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Masaccio (1401-1428), *St Peter Distributing Alms to the Poor* (ca 1425). See page 316.

RISK OF BACTEREMIA IN YOUNG CHILDREN
WITH PNEUMONIA TREATED AS OUTPATIENTS

USE OF COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE
BY CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES

COMPLETE TABLE OF CONTENTS ON PAGE 311

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Masaccio (1401-1428)

St Peter Distributing Alms to the Poor (ca 1425)

FOR ALMOST 6 centuries, visitors to the Brancacci Chapel in Florence, Italy, have been charmed by the toddler shown here clinging to his mother, his little rounded rump dangling over her arm.

The frescoes that cover the chapel walls show scenes from the life of St Peter, one of Christ's 12 disciples. In this panel, Peter has traveled to a town in Palestine to spread the gospel and to do good works following Christ's resurrection. A community of believers have sold their personal property and pooled their funds, to be distributed according to need. Peter is shown putting money into the hand of the child's indigent mother. At their feet lies a man named Ananias, who secretly withheld part of the proceeds from selling his property and who fell dead when his deception was exposed.

St Peter's life was chosen as the subject for this set of frescoes because he was the patron saint of Piero di Piuvichese Brancacci, patriarch of a rich Florentine family of silk merchants, who paid to build the chapel in 1367. Its walls remained bare until about 1425, when Masaccio and his colleague Masolino were hired to commemorate the late Piero Brancacci with frescoes honoring the saint who shared his name.

Masaccio, then in his early 20s, was an innovator in making art accessible and salient to the public. Breaking with the ornate Gothic style, he peopled his scenes with characters from everyday Florentine life. His human figures were simply drawn, but with careful use of shading to reveal the curved forms of the body. The architectural setting was that of 15th-century Florence. In several scenes, Masaccio used the newly developed techniques of perspective to help create a convincingly 3-dimensional pictorial world that invited viewers inside.

Unlike the egalitarian community in the biblical story, however, Masaccio's Florence was a highly stratified city of haves and have-nots. Commercial success in

banking and textiles had made some families wealthy, but many others were left behind. Hundreds of children were abandoned each year by poor parents who could not afford to raise them. Aid for these foundlings came from private charity and from the silk industry, whose guild had agreed in 1294 to become the official protector of the city's abandoned children. While Masaccio was working on the Brancacci Chapel, across town the Ospedale degli Innocenti (Foundling Hospital) was being built by the silk guild. (The "bambino" insignia of the American Academy of Pediatrics was later drawn from a roundel on the hospital's facade.¹)

What motivated this voluntary transfer of wealth to aid poor children? Genuine altruism certainly played a role: rich men had children of their own, and the Renaissance was a time of rising humanism. Good public relations was another factor: viewers could easily draw a parallel between the benevolence of St Peter and that of his namesake, for example. Finally, charitable donations eased many a guilty conscience: they were an investment toward a favorable outcome when men's souls were weighed at the Last Judgment and sent to heaven or hell.

Masaccio and Masolino both interrupted their work in the Brancacci Chapel to pursue other commissions outside Florence. Neither ever returned. Masaccio died in Rome at the age of 27. The Brancacci Chapel frescoes were finally completed in the 1480s by Filippino Lippi, one of the many Renaissance artists who learned his craft in part by studying the pictorial legacy that the young Masaccio had left behind.

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1. Kahn L. The "Ospedale degli Innocenti" and the "bambino" of the American Academy of Pediatrics. *Pediatrics*. 2002;110:175-180.