

AUTHENTICITY AND FICTION: ON THE PICTORIAL CONSTRUCTION OF INNER PRESENCE IN EARLY MODERN ITALY

Klaus Krüger

In conjunction with an Italian votive image from the 1950s (Fig. 7), a practicable procedure promises to elicit visions, facilitating the veneration of a local saint, or *santino*, as one would say. The ‘grande visione del grande Santo’, as the inscription has it, can be expected to appear after the worshipper has held his gaze steadily on the illustrated black-and-white negative for a full minute, and then turned his eyes upward, toward the heavens. There, he will be greeted by the lifelike countenance of Don Bosco, in the shape of a radiant, luminous apparition.¹

It remains to be determined whether such optically based instructions for summoning ‘visions’ are to be regarded as the products of naive popular belief, or instead as instances of subtle irony. In any event, we can hardly fail to perceive the continuity of such practices within the Christian tradition, practices employing mystical images, which stretches all the way back to ancient times. That the visible, material image is an instrument leading from the visible to the invisible (*per visibilia ad invisibilia*), that it serves as a mere medium of transmission in an anagogical sense, as a gateway to a higher, imaginary actuality, one which alone, in its real dimensions, opens onto the inward faculty of the imagination and therefore remains ineffable in pictorial terms, is the familiar core idea of all theories dealing with mystical images. We encounter this theory in perpetually novel formulations from Augustine to Gregory the Great, from the Pseudo Dionysius

¹ Annamaria Rivera, *Il mago, il santo, la morte, la festa. Forme religiose nella cultura popolare* (Bari: Edizioni Dedalo, 1988), p. 33. All translations mine unless noted otherwise.



Fig. 7: Sorprendente Foto Apparizione, anonymous votive image. 1950s.

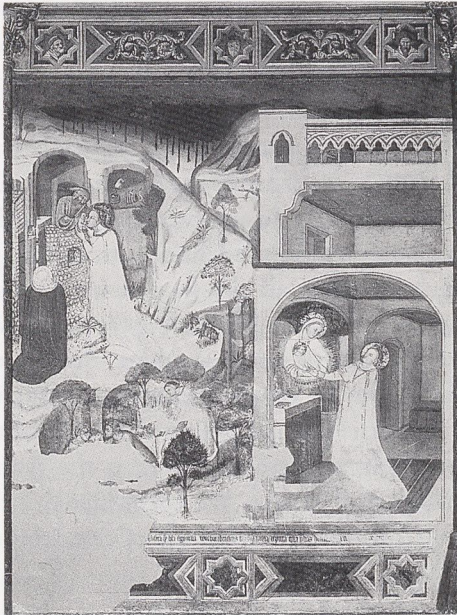


Fig. 8: Andrea di Bartolo, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria Praying*, Assisi, Church of San Francesco. c. 1370. Reproduced courtesy of the Sacro Convento Assisi, P. G. Ruf.

all the way to Bernard of Clairvaux, from Bonaventura to Thomas Aquinas and well beyond.²

This same idea is the basis for the descriptive topics of such visions, as found in hagiographical writings and devotional literature, visions in whose geneses images play a decisive role. Already the *Life of Pope Gregory VII*, dating from the late eleventh century, tells how St Peter appeared to him in a vision, and exactly in the form familiar to him from pictorial representations ('ut in picturis videre solebat').³ And a legend from c. 1375 describes explicitly how Catherine of Siena, when raising her eyes heavenward ('levando gli occhi verso il cielo'), saw often apparitions of Sts Peter and Paul, Johannes and Dominic, who always assumed the same poses she had seen them taking earlier in painted pictures hanging in church: 'in quella forma che veduta l'avea dipinto nella chiesa.'⁴ Something similar, according to legends handed down from the late medieval period, was experienced by Catherine of Alexandria, who was once given a painted panel by a hermit which depicted the Virgin with the infant Jesus. She surrendered to the image in such a state of self-absorbed contemplation that on the same night, in the silent darkness of her chamber, she actually saw an apparition of the Holy Virgin, an event which, as we know, culminated in her mystic marriage to Christ (Fig. 8).⁵ Regularly recurring testimonials of this kind, which document the appearance of visions preceded by the viewing of painted images, could be multiplied without much difficulty, and the phenomenon they describe is by no means confined to

² Ernst Benz, 'Christliche Mystik und christliche Kunst', in *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 12 (1934), 22–48; Ernst Benz, *Die Vision. Erfahrungsformen und Bilderwelt* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1969), pp. 313ff.; Sixten Ringbom, 'Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions: Notes on the Place of Art in Late Medieval Private Piety', in *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 73 (1969), 159–70, especially pp. 162ff.; David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 161ff.

³ Otto Lehmann-Brockhaus, *Schriftquellen zur Kunstgeschichte des 11. und 12. Jahrhunderts für Deutschland, Lothringen und Italien*, 2 vols (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1938), I, 724, no. 3049.

⁴ Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 105–06.

⁵ Meiss, pp. 107ff.; Klaus Krüger, 'Bildandacht und Bergeinsamkeit. Der Eremit als Rollenspiel in der städtischen Gesellschaft', in *Malerei und Stadtkultur in der Dantezeit. Die Argumentation der Bilder*, ed. by Hans Belting and Dieter Blume (Munich: Hirmer, 1989), pp. 187–200 (p. 190).

medieval times.⁶ Just how contagious and how prevalent such conceptions remained into the early modern period is exemplified by an engraving from the late sixteenth century (Fig. 9) illustrating the religious praxis of the *imaginaria visio*.⁷ The image shows a Carmelite monk kneeling in an open landscape, his gaze raised heavenward in contemplative rapture. There, he beholds the radiant apparition of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus, and in the form, moreover, of a framed panel painting. It functions like an open window that leads his gaze upward and into the depths of the celestial beyond, visible through a corona of clouds. Here, the pious Carmelite actually sees ‘per visibilia ad invisibilia’, whereby the *imaginary* actuality of Mary as a vision virtually coincides with her *pictorial* reality as man-made image.

Clearly, for the monk who is experiencing this *imaginaria visio*, the event is bound up with definite salvific expectations, all the more so since the mother of God figures here in her privileged role as ‘mediatrix’ and mediator of a celestial Paradise. Mary begins to appear in this role in the Medieval era, not just in her topically recurring characterizations as a ‘window to heaven’ (*fenestra coeli*) or as a ‘window of illumination’ (*fenestra illuminationis*), but also in a multitude of correspondingly conceived pictorial representations in which she appears in a simulated window frame, located directly on the threshold separating the mundane sphere of the beholder from the divine realm beyond it.⁸ A painting created by Vincenzo Foppa c. 1460–70, may here serve as one example among many (Fig. 10).

⁶ For the entire complex of questions about the exchange between images and visions with further examples, see Sixten Ringbom, ‘Devotional Images’, pp. 160ff.; Chiara Frugoni, ‘Le mistiche, le visioni e l’iconografia: rapporti ed influssi’, in *Temi e problemi nella mistica femminile trecentesca (Convegni del Centro di studi sulla spiritualità B medievale, Perugia 1979)* (Todi: Accademia Tudertina, 1983), pp. 137–79; Chiara Frugoni, ‘“Domine, in conspectu tuo omne desiderium meum:” visioni e immagini in Chiara da Montefalco’, in *S. Chiara da Montefalco e il suo tempo (Atti del quarto Convegno di studi storici ecclesiastici, Spoleto 1981)*, ed. by Claudio Leonardi and Enrico Menestò (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1985), pp. 155–75; Freedberg, pp. 283ff.; Victor I. Stoichita, *Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art* (London: Reaktion 1995), pp. 47ff.; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone, 1998).

⁷ Stoichita, p. 60.

⁸ For the theological concept of Mary as *fenestra coeli*, see Yrjö Hirn, *The Sacred Shrine: A Study of Poetry and Art of the Catholic Church* (London: Macmillan, 1912), pp. 343ff.; Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-up in 15th-Century Devotional Painting* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1965), pp. 42ff.; Rona Goffen, ‘Icon and Vision: Giovanni Bellini’s Half-Length Madonnas’, in *Art Bulletin*, 57 (1975), 487–518; Carla Gottlieb, *The Window in Art: From the Window of God to the Vanity of Man* (New York: Abaris, 1981), pp. 69ff.; Hana Hlaváčková and Hana Seifertová, ‘Mostecká Madona — imitatio a symbol’ (The Madonna of Most — Imitation and Symbol), in *Umeni*, 33 (1985), 44–57



Fig. 9: Antoine Wiericx, imaginative vision (*imaginaria visio*), Brussels, Cabinets des Estampes. After 1591. Reproduced courtesy of the Department of Art History, Freie Universität, Berlin.

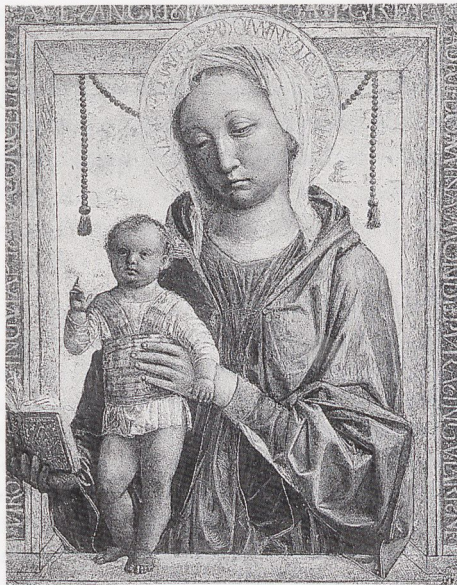


Fig. 10: Vincenzo Foppa, *Madonna and Child*, Milan, Pinacoteca di Castello Sforzesco. c. 1460–70. Reproduced courtesy of the Soprintendenza P.S.A.E. per le province di Milano e Bergamo.

Its iconographic content — Mary offering herself to the eyes of the beholder as an image of hope and a gateway to Paradise — is expressly affirmed in an inscription on the painted frame: ‘Ave Sanctissima Maria Porta paradixi [ecc.]’.⁹

What finds expression in such testimonials and representations is essentially the notion that the painted image functions in a specific manner as a *medium* of vision, and more precisely as a medium situated right in the intermediate zone between concrete sensual experience and the trans-material imaginary. By taking this in-between position, that is to say by performing a continuous mediation between these polarities while also maintaining their dissociation, the image is capable of generating a specific type of experience, one that oscillates in an intricate manner between perceptions of *similarity* and those of *difference*.

It is precisely this function — or better: this particular ontological form, manifested as a medium — to which the painted image owes its special ambivalence, regarding both the degree of reality inhering in its representations, and its claims to possess revelatory and prophetic powers. On the one hand, it functions merely as a transitional locus, and is to a degree transparent in relation to a higher, imaginary actuality, one which alone, in its real dimensions, opens onto the inward faculty of the imagination. The scenes showing Catherine of Alexandria make this quite clear when they repeatedly represent the saint *excessu mentis*, in a state of inner rapture, that is to say: turning away from the panel painting and closing her eyes as she receives the heavenly revelation in an inner vision (Fig. 11). On the other hand, however, the image acts simultaneously as a medium in which precisely the higher reality to be viewed in the imagination assumes a pictorially concretized and hence durable, visible, and more-or-less distinctly characterized shape, one capable, in the end, of meeting the demands of authentic presence.

⁹ Fernanda Wittgens, *Vincenzo Foppa* (Milan: Pizzi, 1949), pp. 57–58 and 96; Maria Teresa Fiorio and Mercedes Garberi, *La Pinacoteca del Castello Sforzesco* (Milan: Electa, 1987), p. 77 (with additional bibliography); *Arte in Lombardia tra Gotico e Rinascimento* [exhibition catalogue, Milan, 1988], ed. by Liana Castelfranchi Vegas (Milan: Fabbri, 1988), pp. 190–91, no. 48; Maria Grazia Balzarini, *Vincenzo Foppa* (Milan: Jac, 1997), p. 154, cat. 13; *Vincenzo Foppa. Un protagonista del Rinascimento*, ed. by Giovanni Agosti, Mauro Natale, and Giovanni Romano (Milan: Skira, 2002), p. 120, cat. 54. The inscription of the frame reads as follows: ‘AVE SANCTISIM[A] MARIA PORTA PARADIXIDOMINA MONDIPURA SINGVLARISNE VIRGO SINGVLARIS TV CONCEPTISTEIXU.’ The tradition and conceptual context of this iconography is fully discussed by Klaus Krüger, *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren. Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien* (Munich: Fink, 2001), pp. 46ff. (English trans. publ. as *Unveiling the Invisible: Image and Aesthetic Illusion in Early Modern Italy* (New York: Zone, 2008, in press)).

As we know, the powers of conviction and actualization that emerge from such graphic concretizations occasionally go so far that for the beholder, the painting in its material presence virtually ‘embodies’ the depicted persona. This aspect too is demonstrated vividly in the scenes of Catherine of Alexandria, that is, in the intimate tenderness with which she receives the Marian image from the hermit’s hands and nestles up against it (Fig. 12). The importance often attained by the material aspect of images in such devotional practices is confirmed by the diary of the Florentine merchant Giovanni Morelli, dating from the early fifteenth century, which often refers to intimate devotions before a panel painting of the Crucifixion. Giovanni kneels down before the image and addresses the individual figures of Christ, Mary, and John directly and insistently, and in cases of illness, he and his son Alberto even implore the image for support and curing via bodily contact. At one point, Giovanni writes, ‘I took hold of the panel with devotion and kissed it in the same places where, during his illness, my son had sweetly kissed it.’¹⁰

Accordingly, the image’s constitutive ambivalence — sketched here in somewhat abbreviated form — between materiality and transparency, between original and reproductive existence, between similarity and difference, is intimately bound up with its affects on the beholder. More precisely, we encounter the question whether the potency of pictorial experience on the part of the observer/believer leads *either* toward the fixation in the beholder’s mind of something he regards as concrete and objective, thereby reducing the scope available to the play of fantasy by delivering the imprint of a complete and coherent illusion, *or* whether the image instead activates and liberates the imagination, facilitating the production of individualized interior images. Needless to say, behind this question lies another of far-reaching complexity, namely that concerning the social and religious effectiveness inhering in relations of authority and emancipation, and

¹⁰ ‘[L]evatomi in piè, presi con divozione la tavola e ne’ propri luoghi basciandola, dove dolcemente il mio figliuolo avea nella sua infermità baciata [...] moltissime volte, tenendo nelle braccia la tavola, basciai il Crocifisso e la figura della sua Madre e dello Evangelista’: Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli, *Ricordi*, ed. by Vittore Branca (Florence: Le Monnier, 1956), pp. 475–91. (p. 487 and 491). For this important source see Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Academic, 1980), pp. 176ff.; Michele Bacci, ‘Pro remedio animae’. *Immagini sacre e pratiche devozionali in Italia centrale (secoli XIII XIV)* (Pisa: ETS, 2000), pp. 138ff.; Klaus Krüger, ‘Bild und Bühne. Dispositive des imaginären Blicks’, in *Transformationen des Religiösen. Performativität und Textualität im Geistlichen Spiel*, ed. by Ingrid Kasten and Erika Fischer-Lichte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), pp. 218–48.



Fig. 11: Andrea di Bartolo, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria Praying*, Assisi, Church of San Francesco. *c.* 1370. Detail. Reproduced courtesy of the Sacro Convento Assisi, P. G. Ruf.



Fig. 12: Andrea di Bartolo, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria Praying*, Assisi, Church of San Francesco. *c.* 1370. Detail. Reproduced courtesy of the Sacro Convento Assisi, P. G. Ruf.

not least of all questions concerning the criteria, exegetical competence, and norm-defining powers of pictorially generated authenticity.¹¹

The illustration of the *imaginaria visio* (Fig. 9) already suggests the dimensions of this nexus of factors. The Carmelite monk appears within an expanded open landscape as a self-determined individual involved in the exercise of personal religious devotion; he does not seem especially constrained either by collective norms or by any particular institution, for example, his own religious order. Nevertheless, he has in fact been allotted a fixed position within a distinctly hierarchical structure controlling the bestowal of celestial illuminations, which he now takes up in the role of the recipient who kneels in a posture of gratitude and humility.

A slightly earlier painting from 1561 by Michele Tosini, which is situated in a chapel of the nunnery of San Vincenzo in Prato, yields a similar constellation (Pl. 1).¹² The beholder assumes a position comparable to that adopted by our Carmelite, for he is confronted with a perspective arrangement organized into progressively receding and ascending stages in relation to which he is consigned the most inferior position. Removed into the distance and surrounded by a bright aureole of heavenly clouds, the standing Virgin appears recognizably in pictorial format. She is set off from the saints congregating in the foreground by means of a painted frame, at one time even more visually prominent, because worked up into plastic relief. As with the *imaginaria visio*, the elevation and distancing of the Madonna as a celestial apparition coincides with her characterization as an image.

But there is more. The visible coincidence of image and vision becomes incomparably more suggestive when we realize that the standing Virgin appears here exactly in the pose of a celebrated cult image, namely the *Madonna di Loreto*, venerated throughout Italy. The old and original cult idol, dating from the early fourteenth century, which unfortunately was burnt in 1921 (Fig. 13),¹³ generated

¹¹ On the historical and systematic complexity of this relationship see the contributions and case studies in *Imagination und Wirklichkeit. Zum Verhältnis von mentalen und realen Bildern in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Klaus Krüger and Alessandro Nova (Mainz: Zabern, 2000), with some hints to the relevant literature in the introduction. See also n. 27, below.

¹² Maria Grazia Trenti Antonelli, in *L'iconografia della Vergine di Loreto nell'Arte* [exhibition catalogue, Loreto, 1995], ed. by Floriano Grimaldi and Katy Sordi (Loreto: Cassa di Risparmio di Loreto, 1995), pp. 118–20.

¹³ For this statue see *Loreto, Basilica Santa Casa*, ed. by Floriano Grimaldi, Musei d'Italia, Meraviglie d'Italia, 8 (Bologna: Calderini, 1975), p. 126, no. 420; Floriano Grimaldi, *Il sacello della Santa Casa di Loreto. Storia e devozione* (Loreto: Cassa di Risparmio di Loreto, 1991), p. 39; Floriano Grimaldi, in *L'iconografia della Vergine di Loreto nell'Arte* [exhibition catalogue, Loreto, 1995], ed. by Floriano Grimaldi and Katy Sordi (Loreto: Cassa di Risparmio di Loreto, 1995), pp. 15ff.



Fig. 13: Cult statue of the Madonna di Loreto, Loreto, Sacello della Santa Casa. Early fourteenth century. Reproduced courtesy of the Soprintendenza B.A.A. delle Marche, Ancona.



Fig. 14: Sebastiano Sebastiani, *Statue of the Madonna di Loreto*, Montalto Marche, Convent of Santa Maria delle Clarisse. Early seventeenth century. Reproduced courtesy of the Soprintendenza B.A.A. delle Marche, Ancona.

numerous later replicas, one of which is a wooden statue from the early seventeenth century, today in the Convent of Santa Maria delle Clarisse (Fig. 14).¹⁴ Image and vision stand here in relations of reciprocity, relations that succeed in mutually confirming and reinforcing their respective claims to authenticity. In short: the visionary apparition of the Holy Virgin in the picture in Prato is credible and authentic because it resembles the ‘true’ cult image in Loreto. And conversely, the appearance and the powers of grace possessed by the Loreto Madonna are credible because she is confirmed by the heavenly apparition.

The significance of this circumstance becomes clear when we consider that the veneration of the Loreto image, with its purported miraculous powers, experienced a remarkable upsurge in the later sixteenth century, one vigorously promoted by the Counter-Reformation. In the years around 1560/70, hence coincident with the production of the Prato image by Tosini, a lively discussion concerning the veracity of the Loreto legend followed in the wake of Counter-Reformation efforts to certify the tradition and authenticity of its own devotional practices. In the course of this controversy, graphic reproductions increasingly circulated that depicted the devotional image of the Virgin and certified its authenticity via inscriptions referring to it as a ‘vero retratto’ or an ‘effigies S. Mariae Lauretanae’ (Fig. 15).¹⁵



Fig. 15: Madonna di Loreto, anonymous engraving. 1580s–90s. Reproduced courtesy of the Department of Art History, Freie Universität, Berlin.

¹⁴ Stefano Papetti, in *L'iconografia della Vergine di Loreto nell'Arte* [exhibition catalogue, Loreto, 1995], ed. by Floriano Grimaldi and Katy Sordi (Loreto: Cassa di Risparmio di Loreto, 1995), p. 184.

¹⁵ Floriano Grimaldi, *La historia della chiesa di Santa Maria de Loreto* (Loreto: Carlio, 1993), especially pp. 17ff.; Bert Treffers, “In agris itinerans”: L'esempio della Madonna di Loreto del

Considering these circumstances, one might say that Tosini's painting attests to the central demands of the Counter-Reformation church, namely the need to establish authoritative control over religious images, especially those enjoying supraregional influence and popularity, thus simultaneously establishing control over and canalization of the religious gaze and imagination, and over the powers of inner experience activated thereby. Images, to cite the view expressed by the Bolognese cardinal Gabriele Paleotti in 1582 in his well-known tract on images, are 'instruments for uniting the people with God' (*istrumenti per unire gli uomini con Dio*), and their ultimate significance lies in their capacity 'to persuade people to piety and submission to God; their aim is to propel the people to display the obedience and allegiance due god' (*movere gli uomini alla debita obediienza e soggezzione a Dio*).¹⁶

Such authoritative control over the meaning and significance of images is also manifested in the saints that are assembled in strict symmetry to the right and left of the depicted divine apparition. In perfect harmony with contemporary ecclesiastical prescriptions, especially those contained in the Council of Trent's 1563 decree on images,¹⁷ their varied poses and gestures — the pious devotion, the

Caravaggio', in *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome*, 55 (1996), 274–92, especially pp. 280ff.; Cinzia Ammannato, 'L'immagine lauretana nell'età della Riforma', in *Loreto crocevia religioso tra Italia, Europa e Oriente*, ed. by Ferdinando Citterio and Luciano Vaccaro (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1997), pp. 349–62.

¹⁶ Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane* (Bologna, 1582), in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. by Paola Barocchi, 3 vols (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1960–62), II, 117–509 (p. 215). For the historical meaning and influence of Paleotti and his writings, see Paolo Prodi, *Ricerche sulla teorica delle arti figurative nella riforma cattolica* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1984), especially pp. 25ff. and 55ff.; Christian Hecht, *Katholische Bildertheologie im Zeitalter von Gegenreformation und Barock. Studien zu Traktaten von Johannes Molanus, Gabriele Paleotti und anderen Autoren* (Berlin: Mann, 1997).

¹⁷ For the whole complex of the Tridentine decree and its effect on the cult of images, see Theodor Aschenbrenner, 'Die tridentinischen Bildervorschriften. Eine Untersuchung über ihren Sinn und ihre Bedeutung' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Universität Freiburg im Breisgau, 1930); Hubert Jedin, 'Entstehung und Tragweite des Trienter Dekrets über die Bilderverehrung', in *Theologische Quartalschrift*, 116 (1935), 143–88, 404–29; Hubert Jedin, 'Das Tridentinum und die Bildenden Künste', in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 74 (1963), 329–39; Hubert Jedin, *Der Abschluß des Trienter Konzils 1562/63. Ein Rückblick nach vier Jahrhunderten* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1963); Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, 4 vols (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder 1951–75), IV, pt 2, 183–84; most recently: Martin Seidel, *Venezianische Malerei zur Zeit der Gegenreformation. Kirchliche Programmschriften und künstlerische Bildkonzepte bei Tizian, Tintoretto, Veronese und Palma il Giovane* (Münster: LIT, 1996), pp. 21ff. and 309ff.; and Hecht, especially pp. 17ff.

stiffly severe gravity and emphatic religiosity, the abstracted humility and meditative immersion, and so forth — serve the eyes of the faithful ('oculis fidelium', as defined in the decree on images)¹⁸ as models for their own attitudes of piety and devotion. In keeping with this function, they are painted in a thoroughly contemporary style and even appear — especially in the cases of the two female saints — in contemporary costume and hairstyle. Not by accident, they find themselves in the extreme foreground of the pictorial field — and hence in immediate proximity to the beholder — against a mundane and realistically rendered landscape set in the distance, which even features a view of Prato itself. In short: both compositionally and emotionally, the saints are brought close to the believer in order to maximize their effectiveness in guiding emotional effect and providing the necessary mental preparation for contemplating the visionary image.

Conversely, the painted apparition of the Virgin with the infant Jesus conforms to a typology that requires her to be as psychologically unapproachable as she is stylistically archaic, and according to which she must be endowed with an aura of remoteness — not only spatially, but temporally and emotionally as well. With that, her manner of presentation is symptomatic of the aspiration of the post-Tridentine church to return to authentic modes of sacred depiction and to accomplish revivals of church tradition. The scholar and religious author Giovanni Andrea Gilio da Fabriano, for example, writes in 1564, barely a year after the decisions of the Tridentinum, that the contemporary artist should execute 'holy pictures' (sacre imagini) with seriousness and devotion, following 'earlier custom' (antica consuetudine) and thereby endowing them with all of the elements and accessories employed by artists of earlier times to emphasize their privileged and sacred status ('con que' segni che gli sono stati dati dagli antichi per privilegio della santità').¹⁹

In light of these considerations, it might be said that the believer positioned before Tosini's painting is subjected to a thoroughly regulative influence upon his imagination and religious effects, in that the representation clearly pre-conditions and shapes both *which* vision he sees, as well as *how* he understands it.

¹⁸ Joannes Dominicus Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio [...]*, ed. by Louis Petit and Jean Baptiste Martin, 55 vols (Paris; repr. Graz: ADEVA, 1759–1962), xxxiii, 171–72.

¹⁹ Giovanni Andrea Gilio, *Degli Errori de' pittori* (1564), in *Trattati d'Arte del Cinquecento* (see n. 16, above), II, 1–115 (p. 111). For the context, see Giovanni Previtali, *La fortuna dei primitivi. Dal Vasari ai neoclassici* (Turin: Einaudi, 1964), pp. 21ff.

As an altar painting in a chapel in Prato which is dedicated to the Madonna venerated in distant Loreto, the image endows precisely this *Madonna di Loreto* not merely with visible presence and durable actuality, but also registers this presence as a special celestial proof of grace for this special chapel, a proof in which believers may participate if they surrender themselves steadfastly to the ubiquitous effectiveness of the Loreto cult, 'in obedience and allegiance owed to god', as Paleotti would say.

Tosini's altarpiece is by no means a unique instance of the artistic procedure that promotes the cult of the *Madonna di Loreto* supraregionally by means of her embodiment as a heavenly pictorial apparition, or better: which elevates her to a transregional grace-dispensing agency that enjoys ecclesiastical sanction. A painting by Lucio Massari from c. 1620–25, today located in S. Maria delle Grazie in Modena (Fig. 16),²⁰ or a still later work by Antonio Amorosi, executed around 1685 for the Church of S. Caterina in Comunanza (Fig. 17),²¹ among others, might be mentioned. The picture in Modena (Fig. 18) stages, so to speak, a doubled, perspectively recessed register occupied by the figures mediating between Mary and the beholder. Below, in the foreground, are Sts Carlo Borromeo and Francis, among the most popular and venerated cult figures of the Counter-Reformation. As we have seen earlier in the case of our Carmelite monk (Fig. 9), they kneel down in poses of devotion and gaze upward at the Madonna as though experiencing an *imaginaria visio*, hence serving as exemplary figures for the guidance of the faithful standing or kneeling before the image. Above them, positioned on clouds, float Sts Nicholas and Felice Cappuccino who, via eye contact and elaborate gestures of supplication, invite the faithful to participate in the celestial revelation.

In its lower region, the painting in Comunanza (Fig. 17) shows the souls in Purgatory gesticulating violently in anticipation of the Last Judgement, and imploring the Madonna — who appears high above in the clouds, accompanied by the Archangel Michael and St Joseph — for advocacy and divine intervention.

²⁰ Daniele Benati, in *L'arte degli Estensi. La pittura del Seicento e del Settecento a Modena e Reggio* [exhibition catalogue, Modena, 1986] (Modena: Panini, 1986), p. 155, cat. 69 (with additional bibliography).

²¹ Marina Massa, in *L'iconografia della Vergine di Loreto nell'Arte* [exhibition catalogue, Loreto, 1995], ed. by Floriano Grimaldi and Katy Sordi (Loreto: Cassa di Risparmio di Loreto 1995), p. 176; Claudio Maggini, *Antonio Mercurio Amorosi, Pittore (1660–1738). Catalogo Generale* (Rimini: Luise, 1996), p. 96, cat. 1; Ammannato, pp. 361–62.



Fig. 16: Lucio Massari, *Vision of the Madonna di Loreto with Saints*, Milan, Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie. c. 1620–25. Reproduced courtesy of the Soprintendenza BB.AA.SS. di Modena e Reggio Emilia.



Fig. 17: Antonio Amorosi, *Vision of the Madonna di Loreto with Saints and the Souls of Purgatory*, Comunanza, Church of Santa Caterina. c. 1685. Reproduced courtesy of the Soprintendenza BB.AA.SS. di Modena e Reggio Emilia.



Fig. 18: Annibale Fontana, Statue of the Madonna Assunta, Milan, Santa Maria presso San Celso. 1586. Reproduced courtesy of N. Riegel.

As with Tosini's painting (Pl. 1), both of these images feature hierarchically conceived structures. They are based upon a perspective recession that leads upwards and into depth, and is designed to integrate the beholder directly and personally into the event of the heavenly apparition. This is especially true for the painting at Comunanza (Fig. 17). By means of a painted trompe l'oeil curtain, which looks as though it is being pulled away from both sides, this heavenly display, centred around the Virgin, is presented to the eyes of the faithful as an actually transpiring 'unveiling'.

Both paintings represent the Madonna as a divine apparition, set in an aureole and surrounded by clouds, but now, moreover, in faithful imitation of the old cult statue at Loreto, complete with her festive liturgical ornaments: a golden crown is set upon her head, while her elaborately embroidered white dalmatic leaves only her face and that of the Christ child exposed. If in Tosini's case, the pictorial character of the vision was indicated mainly by a frame that was, so to speak, projected onto the sky, then here the celestial apparition unmistakably assumes the identity of the long-revered cult statue, a condition lent additional emphasis in the painting at Comunanza by the Virgin's darkened, soot-coloured face. Mary appears in the shape of a 'picture' while conversely the image itself appears as the 'real Mary'.

Certainly, the faithful in Modena and Comunanza were prompted — just as they were by Tosini's picture in Prato — to visualize the divine presence of the Virgin in the actual here and now, to reconstruct as an inward vision that which the altar painting presents visibly to their eyes. However, the liberty granted for the exercise of fantasy in relation to Mary's actuality, her appearance, her apparent religious or maternal sentiments, and so forth, is far more emphatically restricted than in Tosini's case. To the devout imagination, Mary represents not a partner in an individually determined, intimate dialogue, but instead a grace-dispensing agency set at an unapproachable remove. More pointedly: the imaginative activity elicited by the image serves less the self-constitution of the religious subject and far more the affirmation of a hierarchical ideology of salvation.

One should try to further differentiate these observations and to discuss the rich diversity and elaborateness of the artistic solutions actually produced during the Counter-Reformation in the attempt to give form to the intricate relationship between image and imagination, looking more closely to another example. A painting by Cerano, alias Giovanni Battista Crespi, dating from around 1610 (Pl. 2) shows the standing Virgin accompanied by — once again — Sts Francis and Carlo Borromeo, in the schema of the *Sacra Conversazione*.²² Both saints, having sunken

²² Nikolaus Pevsner, 'Die Gemälde des Giovanni Battista Crespi genannt Cerano', *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 46 (1925), 259–85 (p. 278); Marco Rosci, *Mostra del Cerano*

down to the left and right of Mary's feet, assume attitudes of humility, abandoning themselves to contemplation of the Virgin with insistent gazes and in solemn silence. For her part, Mary directs her glance heavenward while extending her opened hands toward the saintly pair in a classical gesture of intercession, offering the heavenly Father testimony to their elevated religious virtues and faithful devotion.

And if all three figures are united by a common scale, then they are nonetheless distinguished by unequal degrees of reality, for the Madonna — depicted in a pale grisaille that extends to her face and hands, and even to the pair of putti standing at her feet — is clearly conceived as a marble statue, and hence stands on a pedestal decorated with reliefs. In view of this sense of dissociation of realities, the spatially and physically condensed grouping of the three figures and their association, so intimately felt psychologically, is clearly the external manifestation of an interior mental state: Mary is present not as a living and corporeal individual, but instead in the imagination, an externalized object of inner contemplation conjured by the saintly pair.

Still, the substance and complexion of this 'externalized object' of the religious imagination — and hence too the structure of this 'externalization' — reveals itself as exceedingly multilayered. Thus, while the Virgin appears unreal and imaginary as a *person*, as an *image* she has actual substance. For she figures here exactly in the shape of an existing marble statue, namely the one residing in Milan's S. Maria presso S. Celso above the altar of the left eastern pier of the crossing (Fig. 18). This statue was executed in 1586, only twenty-five years or so before the painting, and represents a key late work in the oeuvre of the Milanese sculptor Annibale Fontana.²³ Here, we see the Mary of the Assumption, the prospective queen of heaven, in the transitory moment of her ascent, chaperoned by angels who already place a crown on her head.

[exhibition catalogue, Novara, 1964] (Novara: Banca Popolare di Novara, 1964), pp. 64–65, cat. 58; Noemi Gabrielli, *Galleria Sabauda. Maestri Italiani* (Turin: Ilte, 1971), p. 101, cat. 464; *La Galleria Sabauda: Dipinti italiani dei secoli XVI–XVII–XVIII* (Turin: Tiringraf, 1982), pp. 126–29; Marco Rosci, *Il Cerano* (Milan: Electa, 2000), pp. 150–51, cat. 87.

²³ Ernst Kris, 'Materialien zur Biographie des Annibale Fontana und zur Kunsttopographie der Kirche S. Maria presso S. Celso in Mailand. Mit einem archivalischen Anhang', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 3 (1919–32), 201–52 (pp. 222ff.); John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), pp. 87 and 400; Barbara Agosti, 'Contributo su Annibale Fontana', *Prospettiva*, 78 (1995), 70–74.

The fact that the painting shows precisely *this* statue and should also contain a likeness of Carlo Borromeo calls for explanation. For since the Quattrocento, the altar in S. Maria presso S. Celso, has been zealously venerated by pilgrims. Its significance is owed to an old, by now virtually unrecognizable Marian fresco (Fig. 19) which pious legend claims was executed in the fourth century, that is, during the heroic early years of the Christian era, and on instructions from Milan's illustrious holy patron, St Ambrose.²⁴ The fresco — which in reality dates only from the early fifteenth century — remains today in its original location: well below the marble statue, and painted directly onto the wall of the pier behind it. There, it has in the meantime been enfolded by the altar, and is accessible only by opening a pair of bronze doors on the altar front (Fig. 20).

The fresco owes its special reputation to a miraculous apparition said to have occurred in the church in 1485, in front of a huge crowd of worshippers, during a solemn mass performed to repel an epidemic of plague then raging through the city of Milan. Immediately after Communion, so the story goes, the Madonna in the fresco reached out her hands to open the curtain hanging in front of her and addressed the faithful with a merciful and vivid gaze, extending her hands to each of them. This procedure continued, it is said, throughout the *Miserere*, and afterward, as one might expect, the plague was vanquished.

The cult of this Marian image lived on, and even experienced a marked upsurge in the late sixteenth century, around the very time when Carlo Borromeo, high-ranking archbishop and one of the most prominent figures of the Counter-Reformation in Milan, took responsibility for the preservation of the early Christian heritage, then regarded as evidence of the church's long-lasting cultic traditions. Not least, Carlo Borromeo especially promoted the cult of the miraculous image of S. Celso. Finally, in 1577, he ordered the erection of a new, monumental tabernacle in its honour, thus enveloping the image itself, for the sake of its physical preservation, in a protective altar. For over time, the original fresco had become worn and unrecognizable from the incessant touching and kissing of pilgrims; it had been repeatedly repainted, and in the end, a copy was commissioned, so that a 'visible representative' of the original would be available to pilgrims and might remain on view during liturgical celebrations.

²⁴ Francesco Maggi, *San Celso e la sua Madonna* (Milan: Santuario di N. S. dei Miracoli, 1951), pp. 95–153; for further discussion of the historical circumstances of the veneration of this Marian cult image as well as of its altar, see Nicole Riegel, *Santa Maria presso San Celso. Der Kirchenbau und seine Innendekoration, 1430–1563* (Worms: Wernersche, 1998), pp. 33ff.



Fig. 19: Cult image of the Holy Virgin Mary, Milan, Santa Maria presso San Celso. Early fifteenth century. Reproduced courtesy of N. Riegel.

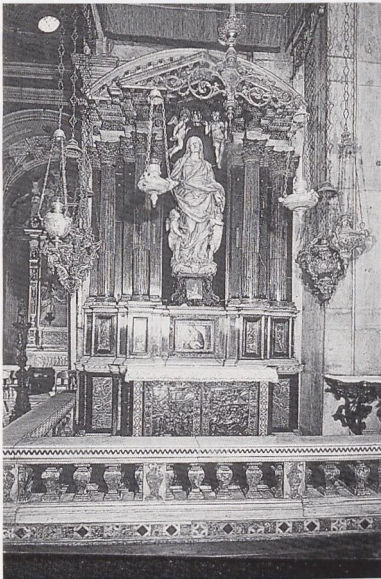


Fig. 20: Altar of the Holy Virgin Mary, Milan, Santa Maria presso San Celso. 1580s. Reproduced courtesy of N. Riegel.

With the erection of the new altar at Carlo Borromeo's behest, this copy was set into the marble panelling directly above the altar mensa, where it was intended as a material substitute for the miraculous image it was meant to duplicate by resemblance.²⁵

But the focal point and visual centre of the altar was actually Annibale Fontana's monumental marble statue, showing the Madonna now as an *Assunta* (Fig. 18). The transitory character of the event represented — the ascension of the Mother of God and her glorification as Queen of Heaven — is given vivid expression by the richly orchestrated, dynamically cascading draperies. Without offering a comprehensive interpretation of this statue, I note here that the sculptor, justly regarded as a notable predecessor of Bernini's, has mastered a difficult task with great sensitivity. His artistry has translated hard, lifeless marble into animated, softly flowing draperies, thereby transforming the heavy, static standing figure on its pedestal into a lightly floating apparition, seemingly enlivened and guided upward by divine forces. But this process of transformation playing itself out before the eyes of the beholder as an *artistic* event, also concretizes — *visibiliter* and *materialiter* — the *thematic* substance of the sculpture, its content, namely the ecstatic and transforming event of Mary's transit from a mundane to an other-worldly realm. In a word: the artistic *transfiguration of its form* converges now with its iconographical content, Mary's *transfiguration as an individual*.

The fact, however, that Mary's transfiguration transpires as one of artistic form, only becoming perceivable *through* it, reacts back decisively upon the status and significance of the ancient miracle-working image (Fig. 20). And if its material presence had been gradually overlaid by various overpaintings, and finally by a specially prepared copy, as though by a series of palimpsests, then it was now fully masked by the *Assunta* statue that would actually substitute for it. The original miraculous image now vanished into the altar's hidden recesses, while the new statue acquired a correspondingly prominent and entirely new dimension of visibility.

²⁵ For the whole context with discussion of the relevant sources, see Anna Patrizia Valerio, 'Annibale Fontana e il paliotto dell'altare della Vergine dei Miracoli in Santa Maria presso San Celso', *Paragone*, 24.279 (1973), 32–53. Giuseppe Antonio Sassi, *Notizie istoriche intorno alla miracolosa imagine ed insigne tempio della B. V. Maria presso San Celso* (Milan: [n. pub.], 1765), pp. 26–28, tells about a huge procession to the cult image, which took place under the guidance of Carlo Borromeo in 1576 during an epidemic of plague in Milan.

Unfolding here was essentially a transformation of Mary's very mode of existence, one presenting the beholder with a transfiguration of her substance that was at once thematic *and* artistic. These two aspects of the transformation are inseparable and even mutually conditioning. For as Mary transferred the visibility she had hitherto possessed as an ancient miraculous image onto the statue, she also, as a direct consequence, delegated her special powers to the new figure. And when her status as a miraculous image passed into the *Assunta* statue, then both it and its miraculous effects were thereby altered. Stated differently: present in the figure of the *Assunta* is none other than the very same Mary who, long ago, in person effected the miracle that liberated the city from the plague. Not least for that very reason, she would now be transfigured, first by God the Father, who raises her up into the celestial realm, but also by Art, by means of which the city of Milan and pre-eminently Carlo Borromeo would apotheosize her in the brilliant radiance of an external semblance that is a durable expression of gratitude for her compassionate intercession.

What we can observe here seems to be a fundamental shift, in that way that the power to work divine miracles manifests itself as the effective power of artistic form, or stated in epistemological terms: a shift from the reality of substance to that of appearance. God's divine mercy (*gratia*) is manifested now in the aesthetic gracefulness of artistic form and in *its* effects on the faithful — a circumstance which, by the way, was discursively anchored within contemporary Italian art theory by means of the term *grazia*.²⁶ This new aesthetic category of grace is double-edged; it refers simultaneously to the endowment of an artistic form — as though by some higher power — with *both* lifelikeness and beauty. Briefly: in its pretensions, the *Assunta* statue has ceased to be 'authentic', and yet is capable, as a patent artistic fiction, of making a definite impression on the beholder, one of animated lifelikeness and transfigured beauty.

For the complex of questions concerning the connections between image and imagination, and more specifically, those concerning the degree to which the productivity of the imagination is restricted and inhibited by the image, or conversely, is animated and set free by it, this conclusion takes on an elementary significance that extends well beyond the special case of the *Assunta* statue itself. Humanistic art theory already posed this question and tried to determine which religious meanings and powers might be attributed to the Christian image when constituted as an aesthetic fiction. And not by accident, this discussion had

²⁶ Samuel Holt Monk, 'A Grace Beyond the Reach of Art', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 5 (1944), 131–50; Patricia Emison, 'Grazia', *Renaissance Studies*, 5 (1991), 427–60.

recourse to Antique prototypes. Philostratus has already argued, with reference to the creation of statues of the gods, that a Phidias or a Praxiteles had certainly never ascended to Olympus in order to fashion 'portraits' of divinities. Consequently, such creative achievements must be attributed to 'fantasia'. Mimesis, insisted Philostratus, merely recapitulates visible phenomena, while fantasy alone can unveil the invisible.²⁷

In the Quattrocento, Leon Battista Alberti returned in his tract on painting (1435) to this very argument. Significantly, he did so in the context of his elaboration on the 'divine force' (*forza divina*) ascribed to painting by virtue of the capacity of images to make absent persons present, even allowing individuals who had been dead for many centuries to reappear in a state of virtual lifelikeness ('non solo [...] fa li huomini assenti essere presenti ma più i morti dopo molti secoli essere quasi vivi').²⁸ At this point, Alberti links his argumentation to the implicit analogy between the pictorial making-present of absent or deceased individuals and that of gods or holy figures: 'Some think', he explains,

that painting shaped the gods who were adored by the nations. It certainly was their greatest gift to mortals, for painting is most useful to that piety which joins us to the gods and keeps our souls full of religion. They say that Phidias made in Aulis a god Jove, whose beauty (*bellezza*) considerably strengthened the religion then current.²⁹

Remarkably, Alberti connects the believability of the representation, and hence its religious powers of persuasion, not so much to the qualities of similarity or authenticity, but instead far more to the purely aesthetic criterion of beauty (*bellezza*), and to its genuine impact upon the beholder. The conclusion following

²⁷ Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonios of Tyana*, VI, 19, quoted after Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der älteren Kunsttheorie* (Leipzig: Tüebner, 1924), p. 8. See Bernhard Scheitzer, 'Mimesis und Phantasia', *Philologus*, 89 (1934), 286–300; Martin Kemp, 'From "Mimesis" to "fantasia": The Quattrocento Vocabulary of Creation, Inspiration and Genius in the Visual Arts', *Viator*, 8 (1977), 347–98, especially p. 367; Alfons Reckermann, 'Das Konzept kreativer *imitatio* im Kontext der Renaissance-Kunsttheorie', in *Innovation und Originalität*, ed. by W. Haug and B. Wachinger, *Fortuna vitrea*, 9 (Tübingen: Niemeyer 1993), pp. 98–132, especially pp. 100ff.

²⁸ Leon Battista Alberti, *Kleinere kunsttheoretische Schriften, im Originaltext herausgegeben, übersetzt, erläutert, mit einer Einleitung und Excursen versehen von Hubert Janitschek*, *Quellenschriften für Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttechnik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, 11 (Vienna: Braumüller, 1877), pp. 89–90; English translation: Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans., with introduction and notes, by John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press 1966), p. 63.

²⁹ Alberti, *On Painting*, p. 63.

from this for the semiotic structures of such images of gods or saints will be readily apparent: the psychological impact, the beholder's expectations of and yearnings for heavenly grace associated with the contemplation of images have their points of departure in the visible — not the invisible — aspects of the representation.

The subsequent development and manifold diversification experienced by this concept of the image in the ensuing period, with its continuing impact and its implications for the aesthetics of reception, will not be discussed here.³⁰ In any event, we can say that Fontana's *Assunta* statue offers a vivid example of an aesthetic conception that had already been sketched out, in its core, in Alberti, a conception which gradually replaces a truth of substance and authenticity with a new artistic truth, that of the emerging impact of artistic beauty, and of a fictionally constituted reality.

This circumstance is also confirmed when we turn our attention again to Crespi's painting (Pl. 2). As mentioned earlier, the representation of the two saints shows at once the *act* of religious contemplation, and — in Mary — the *object* of this contemplation. The latter is conditioned by an irresolvable ambivalence, in that its status of reality oscillates between imaginary presence and fictive-visual representation. To be sure, Mary appears both with a high degree of concreteness and in the present tense, almost tangible and graspable by human hands, yet this presence is actualized only as that of a work of art. The saints really do see Mary, yet what they perceive is only a 'semblance' of her. And precisely as such, namely as an 'image', paradoxically, Mary acquires a singular, unmistakable individuality, for she is not simply Mary, but instead the celebrated, familiar, merciful Mary of S. Celso. Although she appears as a piece of lifeless marble, without flesh and blood, not to mention eyes, she figures nonetheless as a perpetually living, ever-present, personally effective advocate.

This ambivalence, or more precisely, this paradox is most relevant to questions concerning the relationship between image and imagination. For differently than with the paintings discussed earlier, we see here not a heavenly vision, not Mary in her implicitly other-worldly actuality, that is, 'as she really appears in heaven', but instead in the shape of a mundane, artistically produced fiction. This status as fiction, this status as the *material* concretization of an *imaginary* semblance of Mary, is distinctly characterized by its existence as a work of art. This circumstance is inseparable from the experience of difference: we view this work *as though* it were Mary, while in the full knowledge and awareness that it is not her at all. But precisely this experience of difference opens up a space for the productive

³⁰ See the extensive discussion by Krüger, *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren*, pp. 46ff.

play of the imagination, a space for projections and inner representations of how Mary may 'really' look: the possible complexion of her skin, cheeks and lips; the possible colour of her eyes, the sound of her voice. Even more: how she might feel, think, and behave.³¹

That the 'image' of Mary is constantly reconfigured anew in this way from projections and inner representations is also true of Fontana's sculpture (Fig. 18). As we saw earlier, the statue stands there 'as though' it were the Madonna of S. Celso that worked its famous miracle so long ago. This notion is given specificity by the pose of her arms which — in contrast to the traditional iconography of the *Assunta* as found in Mantegna or Titian and many others — are extended not heavenward, but instead held out toward the assembled faithful, firstly in order to intercede for their sakes, but also unquestionably in reference to original reports of her miracle, which expressly describes how she held out her hands to each member of the congregation during the *Miserere*.

New projections flow into Crespi's painted version of the Madonna of S. Celso (Pl. 2), those we might well associate with the inner contemplation of Sts Francis and Carlo Borromeo. Before their collective inner eye, so to speak, Mary changes from the aged mother of the statue into a tenderly youthful virgin. In other words, she appears in the timelessly transfigured, permanent ideality of her *bellezza*. It goes without saying that Francis never laid eyes on this statue, but we might conclude by mentioning that neither did Carlo Borromeo; despite having commissioned it, he died two years before its execution.

Returning to the examples discussed up to this point, we notice a kind of polarity — or at the least a divergence — among artistic procedures in general use in this period. On the one side, in Modena and Comunanza (Figs 16 and 17), the strengthening of an authentic 'original' located at an unapproachable distance, whose pictorial making-present regulates the imagination of the believer far more than supporting it. On the other side, in Milan (Pl. 2 and Fig. 18), a calculated withdrawal of the original in favour of its substitution by a new artefact with its own aesthetic logic, a logic of the 'as if', which is ultimately satisfied, so to speak, only in the productivity of the imagination.

The varieties of solutions arrayed between and beyond these poles assume numerous forms which can hardly be elaborated systematically here. In any case, we find indications that the pictorial discourse of the imaginary is constituted — as

³¹ See the theoretical debate on this topic which developed since early Christian times (Augustine) and then newly livened up in the time of Counter-Reformation with Molanus, Paleotti, and others; Jessica Winston, 'Describing the Virgin', *Art History*, 25 (2002), 275–92.

substantially as it is durably — by the relationship between two parameters: first, the necessary *authentication* of the depicted; second a tendency toward its *fictionalization*, one inherent in the very medium of representation. If these parameters converge in serving the claims of both credible and persuasive representations, then they are nonetheless also highly divergent when we examine the semiotic structure of a given representation.

Discussions of this constellation could be accompanied by any number of examples. The picture tabernacle, for instance, so widely disseminated during the Counter-Reformation, represents a composite form of presentation in which both above mentioned parameters are conspicuously effective (Fig. 21).³² Like the paintings imitating the Loreto Madonna, they are organized around ancient and revered Marian images, not now in the shape of a *simulated* presence, but instead in the form of an authentic original which is present in the material, *factual* sense. The framing painting, conversely, is modern, and contains a spatially and dramatically coherent fiction involving saints and angels who call attention to the framed image with looks, gestures, and attitudes, dramatizing it as a revelation (*revelatio*) for the eyes of the faithful. Without elaborating further on the complexity of this composite type of pictorial ensemble, we can say that its effects on the beholder are founded on an irresolvable paradox. For the 'authentic' character of the Mother of God remains — despite its material presence — that of an image, and even highlights this fact via its age and its surrounding frame. Conversely, the saints of the external painting make an animated and lifelike impression, yet their status, when confronted with the materiality of the Marian icon, remains irrefutably fictive. What emerges in the eye of the beholder as a consequence of this contradictory unity of authenticity and fictionalization is a perpetual interplay, stimulated by the imagination, between making-present and withdrawal, presence and absence.

Something similar is true for another type of ensemble, also widely distributed during the Cinquecento, in which a *sculptural* crucifixion appears at the centre of a *painted* scene. A canvas, today in the Museum in Terni, offers a good example (Fig. 22). It was executed in the early sixteenth century to serve as a scenic background for a sculpture of the crucified Christ dating from the early fifteenth century.

³² Karl-August Wirth, 'Einsatzbild', in *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, ed. by Otto Schmitt, 10 vols (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1937–2003), IV (1958), cols 1006–19; Martin Warnke, 'Italienische Bildtabernakel bis zum Frühbarock', *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, ser. 3, 19 (1968), 61–102.



Fig. 21: Francesco Vanni, *Saints with the Madonna dei Mantellini*, Siena, Santa Maria del Carmine. 1595 and c. 1270. Reproduced courtesy of the Soprintendenza B.A.S. Siena.

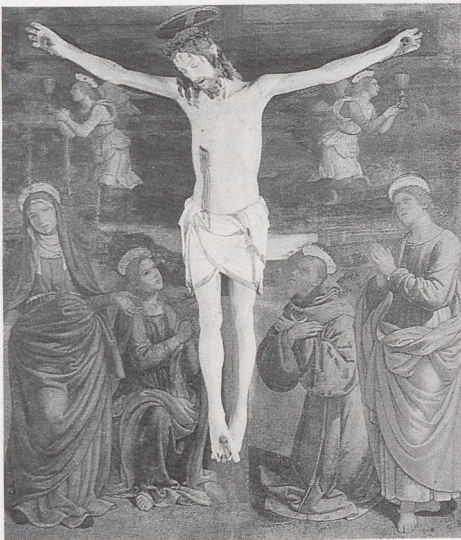


Fig. 22: Giovanni di Pietro called Lo Spagna and Giovanni Tedesco, *Statue of the Crucified Christ and painted figures of the Crucifixion*, Terni, Pinacoteca Comunale. 1480s and early sixteenth century. Reproduced courtesy of the Department of Art History, Freie Universität, Berlin.

Via its three-dimensionality, the crucified figure acquires an almost corporeal presence, while its 'contrafature', that is, material difference from the medium of the painted background scenery, as well as its slightly reduced scale, also explicitly signals its ontological status as a work of art.³³

Within our typological scale of pictorial experience, in which the productive imagination is animated by the interplay between authenticity and fiction, such examples are to be found at one end of the spectrum. From this point, the series leads, so to speak, to the paintings we have seen which contain the Loreto Madonna, and then to images featuring simulations such as Crespi's *Assunta* statue. From here, we are not far from works which, following the tradition of the Venetian *Sacra Conversazione*, fictionally represent the Virgin virtually as a living statue. Positioned on a high pedestal within a wall niche, she is set off from the saints standing before her, with whom she is nonetheless tied via a common quality of verisimilitude (Fig. 23).³⁴



Fig. 23: Giovanni Battista Moroni, *Madonna with Saints*, Gaverina, Church of San Vittore. 1576. Reproduced courtesy of the Department of Art History, Freie Universität, Berlin.

³³ For an overview and critical discussion of these combinations and their aesthetic implications, see most recently, Iris Wenderholm, 'Skulptur und Malerei vor dem Paragone. Zur Funktion und Geschichte intermediärer Bildformen im Sakralraum der italienischen Renaissance' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Freie Universität, Berlin, 2004).

³⁴ Silvana Milesi, *Moroni e il primo Cinquecento bergamasco* (Bergamo: Corponove, 1991).

A painting by Moroni indicates the space for variety offered by such representations (Pl. 3). This altarpiece from *c.* 1560 in the parish church of Almenno displays the by now familiar mystical experience of St Catherine of Alexandria, who once saw an apparition of the Virgin and Christ child.³⁵ Mary is again shown as a 'living statue', while the saint herself also stands within a wall niche, from which she seems to be emerging in order to approach her visionary correlate opposite, thereby consummating her mystical wedding. The architectural context that envelops the figures, and which contributes so much to the impression of their sharing a spatially logical environment, is readily identifiable as belonging to a church interior. It is so configured that the saint stands before Mary just as the believer stands before this very altarpiece. The beholder finds himself confronted with a scene that corresponds to his own immediate surroundings, and in which he is, moreover, emphatically implicated via perspective alignment. Facing the image, he participates in an event that is directly parallel to his own experience, and which is nonetheless, as the inner experience of the saint, imaginative in nature. Conversely, the saint's imagined experience actually 'reproduces' the authentic reality of the beholder in order to set it anew before his eyes as both a pictorial fiction and an exemplar of pious behaviour.

A work by the Florentine painter Santi di Tito, dated 1593 and located in S. Marco in Florence, goes even further in presenting, once again, a vision that has been conditioned by prior experiences with images (Pl. 4).³⁶ Here, we see Thomas Aquinas kneeling before an image of the crucified Christ, who is supposed to have spoken directly to the saint in a miraculous manner during his devotions, thanking him expressly for his theological writings with the words: 'You have written well of me, Thomas' (*Bene scripsisti de me, Thoma*). The space of the 'picture within a picture', that is, the crucifixion scene, continues uninterrupted into that of the represented church interior, becoming diffused into it. The architectural forms and the monks to the rear right make clear that here again the fictive space of the church *within* the picture corresponds directly to that of the beholder standing *before* it. We are dealing, hence, with a dual actualization: the event of the Crucifixion obtrudes into the depicted space of the church, while this space then intrudes into that of the beholder. This accords with the gradual

³⁵ Milesi, p. 60.

³⁶ *La comunità cristiana fiorentina e Toscana nella dialettica religiosa del Cinquecento* [exhibition catalogue, Florence, 1980] (Florence: Becocci, 1980), p. 211, cat. 12; Jack Spalding, *Santi di Tito* (New York: Garland, 1982), pp. 432ff., cat. 26 (with additional bibliography).

'actualization' of the depicted figures and their garments: Thomas Aquinas and Catherine of Alexandria opposite him, the pair closest to the beholder, appear in contemporary costume, the latter in particular wearing fashionable attire, while Mary Magdalene, who kneels at Christ's feet, already wears more-or-less timeless garb, and Mary and John, finally, appear in their traditional costumes. The incorporation of the beholder appears even more suggestive when we consider that, given the monumental format of this picture, with its height of about 3.6 metres, the scale of the figures *within* the image corresponds precisely to those standing *before* it.

This representation visualizes, if you will, a topical idea governing Christomimetic mysticism, namely that of assimilating, via a retreat from external to interior reality, the reality of Christ himself: 'I desire to dissolve and be with Christ' (Desiderium habens dissolvi, et esse cum Christo), as St Paul, for example, formulated it in his epistle to the Philippians (1. 23). The 'being-with-Christ' of Thomas Aquinas is realized as an *inner* experience of the imagination, yet is dramatized in theatrical fashion in the painting as an *external* event. The representation, hence, fulfils a dual function: first, it attests to the transformative powers of the imagination, insofar as the painted crucifixion comes to life under Thomas's eyes. Second, it permits the beholder to participate suggestively in the exercise of this imaginative power. Suggestively above all because, as with a picture puzzle, he is simultaneously shown *two* subjects: the 'Vision of Thomas Aquinas' and the 'Crucifixion of Christ with saints', meaning Mary and John, as well as Catherine, Mary Magdalene, and Thomas. As such, this painting is directly comparable with the ensembles of sculpture and painted image shown previously, where the three-dimensional figure of the crucified Christ intrudes into the literal space of the beholder (Fig. 22).

Santi di Tito's altarpiece in San Marco unifies two themes: the Crucifixion, and the gaze of the imagination falling onto it. The beholder standing *before* the image, and assuming there the same role taken by Catherine and Thomas *within* it, is directly implicated in the events of the sacrifice. But it can only become a *living* event for him should he, like Thomas, transform the outer image into an inner visual experience, in order to be entirely 'with Christ' (esse cum Christo). The painting then truly serves him, to cite Paleotti once again, as an instrument for unifying the self with God.

The post-Tridentine church was tied to the instrumental function of religious imagery in a double sense. If the image was an *object* of contemplation, then it also functioned to instruct the mind on how to enter a contemplative state, stimulating the religious gaze while at the same time guiding and controlling it.

The relevant examples are legion, but we need not present them exhaustively here. Let us finally look only at a painting by Francesco Vanni from 1602 in Lucca, which again depicts the vision of Thomas Aquinas (Pl. 5).³⁷ The crucified Christ speaks here to the enraptured saint via a legible inscription, yet he is positioned frontally at the point closest to the beholder, before whose eyes he is actually unveiled by a pair of putti. The arrangement of books, hourglass, and skull assembled on a writing desk in the foreground includes the standard accessories of the religious vanitas image. As a *trompe l'oeil*, it is set up as much for the benefit of the saint as for the beholder. Toward the latter turn not only the youthful figure in the right-hand foreground, presumably a personification of theology, but also the monk in the background, whose stern look seems admonitory in character. In short, the believer's gaze, along with his mental habitus, is regulated by the image in a variety of ways. Against this background, finally, it is highly significant in symbolic terms that the figure of St Thomas — which functions within the image as a surrogate for the beholder, and which appears surrounded by an aureole, floating in ecstasy above the floor — is precisely congruent with the perspective vanishing point of the space of the painted church. We could even say that the imaginary as such is now 'placed' in the space of the church (*intra ecclesiam*), and insofar as the believer *before* the image also finds himself within the literal space of a real church, all of the dialectics summoned by the image, that is, the dialectic between front and back, between suggestive proximity and the perspective pull into depth, in short, between making-present and withdrawal, culminate finally in this intention.

In summary, one can say of the paintings considered here that questions concerning the pictorial discourse of the imaginary, that is to say, concerning the process and the structure by means of which the *imaginatio* is concretized in the *imagines*, thus assuming determinate shape, are inseparable from questions about the complex ontological status of the image, or more precisely, its medial nature. What emerges here is that in the early modern period, the discourse of the imaginary, strengthened in the sense of a theoretic investment, was inscribed into painting itself. This means that the painting now displays not merely the object of a given vision, but also the manner of its imaginative creation and contemplation, not only the *what*, but also the *how*. In this way, the beholder standing before the image becomes an observer of an act of vision, not one he has summoned himself in the exercise of his own imaginative powers, but one in which he participates when gazing at the image. And this is possible because the

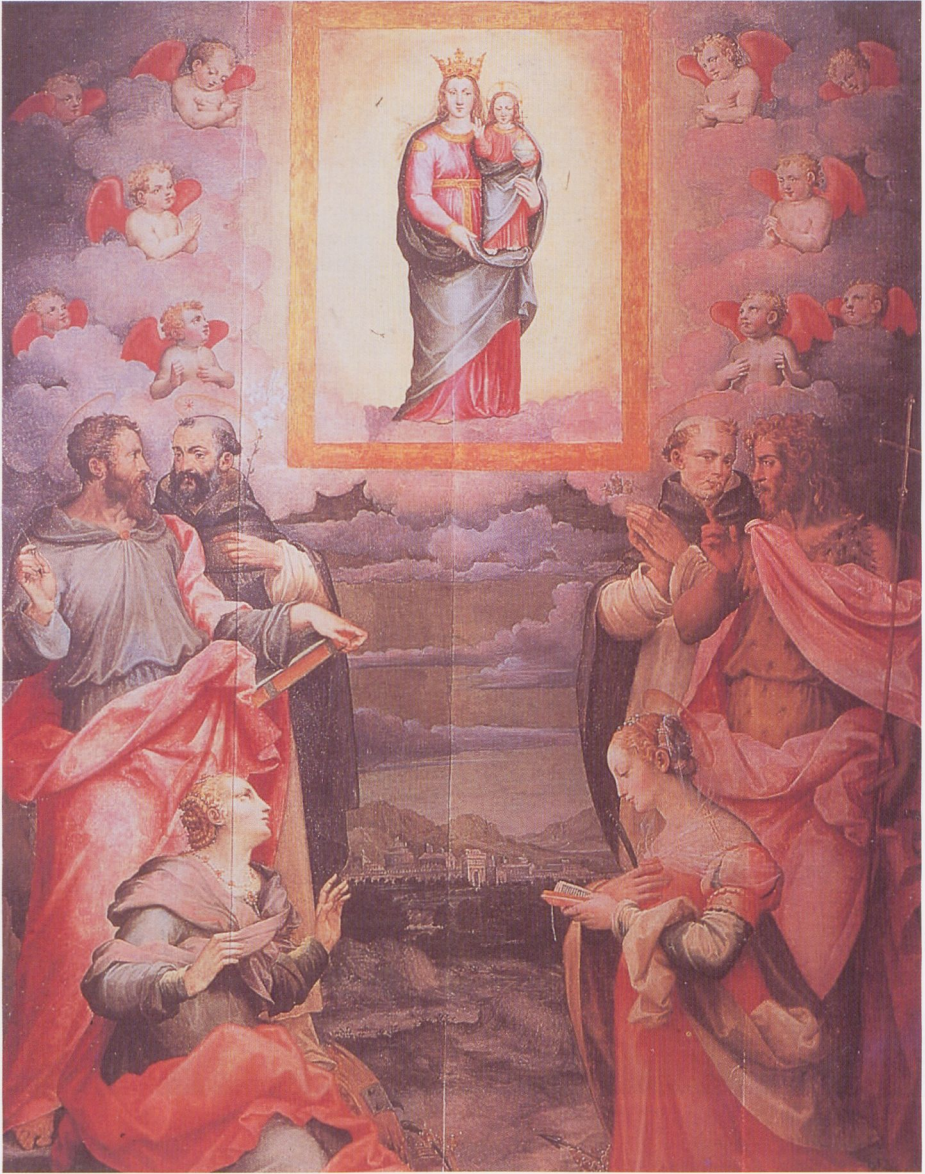
³⁷ *La pittura in Italia. Il Seicento*, 2 vols (Milan: Electa, 1989), I, 329.

painting, placed before his eyes in lieu of an actual vision, possesses an ambivalent, intermediate status and at the same time functions like a membrane between the mundane and transcendent realms; between 'here below' and 'there above'; between the space 'before the image' and that 'behind the image'; in short, between visibility and invisibility. Considering the examples discussed here, this ambivalence becomes acute insofar as they integrate heterogeneous modes of imagery by uniting and synthesizing iconic and narrative, historical and transhistorical, authentic and fictive modes of representation.

Not least of all, the artistic procedures employed in the realization of this task must also be set against the larger context of intellectual history and of the social conditions under which visual media of communication were accorded a growing significance in the early modern era, a significance in rendering the world intelligible and in assigning an ideological system of values. And if the epistemological and theological situation of the early modern period was, briefly put, stamped by a fundamental scepticism concerning the 'visible', then it was nonetheless also characterized by persistent demands for 'sensory evidence'. From such conditions emerged a multifaceted and increasingly reflexively visual media that served to identify and to exercise control over the 'deceptive gaze', over 'appearances', over 'false images', and so forth. Take only, for example, in an emblematic sense the invention of the telescope or the microscope or the rhetorical dialectics of *inganno* and *disinganno*.³⁸ Within the ongoing process of the desubstantialization of the invisible, that is to say, of the accumulation of

³⁸ On the larger context of the 'epistemological turn', see above all Hans Blumenberg, *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975). As for the new poetics inherent in the dialectic between fact and fiction, *inganno* and *disinganno* in literature and rhetoric, see among others, Hans Blumenberg, 'Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Möglichkeit des Romans', in *Nachahmung und Illusion*, ed. by Hans Robert Jauf, Poetik und Hermeneutik, 1, 2nd edn (Munich: Fink, 1969), pp. 9–27; W. Nelson, *Fact or Fiction: The Dilemma of the Renaissance Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Gerhart Schröder, *Logos und List. Zur Entwicklung der Ästhetik in der frühen Neuzeit* (Königstein/Ts.: Athenäum, 1985), especially pp. 39ff.; Andreas Kablitz, 'Dichtung und Wahrheit: Zur Legitimität der Fiktion in der Poetologie des Cinquecento', in *Ritterepik der Renaissance*, ed. by Klaus W. Hempfer, Text und Kontext, 6 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1989), pp. 77–122; Klaus W. Hempfer, 'Probleme traditioneller Bestimmungen des Renaissancebegriffs und die epistemologische "Wende"', in *Renaissance. Diskursstrukturen und epistemologische Voraussetzungen. Literatur, Philosophie, bildende Kunst*, ed. by Klaus W. Hempfer, Text und Kontext, 10 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993), pp. 9–45; Gerhart Schröder, 'Anamorphosen der Rhetorik: Die Wahrheitsspiele der Renaissance', in *Anamorphosen der Rhetorik: Die Wahrheitsspiele der Renaissance*, ed. by Gerhart Schröder and others (Munich: Fink, 1997), pp. 11–32.

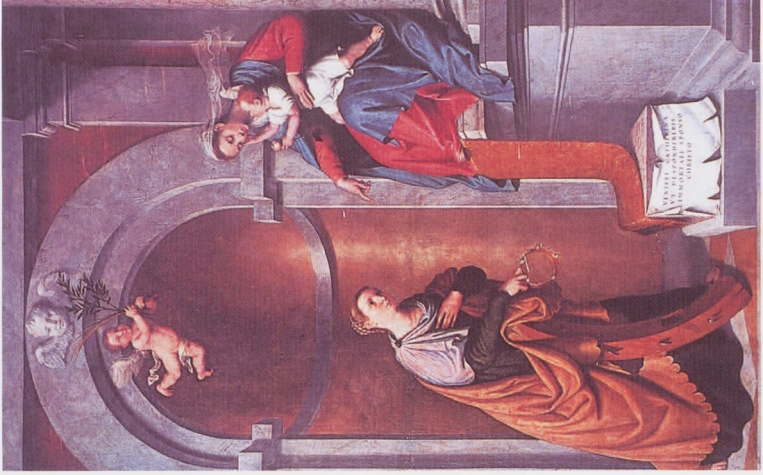
insights into its categorical dependency upon the medium of its presentation, painted images were accorded ever greater importance. The multitude of ways in which images were exploited during the Counter-Reformation in the context of struggles for discursive hegemony and for the domination of the imaginary is only one chapter, if a central one, in this larger process.



Pl. 1: Michele Tosini, *Vision of the Madonna di Loreto with Saints*, Prato, San Vincenzo. 1560–61. Reproduced courtesy of the Kunsthistorisches Institut Florence.



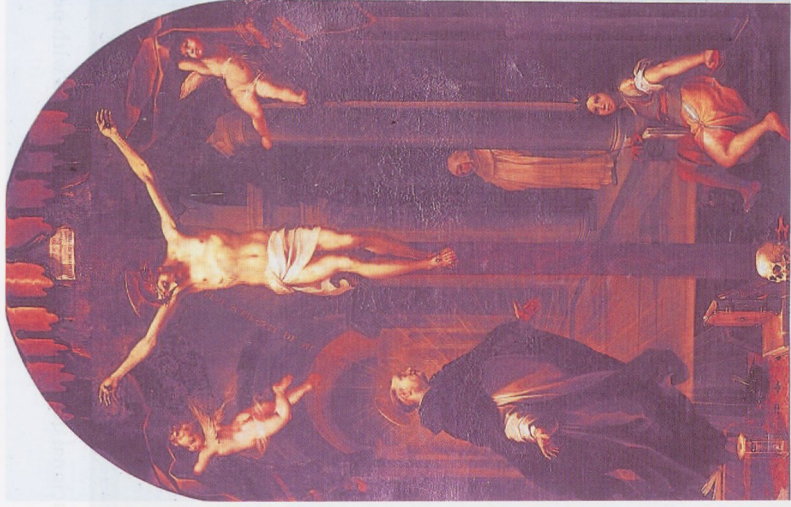
Pl. 2: Giovanni Battista Crespi called Il Cerano, *Virgin Mary with Saints Francis and Carlo Borromeo*, Turin, Galleria Sabauda. c. 1610. Reproduced courtesy of the Department of Art History, Freie Universität, Berlin.



Pl. 3: Giovanni Battista Moroni, *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, Almenno, Parish Church. 1560s. Reproduced courtesy of the Department of Art History, Freie Universität, Berlin.



Pl. 4: Benvenuto Tisi, *Vision of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Florence, Church of San Marco. 1593. Reproduced courtesy of the Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence.



Pl. 5: Francesco Vanni, *Vision of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Lucca, Church of San Romano. 1602. Reproduced courtesy of the Soprintendenza B.A. per le province di Lucca.