Milan's domination by the Visconti and subsequently the Sforza, before its loss of independence and Spanish conquest is a long drawn out history. Occupying more than two centuries, it was marked by a strong dynastic continuity which was politically indispensable for the Sforza, who intentionally adopted their predecessor's Christian names and heraldic symbols. They frequented the same symbolic places: the palaces near the cathedral, the castles at Milan and Pavia, the other numerous castles in the countryside, flaunted with their visual propaganda, replete with portraits, equestrian monuments, and the many series of Famous Men beloved from Azzo Visconti to Ludovico il Moro.

This continuity of taste, international and unremittingly courtly endured until the late Quattrocento watershed, when Ludovico il Moro introduced the maniera moderna. But within this enduring courtly culture was another persistent characteristic which—if a familiar historiographic trope is correct—was almost an innately self-referential attitude leading Lombard artists to scrutinize the natural and physical world, starting from Trecento painting and manuscript illumination, through the mimetic devotion of wooden sculpture until to Caravagesque ‘realism’ and beyond.

The dialectic between local artists and brilliant foreigners, which began as a lasting Visconti ambition, intensified during the reign of Ludovico il Moro, although not without local hostility or resistance. But without Giotto, Bramante and Leonardo, Lombard art would be unimaginable. Milan was unrivalled in Europe as an artistic crossroads, a crucible consistently undervalued for historic and historiographic reasons. This essay aims to provide a skeletal and synthetic account of the formation of this international crucible.

The Beginning of Visconti Rule

Triumphantly entering Milan after crushing Napoleone Della Torre at Desio in 1277, Archbishop Otto Visconti immediately enlarged and fortified his stronghold at Angera, demonstrating immediately his strong interest in visual propaganda: the main hall frescoes narrated his military and political achievements
The cycle faithfully matches Stefanardo da Vimercate’s literary account, composed virtually simultaneously. The parallelism emphasizes the comprehensiveness of Archbishop Otto’s political and cultural project. The frescoes, datable to the 1280’s or little after, show Otto, immediately after Desio and newly installed in Milan, purposively exploiting word and image to promote his version of events. The Visconti historical myth was already being formulated: Galvano Fiamma’s writings and the artistic programs of Azzo Visconti, during the 1330’s polished and confirmed it.\footnote{1}

Otto entrusted his pictorial credo to a workshop steeped in Veneto- Byzantine visual culture.\footnote{2} Soon afterwards, repercussions of the pictorial
