It was around 1460 that Netherlandish painting began to make a significant impact in Florence. About this time the Medici were acquiring the first of the numerous Netherlandish pictures in their collection, including the celebrated *St Jerome in his study* by Jan van Eyck, as well as other, unknown, works purchased for Piero di Cosimo by Tommaso Portinari, manager of the Medici bank in Bruges, at the Antwerp fairs. By 1460, too, Alessandra Strozzi, through her son Lorenzo in Bruges, was importing Netherlandish paintings for sale on the open market in Florence, which assumes the existence of a demand for such works. Additionally, northern prints had begun to circulate in artists’ workshops, disseminating motifs, designs and iconographic types frequently derived from types of Netherlandish origin.

Florentine painters of the 1460s, notably Baldovinetti, Verrocchio and his associates, and the Pollaiuolo brothers, enjoyed unprecedented access to northern works of art in a climate of heightened awareness and enthusiasm. This is reflected in the degree to which Netherlandish influence is manifest in their works. They recreate, for example, within the indigenous topographical context of the Val d’Arno, panoramic landscapes ‘alla fiamminga’: detailed bird’s eye views of winding rivers, microscopic buildings, clumps of trees and distant mountains. They employ the stylised, angular, forms of Netherlandish drapery patterns (an influence which, in Verrocchio’s case, extends into sculpture, in the drapery of the *Christ and St Thomas, Or San Michele*, Florence, begun in the 1460s). They adopt colours which recall the Netherlandish palette, being generally richer and darker in hue and tone than those of the previous generation of Florentine painters, and they emulate the virtuoso techniques admired by contemporary commentators on Netherlandish painting, such as the glinting surfaces of glass and metal, the lustre of jewels and the sheen of sumptuous fabrics. Moreover, they appear to have been the first Florentine painters to employ an oil medium for other than the traditional, limited uses described by Cennino.

The oil technique is associated with northern painting by Italian writers from Cennino onwards. Vespasiano da Bisticci goes so far as to claim that Federigo da Montefeltro had a painter (Justus of Ghent) brought from the Netherlands to Urbino because he could find none in Italy skilled in the use of oil. Its mastery was certainly an accomplishment which, during the course of the of the fifteenth century, Italian painters increasingly sought to
attain. As Filarete put it, explaining the process of oil painting in his treatise, written in the early 1460s and one of the earliest accounts of the technique, ‘è bello chi lo sa fare’.9 The reasons for this are bound up in a term which, in contemporary writings on art, is almost invariably coupled with *olio* and hence with Netherlandish painting: *colorito*. In quattrocento texts *colorito* is complementary to *disegno*, as yet not a subject of academic debate.10 It crops up with reference to Netherlandish painting in the writings of Filarete, Vespasiano, Fazio11 and Giovanni Santi,12 and in sixteenth-century texts, notably Vasari’s account of oil painting.13 *Colorito* can be interpreted in several ways, none of which excludes the others. Most simply, it means the action of painting: the application of colours and the way they are handled; it also refers to colour *per se*, the aesthetic value of hue, and lastly to tone and lighting, since hue varies according to light and shade. For much of the fifteenth century these qualities were more highly developed in Netherlandish painting than in Italian, and this is unlikely to have gone unnoticed, given contemporary Italian interest in the naturalistic representation of light and colour, as expressed for instance by Alberti in *De pictura*.14

No work of the 1460s is more Netherlandish in visual effect than the altarpiece for the Cardinal of Portugal’s Chapel in San Miniato al Monte by Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo, now in the Uffizi (fig. 1). This is implicitly acknowledged in Vasari’s brief account of the work: ‘[Antonio e Piero] ... per dilettarsi molto del colorito, fecero al Cardinale di Portogallo una tavola a olio in San Miniato al Monte’.15 Significantly, it is the ‘Netherlandish’ qualities of *colorito* and *olio* which are remarked upon. Furthermore, as his own account of oil painting implies, Vasari knew that in the mid fifteenth century the execution of a ‘tavola a olio’ was not as yet common practice in Florence, although standard in the Netherlands. Ever reluctant to concede that Italian painters were in any way indebted to northern art – even his historically impossible account of the transmission of the oil technique has Jan van Eyck divulging the jealously-guarded secret in return for Italian drawings offered him by Antonello da Messina16 – this is as close as Vasari comes to recognising Netherlandish influence.

Cardinal James of Portugal, a member of the Portuguese royal house and nephew of the Duchess of Burgundy, had died at Florence in 1459, making provision in his will for the endowment of a chapel at San Miniato, where he wished to be buried.17 Commissioned in October 1466 and completed by the spring of 1468, the altarpiece shows St James, the Cardinal’s patron saint, flanked by St Vincent, patron of the Portuguese royal house, and St Eustace, patron of the Cardinal’s titular church in Rome. Its authorship is generally credited to Antonio and Piero conjointly.18 Both brothers are named in the payment: ‘adi xx di ottobre [1466] f. ciemto d’oro larghi […] a Antonio e Piero di Ichoppo del Polliauolo, porto Piero detto chomtanti’.19 The payment further mentions an ‘iscritta […] di mano di detto Antonio e Piero’, presumably signifying the contract.20 Antonio was perhaps responsible for the cartoon; each brother may subsequently have worked on different parts of the design on the panel itself. The superior draughtsmanship and characterisation of the St James suggests the hand of Antonio, while the weaker figure of St Eustace, and possibly also the St Vincent, may have