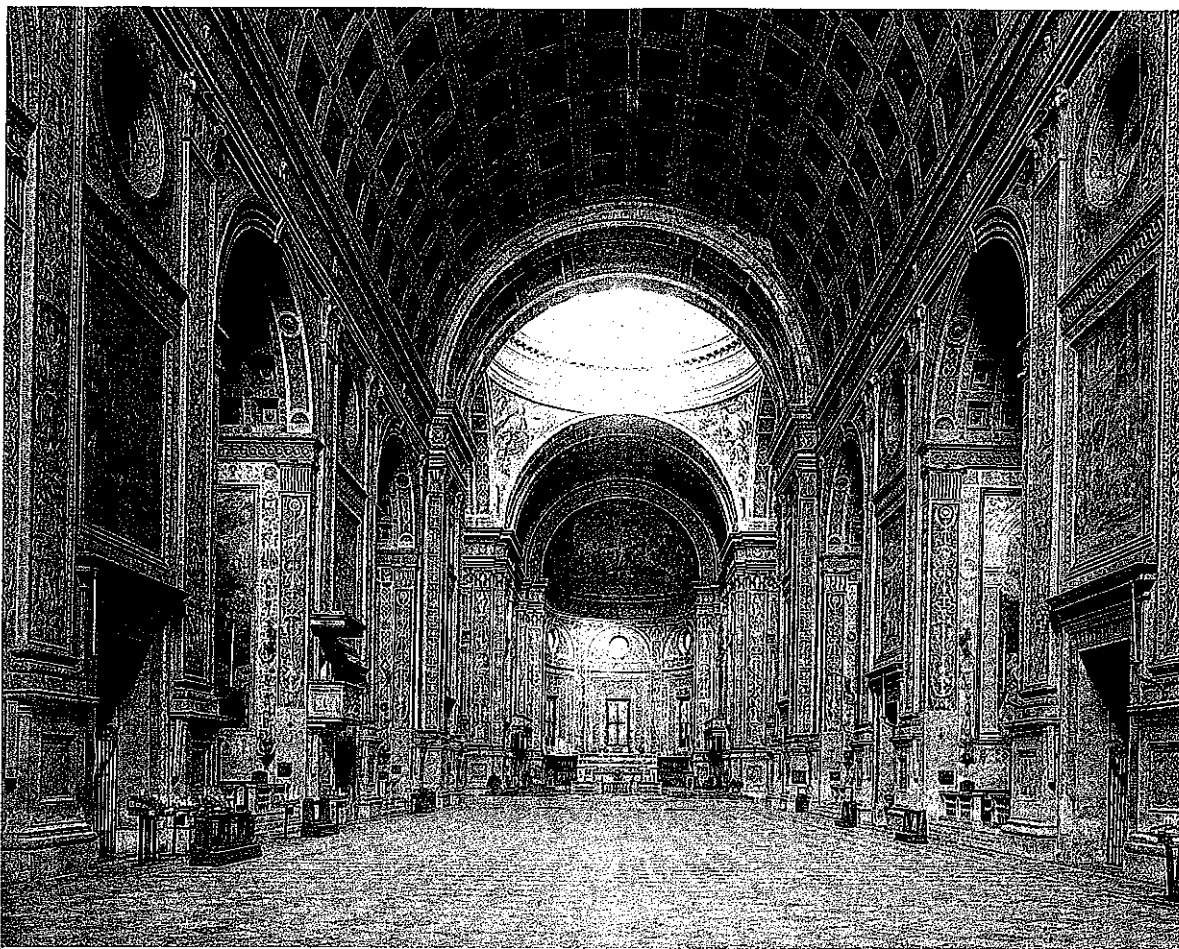


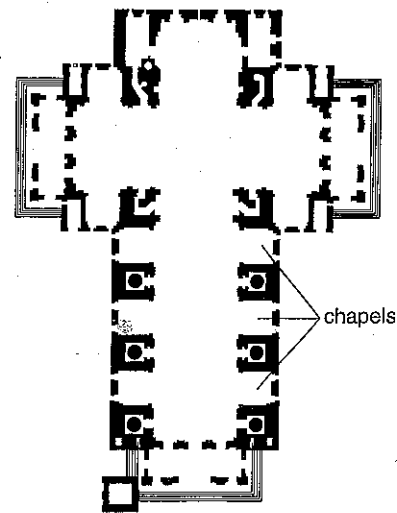


if you stand far off, they appear to be in relief. Actually they are in very low relief. The figures in the foreground look larger and those in the distance smaller, just as they do in reality."⁵

The youth of the great innovators of the Renaissance can sometimes astonish us. Donatello was twenty-five when he began work on *St. Mark*; Ghiberti was twenty-three when he won the competition for the baptistry doors. Our next artist, Masaccio, transformed the art of painting at age twenty-four with his fresco *Trinity with the Virgin, St. John the Evangelist, and Donors* (16.3) in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Masaccio does here for painting what Ghiberti did for sculpture in relief, using the new technique of linear perspective to construct a deep, convincing architectural space as a setting for his figures.

Masaccio has arranged the figures in a stable triangle that extends from the head of God the Father, who stands over the dead Christ, through the two donors who kneel to either side of the holy grouping and outside their sacred space. Triangular (or pyramidal) organization would remain a favorite device of Italian Renaissance artists. Earlier in this book, we noticed it in Raphael's *The Madonna of the Meadows* (see 4.16). Masaccio's composition is organized by a vanishing point located directly under the cross, at the midpoint of the ledge on which the donors kneel. Five feet above the floor, it is at the eye level of an average viewer. To visitors to the church, the painting thus is designed to present as convincing an illusion as possible that the sacred scene is really present before them.

Even the architectural setting that Masaccio has painted is in the new Renaissance style. We can see the sort of interior that inspired him in the church of Sant'Andrea in Mantua (16.4, 16.5), by the architect Leon Battista Alberti. In Chapter 5, we examined the rhythms of the facade of this church (see 5.28). The photograph here is taken looking up the nave toward the apse;



16.4 (top) Leon Battista Alberti. Interior of Sant'Andrea, Mantua. 1470-93.

16.5 (above) Plan of Sant'Andrea.

the light in the middle distance is entering through the dome that rises over the intersection of the transept and the nave.

Sant'Andrea was Alberti's last work. Construction began in 1472, the year of his death, and was completed two decades later. Though marred by some changes carried out during the 18th century, the interior still allows us to see how Alberti developed the themes and elements announced by his facade. As in the facade, the square, arch, and circle dominate. The aisles of the standard basilica plan have given way to a procession of square, barrel-vaulted chapels along a majestic barrel-vaulted nave. This sequence of barrel-vaulted spaces placed at right angles to each other carries through the theme announced in the entryway while also preparing us for the grander right-angle crossing of the transept. The roundel (circular area) set in the pediment of the facade and again over its doors is repeated on the walls of the nave between the chapels and culminates with the great circular opening of the dome. The vast interior space composed of geometric volumes harks back to Roman examples such as the Pantheon (see 13.13).

In addition to Christian themes, Renaissance artists turned to stories of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses for subject matter, as did many Renaissance poets. An example is *The Birth of Venus* (16.6), by Sandro Botticelli. Born in 1445, Botticelli belonged to the third generation of Renaissance artists. Early in his career, he had the great fortune to enjoy the patronage of the Medici, the ruling merchant family of Florence, who probably commissioned this painting. The Medici sponsored an Academy—a sort of discussion group—where humanist scholars and artists met to discuss

16.6 Sandro Botticelli. *The Birth of Venus*. c. 1480. Tempera on canvas, 6'7" × 9'2".
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

