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Few icons of the Renaissance are as recognizable as Brunelleschi’s cupola rising over Florence. On 19 August 1418, the citizens of Florence—the "Athens of Italy"—were informed of an open competition calling for proposals to complete the cupola over Santa Maria dei Fiore. Contestants had little more than five weeks to complete a proposal. There was, however, considerable reason to apply: besides the payment of 200 gold florins by the Opera del Duomo, the winner would be assured of immortality.

Built upon the ruins of Santa Reparata, Santa Maria dei Fiore was not only one of the largest churches in Christendom, but a monument to the civic pride of Florence. The commune of Florence stipulated that the church was to be "a more beautiful and honorable temple than any other in all of Tuscany." The problem of the dome was put off, but by the early fifteenth century, the Opera del Duomo could no longer avoid a dilemma: how was the church to be finished with what would have to be the highest and widest vault ever raised? Hence the competition announced in August 1418. The winner of the competition was Filippo Brunelleschi or "Pippo," a forty-one-year-old goldsmith, clock maker, and scholar of Dante from the San Giovanni quartiere of Florence. Living almost in the shadow of the great church, Brunelleschi would walk past the construction site every day of his life.

Ross King has reconstructed not only the mechanical problems and solutions presented by the cupola, but has also presented a vivid, colorful, and delightful portrait of medieval and Renaissance Florence. Here is his impressionistic depiction of the construction of the Duomo:

> Already at work on the building site, which sprawled through the heart of Florence, were scores of other craftsmen: carters, bricklayers, lead beaters, even cooks and men whose job it was to sell wine to the workers on their lunch breaks. From the piazza surrounding the cathedral the men could be seen carting bags of sand and lime, or else clambering about on the wooden scaffolds and wickerwork platforms that rose above the neighboring rooftops like a great, untidy bird’s nest. Nearby, a forge for repairing their tools belched clouds of black smoke into the sky,
and from dawn to dusk the air rang with the blows of the blacksmith's hammer and with the rumble of ox carts and the shouting of orders.

Before Brunelleschi proved his genius by designing and constructing the cupola (without any internal wooden supports as was universal at the time), he was involved in one the most famous competitions of the Renaissance: the competition to cast the bronze doors of the Baptistery of San Giovanni. Lorenzo Ghilberti was the eventual winner of that competition and King's description of the life-long rivalry between Ghilberti and Brunelleschi is a continuous thread of the narrative. Having suffered the humiliation of losing that competition, Brunelleschi spent time in Rome—time and experience that was to prove decisive for his conception and construction of the cupola in Florence. The Pantheon and pozzolana concrete that Brunelleschi discovered in Rome were to influence his designs in Florence.

Besides a clear description of the building of the cupola, King gives the reader some fascinating asides into the effects of the Black Death, the changing conception of time in the Quattrocento, the internecine quarrels between Florence, Milan, and the Papacy, and the technical problems of working with Carrara marble. These intellectual excursions are delightful detours. The tale of Brunelleschi's practical joke on a local carpenter—convincing the hapless and naive Manetto di acopo that he (Manetto) was, in fact, not Manetto but another man named Matteo. What the story reveals is not only Brunelleschi's sense of humor which resembled that of Boccaccio, but his obsession with the properties of vision and perception.

As most people know, Brunelleschi's ingenious solution was to construct what were really two domes, one inside the other. In addition, the cupola was not to be a round, Roman design but a "quinto acuto," or an octagonal vault composed of four interpenetrating barrel vaults. His real stroke of genius was to construct the external, octagonal, visible shell of the cupola over a circular skeleton. As King points out, Brunelleschi's genius was not limited to finding a solution to building the cupola but also in solving dozens of mechanical problems related to the Duomo, from constructing one-way, illuminated staircases for the workers to hoisting tons of material to the roof of the Duomo.

Although Brunelleschi suffered severe setbacks in later life, he was still alive when the first stone of the dome's lantern was consecrated in March 1446. He died a month later. According to Vasari, the people of Florence appreciated Brunelleschi more in death than in life. What is indisputable is that Brunelleschi—by changing our conception of what is possible in the art of architecture—changed what is possible in our conception of ourselves.
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