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THE GAZE, TOUCH, MOTION: ASPECTS OF HAPTICITY IN ITALIAN EARLY MODERN ART

"[Vincenzo Tamagni] fece alcune cose, le quali io mi tacerò per non coprire con questa la lode et il gran nome che s'aveva in Roma onorevolmente acquistato."[1]

Giorgio Vasari

In the 15th century, artists were highly creative in the ways they adapted accepted visual formulae to form a kind of imagery that enjoyed considerable popularity – at least in the more rural areas of Italy: It was the intermedia altarpiece, as I will call this particular combination of sculpture and painting in the following. Contrary to Vasari's disparaging remarks about intermedia altarpieces, quite a few things speak for this art form having played an important role in 15th-century Italian art history and provide ample justification for salvaging them from the aesthetic isolation they experienced through subsequent art criticism.[2] Due to the fact that intermedia images cannot be grasped as a

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1   Giorgio Vasari: Le Vite de' più eccellenti Pittori Scultori e Architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini/Paola Barocchi, vol. 6, Florence 1966–1987, 1987, p. 265.

2   While this chapter is based on my PhD thesis, it goes beyond my treatment of hapticity therein. Iris Wenderholm: Bild und Berührung. Skulptur und Malerei auf dem Altar der italienischen Frührenaissance, Munich/Berlin 2006 provides a more in-depth study with ample documentation on the outlined topics. Additionally compare the chapter by Roberta Serpolli: Crocifissi a rilievo su pittura in valle umbra tra '400 e '500: ipotesi per una ricognizione, in: Bollettino storico della città di Foligno 27–28 (2003/04 (2006)), pp. 273–296, whose research could no longer be incorporated in the publication of my PhD thesis: Serpolli focuses on Umbrian syntheses of media with crucifixes and investigates, inter alia, the pivotal role played by Paolucci Trinci for the Observant movement. The reference to miracles that occurred in conjunction with crucifix sculptures is especially significant for my chapter (see ibid., p. 289).

Fig. 1   Vincenzo Tamagni: Adoration of the Crucified Christ, ca. 1530, San Gimignano, Sant'Agostino.

genre – because they do not conform to any established canon – no contemporary took the pains to acknowledge their merits or systematically examine their significance in art. However, their existence fundamentally argues for early modern Italian art having embraced parallel developments and artistic side roads quite separate from a stringent adherence to the accepted narrative of a progression from polyptych to Renaissance *pala*.

The underlying thesis of the following chapter asserts that, at an early date, intermedia altarpieces contributed fundamentally to the development and formation of normative genres. They functioned as vehicles for addressing the very different medium-specific advantages of sculpture and painting. It can be safely assumed that this occurred within traditional workshop contexts in which painters and sculptors contributed to image production in equal measures. Initially it seems unlikely that reflection on media took place within Church buildings. But this art form combined the two media in total conformation with practices of piety current at the time, and it was only in the 16th century that

Fig. 2   Sienese Painter/Nino Pisano:
Calvary, ca. 1365, Florence,
Private Collection.

sculpture and painting were played out against one another in a deeply reflective competition that was often articulated in aesthetic terms in art.

We must ask to what extent the explicitly staged hapticity of intermedia images and their differentiated implementation of painting and sculpture underpinned the altarpiece's function as an intermediary agent for Salvation during the 15th century. The very existence of such an art form raises the controversial question of how and for what reasons sacred images evoked tactile perception and how the various media explore differing haptic values.

One of the artworks that Vasari would have preferred not to mention to his readers is Vincenzo Tamagni's *Adoration of the Crucified Christ*, which was executed around 1530 and set up in Sant'Agostino in San Gimignano (fig. 1).[3] It is

3   On this topic see Wenderholm: Bild und Berührung (as fn. 2), cat. 84; see also cat. 83 for a further example of an intermedia altarpiece by Tamagni in San Gimignano.

Fig. 3   Cima da Conegliano/unknown sculptor:
Olera-Polyptych, 1486–1488, Olera, San Bartolomeo.

a characteristic example of the heterogenous group of intermedia altarpieces that all featured a central figural sculpture with a painted background.[4] The earliest examples dating from the late 14th century were found in Florentine and Sienese artistic circles and largely comprised small-format Calvary paintings with a sculpted Crucifix (fig. 2). They were an early manifestation of altarpieces that, in the course of the 15th century, had left the context of private devotion practices and moved into the latent public space of churches and chapels while adapting to meet the liturgical demands of altar retables. Since the first quarter of the quattrocento and increasingly since the mid-century in Tuscany as well as in Venice and the Venetian provinces, large painted panels were executed to decorate side altars with the sculpture of a saint as a centerpiece (fig. 3). After 1450 the dissemination of intermedia Calvaries reached its peak, propagated and fostered by the Franciscan Observants in Umbria, and simultaneously numerous intermedia altarpieces with sculptures of saints were produced in

4   For a discussion on the history and function of intermedia altarpieces see ibid.

Fig. 4   Filippino Lippi/Benedetto da Maiano: Tavola Bernardi (reconstruction),
ca. 1482/1483, Pasadena, The Norton Simon Foundation/Lucca, Curia Arcivescovile.

Tuscany. In the case of these composite *sacre conversazioni*, the sculpture of a
saint mostly stands in a painted niche within a tabernacle-like structure.

In contrast to medieval shrines and to most of the carved wooden altars
produced north of the Alps, the side panels of the altarpieces were static and
could not be closed, that is, they had no *wings* (fig. 4).[5] They therefore lacked one
of the original features that encouraged worshippers to tactually communicate
with altars, as was typical for the small, private triptychs popular during the
Trecento, where opening and closing or, succinctly, touch signified verification.[6]
Instead, the sculpture adorning the centre of the retable was predestined to be

[5]   Also in this case there are rare exemptions: Thus, in a private context, the wings of
       a Crucifixion shrine from the first quarter of the 16th century by Andrea Bres-
       cianino could be closed; see ibid., cat. 93.
[6]   "Touch during ritual […] can function to transform the devotional experience into
       a physical, tangible act." David G. Wilkins: Opening the Doors to Devotion: Victor
       M. Schmidt (Ed.): Trecento Triptychs and Suggestions concerning Images and Do-
       mestic Practice in Florence, in: Italian Panel Painting of the Duecento and Trecento,
       New Haven/London 2002, pp. 371–393, p. 376.

experienced haptically. Because such altarpiece sculptures could mostly be dismounted, the possibility of being able to touch them was, as part of ritual practices, probably intended. In this context, the relationship between performativity and intermediary agency – in regard to actual hapticity or fictive tactile values – demands closer investigation.

Materials and Medium

Since Gregory the Great, Christian art acquired its efficacy by its resemblance (*similitudo*) to the Divine Archetype. Its function was to imbue the denizens of heaven with a visual form in a material medium and, ultimately, make the unfathomable comprehensible to the senses. The merely referential character of the artefact, the categorical difference between the image and divinity, was often part of the subject matter.[7] Within this complex interplay, sculptures were allocated a threshold position as, due to their plastic corporality and spatial presence, they partook of both realities – of that intrinsic to the image and of that occupied by the beholder. Therein lay the often topically enhanced possibility of mistaking reality and representation – sustenance for critical voices amongst theologians since the Early Middle Ages concerning freestanding sculptures that were not part of a building's architectural decoration.[8]

It is of considerable relevance to the context in question that – comparable to the early modern *sacri monti* and Lamentation groups[9] – most of the sculptures belonging to intermedia artworks were either (prevailingly) made out of the semantically highly charged material of polychrome terracotta, or (in some cases) of painted wood. Even though both materials were not valuable, they nevertheless had special significance due to their far-reaching connotations in the Renaissance, and must be understood as vehicles of meaning in regard to intermedia altarpieces.

In the case of terracotta, it was Lorenzo Ghiberti who, calling on Pliny, described sculpting with clay in the words: "madre dell'arte statuaria e della

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7   For an in-depth treatment of this issue see Klaus Krüger: Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren. Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien, Munich 2001, pp. 11ff.

8   The theological position in regard to the medium of sculpture is explained in Hans Belting: Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst, Munich 1990, pp. 331ff. as well as in Reinhard Hoeps: Aus dem Schatten des goldenen Kalbes. Skulptur in theologischer Perspektive, Paderborn et al. 1999.

9   For a general account of this topic see Kathleen Weil-Garris: 'Were this clay but marble', a reassessment of Emilian terra cotta group sculpture, in: Andrea Emiliani (Ed.): Le arti a Bologna e in Emilia dal XVI al XVII secolo, Bologna 1982, pp. 61–79 and Grazia Agostini/Luisa Ciammitti (Eds.): Niccolò dell'Arca. Seminario di Studi. Atti del Convegno, Bologna 1987, Bologna 1989.

scultura."[10] In Christian tradition, clay also bears the mythic connotations of being an archetypal substance.[11] For Pomponio Gaurico this sufficed to allot primacy – among the *sculptores* – to the *fictores* working with this malleable material, analogous to the God of Genesis.[12]

Thus, terracotta had desirable characteristics independent of its material value and was preferred to marble in sacred buildings in Italy during the Early Renaissance and, especially after Petrarch, was considered to represent virtue.[13] The same was valid for the materials of wood and clay, which could signify close affinity to nature and the complete inverse of artificiality in early modern trea-

10   **Quoted by Mario Pepe in: Luigi Grassi/Mario Pepe (Eds.): Dizionario di Arte, Tu-**rin 1995, s.v. scultura, pp. 747–749, p. 748. Ghiberti apparently was acquainted with Pliny's *Naturalis historia* even before it was published in 1469 in Venice and, in Italian translation, in 1476. Cf. Susan Jean Vick: Pictura and the Concept of the Cognate Arts in Florence, New Brunswick 2001, p. 30.

11   In Christian tradition terracotta references the notion of God the Creator as a potter who mixes three kinds of colored dust with his saliva and forms man as the first "sculpture." On further sources of images and texts that adopt the view from Genesis 2.7, such as *Libri Carolini*, Isidor of Seville and Rabanus Maurus, see Hans-Rudolf Meier: Ton, Stein und Stuck. Materialaspekte in der Bilderfrage des Früh- und Hochmittelalters, in: Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft 30 (2003), pp. 35–52, p. 42. **Johannes Taubert: Farbige Skulpturen. Bedeutung – Fassung – Restaurierung,** Munich 1978, p. 11, points out an alternative source in the Mayan legend of the genesis of man where the gods first made humankind out of clay, and after such figures dissolved in the rain, the waterresistant material of wood was used. On the history of ideas-context of the self-mythologisation of Renaissance artists see Rudolf Preimesberger: Albrecht Dürer. ,…propriis sic… coloribus', in: Porträt, ed. by Rudolf Preimesberger et al., Berlin 1999, pp. 210–219, pp. 212–213, including older literature.

12   Marco Collareta: Le immagini e l'arte. Riflessioni sulla scultura dipinta nelle fonti letterarie, in: Exh. cat.: Scultura lignea. Lucca 1200–1425, Lucca, Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Mansi/Museo Nazionale di Villa Guinigi, ed. by Clara Baracchini, 2 vols., vol. 1, Florence 1995, pp. 1–7, p. 5.

13   "G[audium]: Variis delector statuis. R[atio]: Harum quippe artium, manu naturam imitantium una est, quam plasticen dixere haec gypso & ceris operatur ac tenaci argilla, quae cognatis licet artibus, cunctis amicitior sit, virtuti aut certe minus inimica modestiae in primis & frugalitati, […]." Francesco Petrarca: Operum, 3 vols., vol. 1, Ridgewood 1965 [reprint Basel 1554], p. 51. Meier points out that also in Carolingian times in Rabanus Maurus's *De universo*, following Isidor of Seville's *Etymologiae* (book 19, chapter 12), works in plaster and stucco were simply called "sculptures," and these materials were never subject to the criticism of idolatry. Cf. Meier: Ton, Stein und Stuck (as fn. 11), pp. 40–41. Meier sees the reason for this in the fact that such works were integrated into the architecture of Church buildings and, because of their polychrome state, were more closely related to painting than to sculpture. – In general on the issue of the semantics of materials, see Monika Wagner/Dietmar Rübel (Eds.): Material in Kunst und Alltag, Berlin 2002, **especially the chapters by Bruno Reudenbach and Karl Schawelka,** additionally, on material und technique, see Majorie Trusted (Ed.): The Making of Sculpture. The Materials and Techniques of European Sculpture, London 2007.

tises on art. The opening lines of Leon Battista Alberti's treatise on sculpture present a much-cited example, in which his narrative has sculpture begin with a chance image formed by nature: "They probably occasionally observed in a tree-trunk or clod of earth and other similar inanimate objects certain outlines in which, with slight alterations, something very similar to the real faces of Nature was presented." According to Alberti, as the art of humankind grew more refined, artists became increasingly proficient in creating things that resembled the works of nature out of inorganic materials "[…] even when they found no assistance of half-formed images in the material to hand, they were still able to make the likeness they wished."[14] Alberti outlined the goal of artistic creation as: "[…] the work they have undertaken shall appear to the observer to be similar to the real objects of Nature."[15] Paradigmatic for 15th-century perception of sculpture, Alberti was convinced that its merit lay in the medium's ability to imitate nature perfectly. Wood and clay had an intrinsic affinity to nature as materials, and thus they required less artistic manipulation than metals or stone. In comparison to the latter, they were considered less "artificial" and more "natural." Their use in intermedia altarpieces would certainly have significantly reduced aesthetic distance for the beholders of the sculptures of saints. It is therefore obvious that religiously motivated touching of statues of saints was linked in some way to the use of these materials.

Transitions/Transgressions

Reading the use of materials such as clay and wood as referencing Christianity, virtue, and naturalness does not yet adequately explain why a sculpted element was placed at the very centre in front of a background painting or a two-dimensionally painted tabernacle. Rather, we can assume that, in the new representational contexts of intermedia altarpieces, sculptures developed a new and different form of presence that was directly linked to the connotations they conveyed while guaranteeing special efficacy for the entire tabernacle.

Since the biblical narrative of Genesis, plastic reality and colour are the essential representational characteristics of humankind. Their anthropological properties play an important role for theories of embodiment – in the sense of a potential identification of humankind with the medium of sculpture – and can be designated as the features that definitely make a sculpture appear specifically lifelike.[16] We see the ontological transition from inanimate sculpture to human

14   Leon Battista Alberti: Opere volgari, vol. 3: I. De Pictura/Della Pittura [1434/1435], ed. by Cecil Grayson, Bari 1973, p. 121 (De statua, section 1).
15   See ibid., p. 121 (De statua, section 2).
16   Taubert: Farbige Skulpturen (as fn. 11), p. 11. For studies on the implications that the topic of images coming to life involves see Ernst Kris/Otto Kurz: Die Legende

life mirrored especially in the suggestion of movement, which is articulated in a wide range of anecdotes – from artists carving statues to the total liberation of the latter from the fetters of an inorganic material substance.

By means of the sculpture's almost life-size dimensions and its animated corporality in intermedia altarpieces, the central devotional image conveyed identity and proximity to the devout observer. The boundaries between the reality of the image and that of the beholder had become, to an extent, fluid due to the suggested transgression of aesthetic boundaries, strongly underpinning corporeal identification with the viewer.[17] Manifold legends from the Middle Ages and early modern times have been passed on to us about miracles of artworks coming to life and about visual imagery stepping into the space of worshippers.

Greatly due to the fact that the sculptures we are dealing with here were not free-standing statues within Church buildings, but instead located in a well-defined pictorial space, their dynamic presence was enhanced by their relation to a painted panel as a static point of reference. It is therefore justifiable to speak of medium-specific enhancement of their impact on beholders: The sculptures' suggestion of movement makes them appear to advance out of the altarpiece context.

During the 15th century, defying the flatness of the picture surface was a key issue in art and art theory. When Alberti wrote his treatise on painting in 1435, he appealed for more realism in painting by rendering the faces in such a way as to evoke the illusion of plasticity on two-dimensional surfaces: "In painting I would praise […] those faces which seem to stand out from the pictures as if they were sculpted […]."[18] Interestingly, he does not describe protrusion from a flat surface "as resembling reality" but in terms of the vocabulary usual for sculpture: "come scolpiti." Alberti was of course addressing fictive transgression through painted *rilievo*. But in intermedia artworks something else occurred: The medium of sculpture enhanced painting and vice versa because – in their direct juxtaposition on one common support – the potential of the early modern image became manifest. However, the convincingness of an intermedia altarpiece's effect in no way relied on a paragone-based representation, but instead on all visual media pursuing a mutual goal.

vom Künstler. Ein geschichtlicher Versuch, Frankfurt/M. 1995 (original edition Vienna 1934) and especially Victor I. Stoichita: L'effet Pygmalion. Pour une anthropologie historique des simulacres, Geneva 2008.

17   Hoeps: Aus dem Schatten des goldenen Kalbes (as fn. 8), pp. 87–88 as well as Krüger: Das Bild als Schleier (as fn. 7), with his fundamental study on transitional states and aesthetic illusion in early modern art.

18   Alberti: Opere volgari (as fn. 14), p. 89 (De pictura, book 2, section 46).

The statues themselves assumed the role that Alberti saw fulfilled in the bridging function of emotions[19] in successful history paintings.[20] By gazing out of the image the figures involve the beholder at the altar directly in a *Sacra Conversazione*. The images address beholders with the aim of stirring their emotions – inciting either empathy or fear, evasion or nearness. The visual relationship established between pictured persons and beholders can be characterized in terms of motion.[21] The almost life-size dimensions and the fact that the sculptures encroach into the viewer's space were pivotal characteristics for intermedia altarpieces to achieve the desired impact, underscoring the importance of the statues as intermediary agents. A three-dimensional devotional image experienced haptically and set at the centre of an intermedia altarpiece opened up new channels of making it accessible to believers and invited their active participation.

Vasari's *Vite* provide insight into the contemporary reception of the central figure of a saint. Although he only mentioned three intermedia altarpieces, his acknowledgement of *Tavola Bernardi* is particularly interesting with regard to the subject matter in question here. In fact, his comments allow us to rediscover the terms in which the altarpieces were discussed at the time (fig. 4). As in the other examples and already by virtue of its three-dimensionality as opposed to two-dimensional altarpieces, Vasari remarks that the polychrome terracotta sculpture of St. Anthony appears to step out of the altarpiece and stand on the threshold of pictorial space and the real space occupied by the viewer. The suggestion of movement is strengthened by a combination of different media:

19 Moshe Barasch addressed this issue under the term "Affektbrücke," see Moshe Barasch: Der Ausdruck in der italienischen Kunsttheorie der Renaissance, in: Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft 12 (1967), pp. 33–69, p. 38.

20 "E piacemi sia nella storia chi ammonisca e insegni a noi quello che ivi si facci, o chiami con la mano a vedere, o con viso cruccioso e con gli occhi turbati minacci che niuno verso loro vada, o dimostri qualche pericolo o cosa ivi maravigliosa, o te inviti a piagnere con loro insieme o a ridere. E così qualunque cosa fra loro o teco facciano i dipinti, tutto apartenga a ornare o a insegnarti la storia." Quoted from Alberti: Opere volgari (as fn. 14), pp. 72–74 (book 2, section 42).

21 See Norbert Herold: Bild der Wahrheit – Wahrheit des Bildes. Zur Deutung des 'Blicks aus dem Bild' in der Cusanischen Schrift 'De visione Dei', in: Volker Gerhardt/Norbert Herold (Eds.): Wahrheit und Begründung, Würzburg 1985, pp. 71–98, p. 75; he bases his interpretation of the archer at Nürnberger Markt on Nicolaus Cusanus' *De visione Dei*: the archer, by means of extreme foreshortening, seems to aim at the beholder. For basic further reading on identificatory agency in images see Wolfgang Kemp: Kunstwerk und Betrachter. Der rezeptionsästhetische Ansatz, in: Hans Belting et al. (Eds.): Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung, Berlin ⁵1996, pp. 241–258, pp. 247–248; on the limitation and reciprocal complementation of the aesthetics and psychology of reception see Kemp's introduction in: Wolfgang Kemp (Ed.): Der Betrachter ist im Bild. Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik, Köln 1985.

Especially the varying degrees of depth lead to a media-specific disparity between feigned and actual plasticity. The physiognomic resemblance between the head of the statue of St. Anthony at the centre and that of the painted figure of St. Benedict on the left guides the gaze, causing it to oscillate between fictive and factual corporality, between two- and three-dimensionality.

Vasari assessed the sculpture of St. Anthony Abbas as "cosa prontissima e bellissima," while also mentioning that it was set up within a *tavola*.[22] His choice of terms referenced a special pictorial semantics that addressed the sculpted figure of the saint: The category of *vivacità* or *prontezza* of represented figures was a familiar topos that addressed the expectation of fictional vitality in art and was an aesthetic demand of contemporary art criticism.[23] Motion as evidence of life and *enargeia* were the notions with which the impression of vitality could be grasped in the case of *static* images.[24] This effect was achieved through plasticity, life-size dimensions, and by transgressing aesthetic representational boundaries. The phenomenon of suggested media transgression between painting and polychrome sculpture as well as their reciprocal enhancement can be appropriately designated as *media contrapposto*.

In intermedia representations, life-size figures made of polychrome wood or clay were charged in a specific way, which also influenced the aesthetic impact of the accompanying painted panels. A distinctive characteristic of polychrome sculptures is the immediacy with which they address beholders, while the flat, painted areas were integrated for the rhetorical purpose of *persuasio*. The impact of painted panels was enhanced especially in the case of intermedia Calvary panels in which the crucifix is fixed directly onto the support, because

22 On the term *tavola* and its use see Wenderholm: Bild und Berührung (as fn. 2), pp. 19ff.

23 Joachim Poeschke: 'Prontezza'. Zu Donatellos Georgsstatue und Albertis mutmaßlichem Selbstbildnis, in: Damian Dombrowski (Ed.): Zwischen den Welten. Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte für Jürg Meyer zur Capellen. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag, Weimar 2001, pp. 28–38 investigates the notion of *prontezza*; on the category of animation see as basic reading material **Frank Fehrenbach: Calor nativus – Color vitale. Prolegomena zu einer Ästhetik des 'Lebendigen Bildes' in der frühen Neuzeit**, in: Ulrich Pfisterer/Max Seidel (Eds.): Visuelle Topoi. Erfindung und tradiertes Wissen in den Künsten der italienischen Renaissance, Munich/Berlin, pp. 151–170, esp. p. 151, n. 4, with suggestions for further reading.

24 On *enargeia* see Valeska von Rosen: Die Enargeia des Gemäldes. Zu einem vergessenen Inhalt des Ut-pictura-poesis und seiner Relevanz für das cinquecenteske Bildkonzept, in: Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft 27 (2000), pp. 171–208, as well as a comprehensive study with a focus on the phenomenon of intermedia images in Wenderholm: Bild und Berührung (as fn. 2), pp. 107ff. Furthermore, see the fundamental study on transgressivity of artworks by Frank Fehrenbach: Kohäsion und Transgression. Zur Dialektik lebendiger Bilder, in: Ulrich Pfisterer/Anja Zimmermann (Eds.): Animationen, Transgressionen. Das Kunstwerk als Lebewesen, Berlin 2005, pp. 1–40.

the feigned corporality achieved by *rilievo* was underpinned by the actual three-dimensionality of the plastic medium.

Thus, in Vincenzo Tamagni's Crucifix altar (fig. 1), the fabricated plasticity of the purely painted stem of the cross is accentuated by St. Mary Magdalene appearing to hug it – an artifice on which the three-dimensionality of the pictorial space largely depends.[25] The plastic Crucifix was set on the carved suppedaneum, which was transformed into an intermediary zone between two- and three-dimensionality. Tamagni painted his figures of saints with great dedication to plasticity in depicting the folds of their clothes and shadows so that, by these means, their corporality would much resemble true three-dimensionality. Pietro Perugino too succeeded in achieving the same effect in the double-sided altarpiece for San Francesco a Monteripido in Perugia (fig. 5).[26] As the original Crucifix has survived in its original position, we can closely scrutinize how the two representational media interact. A crucifix some 40 years older made by Giovanni Tedesco was mounted onto Perugino's background painting, evidencing the esteem enjoyed by art north of the Alps in the field of religious devotional images. Just as in Francisco da Hollanda's reflections 100 years later or those of a contemporary on his travels during the early cinquecento, the non-artificial and non-idealized appearance of northern sculpture was considered as evidencing a high degree of truth and thereby seen, in this connection, as being especially effective for evoking religious emotions, in particular empathy. Secretary Antonio de Beatis left one of the rare testimonies to the reception of northern Crucifixes while he accompanied Roman Cardinal Luigi d'Aragona on a trip to Germany, France, and the Netherlands in 1517. On viewing a Calvary representation executed north of the Alps he noted down that he had seen "crucifixi revelatissimi e grandissimi," describing the effect they had on him in the following words: "el che veramente induce non meno terrore che devozione."[27] In close affinity to the *terribilità* attributed to Michelangelo, "German" crucifixes enjoyed great popularity in Italy during the 15th and early 16th centuries due to the tension arising from the brutal excessiveness that marked the veristic style of art north of the Alps and due to their impact on beholders, inciting empathy or *compassio*.

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25   Unfortunately no information can be found on the Crucifix that originally was attached to Tamagni's painted altarpiece panel.

26   On the Pala di Monteripido see Pietro Scarpellini: Il Perugino, Milan 1984, cat. 127, as well as the fundamental study on Perugino by Rudolf Hiller von Gaertringen: Raffaels Lernerfahrung in der Werkstatt Peruginos. Kartonverwendung und Motivübernahme im Wandel, Munich et al. 1999.

27   Quoted in Valentin Groebner: **Ungestalten. Die visuelle Kultur der Gewalt im Mittelalter**, Munich/Vienna 2003, pp. 96–97.

Fig. 5   Pietro Perugino/Giovanni Tedesco: Pala di Monteripido, 1502–1504 and ca. 1460, Perugia, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria.

Just as we find in the example of Tamagni's image, in the *Pala di Monteripido* the gaze of the beholder follows the eyes and exchange of looks of the painted figures – who look at the Crucifix as well as out of the painting at the faithful. In the example in San Gimignano, the realistic details of a stone and a wedge appear to hold the vertical beam of the cross upright, accentuating and defining, with the front edge of the frame, the threshold between the beholder and the image. The sculptural object can be described in relation to the painted background as well as to the aesthetic boundaries of the frame, whose specific characteristics lie in its ability to link the respective realities of image and beholder while simultaneously segregating the two.[28]

Because no written sources have survived that testify to contemporary reception of intermedia images, we must take recourse to the *sacri monti* that similarly combined background painting and sculptures to make a kind of history painting resembling an immobile holy theatre. The example of the Crucifixion chapel of the sacro monte di San Vivaldo built in the early 16th century, only a short distance from Florence, makes apparent how materiality, colour, and real as well as feigned plastic qualities address worshippers' emotional and physical (tactile, corporeal) empathy. The faithful enter at a lower level and, once inside, are confronted by a cavity in the floor that channels their gaze to offer an ideal view of the Crucifixion group on the floor above. Viewers are not only

28   On this topic see Krüger: Das Bild als Schleier (as fn. 17), pp. 60ff.

guided by the opening in the floor, but find themselves in close company with life-size terracotta figures who demonstrate the appropriate reactions by displaying their emotions of grief and mourning. A prerequisite for such specific perception was that the artwork not only addressed the faculty of sight, but that it appealed to all the senses by means of its representational media transgressing into the space occupied by beholders, making their perception comprehensively corporeal, while at the same time corporeal perception was the precondition for the intended mode of reception to become manifest.

Mobility and Haptic Image Strategies

The specific function of the central sculpture in intermedia altarpieces needs to be investigated in regard to the question of why such combinations of various representational media were considered the appropriate and perhaps even the necessary solution for places of worship in the 15th century. Presumably, because sculptures could be experienced tactually, their physical presence was regarded as having a different status in devotional practices than the flat surface of a painting. Due to the fact that intermedia altars were largely dedicated to patron saints called on against plague and sickness, a real corporeal and tactual experience of the saint by the suffering was not only logical but highly desirable. Worn members of the statues, such as the foot of Antonio Rossellino's *St. Sebastian*,[29] evidence an aesthetic appeal to our sense of touch (*tactus*), targeting the emotions of beholders and offering consolation via haptic experience. Contemporary woodcuts reveal that the desire for tactile proximity to saints was especially prevalent in the case of plague altarpieces: As votive picture offerings to the individual saints they depict physical contact with the same as a means of ensuring their actual presence.[30] Because of the transgressive character of factual and feigned plasticity, it was employed as proof of religious efficacy in intermedia images.

The transgressive quality peculiar to statues of saints before a painted background addressed the aspect of their intrinsic mobility, and cannot be comprehended without considering the cultural background of religious processions in the Middle Ages and early modern times.[31] Research has shown that worship

29   Francesco Botticini/Antonio Rossellino, *Tavola of St. Sebastian*, executed after 1476, today in Empoli, Museo della Collegiata, see Wenderholm: **Bild und Berührung** (as fn. 2), cat. 19.

30   Cf. the example of the Swabian woodcut of St. Antonius Abbas made around 1440–50, in: Wenderholm: Bild und Berührung (as fn. 2), ill. 28.

31   Processions were understood as visualizations of the specifically Christian notion of the mobility of saints and holy beings, see Peter Brown: The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity, Chicago 1981.

of saints in medieval times was not restricted to staging the sacred inside church buildings. Instead, worship was channeled to focus primarily on holy objects, also at the heart of religious processions – whereby processions must be viewed as virtual manifestations of sacred space that had been transposed from the inside of churches and chapels to the outside.[32] Hence, Edward Muir, basing his thoughts on Arnold van Gennep's theory of the *rites de passages*, describes processions as mobile and extended threshold zones in which the saints were taken out of their arcane existence and periodically unveiled to worshippers.[33]

Muir pointed out the impracticability of taking a whole retable over a specific size and weight along on a procession, so that we can with certainty assert that such festive events centering around a revered object – such as the *Pala d'Oro* in S. Marco in Venice – proffered an additional possibility for believers to ritually come into contact and confer with the saints. The plastic devotional images of intermedia altarpieces provided a practical alternative: The saint or Crucifix could not only be readily removed and was at the free disposal of the clergy, but could also fit into an extensive framework (static and immobile) and a comprehensive program of images.

Intermedia altarpieces demonstrated the desired mobility in a formal way by deploying different media that referenced removability and presence: The sculptures – because of the material they are made of, their three-dimensionality, and their different state to that of the painted background – appeared to optically advance out of the retable context towards worshippers, and for religious ceremonies they could actually be removed. In this case they literally "moved out of" the altarpiece. Indeed, most of the figures of saints could be physically taken out of an altarpiece context, and it is only logical to conclude, as can be verified in individual cases, that they accompanied processions celebrating the respective saint's feast day. The ritual parading of sculptures of saints in the center of people clad in ceremonial dress gave impetus to the reception of such statues as having actual presence and efficacy because, by appearing to move with the crowd much like the celebrants, their credibility as intermediary agents on earth was enhanced.

The sculptures' aesthetic impact of actual presence and liveliness was facilitated by a particular that was not related to the formal qualities of representation. In this regard it must be underscored that form and actual function of the compound altarpieces often greatly diverged: Intermediary altars appear to

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32   Edward Muir: The Eye of the Procession. Ritual Ways of Seeing in the Renaissance, in: Nicholas Howe (Ed.): Ceremonial Culture in Pre-Modern Europe, Notre Dame, Indina 2007, pp. 129–153, p. 133: "Instead of sacred places, medieval Christians oriented worship around sacred objects, most notably the eucharistic body of Christ and the remains of the dead."

33   See ibid., p. 131.

have been box-like receptacles for the most part, rather than shrines that could be opened and closed. Auratization of the sculptures at the center of the altarpieces was achieved by artistic means alone and the valence intrinsic to the plastic medium. The fact that the central piece of sculpture was seen as a relic receptacle was one of the possible modes of reception. Hans Belting pointed out the analogy between relics and three-dimensional seated statues in altars, arguing both – which much resemble one another – address the physical presence of the saint. "The relic as *pars pro toto* was the body of a saint, who remained present even in death and gave proof of his or her life by miracles. […]. The bodylike sculptures made the saint physically present."[34]

It has been proven that relics were encased in a number of the centrally positioned sculptures. The Borghesi altarpiece contained a highly revered relic in the figure of St. Catherine. The fact that the donor Niccolò Borghesi was healed evidenced, for contemporaries, her powers.[35] The hidden relic was embodied in the figure of the saint, thus acquiring a form, by means of art, that could be haptically experienced. Indeed, we must ask if not alone the three-dimensional form and the structural orchestration of the shrine-like receptacle in which they were set already bore a special connotation for the sculptures. Accordingly, similar to a relic tabernacle, the sole material presence of the sculpture of a saint evoked his or her presence as well as his or her powers and offered the haptic experience of the same.[36] This seems quite obvious if we consider the many reports of miracles allegedly performed by statues. The now dismantled St. Nicolas of Tolentino Altarpiece that was executed around 1478 for the Finetti family in Sant'Agostino in Siena presents a well-documented example.[37] The polychrome wooden figure of the saint carved by Giacomo Cozzarelli is 180 cm high and was originally placed in the middle of two painted panels. SS. Cosmas and

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34 Hans Belting: Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art, Chicago 1997, p. 299.

35 **On the now dismantled Borghesi altarpiece, which was made by the artists Ma-**
   riotto Albertinelli and Giacomo Cozzarelli 1509–1511/12 and was formerly in
   S. Spirito in Siena, see Wenderholm: Bild und Berührung (as fn. 2), cat. 108.

36 On the material presence of saints and, in devotional practices of the Middle Ages, the assumed identity and presence of salvation in representations as well as of the representations themselves, see Belting: Bild und Kult (as fn. 8) and also Thomas Lentes: Auf der Suche nach dem Ort des Gedächtnisses. Thesen zur Umwertung der symbolischen Formen in Abendmahlslehre, Bildtheorie und Bildandacht des 14.–16. Jahrhunderts, in: Klaus Krüger/Alessandro Nova (Eds.): Imagination und Wirklichkeit. Zum Verhältnis von mentalen und realen Bildern in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit, Mainz 2000, pp. 21–46, esp. pp. 22–23.

37 For a more in-depth treatment see Wenderholm: Bild und Berührung (as fn. 2), cat. 96. See also for a general account Serpolli: Crocifissi a rilievo su pittura (as fn. 2) and Elvio Lunghi: La Passione degli Umbri. Crocifissi di legno in Valle Umbra tra Medioevo e Rinascimento, Foligno 2000.

Damian together with representations of the miracles they wrought were illustrated on the two now lost panels, and they were accompanied by a program – probably in the predella – the content of which is best comprehended in the context of salvation and miraculous deliverance or healing. The commission for the St. Nicolas altarpiece probably was closely connected to the relic of the saint's finger that was first mentioned in Sant'Agostino in 1467. Girolamo Macchi's 1671 reports of miracles testify to the saint's great popularity in Siena. The altar of the first Augustinian hermit to be canonized was overhauled in 1747 when the paintings were taken away, but the wooden figure was again installed and, according to 18th- and 19th-century eyewitnesses, was taken on processions in honour of the saint. In the case of the intermedia Calvaries of Umbrian Franciscan Observants, the antiquity of objects guaranteed their authenticity and potency even without relics.[38] Visual rhetorics explains the use of the Crucifix so that later generations of faithful and Observants could experience Christ appearing before them, too, just as he did for St. Francis. Separable as a haptic image from a painted background, the historically timeless representation of the body of Christ as a veristic Crucifix is an evocation of the *verum corpus* as the "true body" worshipped by the Franciscan friars.

Intermedia images present a significant response to the subject of hapticity in painted panels. In the context of the new orientation of religious painting during the 15th century, they present a solution to the aesthetic proposition of an image advancing out of its realm into the reality of the beholder – as was demanded by Alberti and picture-making practices at the time.

Intermedia altarpieces are testimonies of transitional alternative solutions addressing the problem of how this was to be achieved: They were made during the nascent phase of early modern genre formation and before the paragone debate underwent theoretical concretization in written form. Therefore, they must be viewed as having made an independent contribution to image-theory problems of the time. The conditions that facilitated the invention of the intermedia altarpieces are to be found in the fact that the dividing lines between the genres were fluid in the 15th century, and that they provided the option of transgressing the limits of working in just one medium. Because they were formally and essentially variable they could be used for a number of functions and represented artistic experimentation in different media before the canonization of genres. As a simultaneous phenomenon to the development of the purely painted *pala*, it is justifiable to view them as an attempt to rejuvenate devotional images in which the pronounced haptic experience of images played a fundamental role. The key characteristic is not in deceiving the eyes as we know from

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38   Because no actual corporeal relics of Christ exist, the image itself serves as a surrogate to fill this void, see Belting: Bild und Kult (as fn. 8), p. 333.

trompe-l'œil painting, but rather that the beholders' senses are made to oscillate between visual and the possibility of haptic experience. Intermedia altarpieces made a significant contribution to laying the foundations for a devotional art form that had a tactile and visual impact on viewers while also reflecting key positions of contemporary art theory and practices.