This watercolour is a copy made by Cesare Marianecci (c.1819 - c.1894) after the fifteenth century frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel, Florence. The copyist reproduced all twelve scenes from the chapel for the Arundel Society between 1859 and 1860. The Society was founded in 1848 to promote knowledge of the art of European Old Masters through the publication of watercolours and chromolithographic reproductions. The Brancacci Chapel copies were published as chromolithographs between 1861 and 1868.

The decoration of the chapel in Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence was commissioned by the Florentine silk merchant Felice Brancacci (1382 - c.1440) around 1425 and awarded to the painters Masolino (1383 - after 1435) and Masaccio (1401 - 1428). The frescoes remained unfinished when the two artists left for Rome and were only completed in the 1480s by Filippino Lippi (1457 - 1504).
brought a new wave of interest in the Chapel. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Brancacci Chapel and Masaccio’s frescoes had become a requisite stop for any Grand Tourist. During this period, there was intense debate between those art historians following Vasari’s example and attempting to distinguish the hands of Masolino and Filippino Lippi from that of Masaccio (Rumohr, Italienische Forschungen, 1827; Franz Kugler, Handbuch der Geschichte der Malerei, 1837; Gaye, Carteggio inedito d’artisti, 1839; Milanesi, Le pitture della cappella Brancacci, 1848) and those who attributed most of the cycle to Masaccio (Rosini, Storia della pittura italiana, 1840; Crowe and Cavastelle, A History of Painting in Italy, 1864).

It was in this atmosphere of heightened interest in the Brancacci Chapel that the fresco cycle was systematically copied for first time by the Arundel Society. This initiative came from Austen Henry Layard (1817-1894), a member of the Society who had been elected to the council in 1852. While travelling extensively in Italy, he became aware of the destruction and neglect of the frescoes. During the annual meeting of 1857, he listed a series of Early Renaissance frescoes with considerable narrative interest that urgently needed the attention of the Society.

Arundel Society

The Arundel Society was founded in 1848 to promote knowledge of the art through the publication of reproductions of works of art. The Society was named after Thomas Howard, 2nd Earl of Arundel (1585-1646), important aristocratic patron and collector of the early Stuart period. The Society was intended to reach the largest possible audience through these reproductions. Subjects were chosen because of their instructive meaning rather than their popularity. In addition to copies of famous paintings, the Society published an English translation of Giorgio Vasari’s (1511-1574) Lives of the most excellent painters, made in 1850 by Giovanni Aubrey Bezzi (1785-1789), one of the founding members of the Society.

The Arundel Society popularised Renaissance art, particularly that of the Italian Old Masters, echoing a growing interest for ‘primitives’ in the second half of the nineteenth century. The founding members of the Arundel Society were all acknowledge experts on Italian art. For instance, Sir Charles Eastlake (1793-1865; painter and art administrator), whose house was the meeting point of the Society, was Director of the National Gallery in London from 1855 until 1865 and during his tenure, he began one of the finest collections of Italian art in Britain.

Other preeminent members were John Ruskin (1819-1900, English writer, painter and collector), who supervised projects including the watercolours series of the Upper and Lower Church in Assisi, and Sir Austen H. Layard (1817-1894; English archaeologist, politician, diplomat, collector and writer). Layard lived and travelled in Italy for many years and his knowledge of the country’s art was extensive. It was thanks to Layard’s funding that the Society were able to publish copies of the watercolours made at their direction using chromolithography. Although photography was increasingly popular, as photographs could only be made in black and white, chromolithography was chosen as it was felt to be closer to the principals of the Arundel Society: they were coloured and had the aura of traditional prints. In this way, copies were more like the originals.

The Society reached the height of its popularity in the 1860s. However, by the end of the century, it faced mounting criticism with regards to the accuracy of its watercolour copies. The Society ceased its activities in 1897. At this time the availability of second hand prints had increased and the Society found it difficult to find market for its chromolithographs. Moreover, photographic reproductions were becoming increasingly popular thanks to technical advances. The last display of the Arundel Society’s watercolours took place at the National Gallery and when the Society was dissolved, some watercolours were given to that Institution, while others were acquired by the then South Kensington Museum (now V&A). The outstanding watercolours were transferred from the National Gallery to the V&A in the 1990s.

Copyist

From 1859, the twelve scenes were copied in watercolour by the Italian artist Cesare Mariannecci. Born in Rome and trained in the workshop of Tommaso Minardi (1787 - 1871), Mariannecci was mostly active in Florence as a copyist. His watercolours of the Brancacci Chapel were printed as chromolithographs (with four heads taken from the scene) between 1861 and 1868 by the German firm Storch & Kramer. In 1868, Layard published a monograph study of the chapel entitled The Brancacci chapel and Masolino, Masaccio, and Filippo Lippi.

These copies are an important testimony of the works before their restoration; showing, for example that foliage that was added in the late seventeenth century, under the puritanical Gran Duke Cosimo III, in order to hide Adam and Eve’s nudity in the Temptation and Expulsion. However, they do not show the poor state of conservation of the frescoes as denounced by Layard or Cavastelle at that time, nor the stylistic differences from one scene to another. The draughtsman has embellished the colours and standardised the frescoes with his own style. This was severely criticised by the journal Athenaeum (27 Feb. 1864. p. 305; Ledger, A Study of the Arundel Society 1848-1897, 1978, p. 109) that considering the impossibility to differentiate the styles of each artist as a failure.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1020503/copy-after-the-healing-of-watercolour-mariannecci-cesare/