Originalveröffentlichung in: Feigenbaum, Gail ; Freddolini, Francesco (Hrsgg.): Display of art in the Roman palace, 1550 - 1750, Los Angeles 2014, S. 217-228

Chapter 13

CONCETTISMO AND THE AESTHETICS OF DISPLAY: THE INTERIOR DECORATION OF ROMAN GALLERIES AND *QUADRERIE*

CHRISTINA STRUNCK

When the family of Pope Urban VIII planned what was to become one of the most prominent landmarks of Baroque Rome, the Palazzo Barberini, the anonymous author of a project for the palace wrote in 1627 that "every great palace needs a gallery."[1] Indeed, since the middle of the sixteenth century, galleries had become ever more fashionable. The gallery, a longitudinal room usually characterized by numerous windows opening onto an attractive view, had at first functioned primarily as a place for private relaxation and for the enjoyment of the arts. However, in the course of the seventeenth century, galleries had tended to become the most important reception room of the Baroque palace and consequently had assumed functions that had been assigned traditionally to the *sala grande.* This transformation is apparent in written descriptions of galleries and in their design, their position within the palace, their dimensions, and their interior decoration.[2]

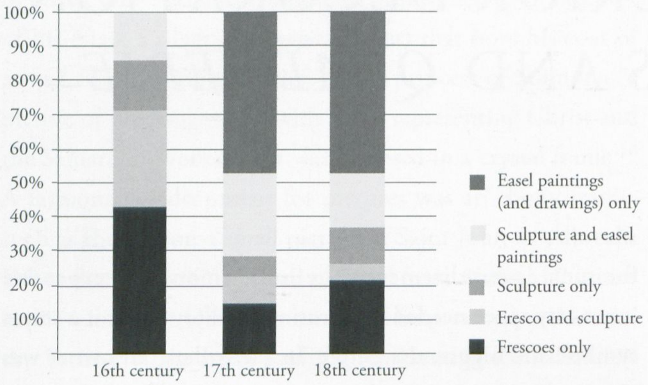
As a systematic overview of Roman galleries dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century has revealed, "social climbers" played a significant role in this development.[3] While the old elite families glorified themselves in the *sala grande* by means of ancestral portraits or frescoes depicting their family history, the papal families (most of whom could not boast any memorable history) had to find an alternative form of self-representation. The gallery offered an ideal site for such aggrandizement. The huge amount of expensive inner-city space needed for creating a gallery made it a status symbol: the bigger, the better. In the gallery, an owner was able to display his refined artistic taste, his magnificence, his wealth, and therefore his power. In 1621, Cardinal Federico Borromeo's artistic adviser, Girolamo Borsieri, cited the papal nephew Scipione Borghese as foremost among those who had acquired immortal fame through a collection of art rather than through military prowess and magnificence as demonstrated at *giostre* (tournaments), which had once been the pride of the old nobility.[4]

On the basis of statistical methods, the present essay sketches some major trends in the decoration of galleries during the period 1500 to 1800. It also analyzes the aesthetics that underpinned such displays. *Meraviglia* (surprise, astonishment) was one of their guiding principles. I will argue that in the context of a "culture of curiosity," gallery displays sought to establish surprising connections that enabled the beholder to discover hidden meanings. Thus, they functioned according to the same principles that informed literary *concettismo.*[5]

Changing Trends in Gallery Decorations

It can now be ascertained that there existed no less than 173 galleries in Rome and its immediate surroundings during the early modern period (1500–1800), and there may have been even more. This large set of data lends itself to

Fig. 67. Types of wall decoration in Roman gallery buildings, sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.



a statistical analysis.[6] Figure 67 summarizes information for the galleries in which the original wall decoration is known, showing clearly that the preferences for certain types of decoration changed significantly over the centuries. In the sixteenth century, 71 percent of the galleries were given frescoed wall decoration, while of the galleries created during the seventeenth century, only 23 percent had wall frescoes. In the sixteenth century, 57 percent of the galleries contained sculptures, whereas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this percentage diminished considerably, probably due to the reduced availability of antiquities. At the same time, easel paintings became ever more prominent. During the sixteenth century, no Roman gallery was decorated exclusively with easel paintings, but the seventeenth century saw an explosion of so-called *quadrerie* (rooms decorated with a collection of paintings).[7] Almost half of the galleries created during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were pure *quadrerie* that contained only easel paintings.

While the popularity of frescoes as wall decoration diminished markedly over the centuries, there was an exactly contrary trend in ceiling decoration: painted vaults graced 66 percent of all eighteenth-century galleries, whereas in the

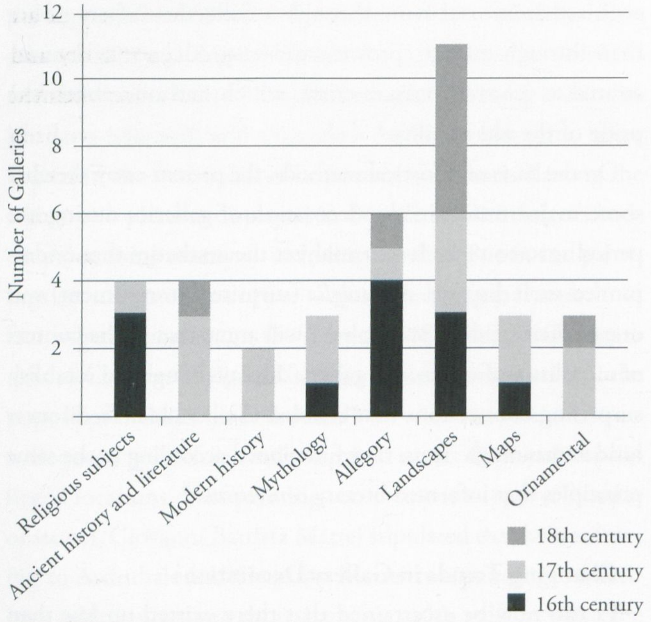


Fig. 68. Prevalent themes of wall decoration in Roman gallery buildings, sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.

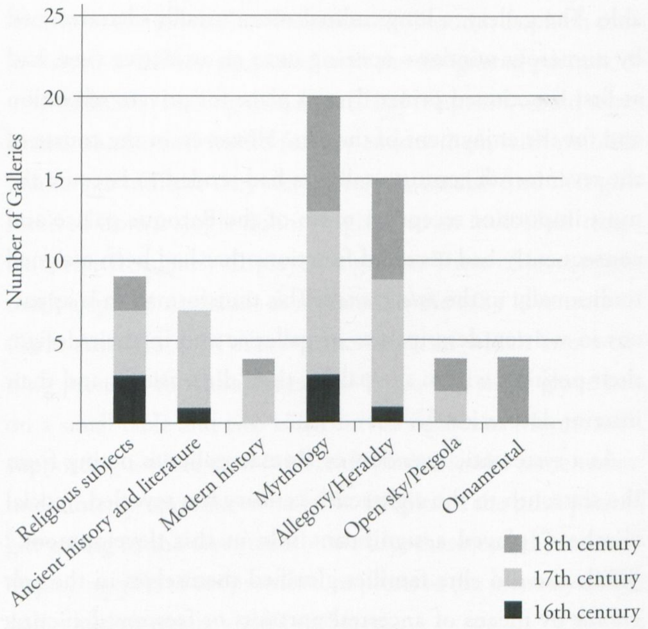
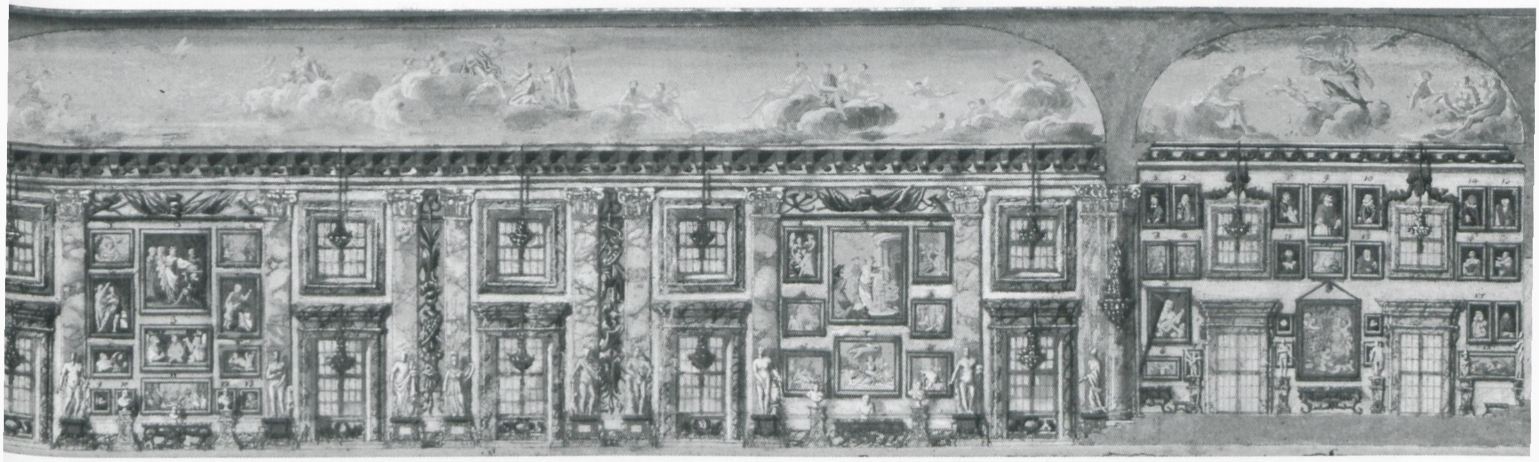


Fig. 69. Prevalent themes of ceiling decoration in Roman gallery buildings, sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.

Fig. 70. Salvatore Colonelli Sciarra (Italian, act. 1729–36). *Design for the North Wall of the Galleria Colonna, Rome,* ca. 1730, watercolor, 14.2 × 52.5 cm (5⅝ × 20⅝ in.). Rome, Collezione Principi Colonna.



sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the majority of vaults had remained undecorated. Interestingly, in only a few galleries were the wall and ceiling decorations devoted to the same theme. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the subject matter of wall and ceiling decorations separately.

For walls, landscapes were clearly the most popular type of decoration, and they remained fashionable throughout the period. Because galleries functioned as recreational rooms that, ideally, had access to a real garden or a beautiful view, the majority of frescoes in those rooms featured subjects that suggested airiness and a link with nature (figs. 68, 69). In addition to landscapes, such frescoes depicted colonnades; feigned pergolas with birds and putti; painted skies; allegories of the seasons, elements, and times of day; cosmological imagery; and maps.[8]

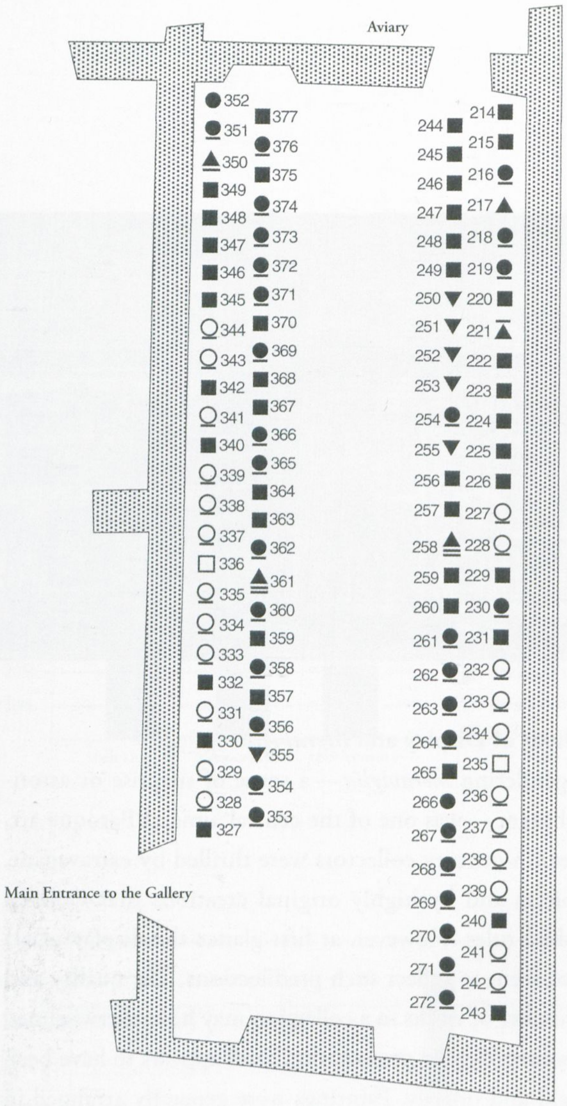
As a comparison between figures 68 and 69 demonstrates, mythology and allegory dominated the ceilings of Roman galleries, though such themes were relatively unpopular as wall decoration. Religious subjects, too, appeared more often on ceilings than in wall frescoes. Deities and allegorical figures seem to have been considered especially appropriate for the "heavenly" sphere of a room—a clear indicator of the conceptions of *decorum* (propriety) that informed the decoration of galleries.

Methods of Display and *Meraviglia*

Engendering *meraviglia*—a sense of surprise or astonishment—was one of the central aims of Baroque art. Seventeenth-century collectors were thrilled by extravagant, rare objects and by highly original creations that violated established rules. However, at first glance the display of art does not seem to reflect such predilections. The quality and sheer number of works in a collection may have overwhelmed the beholder, but the presentation itself appears to have been very rigid and orderly. Paintings were generally arranged in symmetrical compositions.[9] In the Galleria Colonna, this sense of well-defined order was reinforced even further by enclosing each bay in a kind of architectural megaframe formed by the lateral pilasters and the horizontal bands joining the bases and the capitals, respectively (fig. 70).[10] Despite such apparent regularity, many surprising elements can be detected in Roman gallery displays of the Baroque period.

Surprising Discoveries

Telescopes and microscopes, inventions that enabled the seventeenth-century elite to discover new aspects of the visual reality,[11] take pride of place in numerous Flemish paintings of gallery interiors.[12] But optical devices like telescopes and various lenses also appear in quite a few inventories of


Aviary
352
351
350
349
348
347
346
345
344
343
342
341
340
339
338
337
336
335
334
333
332
331
330
329
328
327
377
376
375
374
373
372
371
370
369
368
367
366
365
364
363
362
361
360
359
358
357
356
355
354
353
244
245
246
247
248
249
250
251
252
253
254
255
256
257
258
259
260
261
262
263
264
265
266
267
268
269
270
271
272
214
215
216
217
218
219
220
221
222
223
224
225
226
227
228
229
230
231
232
233
234
235
236
237
238
239
240
241
242
243
Main Entrance to the Gallery

● Bust

● Bust on corbel (*su pieduccio*)

○ Bust with corbel on tapered pedestal (*con pieduccio su sgabellone*)

■ Statue

□ Statue on tapered pedestal (*su sgabellone*)

▼ Statuette

▲ Object on corbel (*su pieduccio*)

▲ Object on wooden support

▲ Object on column

[In the interest of clarity, four rows of busts that were at the center of the gallery as well as busts that were on one of the narrow sides are not shown in the diagram. For an interactive floor plan, see www.staff.uni-marburg.de/~strunck/web/plans.htm.]

Fig. 71. Reconstruction of the display of sculptures in the gallery of the Palazzo Giustiniani, Rome, based on the inventory of 1638 (see note 20).

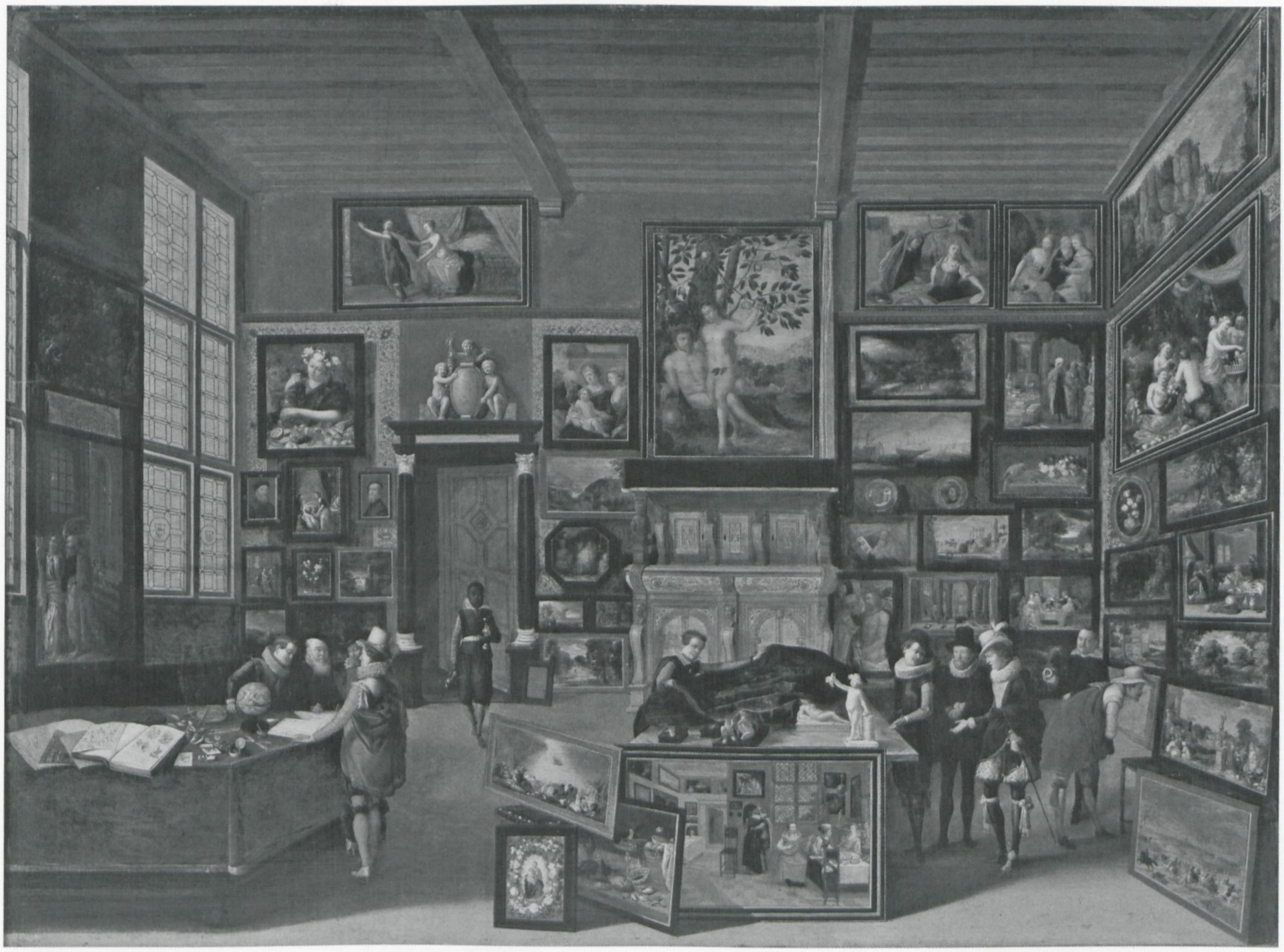
Roman galleries—not only in the Museo Kircheriano but also in private galleries owned by Federico Cornaro, Francesco Marucelli, and Bernardino Spada.[13] Gian Lorenzo Bernini told the French collector Paul Fréart de Chantelou that he liked to design in the gallery of his Roman house—and he also said that he would view his designs through various colored lenses in order to gain a new vision of them.[14] It is quite likely that the optical devices in Roman galleries served a similar purpose—namely, to experiment with vision itself.

Staggering visions were also created by placing mirrors opposite each other, as, for instance, in the Colonna and Borghese galleries, thereby dissolving the real boundaries of the room. In the Galleria Colonna and in the Galleria Pamphilj al Corso, the combination of mirrors with crystal chandeliers further heightened these dazzling visions.[15]

Looking through lenses and magnifying glasses allowed new aspects of a work of art to be discovered. This unveiling of hidden qualities was echoed by several display strategies. For instance, the greatest treasures in Queen Christina of Sweden's Roman gallery, her ancient Roman coins and medals, were kept out of sight in two wooden cabinets where each drawer revealed new surprises.[16] In other galleries, the furniture itself required close examination: the Colonna and Degli Effetti cabinets constituted "a gallery within the gallery" by displaying painted and sculpted miniature copies of famous works of art,[17] and in the Palazzo Grande of the Villa Ludovisi, visitors who opened a cabinet in the second-floor gallery would be surprised by painted mirrors.[18]

In numerous collections, curtains protected particularly valuable or exciting paintings;[19] thus, the theatrical unveiling was part of the aesthetic pleasure. Vincenzo Giustiniani's innovative display of sculptures recorded by the inventory of 1638 followed a similar principle: the "surprise factor" of this gallery consisted not only in the sheer number of sculptures but also in the way they were displayed, in two rows on either side of the room (fig. 71).[20] By placing the statues in front of

Fig. 72. HIERONYMUS FRANCKEN II (Flemish, 1578–1623). *Picture Gallery,* 1621, oil on wood, 94 × 124.5 cm (37 × 49 in.). Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, inv. 2628.



each other, some sculptures were partially hidden from view, thereby creating a sense of suspense and curiosity.

In sixteenth-century galleries, sculptures were presented in niches, which had the effect of distancing them from the visitor.[21] In seventeenth-century displays, statues were normally placed in the gallery proper, which would encourage the beholder to discover a work's beauty by walking around it and by looking at it from various perspectives.[22] On the whole, seventeenth-century displays created obstacles that had to be overcome by curious beholders. Viewers needed to become active—to open drawers, to draw curtains, to take views from various angles and even through lenses—but they would be rewarded with surprising discoveries. An interior by Hieronymus Francken II (fig. 72) very aptly illustrates this display strategy. A painting of the Fall of Man dominates the background. This prototypical first act of curiosity, which resulted in the need to cover the human body, is juxtaposed with an act of uncovering that appears in the foreground, where curious beholders are shown discovering the statuette of a reclining nude.[23]

Expected and Unexpected Comparisons

Many Roman galleries encouraged comparisons by displaying series of objects. Some series formed a thematically unified group (for instance, paintings of the main Roman churches),[24] while other series were unified through their formal characteristics, such as technique and format: for example, Benedetto d'Aste's gallery contained a large number of pastels,[25] other collectors focused on small-scale *quadretti,*[26] and the gallery of the art dealer Leonardo Santi presented an ensemble of 325 octagonal paintings.[27] Several galleries boasted series of emperors' busts.[28] There were quite a few portrait galleries in Rome, and Paolo Maccarani owned a gallery with sixty-six likenesses of beautiful women.[29] The gallery of the Villa Ludovisi displayed mainly Madonnas, almost like a spiritual counterpart to Maccarani's gallery of worldly beauties.[30] While in the latter case the beauty of the sitters themselves was compared, in the case of the Madonnas the comparison concerned the beauty of the representation, thus staging a *paragone* among several painters.

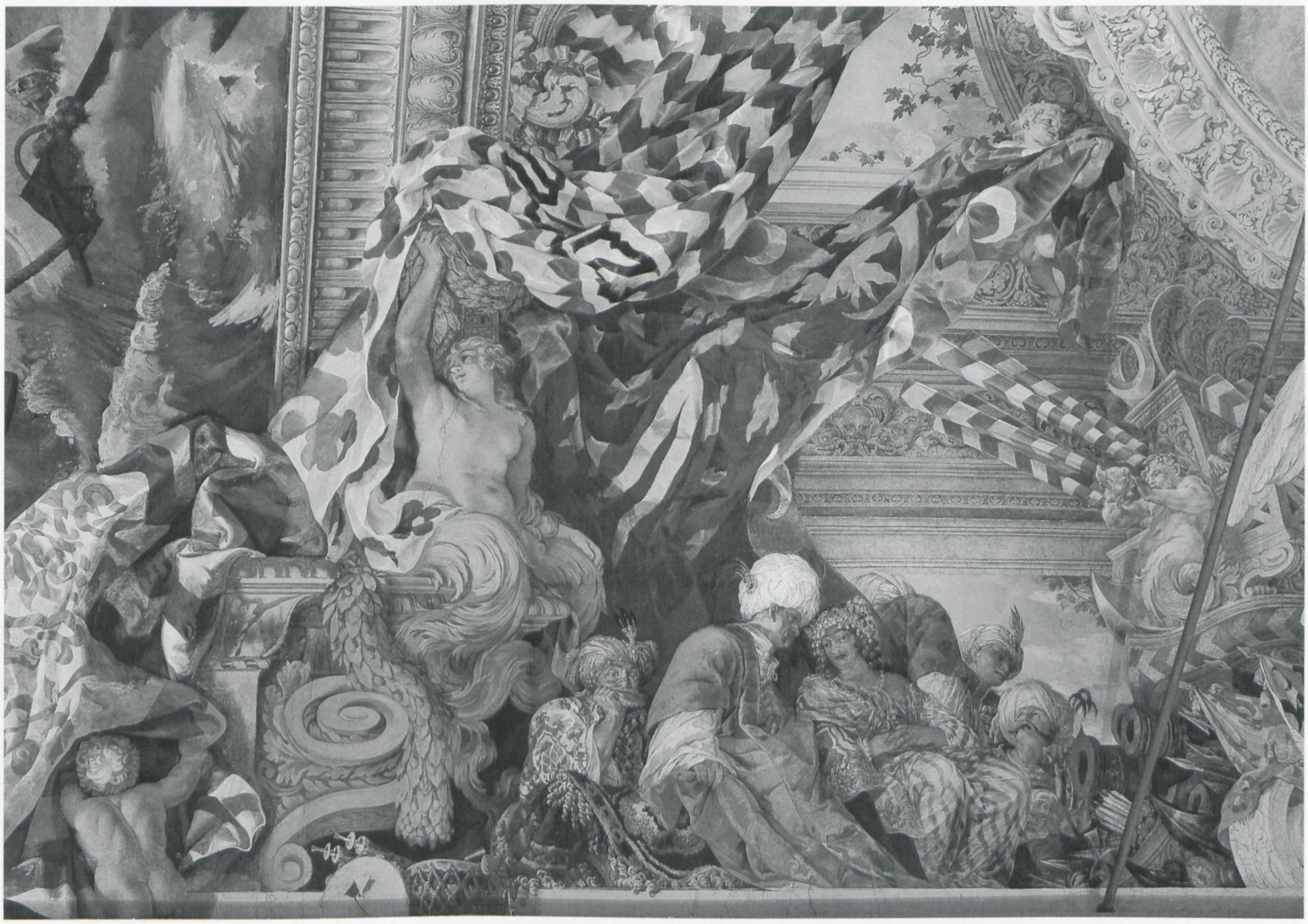
The *paragone* (literally, "comparison") was a well-established topos of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century aesthetic discourse. The term referred to various types of competitive relationships—for instance, between painting and poetry, between ancient and modern art, or between painters and sculptors.[31] A cultivated beholder would have expected to make comparisons in a gallery according to the categories of the *paragone.* Seventeenth-century art critic Giulio Mancini gave voice to this expectation when he recommended hanging paintings according to schools and epochs, but enlivening the display by juxtaposing different schools—a suggestion that presupposes a comparative way of looking.[32]

Indeed, it is easy to find examples for Roman gallery displays that staged a *paragone.* For instance, in the gallery of the Villa Borghese, a painted portrait of Pope Paul V by Caravaggio could be compared to Bernini's sculpted likeness of the same sitter.[33] In the Galleria Giustiniani, two paintings of Amor by Giovanni Baglione were juxtaposed with two ancient sculptures of the god of love.[34] In this way, the *paragone* between painting and sculpture was extended to a comparison between ancient and modern art.

The *paragone* also informed frescoed gallery decorations, most notably in the Galleria Farnese. In the vault of the gallery, Annibale Carracci underlined the superiority of painting by demonstrating its capacity to represent both nature and art: he imitated architecture, easel paintings, marble statues, and bronze reliefs, but he also created illusionistic openings to the sky and seemingly real people who sit on the cornice.[35] The latter two motifs were innovations in Roman gallery design and were soon copied elsewhere, for example in the Pamphilj and Colonna galleries. As in the Galleria Farnese, the fictive openings in the vaults of the Pamphilj and Colonna galleries create a sense of surprise that is heightened when the visitor notices the apparently real people on the cornice, who seem to inhabit the same spatial and temporal continuum as the beholder.[36] Moreover, some of those illusionistic people appear to be watching the flesh-and-blood visitors in the gallery below (fig. 73), thus inverting the roles: the spectator who visits the gallery in order to look at works of art is now being looked at by the works of art themselves!

This playful approach to the boundaries between art and reality can also be detected in various other features of Roman gallery design. In both the Colonna and the Spada palaces, balconies ran alongside the outer gallery wall.[37] A person who entered the balcony could look into the gallery from the outside. When the windows were open, a person thus positioned on the balcony would appear to visitors in the gallery like a living painting within the window frame. A comparable effect was created by the mirrors that appear in numerous inventories of Roman galleries.[38] In the elaborately framed mirror, one could experience one's own image as an animated, moving painting. Tilted mirrors (see fig. 70, on the dividing wall) offered the novelty of seeing bird's-eye views of one's own body. These surprising visions made the spectator a part of the gallery display.[39] A similar blurring of the boundaries between art and life was

Fig. 73. Giovanni Paolo Schor (Austrian, 1615–74). Frescoes in the vault of the Galleria Colonna, Rome (detail).



expressed in seventeenth-century depictions of art collections; for instance, in a Flemish painting of 1666, seemingly "real" people in the right foreground appear to climb into the representation of a painting (fig. 74).[40]

At Frascati, the fashionable villa resort near Rome, the very large gallery of the Villa Mondragone was decorated exclusively with rural subject matter: ninety-nine easel paintings of landscapes and still lifes hung between fifty-two windows that commanded a splendid view of the countryside.[41] The paintings rivaled the views of the real landscape framed by the gallery windows: once again, the visitor was confronted with a surprising comparison between painted life in the gallery and living paintings beyond the gallery windows.

Astonishing Connections

As demonstrated above, Roman gallery displays encouraged various types of comparisons. The spectator could discover links between paintings and sculptures and discuss them within the well-established art-theoretical framework of the *paragone.* Such expected comparisons were, however, counterbalanced by unexpected, astonishing ones. For instance, the spectator was prompted to experience the scenery like a living painting and to establish a *paragone* between the imperfections of real nature and the composed naturalness of painted landscapes. Similarly, galleries outfitted with mirrors and illusionistic frescoes invited a *paragone* among conventional portraits, mirror images, and illusionistic human presences. However,

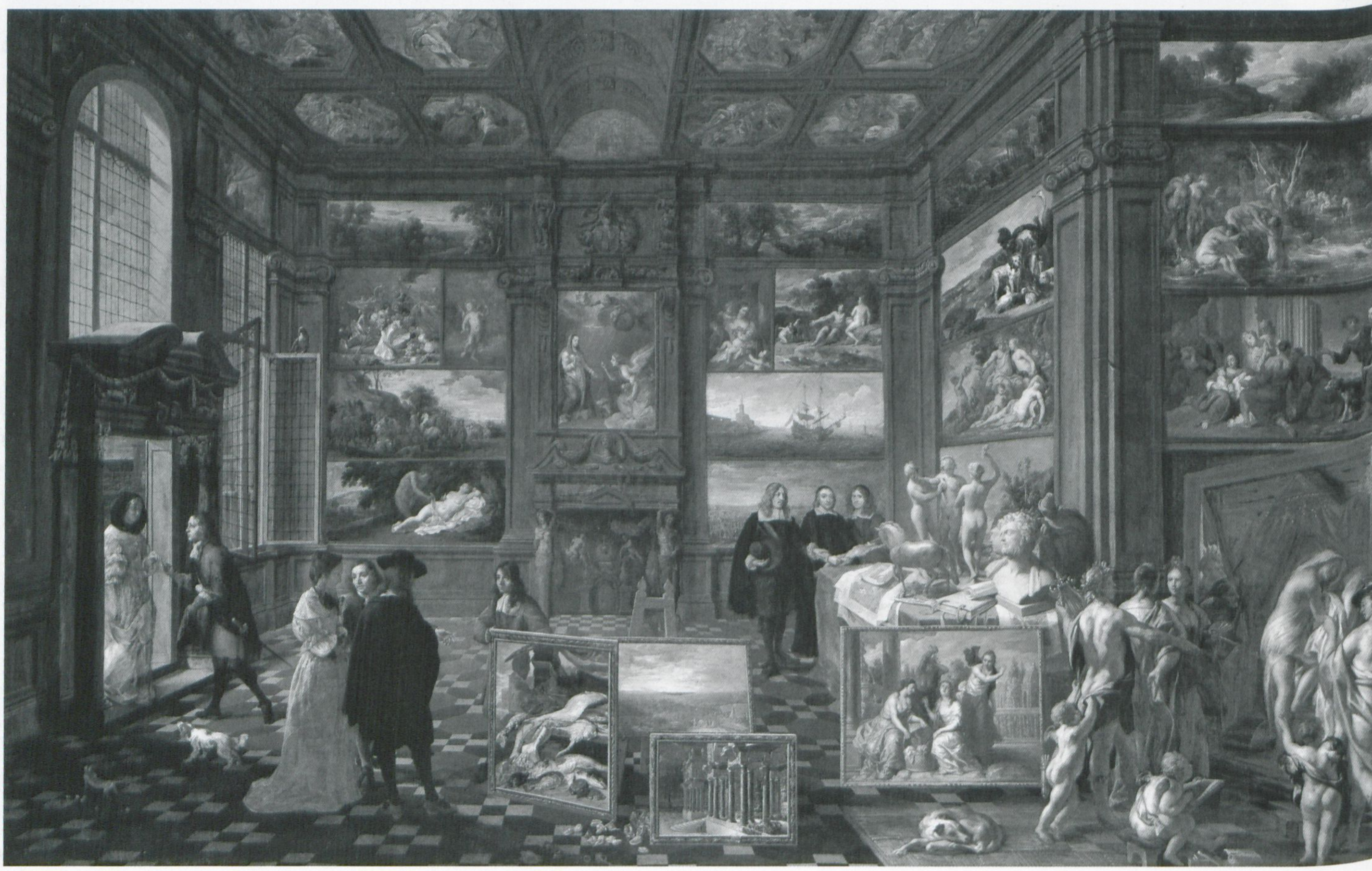
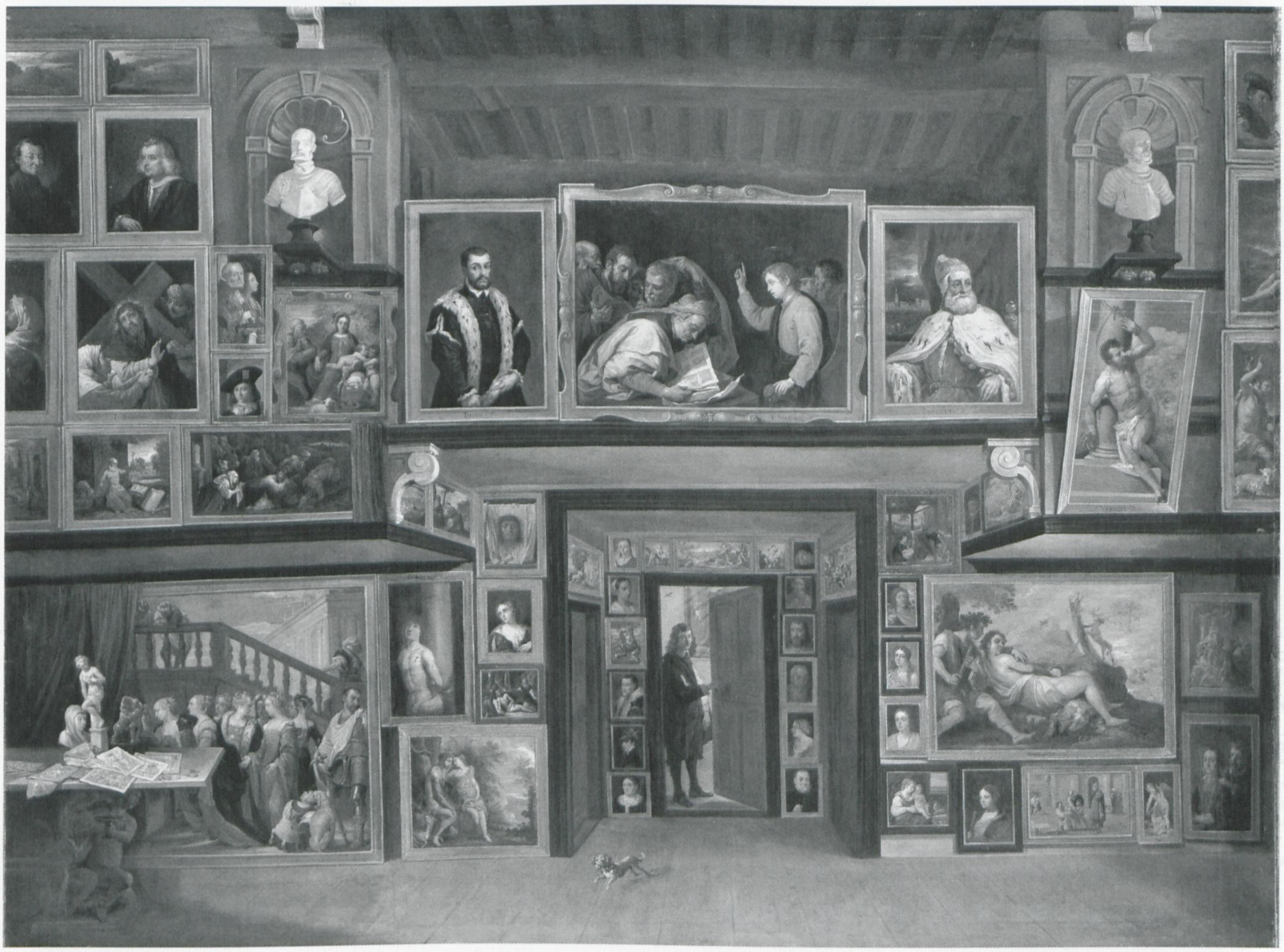


Fig. 74. Wilhelm Schubert van Ehrenberg (Flemish, 1630–76). *View of a Picture Gallery,* 1666, oil on canvas, 142.5 × 237 cm (56⅛ × 93¼ in.). Neuberg, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, inv. 896.

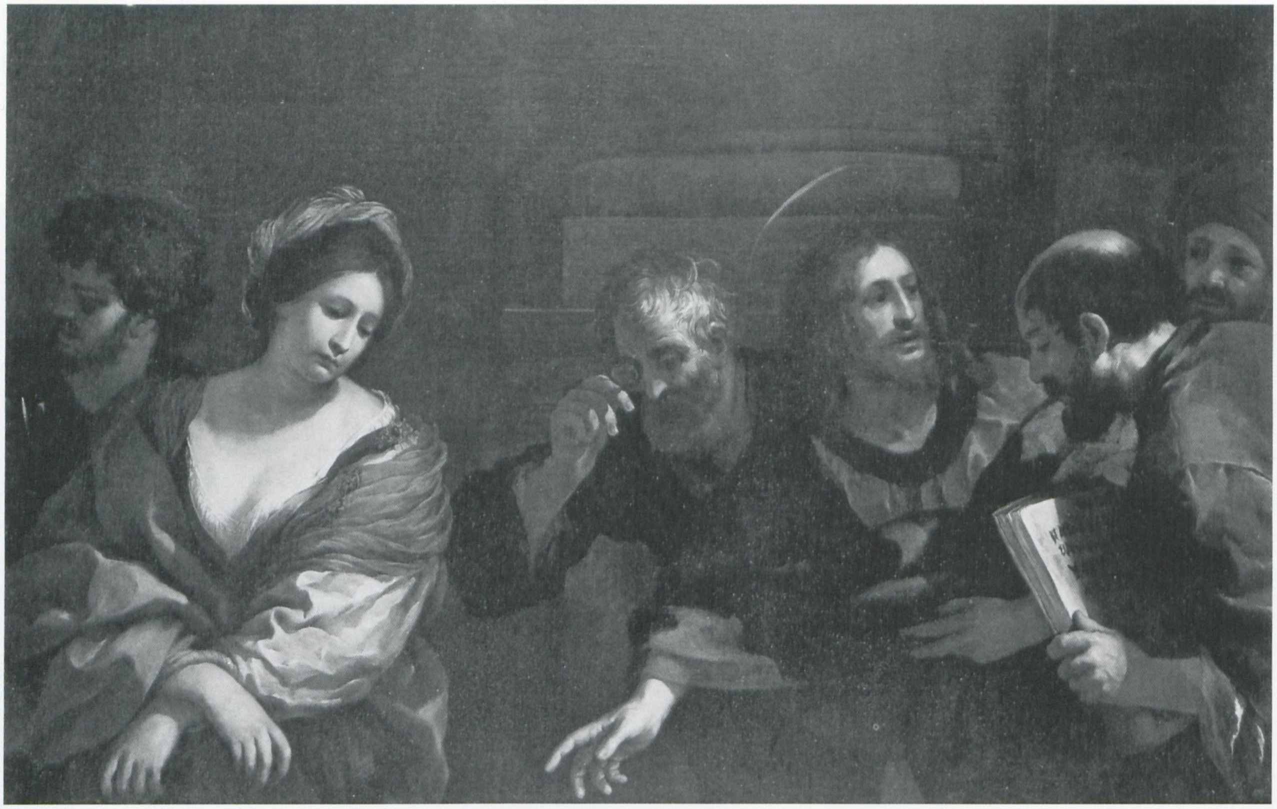
Fig. 75. David Teniers the Younger (Flemish, 1610–90). *View of the Gallery of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in Brussels,* 1651, oil on canvas, 96 × 128 cm (37¾ × 50⅜ in.). Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, inv. 1840.



the *paragone* was just one way of linking several visual impressions in a gallery. I will now turn to connections that went beyond a simple comparison.

As Ulrike Ganz has shown, the ideal gallery displays imagined by Netherlandish painters often contain hidden narrative interrelations between adjacent objects. For instance, in David Teniers the Younger's painting of a gallery (fig. 75), the artist positioned Paolo Veronese's large painting *Esther before Ahasverus* in such a way that the man on the right seems to be furtively glancing over his left shoulder at Adam and Eve. On the right in Teniers's painting, a depiction of Saint Sebastian is tilted forward in order to create the illusion that Sebastian's column supports the bust displayed above. In the center, numerous small portraits frame an ambivalent image that could be either a trompe l'oeil painting or a "real" man entering through a door. Above it is a representation of Christ in the Temple, in which one of the doctors looks down, as if to check who is coming in.[42]

Ganz interpreted such pictorial strategies as an expression of the Baroque "culture of curiosity," which was characterized by its desire to cross boundaries and to discover hidden connections.[43] So far, it has gone unnoticed that similar



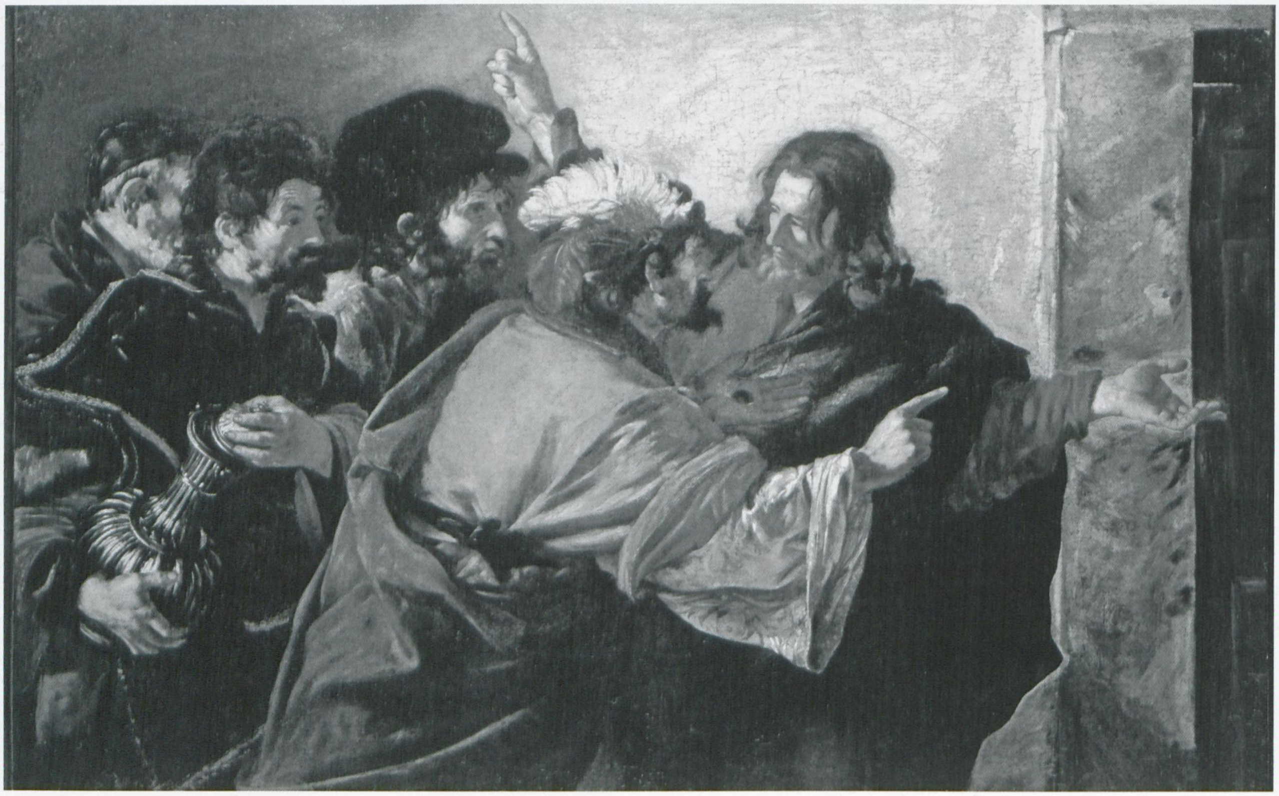


Fig. 76. Pietro da Cortona (Italian, 1596–1669). *Christ and the Adulteress,* 1624–26, oil on canvas, 132 × 226 cm (52 × 89 in.). Detroit, Taubman collection.

Fig. 77. Giovanni Serodine (Italian, ca. 1600–1630). *The Tribute Money,* ca. 1620–30, oil on canvas, 146 × 227 cm (57½ × 89⅜ in.). Edinburgh, Scottish National Gallery, NG 1513.

tendencies can also be observed in Roman galleries of the seventeenth century. I will illustrate this point with examples taken from the Galleria Mattei, as in that case the easel paintings were commissioned expressly for the gallery (1624–31).[44] Therefore, connections among them are certainly not a result of mere chance.

In a prominent position opposite the main entrance to the gallery, Asdrubale Mattei placed Pietro da Cortona's *Christ and the Adulteress* (fig. 76).[45] Interestingly, Cortona chose a half-length format that omits a key element of the story. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees had asked Jesus whether it was right to stone a woman caught in adultery. Jesus did not answer straightaway but bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. Only then did he say, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."[46] In Cortona's painting, the four protagonists look down at the writing on the ground, which is, however, not visible to us. Christ points at it while the old man in the center uses a magnifying glass in order to see it better. In a way, the old man demonstrates what a visitor is supposed to do in the gallery: to look closely and to discover that which is not apparent at first glance. We do not know precisely what hung underneath Cortona's *Adulteress,* but it must have been part of the frieze-like depiction of cavalcades that ran all around the room.[47] Cortona's composition drew attention to these paintings, which were full of detail and small-scale figures. Thus the man with the magnifying glass encouraged the beholder to switch focus and to turn from large-scale religious history to the painstakingly close observation of contemporary history.

Giovanni Serodine's *The Tribute Money* (fig. 77) is another unusual composition designed expressly for the Galleria Mattei.[48] Here, too, the protagonists point and look at something that is outside the picture.[49] The structure at the right seems to be a door frame with part of a wooden door. What does it hide? Serodine visualized the moment Christ said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."[50] His posture illustrates this: one hand points heavenward, while the other hand gestures in the direction of the door, which must thus be somehow connected with Caesar. According to the 1631 inventory, the painting that followed depicted the blessed Luigi Gonzaga.[51] He had indeed been brought up to serve Caesar (that is, the house of Hapsburg) but had then chosen to become a follower of God. In Francesca Cappelletti's reconstruction, the history painting hanging next to Serodine's *Tribute Money* was *Christ among the Doctors* by Antiveduto Gramatica, a painting the Mattei had already owned before the creation of the gallery.[52] It is striking that Serodine's composition seems to respond symmetrically to the older picture. The connection makes sense, because in both paintings Christ appears as a wise teacher. The saint whose likeness hung in between was a person converted by these teachings.

The Galleria Mattei is a special case, but it's certainly not an isolated one.[53] Kristina Herrmann Fiore has demonstrated that there existed close thematic connections between the objects in the gallery and in the *sala grande* of the Villa Borghese,[54] and my analysis of the Giustiniani and Ludovisi collections has shown that they were arranged according to narrative principles. The works of art were combined in such a way that the visitor could discover stories that united them.[55] This holds true for the display of sculptures and also for the display of paintings. The tendency to commission paintings in pairs was certainly not only motivated by reasons of symmetry but also meant to tease the gallery visitor: such pendants challenged the beholder to engage with them more deeply in order to unravel their thematic bond.[56] That seventeenth-century art lovers indeed looked for narrative units is confirmed by Scipione Francucci, who, in 1613, organized his account of the Borghese collection as a continuous narrative poem.[57]

Curiosity, *Meraviglia,* and *Concettismo*

The many surprises built into seventeenth-century Roman gallery displays need to be seen in a bigger context. The visitor was expected to participate actively in order to discover surprising views, hidden objects, hidden connections, and hidden meanings. Although at first glance the displays seemed very orderly and rigid (see fig. 70), the beholder was required to transcend the borders between the individual works of art. The display stimulated viewers to explore stories that united several art objects. Moreover, in many galleries, the boundaries between art and reality were wittily dissolved, for instance through the inclusion of mirrors and illusionistic ceiling frescoes. Such strategies were meant to astonish the visitor and to produce *meraviglia,* but they also aimed at the uncovering of a secret deeper order.

The crossing and expanding of boundaries was central to the seventeenth-century culture of curiosity, which extended far beyond the sphere of art and included also the natural sciences.[58] Instruments like the telescope and the microscope expanded human vision, but they also proved the limits of unaided natural perception and raised doubts about the validity of judgments based on human senses alone. Therefore, hidden truths were best represented through symbols, be they mathematical symbols or the artistic symbols of emblem, *impresa,* allegory, and metaphor.

Emblems and *imprese* combine from different sources a visual image and a text. It is the beholder's task to establish a connection between them and to uncover the veiled meaning.[59] Similarly, Baroque readers enjoyed the deciphering of particularly complicated metaphors and allegories whose "pictorial" elements were rendered only through literary means. My point is that the strategies of display in Roman Baroque galleries were based on the same predilection for conceits — the aesthetics of *concettismo.*[60] Both in literature and in the visual arts, *concettismo* sought to astonish and to delight the audience through the process of decoding elaborate conceits. Analogously, Roman Baroque galleries gave pleasure by providing the opportunity to discover hidden connections and hidden meanings.

Many factors may account for the dramatic rise in popularity of *quadrerie* that is statistically so evident (see fig. 67). Collections of paintings were more flexible than frescoed wall decorations: they could be expanded and rehung as desired. Moreover, as art collecting became an ever more prestigious activity, collectors' galleries testified to the owner's social status, taste, and discernment, enabling him to show off his erudition by making polite conversation about the artworks. However, as I have suggested in this essay, the popularity of collectors' galleries may have also been due to the specific qualities of their display.

In sixteenth-century galleries, everything had its well-defined, almost eternal place. The stucco and fresco decoration was unchangeable, and sculptures were allotted permanent positions in niches. Some galleries — for example, the Galleria Rucellai and the Galleria delle Carte Geografiche (plate 22) — even tried to depict a whole world order.[61] In general, these early galleries resemble sixteenth-century mnemonic devices, like Giulio Camillo's *Theatro* (1550) — structures that helped one memorize a universal order by giving everything its fixed place within a fictive architecture.[62]

Seventeenth-century galleries were characterized by completely different ordering principles. The order seemed stable at the surface, held together by formal symmetries, but it opened up almost endless possibilities for individual discoveries. Beholders were not confronted with a given world order but rather were expected to construct an order of their own by exploring the connections that were stimulated by the display. In this way, the display appealed to the general predilection for *concetti meravigliosi* and became a constant source of aesthetic and intellectual pleasure. I therefore suggest that we can explain the popularity of collectors' galleries not only through social factors but also through their particularly interesting methods of display. After all, the display of art in Roman galleries was in itself a work of art.