

## Report from Rome by Fiorella Operto

### Save Brunelleschi's dome!

*The Schiller Institute has addressed an urgent plea to the authorities to reverse the damage done in 1979.*

**J**ust before the close of 1988, a ceremony was held at Palazzo Pitti in Florence to mark the beginning of restoration work on the 16th-century frescos by Vasari and Zuccari in Santa Maria del Fiore, the celebrated cathedral of Florence. Italy's press reported this with great fanfare; but in the midst of all the mutual plaudits for this event (which has been gestating for a decade!), it was forgotten that the primary and most urgent restoration that has to get done is not the work on cleaning the frescos, but that on the structure of the dome itself.

The dome built by Filippo Brunelleschi between 1418 and 1436, the most famous dome in the world and the model for all other Western domes thereafter, is rapidly being deformed, because of the pressures put on it by the reinforced concrete which was put into all 48 of the staging-holes around its octagonal base.

In December 1988, the Schiller Institute of Italy held a press conference in Rome with Prof. Lando Bartoli, an architect who is one of the world's experts on the Brunelleschi dome. Early in 1989, the Schiller Institute sent a letter to the authorities in charge of preserving this world-famous monument, asking:

1) That the Superintendency of Monuments of Florence present the tests of the scaffolding of the dome, to prove that it really functions. In fact, according to journalistic sources, and despite the "launching" ceremony for the restoration, the relevant Local Health Unit has not approved the scaffolds, because the official testing of

their statics has not taken place! On this important question, which was the subject of a query by a journalist during the Palazzo Pitti ceremony, the authorities did not even give an evasive answer.

2) Information is sought on the photo album which has been mentioned several times in the memoranda of Professor Bartoli, which was handed over in 1938 by the Commission of Father Alfani and Pier Luigi Nervi to the Superintendency of Monuments of Florence, and which contained the documentation of the status of the dome at that time.

3) It is stressed once again that it is urgent to free the obstructed staging holes by some provisional, but expeditious, solution. This solution is more urgent than restoring the frescos.

4) The data resulting from the recording systems installed and managed by the ISMES company, to document contraction and expansion of the masonry of the dome, must be made public, together with the Superintendency of Monuments's figures, and with those of the Cathedral Works, such that taken all together, these data can lead to a clear judgment of the phenomenon which is still going on and which is being kept under the most absolute silence.

5) The restoration of the frescos, if it is not to be postponed, can be carried out simultaneously with the intervention to free the staging-holes, which has been so long delayed.

6) The figures put together by Bartoli, and those gathered so far in 1988 show that the entire base of the dome

is becoming deformed. The octagon of the base is spreading out under the pressure of the perceptible spreading of the holes which have been filled with cement and iron.

7) What is hidden behind the curtain of silence which has fallen over the entire problem? Does no one realize that this is a guilty silence? Could one not hypothesize the crime of *ideological fraud*?

That sums up the letter. Attentive observers have asked various questions about the illogical behavior of the authorities, including the really singular actions of the Cathedral Works, which is the "landlord," (the real owner being the Archdiocese of Florence, through the Works), is acting as though nothing were going on in their own house, as if the responsibility for actions or omissions concerning the damage to the dome would not be attributed to the first responsible one—the landlord.

One also wonders what the administration of ISMES thinks about the problem. ISMES had the job of installing the reporting systems placed on the dome as well as gathering the data and "processing" it. Is it possible that ISMES never suspected anything serious was happening to the dome? And for what reason have these data been kept secret for months, and not been communicated to the Commission for the Dome, a commission which, still today, is responsible to the Ministry of Culture for studying the "stability" of the cathedral complex, and which has not been dissolved, even though it has not been functioning for months? To whom or to what agency is ISMES supplying its readings, since it is not giving them to the Commission? Should not ISMES be concerned about the fact that somebody could officially ask them for an accounting of what they do?