Foregrounding the Background in Italian Renaissance Painting of the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries

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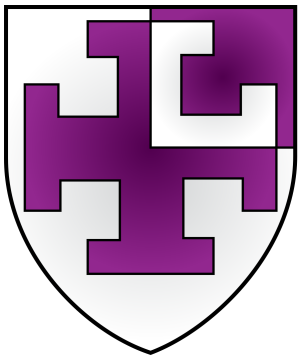

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B. Short Abstract

The current dissertation seeks to provide a novel approach to Italian Renaissance painting by focusing on the pictorial background behind and around the figure. Considering the problem of the ground or background (referred to in Renaissance sources as the 'campo') raises some new questions regarding the production and reception of Renaissance paintings, which could be treated as both material objects and immaterial works of art that represent both real and fictional worlds. As a counterpoint to the ongoing emphasis in scholarship on the figure in Italian Renaissance painting, I discuss how the employment of different kinds of backgrounds also contributed to the varied socio-cultural meanings and changing functions of Renaissance paintings. I make a case study approach to exploring both the symbolic meanings of backgrounds as pictorial forms and the social-historical functions of such backgrounds in different contexts between c. 1450 and c. 1550, with a particular focus on the fifteenth century.

Given the formal and semiotic complexities of different types of backgrounds in Renaissance paintings, I have adopted a typological approach that addresses all the major types, ranging from gold grounds to backgrounds consisting of landscapes, architectural forms or textiles such as curtains and so-called cloths of honour. Chapter 1 addresses how the concepts of 'ground' and 'background' are dynamically changing in the contemporary term *campo* in Renaissance writings on art. Chapter 2 considers how the long-standing tradition of gold backgrounds was reimagined in some late fifteenth-century Italian paintings and frescoes. Chapter 3 looks at how landscape backgrounds in paintings were produced both as an independent impulse within Italy and as an apparent response to Northern examples. Chapter 4 explores the development of architectural backdrops in both the theory and practice of Renaissance art and how backgrounds take centre stage in the three 'Ideal City' panels.

By foregrounding the background, I provide a new approach to theorising the art of pre-modern Italy that quite literally de-centres the figure which has traditionally been the focus of most scholarship on this period.

C. Long Abstract

This dissertation has demonstrated that a period understanding of the key term *campo* (meaning 'background' or 'ground') sheds new light on the making, meaning and reception of Italian Renaissance painting. I argue that the volatile and unstable status of *campo* as a term and concept affects the shifting meanings and functions of Italian Renaissance painting and enriches our understanding of Renaissance pictures that previously have been considered primarily or only within perspectival paradigms. As a result of revisiting the complicated relationship between varied backgrounds and perspective, the current dissertation argues that studying backgrounds can yield richer results than if one only focuses on perspective. Rather than providing a general history of the evolution of pictorial backgrounds in Italian Renaissance paintings diachronically, a synchronic and case-study approach has been adopted that regards painted or gilded backgrounds as strategies adopted by artists to address diverse audiences and concerns within a variety of contexts. I also argue that such an approach provides new insights into the shift from skilled artist-artisans to the notion of the autonomous 'Artist'.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the concepts of 'background' and 'ground' in relation to the period term *campo* in Renaissance writings on art (e.g. Alberti's *Della pittura*, Leonardo's *Treatise of Painting*, and Vasari's *Lives*). Particular attention is paid to how Alberti's theorisation of pictorial background in rhetorical terms is different from the ongoing practice of painting or gilding *campi* as demonstrated in the writings of Cennino Cennini, Leonardo, Vasari and beyond.

Chapter 2 discusses the 'continuation' of gold grounds in the late Quattrocento, with a particular focus on key fresco projects in the papal precincts in Rome including the Room of Liberal Arts in the Borgia Apartment and the narrative paintings on the walls of the Sistine Chapel, as well as in independent painted panels in Florence. It is emphasised that Alberti was not the first to criticise the use of gold in visual arts. There

was a tradition ranging back to St Bernard in criticising the use of gold on moral grounds. At the same time, I demonstrate the shift from immateriality to materiality from the Byzantine to the Latin West reception of gold ground paintings, while recognising how the Renaissance embraced both approaches.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the tradition of Northern, especially Flemish, landscape painting and how landscape backgrounds of Italian Renaissance paintings in both the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were discussed in contemporary writings. There was a shift of taste from audiences engaging Jan van Eyck's empirical landscapes to wanting to consume more idealised and atmospheric versions of landscapes that find their theoretical basis in the aesthetic of *vagare*. This socio-cultural shift is in accordance with two image paradigms of Renaissance landscape paintings which centre either on the 'near view' or 'distant view'.

Chapter 4 discusses the development of *piano* and *casamenti* in theory and the use of architectonic devices in Renaissance female portraits. The practice of using architectural perspective in furniture pieces in relation to the moral connotations of architectural views in the so-called 'Ideal City' panels of the fifteenth century could be argued to expose the widening gender and class distinctions in Italy. It is further demonstrated that Renaissance fictive architectural backgrounds are not a simple extension of the Albertian window metaphor of painting but carry independent traditions and opacity.

To conclude, by questioning the transparency of the Albertian perspectival paradigm, I argue that backgrounds are bearers of rich layers of meaning and should be understood as being no less important than foreground figures. Issues such as medium, composition, genre, patronage, iconography, gender, class and function are what Renaissance artists and their patrons must have taken into account when commissioning and producing a particular picture. Although most art historians have tended to consider these factors only in relation to the figure(s) depicted, I have evaluated the role of all these factors in

relation to how backgrounds are depicted in Italian Renaissance paintings in the fifteenth century. By foregrounding the background, I have demonstrated the crucial role played by what surrounds figures in Renaissance art. From gold grounds to architectural backgrounds, the choices afforded by this compositional element, while clearly influenced by individual patrons' demands, also are signposts of the embryonic emergence of increasingly independent artists, thus marking a significant step towards the modern understanding of the 'Artist' as an autonomous agent.

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E. List of Abbreviations

Alberti-Mallè	Alberti, L. B., *Della Pittura*, ed. L. Mallè (Florence, 1950).
Alberti-Spencer	Alberti, L. B., *On Painting*, trans. J. R. Spencer (New Haven and London, 1966).
Alberti-Grayson	Alberti, L. B., *On Painting and On Sculpture*, trans. C. Grayson (London, 1972).
Cennini-Broecke	Cennini, C., *Cennino Cennini's* Il Libro dell'Arte: *a New English Translation and Commentary with Italian Transcription*, trans. L. Broecke (New York, 2018).
McMahon	Leonardo, *Leonardo's Treatise on Painting*, ed. and trans. A. P. McMahon (2 vols, Princeton, 1936).
Richter	Leonardo, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. and trans. J. P. Richter (London, 1939).
Vite	Vasari, G., *Le Vite de Più Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architettori nelle Redazioni del 1500 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi (Florence, 1966-1987).
Vocabolario	Academia della Crusca, *Vocabolario degli accademici della Crusca* (Florence, 1691).
OED	Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford, 2018).

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Introduction

Until relatively recently, art historical scholarship has shown surprisingly little interest in the question of ground and background in Italian Renaissance art. General art-historical interest in the ground as a subject appeared as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, such as can be seen in Alois Riegl's *Die Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* (*Late Roman Art Industry*) published in 1901.[1] However, only in 1988 did Jeroen Stumpel provide us with the first study of the varied meanings of the period term *campo* in Renaissance written sources, a term that can be translated as 'ground', 'background' or 'field'. Stumpel demonstrates how the different uses of the term map onto the development of the background in Italian Renaissance art from gold ground to landscape or architectural backgrounds.[2] Over the past quarter century, scholars such as Thomas Puttfarken, Karin Leonhard, Matteo Burioni and Gottfried Boehm have further contributed to the theorising of ground and background in the history of Early Modern European art, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1.[3]

In 2022, well after research for the present dissertation began, David Kim published the first book-length study on what he called the 'groundwork' of Italian Renaissance paintings, which encompasses three meanings of 'ground': ground as material

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[1] A. Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. R. Winkes (Rome, 1985).

[2] J. Stumpel, 'On Grounds and Backgrounds: Some Remarks about Composition in Renaissance Painting', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 1988, Vol. 18, no. 4 (1988), pp. 219-243.

[3] T. Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition. Theories of Visual Order and Painting 1400-1800* (New Haven & London, 2000); K. Leonhard, 'Pictura's fertile field: Otto Marseus van Schrieck and the genre of sottobosco painting', *Simiolus*, 2009, Vol. 34 (2), pp. 95-118; M. Burioni, 'Der Künstler als Champion. Kunsttheoretische Figuren des Grundes in der Frühen Neuzeit', in Hubertus Busche (ed.), *Departure for Modern Europe. A Handbook of Early Modern Philosophy (1400-1700)* (Hamburg, 2011), pp. 954-68; M. Burioni, 'Grund und *campo*. Die Metaphorik des Bildgrundes in der frühen Neuzeit oder: Paolo Uccellos *Schlacht von San Romano*', in G. Boehm and M. Burioni (eds), *Der Grund. Das Feld des Sichtbaren* (Paderborn, 2012), pp. 95-150; G. Boehm and M. Burioni (eds), *Der Grund. Das Feld des Sichtbaren* (Paderborn, 2012); K. Leonhard, *The Fertile Ground of Painting. Seventeenth-Century Still Lifes & Nature Pieces* (London/Turnhout, 2020). For the question of backgrounds in Renaissance relief sculptures, see D. Cooper and M. Leino (eds), *Depth of Field. Relief Sculpture in Renaissance Italy* (Bern and Oxford, 2007). Even more recently, other scholars such as Saskia Quené and Chloe Pelletier have also begun to explore backgrounds in their ongoing research.

preparation; ground as plane and terrain; and ground as background.[4] His case studies thus focus on a small number of those monochromatic (back)grounds from different genres and periods, specifically, gold grounds in Gentile da Fabriano's devotional images, rocky backgrounds in Giovanni Bellini's landscape paintings, grey grounds in Moroni's portraits, and dark backgrounds in Caravaggio's tenebrist paintings. This research, carried out while the present thesis was underway, provides important insights into these particular examples, as well as broader issues. However, as will be discussed below, the present thesis both considers a wider range of backgrounds and reconsiders some of Kim's more general proposals.

In Stumpel's foundational article 'On grounds and backgrounds: some remarks about composition in Renaissance painting', published nearly 35 years before Kim's monograph, he began by discussing the term *campo* itself. According to Stumpel, 'a grasp of the word *campo* may give us a firmer hold on the few basic facts of the art of painting in the period'.[5] Stumpel's article unpacks the semantic range of the term *campo* and explores its role, alongside that of *piano* (pavement), in image-making in the Renaissance. At the same time, he explains the paradigm shift in painting technique from using gold grounds to landscape or architectural backgrounds in paintings through the lens of two meanings of the term *campo*, one as 'ground' and the other as 'background'.[6] Further developing Stumpel's thesis, Kim provides a new paradigm for understanding Renaissance paintings beyond the perspectival paradigm, based on the 'ground' set in opposition to linear perspective. Kim, as a result, strategically avoids discussing historiated or scenic backgrounds such as landscape and architectural backgrounds, which are closely related to the discovery of linear perspective and, by

[4] Research for the present dissertation began in 2013 and thus David Kim's work only became available in the final stages of completion. See D. Y. Kim, *The Groundwork. A History of the Renaissance Picture* (Princeton and Oxford, 2022), pp. 26-55. I'm very grateful to Prof Kim for sharing the proofs of this book with me before it was published. In addition to Kim's recent book, he has also published a number of relevant articles, including D. Y. Kim, 'Points on a Field: Gentile da Fabriano and Gold Ground', *Journal of Early Modern History* 23(2019), pp. 191-226; Kim, 'Stonework and Crack in Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in the Wilderness', in I. Augart, M. Saß and I. Wenderhom (eds), *Steinformen. Materialität, Qualität, Imitation* (Berlin/Boston, 2019), pp. 59-74.
[5] Stumpel, 'On Grounds and Backgrounds', p. 219.
[6] Ibid.

implication, the position of the implied external beholder. This avoidance is presumably conditioned by the assumption that the ground should opposed to the figure, as matter is opposed to form, or *colore* is opposed to *disegno*. Considering ground as the antithesis of perspective, Kim's approach, while thought-provoking, is ultimately highly selective and at times polemical. It also means that the question remains open as to whether the *campo* actually was historically perceived and practised in opposition to perspective. Kim's choice of case studies likewise does not address how non-monochromatic backgrounds of various types were understood by Early Modern beholders.

Building on the growing interest in ground and background in Italian Renaissance art as seen in the work of scholars such as Stumpel, Kim and others, which has thus far focused on a fairly limited number of individual case studies of particular artists or genres, the present thesis offers the first attempt to provide a panoramic and synthetic overview of how Italian Renaissance painters, patrons and beholders thought about 'pictorial fields' or *campi* in relation to figures across a variety of genres and how these ideas manifested themselves in the actual objects that were produced.[7] The nature of the current thesis is revisionist. There has been a sizeable jump in analytical appreciation of this term between Stumpel's article and Kim's very recent monograph. However, I argue that we can valuably extend this interest by applying a more nuanced understanding of the term *campo* to a broader range of images and objects across different types of backgrounds, including gold grounds and painted representational backgrounds. In order to achieve this aim within the word limitations of a doctoral dissertation, the present study has only been able to focus on the medium of painting in central and Northern Italy, ranging from frescoes to paintings on panel and canvas. This means that the present thesis has inevitably had to be highly selective in terms of the number of specific examples that could be considered. But it is hoped that this research will provide a basis for future studies about both the ground and background that will

[7] I started the current project in 2013, at proximately the same time or even earlier than Kim started his project on groundwork.

include not only additional painted examples from throughout the Italian peninsula (and further afield), but also work in other artistic media in which figures are set against a variety of grounds and backgrounds such as relief or even freestanding sculpture, as well as printed images, stained glass, textiles, intarsia, and maiolica.

But why does background or ground matter? My thesis first posits that in Italian Renaissance painting, backgrounds and grounds can only be properly understood in correlation with foreground figures. A representational background can be understood, in a meta-pictorial sense, as a self-contained painting within a painting.[8] Both landscape and architectural backgrounds can and do develop into independent genres in later centuries. At the same time, in Renaissance theories of painting, a representational background is also dependent on the foreground figure just as the *parergon* is on the *ergon*. However, gold and dark monochromatic grounds are another matter. More generally, they are ontological and foundational in the sense that they coincide with the material grounds, thus evoking the painting as an object independent from the beholder. Only occasionally, they are evoked to represent heaven or night just as backgrounds in an iconographic sense.

Rather than reinforcing the by-now clichéd binary of figure and ground, I instead suggest that we can better grasp the potential meanings of a picture by imagining a more complicated and dynamic relationship between figure, foreground, background, ground, and the beholder. To this end, the present thesis has four main focal points: a) period understandings of the terminology associated with ground and background, b) the assumed teleology of the painted panel from gold grounds to landscape and architectural backgrounds; c) the meanings of backgrounds for their original beholders; and d) the relation between perspective, *parergon* and *campo*. In order to address these four aspects fully, I will disentangle the complicated relationship between Leon Battista Alberti's theory of painting and the shift from gold grounds to painted backgrounds. If

[8] For the issue of the metapictorial in early modern art, see V. I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Matapainting*, trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen (Turnhout, 2015).

Kim's book provides an ontological hypothesis of Renaissance painting by digging deep into its groundwork, my thesis aims to develop a more subjective model of Italian Renaissance painting by looking at how the backgrounds can engender extrinsic meanings by engaging external beholders in different ways.

Every painting has a background. In a Renaissance picture, the foreground is usually occupied by the most important element of the painting, which in most cases is deemed to be its subject matter, whereas the background is normally reserved for those less important parergonal elements.[9] Usually, it is the foreground—and the figure or figures in the foreground—that are deemed to be central in meaning-making. Interestingly enough, current interest in re-examining our assumption about the ground and background parallels a revisiting of the figure in recent scholarship, as seen in works like Michael Cole's book *Leonardo, Michelangelo, and the Art of the Figure* of 2014.[10] More generally, scholarly considerations of the figure in Early Modern visual culture have since the 1990s increasingly incorporated a new focus on questions of gender, class and race.[11] This type of intersectional approach can also be productive when thinking about the grounds and backgrounds of Italian Renaissance painting.

* * *

The present dissertation consists of four chapters, which address respectively the notion of background in the Early Modern period and the three most common types of background found in Italian paintings produced between 1450 and 1550. I focus particularly on the second half of the fifteenth century in central and Northern Italy,

[9] There are, of course, important exceptions to this, as seen in works where background scenes include the dominant narrative or symbolic focus of the painting. But these are definitely the exception to the rule the primary narrative or iconic feature of the vast majority Italian Renaissance works are normally in the foreground, often positioned centrally.

[10] M. Cole, *Leonardo, Michelangelo, and the Art of the Figure* (New Haven and London, 2014).

[11] New publications since 2015 include P. L. Rubin, *Seen from Behind: Perspectives on the Male Body and Renaissance Art* (New Haven, 2018); V. Stoichita, *Dark Shades: The Racial Other in Early Modern Art* (London, 2019). But concerns about these issues date back to the 1990s. For instance, see G. A. Johnson and S. M. Grieco (eds), *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (Cambridge, 1997).

although for comparison some sixteenth-century Italian examples and even some Northern European examples are also considered. The first chapter, entitled 'Background, Ground and *Campo* in the Theory and Practice of Italian Renaissance Painting', provides a historiography of deploying aesthetic terms such as ground and background in art-historical discourses from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. It traces the history of the term *campo* in both Early Modern written sources and painterly practices and explores how the period term corresponds to the modern notions of ground and background in one way or another. In place of seeking a single and consistent definition, this first chapter reveals how the concepts of 'ground', 'background', and *campo* both were fluid as well as contested in the Renaissance just as they are today.

The second chapter, entitled 'Between Materiality and Immateriality: Gold Ground Paintings in Late Fifteenth-Century Florence and Rome', proposes a new reading of the late examples of gold ground paintings in Rome and Florence. Specifically, I will discuss the uses of gold ground in Pinturicchio's frescoes of the 'Seven Liberal Arts' in the Borgia Apartment in the Vatican and two works destined for Florentine churches: Filippino Lippi's destroyed *Pala Valori*, and Botticelli's *San Marco Altarpiece* of 1490-2. The examples of gold ground in Pinturicchio and Botticelli, in iconographic terms, allow the important question of how to represent the sky after the advent of linear perspective to be addressed. Pinturicchio's case also suggests that gold grounds can enhance the allegorical nature of the foreground figures. Lippi's destroyed *Pala Valori* will be discussed as a typical example of the iconic reinstatement of gold grounds within the context of the Renaissance 'hybrid' combinations of gold backgrounds and landscapes, a practice also popular in the Marches, Milan and Ferrara. I argue that these cases have less to do with anachronism than has hitherto been assumed, but rather they address contemporary iconographical and devotional concerns.

Chapter Three, entitled 'Grounding the Secular and Sacred: Landscape Backgrounds in Italian Renaissance Art', posits that the development of landscape backgrounds in

Italian paintings beginning in the 1470s can be seen simultaneously as a gesture of showing and concealing. I illustrate this, first, with a discussion of how a group of fifteenth-century examples such as Piero della Francesca's diptych portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza responded to the paradigm of Jan van Eyck's 'bird's-eye view' landscape painting such as seen in his *Rolin Madonna*. Works like Piero's diptych also depict the so-called 'possessive gaze', in which the patron pictorially occupies and iconographically owns part of the landscape. In other Italian examples such as Botticini's *Assumption of the Virgin*, the depicted patrons will also invite the external beholder to enter into the landscape in which they are set. Second, I will pay particular attention to the so-called 'gold ground effect' in relation to the use of the so-called cloth of honour/curtain in images of the Madonna and Child. Third, I will discuss the notion of *vagare* in Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Francis* and in Perugino's *Combat between Love and Chastity* and his *Lamentation* in the Uffizi in relation to Isabella d'Este. I chose all these examples to demonstrate that landscape backgrounds in Italian Renaissance art were fraught with meaning for their original patrons and beholders.

As a counterpart to Chapter Three, Chapter Four, entitled 'Foregrounding the Background: Depicted Architecture, Artist's Perspective and the "Ideal City" Panels', proposes a gendered and moralised reading of the three so-called 'Ideal City' panels in Urbino, Baltimore, and Berlin. In order to contextualise these three panels, I will discuss relevant earlier examples that depict architectural interiors including in relief sculpture, such as Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Jacob and Esau*, before they became the subject in the foreground in so-called 'Ideal City' panels. This chapter will pay particular attention to the theory and technique of representing architectural elements in both the background and foreground of Italian Renaissance paintings. The key issues that will be addressed include: a) the relation between *campo* and *disegno*; and b) the condition under which the painted architecture comes forward into the foreground from the background and becomes the subject matter. The chapter argues that the painting method of those architectural vistas is informed by the technique and designs associated with intarsia woodwork.

Building on scholarship dating back to Riegl, but also taking into account more recent (and growing) interest in ground and background as seen in the work of Stumpel, Kim and others, the present dissertation seeks to broaden our understanding of Italian Renaissance painting by foregrounding a greater variety of backgrounds than has hitherto been considered, in the process opening up new avenues of research into the period-specific production and reception of images more generally.

Chapter One

Background, Ground and *Campo* in the Theory and Practice of Italian Renaissance Painting

The methodologies used to study Early Modern European art have never been under more intense scrutiny than in the present day. In the past, the field of Renaissance studies itself provided some of the major paradigms that defined the methodologies of art history as a discipline. We only have to think of crucial contributions to the field by scholars of Renaissance art like connoisseurship, iconography, and iconology. Nowadays, in contrast, methodologies from beyond art history itself have been applied to the study of Renaissance or Early Modern art.[12] One such aspect of Early Modern European art that has received increasingly sustained scholarly attention recently is the question of ground and background, which has attracted interest from scholars working from both within and beyond the field of Renaissance art history. The question of ground and background could be seen as a sub-field of the larger question of the so-called 'figure and ground' issue, which has been deemed fundamental to both image theory and art history.[13] Thanks to the publication of key works such as those by Stumpel in 1988, the 2012 anthology of essays edited by Boehm and Burioni dedicated mainly to European but also including some non-European examples, and most recently Kim's 2022 monograph, scholars of Early Modern European art scholars have been inspired to return to this question and rethink the important issue of the picture ground in both period-specific and more general contexts.[14]

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[12] One major difference between the notions of 'Renaissance' and 'Early Modern' is that the former is an essentially hermeneutic term, meaning 'revival' or 'rebirth'. It is thus associated with many cultural and ideological meanings. The term 'Early Modern' is more of a temporal framework approximately ranging from 1400 to 1800, rather than a hermeneutic programme. But in the thesis, I do not systematically replace 'Renaissance' with 'Early Modern' because one aim of my thesis is to revisit some old assumptions about the idea of 'Renaissance'.

[13] For the most recent discussion about the question of figure and ground in various contexts such as philosophy, phenomenology, psychology, painting and so on, see J. Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 78-128.

[14] For the key publications, see notes. 2, 3, 4.

Although Stumpel was the first scholar to explore the term *campo* in any depth, the present chapter will revisit the question of how *campo* was understood in period terms, how it corresponds to the modern notions of ground and background, and how it can shed light upon the stylistic shift from using *campo d'oro* (normally translated as 'gold ground') to representational and monochromatic painted backgrounds in the practice of Renaissance painting. The teleology from gold grounds to painted backgrounds also preoccupied Stumpel and other scholars such as Michael Baxandall and Thomas Puttfarken. Although what follows is a chronological survey of the meaning and use of the term *campo*, I will emphasise the fluidity of how the conception of 'background' was perceived. This fluidity is revealed, for instance, in a quotation from Sperone Speroni: '…your argument is very like those paintings commonly called *lontani*, in which one sees little figures walking through landscapes ('paesi'), which, when looked at closely, have no part that resembles human limbs'.[15] For a Renaissance beholder, human figures in the pictorial background could at times consist only of colourful daubs, whose function was primarily to assist in the material construction of the background landscape or *lontano*. In other words, a painted background could be understood in the sixteenth century simultaneously as a representation and its dissemblance, depending on the beholder's perspective (actual as well as metaphoric). The conditions of illusion were thus contested and fluid in the period itself. In light of this, could we claim that the *campo*, whether translated as ground or background, in Renaissance paintings should be understood in both visual and material terms? We need more visual and textual evidence to address this question. But before doing so, it is necessary to provide a brief historiographical survey of the previous scholarly approaches toward ground and background.

1.1 Scholarly Approaches towards Ground and Background: A Historiographical Survey

[15] S. Speroni, *Dialoghi* (Venice, 1544), pp. 22.

Before discussing how the period term *campo* was understood conceptually as well as practically in pre-modern times, we need to elucidate how critical terms such as 'ground' and 'background' have been understood in modern times. In English, the terms 'background' and 'ground' are two different but interrelated concepts. In the realm of painting, 'ground', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means the prepared or unprepared material surface upon which an artist works.[16] It was first used around 1398 by Bartholomaeus Anglicus in *De Proprietatibus Rerum*.[17] The ground could be traditionally a paper, canvas, or wall—or even many other types of the material surface including metal, glass, stone/marble, textile. Prepared grounds include neutral gesso grounds as well as coloured grounds, which are prepared before any actual designs are executed on them. In a painting, the ground is usually invisible to the beholder because it lays underneath the painted surface. But there are exceptions. In Cezanne's paintings, for instance, the canvas is sometimes deliberately rendered visible to achieve certain effects. In a Chinese scroll painting, the paper itself is the visible ground beneath figures and landscape, urban or interior spaces.

According to the *OED*, 'background' means the ground or surface lying at the back of or behind the objects for contemplation, which occupy the 'foreground'.[18] One can elaborate further that 'background', in pictorial practice, means the pictorial area external to the figure on the visible surface of the painting, which appears to recede. In the English context, the notions of 'background' and 'foreground' were coined much later than the time when the concept 'ground' was first used. The term 'foreground' first appears in John Dryden's English translation of Du Fresony's *De Arte Graphica* (1695).[19] The first-ever known use of 'background' in a pictorial context only took place in 1752 in an English translation of Edme-François Gersaint's catalogue of Rembrandt's etchings.[20] The term 'background' in a more general context first appears

[16] OED online database.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

in a stage instruction in William Wycherley's play *Love in Wood* (1672), meaning the back of the stage. This theatrical origin of the term 'background', interestingly, suggests a kind of interconnectedness between the idea of background and visuality when it was first used in an English context. Interestingly, the term 'background' is not commonly used in modern studies of the so-called 'figure and ground' question. Instead, the term 'ground' or 'field' is preferred. It might be the case that the ground is indispensable to the figure while the background is more independent and can function on its own. This difference is crucial. Indeed, as we will see, the ground was growing more independent from the figure in the fifteenth century and had become a kind of background. Furthermore, the ground is related to the image itself, whereas the background is more germane to the beholder. Indeed, the difference between ground and background hasn't been addressed properly.

In the first place, I will discuss the conventional usage of the term ground in the so-called 'figure and ground' problem. The question of 'figure and ground' is both aesthetic and psychological, a question posed originally by scholars separately from historical investigations of the production and reception of images. Basically, it means the distinction between a coherent figure or form and the two-dimensional or deep-spatial environment that surrounds it. The pairing of the terms 'figure and ground' as a Gestalt theory was first initiated by Edgar Rubin in his *Synsoplevede Figurer. Studier i psykologisk Analyse* ('Visually experienced figures: Studies in psychological analysis') published in 1915.[21] Following Rubin, Rudolf Arnheim, in his 1974 book *Art and Visual Perception*, argues that the relationship between figure and ground is 'ambiguous' and the 'conditions determining which of the two shapes lies in front' vary.[22]

The psychology of figure and ground was applied several decades earlier by Hans Sedlmayr in his ground-breaking analysis of Francesco Borromini's church of S. Carlo

[21] E. Rubin, *Synsoplevede Figurer. Studier i psykologisk Analyse* (Köbenhavn og Kristiania, 1915).
[22] R. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception. A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley, 1974), p. 228.

alle Quattro Fontane in 1925. He argues that the art historical description of an object should be based on a way of 'seeing' (*Sehen*) that can grasp the object's internal structure.[23] For instance, when he described the interior of San Carolo alle Quattro Fontane, he made the following observation:

> 'Because the central fields ['Mittelfelder'] of the niches are completely filled with dark images, new figures emerge between them in the spatial boundary'.[24]

Here, the internal lighting of the chapel makes the paintings look dark and the sculptural figures look bright in contrast, thus establishing a figure-and-ground relationship within an architectural space.

Separately from interventions from the field of the psychology of perception and its early application in art history, the question of figure and ground had already been used as a framework to analyse formal relationships and stylistic characteristics by Alois Riegl in his *Late Roman Art Industry* published in 1901.[25] As early as in his *Die Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901), Riegl developed a theory of so-called 'haptic' and 'optic' visions to describe the fundamental divide between the art of antiquity and the art of the modern world. For Riegl, the formal relationship between figure and ground shifted over time.[26] 'Haptic vision' is *nahsichtig*, 'near-seeing', and its emphasis is on the outlines and material individuality of the figure. This kind of vision can be found in Egyptian art. In contrast, 'optic vision' is *fernischtig*, 'far-seeing', in which the plane, or ground is not tactile, but contains interruptions achieved through deep shadows and the objects depicted also blur into their environment. According to Riegl, this type of vision characterises late Roman art. Riegl believed that the phase in between, that of classical Greek art, was a time when

[23] H. Sedlmayr, 'Gestaltetes Sehen', in *Belvedere*, 8 (1925), pp. 65-73.
[24] Sedlmayr, 'Gestaltetes Sehen', p. 68: 'Dadurch, daß die Mittelfelder der Nischen ganz mit dunklen Bildern ausgefüllt sind, treten zwischen ihnen in der Raumgrenze neue Gestalten hervor.' Unless otherwise stated, translations are by the present author.
[25] See Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*.
[26] Ibid.

perception was neither *nahsichtig* (near-seeing) nor *fernsichtig* (far-seeing), but what he called *normalsichtig* (normal-seeing).[27] To put it briefly, Riegl historicises 'optic vision' and 'haptic vision' in teleological terms. But this bears a problem that these two modes of vision have been conceived mutually exclusive, and this exclusiveness cannot be applied to Italian Renaissance art.

Riegl's theory has continued to be relevant to art historians. It was immediately revisited in Heinrich Wölfflin's theory of 'painterly' and 'linear' styles in 1915 and was further elaborated in 1973 in Henri Maldiney's less well-known but important theory of 'systolic/diastolic' moments of sensation in 1973.[28] In the interplay of systole and diastole, one finds 'the ontological relation of existence to ground', which is rendered in art as the aesthetic relation between motif and ground, or *fond*.[29] In sculpture, for instance, the systolic moment happens when the motif emerges as a separate entity from and against the ground, while the diastolic moment is when the ground of the motif is the spatial world in which it appears, namely, the landscape.[30] These two moments of sensation are an elaboration of Riegl's haptic and optic visions but do not adhere to a single teleology from the haptic to the optic in the development of pictorial art.

In 1952, Dagobert Frey used the notion of the force of the picture field to analyse figural compositions in Giotto's frescoes, incorporating the ground into the figural composition as the focus of his art-historical discussion.[31] In the late 1960s, Meyer Schapiro is the first to focus on the particular characteristics of the ground by analysing it in works of arts from different historical periods and geographical areas.[32]

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[27] Ibid., pp. 24-7.
[28] H. Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History. The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, trans. Jonathan Blower (Los Angeles, 2015), pp. 100-55; H. Maldiney, 'L'art et le pouvoir du fond', in *Regard, Parole, Espace* (Lausanne, 1973), pp. 173-207.
[29] Maldiney, 'L'art et le pouvoir du fond', p. 173.
[30] Discussed in R. Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts* (New York and London, 2003), pp. 141-2.
[31] See D. Frey, 'Giotto und die maniera greca. Bildgesetzlichkeit und psychologische Deutung', in *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, vol 14 (Köln, 1952), p. 74. For Frey's approach, also see M. Imdahl, *Giotto Arenafreksen. Ikonographie. Ikonologie. Ikonik* (München, 1980), pp. 35-42.
[32] Meyer Schapiro's article on ground was first published in 1969. See M. Schapiro, 'On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs', in M. Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy*

Within scholarship specifically on the early modern period, however, the differentiation between ground and background is often used as a yardstick in the periodisation of Italian Renaissance art. In Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, first published in 1972, for instance, the author discusses the transition from gold ground to landscape background in fifteenth-century Italian paintings, while, interestingly, not considering the period term *campo*.[33] Instead, Baxandall's original dictum is that fifteenth-century Italy (or Florence to be more specific) saw a shift from consuming 'material value' to the 'value[ing] of artistic skills', which he argues resulted in a decreasing use of gold in paintings. In other words, according to Baxandall, there was a paradigm shift from materiality to visuality in fifteenth-century Italy. After Baxandall, Jeroen Stumpel intervened by focusing on the relationship between composition and Early Modern understanding of the term *campo*, which literarily means 'field' more generally but can be translated as 'background' or 'ground' in the art historical context.[34] Focusing on the term *campo* itself, Stumpel argued that the 'period eye' (to use Baxandall's terminology) of Renaissance beholders would have appreciated a picture on the basis of figure and ground rather than figure and perspective. Stumpel also suggested that the function of linear perspective in Renaissance painting is none other than to enrich the background, which is opposed to Panofsky's earlier position that an all-pervasive perspectival construction transforms the whole picture into a homogenous and continuous space.[35] By taking advantage of the original meaning of the notion 'composition' (referred to in Italian sources as *componimento* or *composizione*), Stumpel argues that a Renaissance painting is made by piecing together different parts: the figure, the background and the pavement.

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of Art: Style, Artist, and Society (New York, 1994), pp. 1-32.

[33] Baxandall discusses terms such as *rilievo*, *puro*, *facilita*, *prospectiva* and so on, see M. Baxandall, *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 118-51.

[34] J. Stumpel, 'On Grounds and Backgrounds: Some Remarks about Composition in Renaissance Painting', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1988), pp. 219-243. Further development of Stumpel's view can be found in T. Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition. Theories of Visual Order and Painting 1400-1800* (New Haven & London, 2000), pp. 97-122

[35] Stumpel, 'On Grounds and Backgrounds', p. 241; E. Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher Wood (New York, 1997).

Bridging Baxandall's argumentation with Stumpel's study of the period term, Thomas Puttfarken more explicitly claimed that the 'transformation of *campo* from "ground" of gold or blue to "background" generally is directly related to the transformation of painting practices and critical criteria in the quattrocento'.[36] According to Puttfarken, as a consequence of this transformation, the 'empty part' of the background, or *campo*, has become a new arena for free artistic expression. The apparently lower status of the *campo* allowed artists to exercise their artistic sovereignty beyond their patron's contractual control. This assumption of the background's lower status vis-à-vis the foreground has relegated the *campo* to the merely ornamental within most scholarship on Renaissance art scholarship until fairly recently.[37] In Puttfarken's own words, the pictorial order of Renaissance painting resides in that the 'figures standing out in prominent *rilievo* towards us and approaching us, and with backgrounds receding, extending into the distance…nearness is identified as important, distance as less so'.[38] Following this observation, Puttfarken made another important observation, namely, that there is a distinction between Italian and Netherlandish art in that the normative paradigm of Italian art is fresco painting which sees human actions as significant, while the latter had its origin in the schools of book-illuminators in Burgundy in which attention is paid to details and the world that surrounds the human figures. Puttfarken's conclusion is rooted in a belief in the irreversible *difference* between figure and ground, but how and why this geographical difference comes about is not discussed. In fact, as I demonstrate in my chapter on landscape backgrounds, the patrons, in some cases, did indicate what they wanted in the background, which problematises Puttfarken's assumptions.

Interestingly, the most recent scholarship on the background and ground in Early Modern art has returned to the framework of the so-called 'figure and ground' question.

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[36] T. Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition*, p. 110.
[37] Thomas Puttfarken has used numerous examples to try to prove this point, see Ibid., pp. 111-21.
[38] Ibid., p. 116 and p. 120.

The new trends of scholarship, represented by the work of Gottfried Boehm, Matteo Burioni, David Kim, and Karin Leonhard, suggest how the study of the figure-and-ground relationship could generate a new understanding of Early Modern art that goes beyond the traditional dichotomy between form and matter and the old paradigm of perspective—the *locus classicus* of Renaissance scholarship.[39] Elaborating on the metaphorology of the term *campo* as a battlefield, Burioni argues that the artistic practice of painting on the *campo* as a *Bildgrund* (translated as 'pictorial ground') is analogous to how the virtuous deed of the artist, just as on a battlefield (*campo*), is expressed when he takes control of the *campo* and makes the figure stand out from it.[40] Further developing the analogy between pictorial ground and battlefield as a space for action, Burioni argues that the depiction of discarded lances on the ground in Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* creates a 'dynamic unfolding space', which conditions a ceremonial rather than historical depiction of the battle scene in which the figural subject has been foregrounded into the beholder's space.[41]

Departing from his previous research on perspectivity, Boehm, in an article entitled 'Der Grund. Über das ikonische Kontinuum', associates ground more generally with chaos and continuum, and defines it as 'an active surplus, at the same time material and emergent, pathic and generative, obtuse and meaningful'.[42] Interestingly, Boehm finds

[39] For a critique of the traditional focus on the figure and perspective in Renaissance scholarship, also see G. Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance & Figuration*, trans. J. M. Todd (Chicago and London, 1995), pp. 13-21. For a recent exploration of the question of the figure in Renaissance art, see Michael Cole, *Leonardo, Michelangelo, and the Art of the Figure* (New Haven and London, 2014). For perspective as a paradigm in earlier scholarship, see in particular Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*.

[40] Burioni, 'Der Künstler als Champion', pp. 957-61. Burioni has analysed the complicated military lexicon of the terms *campo* and *campeggiare* in various early modern texts in relation to the status of the artist in the practice of painting and sculpture. The use of the term 'he' in regard to the artist here and elsewhere in this present study reflects the fact that in the Early Modern period, the vast majority of professional artists were men. This is particularly true before the mid-sixteenth century, which is the focus of the present dissertation.

[41] M. Burioni, 'Grund und *campo*. Die Metaphorik des Bildgrundes in der frühen Neuzeit oder: Paolo Uccellos Schlacht von San Romano', p. 111-38.

[42] G. Boehm, 'Der Grund. Über das ikonische Kontinuum', in Boehm and Burioni (eds), *Der Grund. Das Feld des Sichtbaren*, p. 48. For Boehm's theory on ground, also see G. Boehm, 'Die Kraft des Grundes', in Sonja Frohoff et al (eds), *Bilderfahrung und Psychopathologie. Phänomenologische Annäherungen an die Sammlung Prinzhorn* (Paderborn, 2014), pp. 170-185. For Boehm's early research on perspectivity, see G. Boehm. *Studien zur Perspektivität. Philosophie und Kunst in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Heidelberg, 1969).

that the artistic interests in mastering the ground in the early modern period can be seen in its representations of the labyrinth, which oscillates between linear distinction and chaotic continuum, between heavenly verticality and earthly horizontality, as seen in many Early Modern visual examples ranging from Leonardo da Vinci to Nicholas Cusanus and beyond.[43] In other words, the ground was perceived simultaneously materially continuous and perceptually distinctive during the early modern period, depending on the viewpoint.[44] However, Boehm does not push this observation further but ends his discussion with highlighted examples from American post-war art after 1945, which are considered to have transcended the Renaissance perspectival paradigm of seeing ground as a depicted sign, such as a landscape fading into the distance.[45] For instance, Pollock's art is considered 'below the level of intentionality' and emerges as 'a new kind of painting of *écriture* without symbols and signs, a chaotic dripping that gives rise to an oceanic, floating and gliding experience'.[46] By using these modern examples, Boehm, in a self-contradictory sense, downplays the duality of seeing ground through the lens of both material continuity and perspectival clarity.

Developing further the approaches adopted by Burioni and Boehm, the work of Kim and Leonhard responds to the 'material turn' seen in recent decades in art history more generally. The 'grounds' of seventeenth-century still life paintings and Gentile da Fabriano's gold-ground paintings have been respectively interpreted by Leonhard and Kim as a 'fertile field' and a 'ground of possibilities'.[47] In their studies, the ground and background are not treated as passive recipients of objects but possess a certain active agency. As argued in her book *The Fertile Ground of Painting*, Leonhard sees the

[43] Ibid., pp. 51-65.
[44] Boehm conceptualises these two modes of gaze later. As he claimed, 'One leads into the midst of the abundance of distinctions, whose juxtapositions are recorded in a temporal succession, identified, questioned for referential relationships…The second approach opens up the same abundance in a different way. It is oriented towards the limits of clarity, graps what is revealed in its entirety and in an instant, which includes a certain lack of clarity, also a loss of information. It is the continuity-oriented gaze', see Boehm, 'Der Grund', p. 72.
[45] Boehm, 'Der Grund', pp. 77-84.
[46] Ibid., pp. 79-80.
[47] K. Leonhard, 'Pictura's fertile field: Otto Marseus van Schrieck and the genre of sottobosco painting', in *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2009/2010), pp. 95-118; Kim, 'Points on a Field'; Burioni, 'Grund und *campo*'.

ground, or *campus*, in seventeenth-century European still-life paintings as a living agent rather than a passive *parergon*.[48] For Kim, Renaissance gold ground painting, as exemplified in Gentile da Fabriano's work, 'unfolds a spectrum of material, medial, perceptual, and devotional possibilities, which facilitates continuous passage' between 'pictorial and metallurgical' worlds.[49]

Unlike Stumpel, however, this more recent scholarship conflates the notion of ground with that of background. A good example of this is in Kim's most recent book, *The Groundwork: A History of the Renaissance Picture*, in which the umbrella term 'ground' connotes not only the material layer under the painting but also what has in the past been called the 'background'. He knowingly plays upon the ambivalence of the terms.[50] For Kim, what he seems to want to emphasise is not 'a strict separation between these concepts' but the 'very impulse to formulate words for grounds'.[51] This drive, according to him, 'suggests that writers on art in the Renaissance were engaged in diagnosing the conditions of the painting medium'.[52] Kim is interested in the materiality and condition of image-making of Renaissance paintings, that is how 'ground' (encompassing both the laying in of grounds and the painting of backgrounds) 'dramatizes what painting aimed to be and to become'.[53] His choice of examples offered as evidence, interestingly, are those monochromatic or non-figural backgrounds that could indeed be viewed as substitutes for material grounds, such as Gentile da Fabriano's gold ground, Giovanni Bellini's rock background, Moroni's grey background and Caravaggio's dark background. Indeed, Kim adheres to the ambivalence of the German word *Bildgrund* itself, which literally means pictorial ground but actually has no equivalent in the English context. But what kind of ground is 'pictorial ground'? It is a background or ground? Indeed, 'ground' and 'background'

[48] Leonhard, *The Fertile Ground of Painting.*
[49] Kim, 'Points on a Field', p. 191.
[50] Kim, *The Groundwork*, pp. 4-5.
[51] Ibid., p. 46.
[52] Ibid., pp. 46-7.
[53] Ibid., p. 7.

as terms were conflated in Germanic in the later eighteenth century.[54] For instance, according to Johann Georg Sulzer's two-volume art dictionary published between 1771 and 1774, *Grund* not only means 'ground', the material surface on which the pictorial design is laid, but also 'background', the ground against which the object is seen.[55] As an example, he notes that the sky serves as the 'ground' for clouds.[56]

The recent 'material turn' takes advantage of the peculiar characteristics of the ground, which is assumed to be phenomenologically opposed to the figure, just like form is opposed to matter.[57] The apparent dichotomy between figure and ground allows the ground to be studied independently from the figure and the beholder. Nevertheless, could this growing interest in the ground of the painting, or 'groundism' (to coin a term) in recent scholarship, be essentially nothing more than clever 'word-play' of Germanic language? In modern German, for instance, *Grund* means ground, soil, bottom, reason, and so on. Besides its more literal meanings, the key metaphorical meaning of the word in German is 'reason'. In English, ground can also be identified with reason, such as seen in the expression 'on the grounds that…'. Just as the reason or cause metaphorically has been seen as a foundation on which the result can be firmly built, the ground of a painting could be related to a presumably painting's solid foundation. Developing this metaphorology of ground thus itself generates new scholarly interpretations, even if they may not be clearly related to the period understanding of the term in Italian.[58] The semiotic depth of the term 'ground' (*Grund* in German) thus appears to provide scholars such as Kim and Leonhard with new possibilities to interpret the ground as something opposed to the Albertian notion of place as a kind of

[54] It should be noted that, in modern German, there is a specific term for 'background'—that is, *Hintergrund*.
[55] H. J. Dethlefs, 'Art Lexicography as Art Theory: On Pictorial Grounds in J. G. Sulzer's *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* (1771-1774)', in Michèle-Caroline Heck et al (eds), *Lexicographie Artistique: Formes, Usages et Enjeux dans l'Europe Moderne* (Montpellier, 2018), pp. 265-90.
[56] Ibid., p. 269.
[57] For the most recent discussion about the question of figure and ground in various contexts such as philosophy, phenomenology, psychology, painting and so on, see Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them*, pp. 78-128. Also see B. Johnson, 'Is Female to Male as Ground is to Figure?', in B. Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 17-36.
[58] On 'metaphorology' as a theoretical framework, see H. Blumenberg, *Paradigms for Metaphorology*, trans. R. Savage (New York, 2010).

fixed enclosure. This is then set against the striving for perspectival 'realism' seen in Italian Renaissance painting.[59]

Although such semantic excurses can be thought-provoking, they neglect the question of background in the historical context of Italian Renaissance art and Early Modern Italy. Unlike the underlying ground that covers the whole pictorial surface but that usually remains invisible, the background in an Italian Renaissance painting is a localised pictorial element embedded within a composition, sometimes defining the *when* and *where* of the subject matter.[60] It is closely related to the discovery and application of linear perspective in paintings. Despite the laudable aim of scholars like Kim to provide a new paradigm for Renaissance painting that moves beyond the old paradigm of perspective, this approach raises new questions. For instance, what is the relationship between background (and possibly ground as well) and perspective? And what does the development of the former owe to the latter?

It should be emphasised that the term *campo* in its Italian context means 'field', that is a demarcated area. According to the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, the term *campo* primarily means 'spazio di terra, dove si semina'.[61] Secondly, it is used to denote 'countryside', which is equivalent to the Latin term *campus*.[62] Given these two primary meanings, *campo* is certainly a place defined by its boundaries rather than an infinite space. So, the term *campo* or *campus* in Latin conceptually is very close to the Aristotelian notion of *locus*.[63] But unlike *locus*, the notion *campo* is more materially concrete and should be seen as a milestone in the development of Western agricultural history. Rather than simply denoting earth, *campo* means the use of earth as a field or

[59] Kim, *Groundwork*, p. 8.
[60] One of the few scholars to consider Italian Renaissance backgrounds from an iconographic point of view is Luba Freedman. See, for instance, L. Freedman, 'The Arno Valley in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Painting', *Viator*, vol. 44, 2 (2013), pp. 201-42; L. Freedman, 'Florence in Two Pollaiuolo Paintings' in *Censura, Riscrittura, Restauro. Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, 2/1 (2012), pp. 275-96.
[61] *Vocabolario*, II, p. 269.
[62] Ibid.
[63] For 'place' as a philosophical concept, see E. Casey, *The Fate of Place: a Philosophical History* (Berkeley and London, 1997).

a material carrier for cultivation, which means it lies at the very heart of the intersection between nature and culture.

The notion *campo* is already an image. Rather than an inert sign, *campo* possesses both the immanent potential of nature and the transforming power of human agency. However, this dialectic between nature and culture in the meaning of the word *campo* hasn't been applied in explaining its use in the discourse of Renaissance paintings. Instead of replacing the perspectival paradigm of painting with *Bildgrund* as seen in the current fashion of scholarship, I argue that we should shift our attention from linear perspective in the abstract to the more material and concrete notion of the *campo*, which encompasses a variety of painted and gilded backgrounds. The *campi* of Renaissance paintings not only provide accurate information on *where* and *when* of the subject matter in the foreground but are material properties themselves. One way to map the term *campo* onto the language of the pictorial practice is to re-address the questions of transparency and materiality of Italian Renaissance paintings.[64] How to reconcile the meaning and materiality of backgrounds? This present thesis, thus, also pays particular attention to the *campo* as simultaneously being material and transparent. This is seen, for instance, in Renaissance portraits where the artist uses the motif of a shadow cast on the background/ground or *campo* in order to emphasise the three-dimensional presence of the sitter in the foreground.

We can explore this phenomenon in Raphael's portrait of *Baldassare Castiglione* (Fig. 1).[65] The background of much of the pictorial space consists of a mottled but, for the most part, pale beige ground. This works visually like a gold ground that can simultaneously evoke both the finite through the reality of its surface materiality and the infinite through its immaterial luminosity, a topic that will be considered at length

[64] Louis Marin has used categories such as transparence and opacity to study Renaissance art, see L. Marin, *Opacité de la peinture: essais sur la representation au Quattrocento* (Paris, 2006).
[65] For a recent consideration of this portrait with an earlier bibliography, see T. Henry and P. Joannides (eds), *Raphaël. Les Dernières Années* (Paris, 2012), pp. 292-6. For a fairly recent catalogue entry of this portrait, see D. Ekserdjian et al. *Raphael* (London, 2022), pp. 278-9.

in the next chapter. In the case of the portrait of Castiglione, there is an optical fusion between the beige ground and the foreground figure. Thanks to the immaterial visual qualities of this nebulous, spatially-undefined background, the figure looks ethereal and appears fully submerged within it. The opticality of this pale beige ground is further emphasised by the subject's blue penetrating eyes, which could be read as evoking the sense of sight and vision more generally. However, if one focuses on the darker shadow cast by the figure on the right side of the picture, the beige ground begins to seem more solid and material, something onto which a shadow can be cast, and thus appears to push the figure forward into the beholder's space.[66] This painting illustrates Maldiney's systolic and diastolic moments in the relationship between figure and ground, as the figure simultaneously emerges from the ground if the latter is read as a solid material surface and is enveloped by the background if it is read as an indeterminate, possibly infinite spatial depth.

But we shall not stop at analysing Raphael's portrait in formal terms. We should, instead, try to ask why a neutral ground (being predominantly material) is chosen for this particular sitter? Using neutral backgrounds is certainly counter-narrative and enhances the iconic focus of the figure. This iconicity is also evoked through a motif within the picture itself. The black beret worn by the sitter is adorned with a medallion. It is unknown what that medallion looks like. But normally, like all other medals or medallions, Castiglione's medallion should have a neutral metal ground. The depiction of that half-hidden medallion could be an internal reference to the neutral background, which is used by Raphael to coincide literarily or conceptually with the material ground beneath the pictorial surface. Raphael's portrait could definitely be a self-referential painting in that the new format of Renaissance portraiture with neutral backgrounds refers back to the old format of the medallion.

[66] I am grateful to Tatian C. String for sharing her unpublished article 'Shadows and Temporality in Anglo-Netherlandish Portraiture', which contains useful observations about shadows in Renaissance portraits.

A key issue linked to the question of the 'invention' of different kinds of backgrounds is that of periodisation in relation to Italian Renaissance art in general. The debate as to whether there is a transition from 'ground' to 'background' in the fifteenth century raises the question of the temporality of the *campo* as a changing and unstable concept. Over the past few decades, some scholars have argued that the Renaissance should be seen as a continuation of medieval culture rather than as a clear Burckhardtian rupture.[67] In some of the most recent discussions about the temporality of Renaissance art, the question of 'anachronism' in particular has been raised. Developing further the dichotomy between the 'era of image' and the 'era of art' first advanced by Hans Belting, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, in their book *Anachronic Renaissance*, have put forward two contrasting models of image-making: the authorial versus substitutional models.[68] However, as pointed out by Megan Holmes, the 'schematic binary' and the 'implicit teleology', which in some ways continue to echo Burckhardtian assumptions about rupture, remain problematic.[69] If we identify the invention of transparent backgrounds as a hallmark of Italian Renaissance painting since Alberti, how to explain the numerous uses of neutral grounds in Renaissance portraits, among which one example is Raphael's *Baldassare Castiglione* (Fig. 1)? Could they be termed as substitutions of gold grounds and thus 'anachronic'?

These more general debates also come into play when one reconsiders accepted teleological models of the linear development from gold ground to painted background. Doing so suggests that such assumptions may be built on more shaky foundations than is usually thought. I will propose that we assume that these two kinds of *campi* (i.e., material ground and transparent background) were in dialogue with each other, as will be discussed in the next chapter on the hybrid use of gold and landscape backgrounds in Pinturicchio's Borgia Apartment. At the same time as there is undoubtedly continuity

[67] For an early critique of Burckhardt, see W. K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (Boston, 1948), pp. 290-385.
[68] H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (Chicago and London, 1994); A. Nagel and C. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York, 2010).
[69] M. Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence* (New Haven and London, 2013), pp. 160-1.

and dialogue, however, I posit that a new idea of 'background' did indeed emerge in the late medieval period. But rather than assume a definitive shift of meaning in the term *campo* from 'ground' to 'background' in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, it might be more helpful to discuss the unstable meaning of the term *campo* itself and how the tensions between ground and background can shed some new light upon the pictorial logic behind the uses of both gilded and painted backgrounds in Italian Renaissance paintings in this period.

Looking at the available scholarship, it is evident that a broader overview is needed of how Renaissance artists thought about *campi* across a variety of genres and how these ideas manifested themselves in the actual paintings they produced. By examining different *campi* across a range of artistic genres (albeit mostly in the medium of paint), the present thesis emphasises both the material and immaterial qualities of the *campo* and considers how this tension can shed some new light upon the making, meaning and reception of some Renaissance paintings in their original contexts. Doing so makes it clear that during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in Italy and Northern Europe, different modes of thinking about *campi* were rapidly developing. Avoiding the reductionist trap of trying to provide a single overarching theory, I will instead highlight how different theories overlapped and sometimes even conflicted with one another. This will allow me to tease out a possible inter-relationship between how period terms such as *campo*, *fondo* and *lontano* were understood in their own time and how the 'backgrounds' of Italian Renaissance paintings began to form a repertoire of pictorial forms with a range of functions and meanings.

In order to do this, the sections that follow will chart the changing semantics of the period term *campo*. Unlike Stumpel who situates *campo* within an implicit teleology to an end, my survey of the term will be more nuanced and dialectical, pointing *campo* to its origin. But chronology is useful. The discussion that follows is based on key textual examples gleaned from the fourteenth century through the Counter-Reformation, correlated with the changing painting practices and ever-shifting intellectual, socio-

political and religious contexts. I aim to elucidate, in chronological order, how changing conceptions of *campo* inform the practice of painting as described in the writings by Cennini Cennino, Alberti, Leonardo, Paolo Giovio, Vasari, Gabriele Paleotti, Raffaello Borghini, Vincenzo Borghini, Federico Borromeo and others. In addition to the uses of the term *campo*, I will also consider other period concepts that are intimately related to the ideas of 'ground' and 'background' more generally in artistic treatises, inventories, contracts, and the recorded lives of artists in the early modern period. In parallel to the emergence of linear perspective and landscape views in the transparent backgrounds of Italian paintings, *campo* as a material concept continued to play an important role in the writings of Leonardo and Vasari, a topic that will also be considered in the present chapter. However, although Leonardo wrote extensively on the problem of *campi*, his actual influence was quite marginal in the fifteenth century itself given that his thoughts on this topic remained unpublished at the time. But his thoughts on *campi* should be seen as an important example of how grounds and backgrounds were understood by some artists from the late fifteenth century to the early sixteenth century.

1.2 *Campo* and *campeggiare* in Cennino Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte*

A thorough historical understanding of how the period term *campo* interacted with the practices of Renaissance painting has yet to be achieved. Although the term *campo* may not have been coined by the late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century artist Cennino Cennini, it is in Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte* that the notion of *campo* has attained a consistent meaning that is relevant to our understanding of Italian Renaissance picture-making. Cennini's work was intended to display the summit of his knowledge and skill to the discriminating audience of the Carrara court in Padua.[70]

Cennini's usage of the term *campo*, above all, is to address the materiality of the image. It is, however, not an isolated phenomenon. Before discussing Cennini, it is necessary

[70] On the context in which this book was produced, see Cennini-Broecke, pp. 1-9.

to provide a general context. An early example of using *campo* to mean a material ground can be found in Theophilus' *De diuersis artibus*, compiled in the twelfth century. In a section entitled 'The Embellishment of a Painting on Glass (*De ornatv pictvrae in vitro*)', the author gives a lesson on how to portray draperies or other figurative elements effectively:

> In the same way, you make grounds of very bright white ('facies campos ex albo clarissimo') and the figures against it ('cuius campi imagines') you clothe in blue, green, purple and red. On grounds of blue and green, painted in the same way, and of red, which is not painted, you make the draperies of very bright white. Nothing is more splendid ('speciosius') than this kind of drapery.[71]

Here *campo* is used as a material term associated with colour and colouring. Cenninni's *Il Libro* should be seen within this medieval tradition of painting, emphasising its materiality.

The term *campo* is extensively used in Cennini's *Il Libro* to mean various kinds of grounds. For instance, in some places, it can refer to the ground or the expanse of a piece of paper ('lo campo del tuo carta').[72] More often, the term 'campo d'oro' is used, which characterises much of medieval painting in general.[73] These two examples could suggest that *campo* is understood by Cennini as a 'material or physical ground' on which an image is painted. But the key question is how to translate the term *campo d'oro*? The English term 'gold ground' is a translation of the German term *Goldgrund*, the latter of which is probably derived from the medieval conception of the primer for a gilding, as seen in terms such as 'Gult grunt', 'Goltgrunt' or 'fundamentum pro auro'.[74] However, in the Italian context, the prevalent term is *campo d'oro*. It could be either translated as 'gold background' or 'gold ground', depending on the relationship between the figure and the *campo*.[75] In most cases, the gold leaf is usually only applied

[71] Theophilus, *The Various Arts*, trans. C. R. Dodwell (London, 1961), p. 51.
[72] Cennini-Broecke, p. 37, Ch. 16.
[73] For instance, see Ibid., p. 159, Ch. 123.
[74] For these medieval terms, see C. Hecht, *Die Glorie: Begriff, Thema, Bildelement in der europäischen Sakrualkunst vom Mittelalter bis zum Ausgang des Barock* (Erlangen-Nürnberg, 2002), p. 69.
[75] According to Paul Hills in an oral communication on 9th March 2018, *campo d'oro* should perhaps

in a separate field surrounding the painted areas of the panel. In this case, the term *campo d'oro* should be translated as 'gold background'. But there are also rare cases in which the figures are painted on top of *campo d'oro*, as will be discussed below, cases when it would therefore be more appropriate to speak of a 'gold ground'.

In Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte*, the term *campo*, for the first time, defines simultaneously the *locus* of the figure and the material ground of painting. Apart from the situations discussed above, an interesting usage of the term can be found when Cennini describes the relationship between the figure and the ground, from which a more ambiguous conceptualisation of the *campo* emerges. In material terms, the gilded area of a gold-ground painting is not beneath but *external to* the incised outline of the figure, which seems to contradict the idea of 'ground' referring to the area *beneath* a figure.[76] For Cennini, interestingly, the figure is both *on* and *surrounded by* the gold ground. For instance, in Chapter cxxiii, Cennini describes figures as being 'on the gold ground' ('in campi d'oro'), while elsewhere, he speaks of figures 'alongside the grounds' ('verso i campi').[77] This ambiguity suggests that the term *campo* in the term *campo d'oro* could either be ground or background. In Chapter cxl, Cennini even used the expression 'picking out the figures from the ground' ('ritagliando le figure dal campo') as if the ground is the matrix from which the figure emerges.[78] These descriptions of the relationship between figure and ground also may reflect the technique of gold ground painting in which the gold ground was prepared before the figure was depicted. But I want to emphasise here that the idea of figures being depicted 'on a gold ground' is apparently a conceptual or perceptual fallacy because the gold ground, in reality, is prepared up to the edge of the figures rather than running beneath them.

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not be translated as 'gold background', because its formal flatness entails its ornamental rather than representational status. Hills instead believes *campo d'oro* is better translated as 'gold field' in English. This observation is crucial, as I believe that there is no need to be consistent in translating *campo d'oro*. It could be translated as 'gold ground', 'gold background', or 'gold field', depending on the context.

[76] For this technical issue, see D. Bomford et al, *Art in the Making. Italian Painting before 1400* (London, 1989), p. 21.

[77] Cennini-Broecke, p. 159, Ch. 123.

[78] Ibid., p. 175, Ch. 140.

But there is also a case in Cennini in which figuration occurs within the gold ground itself. This situation is related to the technique of the so-called granulation:

> This granulation that I am telling you about is one of the loveliest branches which we have. And you can granulate over a large area as I explained to you. And you can granulate into relief ('granare a rilievo') so that, with a sensitive imagination and a light touch, on a gold ground you can make foliate decorations and make little angels and other figures which show up in the gold ('traspaiano nell'oro'). That is: do not do any granulation in the folds and in the shadows, do a little in the half-tones, do a lot on the relief because granulation amounts to brightening the gold since, on its own, it is dark where it has been burnished…[79]

We see here that the gold itself is the medium from which the figures and foliage emerge and appear. One prime example of this technique of *granare a rilievo* can be found in the angels delineated on the gold ground of Benedetto Bonfigli's *Adoration of the Child* (Figs. 2, 3). This practice of *granare a rilievo* is different from *ritagliare le figure dal campo* because granulation (opus punctorium) is directly applied to the ground area.[80] Using the sophisticated technique of *granare a rilievo* certainly suggests a highly-skilled artisan, or, in Andrea de Marchi's words, an *orafo-pittore* (goldsmith-painter).[81] Kim argues that such a use of gold ground 'speak[s] to the possibility of a world whose appearance fluctuates, unable to be grasped simultaneously', which is opposed to 'a rationalized, fixed, and measurable depiction of the world' as seen in one-point perspective.[82] However, Kim's claim is not applicable to the combination of gold ground and landscape, such as seen in the Borgia Apartment, in which the ground is

[79] Ibid., pp. 175-6, Ch. 141.
[80] On the history and technique of *granare a rilievo*, see B. Eclercy, '"Granare". Zur Historischen Terminologie des Goldgrunddekors im Traktat des Cennino Cennini', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* (2007), pp. 539-554. Also see N. Muller, 'In a New Light: the Origins of Reflective Halo Tooling in Siena', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 2012, 75. Bd., H. 2 (2012), pp. 153-178.
[81] A. de Marchi, 'Interferenze possibili tra oreficeria e pittura nel Nord Italia, prima e dopo Gentile da Fabriano', *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Classe di Lettere e Filosofia* 15 (2004), pp. 27-47.
[82] D. Kim, 'Points on a Field: Gentile da Fabriano and Gold Ground', p. 221.

adaptable to perspectival representations, as is discussed in Chapter Two on Renaissance gold ground paintings.

In fact, from the start, the concept of the *campo* was far from stable and could take on a dynamic value in Cennini's text. At the very beginning of the book, Cennini introduced the notion of 'campeggiare' as a key practice of painting, one that he considered to comprise one of 'the foundational tasks of art' ('il fondamento dell arte').[83] It could be metaphorically related to the idea of grounding the figure as well. In a fifteenth-century German treatise, for instance, the progressive build-up of priming layers during gilding is compared to the process of building or construction, such as seen in the passage: 'Wiltu machen ein gut fundament dar ruff man silber und golt leit daz es schön und glanz werde'.[84] In a metaphorical sense, the term 'ground' linked here to the Latin loan word 'fundamentum'.

There are two implications of the association between pigments and *campo* in the writings of Cennini: pigments are either mixed or juxtaposed one beside the other. Importantly, the term *campeggiare* can also mean laying grounds beneath the painted surface. As Cennini suggests: 'And bear in mind that the panel needs to be laid in more times ('più volte campeggiata') than a wall'. The verb form *campeggiare*, which seems not to exist in earlier writings on art, here designates the practice of colouring a designated area. Conceptionally, it is the opposite of *ritagliare*, that is 'to distinguish the outlines of the figures from the field with signs made with a brush or awl'.[85] When explaining how to paint a wounded man, Cennini advises: 'To do, or rather to paint a wounded man, or rather a wound, take pure vermilion. Make sure that you lay it in where you want to do blood' ('A fare o ver colorire un uomo fedito, o vero fedita, togli cinabro puro; fa' che campeggi dove vuoi far sangue.')[86] But more often than not, the

[83] Cennini-Broecke, p. 25, Ch. 4.
[84] Discussed in M. Burioni, 'Grund und *campo*', p. 97.
[85] See Didi-Huberman's discuss of this pair of terms in Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, p. 18.
[86] Cennini-Broecke, p. 193. Ch. 149.

practice of *campeggiare* is associated with laying in the colour of draperies, as seen in the following passage: 'if you want to make the drapery red, lay in ('campeggia') vermilion'.[87] It is not difficult to see the link between colouring a figure within its circumscribing outline and 'to make a ground' ('facere campos') around a figure more generally in medieval paintings. As early as in the *Mappae clavicula*, a collection of medieval Latin treatises on tingeing which dates from the eighth to the twelfth century, the phrase 'facere campos' was used to refer to the process of putting ground colours on papers on a flat surface (whether paper, hide, cloth, wood, plaster, galss or any other material) by mixing one pigment with another.[88]

In the medieval military lexicon, *campeggiare* means 'to control or occupy the terrain'.[89] These link between the art of war and the art of painting as is poetically expressed in Canto XI in Dante's *Purgatorio*:

> Credette Cimabue ne la pittura
> tener lo campo, e ora ha Giotto il grido,
> sì che la fama di colui è scura.
> (Cimabue believed he held the field in painting,
> and now Giotto has the cry, so that the fame of the
> first is darkened.)[90]

Here, Dante has combined the pictorial connotations of the 'campo' as the ground of a painting with its military associations of a battlefield. Cimabue's practice of painting,

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[87] Ibid., p. 177, Ch. 142.

[88] E. J. Beer, 'Marginalien zum Thema Goldgrund', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 46. Bd., H. 3 (1983), p. 283. For an English translation, see C. S. Smith and J. G. Hawthorne, *Mappae Clavicula: A Little Key to the World of Medieval Techniques*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 64, No. 4 (1974), p. 28, 'If you want to make grounds, make a beautiful rose from vermilion and white. Again, make a ground from folium tempered with lime. Again, make a ground from green tempered with vinegar. Again, make a ground from green itself'. (Si vis facere campos, fac pulcram rosam de vermiculo et albo. Item, fac campum de folio distemperato cum calce. Item, fac campum de viridi distemperato cum acceto. Item, fac campum de ipso viridi…)

[89] The word *campeggiare* is found in a number of historical sources, e.g. Commentari di Gino di Neri Capponi Dell'aquisto, ovvero Presa di Pisa seguita l'Anno 1406: 'Mandò il Duca di nuovo a Lucca con 200 lance Lodovico Colonna: il perché a Micheletto non parve essere forte a campeggiare né a Calci, né altrove, avendo da ogni banda i nemici', see Burioni, 'Grund und *campo*. Die Metaphorik des Bildgrundes in der frühen Neuzeti oder: Paolo Uccellos *Schlacht von San Romano*', p. 144, n. 58.

[90] *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, eds and trans. Robert M. Durling, Vol. 2, Purgatorio (New York, 2003), pp. 176-7.

which readers would assume was executed on a 'campo' as pictorial ground, is at the same time like a war waged on a 'campo' as battlefield. This military connotation of *campo* could also have been evoked in Cennini's use of *campeggiare* in the case of painting the red blood of a wounded man, who was quite possibly a soldier. The military connotations of the *campo*, including the idea of occupying/being occupied, came to be rehearsed again later in the relationship between figure and ground in some early Renaissance profile portraits with landscape backgrounds, as will be discussed in Chapter 3 on landscape backgrounds.

As we have seen, the term *campeggiare* is reserved by Cennini Cennino for the practice of laying in colour within the contour of a figure. Thus, to some extent, it is related to the idea of foregrounding the colour. One can instead argue that the relationship between foreground and background implied in Cennini in a gold ground painting is one in which the figure should be seen as the 'foreground' while the gold is seen as the 'background'. Following this logic, the term *campo d'oro* could be more accurately translated in general as 'gold background' rather than as 'gold ground'. The exceptions are in the case of the technique of *granare a rilievo* on the *campo d'oro*, which registers the *campo* as actual material ground and, in some cases, also as representational background, as noted above. Thus, *campo d'oro* could be understood in both visual and material terms, depending on the specific context.

There is perhaps no better example of this duality than Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Annunciation* (Fig. 4), in which the *campo d'oro* serves both as background and ground for the picture. The upper half of the central column appears to be part of or perhaps submerged in the gold ground. But given that the lower part is depicted in front of the perspectival *piano* or floor, it could also be seen as detached or separate from it, features that demonstrate the two ways of understanding gold as both ground and background.

1.3 Perspective and *campo*: Alberti's *Della pittura* and Fifteenth-Century Painting

A key question that has preoccupied previous scholars is when 'ground' became 'background'. One common response is to map stylistic and formal developments from the deployment of *campo d'oro* to landscape in fifteenth-century paintings. Some scholars have argued that gold grounds began to wane once the use of perspectival backgrounds began to grow.[91] Yet, how do we account for the fact that gold grounds did not disappear? Artists were still using them in some regions of Italy well into the fifteenth century and even into the sixteenth century.[92] Moreover, if the term *campo d'oro* is translated as 'gold background' (rather than as 'gold ground'), the significance of this shift or supposed break with the past becomes much less obvious than previous scholars have assumed. But on the other hand, I believe the idea of 'background' does become established more consciously and in different ways in a new kind of picture, which was codified by Leon Battista Alberti for the first time in the fifteenth century.

The key textual evidence for this change is Alberti's *De pictura* (*Della pittura* in the vernacular version), written in 1435. Interestingly enough, the word *campo* is never used by Alberti. He famously criticised the use of gold ground in paintings, though without using the term *campo*.[93] One explanation for not using this term could be that Alberti consciously sought to avoid mentioning the *campo* in relation to painting to distance his text from the language of artisans, including Cennini. He hoped instead to make his writings sound more 'classical' (or perhaps one could say more progressive or innovative), in part by elevating the humble artisan to the status of a learned (humanist) artist. More prosaically, the lack of the term *campo* could be simply because, in painting practice, gold grounds (which had previously been closely associated with this term) were used less and less by time Alberti wrote his treatise.

[91] Michael Baxandall has already noted the decrease in using gold grounds in Florentine fifteenth-century paintings in Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, p. 15. Thomas Puttfarken follows this claim, see Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition*, p. 110.
[92] This will be the topic of the next chapter on Renaissance gold ground painting.
[93] See Alberti-Grayson, pp. 92-3.

In *Della pittura*, Alberti divides the painting into three parts: circumscription, composition, and the reception of light. This sequence indicates a specific hierarchy that is fundamental to Alberti's theory of painting. For Alberti, the surfaces are the 'prime parts of the painting'.[94] Each surface 'contains in itself its pyramid of colours and lights'.[95] He uses the term *superficie* (*superficies* in Latin) to denote the surface of either the figure or the ground, though it mostly refers to figure. According to the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, the term *superficie* means 'the outside of everything, almost the top of the face'.[96] Significantly, the term *superficie* could also mean the surface of a pool of water, thus suggesting both the transparency of the pictorial surface through which one can peer into the depths, as well as its opposite, a reflective surface that bounces back one's own reflection. Consequently, Alberti's perspectival system works more like a burnished mirror surface.

But should we oppose the *campo* (as ground) to the paradigm of perspective (as background) that denies the materiality of the surface?[97] According to Georges Didi-Huberman, the answer is yes. The key, according to Didi-Huberman, is the change in understanding of the notion 'place'. It is worth quoting in full Didi-Huberman's discussion about the difference between Cennini's *campo* and Alberti's notion of place. According to Didi-Huberman,

> Far from being considered a germinating 'virtue', a divine virtue that engenders forms, Alberti's notion of place is envisioned as a 'quality inherent to surfaces': it is above all a matter of 'circumscription' – and thus presupposes the act of *ritagliare* – and not of 'field', the act of *campeggiare*. The place does not have a genetic quality but rather a perceptual one: it concerns the sight of things…rather than the things themselves.[98]

[94] Alberti-Grayson, II, 35, 'Primae igitur operis partes superficies'.
[95] Alberti-Spencer, p. 51.
[96] *Vocabolario*, III, p. 1655: 'Il di fuori di ciascuna cosa, quasi il di sopra della faccia'.
[97] In Chapter 3 on Renaissance gold ground painting, I will suggest that in Pinturicchio's Borgia Apartment, grounds co-exist with landscape and perspectival backgrounds on the same pictorial surface.
[98] Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico.*, p. 43.

Here, Didi-Huberman has rightly implied that the absence of the term *campo* in Alberti's *Della pittura* results in a loss of the power, or 'virtue' of the *campo*.[99] However, did Didi-Huberman intend to adopt a dichotomy between form and matter in discussing the difference between *ritagliare* ('to draw an outline') and *compeggiare* ('to lay in colour')? I would suggest that Alberti himself did not play down the significance of the matter or materiality in his *Della pittura* as Didi-Huberman claims. As Rebecca Zorach argues in her most recent revisiting of Alberti, there is no contradiction between form and matter in Alberti's method of single-point perspective.[100] Indeed, she believes that Alberti repeatedly uses different metaphors to close the distance between a painting and the material world to such an extent that he can advise artists to convert their geometrical knowledge to what he calls a 'pinguior Minerva', a 'fatter (or 'oilier')' and thus implicitly more material form of knowledge.[101] The famous window metaphor is just one aspect of Alberti's theory, one which should not be seen as negating Alberti's concurrent emphasis on composition and materiality. But Didi-Huberman is right in suggesting there is a shift from seeing *campo* as a 'genetic place' (to use Didi-Huberman's phrase) on which a painting originates to an optical surface intended to be seen *through*.

Alberti does discuss the process of *compeggiare*, in the sense of laying in colours, but he explicitly avoids using this particular term just as he avoided using *campo* in both the Latin and vernacular editions of his treatise. When explaining the difference between drawing a figure's outline and colouring the surface of a figure, Alberti exhorts painters:

> Should you ask some what they are doing when they cover a plane with colours ('tingono superficie'), they will answer everything but what you ask. Therefore,

[99] For the whole idea of power and its association with allegorical reading of scripture, see Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*, pp. 13-44. The idea of *campo* as having an allegorical depth will be revisited throughout the current thesis.
[100] R. Zorach, *The Passionate Triangle* (Chicago and London, 2011), pp. 29ff.
[101] Ibid., p. 34. Zorach's translation. Note that the phrase has been translated by John Spencer as 'more sensate wisdom' and by Cecil Grayson as 'cruder terms'. See Alberti-Spencer, p. 43; Alberti-Grayson, p. 37.

> I beg studious painters not to be embarrassed by what I say here. It is never wrong to learn something useful to know from anyone. They should know that they circumscribe the plane ('la superficie') with their lines. *When they fill the circumscribed places with colours ('empiono di colori'), they should only seek to present the forms of things seen on this plane as if it were very translucent and glass-like*. Thus the visual pyramid could thus pass through it, placed at a definite distance with definite lights and a definite position of centre in space and in a definite place in respect to the observer.'[102]

Here, Alberti explicitly stresses that the colours that are to be applied should be none other than those that pass through the plane. That the pictorial surface has been redefined as being translucent suggests that he is setting the notion of 'transparency' against the material solidity of what others called the *campo*, but he chooses to call it plane or surface ('la superficie'). Here, colour has been transformed from a material property to a kind of light. It is now part of optics that the skilled painter should only represent those colours that are visible to the beholder.

It seems that the tradition of assuming that the *campo d'oro* is the foundation of pictorial design may have persuaded Alberti to argue that perspective was similarly fundamental. Instead of referring to the 'ground' or 'foundation', Alberti uses the term *pavimento* in his Italian edition and *pavimentum* in Latin, usually translated into English as 'pavement'. The 'method of dividing up the pavement' ('questa ragione di dividere il pavimento'), as Alberti demonstrated in Book One of his treatise, is part of the process of composing a picture. This principle was, according to Alberti, unknown to earlier writers such as Cennini.[103]

In Book Two, Alberti further discusses how to start a painting from its foundations, which he defines as the meeting points between the pavement and the bottom of the walls, when composing an *historia*. When explaining the so-called *costruzione legittima* in his *De pictura* or *Della pittura*, for instance, Alberti observes: 'I begin first

[102] Alberti-Spencer, p. 51; Alberti-Malle, p. 65. Emphasis added.
[103] Alberti-Grayson, pp. 57-8. Alberti-Mallè, p. 74.

from the foundations' ('Principio comincio dai fondamenti'; or, in Latin, 'principio ab ipsis fundamentis').[104] As noted by Stumpel, the construction of geometrical *piani* or checkerboard floors is fundamentally important, because the *piano* is the means through which the consistency of the painted world can be established and tested by the beholder.[105] Critically, Alberti recommends that *pavimento* be conceived and prepared prior to any figures.

Following Alberti, Antonio Filarete (c. 1465) also compares constructing a building to learning perspective.[106] Even Leonardo was aware of this metaphor, as when he stated that 'painting is based ("fondata") upon perspective'.[107] There seems to be an intersection between a vertical relation as implied in the building metaphor and a horizontal one as determined by perspective that engages the viewer through the depiction of pictorial depth. Although ground and perspective are two different things, it is un-historical and out of context to see them in opposition.

Despite the absence of the term *campo* in both editions, Alberti does address the question of background very briefly. Due to the pavement receding into the depth of the picture, a new form of pictorial space is opened. Alberti thus advised painters to fill the 'emptiness' ('vacuo') with those parergonal details or ornaments which he described by using rhetorical terms such as *varietà* and *copia*.[108] He must certainly imply the existence of backgrounds when he comments upon the 'emptiness' of paintings presumably without parergonal figures, objects, buildings or landscapes, as well as conversely when he criticises those who overfill their paintings with what one

[104] Alberti-Grayson, p. 71, Book II, 33; Alberti-Spencer, p. 70; or in Italian, 'Principio comincio dai fondamenti', see Alberti-Mallè, p. 86. It should be emphasised that the concept of *costruzione legittima* does not actually appear in Alberti's text. Nevertheless, I will follow most modern scholars in using this term to refer to Alberti's 'construction' of perspectival pavements.
[105] Stumpel, 'On Grounds and Backgrounds', p. 231.
[106] J. Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca & London, 1994), p. 47.
[107] Richter. I, p. 129, 50, 'la pittura è fondata sulla prospettiva'.
[108] For an influential study on Alberti's notions of *varietà* and *copia* in context, see M. Gosebruch, '"Varieta" bei Leon Battista Alberti und der wissenschaftliche Renaissancebegriff', in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 20, Bd., H. 3 (1957), pp. 229-238. For the classical theories of rhetoric that Alberti's theory of painting is based upon, see M. Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 135-9.

assumed must be background details: 'I disapprove of those painters who, in their desire to appear rich, leave no space empty, follow no system of composition, but scatter everything about in random confusion' ('Biasimo io quelli pittori quali, dove vogliono parere copiosi nulla lassando vacuo, ivi non compositione ma dissoluta confusione disseminano').[109]

The question then arises of how to treat this spatial emptiness in pictorial terms. The idea of 'background', even if not explicitly named by Alberti, as consisting first and foremost of a painting's landscape elements fits in well with Alberti's conception of *varietà* and *copia*, even if he also never explicitly refers to landscapes in his text. Alberti borrows terms from classical rhetoric like *copia* and *varietà* to make those landscape elements sound more 'humanistic' or perhaps more innovative, despite them being stock motifs found in earlier medieval paintings.[110] According to Alberti, an admirable and praiseworthy *historia* should be ornamented with alluring details that can hold the attention of both the learned and the unlearned. He helpfully lists those elements that can provide pictorial copiousness and variety: '…old men and men in their prime, youths, boys, mature women and maidens, young children, pet animals and puppy-dogs, small birds, horses, cattle, buildings and stretches of the country ('province')'.[111] Nevertheless, the author does not fully explain, as he does in his discussion of pavements in the *costruzione legittima*, how to represent these details in geometrical terms. Although he does not discuss how to depict landscape elements in scientific terms in *Della pittura*, Alberti did discuss it elsewhere, as will be discussed briefly below and more elaborately in Chapter 3.

Alberti's demand for abundance in narrative painting is partly addressed by his so-called 'miracles of painting' ('miracoli della pittura'), which are related to the older

[109] Alberti-Mallè, *Della pittura*, p. 92.
[110] On 'marginalia' in medieval painting, see M. Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London, 1992); M. Goehring, *Space, Place and Ornament: the Function of Landscape in Medieval Manuscript* (Turnhout, 2013).
[111] Alberti-Mallè, p. 92; Alberti-Spencer, p. 75.

tradition of *perspectiva naturalis* and may have relied on early forms of the 'camera obscura'.[112] These instruments were considered part of a craftsman's tools, however, rather than a type of pictorial construction to be learned by a humanistically-oriented artist.[113] In his autobiographical writings instead of *Della pittura*, Alberti describes how he '…showed in a little box with a small opening…huge mountains, vast provinces, the immense round of the sea surrounding them, and regions so distant from the eye that sight was dimmed.'[114] Such demonstrations of the natural world do not require mathematical knowledge of geometry. The cognition of them, according to Alberti, is based on *comparatio*:

> All knowledge of large, small; long, short; high, low; broad, narrow; clear, dark; light and shadow and every similar attribute is obtained by comparison ('comparatio'). Because they can be, but are not necessarily, conjoined with objects, philosophers are accustomed to calling them accidents…Thus all things are known by comparison, for comparison contains within itself a power ('vis') which immediately demonstrates in objects which is more, less or equal…bright when it is brighter than a shadow, brilliant when it is brighter than something bright.[115]

Alberti's notion of 'accidents' is derived from Aristotle's definition of the term.[116] For Aristotle, accidents are changeable properties either belonging to or external to an object. Accordingly, the cognition of these changeable qualities is derived from comparison. More importantly, *comparatio* is also a rhetorical term, which ancient rhetoricians from Aristotle to Priscian recommended as an important element of epideictic rhetoric.[117] By associating background elements with the *camera obscura*, Alberti definitely aimed to suggest the landscape elements should be *seen* by the

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[112] Alberti-Mallè, p. 72. For a recent discussion about Alberti's 'camera obscura', see Y. Hersant, 'Alberti et la "Camera Obscura"', *Albertiana*, Vl. XVIII (Firenze, 2015), pp. 119-33.
[113] Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective*, p. 49.
[114] Cited in A. Grafton, *Leon Battista Alberti. Master Builder of the Italian Renaissance* (London, 2001), pp. 84-5.
[115] Alberti-Spencer, p. 55.
[116] J. M. Greenstein, 'On Alberti's "Sign": Vision and Composition in Quattrocento Painting', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (1997), p. 682.
[117] On epideictic rhetoric in general, see L. Pernot, *Epideictic Rhetoric: Questioning the Stakes of Ancient Praise* (Austin, 2015). For its reception in the Renaissance period, see Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*.

audience. This suggests the background should be one of the iconographic focal points of the *historia* and should not be hidden from sight.

I have argued thus far that, even in the absence of the term *campo* in Alberti's *Della pittura*, the idea of ground or foundation is addressed implicitly in the text in association with linear perspective and the *pavimento* (or *piano*). At the same time, as our review of Alberti's *Della pittura* has shown, the *campo* has been transformed into the (potentially) empty part of the picture. Alberti emphasises that the *campo* needs to have some, but not too many elements in order to create a scene that ignores or perhaps even denies the opacity of the ground and instead emphasises its transparency through elements such as linear perspective, though cautioning that these backgrounds should be neither too empty nor too full. A good example to illustrate Alberti's principle is Andrea Mantegna's *Death of the Virgin* (Fig. 5). In this picture, the main protagonists are positioned firmly upon a geometrical *piano*, while the background is filled with a landscape view. In this painting, the figures have been placed in the foreground within a perspectival box, which is linked to, but also kept separate from the even deeper space suggested by the landscape. This follows Alberti's theory of background and *piano* in that the perspectival foreground has apparently little connection with the background landscape, which functions as a transparent window opening toward the outside world. The unified integrity of the figure and its *campo* as an opaque field will only be restored by Leonardo da Vinci, as we will discuss later.

In the practice of painting, the idea of 'background' as the empty part of the picture, or in Alberti's term, *vacuo* was developed in the fifteenth century. As we have seen, Stumpel glosses this as *campo* meaning the area external to the figures.[118] The example he gives is the specification made in Pinturicchio's 1495 contract for an altarpiece in S. Maria de' Fossi in Perugia (Fig. 6). This contract indicates precisely that:

[118] Stumpel, 'On Grounds and Backgrounds', p. 221.

> The painter also promises to paint in the empty part of the pictures, or more precisely on the backgrounds of the figures ('nel vacuo delli quadri o vero campi de le figure') landscapes and skies ('paese et aiere') and all other grounds too where colour is put: except for the frames, to which gold is applied.[119]

This example is fascinating and problematic. In the central panel of this altarpiece, you will find that the Madonna's throne is depicted in perspective terms with the orthogonal lines receding into the far distance, whereas the landscape on the *campo* is rendered in aerial perspective. You can find the fading blue in the distant mountains (Fig. 7). Yet, in the two flanking panels of two saints, the *campi* are not representational. Instead, they are flat and ornamental, which is very similar to the practice of gold grounds. Looking more closely, it is easy to detect that the *campi* behind St Augustine and St Jerome consists of gilded geometrical forms painted against dark grounds. These could be pictorial simulations of hanging textiles. However, their abstract designs without any *trompe-l'oeil* devices suggests instead that they are more likely to be non-representational arabesque patterns to be read as depicted on the ground rather than the background. But Pinturicchio seems to have play with the ambiguity here. Despite this ambiguity, I will translate *campo* as 'background' instead of 'ground' more generally after Alberti since I believe the year 1435 (when Alberti completed *Della pittura*) is a turning point of Renaissance picture making including in relation to the question of the *campo*. It can even be claimed that Alberti represents an optical revolution. By replacing *campo* with *superficie*, Alberti put into words explicitly what his contemporary painters did. But Albertian transparent background shall not be considered as a normative model of Renaissance pictures. There are various occasions when the foundational potential of *campo* was evoked again to play against the transparency of *campo*. Or in other words, it can be argued that whether *campo* should be understood as ground or background after Alberti was still debatable. The following case of Leonardo da Vinci will prove this point.

[119] 'Anche promette nel vacuo delli quadri o vero campi de le figure pegnere paese et aiere et tutti li altri campi dove se mette colore excepto li cornicioni dove se ha a ponere loro li quadri non sintendono in epso coptimo.', quoted from Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, p. 17. Translation is mine.

1.4 Optics and *campo*: Leonardo da Vinci's Theory of Painting

As an heir to Alberti's rhetorical conception of *comparatio,* Leonardo discussed backgrounds or *campi* largely within a rhetorical framework. But as will be seen later, Leonardo's understanding of *campo* is anti-Albertian since he questioned the legitimacy of linear perspective in the end. Although his writings may not have been known by most of his immediate contemporaries, his approach to the notion of *campi* did become quite influential in the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, I argue that a consideration of Leonardo's understanding of *campi* does contribute to a broader appreciation of how *campi* were understood in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It is evident that Leonardo incorporated the notion of the *campo* into his understanding of *chiaroscuro* compositions:

> Of the backgrounds of forms ('campi delle figure'), that is light against dark, and dark against light: white against black, or black against white seem more powerful ('potente'), one because of the other ('l'uno per l'altro'), and thus opposites always appear more powerful because of one another.[120]

Analogous to the notion of power ('vis') in Alberti's comparison, here the contrast between light and dark can make the picture look more 'powerful'. This practice, according to David Summers, is essentially rhetorical, linked to Quintilian's notion of *emphasis*, a type of ornament of rhetoric.[121] Its function is to make things '*more* intelligible' and, consequently, 'the whole visual field is *emphatic*'.[122] Emphasis means something beyond or more than what is denoted. Summers' observation is insightful because the idea of *emphasis* is more closely related to the subjective reception of the image in the beholder's eye rather than the image in its original materiality. We can treat Leonardo's theory about background as a further development of the Albertian

[120] Leonardo, *Treatise on Painting*, ed. and trans. P. McMahon (Princeton, 1956), I, 75, 153.
[121] D. Summers, '*Chiaroscuro*, or the Rhetoric of Realism', in F. Fiorani and A. Nova (eds), *Leonardo da Vinci and Optics. Theory and Pictorial Practice* (Venice, 2013), pp. 29-54.
[122] Ibid., p. 45.

picture. The following illuminates how Leonardo improves Alberti's linear perspective in a shift from *perspectiva artificialis* to *perspectiva naturalis*.

Leonardo's unfinished *Treatise on Painting* (*Trattato della Pittura*) included an entire section devoted to the problem of the background, entitled 'Objects and their Backgrounds (or Fields)' (in Part Two, 'Of Rules for the Painter').[123] This section was to be preceded by a section on 'Light and Shadow Should be Consistent with the Location of Figures' and followed by a section on 'Reflected Light'.[124] In Leonardo's treatise, the *campo* has therefore become either the focus of representation or a protagonist in the process of representing forms.

Leonardo seems to be the first theorist to use the word *campo* to describe the spatial illusion behind and around the figure. In Leonardo's writings, *campo*, being indispensable to the figure, has gained a compositional value which is absent in Cennini's *Il Libro*. For instance, for Leonardo, *campi*, in plural form, means the areas enclosing the main figures:

> La prima parte della pittura e chelli corpi con quella figurati si dimostrino rilevati e che li campi dessi circondatori con le lor distantie si dimostrino entrare dentro alle pariete dove tal pittura e gienerata mediante le tre prespettive.[125]

According to Leonardo, the first principle is that the bodies ('corpi') should appear in relief while the 'backgrounds' ('campi') should recede according to their diverse distances ('distantie'). Here, *campi* has become synonymous with landscape backgrounds. The sequence of *corpi* and *campi* in this sentence seems to imply the priority of the former over the latter, a position also held by Alberti.[126] The term

[123] The original Italian title is 'De campi delle figure'. Philip McMahon translated *campo* systematically as 'background'.
[124] See McMahon, I, pp. 73-5. In the quotations in the following discussion, I will use the English translations by Philip McMahon and Jean Paul Richter unless otherwise indicated.
[125] McMahon, II, 50v.
[126] On the parallels between Alberti and Leonardo, see K. Clark, *Leone Battista Alberti on Painting*, Annual Italian Lecture of the British Academy (London, 1944), pp. 16-7.

'circondatori' is particularly interesting. In Alberti's conception of 'circumscription', what circumscribes a figure/body is a line or contour. Here, the abstract contour is replaced by a more inclusive and material *campo*. In this sense, the continuity between the figure and its *campo* is made clear.

When discussing spatial depth, Leonardo mentions three kinds of perspective, using which backgrounds would appear to recede into the wall. These three perspectives, Leonardo explains, are the diminution of the forms of objects, the diminution of their magnitudes, and the diminution of their colours. The *campo* has here become a window-like 'background' instead of an opaque 'ground' and it implies a horizontal relationship into the depth that makes the viewer complicit in the illusion. A good example to illustrate Leonardo's principle of *campo* is *Ginevra de' Benci* of c. 1474/1478 (Fig. 8). The dark *campo* composed of vegetation behind the head of the female figure is a compositional element that is unique to Leonardo. It aims to give a strong *rilievo* effect to the figure and helps to create a better transition between the foreground figure and the background landscape. We know from the infrared images and X-radiographs that this area of paint was laid in during the early stages of executing the portrait, which suggests that dark backgrounds might have played an important part in the painting's initial composition.[127] This is a direct contrast to Albertian constructions of interior scenes in which the figure is placed within a perspectival box. The latter was a type of design favoured in many contemporary Florentine female portraits.

Like Alberti, Leonardo also considered perspective to be the theoretical 'foundation' of the practice of painting. Leonardo once observed that 'Painting is based upon perspective' ('la pittura è fondata sulla prospettiva').[128] He also claimed that 'practice must always be founded on sound theory, and to this perspective is the guide and

[127] On the juniper bush from a technical point of view, see E. Walmsley, 'Leonardo's portrait of Ginevra de' Benci: a reading of the X-radiographs and infrared reflectographs', in M. Menu (ed.), *Leonardo da Vinci's Technical Practice. Paintings, Drawings and Influence* (Paris, 2014), pp. 64-8.
[128] Richter, I, p. 129, 50.

gateway' ('sempre la pratica debbe esser edificata sopra la bona teorica della quale la prospettiva è guida e porta').[129] Nevertheless, the geometric foundation provided by Alberti does not, in the end, satisfy Leonardo's more all-encompassing approach, one in which he wanted painting to imitate the capabilities human sight. As a complement to Alberti's geometrical perspective, Leonardo pointed out around 1492 that there were three further types of perspective that painters should also master: perspective *di coloure* ('of colour'), perspective *di spedizione* ('of visual sharpness') and *dei perdimenti* ('deletions').[130] These types of perspective both deal with the changeable qualities of the surface, such as its size, shape, colour, and degree of brightness, which are more related to natural vision, or *perspectiva naturalis*. Although having noticed the difference between pictorial perspective (*perspectiva artificialis*) and natural vision (*perspectiva naturalis*) can be seen as early as MS A, written in ca. 1490-92, Leonardo only defined these terms in his writings around 1508.[131] Unsurprisingly, given the statements noted above, the science of painting, according to Leonardo, includes:

> …all the colours of surfaces, and the forms of the bodies bounded by them, as well as their nearness and distance, including the proper degrees of diminution, according to degrees of distance. This science is the mother of perspective or visual lines.[132]

Following this logic, we can certainly claim that Alberti's linear perspective is only a simplified version of the medieval tradition of *perspectiva naturalis*, which, in Leonardo's words, is the 'mother' of linear perspective. As David Lindberg has pointed out, Alberti just needed the 'barest framework, the mathematical skeleton' of *perspectiva naturalis*.[133]

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[129] Ibid., p. 119, 19.
[130] J. C. Bell, 'Colour perspective, circa 1492', *Achademia Leonardi Vinci*, V, (1992), p. 64-77, in particular p. 70-3.
[131] M. Kemp, 'Leonardo and the Visual Pyramid', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 40 (1977), pp. 147-8; also J. S. Ackerman, 'Leonardo's Eye', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 41 (1978), pp. 108-46.
[132] McMahon I, p. 4, 5.
[133] D. C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago and London, 1981), p. 154.

It has been argued that Leonardo's theory of visual perception is an adaptation of Aristotle's arguments on the same subject.[134] According to Aristotle in his *De Anima*, the five senses continuously transmit their impressions to the *sensus communis*, among which the faculty of sight is the noblest. Aristotle classifies the objects of the senses according to whether they are perceived by one sense or several senses. Colour and light are the objects of one sense, that is the eye, whereas motion, rest, and magnitude are the objects of several senses in common. Leonardo listed ten such objects in total for the eye and called them 'scientifici e veri principi le quali colla mente si comprendono'.[135] These ten objects of the eye, which Leonardo considers to encompass all wordly beauty ('la bellezza del mondo'), are '…light, shade, colour, body, figure, position, distance, nearness, motion, and rest' ('…luce, tenebre, colore, corpo, figura, sito, remotione, propinquita, moto e quiete').[136]

Among his contemporaries, Leonardo was the first painter to go beyond the framework of Albertian optics and to study the vagaries of sight itself. In light of his own keen observational skills, and his anatomical studies, Leonardo was an eclectic scholar, who was almost certainly influenced by an Arab theorist, Ibn al-Haytham, known in Europe as Alhazen.[137] He too explored phenomena like differences in apparent size and distance caused by various colours, the mutual effect of juxtaposed colours and tones, and the blurred forms in rapid motion.[138] As Martin Kemp has pointed out that

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[134] On Leonardo's interest in Aristotle's notion of the *senso comune*, see M. Kemp, '"Il Concetto dell'anima" in Leonardo's Early Skull Studies,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 34 (1971), pp. 115-134; more generally, see D. Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 1987).

[135] In addition, Leonardo also referred to them as 'dieci varii discorsi co' quali esso (il pittore) conduce al fine le sue opere', 'dieci varie nature d'obietti in quale l'occhio s'astende', or 'dieci ornamenti della natura', see Richter I, pp. 24-5.

[136] Urb. 9a-10a, Trat. 20; Richter I, p. 59, 24.

[137] On Leonardo's possible knowledge of the medieval tradition of optics such as seen in the writings of Alhazen, see M. Kemp, 'In the Beholder's Eye: Leonardo and the 'Errors of Sight' in Theory and Practice', in *Achademia Leonardi Vinci*, Vol. 5, (1992), pp. 153-62; for Alhazen's optical theory more generally, see A. Mark Smith, *From Sight to Light: the Passage from Ancient to Modern Optics* (Chicago, 2015), pp. 181-226; for a more recent study on Leonardo's engagement with Alhazen's treatise on optics, see L. Pericolo, 'Knowing through the Eye. Leonardo da Vinci's *Imprensiva* and Alhazen's *Intuitio*', *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 44 (2019/2020), pp. 205-60.

[138] They are also known as 'subjective effects' in the nineteenth century. On Leonardo's interest in 'subjective effects', see M. Kemp, 'In the Beholder's Eye: Leonardo and the 'Errors of Sight' in Theory and Practice', in *Achademia Leonardi Vinci*, Vol. 5, (1992), pp. 153-62.

Leonardo cites examples in his writings similar to the discussions of the so-called 'failures of recognition' (*in cognitione* or *per scientiam*) such as blurred forms due to the 'errors of sight', or *deceptiones visus* found in Alhazen's *Optics*.[139]

From the thirteenth century onwards, Latin translations of Alhazen's major optical treatise circulated under the title of *Perspectiva* or *De aspectibus*. This treatise influenced every major European writer on optics from Roger Bacon, John Pecham, and Witelo to Johannes Kepler. In the fifteenth century, thanks to an Italian translation by Guerruccio di Cione Federighi, Alhazen was accessible to Lorenzo Ghiberti and other artists in Florence, probably including Leonardo.[140] Even if Leonardo did not consult this Italian version directly, he would surely have known about Alhazen through medieval writers like Roger Bacon and John Pecham, or even through Ghiberti. The third part of Ghiberti's *Commentaries* includes lengthy discussions about Alhazen's optics.[141] As Kemp has suggested, Leonardo's discussions of the 'vagaries of sight' are indebted to Alhazen directly or indirectly.[142]

Interestingly, it is in the context of the 'vagaries of sight' that Leonardo discussed the question of the *campo* in relation to the figure. This suggests that the appearance of the figure and the *campo* is formed in the beholder's eyes. As early as 1490, Leonardo had already discussed how various backgrounds would affect the perception of form by means of optics associated with astronomy. When explaining how an object would appear separated from its background, Leonardo uses the example of an eclipse:

> No visible object can be well understood and comprehended by the human eye except from the variety of the background ('la uarietà del campo') against which

[139] Kemp, 'In the Beholder's Eye'.
[140] G. Federici-Vescovini, 'Il problema delle fonti ottiche medievali del Commentario terzo di Lorenzo Ghiberti' in *Lorenzo Ghiberti nel suo tempo. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi (Firenze, 18-21 Ottobre, 1978)*, (Florence, 1980), p. 370.
[141] For Ghiberti's reliance on Alhazen, see A. R. Bloch, 'The Evolution of Lorenzo Ghiberti's Approach to the Narrative Relief', in Cooper et al, ed. *Depth of Field*, p. 139. Also see, D. Raynaud, 'Lorenzo Ghiberti's Optical Sources Revisited Through the Tracer Method', in F. Jonietz et al (eds), *Ghiberti Theorico. Natura, arte e coscienza storica nel Quattrocento* (Milan, 2019), pp. 89-102.
[142] Kemp, 'In the Beholder's Eye', pp. 153-62.

> the edges of the object terminate and by which they are bounded, and no object will appear [to stand out] separate (‘diuisa’) from that background so far as the outlines of its borders are concerned. The moon, though it is at a great distance from the sun, when, in an eclipse, it comes between our eyes and the sun, appears to the eyes of men to be close to the sun and affixed to it (‘congiunta e appiccata con esso sole’), because the moon is laid out over (‘campeggia sopra’) onto the sun.[143]

Leonardo’s observation regarding the optical effects associated with an eclipse indicates how a background can affect one’s assumptions about the distance between two objects. What Leonardo seems to mean by the ‘variety of the background’ can be inferred from a passage entitled ‘De prospettiva comune’ (1497) where Leonardo explains how a variety of background colours will affect our perception of an object’s size:

> An object of equal breadth and colour throughout, seen against a background of various colours (‘campo di disuniforme colore’), will appear unequal in breath.
>
> And if an object of equal breadth throughout, but of various colours, is seen against a ground of uniform colour, that object will appear of various breadth. And the more the colours of the ground or of the object seen against the ground vary, the greater will the apparent variations in the breadth be, though the objects seen against the ground be of equal breadth (throughout).[144]

This proportional relationship between ground colour and the object’s perceived size is also applicable to the tonal contrast between the object and its ground. In the same notebook, Leonardo writes,

> A dark object seen against a bright background will appear smaller than it is.

[143] C. 4a (12b), Richter I, 217, 251. ‘Nessuno evidente corpo può dagli umani ochi essere ben conpreso e ben giudicato se non per la uarietà del campo dove li stremi d’essi corpi terminano e confinano, e nessuna cosa inquanto a liniamenti de’ sua stremi apparirà essere da essi campi diuisa; la luna benchè sia molto distante dal corpo del sole quando per le eclissi si truoui infra li ochi nostri e ’l sole, perché essa luna campeggia sopra il sole, appare ali ochi umani congiunta e appiccata con esso sole.’

[144] I[1]17b, Richter I, 214, 241, ‘Quella cosa d’uniforme grossezza e colore che sarà veduta in campo di disuniforme colore si dimostrerà di disuniforme grossezza. / E se una cosa d’uniforme grossezza e di varri colori sarà veduta in campo d’uniforme colore, essa cosa si dimostrerà di varia grossezza, e quanto i colori del campo o della cosa nel campo veduta sarà di colori ch’abbino maggiore varietà, allora le grossezze par rano piu varie, ancora che le cose nel campo vedute sieno di pari grossezza.’ Translation is Richter’s.

> A light object will look larger when it is seen against a background than itself.[145]

The impact of different types of backgrounds on what a beholder sees is also evident when identifying the intensity of light and dark. In 'Where lights fool the judgment ('giudizio') of the painter', Leonardo writes that '…among lights of equal brightness, that will seem stronger which will be surrounded by a darker ground'. The opposite principle is that '…among shadows of equal darkness that was shown least dark which is surrounded by lights of less potency, such as shadows generated among reflected lights'.[146] Nevertheless, these quirks of vision can be positively exploited. Leonardo in one passage called *rilievo* 'the importance and soul of painting'.[147] By building tonal contrast into the bordering area between the figure and its background, a painting will produce a more enhanced relief effect:

> The form of any body will seem to be in greater relief and more detached from the backgrounds when the borders between the form and the background are of the greatest possible contrast of bright or dark colour.[148]

Writing sometime between 1510 and 1516, Leonardo even stressed that the 'principalissima parte della pittura sono li campi de le cose dipinte'.[149] The whole passage reads as follows:

> A most important part of painting consists in the backgrounds of the objects represented ('principalissima parte della pittura sono li campi de le cose dipinte'); against these backgrounds, the outlines of those natural objects which are convex are always visible, and also the forms of these bodies against the background, even though the colours of the bodies should be the same as those of the background. This is caused by the convex edges of the objects not being

[145] I[1]18b, Richter I, 214, 242, 'Quella cosa oscura che fia veduta in campo chiaro essa si dimostrerà minore ch'essa non è. / Quella cosa chiara si dimostrerà di maggiore figura che sarà veduta in campo di piu oscuro colore.' Translation is Richter's.
[146] Discussed in Summers, *The Judgment of Sense*, p. 174.
[147] Richter, I, p. 114.
[148] McMahon, I, 75, 152.
[149] G. 23b, McMahon, II, 153; Richter, I, p. 335, 'A most important part of painting consists in the backgrounds of painted objects'. The plural form of *campi* is coherent with Leonardo's conception of the plurality of perspectives.

> illuminated in the same way as, by the same light, the background is illuminated, since these edges will often be lighter or darker than the background. But if the edge is of the same colour as the background, beyond a doubt it will in that part of the picture interfere with your perception of the outline, and such a choice in a picture ought to be rejected by the judgment of a good painter, inasmuch as the purpose of the painter is to make his figures appear detached from the background; while in the case here described the contrary occurs, not only in the picture, but in the objects themselves.[150]

In this important passage, Leonardo reversed the Albertian focus on the figure by claiming that the *campo* is the most important part of the painting. Here, *campo* can also be understood as ground or as a foundation. The reason to translate it as 'background' is that Leonardo, unlike Cennini, has already discussed the relationship between figure and *campo* in an optical way to involve the beholder. The *campo* has already been transformed into a form oscillating between light and darkness. But it should be emphasised that in this passage in particular the *campo* is not transparent in the Albertian sense.

Theoretically speaking, in addition to Alhazen, Leonardo's knowledge of this type of technique could have been directly gained through the training that Leonardo received when he was still a pupil of Verrocchio's. During his apprenticeship, Leonardo could have seen examples of figures against dark grounds painted by his teacher, Verrocchio (Fig. 9). He would have also very likely been impressed by the sculptural effect of using monochromatic grounds seen in the equestrian cenotaphs painted in fresco by Uccello and Castagno in Florence cathedral (Figs. 10, 11).[151] What Leonardo has done is to re-formulate this common workshop practice into a theory of optical knowledge, as seen in the following passage:

> The colours with which you clothe your forms should be such that they lend attractiveness ('gratia') to one another, and when the color of one is the background of another ('l'un colore si fa campo del altro'), let them be so

[150] Richter, I, p. 335. The translation is Richter's.
[151] About the use of dark grounds in the Florentine tradition to achieve a kind of 'sculptural value' of paintings in *all'antica* subjects, see A. Wright, *The Pollaiuolo Brothers. The Arts of Florence and Rome* (New Haven and London, 2005), p. 112; 171.

> arranged that they do not appear joined and attached to one another, even though they should be of the same kind of colour, but let them be different in brightness, as is required by the coming between them of distance and volume of air. Let the clarity of their outlines follow the same rule, making these sharper or less sharp as their proximity ('propinquinta') or distance ('remotione') requires.[152]

Here, even a single colour differing in brightness can act as the 'background' or 'ground' (depending on the context) of another. Leonardo's *campo* is no longer the stable component in colour composition as we have seen in Theophilus' writing. Instead, it enters into a dynamic relationship that can continue *ad infinitum*—that is, colour A can become the foil or background of colour B; but at the same time, colour C can become the foil of colour A, which then puts colour A into the foreground. Thus, there is no longer a predetermined relationship between foreground and background. Rather, that relationship is based on the judgment of the eye. Leonardo's contribution lies in fusing the artistic conventions with observations made in his more theoretical enquiries into the phenomena associated with vision.

As we have seen, Leonardo's theory of the *campo* assimilates the direct observation of nature and the rhetorical concept of *comparatio*, while also being informed by the workshop tradition of the *campo*. In his theorising, Leonardo started to develop this theory after 1490. However, in his practice, Leonardo had started to use dark foils or grounds as early as in his portrait of *Ginevra de' Benci* of c. 1471/1478 (Fig. 8). Although Leonardo is often assumed to have preferred a naturalistic approach in his art, his interest in using dark foils in paintings appears to be linked to his strategy for down playing the disruptive effect of the *contre-jour* of landscape backgrounds. A landscape background would naturally flood the foreground with sunlight, whereas a dark interior background (or possibly ground) would be most suited to depicting human figures. Leonardo's interest in using dark *campo* in configuring his pictorial compositions influenced later writers such as Vasari and Baldinucci as much as—and possibly more—than his writings about such phenomena.

[152] McMahon, I, 55, 260.

1.5 Around Raphael: *Parergon* and *campo* in Sixteenth-Century Theories of Painting

In the first half of the sixteenth century, an emphatic link between painting and poetry (*ut pictura poesis*) was evolving. According to Puttfarken, the growing influence of Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics* in the mid sixteenth century led to increasing interest in the notion of imitation, especially around 1550.[153] This development was matched by a wealth of theoretical writings on visual art that became available around the same time. First and foremost, a new Italian translation of Alberti's *De pictura* was produced and published by Lodovico Domenichi, an acquaintance of Dolce's, in 1547 in Venice. Paolo Pino published his *Dialogo di pittura* in 1548. A year later, Anton Francesco Doni's *Disegno* and Michelangelo Biondo's *Della nobilissima pittura* were published. Ludovico Dolce's *Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Aretino* appeared in 1557. Outside the Venentian circle, the first edition of Vasari's *Lives* appeared in 1550. Puttfarken observes that these writings defied the Platonic injunctions against imitation and revealed fresh interest in the diversity and abundance of worldly things.[154]

In these writings, pictorial details and backgrounds become almost synonymous with painting itself, because they are seen as the domains in which artists could best display their skills in capturing the richness of nature. The mimetic possibilities of painting are especially evident in the *paragone* debate between painting and sculpture.[155] For Castiglione, the application of chiaroscuro and perspective widens the mimetic range of painting, and he thus privileges the painter over the sculptor. In Castiglione's *Cortegiano* (1528), the debate between painting and sculpture is carried out in an

[153] For the development of new theories of imitation in the sixteenth century, see T. Puttfarken, *Titian & Tragic Painting. Aristotle's Poetics and the Rise of the Modern Artist* (New Haven and London, 2005), p. 41-56.
[154] Puttfarken, *Titian & Tragic Painting*, p. 48.
[155] On the *paragone* debate in the Renaissance period, see L. Mendelsohn, *Paragoni: Benedetto Varchi's Due Lezzioni and Cinquecento Art Theory* (Ann Arbor, 1982); B. Thomas, *The Paragone Debate and Sixteenth-Century Italian Art*, (D.Phil thesis, The University of Oxford, 1996).

imagined dialogue between Signora Emilia and the sculptor Ioanni (or Gian) Cristoforo Romano.[156] In criticising the lack of light and shadow involved in making sculpture, Signora Emilia says the superiority of painting lies in the fact that a painting can counterfeit nature on a single surface, while a statue is already a three-dimensional form in nature. Exploiting the rules (*ragion*) of perspective, the illusion of three dimensional bodies can be rendered in paintings using foreshortenings and diminutions of scale. Furthermore, the perspective 'di linee misurate, di colori, di lumi e d'ombre' can enable a painter to depict directly on the surface of a wall the illusion of the foreground (*il piano*) and background (*il lontano*) more or less as the painter wishes.[157] With Raphael's art in mind, Castiglione's main concern is the 'imitation of natural colours' (*imitazione dei colori naturali*), through which not only clothes and flesh can be counterfeited, but also other natural phenomena including 'the colour of shimmering hair', 'the splendour of armour', 'a dark night', 'a tempest of the sea', 'lightning and thunderbolt', 'a city on fire', 'the rising of a rosy dawn', 'the gold and purple beams', together with other natural objects like 'sky, sea, earth, mountains, forests, meadows, gardens, rivers, cities, buildings'[158] As is evident from Castiglione's description, *colore* had become the key tool for rendering diverse optical phenomenon.

Perhaps the best example of landscape backgrounds as evidence of artistic invention is in the art of Raphael. It was Vasari who suggested a relationship between *parergon* and *campo* as embodied in the art of Raphael. In Vasari's description, *campo* has become a 'wider field', analogous to the notion of artistic capacity, which could also be linked to the ground of a painting itself. Here, the idea of a 'wider artistic field', or 'campo largo' is related to the notion of composition (*componimenti*). We see these ideas in the following passage from the life of Raphael in the second and enlarged edition of Vasari's *Lives* in which Vasari positioned Raphael in relation to Michelangelo in terms

[156] Barocchi, *Scritti d'arte del Cinquecento*, I, p. 489-92.
[157] Ibid., p. 490.
[158] Ibid., pp. 490-1. 'il color de'capegli favi', 'il splendore dell'areme', 'una oscura notte', 'una tempest di mare', 'que'lampi e saette', 'lo incendio d'una città', 'il nascrere dell'aurora di color di rose', 'que'raggi d'oro e di porpora', as well as other natural objects like 'cielo, mare, terra, monti, selve, prati, giardini, fiumi, città, case'.

of the contrast between *ergon* and *parergon* while also using *campo* in a metaphorical way:

> Knowing, however, that in this respect he [Raphael] could never attain the perfection of Michelangelo, he reflected, like a man of supreme judgment, that painting does not consist only in representing the nude human figure, but has a wider field ('il campo largo'); that one can enumerate among the perfect painters those who express historical inventions well and with facility, and who show fine judgment in their fancies; and that he who, in the composition of scenes ('componimenti delle storie'), can make them neither confused with too much detail nor poor with too little, but distributed with beautiful invention and order…[159]

Although Vasari didn't use the term landscape or *paese* here, background details certainly feature in the 'composition of scenes' ('componimenti delle storie'). Vasari argues that Raphael's decision to paint parergonal elements resulted from his belief that he could not compete with Michelangelo in the field of human figures. Raphael did, in fact, paint many detailed landscape backgrounds. A good example is his *Ezekiel's Vison* (Fig. 12) now in the Pitti Palace, Florence. In this picture, the tree in the middle links the dominant figures in the centre of the composition – the primary subjects of the composition who are foregrounded, even if the tree itself seems to be in front of the clouds on which they sit – and the background landscape, thus creating a synthesis between the figures hovering in the air in the foreground and the landscape below, which leads the beholder's gaze away into the very far distance.

Raphael's interest in landscape detail displays an almost scientific focus and precision. For instance, in a drawing dated around 1503 now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (Fig. 13), there is an independent study of a landscape next to a larger study that features a schematic version of the landscape beside the planned work's main subject, a *Madonna and Child*. It is as if Raphael is thinking telescopically, with the landscape considered both on its own and in relation to the key figurative element of the Madonna

[159] Vasari, *Vite*, IV, p. 206.

and Child. The independent study of the landscape background, though quite sketchy, reveals, in Paul Joannides' words, Raphael's 'deep concern with integrating figure and landscape'.[160]

The finished painting that grew out of Raphael's drawing is the *Madonna and Child with Book* (Fig. 14), now in Norton Simon Museum of Art. In the finished painting, the castle in the distance has been moved from the right to the left side of the composition, which indicates Raphael's preoccupation with finding the best way to combine fore- and background elements. It seems by adding the paragraph on Raphael's landscapes in the second edition of the *Lives*, Vasari wanted to portray an antithesis between Michelangelo (as *ergon*) and Raphael (as *parergon*). As noted by Fausto Testa, Vasari's seemingly anti-Michelangelesque position on this issue in saying that Raphael has a 'wider field' could be derived from Ludovico Dolce's critical judgement of Titian's *colorito* in contrast to Michelangelo's practice of *disegno* and his reserving for Raphael's painting in his *Dialogo della pittura*.[161] In the same book, Dolce praised the three parts of Raphael's painting: *disegno*, *invenzione* and *colorito*.[162] In regards to Raphael's *invenzione*, Dolce wrote that Raphael 'have admirably observed all that belongs to it [the painting]; and Michelangelo either nothing or little' ('[Rafaello] aver mirabilmente osservato tutto quello che a questa ['la pittura'] appartiene; e Michelagnolo o niente o poco').[163] Here, landscape backgrounds certainly are implied in the phrase 'tutto quello che a questa appartiene'.

The term 'landscape' itself may need further unpacking. It is salient that the first recorded use of the word 'landscape' in English in relation to painting uses the

[160] P. Joannides, *The Drawings of Raphael with a Complete Catalogue* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983), p. 141.
[161] F. Testa, 'Il "campo largo" di Raffaello e le "invenzioni di componimenti". Pittura e retorica tra Alberti e l'età di Winckelmann', in H. G. Held (ed), *Winckelmann und die Mythologie der Klassik* (Tübingen, 2009), pp. 68-69.
[162] Ibid., p. 68.
[163] Ibid., p. 69.

backgrounds of a religious painting as the key examples. According to Thomas Blount in his *Glossographia* (1656), 'landscape', or 'landskip' means:

> Parergon, Paisage or By-work, which is an expressing of the Land, by Hills, Woods, Castles, Valleys, Rivers, Cities, &c. as far as may be shewed in our Horizon. All that which in a Picture is not of the body or argument thereof is Landskip, Parergon, or by-work. As in the Table of our Saviours passion, the picture of Christ upon the Rood…the two theeves, the blessed Virgin Mary, and St. John, are the Argument. But the City Jerusalem, the Country about, the clouds, and the like, are Landskip.[164]

Here, the term 'landscape' has been distinguished from the main subject matter, the 'Argument' (or *ergon*), and contrasted, above all, with secondary details (or *parergon*). The Greek word *parergon* comes from a combination of the Greek words *para*, meaning 'beside', and *ergon*, meaning 'work'.[165] The term *parergon* (para = besides or against; ergon = work) was originally a rhetorical device, meaning not only the embellishments added to a discourse but also those added to a painting (*addenda*).[166] The process when *parergon* becomes *ergon*, such as seen in the development of still life as an independent genre, is called by Victor Stoichita 'an intertextual process'.[167]

That landscapes can only be what is extraneous to the main 'body or argument' of a picture implies a secondary status. The notion that landscape painting is subordinate to history painting was also pervasive in the seventeenth century and later in England. It is also in the seventeenth century with the founding of the French Royal Academy that the modern hierarchy of genres was first established on both a theoretical and a practical basis. The painter of living beings is ranked higher than the painter of inanimate nature

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[164] Thomas Blount, *Glossographia*. reprint (facsimile) (Menston, 1969).
[165] Kant, most famously, sees that *parerga* or 'ornaments' function 'externally as a complement' to the main thing 'for example, the frames of pictures or the draperies of statues or colonnades around palaces', see Kant, J. C. Meredith, trans. *Critique of Judgement* (Oxford, 2007), p. 57. For a deconstruction of Kant's notion of the *parergon*, see J. Derrida, 'The Parergon', trans. C. Owens, *October*, Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979), pp. 3-41. For a more recent discussion and bibliography on *parergon*, see especially V. Platt and M. Squire (eds), *The Frame in Classical Art. A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 38-59.
[166] Quintillian*, Instituio Oratoria*, vol. I, pp. 216-223, lib. II, 39; Pliny, *Natural History*, pp. 334-339, lib. XXXV, 101.
[167] Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image*, pp. 53-65.

who depicts 'choses mortes et sans mouvement.'[168] The highest achievement to which the painter can aspire is history painting, the depiction of groups of figures in narratives derived from Biblical, historical and mythological sources. The fundamental opposition here is between painting as a merely imitative or mechanical art, which is addressed to the eye alone, and painting as a work of 'invention' or 'imagination', which is addressed to the mind.[169] As discussed by Martin Kemp, Italian art theory was already witnessing a shift of emphasis from *mimesis* to *fantasia* in the fifteenth century.[170] There was a growing consciousness that artists could be regarded as inventors more than imitators. Here, we have arrived at the crux of the matter: how to clarify the position of the artist who produces backgrounds within the context of art theory in Renaissance Italy.

In humanistic literary theory, invention usually involves developing a subject matter, with the patron commissioning the work (or a learned advisor they have engaged) often serving as the inventor of a particular *historia*.[171] When background details feature in the contracts, such as seen in Pinturicchio's contract, the patron could be very precise in describing background details like 'landscapes and skies' as ornaments external to the main subject or *historia*. In other words, the depiction of background details belongs to the execution of a painting rather than to its invention. This division between execution and invention, between form and content, is in accordance with Cicero's differentiation between *inventio* and *collocatio* in his five-part scheme for rhetoric, which includes *inventio*, *collocatio*, *elocutio*, *actio* and *memoria*.[172] The notion of *inventio* deals with the subject matter, while *elocutio* refers to the application of detailed ornament (i.e. the parergonal) during a work's execution.

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[168] André Félibien, 'Preface' to *Conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture pendant l'année 1667*, in A. Mérot, ed. *Les Conférences de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1996), pp. 50-51.

[169] Addressing students of the Royal Academy in London in 1770, Joshua Reynolds could continue to dismiss landscape and still-life as the 'meaner walks of painting', which require only 'mechanical' expertise. See Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. R. Wark (London, 1997), p. 51.

[170] M. Kemp, 'From Mimesis to Fantasia: The Quattrocento Vocabulary of Creation, Inspiration and Genius in the Visual Arts', *Viator*, 8, 1977, pp. 347-98.

[171] Ibid., p. 356.

[172] Discussed in Kemp, 'From Mimesis to Fantasia', p. 356.

A second connotation of the term 'invention' can also mean 'discovery' (or 'excogitation') and thus is related to the image-forming faculty of *ingegno* or ingenuity, which is particularly evident in Francesco di Giorgio's architectural theory.[173] From the late fifteenth century onwards, the notion of invention becomes more and more enmeshed in the 'imagination' or *fantasia* of the artist if not the patron alone, particularly in the cases of Giovanni Bellini and Leonardo.[174] Seen in this context, the production of *parergon* is associated with the rising status, and associated free agency, of the artist from the late fifteenth century on.

Depicting distance views plays a key role in composing *parergon* in relation to the figure and transforming the *campo* from ground into background. In the fifteenth century, the first use of the classical notion of *parergon* to describe distant prospects or backgrounds can be found in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia poliphili* (1467?). In describing the details surrounding the subjects such as Europa and Icarus, Colonna writes: 'There are exquisite details ('parergi') of waters, springs, mountains, hills, woods and animals, whose colours faded with distance and opposing light'.[175] Here, *parergi* is used to describe the landscape details 'dipravato il coloramento cum la distantia et cum il lume opposito'.[176] Depicting a landscape panorama now involves direct observation of nature, a practice that preceded Leonardo's interests in depicting *campi* or backgrounds scaled in relation to the figures. In Venetian scientific culture, the problem of diminution of colour in relation to distance had been discussed as early as 1440 by Giovanni Fontana in his *Liber de omnibus rebus naturalibus*, a treatise that was rediscovered and then posthumously published in 1544.[177] The depiction of

[173] Ibid., p. 353.
[174] Ibid., pp. 359-61. For the sixteenth-century theory on imagination or *fantasia*, see D. Zagoury, 'The Autonomous Maker Within: *Fantasia* in Sixteenth-Century Italian Art Theory (1501-1568)' (PhD dissertation, Cambridge University, 2018).
[175] Francesco Colonna. *Hypnerotomachia poliphili*, ed. G. Pozzi & L. A. Ciapponi (Padova, 1964), vl. 1, p. 53, 'cum gli exquisiti parergi, aque, fonti, monti, colli, boscheti, animali; dipravato il coloramento cum la distantia et cum il lume opposito'. The English translation is from Francesco Colonna. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili. The Strife of Love in a Dream*, trans. J. Godwin (London, 1999), p. 61.
[176] Ibid.
[177] G. Bora, 'Prospettiva lineare e prospettiva "de perdimenti": Un dibattito sullo scorcio del Quattrocento', *Paragone*, 595 (September,1999), pp. 3-45.

seascapes in the backgrounds of paintings also became quite fashionable from the later fifteenth century onward. These are seen, for example, in works by other artists such as Ghirlandaio as seen in his depiction of the Apostles in the Sistine Chapel or the seascapes found in Leonardo's *Annunciation*.

Perhaps the best example to show the positive relationship between background *parergon* and intellectual capacities and ambitions of the artist can be found in the Renaissance definition of the term *parergon* in the post-Classical period. Writing soon after 1527, Bishop Paolo Giovio singled out a unique quality in the work of Dosso Dossi when discussing his art in the 'Life of Raphael' (*Raphaelis Urbinatis Vita*):

> The elegant talent ('ingenium') of Dosso of Ferrara is proven in his proper works ('iustis operibus'), but most of all in those that are called *parerga*. For pursuing with pleasurable labour the delightful ('voluptario') diversions of painting ('picturae diverticula'), he used to depict jagged rocks, green groves, the firm banks of traversing rivers, the flourishing work of the countryside, the joyful and fervid toil of the peasants, and also the distant prospects of land and sea, fleets, fowling, hunting, and all those sorts of things so agreeable to the eyes in an extravagant and festive manner ('luxurianti ac festiva manu').[178]

According to Giovio, Dosso's talent, or *ingenium*, is demonstrated most effectively in *parerga* rather than in his main subjects. The key point I want to emphasise here is the link between artistic talent ('ingenium') and *parerga* in the sense that so-called diversions in the backgrounds of Dosso's paintings are seen as the products of his own unique *fantasia*, or imagination. Northern Italian artists favoured detailed landscape backgrounds in contrast to the central Italian artists whose focus remained more firmly fixed on figures. The exemplary artist who focuses his art on the depiction of figures rather than on backgrounds is, of course, Michelangelo, as we have seen earlier.

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[178] P. Barocchi, ed. *Scritti d'arte del Cinquecento* (Milan/Naples, 1971-77), I, p. 18, 'Doxi autem Ferrariensis urbanum probatur ingenium cum in justis operibus, tum maxime in illis, quae parerga vocantur. Amoena namque picturae diverticula voluptario labore consectatus, praeruptas cautes, viventia nemora, opacas perfluentium ripas, florentes rei rusticae apparatus, agricolarum laetos fervidosque labores, praeterea longissimos terrarum marisque prospectus, classes, aucupia, venationes et cuncta id genus spectatu oculis jucunda, luxurianti ac festiva manu exprimere consuevit.' The English translation is from C. S. Wood, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (London, 1993), p. 55.

So why did Giovio use *parerga* to refer to the landscape details in Dosso's work? Giovio seems to have, consciously or unconsciously, combined and reinterpreted these two sources identified by Gombrich.[179] One is Pliny's account of Studius as a landscape painter in his *Natural History*, xxxv, 116-17. The other is Protogenes painting little ships next to his major work of 'Paralus and Hammonias', also known as the Nausicaa, as also recounted in his *Natural History*, xxxv, 101. Paolo. It is worth quoting Pliny's discussion of Studius in full to compare it with Giovio's account:

> Studius too, of the period of the Divine Augustus, must not be cheated of his due. He first introduced the most attractive fashion of painting walls with villas, porticoes (harbours?), and landscape gardens, groves, woods, hills, fish-pools, canals, rivers, coasts—whatever one could wish, and in them various representations of people strolling about, people sailing, people travelling overland to villas on donkey-back or in carriages, and in addition people fishing, fowling, hunting, or even gathering in the vintage. His pictures include noble villas reached across marshes, men tottering along with women, trembling burdens, on their shoulders, carried for a wager, and very many such lively witty subjects besides. It was the same man who introduced the practice of painting seaside cities in open terraces, producing a charming effect with minimal expense.[180]

Although the term *parerga* does not appear in Pliny's description of Studius, the iconography of landscape elements as recounted in Paolo Giovio echoes Pliny's. It is likely that Paolo Giovio had access to Pliny's texts when he was working in the Vatican Library between 1523 and 1527.[181]

The term *parerga* was used by Pliny in an episode about Protogenes's depiction of small warships in his *Natural History*.[182] A rendering that evokes these details can be found in a wall painting of Adriadne upon the shore seeing the ship of Theseus out at

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[179] Gombrich, 'Renaissance artistic theory and the development of landscape painting', pp. 107-21.
[180] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, xxxv. 116-17
[181] T. C. P. Zimmermann, *Paolo Giovio. The Historian and the Crisis of Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Princeton, 1995), p. 66.
[182] For a brilliant analysis of this Plinian passage on Protogenes's *parerga*, see C. Torr, 'Protogenes of Kaunos', *The Classical Review*, Vol. 4, No. 5 (1890), pp. 231-2.

sea, now in the British Museum (Fig. 15). Until the age of fifty, according to Pliny, Protogenes was by trade a ship-painter.[183] He added to a painting of two Athenian sacred triremes 'small long ships which painters called *parerga*' ('parvolas naves longas…quae pictories parergia appellant').[184] These ships could be seen as secondary subjects, side-pieces, next to the main subject. In fact, Protogenes' ships can also be read as an allusion to his own artistic journey since he was originally trained as a ship-painter. Pliny then continues, saying that these ships are 'to show from what origins his work had arrived at the pinnacle of glorious display' ('a quibus initiis ad arcem ostentationis').[185]

This Plinian episode of Protogenes and his *parerga* became the touchstone for writers such as Paolo Giovio and Vasari when describing background details in the sixteenth century. In his description of the nudes in the background of Michelangelo's *Doni tondo* (Fig. 16), for example, Vasari claims that 'as this [composition] did not allow him to display his great mastery of art to the full, he made many figures in the *campo* of this work, leaning, standing and seated.'[186] Here, Michelangelo's *campo* is located in the background of the painting, yet is also the arena in which he can display his utmost artistic skills 'to the full'. Not all painters needed extra spaces in order to demonstrate their artistic imaginations. Commenting on Rosso Fiorentino's *Marriage of the Virgin* (Fig. 17), Vasari claimed that 'He showed such rich invention that he never needed to produce any background ('niente di campo') in his pictures.'[187]

It is against this background we can approach the renewed theoretical interest in the relationship between perspective and *campo* in Vincenzio Borghini's *Selva di notizie* (1564). Vincenzio Borghini emphasises that perspective should not only encompass the

[183] Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.101.
[184] Ibid. Translation is mine.
[185] Ibid., 101-2. Translation is from H. Rackham.
[186] Vasari, *Vite*, vol. 7, p. 159, 'Né bastando questo a Michelangelo, per mostrare maggiormente l'arte sua grandissima, fece nel campo di questa opera molti ignudi appogiatti, ritti, a sedere…e con tanta diligenza e pulitezza lavorò questa opera, che certamente delle sue pitture in tavola, ancora che poche sieno, è tenuta la più bella opera che si truovi.'
[187] Vasari, *Vite*, vol. IV, p. 477.

depiction of buildings or houses, but also 'men, animals, woods, trees, fields, huts'. Vincenzio Borghini played a key role in helping Vasari revise the *Lives* for its second edition in 1568. Under the influence of Vincenzio Borghini's historical interests, Vasari not only added a new section on Northern artists in the second version of the *Lives*, but he reconfigured the whole project so that it conformed to more rigorous forms of historical writing.[188] I would like to further suggest that Vincenzio Borghini's historicism is also reflected in his own renewed enthusiasm for perspective and backgrounds. Indeed, it seems that Vasari's interests in a teleological view of landscape backgrounds in the 1568 edition might have been triggered by Vincenzio Borghini's intervention.[189] In a section entitled 'Testimonianze sulla Pittura e sulla Sculptura, Pittura, Poesia e Musica', Vincenzio Borghini suggests that just as the combination of short and long syllables in poetry create a beautifully written composition, the background and foreground views ('lontani e pressi') together can create a successful (and poetical) picture ('una pittura poetica').[190] For Vincenzio Borghini, the exemplary figure who achieved this 'harmony' in the visual arts was not an Italian, but rather a Dutch painter and printmaker Luca d'Olanda, better known as Lucas van Leyden. Vincenzio Borghini's admiration of Lucas van Leyden's depiction of backgrounds seems to be a sixteenth-century continuation of an earlier humanistic interest in Northern art such as was seen in the fifteenth century in the writings of Bartolomeo Fazio.[191] A hundred years later the focus has turned towards the medium of print rather than oil painting.

While discussing the relationship between the foreground and background, Vincenzio Borghini also deploys musical analogies.[192] For Vincnezio Borghini, what matters

[188] P. L. Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari. Art and History* (New Haven and London, 1995), pp. 190-7.
[189] For Vasari's views on landscape backgrounds in the *Vite*, see K. H. Goodchild, '"A Hand More Practiced and Sure": The History of Landscape Painting in Giorgio Vasari's "Lives of the Artists"', *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 32, No. 64 (2011), pp. 25-40.
[190] Barocchi, ed. *Scritti d'arte*, ed. Barocchi, I, p. 650-1.
[191] Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition*, p. 190.
[192] Ibid., p. 181.

most in this context is how the foreground and the background use perspective as a compositional device. His criticism of narrow definitions of perspective is unusual:

> This composition, this agreeable discordance (*discordanza concorde*), this harmony and proportion, or by what other name one wants to call it, I would have thought should be called perspective, which contains a rule for diminishing the things on a plane according to the rule of views (*la regola delle vedute*), according to which near things appear naturally larger and distant ones smaller. And that is so not only with houses and buildings, but with all the things made by nature which painters may have to imitate. For men, animals, woods, trees, fields, huts diminish on a plane according to the same rule and proportion, and they shrink and reduce themselves in the same way; these rules are no less necessary in respect of these things than in respect of houses and buildings. But because that name 'perspective' has, through long use, by now taken on the meaning of houses and buildings, I shall not call this perspective, but refer to it with all the above-mentioned names.[193]

Vasari himself, in fact, used precisely the narrow definition of the term 'perspective' about which Vincenzio Borghini complained, as did Benedetto Varchi and Paolo Pino.[194] Vincenzio Borghini's criticism of this term suggests that he perceived there to be a historical development in terms of the practice of 'perspective' from Alberti to his own time. In Alberti's *Della pittura*, mathematical perspective is solely used for the depiction of regularly shaped buildings and easily measured features such as paved floors. Perspective is then expanded by Leonardo to include the problem of how to depict trees, mountains and other distant views, topics Leonardo then discussed in terms of the aerial perspective. In Serlio's writings on perspective (1545), the division between rustic and tragic scenes seems to be most closely akin to debates about whether 'perspective', which he similarly understands to encompass both buildings and landscape scenes, should be deployed when working in high or low styles.[195] Such earlier, more expansive views about the use of perspective appear to have had an impact on Vincenzio Borghini's very broad understanding of 'perspective', even if by the time

[193] The translation is from Puttfarken, see Puttfarken, *The Discovery of Pictorial Composition*, p. 181.
[194] This observation has been made by Paola Barocchi, see *Scritti d'arte*, ed. Barocchi, I, p. 649, n. 4.
[195] S. Serlio, *On Architecture*, trans. V. Hart and P. Hicks (New Haven & London, 1996), pp. 88-91.

he was writing in the mid-1560s, the meaning of perspective appears to have returned once again to Alberti's more narrow understanding of the term.

Vincenzio Borghini's understanding of perspective encompassed not just literary and musical metaphors, but also agricultural ones. Interestingly, the first entry of the word *campo* in the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca* (1691) is: 'spazio di terra, dove si semina', that is, the 'space of land, or earth where one sows'.[196] Representing landscape in the *campo* of a painting is therefore tied etymologically to the primary agricultural meaning of the term *campo* by the seventeenth century. It thus seems no accident that Vincenzio Borghini could discuss pictorial composition by using a comparison between farming and painting. He advises the artist not to '…appear to have thrown his figures ('le figure') onto his picture like a farmer throws grain, by chance, when sowing in the fields ('il contadino che semina a ventura il grano nel campo'), but they should be placed with judgement, rule, and grace.'[197] The metaphor that equates the pictorial ground with the fertility of the earth. His analogy between the painter and the farmer is not the only such example from the early modern period. We know that in the seventeenth century, for instance, both Cornelis de Bie and Arnold Houbraken compared the still-life painter with a farmer 'cultivating Pictura's fertile fields' in the seventeenth century.[198] Most importantly, Borghini's understanding of the pictorial ground as a fertile *campo* is also similar to Montaigne's notion of 'le vague champ des imaginations'.[199] Like Vincenzio Borghini's claim that the ground or *campo* needs to be sown for it to become useful, Montaigne considers that the mind will lose itself without aims by comparing it with the fertile ground in a negative way.

A similarly positive view on understanding *campo* as a parergonal element can be found in Raffaello Borghini. In his *Il Riposo* of 1584, Raffaello Borghini explicitly points out

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196 *Vocabolario*, II, p. 269.
197 *Scritti d'arte*, p. 650, '…che'e' non paia il pittore aver gittate le figure in sulla tavola come getta il contadino che semina a ventura il grano nel campo, ma sien poste con giudizio, con regola e con grazia.'
198 Quoted in K. Leonhard, 'Pictura's fertile field', p. 102.
199 Corpus Montaigne, Livre Premier, Chapitre VIII. *De l'Oisiveté*, p. 27.

that the composition of an *istoria* should leave space for the depiction of background objects, including landscapes. According to Raffaello Borghini, a painter with good judgment should position the figures in the front bending or seated so that the figurative elements in the back are not invisible. [200] In other words, a judicious composition should allow background details to be clearly visible, including other figures, buildings and landscapes. The concept of *campo* as background is therefore very much evident in Raffaello Borghini's discussion of pictorial composition. Unlike Paleotti who also wrote during the Counter-Reformation, Raffaello Borghini showed enthusiasm for these parergonal elements in line with Alberti's recommendations. His advice thus appears to seek to moderate the compositional style of many so-called Mannerist painters, who consistently include monumental figures in the foreground who block a clear view of the background, such as seen in *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist and Saint Francis* painted by Vasari (Fig. 18).

1.6 Against *parergon*: Figure and *campo* in Vasari, Paleotti, Borromeo and Baldinucci

Artistic licence was not without its critics. Early modern attitudes towards *parerga* as a kind of artistic invention are not always as positive as in the comments on Dosso's landscapes or Michelangelo's background *ignudi*. Contemporary attitudes toward the *parergon* varied in different times and places.

Against the background of *ut pictura poesis* in Raphael's art, it is interesting to see that Vasari still defined the practice of painting without relating it to the development of landscape painting in Raphael and other artists. As Louisa MacLehose has pointed out, Vasari largely stuck to the 1550 version of the *Proemio* in the second edition of his

[200] Raffaello Borghini, *Il riposo*, trans. Lloyd Ellis (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2007), p. 126; Borghini, *Il riposo* (Milan, 1967), 177-8: 'Rather it is necessary to avoid placing large standing figures in the front because they cut off the view of those behind and occupy a great part of the background ('tolgono la vista delle seconde, & occupano gran parte del campo').'

Lives without much change.[201] According to Vasari in the *Proemio* of his *Lives* in both editions, the primary task of painting was to create three-dimensional forms on a flat surface:

> The painting is a plane ('piano') covered with patches of colour ('campi di colori') on the surface of wood, wall, or canvas, surrounding diverse outlines ('lineamenti'), which, by virtue of a good design of encompassing lines, surround the figure. If the painter treats his flat surface with the right judgment ('retto giudizio'), keeping the centre light and the edges and the background ('fondo') dark and medium colour between the light and dark in the intermediate spaces, the result of the combination of these three fields of colour will be that everything between the one outline and the other stands out and appears round and in relief.[202]

This interest in using dark background rather than a landscape in defining what a painting should look like reflects the shifting painting technique of Mannerist painters, who preferred placing figures directly before a dark background. This interest in dark backgrounds might also be linked to the taste of the patron of the *Lives*, Duke Cosimo himself. Unlike Vasari's use of a combination of a rocky and landscape background in the portrait of his predecessor, Alessandro de' Medici (Fig. 19), Cosimo may have preferred a darker (though still representational) interior setting, as seen in the portrait of him by Bronzino in which he is posed before a dark blue curtain (Fig. 20).[203] All of this suggests that the pictorial idea of 'background' (whether described as *campo* or *fondo*) remained fluid in Vasari's time.

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[201] L. Maclehose, *Vasari on Technique* (New York, 1960), p. 17.

[202] This passage is quoted from the 1550 edition of Vasari's *Vite.* Vasari, *Vite*, I, p. 113. 'La pittura è un piano coperto di campi di colori, in superficie o di tavola o di muro o di tela, intorno a diversi lineamenti, i quali per virtù di un buon disegno di linee girate circondano la figura. Questo sì fatto piano, dal pittore con retto giudizio mantenuto nel mez[z]o chiaro e negli estremi e ne' fondi scuro et accompagnato tra questi e quello da colore mez[z]ano tra il chiaro e lo scuro, fa che, unendosi insieme questi tre campi, tutto quello che è tra l'uno lineamento e l'altro si rilieva et apparisce tondo e spiccato.' The English translation is from Louis Maclehose in *Vasari on Technique*, pp. 208-9.

[203] Alessandro de' Medici's interest in landscape or outdoor backgrounds is also evidenced in a portrait by Pontormo, in which there is background of a blue sky with white clouds partially covered by a wooden door.

In contrast to the 'transparent plane' defined by Alberti in the *Della pittura*, Vasari's comments on the picture plane are a reminder that a painting essentially consists of layers of opaque colour. In the passage in Vasari cited above, *campo* means 'colour field' rather than 'background' or 'ground'. Interestingly, Vasari also pays attention to the different kinds of picture supports that can be used by painters, including walls, panels and canvases. In addition to its association with *rilievo*, the predominant role played by *colore* in Vasari's definition of painting is a reminder of the practical aspects of painting, which Vasari, being a painter himself, would have been well acquainted with. Vasari may have become a great admirer of Michelangelo, the high priest of *disegno*, but he was first trained in the workshop of Andrea del Sarto, who was famous for being a great colourist.[204] It is thus reasonable to suggest that Vasari's theory of painting would have been much influenced by the painterly practice of Sarto, and probably also that of his fellow pupils Rosso Fiorentino and Jacopo Pontormo.

In the passage just quoted above, Vasari for the first time distinguishes the notion of *campo* from that of *fondo*. The latter term could mean 'bottom', with the background thus seen as a kind of bottom or base of painting. In the Life of Michelangelo, when discussing the artist's sculptural practice, Vasari uses the term 'fondi' to designate the lower parts of a statue ('le parti più basse della figura') in the water.[205] He compares the process of lifting the statue out of the water to the process of carving a figure out of the stone by effectively revealing it. In this context, the material from which a figure is carved could thus be compared to its ground or *fondo*. This observation about Michelangelo's sculpture-making in accordance with Vasari's view of painting as a *thing* made or composed of material paint. By using the term *fondo*. Vasari seems to have envisaged the emergence of a human form out of a dark ground in the medium of paint as being similar to a figure emerging as it is carved out of marble.

[204] For Vasari's apprenticeship under Sarto, see J. Shearman, *Andrea del Sarto* (Oxford, 1965), vol. 1, p. 168.
[205] Vasari, *Vite*, VI, p. 110.

The role of *colore* in unifying the pictorial field is evident in Vasari, as he maintains that 'unity in painting is produced when a variety of different colours are harmonized together, these colours in all the diversity of many designs show the parts of the figures distinct the one from the other, as the flesh from the hair, and one garment different in colour from another'.[206] Vasari also advises artists to apply the most attractive and charming colours ('i colori più vaghi, più dilettevoli e più belli') to the principal figures, so that the figures 'standing behind are darker than the first, and so little by little as the figures retire inwards'.[207] Vasari goes on to say:

> Certain elements of the figures must be lost in the obscure tints and the further parts of the scene ('lontanaza della istoria'), for if they were to appear too vivid and fiery they would confound the distinction between the figures, but by remaining dark and hazy they give even greater force ('forza') to the others which are in front ('innanzi'), almost as background ('quasi come campo').[208]

In this passage, we find that a clear hierarchical relationship between the foreground and the background is established, with the primacy been given to the foreground figure. A successful composition, according to Vasari, should be like Rosso Fiorentino's *Marriage of the Virgin* of 1523 (Fig. 17), in which the crowd of figures in the background fade into the darkness.[209]

In Vasari's text, the *lontanaza della istoria* also fade into the darkness. According to Vasari, one should place dark tints in the area where they are least offensive and the least distracting in order to carve out ('cavare') the foreground figure more clearly.[210]

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[206] Vasari, *Vite*, p. 124, 'L'unione nella pittura e una discordanza di colori diversi accordati insieme, i quali nella diversita di piu divise mostrano differentemente distinte l'una da l'altra le parti delle figure, come le carni dai capelli et un panno diverso di colore da l'altro.' It should be noted that the epistemological function of colour to distinguish one material from another is also evident in Paolo Pino's discourse.

[207] Ibid., p. 125

[208] Vasari, *Vite*, I, *Della pittura*, cap. xviii, p. 127, 'Debbonsi perdere negli scuri certe parti delle figure, e nella lontanaza della istoria; perchè, oltre che, se elle fussono nello apparire troppo vive ed accese, confonderebbono le figure; elle danno ancora, restando scure ed abbagliate quasi come campo, maggior forza alle alter che vi sono innanzi.' The translation is from Maclehose's *Vasari on Technique*, p. 220.

[209] The link between Vasari's writing and Rosso Fiorentino's *Marriage of the Virgin* was pointed out by Jeroen Stumpel, see Stumpel, 'On Grounds and Backgrounds', pp. 222-3.

[210] Vasari, *Vite*, I, *Della pittura*, cap. xviii, p. 127, 'Et in questo modo si debbe nel lavorare metter gli scuri dove meno offendino e faccino divisione, per cavare fuori le figure.'

The exemplary artists Vasari cites who have achieved this ideal are Leonardo and Raphael. This manner of colouring is what Vasari called 'la unione del colorito', with which the painter assures the excellence ('bontà') of the design and gives charm to the picture ('vaghezza alla pittura') and relief ('rilievo'), as well as stupendous force ('forza terribile') to the figure. In a recent article, Janis Bell points out that in Rosso's *Marriage of the Virgin* (Fig. 17), the artist's 'masterful diminution of color, acuity and *chiaroscuro* modeling' in the crowds behind Mary, Joseph and the high priest must have resulted from his knowledge of Leonardo's perspective of shadow.[211] It is unknown whether Vasari had direct access to Leonardo's writings on *prospettiva delle ombre* or not. Nevertheless, he could well have known it through Rosso's adaption of Leonardo's pictorial practice in this respect. But why would Vasari neglect the compositional role of landscape backgrounds in his writings? One possible explanation is that Vasari must have found the incompatibility of depicting *rilievo* together with a bright landscape background, as will be discussed in Chapter 3 on landscape backgrounds.

Separately, Vasari warns against having the *campo* over-filled with figures. The composition (*collocazione*) should be carried out with the judgment or judiciously. This echoes Alberti's advice in his *Della pittura* that the painter should leave some spaces empty—otherwise, there will be no successful *compositio*. According to Vasari:

> It is necessary that the design be carried out with good arrangement, firm drawing, and judgment and invention, seeing that the composition (*collocazione*) in a picture is nothing other than the parcelling out of the places (*loco*) where the figures come, so that the spaces be not unshapely but in accordance with the judgment of the eye (*giudizio dell'occhio*), while the field (*campo*) is in one place (*luogo*) well covered (*pieno*) and in another void.[212]

[211] J. Bell, 'Leonardo's *Prospettiva delle Ombre*', in F. Fiorani & A. Nova (eds), *Leonardo da Vinci and Optics* (Venice, 2013), p. 103.
[212] Vasari, *Vite.*, p. 114, 'il qual è necessario che sia condotto con buona collocazione e disegno fondato e con giudizio et invenzione, attesoché la collocazione non è altro nella pittura che avere spartito in quel loco dove si fa una figura, che gli spazii siano concordi al giudizio dell'occhio e non siano disformi, che il campo sia in un luogo pieno e nell'altro vòto'. Maclehose's *Vasari on Technique*, p. 209.

Here, the *campo* is associated with the composition. These comments are all focused on the practical aspects of producing a painting, but do not have anything to do with the subject matter. Vasari's musings on how a painting should be made in material terms reflect the concerns of the artist. Indeed, we can say that Vasari wrote in the tradition of Cennino Cennini.

In the case of two cardinals, Federico Borromeo (also Archbishop of Milan) and Gabriele Paleotti (also Archbishop of Bologna), who wrote during the Counter-Reformation, their main concern was the relationship between sacred subjects and naturalistic background details and how the latter might distract from the power of the former. For instance, in his *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* (*Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane*) of 1582, Paleotti sought to restrict the usage of *parerga* that were unrelated to a painting's main religious subject matter. Paleotti gives as an example the subject of the Flagellation:

> Some commit another sort of disproportion with respect to the whole, especially with sacred images and other grave things, when they add elements unrelated to that subject, elements that have nothing to do with the main subject. These are called *parerga* in Greek, and examples would include paintings of our Lord being cruelly whipped at the column in which are added to one side, even if off in the distance, a boy playing with a dog, or a battle of birds, or a peasant catching frogs, or other things that painters imagine without caring whether or not they correspond to the main subject.[213]

Indeed, during the Counter-Reformation, the problem of *parerga* details would become an important issue about decorum, as seen in Paleotti's art criticism. Here, *parerga* are criticised for being in appropriately linked to the main scared subject matter. It is, specifically, a 'disproportion' between the sacred subject and the profane background in both iconographical and compositional sense. The elements listed by Paleotti, such as 'a boy playing with a dog, or a battle of birds, or a peasant catching frogs', are

[213] G. Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, trans. W. McCuaig (Los Angeles, 2012), p. 231.

conjured up by the artist's imagination, or *fantasia*, and might serve to distract the viewer's attention from contemplation.

Paleotti's negative attitude towards those naturalistic *parerga* is echoed in the comments by his follower, Borromeo. In the section of his *Sacred Painting* (1624) dedicated to the *campo*, which Kenneth Rothwell translates as the 'compositional field of painting', Borromeo criticised the artistic abuses of *parerga* when used in conjunction with a holy subject.[214] Borromeo's chapter entitled *De campo* opens as follows:

> If a painting is to be historically valid, its overall compositional field must be consistent with the story being depicted. We sometimes see gratuitous depictions, from a distance or close up, of cities, rivers, and gardens, as well as birds, beasts, horses, and dogs—all so poorly thought out as to be utterly preposterous.[215]

Here, Federico Borromeo has found contradictions between the figure and a transparent *campo*, leading him to try to eliminate sacrilegious extraneous details from the sacred field of religious art.

A coherent definition of *campo* was produced by Filippo Baldinucci in 1681 who defines *campo* as a dark background in the *Vocabolario toscano dell'Arte del Disegno*, which was first published in 1681 in Florence, Baldinucci defines 'campo' as:

> Called by painters that space which circumscribes all the margins of the thing painted, and it is the role of a judicious ('giudizioso') painter to lay in ('campire') with such colour that helps to give enough relief to his picture: but you should have proper considerations because in the dark field ('campo scuro') brightness will stand out more. And that they say spaces, meaning also the parts of the depicted thing, which sometimes could serve as the backgrounds of other parts; like for example, one hand with its colour of flesh, seen in bright light, will have

[214] F. Borromeo, *Sacred Painting & Museum*, trans. K. S. Rothwell (Cambridge and London, 2010), pp. 30-5.
[215] Ibid., p. 31.

> little relief and won't stand out ('campeggerà') better, if it is above the dress of the figure which is of the same colour.[216]

Here, *campo*, meaning the area external to the figure, is a compositional element that can make the figure stand out better. It can also be deemed a condition of seeing, because Baldinucci claims that 'because in the dark field brightness will stand out more'. Although associations with concepts such as 'foundation' or 'reason' are not found in Baldinucci's definition of the term *campo*, the use of *campo* in Baldinucci's context does suggeset that the choice of a particular type of background can determine the appearance of a form or figure.

However, the situation was different in the French context at approximately the same time. In 1668, Roger de Piles's French translation of Charles Alphonse Dufresnoy's Latin poem *De Arte Graphica* conflated the terms 'background' (*Derriere du Tableau*), 'ground' (*Fond*) and 'field' (*champ*).[217] This conflation is crucial because it goes against the pictorial order as established in the Italian art theory. Some thirty years earlier in France, Leonardo's *Treatise of Painting* had been translated from Italian to French by Fréart de Chambray in 1651. Leonardo's term *campo* is translated, without further distinction, as both *champ* and *fond*. For instance, in Chapter CLIX entitled 'Des choses peintes en un champ clair…', *campo* is translated as *fond* in the main text: 'Quand un corps ombreux se terminera sur un fond clair et illumine'.[218] So it could be argued that Leonardo might have played a crucial role in disseminating, indirectly, this idea of *campo* as either 'background' or 'ground' in the seventeenth century in France.

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[216] My translation. F. Baldinucci, *Vocabolario Toscano dell'Arte del Disegno* (Florence, 1681), p. 27, 'Dicesi da' Pittori quello spazio che circoscrive tutte l'estremita della cosa dipinta; ed è parte di giudizioso Artefice il campire con tal colore, che aiuti a rilevare assai la sua pittura, perchè nel campo scuro più spicca il chiaro, avute però le debite considerazioni. E quello che si dice delli spazi, intendesi anche delle parti della cosa dipinta, che potrebbon tal volta servir di campi ll'altre parti; come per esempio, una mano veduta a lume caro col uno color di carne aura poco rilieve e non campeggerà bene, se poserà sopra'l vestito della figura, che sia dello stesso colore; e così vadasi discorrendo.'

[217] 'Le champ, le Fond & le Derriere du Tableau ne signifient qu'une mesme chose, sinon que l'on appelle plus ordinairement Fond, ce qui est derriere les objets particuliers', see 'Champ du Tableau', in Du Fresnoy, *L'art de peinture* (1668).

[218] L. da Vinci, *Traitté de la peinture ; de Léonard de Vinci ; donné au public et traduit d'italien en françois par R. F. S. D. C.*, trans. F. de Chambray (Paris, 1651), p. 50.

But this ambiguity could be a misunderstanding of Leonardo's original clear phraseology.

In one specific instance in Dufresnoy's *De Arte Graphica*, the *champ* was described as a luminous and transparent field, such as sky, clouds, or waters, that surrounds an opaque body, which will appear 'rougher and more marked' ('plus aspres & plus marquez') and 'more removed' from the *champ*, or *fond* when 'the chiaroscuro is stronger, and the colours are more sensible'. In direct opposition to Baldinucci's definition of *campo* as a dark field, Dufresnoy's use of *champ* reflects his interest in the 'contre-jour effect', in which the dark object in the foreground is in stark contrast to the bright, luminous, and transparent background.[219] Despite this difference, in both Baldinucci's and Dufresnoy's text, the background is the condition that makes the particular appearance of the figure possible.

There is no evidence of a direct connection between these authors in Italy and France. But it is possible that they might have known each other's writings, although there are nuanced differences between them. Leonardo's earlier writings, which only became widely known a century or more later, were crucial to the seventeenth-century understanding of *campo*. However, his theories could not have had an impact in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries since his writings were as yet almost entirely unknown to his fellow painters, although they do undoubtedly provide an important insight into how one writer approached the question of ground and background around.

1.7 Conclusion

[219] But in Roger de Piles's translation of Dufresnoy's *De Arte Graphica*, there is another example in which the figure and the background are tonally merged as if in a painting. When talking about the *champ* of painting ('Le Champ du Tableau'), Dufresnoy wrote: 'Que le Champ du Tableau soit vague, fuyant, leger & bien uny ensemble de Couleurs amies, & fait d'une mixtion dans lagquelle entre de toutes les Couleurs qui composent l'Ouvrage, comme seroit le reste d'une Palette ; & que reciproquement les Corps participent de la Couleur de leur Champ.'

In Renaissance Italy, the concepts of ground and background were addressed by the same period term: *campo*.[220] It is apparent that the notion of the *campo* became increasingly important in fifteenth-century art theory and practice. First used to describe gold ground ('campo d'oro'), and taking in 'colour field', as seen in Vasari's usage of 'campi di colori', *campo* is clearly associated with the materiality of colour. However, due to Alberti's comparison between painting and window, new elements such as skies, landscapes, architecture, and curtains now began to appear in the previously empty backgrounds of paintings. In the period context, the notion *campo* should more appropriately be translated as 'background' if not 'ground'. This is evident even in the case of *campo d'oro*, a term traditionally translated as 'gold ground' but actually meaning 'gold background', because the gilded surfaces are external to the depicted figures rather than underlying them.

Leonardo appears to be the first artist in Renaissance Italy to resolve the tension between ground and background by discussing the relationships between distance and *campo*. In Leonardo's writings, the term *campo* could be understood simultaneously as ground and background because the *campo* both evokes its material aspect as the matrix of figuration and its representational and visual aspects as a background. Unlike his contemporaries, Leonardo was concerned with how to achieve tonal unity between figures and backgrounds in paintings.[221] A dark background was thus the preferred representational device to push the figure forward into the beholder's own space. On the one hand, Leonardo was opposed to evaluating a painting based on the material value of gold; on the other, he also aimed to sustain the symbolic—and immaterial—meanings of the gold ground by substituting it with a dark field. The emphasis of the *campo* as an important element in paintings is seen in the claim he made in 1510 that 'backgrounds are the most important part of painting'.[222]

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220 Stumpel, 'On Grounds and Backgrounds'.
221 J. Shearman, 'Leonardo's Colour and Chiaroscuro', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 25. Bd., H. 1 (1962), pp. 13-47.
222 Ibid., I, p. 170, 464.

To sum up, the term *campo* stands at the intersection between visuality and materiality in Renaissance Italy. I agree with Caroline Walker Bynum that it is problematic to assume that the change from the early to the late medieval period is characterised by a paradigm shift from materiality and visuality.[223] Materiality clearly continues to play a crucial role in late medieval devotion and beyond.[224] Beyond the world of painting, the term mainly means field (including battlefield) or piazza, concepts related to human interventions in the world. Employing the word *campo*, or *campus* in Latin, to designate the 'ground' or 'background' of painting is, above all, linked to the notion of an architectural foundation. The medieval notion of 'facere campos' already suggests the involvement of human labour involved in producing a stable ground onto which one can inscribe letters or figures. At the same time, producing a background filled with details evokes the metaphor of a fertile field, which over time became associated with the artistic use of perspective.

With this deeper appreciation of the history of the term *campo* from the late medieval period to the Counter-Reformation, one can gain new insights into different kinds of fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century grounds and backgrounds such as gold grounds and painted backgrounds depicting landscapes and architectural features, as will be discussed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

[223] C. W. Bynum, *Christian Materiality. An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011), p. 19.
[224] Ibid., pp. 19-31.

Chapter Two

Between Materiality and Immateriality: Gold Ground Paintings in Late Fifteenth-Century Florence and Rome

The current chapter aims to discuss the iconography and devotional function of gold ground, or *campo d'oro*, through some key examples in late fifteenth-century Italian paintings mainly in Rome and Florence. The focus of this chapter is not to reinstate a new paradigm of 'gold ground painting' against that of 'perspectival painting'.[225] Rather, it aims to address the materiality and temporality of the gold ground in moments when it was in a mutual dialogue with other figurative backgrounds such as landscapes or backgrounds of architecture. The meaning of the term *campo* will not be confined to that of 'ground' or 'background' but includes the idea of 'field of colour', which gives an opportunity to examine the use of gold grounds in the larger context of using gold as a kind of colour in Renaissance paintings.

It should be noted that the criticism against using gold found in humanistic written theory should be separated from the practice of employing gold in paintings.[226] I will highlight a moral imperative in the criticism against the use of gold or extensive ornamentation in images by figures such as St Bernard, Alberti, Vasari and even Savonarola. Contrary to this theory against using gold, gold grounds and gold ornaments can still be found in many paintings produced in the second half of the fifteenth century in both Florence and Rome. The examples I'm going to discuss, such as in the Borgia Apartment (Fig. 21), speak to the ongoing currency and adaptability of

[225] For the antithesis between gold ground and perspective, see Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, pp. 48-49; L. H. Shelton, 'Gold in Altarpieces of the Early Italian Renaissance: a Theological and Art Historical Analysis of its Meaning and the Reasons for its Disappearance' (PhD thesis, Yale University, 1987), pp. 177-83; and D. Y. Kim, 'Points on a Field: Gentile da Fabriano and Gold Ground', *Journal of Early Modern History*, 23 (2019), pp. 191-226.

[226] Some very traditional Florentine painters like Neri di Bicci, Pier Francesco, and Domenico di Michelino continue to use gold grounds in their altarpieces from the late fifteenth century, but they were in the minority. About the elimination of gold from the backgrounds of paintings, see in particular Shelton, 'Gold in Altarpieces of the Early Italian Renaissance', pp. 80-183.

gold ground in Renaissance Italy.[227] I also argue that the gold ground is adaptable to linear perspective or perspectival illusionism more generally.

In addition, I would like to revisit the hypothesis that a conscious programme of deploying gold grounds in late fifteenth-century Florentine paintings was linked to the preaching of Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola.[228] The painting under consideration is Filippino Lippi's *Pala Valori* (Fig. 22). It seems paradoxical that, on the one hand, Savonarola was appealing for a return to the notion of Christian simplicity in art; but on the other hand, the *Pala Valori*, commissioned, according to some scholars, as a response to Savonarola's reforming agenda, retained a gold ground that underscores the very material preciousness of the gold. No matter whether Savonarola was directly involved in commissioning the *Pala Valori* or not, his sermons could help to better understand this altarpiece. However, by juxtaposing Lippi's unique case of the *Pala Valori* to Pinturicchio's use of gold in the Borgia Apartment, I argue that the symbolic malleability of gold remains a characteristic feature of late fifteenth-century Italian art in Rome and Florence, and its use should be seen in dynamic dialogue responding to contemporary needs and concerns, rather than somewhat distorted by revivalism or anachronistic musings.

This chapter consists of two parts. The first part reviews the received wisdom that gold ground is incompatible with linear perspective or perspectival naturalism in general. The second part both considers new materials and revisits old examples in order to propose a new reading of gold ground paintings in late fifteenth-century Italy. Given the polarity between gold ground and perspective, previous scholars have linked the

[227] My research on the use of gold in Roman context is enormously indebted to Prof. Arnold Nesselrath. I not only benefited from discussions with Prof. Nesselrath's, but I also am very grateful for his generosity in granting me access to Fra Angelico's *Niccoline Chapel*, which is usually closed to the visitors, and to the Borgia Apartment while it was under restoration in 2016.

[228] This thesis was first put forward by André Chastel, *Art et Humanisme à Florence au Temps du Laurent le Magnifique* (Paris, 1959), p. 389. But Chastel's view is repudiated by Ronald Steinberg, see R. Steinberg, *Fra Girolamo Savonarola, Florentine Art, and Renaissance Historiography*, (Athens, 1977), p. 131; also discussed by Lois Heidmann Shelton in 'Gold in Altarpieces of the Early Italian Renaissance', p. 131.

use of gold ground in late fifteenth-century Italy to archaism, anachronism, or Gothic revivalism.[229] Rather than seeing Pinturicchio as 'an anachronism', the current chapter argues that he paints in 'the strong continuing stream of courtly painting in the Renaissance from Pisanello and Gozzoli through to Veronese, which was not just a survival but a live and progressive style'.[230] As will become apparent, the use of gilded *pastiglia* in accentuating architectural elements or covering the area of skies in the paintings in the Borgia Apartment will provide a good case to re-examine the meaning and purpose of using gold grounds in Renaissance contexts.

These examples shed some new light on how the gold ground was perceived in the late fifteenth century. In the Byzantine past, the gold ground was associated with divine light, thus evoking its immaterial connotation rather than its material aspects. However, in its reception in the Latin West, the gold ground was more often understood in terms of its materiality. These two aspects were intertwined in the late fifteenth century. Before considering late fifteenth-century examples of gold ground paintings, we can briefly review how the gold ground has been interpreted by previous scholars.

2.1 Toward an Iconography of Gold Ground: A Broad Overview

The gold ground in late antique and medieval art has often stimulated scholarly speculation.[231] In one approach, it has been interpreted as a kind of space. Alois Riegl, in *Late Roman Art Industry*, is the first to comment on the gold ground in late antique art. He sees it as 'an ideal spatial ground' ('idealen Raumgrund'), which bridges late antique art and modern art:

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[229] For a study on the revival of gold ground and archaising tendencies in the late fifteenth century, see C. Filippini, 'Il Recupero del Fondo d'oro e Altre Tendenze Archaizzanti', in M. Gregori, A. Paolucci, and C. A. Luchinat (eds), *Maestri e Botteghe: Pittura a Firenze alla fine del Quattrocento*, exh. cat., (Florence, 1992), pp. 181-89.

[230] See the discussion of Pinturicchio in the courtly context in M. Mallett, *The Borgias. The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Dynasty* (London, 1969), p. 234.

[231] A good bibliography of previous discussions of the use of gold grounds can be found in P. C. Claussen, 'Goldgrund', *Kritische Berichte* (2007), pp. 64-7. For probably the most recent essay on gold grounds in Renaissance paintings, see Kim, 'Points on a Field: Gentile da Fabriano and Gold Ground'.

> …the gold ground of the Byzantine mosaic, which generally excludes the background and is a seeming regression, is no longer a ground plane but an ideal spatial ground which the people of the west subsequently were able to populate with real objects and to expand toward infinite depth. Antiquity knew unity and infinity only on the plane. Modern art, however, searches for both in deep space; late Roman art stands exactly in between because it has separated the individual figure from the plane and thus overcome the fiction of a level ground which gives birth to everything. Yet still following antiquity it recognizes space as an enclosed individual (cubic) shape and not yet as an infinite free space.[232]

Riegl's interpretation of gold ground underscores the dualistic nature of the Byzantine mosaic gold ground. It could either become a surface plane or be developed into a spatial depth. Interestingly, Riegl's interpretation of gold ground was further developed by Erwin Panofsky in his classic essay *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, which was first published in German as 'Die Perspecktive als "symbolische Form"' in 1924-5. Panofsky comments on the gold ground in the Abraham mosaic from San Vitale in Ravenna (Fig. 23) as follows:

> …here the individual pictorial elements…could be joined…in an immaterial but unbroken tissue, as it were, within which the rhythmic exchange of color and gold…restores a kind of unity, even if only a coloristic or luminous unity. The particular form of this unity once again finds its theoretical analogue in the view of space of pagan and Christian Neoplatonism. 'Space is nothing other than the finest light,' according to Proclus; here, just as in art, the world is conceived for the first time as a continuum. It is also robbed of its solidarity and rationality: space has been transformed into a homogeneous and, so to speak, homogenizing fluid, immeasurable and indeed dimensionless.[233]

Developing Riegl's conception of the gold ground as 'an ideal spatial ground', Panofsky interprets the gold ground in mosaic paintings within a historical teleology.[234]

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[232] Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, pp. 12-3.
[233] E. Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, p 49.
[234] Although a modern photograph of the Abraham mosaic doesn't include a specific gold ground, I would argue that Panofsky should picked out this example to illustrate the style of gold ground paintings more generally because in the previous paragraph he claimed that the forms he was going to discuss are those standing 'in relief against a gold or neutral ground'. It could be the case that Panofsky was using a black and white reproduction of the Abraham mosaic at that time.

For Panofsky, the mosaic ground is a kind of indefinite space, which is 'homogeneous', 'immeasurable', and 'dimensionless'. It prepares for the development of 'the modern "systematic space"', as seen in the discovery of linear perspective in Italian Renaissance art.[235]

However, this spatial approach to interpreting the gold ground has been taken further. Wolfgang Braunfels points out that gold ground in fifteenth-century art could symbolise an 'image of Paradise', 'a space that is appropriate to the mystery of the Incarnation', and a 'new dimension' that 'removes the event into the timeless'.[236] Here, the spatiality of gold ground is further elaborated in a semiotic approach. However, this spatial-semiotic approach has been criticised as anachronistic by Cornelius Claussen. Understanding a gold ground as 'a sign for transcendence' corresponds more to the later Romantic notions of the Middle Ages than the medieval period historically.[237]

A contrasting approach is to interpret gold ground through the lens of the materiality of gold itself without considering the spatial idea of 'ground'. This approach was first developed by Gombrich in 1935.[238] Gombrich interprets gold grounds as essentially 'materials, metal, that is to say, in fact: Gold'.[239] In contrast to the symbolic meanings of otherworldliness advanced by scholars such as Bodonyi on gold grounds, Gombrich suggests that one should emphasise the 'thingness' (*Dinghaftigkeit*) of gold.[240]

The 'material turn' became more concrete in the historical framework described in Ellen Beer's 1983 article. She argues that it is the materiality of gold ground that carries

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[235] Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, p. 58.
[236] W. Braunfels, 'Nimbus und Goldgrund', *Das Muenster* 3 (1950), p. 23.
[237] C. Claussen, 'Goldgrund', in *Kritische Berichte* (2007), No. 3, pp. 64-7.
[238] E. H. Gombrich, Review of J. Bodonyi, 'Enstehung und Bedeutung des Goldgrundes in der spätantiken Bildkomposition', *Kritische Berichte zür Kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur*, Vol. 5 (1932/3), 1935, pp. 65-75. https://gombricharchive.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/showdoc81.pdf (25 May. 2022).
[239] Ibid.: 'Dann wäre eine weitere Eigenschaft der Goldfarbe deutlicher hervorgetreten, die der Autor nur streift und auf die O. Pächt den Referenten aufmerksam gemacht hat: daß sie nämlich im eigentlichen Sinne des Wortes keine Farbe ist, den Farben des Spektrums gleichwertig, sondern Materie, Metall, d.h. eben: Gold.'
[240] Ibid.: 'Denn während B. und andere den außernatürlichen wirklichkeitsfremden Charakter des Goldgrundes im Bilde eindringlich schilden, dürfen wir auch, polar dazu, seine Dinghaftigkeit betonen.'

emphasis: its 'theological superstructure' only comes and goes at certain times.[241] For Beer, what matters most is what gold ground *is* rather than what it *means*. According to Beer, the gold ground cannot be a 'pictorial spatial element' in medieval paintings, because it is at odds with any spatial representations.[242] In other words, Beer wants to argue against any positions proclaiming the representational and symbolic potentials of gold ground. However, Beer also pointed out that, in the final phase of medieval painting in central Europe as seen in the paintings by Nikaus Manuel Deutsch, there was a shift from matter to 'light, air and atmospheric phenomenon', the latter of which indeed evokes the metaphysical superstructure of gold ground and suggest that gold ground can be representational.[243] I agree with Beer that the gold ground is both symbolic and representational but I am doubtful about its antithetical relationship to pictorial space.

Another anti-spatial tendency of interpreting gold ground is evident in an important revisionist article of 2012 entitled 'The Gold Ground in the Middle Ages. "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use!"' by Michael Viktor Schwarz. Schwarz suggests that, unlike the term 'background', the medieval term *campus* is more neutral, and that it is problematic to read iconographical or spatial meanings into the gold ground.[244] However, Schwarz's interpretation is limited in its scope: the gold ground applied within a historiated letter of a manuscript should be certainly distinguished from large-scale golden mosaics or a gold ground altarpiece. Instead, I argue that the term *campus*, or *campo*, is not semiotically neutral in the late medieval and Renaissance periods. Rather, it is representational when it is used as an element representing the sky.

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[241] E. J. Beer, 'Marginalien zum Thema Goldgrund', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 1983, 46. Bd., H. 3 (1983), pp. 271-286.
[242] Ibid., p. 281.
[243] Ibid., p. 284.
[244] M. V. Schwarz, 'The Gold Ground in the Middle Ages. "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use"', in A. Husslein-Arco and T. Zaunschirm (eds), *Gold. Artists in Gold – Tradition and Today* (Chicago, 2012), p. 31.

The antithesis between gold ground and space (or to be more specific Albertian space/place) is further developed by David Young Kim in his essay on Gentile da Fabriano's gold ground paintings. According to Kim, gold ground 'becomes the terrain where the artist can explore the conditions of the possible, dramatizing not what painting is, or should be, but rather what it can be and become. Whereas one-point perspective posits a measurable and contiguous spatial relationship with the viewer, gold ground introduces a space and a viewing experience that is much more indeterminate.'[245] But it will be problematic to adopt a homogenous view of what gold ground *appears to be* in early modern art. Since a key question this chapter examines is the relationship between gold ground and linear perspective, I posit that the immateriality or spirituality of gold ground could be taken advantage of to conform to the earthly illusionism created by perspective.

2.2 Gold Ground from the Byzantine to the Latin West

A key question is whether this 'material turn' in interpreting gold ground can really give us a reliable historical picture of how gold ground paintings were understood in the Renaissance period? In order to answer this question, we need first look at the reception of the Byzantine legacy of the gold ground in the Renaissance. Janes argues that the link between the golden mosaic ground and metaphysical light is predominant in the Byzantine period.[246] In Byzantine theological aesthetics, according to Shelton, gold in icons is associated with the theme of the Transfiguration, in which gold is considered an appropriate material to represent the light of the Divine as experienced on Mount Tabor.[247] Gold was deemed a most worthy and proper offering to and container for the Holy.[248] Finally, in the hierarchies of the material and spiritual worlds, gold was the earthly material closest to the immaterial and was connected by its

[245] Kim, 'Points on a Field: Gentile da Fabriano and Gold Ground', p 201.
[246] For this question, also see D. Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1998).
[247] Shelton, 'Gold in Altarpieces of the Early Italian Renaissance', pp. 13-30.
[248] Ibid., p. 24.

luminosity with the beauty and light of the Divine.[249] In nearly every fourteenth-century altarpiece, gold remains both the ground 'around' the main composition and, at the same time, is also part of the medium of the image itself. The preciousness of a gilded panel leaves the impression that the sacred image is presented on a base of solid gold.

It seems that the gold grounds seen in nearly every Trecento altarpiece evoked the 'unfathomable and anagogic non-space of the Incarnation', as described by Hugh of St Victor (1096-1141): 'All visible things have their symbolical senses, that is, they are given figuratively to denote and explain invisible things […]. They are signs of invisible things and images of those things which dwell in the perfect and incomprehensible nature of the Deity in a manner passing all understanding'.[250] In addition, the gold ground is, in Baert's words, also 'an expression of the Gothic élan that combines costliness and Eucharistic grandeur with an aesthetic of refinement and technical ingenuity.'[251] If the theological interpretation of gold ground is particularly evident in the Byzantine world, the material and earthly aspect of gold would be particularly pronounced in the eyes of the Latin viewers in the West. Indeed, I would suggest that the material and immaterial aspects of gold ground had become interwoven by the late medieval period in Italy.

The Latin viewer's preoccupation with the material value of gold ground can be found in a contract between Pietro Lorenzetti and Guido Tarlati, bishop of Arezzo, for a 'tabula Beate Virginis Marie' on April 17, 1320:

> In the middle of which panel must be the image of the Virgin Mary with her Son and with four collateral figures to the wishes of the Lord Bishop; to be worked in

[249] Ibid., p. 25.
[250] B. Baert, 'Between Technique and Symbolism: Notes on the meaning of the Use of gold in Pre-Eyckian Panel Painting', in C. Stroo (ed) *Pre-Eyckian Panel Painting in the Low Countries*, (Brussels, 2009), vol. 2, p. 12.
[251] Ibid., pp. 7-22.

> the fields and spaces of these figures ('in campis et spatiis ipsarum figurarum') with the best gold at one hundred leafs to the florin.[252]

It is interesting to note that here the contract stipulates that the painter should use the highest-quality gold to fill in the areas surrounding the figures. This contract also suggests that it is the patron who makes the specific choice that the field, or *campo*, should be enriched by luxurious materials such as gold. Analysing the text itself, the spatial implication of the term *campo* is revealed in the parallels between the terms *campus* and *spatium*.

There is no reason to suggest that the secular connotation of gold as seen in the above contract is not at odds with its metaphysical meaning. In an early contract for the *Rucellai Madonna* painted by Duccio, *circa* 1285 (Fig. 24), we can find even clearer evidence that the aesthetic meaning of gold ground in medieval art is independent of the iconographic meaning of the subject depicted. As this contract notes, the painting was 'adorned with the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary and her omnipotent son and other figures…and was to be gilded in order to contribute to the beauty of the said panel'.[253] According to Henk van Os, 'beauty' here is founded on the Scholastic aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas in which beauty transports the beholder towards integrity, proportion and, ultimately, the radiance of God (*claritas*).[254]

It used to be axiomatic that Renaissance artists deliberately abandoned the gold grounds that characterised medieval paintings.[255] Even the concept of 'Renaissance' itself is very much germane to the stylistic shift from deploying gold grounds to landscape and architectural vistas in paintings. Indeed, even as far back as Jacob Burckhardt, we see a scholar linking the idea of the 'Renaissance' as linked to a new paradigm of visuality

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[252] G. Milanesi, *Nuovi documenti per la storia dell'arte Toscana dal XII al XV secolo* (Soest, 1973), p. 23.
[253] H. van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces, 1215-1460, Form, Content, Function* (Gronigen, 1988), p. 186.
[254] Ibid., pp. 11-15.
[255] One of the key reasons for the replacement of gold ground with naturalistic background in Italian Renaissance art was said to be the discovery of linear perspective, as argued most famously by Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*.

which is manifested in a novel pictorial vision of the landscape.[256] But if one treats the gold ground as antithetical to linear perspective, one implies that gold ground is anti-Renaissance, which is undoubtedly problematic.

In his classic essay 'Ars Auro Prior' first published in 1967, Jan Białostocki points out that the Renaissance disinterest (notably in Alberti) in the materiality of gold ground evoked the Ovidian *topos* of *materiam superabat opus*, the notion that art or human craftsmanship exceeds or surpasses the materials used.[257] The original context of this *topos* is the description of Apollo's palace in Book 2 of the *Metamorphoses*, where Phaeton begs Apollo to allow him to drive his chariot through the heavens.[258] Ovid at first praised the luxurious materials the palace was made of, but then observed that the artistry required to make it was even nobler. The Ovidian dichotomy between artistry and materiality re-emerged in Abbot Suger's poem on the gilt doors of the West porch of his church of St Denis in Paris. Though the theological associations of gold were still very strong in Suger's time, the Abbot nevertheless admonished that 'the onlooker should wonder not at the expense and not at the gold, but at the workmanship, the "art".'[259]

Białostocki's essay is the precursor of scholarly interest in exploring the tension between material splendour and artistic craftsmanship in fifteenth-century Italy. In his *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* first published in 1972, Michael Baxandall famously observes that in the fifteenth century, the patrons of art had shifted their passion from the consumption of precious materials, such as gold and lapis-lazuli,

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[256] J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (Harmondsowrth, 1990), pp. 185-229.

[257] For a detailed chronological survey of the role of gold in art in relation to the *topos* of *materiam superabat opus* from antiquity to early modern period, see J. Białostocki, 'Ars Auro Prior', in J. G. Harrell, A. Wierzbiańska, ed. *Aesthetics in Twentieth-century Poland: Selected Essays* (New Jersey, 1973), pp. 270-285. On the changing notions of artistic value in the Renaissance, also see E. Gombrich, 'Visual Metaphors of Value in Art', *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (London, 1963), pp. 12-29.

[258] 'The palace of the Sun rose high aloft / On soaring columns, bright with flashing gold / And flaming bronze; the pediments were clothed / With sheen of ivory; the double doors / Dazzled with silver—and the artistry was nobler still', Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans., A. D. Melville (Oxford, 2008), p. 25.

[259] Białostocki, 'Ars Auro Prior', p. 276.

to paying for artistic skill.[260] One of the reasons for this shift away from material opulence was the triumph of Christian asceticism, which grew out of a neo-Ciceronian humanism in the early fifteenth century. Baxandall singles out Alberti's criticism of gold as an extreme case of this shift away from material splendour on moral grounds. Baxandall thus draws attention to the link between the 'diminishing role of gold in paintings' and a 'selective inhibition about display' throughout western Europe in the fifteenth century.[261] This trend in pictorial styles, according to Baxandall, reflected an art patron's changing taste in public display. It also permeated social tastes in dress or costume as when a preference for gilt fabric gave way to the much more restrained black cloth of Burgundy. The moral argument in Baxandall's thesis could be developed further.

However, the teleology of Baxandall's thesis seems too simplistic. For one thing, gold continues to play a key role in late fifteenth-century Italian style. For another, there is no complete transition from gold ground to representational backgrounds such as landscape or architectural backdrops in the fifteenth century. As discussed in Chapter 1, the term *campo* was still retained to mean both 'ground' and 'background' in the fifteenth century. Baxandall's shift from medieval materiality to Renaissance visuality is too reliant on Alberti's authority. The precondition for achieving the Albertian sense of a 'seeing through' is the negation of the material surface of the image. However, there is no replacement for the actual use of opaque and reflective gold leaf with the metaphor of the transparent medium of glass in the contemporary practice of Italian painting. In other words, the new concept of 'looking' as embodied in Alberti's 'window' metaphor had *not* replaced the old notion of 'looking beyond' as seen in the use of gold ground in medieval painting.[262] The luxurious surface of the painting was still much appreciated.

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[260] See Baxandall, *Painting & Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, pp. 14-8.
[261] Ibid., p. 14.
[262] For the ideas of 'looking beyond' versus 'looking through', see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, p. 66.

There are valuable links between the use and interpretation of gold and questions of temporality and chronology. In Alexander Nagel's and Christopher Wood's book *Anachronic Renaissance*, the authors have put forward two contrasting models of image-making, the authorial versus the substitutional models. The present chapter's subject, the gold ground, is a medium that serves as an important example of Nagel and Wood's substitutional model of image-making in their theory.[263] However, they did not distinguish the gold ground in mosaic paintings from the gold ground in panel paintings. In citing Vittore Carpaccio's *Vision of Prior Francesco Ottobon* (Fig. 25), the two gold-ground polyptychs on the wall were discussed as if they are mosaic paintings. This is problematic since they appear not, in fact, to be mosaics. I argue that it is important to distinguish carefully between the uses of gold grounds in different media. In doing so, it is helpful to revisit Megan Holmes's criticism of the 'schematic binary' and the 'implicit teleology' employed first by Hans Belting and then by Nagel and Wood.[264] Although I will argue that the use of gold ground is not anachronic, it certainly does register as an example of Nagel and Wood's 'substitutional model', as will be discussed in the case of Borgia Apartment.[265]

2.3 Against Gold: Christian Morality in St Bernard, Alberti and Vasari

The reasons for the decline of using gold in fifteenth-century Italian paintings are manifold. They could have included the impact of northern European art, new theological thinking, changing fashion, lack of skill, and a dislike of vulgar exhibitionism. In the case of Florentine paintings, it has been suggested that gold grounds first started to be replaced by landscape or architectural backgrounds in the predella of the *Coronation of the Virgin* by Lorenzo Monaco of 1414, the predella of Gentile da Fabriano's *Strozzi Altarpiece* of 1423, and the predella of Masaccio's

[263] For some recent discussions about the relationship between gold ground and archaism in the Renaissance art, see especially A. Nagel and C. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York, 2010), pp. 38-9; 97-99; 335-345.
[264] Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, pp. 160-1.
[265] For the assumed link between anachronism and gold ground paintings, also see Nagel and Wood. *Anachronic Renaissance*, p. 14.

altarpiece for S. Maria del Carmine in Pisa finished in 1426.[266] Starting with Alberti, there is another possible cause for the so-called decline in gold grounds: the link between the humanistic criticism against using gold and the growing asceticism in the fifteenth century.

Alberti is usually cited as one of the strongest opponents of the use of gold in paintings. However, Alberti's views are actually quite nuanced. Indeed, he may not actually be criticizing the gold grounds as such, but simply be complaining about the overuse of gold as a colour that is too bright. In the third part of his *Della pittura* (the first version was completed in 1435), Alberti criticised the excessive and immoderate use of gold in paintings and declared that it would be more praiseworthy to depict golden objects using colours.[267] The example Alberti cited was Virgil's Dido in the *Aeneid*, in which the poet deployed poetic images of gold to describe several of Dido's belongings.[268] At the end of Book Two of *Della pittura*, Alberti wrote:

> There are some who make excessive ['inmodice' in the Latin version; 'molto' in the Italian version] use of gold, because they think it lends a certain majesty to painting. I would not praise them at all. Even if I wanted to paint Virgil's Dido with her quiver of gold, her hair tied up in gold, her gown fastened with a golden clasp, driving her chariot with golden reins, and everything else resplendent with gold, I would try to represent with colours ['i colori'] rather than with gold this wealth of rays of gold that almost blinds the eyes of the spectators from all angles. Besides the fact that there is greater admiration and praise for the artist in the use of colours, it is also true that, when done in gold on a flat panel [''una piana tavola], many surfaces ['alcuna superficie'] that should have been presented as light and gleaming, appear dark to the viewer, while others that should be darker, probably look brighter.[269]

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[266] H. Wohl, *The Aesthetics of Italian Renaissance Art: a Reconsideration of Style* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 258.

[267] Alberti-Grayson, p. 93. Although it has usually been assumed that the Latin text of 1435 (*De pictura*) predates the Italian one of 1436 (*Della pittura*), it has been argued recently that it was the Italian edition of *On Painting* that first appeared, see L. B. Alberti, *Leon Battista Alberti: On Painting. A New Translation and Critical Edition*, ed. and tr. R. Sinisgalli (Cambridge, 2011). According to Heidmann Shelton, Alberti's criticism of gold marked a turning point in the history of the use of gold in Italian Renaissance paintings, see Shelton, 'Gold in Altarpieces of the Early Italian Renaissance', pp. 81-100.

[268] Alberti-Grayson, p. 93.

[269] Ibid. p. 93. Cecil Grayson's translation is based on the Latin edition. The Italian version of this passage can be found in Alberti-Mallè, p. 102, 'Truovasi chi adopera molto in sue storie oro, che stima proga maestà; non lo lodo. Et benché dipigniesse quella Didone di Vergilio ad cui era la pharetra d'oro,

What really concerns Alberti here, above all, was the incompatibility between the glaring qualities of metallic gold, relief effects as described in his modelling system and the representation of pictorial space. In the passage cited above, Alberti's clear emphasis is on the depiction of golden objects. But how should we interpret what Alberti meant by 'surfaces' or 'superficie'? Given that Alberti's modelling system is solely concerned with the body, the use of gold here could also be interpreted as simply referring to the area inside the contour of a body or other free-standing object. However, if the 'surfaces' were meant to denote grounds, or *campi*, Alberti would have been criticising the glaring effect of burnished gold grounds. That Alberti is not necessarily criticising the use of gold *per se* is suggested by the fact that, immediately after his criticism of using actual gold to depict gold in paintings, Alberti states: 'other ornaments done by artificers that are added to painting, such as sculpted columns, bases and pediments, I would not censure if they were in real silver and solid or pure gold ('auro solido vel admodum purissimo'), for a perfect and finished painting is worthy ('dignissima') to be ornamented even with precious stones.'[270]

For Alberti, it is apparently perfectly acceptable to use gold in the framing elements of a painting. Perhaps the best well-known Renaissance example of a costly golden frame is the now lost gilt framing components for Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, which would have used about twenty thousand gold leaves.[271] Alberti's comments thus suggest that there was no abrupt disappearance in the use of gold used as ornament. While Alberti does not write explicitly about gold ground as we understand it today, is it not possible that he might have interpreted such a ground as another kind of framing ornament surrounding individual figures and objects? In such a reading, Alberti may

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i capelli aurei nodati in oro et la veste purpurea cinta pur d'oro, freni al cavallo et ogni cosa d'oro, no però ivi vorrei punto adoperassi oro però che, ne i colori imitando i razzi del oro, sta più admiratione et lode al artefice. Et ancora veggiamo in una piana tavola alcuna superficie ova sia l'oro, quando deono essere obscure risplendere et quando deono essere chiare parere nere.'

[270] Alberti-Grayson, pp. 92-3, 'Nam et gemmarum quoque ornamentis perfecta et absoluta historia dignissima est'.

[271] M. O'Malley, *The Business of Art: Contracts and the Commissioning Process in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, 2005), pp. 56-7.

therefore not be criticising gold grounds after all, but instead only condemning the overuse of gold in depictions of figures and objects. This passage from Alberti's *Della pittura* reveals an important motivation for using gold or gold ground in paintings, that is, to lend majesty or magnificence to the painting. This impulse will be revisited below when discussing the frescoes in the Borgia Apartment.

One of our emerging themes is the meaning of the gold ground to the patron, rather than to the artist. Within the broader context of early Renaissance humanistic thought, it has been argued that the formation of a new definition of art grows out of a tension between the ideals of Franciscan poverty and the lure of civic riches. This definition privileges the value of artistic skill above the material value, and the illusionism of coloured paint over the visible expense of gold.[272] Alberti's ideological stance against excess is born out of his convictions regarding the ideals of Franciscan poverty. He promotes Masaccio's approach to art, which sought to emancipate art from its servitude to the patron's desire for material luxury. This places Alberti's theory in opposition to Gentile da Fabriano's International Gothic style, as seen in his *Adoration of Magi*, which expresses the taste of an older, more aristocratic class of patron.[273] But it would be foolish to hold Masaccio's art up as the very norm for all Renaissance art. In the early fifteenth century when Masaccio paints his *Holy Trinity* without using any gold, Sassetta uses gold in his *San Sepolcro Altarpiece*, which is now in National Gallery, London. Even within the patronage of the Franciscan order itself, gold is still used much in evidence, such as in the extensive gold backgrounds in the vault ceilings of the Lower Church of the Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi (Fig. 26).[274]

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[272] On the ideals of riches and poverty in the early Renaissance, see H. Baron, 'Franciscan Poverty and Civic Wealth as Factors in the Rise of Humanistic Thought', *Speculum*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Jan., 1938), pp. 1-37. For a more recent discussion on the themes of enrichment and impoverishment in the arts of the early modern period, see M. Cole, '*Arti povere*, 1300-1650', in C. Anderson, A. Dunlop, and P. Smith, ed. *The Matter of Art: Materials, Technologies, Meanings, c. 1250-1650* (Manchester, 2014), pp. 240-62.

[273] An explanation of the stylistic differences between Gentile da Fabriano and Masaccio from an ideological perspective was first made by F. Antal, *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background. The Bourgeois Republic Before Cosimo de' Medici's Advent to Power: XIV and Early XV Centuries* (London, 1948).

[274] On the use of gold backgrounds in the Lower Church, see J. Gardner, *Giotto and His Publics. Three Paradigms of Patronage* (Cambridge and London, 2011), p. 87.

Tempting though it is, it is not useful to see Alberti as a turning point that clearly separates the medieval use of gold ground and the supposed Renaissance renunciation of gold ground. Even his injunction against using gold is not something entirely novel. We can find injunctions against gold also in the writings of Filarete, Giovanni Dominici and Leonardo Bruni.[275] Following Wohl, these criticisms of the excessive use of gold are based on aesthetic and moral grounds and are ultimately questions of decorum.[276] Indeed, it is on the grounds of Christian morality that earlier writers such as St Bernard and later writers like Alberti, Vasari and Michelangelo would criticise the use of gold in paintings. St. Bernard of Clairvaux had already taken the step of condemning the use of gold in religious art. Here he is castigating the practice as an invitation to vice in the *Apologia ad Willelmum Abbatem Sancti Theodorici* written in the twelfth century:

> So say I, 'Tell me ye poor men…if indeed ye be poor, what doeth this gold in your sanctuary? And indeed the bishops have an excuse which monks have not; for we know that they, being debtors both to the wise and the unwise, and unable to excite the devotion of carnal folk by spiritual things, do so by bodily adornments…To speak plainly, doth the root of all this lie in covetousness, which is idolatry…Do we seek not profit but a gift?...for at the very sight of these costly yet marvellous vanities men are more kindled to offer gifts than to pray…They are shown a most comely image of some saint, whom they think all the more saintly that he is gaudily painted…For God's sake, if men are not ashamed of these follies, why at least do they not shrink from the expense?'[277]

Different from Abbot Suger in associating luxurious materials such as gold with the sacred, St. Bernard sees a contradiction between religious meaning and the precious materiality of gold. Rather than inspiring awe and devotion, gold leads to 'covetousness' and 'idolatry'. It could be in the same vein that Alberti in his *Della pittura* criticised the excessive use of gold and claimed that it could only lend 'magnificence', that is, profane grandeur, to the painting.

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[275] H. Wohl, *The Aesthetics of Italian Renaissance Art: a Reconsideration of Style* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 158-9.
[276] Ibid., p. 159.
[277] Cited in Shelton, *Gold in Altarpieces of the Early Italian Renaissance*, p. 46.

Vasari, in his *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* of 1550, interestingly (and perhaps wrongly) singles out Domenico Ghirlandaio as the first painter to use colours to counterfeit the 'trimmings and ornaments' of gold. Ghirlandaio swept away 'in great measure those borders of gilding made with mordant or bole' in his *San Giusto Altarpiece* of c. 1486, because these gildings, according to Vasari, were more suitable for decorative church hangings than for proper works of art.[278] Above all, Vasari's negative attitude towards gold can be related to his negative attitude towards Byzantine art, or what he called art in the 'Greek manner'. The monumental mosaics in San Marco in Venice and the Cathedral of Pisa, in Vasari's eyes, were 'old' (a negative term) rather than 'antique' (a term of high praise), and they consisted of no more than 'a few initial outlines on a field of colour' ('vecchi e non antichi—altro non era rimaso che le prime line in un campo di colore').[279] Moreover, Vasari may have criticised gold less than consciously, as he was steeped in the moral concerns of his age. If one puts Alberti and Vasari in the same group with St Bernard, one can argue that the question of criticising gold is not a new paradigm growing out of the Renaissance itself but contributing to a much older dialectic.

2.4 Cosimo Rosselli and Politics of Using Gold in Renaissance Paintings

Employing gold grounds in paintings also belongs to the larger question of the politics of using gold in Renaissance art. Could Pope Sixtus, to take one of the most wealthy art patrons, be accused of 'vulgar' taste and, is he therefore somehow single-handedly to 'blame' for the revival of gold grounds? Vasari seems to have thought so. One case relates to Cosimo Rosselli's use of gold in the Sistine Chapel frescoes. Devaluing Rosselli's artistic ingenuity by criticising his use of gold, Vasari stated:

[278] See Vasari, *Vite,* III, pp. 478-9. Other examples of Vasari's distaste for gold can be found in the lives of Cosimo Rosselli and Pinturicchio, which will be discussed later below.
[279] Vasari, *Vite*, II, p. 29.

> Cosimo, feeling himself weak in invention and design ['d'invenzione e di disegno'], had sought to conceal ['occultare'] his defects by covering his work with the finest ultramarine blues and other vivacious colours, and had illuminated ['illuminata'] his scenes with plenty of gold, so that there was no tree, or plant, or draper, or cloud, that was not thus illuminated.[280]

The immediate context for Vasari's devaluation of Rosselli's use of gold and other precious materials such as ultramarine was the artist's relationship to the group of Florentine painters summoned to decorate the Sistine chapel. These included Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Signorelli, and Perugino, in addition to Rosselli. In order to 'conceal (*occultare*)' his supposed deficiency in invention and (linear) design, Vasari claims, Rosselli covered his work with ultramarine and other vivid colours and a great deal of gold. The implication was, for Vasari, that using so much gold confirmed Rosselli's lack of artistic skill.

In Vasari's narrative, it was also the vulgar taste of the pope that undermined the ideals of the Ovidian *topos*. Pope Sixtus IV was too easily dazzled by Rosselli's gaudy colours and shiny gold because of the pope's limited understanding of art. As Vasari notes:

> …those colours at the first glance so dazzled the eyes of the Pope, who had little knowledge of such things, although he took no little delight in them, that he judged the work of Rosselli to be much better than that of the others. And so, causing the prize to be given to him, he bade all the others cover their pictures with the best blues that could be found, and to pick them out with gold, to the end that they might be similar to those of Rosselli in colouring and in richness'.[281]

Despite Vasari's later criticism, it is clear that an appreciation of both gold and 'campi di colori' existed in the late fifteenth century in Italy, including at the papal court itself.

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[280] Vasari, *Vite*, III, p. 445: 'Aveva Cosimo, sentendosi debole d'invenzione e di disegno, cercato di occultare il suo defetto con far coperta all'opera di finissimi azurri oltramarini e d'altri vivaci colori, e con molto oro illuminata la storia, onde né albero, né erba, né panno, né nuvolo vi era che lumeggiato non fusse.'

[281] Vasari, *Vite*, III, pp. 445-6, 'perciò che que' colori…a un tratto così abbagliarono gl'occhi del Papa, che non molto s'intendeva di simili cose ancora che se ne dilettasse assai, che giudicò Cosimo avere molto meglio che tutti gl'altri operato. E così fattogli dare il premio, comandò agl'altri che tutti coprissero le loro pitture del migliori azzurri che si trovassero e le toccassino d'oro, acciò che fussero simili a quelle di Cosimo nel colorito e nell'essere ricche.'

According to Peter Cornelius Claussen, a productive way to interpret the significance of gold grounds is to consider them in relation to princely patrons. Such an approach is particularly suited to the case of book illuminations.[282] The enhancement of the social status of the patron had an important influence on the art that has perhaps been de-emphasised in favour of the artist's motivations. Indeed, the gilding of the Sistine fresco paintings can be seen as a prime example of using costly materials to promote a patron. By using large quantities of gold, Rosselli was thus highlighting the status of his patron, the pope, rather than using artistic skill alone to signal his own abilities as an artist.

However, seen beyond the Vasarian lens, it is certainly not the case that Pope Sixtus IV was somehow to 'blame' for the revival of gold grounds. Scholars have, in fact, noted a more general revival of interest in gold in paintings in the 1480s and in the 1490s.[283] A new descriptive value for gold was rediscovered in this period in which gold was used as a kind of colour to represent highlights. In Rome, due to the intervention of Lorenzo de Medici, Sixtus IV summoned a group of leading Florentine and Umbrian masters to decorate the walls of the Sistine Chapel with stories of Christ and Moses.

Stylistically and ideologically, the use of gold on the walls of the Sistine Chapel must have also reminded Renaissance viewers of Byzantine art. Continuing the tradition from the work of figures like Benozzo Gozzoli in the Magi Chapel, or in his collaboration with his master Fra Angelico, in the Niccoline Chapel in Vatican, the artists working in the Sistine Chapel applied gilding with a mixture of colours on the walls by using a method reminiscent of ancient Byzantine chrysographic technique.[284] So, in fact, it was not only Rosselli's paintings that were gilded in certain areas. The

[282] Claussen, 'Goldgrund', pp. 65-6.
[283] For the palatine tradition of using golden highlights in the Sistine chapel frescoes, see J. Shearman, 'The Chapel of Sixtus IV', in C. Pietrangeli et al (eds), *The Sistine Chapel: The Art, the History, and the Restoration* (New York, 1986), pp. 49-50; also see M. Hall, *Color and Meaning: Practice and Theory in Renaissance Painting* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 59-62; Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, pp. 321-45.
[284] On the tradition of chrysography, see J. Folda, 'Sacred Objects with Holy Light: Byzantine Icons with Chrysography', in D. Sullivan, E. Fisher, and S. Papaioannou (eds), *Byzantine Religious Culture: Studies in Honor of Alice-Mary Talbot* (Leiden & Boston, 2012), pp. 155-68. Also see P. Hills, *The Light of Early Renaissance Painting* (New Haven and London, 1987), pp. 25-8.

works by the other four painters' works on the walls of the Sistine chapel also include gilding. Here, gold was both applied as a highlight, as well as used to decorate the fabrics of dresses, to paint jewels and to decorate trees and precious furnishings (Figs. 27, 28, 29, 30). A key function of applying gilding to wall paintings in the Sistine chapel frescoes was to give extra lustre to the represented scenes in general. John Shearman notes that the gilding here:

> …does not merely decorate, it picks out highlights and accentuates relief and detail. And further the gold in the figural frescoes is to be seen in relation to the extensive gilding of architectural members throughout the chapel…Seen in this way the primary function of the gold is to unify, as the painted light does, the decoration and the structure; and indeed the gilding does not interrupt the painted light but reinforces it, making painted forms seems to respond to light in the same way as real ones…[And] when evening ceremonies were conducted in artificial light the reflection of candlelight from gold must have brought not only great magnificence to the whole of the chapel but also clarification to the reading of the histories.[285]

In candlelight, the gilding would have made the scene more visible for viewers from a distance and the gilded areas would have reflected the candlelight. The overall effect must have been spectacular. Given the inevitable stylistic differences between the different artists, restorers have suggested that the gilding was also used to unify the work.[286] Here, individual artistic characteristics have been played down for the sake of artistic unity in order to make it seem, at least from a distance, as if the whole work is executed by a single artist. Seen in this context, Rosselli's use of gold may not be due to his shortage of *invenzione*, but may rather relate to Rosselli's understanding of the varied ways in which gold can produce particular visual effects. Moreover, gold has been carefully integrated into the whole colour spectrum of the frescoes and serves to unify a disparate set of paintings into a unified whole that is well-suited to the setting of the candle-lit Sistine Chapel. The process of using candles and lamps to animate the

[285] Shearman, 'The Chapel of Sixtus IV', pp. 49-50.
[286] M. de Luca, 'Technique and Restoration Method', in F. Buranelli and A. Duston (eds), *The Fifteenth Century Frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. Recent Restoration of the Vatican Museums* (Vatican, 2003), p. 89.

gilding in the Sistine Chapel frescoes could also be akin to the Byzantine image theory. According to Bissera Pentcheva, the 'inspirited' (*empsychos*) icon effectively reinforced the presence and the essence of the sacred, which would then be experienced by devotees as such when they perceived that the images were 'animated' by the gilding.[287]

Aside from the impact selective gilding would have had as part of the backdrop to the rituals of the Sistine Chapel, gold in this setting would have also had alchemical meanings. According to Vasari, Rosselli was obsessed with alchemy.[288] On the basis of the association between gold and light, John Gage has read alchemical meanings in Rosselli's use of gilding in the frescoes. The subject, Moses, was widely regarded as a great alchemist during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.[289] In *De christiana religione* (1474), Marsilio Ficino identifies Moses with Hermes Trismegistus, the reputed author of the Hermetic writings on occult subjects and theology.[290]

Gage noted that in the fresco programme, the *Moses Giving the Law* and the *Sermon on the Mountain* are the images in which the most extravagant colours are used extensively. In the scene of *Moses Giving the Law* (Fig. 30), Moses turns away from on the worship of the Golden Calf. It is thus possible that Rosselli deliberately showed Moses rejecting the vulgar worship of gold in the form of a pagan statue and turning instead towards the spiritual gold of God surrounded by angels in a halo of gilded light.[291] This argument is reinforced by Rosselli's equally unusual treatment of the *Last Supper*, in which the table is laden not with food but ornamented with a single golden chalice (Fig. 31). The inclusion of a golden chalice thus appears to allude to the 'Eucharistic' symbolism of gold. In the writings of Abbot Suger, for instance, the

[287] B. Pentcheva, 'The Performative Icon', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 88 (2006), pp. 631-55; B. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park, 2010).
[288] Vasari, *Vite*, III, p. 446.
[289] J. Gage, *Colour and Culture* (London, 1993), p. 144.
[290] Ficino, *Della Religione cristiana, prima versione in lingua toscana dello stesso Ficino* (Florence, 1568), p. 112. Discussed in Gage, *Colour and Culture*, p. 144
[291] Ibid.

Eucharist and gold were archetypically linked. He believed that one worships God only through the most precious metal (gold) that receives the blood of Christ during the Eucharist.[292] Gold could not be worshipped for its own sake as of the embodiment of worldly wealth, but could instead provide intermediary access to the divine through its ornamental qualities.

The rejections of the Ovidian (and Albertian) critiques of gold by artists like Rosselli clearly has political motivations that reveal the tension between the patron and the artist. As Vasari demonstrated in the preface of his *Lives*, gold was associated with the Byzantine style, which was presented as old and teleologically incompatible with the development of the *maniera moderna*. In order to allow the case of Rosselli to fit into his overall narrative of ongoing artistic 'progress' despite his apparently old-fasioned use of gold, Vasari instead made a scapegoat of the pope by claiming that it was his 'poca intelligenza' that was to blame. For Rosselli, 'campi di colori' had to be used in order to satisfy the patron's taste according to Vasari, even if this was to be criticised in light of his emphasis on the growing independence of the artist. For Vasari, *campi di colori* is the antithesis of *invenzione* and thus anathema to his view of the changing status of the artist, defined precisely by their increasing powers of invention.

A debate over the merit or otherwise of 'campi di colori' in relation to an increasing emphasis on the significance of artistic design can also be found in the much later writings of Armenini. In this case, the artist is Giotto and the patron is a member of the fourteenth-century Florentine elite:

> Giotto was making an azure drapery on a figure he had painted for a Florentine gentleman, and started to lay in the whole drapery with blue in the presence of his patron. He then picked up the darker paints to make the shadowed folds, and began going over it with them. The Florentine begged him not to make the folds with that dark paint but to leave the drapery of one colour, for it seemed to him that he would spoil it. Giotto was outraged upon hearing this, and immediately

[292] E. Panofsky (ed., trans. and annot.), *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St Denis and its Art Treasures* (Princeton, 1979), p. 65.

> took up a knife and scraped off all the paint, telling the man in a fury that he had better leave and go to the workshops if that was what he wanted, because he was not a master in making fields of paint ('campi di colori') and that he had no equal as a painter.[293]

In this tale, Giotto (unlike Rosselli) refused to submit to the patron's taste. Similar to Vasari's anecdote, the patron is described by Armenini once again as ignorant ('ignorante') of art as demonstrated by his demand for a field of uniform colour. Apart from the *paragone* between *disegno* and *colore*, this example highlights a conflict between the new technique of monochromatic illusionistic compositions and the old-fashioned but still popular taste for precious pigments (including not just gold, but also ultramarine) and much brighter colours.

Notwithstanding the growing significance of 'landscape' or 'linear perspective' as a new artistic language deployed in backgrounds in fifteenth-century paintings, we know that some artists (at the request of their patrons) turned once again to gold grounds in devotional paintings of the Madonna and Child and the Crucifixion in the second half of the fifteenth century. For example, in Rome between 1475 and 1480, Antoniazzo Romano produced many Marian images with gold grounds, which may be linked to Sixtus IV's promotion of the cult of the Virgin Mary, including through the worship of older 'iconic' images of the Madonna. The market for Antoniazzo's paintings in an 'iconic' style could be linked to patrons with more conservative tastes, indicating that the late medieval conception of the work of art as a cult object was still prevalent in late fifteenth-century Rome, as Helmut Wohl has suggested.[294] But how should we

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[293] G. B. Armenini, *Dei veri precetti della pittura*, (Pisa 1823), bk. 3, Ch. 15, pp. 238-39: '…Giotto, il quale facendo un panno azzuro ad una figura che avea dipinta ad un gentiluomo Fiorentino, si diede a campire in presenza di quello tutto quel panno di azzuro, ed indi pigliate le ombre, per fargli poi le pieghe scure, e cominciatogli andar sopra con quelle, il Fiorentino lo cominciò a pregare, che per niun modo facesse le pieghe con quello scuro, ma che lo lasciasse così di un colore, perché gli pareva che lo guastasse; il che sentendo Giotto, tutto sdegnato, prese subito un coltello, e gli tirò via tutto il colore con esso, e poi gli disse in collera, che tosto se gli levasse dinanzi, e che andasse dai bottegai se così lo voleva, ch'egli non era mastro da far campi di colori, nemmeno era pittore da pari suoi, poichè voleva dilettarsi di quello, ch' egli ne era del tutto ignorante, e lo scacciò via.' The English translation comes from Stumpel, 'On Grounds and Backgrounds', pp. 227-8.

[294] Wohl, *The Aesthetics of Italian Renaissance Art: a Reconsideration of Style* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 125-7.

locate Romano's artistic output within traditional narratives of fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance art that focus mainly on Florence and Venice and on the notion of 'progress'? Was Rome, for instance, 'conservative' from an artistic point of view in the late fifteenth century? What we do know is that in a number of ceiling paintings produced in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century such as seen in the ceiling decorations of the *Camera degli Sposi* in Mantua (Fig. 32) and of the *Stanza della Segnatura* (Fig. 33) in the Vatican Palace, gold was extensively used. The question to be considered is whether and how the location of these paintings may have determined whether gold was or was not applied.

Roman art in the last decade of the fifteenth century entered a phase that Wohl termed the 'classical ornate style', or in Konrad Oberhuber's words, the 'International Antiquarian' or 'Alexandrine' style, with work in this style produced during the early pontificate of Alexander VI.[295] Oberhuber singled out three representative examples: Filippino Lippi's paintings in the Carafa Chapel at S. Maria sopra Minerva (1488-93); the tomb of Sixtus IV by Antonio del Pollaiuolo (1483-1493); and the fresco decorations in the Borgia Apartment by Pinturicchio and his workshop (1492-4). All these three examples, according to Oberhuber, 'share the rich decorative structure and the animated but small and compact figures in rippling or highly decorated garments surrounded by sparkling architectural or ornamental details…Figures are pressed into the plane, and the architectural and ornamental accessories are given importance nearly equal to them.'[296] This style is characterised by particular attention being paid to depicting garments and architectural and ornamental details. The material opulence of this Roman style in the late fifteenth century is very different from the Christian asceticism of earlier fifteenth-century art produced by figures like Masaccio. The rediscovery of Nero's Golden House, or the *Domus Aurea*—known during the Renaissance as the Palace of Titus, in the late 1480s, was also an influential event that

[295] For Wohl's discussion of this style, see ibid., pp. 115-52. See also K. Oberhuber, *Giulio Romano*, (Milan, 1989), p. 73.
[296] K. Oberhuber, 'Rome and the Art of the Courts in Northern Europe in the Sixteenth Century: Some Reflections', in *"Il se rendit en Italie": Etudes offertes à André Chastel* (1987), p. 72.

triggered an increased use of gold in the late fifteenth century, as well as increased interest in Roman antiquity, especially in the time of Nero and Seneca.[297]

The revival of interest in gold ground in late fifteenth-century paintings was also influenced by late antique and medieval mosaics with gilded tesserae backgrounds and the presence of gold-ground Byzantine icon in Italy, especially in Rome. In the case of mosaics, there were two approaches used to evoke this medium in late fifteenth-century paintings. One was to depict a mosaic apse in the medium of oil paints in an illusionistic manner that evoked gold through the illusionistic use of paint rather than of actual gold leaf, as seen in Giovanni Bellini's *San Giobbe Altarpiece* (Figs. 34, 35); the other was to apply gilding directly onto the ground area with an irregular grid incised into it to feign the material surface of mosaics, a practice which was quite popular in late fifteenth-century Rome, for example in the ceiling decorations of the *Stanza della Segnatura* in Vatican Palace (Fig. 33). These two approaches should be distinguished from each other because the former approach was in accordance with Alberti's view of how to evoke gold appropriately in paintings, while the latter approach appears to contradict him. The fact that both approaches to the depiction of gold co-existed in the later fifteenth century suggests that Baxandall's thesis that Renaissance art witnesses a decisive shift from material value to skill value should be reconsidered in light of some specific cases from the second half of the fifteenth century that, at first glance, appear to contradict these claims.

2.5 Mosaic Revival and the Problem of Time

[297] See J. Schulz, 'Pinturicchio and the Revival of Antiquity', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 25, No. 1/2 (Jan. – Jun., 1962), pp. 35-55. According to Nicole Dacos, the discovery of the Domus Aurea only further encouraged the taste for 'fantastical ornament', which had already been a stylistic trend in the second half of the fifteenth century in both Northern and Central Italy, see Nicole Dacos, *La Découverte de la Domus Aurea et la Formation des Grotesques à la Renaissance* (London, 1969). On the *Domus Aurea*, also see M. Bradley, 'Fool's gold. Colour, culture, innovation and madness in Nero's Golden House', *Apollo*, Vol. CLVI, no. 485 (July, 2002), pp. 35-44.

Alberti's strictures against using gold or gold ornaments failed to make an impact on an ongoing taste for scintillating decoration and colour, which had its origin in the tradition of Paleochristian mosaics. André Chastel identifies a renewed taste for mosaics between 1420 and 1430 in Florence, as seen in the artistic outputs of Ghiberti and Uccello in particular. Ironically, this was the exact moment when the old Venetian mosaic workshops of Saint Marco died out.[298] Donatello's use of gold mosaic backgrounds in the *Cantoria* belongs to this revival of a recently extinguished tradition. Lorenzo Ghiberti wrote about this tradition in the context of light.[299] In his *Third Commentary*, dated to the late 1440s and written as a response to Alberti's *Della pittura*, Ghiberti drew on medieval sources on optics such as Alhazen and lavishly praised Pietro Cavallini's fourteenth-century mosaics in Rome.[300] From a letter of 1441 written from Matteo de' Pasti to Piero di Cosimo de' Medici, we also know that Florentine painters at this time had started to use powdered gold, a technique they had learned from artists working in Padua and Venice.[301] We see the impact of this in Gentile da Fabriano's hybrid style that combined Tuscan naturalism with a Venetian/Umbrian late-gothic ornamentation that was in vogue in late fifteenth-century Italy. As Gombrich has noted in his classic study of Apollonio di Giovanni, Florentine art of the second half of the fifteenth century saw the continued influence of the International Gothic Style as filtered through Gentile da Fabriano's works.[302]

In Florence in 1490, Lorenzo de' Medici himself initiated an actual revival of mosaics. In antiquity, the golden interior was a key feature of the decoration of imperial palaces

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[298] Chastel, *Art et Humanisme a Florence au Temps de Laurent le Magnifique*, p. 159. Chastel seems to be implying that the mosaics went from Venice to Florence at this moment.

[299] For Lorenzo Ghiberti and the Renaissance aesthetics of light, see J. Gage, 'Ghiberti and Light', in J. Gage, *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (London, 1999), pp. 98-104.

[300] Ghiberti considered Pietro Cavallini as the most learned ('dottissimo') master of his time. Other laudatory words include: 'molto excellentemente fatte', 'grandissimo rilievo', 'nobilissimo maestro', 'fece istorie sonon in santa Maria in Trestevere di musaiyco molto egregiamente', see L. Ghiberti, *I commentarii*, ed. L. Bartoli (Florence, 1998), pp. 86-7.

[301] See F. Ames-Lewis, 'Matteo de' Pasti and the Use of Powdered Gold', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 28. Bd., H. 3 (1984), pp. 351-362.

[302] E. H. Gombrich, 'Apollonio di Giovanni: A Florentine Cassone Workshop Seen through the Eyes of a Humanist Poet', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 18, No. 1/2 (Jan. – Jun., 1955), pp. 16-34. Reprinted in E. H. Gombrich, *Norm and Form. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 11-28.

in Rome. It is probably in light of this imperial tradition that Constantine had the first Christian basilica on the Lateran decorated with golden mosaics. Lorenzo's programme to revive the use of mosaic was linked to his promotion of Medicean magnificence and his desire to proclaim the glories of a new *imperium*. Not only did Lorenzo commission a commemorative monument showing Giotto as the first master mosaicist (Fig. 36), but he also contracted Domenico Ghirlandaio and Gherardo di Giovanni to provide mosaic decorations for the chapel of St. Zenobius in Florence Cathedral. According to Chastel, Lorenzo's programme of renovations was intended to revive the old 'national' art of mosaics, turning Florence into a second Venice, and Tuscany into a second Rome.[303]

However, the revival of mosaics in 1490 by Ghirlandaio should not be interpreted as a romanticised throwback to the past but should be viewed as a new and 'modern' phenomenon. This is suggested, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, by Vasari himself. Although Vasari regarded the mosaics in San Marco as 'old' rather than the much more highly valued 'ancient', he praised the fact that 'Domenico [Ghirlandaio] enriched ('arricchì') the art of painting by working in mosaic with a manner more modern than any of the innumerable Tuscans who essayed it', so that 'he has deserved to be held in honour and esteem for such rich ('ricchezza') and undying benefits to art'.[304] Nonetheless, given the apparent incompatibility for Vasari between *maniera moderna* and the Byzantine style as discussed earlier, how should one interpret Vasari's comments on Domenico Ghirlandaio's revival of the art of mosaics as 'modern' instead of 'archaic'? Here, the use of the phrase 'a manner more modern' certainly indicates that Ghirlandaio's revival of mosaic can be compared with and is different from the old originals. The use of the term 'modern' suggests that Ghirlandaio's revival of gold mosaic is being done in accordance with the contemporary taste, Vasari's ultimate determiner of praise. Seen through the eyes of Vasari, the use of gold in paintings by

[303] In André Chastel's words, 'Florence could be another Venice, Tuscany another Rome'. The idea of displacement is quite interesting here. According to Chastel, the mosaic revival in the second half of the fifteenth century was originated in Florence, not Venice, see Chastel*, Art et Humanisme a Florence au Temps de Laurent le Magnifique*, pp. 158-63.
[304] Vasari, *Vite*, III, p. 496.

modern masters such as Ghirlandaio was thus not anachronistic and instead contributed to the formation of *maniera moderna*. A prime example is Ghirlandaio's *Annunciation* (Fig. 37) on the lunette above the door of the Porta della Mandorla, commissioned by the members of the Opera del Duomo of Florence on 10 July 1489.[305]

Modernity could, however, co-exist with art that transcends time itself. Vasari attributed to Ghirlandaio the saying that 'the true painting for eternity was mosaic' ('la vera pittura per la eternità essere il musaico').[306] The work Vasari was referring to is the *Annunciation* (Fig. 37) that Domenico produced with his brother David in 1491 for the tympanum of the Porta della Mandorla in Santa Maria del Fiore, the Cathedral of Florence. It is a key moment when the ancient medium of mosaic appears to have been acceptably (for Vasari) 'modernised'. In his 'Introduction' to the *Vite*, Vasari compares painting to mosaic by emphasising the 'eternal' and time-resistant aspects of the latter: 'Mosaic is the most durable painting there is; whereas ordinary painting is extinguished with time this kind of painting, in being continuously produced is reignited. And whereas painting on its own is consumed, mosaic due to is long life can almost be called eternal.'[307] Mosaic, for Vasari, is thus a medium bound up with temporality, or rather, with overcoming the negative effects of time.[308] At the same time that the medium appears to be timeless, Ghirlandaio's use in the *Annunciation* of linear perspective (including a receding paving pattern) and figures shaded and configured to suggest a convincing three-dimensionality must have made this particular mosaic seem sufficiently 'modern' to Vasari.

The earliest example of the reformulation of mosaic ground in a 'neo-classical' style may be the ceiling decoration of Andrea Mantegna's *Camera degli Sposi* (Fig. 32),

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[305] J. K. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio. Artist and Artisan* (New Haven and London, 2000), p. 281.
[306] Vasari, *Vite*, III, p. 496.
[307] Vasari, *Vite*, I, p. 148, 'E certo è che il mosaico è la più durabile pittura che sia, imperò che l'altra col tempo si spegne e questa nello stare fatta di continuo s'accende, et inoltre la pittura manca e si consuma per se medesima, ove il musaico per la sua lunghissima vita si può quasi chiamare eterno.'
[308] It should be noted that Vasari said similarly that the medium of glazed terracotta can also protect the figures from 'the injuries of time' ('ingiurie del tempo') and 'make works in clay almost eternal' ('faceva l'opere di terra quasi eterne'). See Vasari, *Vite*, III, p. 53.

painted for the Gonzaga between 1465 and 1474 in Mantua. Mantegna used paint to evoke gilded mosaic backgrounds to surround the feigned stucco work depicting eight Roman emperors, each encircled by a laurel wreath carried by a winged putto. The disks of the Roman emperors reveal Mantegna's antiquarian interest in ancient coins.[309] The intention of Mantegna was certainly to evoke Imperial Rome. The difference between Mantegna and Ghirlandaio is that the former only simulated the medium of mosaics in the painterly medium while the latter used real mosaics. Their different treatments reveal their different attitudes towards antiquity.[310] By using 'fake' mosaic backgrounds, as seen in Mantegna, an emphatic historical distance between the present and the bygone classical past was clearly demonstrated. However, employing actual mosaic grounds, as seen in Ghirlandaio, aims to resuscitate antiquity in the present. The convention of using pseudo-mosaics as the backgrounds of images was taken up again by Pinturicchio in the vault decoration of the choir of Santa Maria del Popolo, Raphael in the ceiling of the *Stanza della Segnatura* in the Vatican Palace, and Giovanni da Udine in the vault of the Villa Madama of c. 1523 in Rome.

The presence of Byzantine icons in late fifteenth-century Italy might also have played an important role in shaping the tastes of Renaissance patrons. Lorenzo de' Medici himself was a collector of portable miniature mosaic icons.[311] Such small-scale mosaic icons were a kind of courtly art form, produced in Constantinople between the middle of the twelfth and the early decades of the fourteenth centuries.[312] The majority of these small-scale works were made for private devotion. Fifteenth-century collectors' descriptions of these icons, which use words such as 'beautiful' (*pulchra*), might

[309] It has been pointed out that ancient coins are possible iconographical sources for the vault, see M. Cordaro et al. *Mantegna. La Camera degli Sposi* (Milan, 1992), p. 57. The bibliography on Mantegna is vast. But for a recent discussion on Mantegna and antiquity, see S. J. Campbell, *Andrea Mantegna. Humanist Aesthetics, Faith, and the Force of Images* (Turnhout, 2020), pp. 220-72.
[310] For a discussion of what counted as antiquity in Renaissance Italy (including not only classical statues, but Byzantine icons and mosaics), see A. Nagel and C. Wood, 'What Counted as an "Antiquity" in the Renaissance', in K. Eisenbichler (ed), *Renaissance Medievalism* (Toronto, 2009), pp. 53-74.
[311] L. Fusco and G. Corti, *Lorenzo de' Medici, Collector and Antiquarian* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 74.
[312] R. Duits, '"Una icona pulcra". The Byzantine Icons of Cardinal Pietro Barbo', in P. Jackson & G. Rebecchini, ed. *Mantova e il Rinascimento italiano* (Mantua, 2011), pp. 127-42.

indicate that the aesthetic value of these icons was as important as their antiquity.[313] For instance, the sculpted golden revetment of a miniature mosaic of the Virgin and Child was described as 'very beautiful' ('pulcerimus').[314] What did 'pulchra' mean in this context? It seems to be related to the notion of 'beauty' as we have seen in the contract for the *Rucellai Madonna* painted by Duccio (1255-1318) in c. 1285. In any case, the word 'pulchra' indicates that the practice of collecting miniature icons in the fifteenth century is not only derived from a fascination with the antiquarian past, but also a contemporary appreciation of both the precious materials used to produce these objects and artistry involved in reviving the lost technique of making them.[315]

In the Giotto monument commissioned under the direction of Lorenzo de' Medici and completed by Benedetto da Maiano, the hand of the master, holding a mosaic tessera, is suspended above the gold ground of an unfinished mosaic icon (Fig. 36). When celebrating Giotto's achievements, the fourteenth-century writer Boccaccio had claimed that Giotto's concept of art was based on restraint and simplicity, which satisfies the eyes of the learned, as opposed to the lavishness of colour and the glittering of gold, which appeals to the ignorant.[316] This is a stance very much in accord with the Observant branch of the Franciscan ideology of poverty if not the Conventual which embraces material richness.[317] By the time Benedetto's portrait was produced in the late fifteenth century, however, the link between Giotto's art and the original Franciscan ideology of poverty seems to have disappeared, at least as far as avoiding the use of gold was concerned.

[313] Ibid., p. 136.
[314] Ibid.
[315] Besides 'beautiful', words such as 'very coarse', or 'of a good mosaic-work' was used to describe the artistry and the material qualities of these miniature mosaics, see Ibid.
[316] For Boccaccio's reference to Giotto, see Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. V. Branca (Florence, 1976), p. 417.
[317] About the increasing division between these two branches of the Franciscan order in the second half of the fifteenth century, see G. A. Johnson, 'Approaching the Altar: Donatello's Sculpture in the Santo', *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (1999), pp. 642-53.

Giotto's authorship is the focus, but at the same time questioned in this monument, because he is represented as the producer of a supposedly 'authorless' image, namely, an icon of Christ on a gold ground, or the so-called Mandylion. As Nagel convincingly argues, here Giotto 'did not invent the image before him; instead, he will expertly patch the remaining tesserae in, and thus ensure the faithful transmission of the original and authorless *Christian* imago.'[318] Nagel also notes the contradiction here between the 'work of art as the invention of the artist' and 'the work of art as a mode of cultural transmission'.[319] On the one hand, Giotto is an innovator of naturalism, as suggested by Poliziano's Latin inscription beneath the tondo, which begins: ''I AM HE THROUGH WHOM PAINTING, DEAD, RETURNED TO LIFE'. On the other hand, he is presented as an authorless image of the Holy Face that refers to the Early Christian tradition, a reference made obvious, even from a distance, by the use of a gold mosaic ground around the figure. Using a gold-ground mosaic in this case presents, in Nagel's words, 'an emergent notion of artistic authorship [that] frames and defines a prior model of image-making against which it defines itself.'[320] These dynamic tensions between past and present are also evident in other late fifteenth-century gold ground images, as will be discussed in the following examples.

Indeed, this dual model of authorial performance and authorless substitution can be readjusted in explaining other Renaissance examples. For instance, I believe the tension between artistic and non-artistic concerns in using gold ground is always there. In what follows, I consider the meaning of the use of gold accumulating in the papal apartment of Alexander VI in relation to non-artistic concerns such as the pope's personal taste. The sheer quantity of gold used in the Room of Liberal Arts is striking. It is also in the same room in which the artist left his signature, which implies some compatibility in the artist's mind between gold ground paintings and the ideas of authorship that were emerging in Italy in this period.

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[318] A. Nagel, 'Authorship and Image-Making in the Monument to Giotto in Florence Cathedral', in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 53/54 (2008), p. 150.
[319] Ibid., p. 151.
[320] Ibid.

2.6 Magnificence and Gold in the Borgia Apartment

Pinturicchio's work in the Room of Liberal Arts in the Borgia Apartment in the Vatican (Fig. 21) is a key example of the continuation and, at the same time, the transformation of an Umbrian tradition of gold ground paintings in the late fifteenth century. Bernardino di Betto, or Pinturicchio as he was nicknamed, was the most celebrated painter in Rome during the last two decades of the fifteenth century, as confirmed by his many prestigious commissions including the Borgia Apartment. His attitude to painting, however, appears antithetical to the ideals promoted by his contemporary, Leonardo. By the turn of the sixteenth century, well before Vasari, Leonardo had already articulated a low opinion of painters who, 'from their lack of science have to live by the beauty (*bellezza*) of blue and gold', while contending that 'a subject can be dressed in ugly colours and still astound those who contemplate it, because of the illusion of relief'.[321]

Pinturicchio, in the Borgia Apartment (1492-4), applied extensive amounts of gilded *pastiglia* to decorate the interior space, significantly more than in the frescoes either on the walls of the Sistine Chapel or in the Niccoline Chapel, both also in the Vatican.[322] He used gilded *pastiglia* in a variety of contexts including on gilded objects and details raised in relief and golden wax disks made of *pastiglia* was also used to create extensive areas of gold ground that serve as a sky-like background.

In the Borgia Apartment, the extensive use of gold, apart from adhering to the long-standing Roman convention of using gold in frescoes as seen in the Niccoline Chapel, must have also allowed Alexander VI to show off his exceptional wealth. The years of

[321] McMahon, I, p. 63. The passage where Leonardo mocked 'una cierta gienerazione di pittori' who live on the beauty of precious materials without knowing the science of art can be found in Richter, I, para. no. 501.

[322] The Sistine Chapel's use of gold has been discussed above. For the use of gilding in the Niccoline Chapel, see F. Buranelli, *Fra Angelico. La Chapelle Niccoline du Vatican. Histoire et Restauration*, trans. Denis-Armand Canal (Paris, 2003), p. 120.

Alexander VI's papacy witnessed the restoration and commission of many buildings and works of art.[323] Even before he became the pope, Rodrigo Borgia was thought to possess, according to Jacopo Gherardi da Volterra, 'more gold and riches of every kind than all the other cardinals combined, excepting only d'Estouteville', the latter being the cardinal of Rouen.[324] Although dated in many respects, Ludwig von Pastor's description of Rome emphasises the worldly lives led by Borgia (who had been made a cardinal in 1456, before being elected to the papacy in 1492) and many other cardinals:

> Surrounded in their splendid palaces, with all the most refined luxury of a highly-developed civilization, these Cardinals lived the lives of secular princes, and seemed to regard their ecclesiastical garb simply as one of the adornments of their rank. They hunted, gambled, gave sumptuous banquets and entertainments, joined in all the rollicking merriment of the carnival-tide, and allowed themselves the utmost licence in morals; this was specially the case with Rodrigo Borgia.[325]

Long before von Pastor's romanticised evocations of life in this period, Aeneas Silvius Bartholomeus Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II, was already highlighting many of the same points in his description of Borgia's life as a cardinal:

> All the cardinals who lived along the route had decorated their houses magnificently…All were far outstripped in expenses, effort and cleverness by Rodrigo, the vice-chancellor. His very high and ample palace, which he had built on the site of the ancient mint, was covered with rich and wonderful tapestries. Besides this he had raised a lofty canopy from which were suspended many and various marvels. He had decorated not only his own house but those nearby, so that the square all about them seemed a kind of Paradise full of sweet songs and sounds; and the house gleaming with gold seemed as it is believed Nero's house was.[326]

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[323] On a recent analysis of Alexander VI's patronage, see F. V. G. Llombart, 'Alessandro a Roma: cultura e committenza artistica', in C. Alfano and F. V. Garin Llombart, ed. *I Borgia* (Rome, 2002), pp. 119-33.
[324] L. von Pastor, *History of the Popes* (London, 1901), Vol. V, p. 380. About the life of Alexander VI, see also O. Ferrara, *The Borgia Pope. Alexander the Sixth*, trans. F. J. Sheed (London, 1942).
[325] Pastor, *History of the Popes*, V, p. 279.
[326] E. S. Piccolomini, *The Commentaries*, trans. F. A. Gragg, 2 vols (Northampton, 1936-7), i, pp. 535-536. E. S. Piccolomini, *I commentarii*, ed. L. Totaro, 2 vols (Milan 1984), ii, pp. 1538, 1540: 'Cardinales qui eo itinere habitabant cuncti suas domos mirifice appararunt…At omnium sumptus atque conatus et omnium ingenia longe superavit Rodericus Vicecancellarius, qui aedes suas, quas in solo Veteris Monetae altissimas et amplissimas construxit, divitibus et admirabilibus pannis operuit. Tum coelum sublime erexit, in quo multa et varia suspendit mirabilia; nec suas tantum domos, sed vicinas etiam adornavit, ita ut platea circunducta Paradisus quaedam videretur, suavibus plena sonis et cantibus; seu

It is important to note that Piccolomini compared Borgia's palace, constructed in the early 1460s, with Nero's Domus Aurea even though the latter had not yet been discovered at that time. Piccolomini must instead have relied on literary descriptions of the Domus Aurea in Suetonius' Nero (no. 31), or Tacitus' Annals (15.42). What the interior of Borgia's palace, now called the Palazzo Sforza-Cesarini, was like at that time can be deduced from another eyewitness, Cardinal Ascanio Sforza:

> The whole palace was splendidly decorated. In the great entrance-hall the walls were covered with hangings representing various historical events. A smaller room opened into this, also hung with exquisite Gobelin tapestry. The carpets on the floor were selected to harmonise with the rest of the furniture, of which the most prominent piece was a sumptuous state-couch upholstered in red satin, with a canopy over it. This room also contained the Cardinal's credenza, a chest surmounted by a slab, on which was ranged for exhibition an immense quantity of table plate and drinking vessels in gold and silver, while the lower part was a marvel of exquisitely finished work. This apartment was flanked by two others, one of which was hung with satin and carpet, the divan in it being of Alexandrian velvet; while in the other, still more splendid, the couch was covered with gold brocade and magnificently decorated.

The Borgia Apartment in the Vatican seems to evoke the pope's former lavish residence as a cardinal, which as noted above had been compared by Piccolomini with Domus Aurea.[327] The sumptuous interior of Cardinal Borgia's palace also suggests a connection with notions of ducal magnificence prevalent in Northern Europe in this period. In her recent book *Rethinking the Renaissance: Burgundian Arts Across Europe*, Marina Belozerskaya has drawn attention to the significance and impact of Burgundian magnificence in fifteenth-century Italy.[328] Above all, sumptuous possessions and displays were symbols of exclusivity. Belozerskaya recounts now the entry of Philip

plurimo fulgens auro domus sicut Neronis fuisse perhibetur.'

[327] On Pinturicchio's knowledge of the decorations inside the Domus Aurea before it rediscovered in1479, see C. La Malfa, 'The Chapel of San Girolamo in Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. New Evidence for the Discovery of the Domus Aurea', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 63 (2000), pp. 269-70.

[328] See M. Belozerskaya, *Rethinking the Renaissance: Burgundian Arts Across Europe* (Cambridge, 2002).

the Good into Paris in 1461 attracted crowds of citizens simply to admire the marvels he displayed. Philip even deliberately threw open the doors of his *hôtel* to the public. Rather than an emphasis on artistic innovation, Burgundian patronage focused on 'conjunction of the excellence of materials with the best craftsmanship [in order to have] achieved political, religious, and social aims most effectively.'[329] Moreover, the 'generation and possession of magnificently wrought creations carried social or devotional meanings before the aesthetic ones. In this system of signification, the owner of a work mattered more than the artisan who labored to put into physical form the intended ideas of a lofty patron'.[330]

Belozerskaya's interpretation of the relationship between patronage and the choice of lavish materials in a Burgundian context also applies, at least in part, to the renewed interest in material splendour in late fifteenth-century Italian art, especially the lavish use of gold at the papal court under Alexander VI. Aside from producing materially splendid works that demonstrated the patron's magnificence, both Alexander VI and his artists could have also justified the material splendour as a suitable offering to God, especially within the context of a papal apartment. This is self-consciously manifested in another scene in the Borgia Apartment, the *Resurrection* (Fig. 38) also by Pinturicchio, where we see that the artist has used gold to represent both the mandorla of Christ and to decorate the pope's cope. Material and immaterial interpretations of gold coexisted in Pinturicchio's frescoes by design.

However, from Vasari's later perspective, Pinturicchio's elaborate decorative scheme and extensive use of gold were inappropriate and contradicted both the rules of linear perspective and later Counter-Reformation views on art and decorum:

> Bernardino was much given to making gilt ornaments in relief ['ornamenti di rilievo messi d'oro'] for his pictures, to satisfy people who had little understanding of his art with the more showy lustre and view ['maggior lustro e

[329] Ibid., p. 79.
[330] Ibid., p. 87.

> veduta'] that this gave them, which is a most barbarous thing in painting. Having then executed a story of S. Catherine in the said apartments [i.e. the Borgia Apartment], he depicted the arches of Rome in relief and the figures in painting, insomuch that, the figures being in the foreground and the buildings in the background, the things that should recede stand out more prominently than those that should strike the eye as the larger—a very grave heresy in our art ['eresia grandissima nella nostra arte'].[331]

Like his comments on Cosimo Rosselli's work in the Sistine Chapel, Vasari attributes Pinturicchio's old-fashioned use of gold to his patron's lack of understanding of art. In addition, Pinturicchio's use of gilded *pastiglia* resulted in the final pictorial effect confusing the proportional relationships between proximity and distance, foreground and background. In other words, the painting is anti-perspectival, because it does not give the beholder a clearly and logically-prescribed viewpoint. The phrase 'a very grave heresy in our art' indicates that, for Vasari, what Pinturicchio had done was *outside* what he defined as the norm of Florentine art. Of course, one explanation for the differences Vasari perceived between such artists may be linked to regional differences. As a Florentine, Vasari would by definition have been much less familiar with Roman artistic traditions and tastes to which such commissions would have responded.

The specific painting Vasari discussed in this passage was the *Disputà of Saint Catherine* (Fig. 39). This otherwise flat painted fresco included a three-dimensional gilded relief arch at its centre, which represents the triumphal arch of Constantine. In this scene, time is layered in symbolism of the golden Arch of Constantine. It refers back to an ancient Roman past and forwards to the contemporary present. N. Randolph Parks argues that this arch embodies a series of typological meanings that lie beyond the narrative featured in the painted *historia*. This narrative tells of the battle of the Milvian Bridge, which was where Constantine had defeated the anti-Christian armies

[331] Vasari, *Vite*, Vol. III, pp. 574-5, 'Usò molto fare alle figure dipinte ornamenti di rilievo messi d'oro—per contentare le persone che poco di quella arte intendevano—, acciò avessono maggior lustro e veduta, il che è cosa goffissima nella pittura. Avendo dunque fatto in dette stanza una storia di S. Caterina, figurò gl'archi di Roma di rilievo e le figure dipinte di modo che, essendo inanzi le figure e dietro i casamenti, vengono più inanzi le cose che diminuiscono che quelle che secondo l'occhio crescono: eresia grandissima nella nostra arte.'

of Maxentius, between 312 and 313. But the scene also alludes to a recent victory over the Muslims in Spain and the hope that the Church would, in the very near future, conclusively defeat of the Turks during the period of Alexander VI's pontificate.[332] Pinturicchio's use of *pastiglia* to highlight the triumphal arch has a rhetorical function. According to Quintilian, 'amplification, which gives an intimation of more than has been expressed, that is, *emphasis*, and which allows us to go beyond and exceed reality'.[333] I would suggest that Pinturicchio's gilded triumphal arch could be an evocation of the tradition of gold ground. Braunfels, in an article on the meaning of gold grounds, has suggested the symbolic function of gold as a metaphor of divine splendour and beauty in medieval painting was replaced by the symbolic Roman triumphal arches in Renaissance art.[334] In light of this suggestion, one should consider whether the gilded Roman triumphal arch in the Borgia Apartment, by combining both symbols in three-dimensional gold relief, may refer to a long-standing tradition of illustrating Roman emperors fighting for Christianity against the so-called barbarians.

The gilding in the arch is also formally echoed in the elaborate gilded throne on the left of the composition and the use of gilded reliefs in the Ottoman figure on the horse on the far right. To achieve this typological reading that defies linear time, the artist (presumably in consultation with the patron) separates out the sacred time from the profane in the depicted scene by using the gilded *rilievo* in the triumphal arch, the throne of Maxentius, and one of the soldiers of his army. The beholder's eye is encouraged to shuttle from the painted surface to the protrusive *pastiglia* and back again, and in the process ground and figure begin to resemble one another. This dynamic relationship between the naturalistic painted scene that functions like an Albertian window that renders the surface transparent and the gilded reliefs that draw attention to the depiction's materiality facilitates a Christian interpretation of the gilded arch, which

[332] N. R. Parks, 'On the Meaning of Pinturicchio's *Sala dei Santi*', in *Art History*, vol. 2, issue 3 (September, 1979), pp. 291-317.
[333] Quintilian, *Institues of Oratory*, Book IX, ch. 2.
[334] Braunfels, 'Nimbus und Goldgrund', pp. 25-6.

is that Constantine, the uncle of St Catherine, will defeat and bring the heathen Maxentius to death in the end, through the help of divine aid as symbolised in the gold.

2.7 Gold Ground, Light and Heaven in the Room of Liberal Arts

Secular subjects jostle for space in the *Sala delle Arti Liberali*, which is located in the Borgia apartment beside the *cubiculum* (the Pope's bedroom) and between the *Sala dei Santi* and the *Sala del Credo.* Vasari uses the phrase 'istorie dell'Arti liberali', which implies a narrative with a secular subject, so we might call these images, allegories. Here we find some of the most interesting examples of Pinturicchio's use of golden *pastiglia* in the backgrounds of the wall paintings in the Borgia Apartment's Sala delle Arti Liberali, or the *Room of the Liberal Arts* (Figs. 40, 41, 42). These paintings include figures of Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy, Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric depicted on the lunettes on the walls of the room. The frescoes were executed by Pinturicchio and members of his workshop, including Pastura and Tiberio d'Assisi.[335] Pinturicchio put his own signature under the throne of the figure of Rhetoric, thus emphasising the particular significance of this room within the Borgia Apartment as a whole. The backgrounds are gold skies.

There are a number of theories about the gold skies which I seek to challenge. If a landscape background can provide a particularly appropriate setting for a narrative subject (as will be discussed in Chapter Three), then the use of gold ground, or more specifically, a golden sky background, would have reinforced the allegorical nature of the images in the Room of the Liberal Arts. Like the use of gold in the *Disputà of Saint Catherine*, gold here can be seen as elevating the personifications of the Liberal Arts out of the profane time and eternalising them. But I would like to propose a new reading of the meaning of the gold grounds in the Room of the Liberal Arts. Iris Wenderholm

[335] For the most updated information about the authorship, see https://m.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani-mobile/en/collezioni/musei/appartamento-borgia/appartamento-borgia.html.

considers in her important article, 'Himmel und Goldgrund' ('Sky and Gold Ground'), two competing ways of representing the sky during the Renaissance: either by using the convention of gold ground or by 'domesticating' it (in her words) by using the paint to create an illusionistic mimesis.[336] Wenderholm considers the former as anachronistic in the Renaissance period. In the Borgia Apartment, the re-use of gold grounds to depict skies seems not anachronistic but rather contemporaneous with a continuing tradition of using gold in paintings as we have discussed earlier. There are, indeed, two models representing the sky in Alexander VI's Borgia Apartment: one painted, the other gilded. However, the particular case in the Borgia Apartment is that gold grounds have been perfectly incorporated with landscape views and accommodated to perspectival naturalism, as we will see below. Instead, I propose that these two models, the symbolic and the mimetic, are intertwined to evoke both the materiality and immateriality of the gold ground in the Room of Liberal Arts.

A second theory promulgated by Shelton maintains that gold has no symbolic meaning when it is used in an area of sky. Rather, she claims that such depictions are transitional moments in the historical development of backgrounds when gold grounds had not yet been completely replaced by landscape backgrounds.[337] However, in the Room of the Liberal Arts the skies are all gilded above landscape backgrounds aiming to be convincingly naturalistic. This strongly suggests that golden skies may have had specific meanings and functions for both the pope and his intended audience in this particular case. Although there is no surviving document describing the function of the room, it is generally assumed that it served both as the *studiolo* of Alexander VI and as the site for the ecclesiastical tribunal of the papal court.[338]

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[336] I. Wenderholm, 'Himmel und Goldgrund: Konkurrierende Systeme in der Malerei um 1500', in Joris van Gastel et al. (eds), *Paragone als Mitstreit* (Berlin, 2013), pp. 119-139.
[337] Shelton, 'Gold in Altarpiece of the Early Italian Renaissance', p. 133.
[338] For a discussion of the functions of this room, see E. B. Kelley, *A Papal Hall of State: Ceremony and Multifunctionality in the Borgia Apartment* (unpublished MA thesis, University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2014), pp. 52-6.

Looking more closely at the backgrounds, one sees that they include in the lower zones depictions of the countryside, which stretches out as far as the eye can see behind the thrones. These are sometimes sterile and barren like a desert, at other times fertile with trees and every kind of vegetation, populated and animated by churches and turreted villages (Figs. 40, 41). The gold ground in the sky above these scenes has been produced through the extensive use of protruding spherical wax disks—or in Bellori's words, *bollette*, as will be discussed below (see Fig. 42). The trees rooted in the lower landscapes sometimes extend upwards so that they end up being painted directly on top of the gold ground, as seen in the scene of the figure of Rhetoric, thus blending together illusionistic painting with an anti-illusionistic gold ground (Fig. 41).

This combination of naturalistic, receding landscapes seen as if through a transparent window and anti-naturalistic gold grounds, which quite literally bulge forward to block any sense of the viewer seeing-through, creates a striking contrast. At the same time, the convex gilded surfaces of the skies would have reflected the ambient light to maximum effect. When seen by candlelight, they would have recalled Byzantine-medieval associations of gold with light itself, thereby imbuing the sky with a kind of symbolic naturalism. There is a tension between the painted landscapes in the lower sections that appear to push deep into space, as if seen through a window, and the gold disks that make up the sky, evoking dematerialising light itself which literally protrudes into the physical space.

The framing elements of the compositions engender a similar tension since a kind of 'looking-through' is evoked by the presence of a ledge along the upper part of the lunettes that serves as a window frame to direct the eye into the fictional space of the image (Fig. 41). But as was the case with the *trompe-l'oeil* landscapes in the lower zones beneath the seven scenes of Liberal Arts in an Albertian mode, the gilded sky in the background of each scene (or *historia*) instead emphasises the materiality of the surface itself. The relief effect of the protruding gold disk that makes up the ground gives a kind of thickness and texture to the sky—and to light—itself. The seeming

tension between the gold ground and the Albertian illusionism is perhaps most clearly seen in the scene of *La Dialettica* ('The Dialectic'). The gold ground, in its normative sense as an actual material ground, has been transformed into a gold background, given that the gilded surface appears *behind* the architectural throne, which is *behind* the framing ledge (Fig. 43).

Indeed, one visual effect of the gold ground is to push the enthroned Seven Liberal Arts and their entourages forward into the viewer's own space, especially if seen by candlelight. This evokes Otto Demus' notion of the 'spatial icon' in Byzantine art:

> There is no space behind the 'picture-plane' of these mosaics. But there is space, the physical space enclosed by the niche, in front; and this space is included in the picture. The image is not separated from the beholder…[I]t opens into the real space in front, where the beholder lives and moves.[339]

The icon here is understood as spilling out of its frame and entering the viewer's own space. Demus further emphasises the material presence of light itself in these mosaic decorations, a feature also seen in Pinturicchio's paintings:

> …[the Byzantine decorator] never represented or depicted light as coming from a distinct source, but used real light in the icons and allowed for its effects in the space between the picture and the beholder's eye.[340]

By situating Pinturicchio's most original use of golden *pastiglia* within a typological lineage, we may gain insight into the meanings of his choice which reveal how it may have originally been intended to be viewed. I would now like to evaluate some of the sources for Pinturicchio's use of golden *pastiglia* in the Room of the Liberal Arts and consider to what extent these influenced later paintings. While working with Perugino on the Sistine chapel frescoes, Pinturicchio would have first experienced using gold extensively in frescoes in a papal context. These frescoes, however, did not use

[339] O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (London, 1948), p. 13.
[340] Ibid., p. 35.

protruding gold disks. A possible source for this particular feature of Pinturicchio's work, aside from the Domus Aurea, is likely to be Filippo Lippi's Spoleto *Coronation*, in which the artist first used a golden disk ornamentally to denote the sun high up in the sky behind the Virgin Marry (Fig. 44). In the scene of *St Catherine's Disputation*, Pinturicchio similarly used gilded *pastiglia* to represent the sun and its luminosity to the left of the ancient triumphal arch (Fig. 39). This combination of naturalistically-painted landscape with golden sky may have been deliberately evoked self-consciously in the lunettes of the Room of the Liberal Arts in the Borgia Apartment as a kind of visual reminder of works like Lippi's *Coronation*, which in turn recalled even earlier religious images and icons with gold backgrounds.

Sabine Poeschel has implied that the gold backgrounds in the Room of the Liberal Arts were intended to complement the devotional iconography of the Borgia Apartment as a whole.[341] For instance, the personifications of the seven Liberal Arts are represented in poses commonly associated with images of the Virgin Mary enthroned beneath a baldachin (Fig. 45). The motif of the baldachin in the *Arithmetic*, for example, can also be seen in works like Giovan Battista Caporali's *Pala di san Girolamo* of 1510 (Fig. 46). However, Poeschel's position is untenable. As well as this particular room's apparently secular title, gold ground is not even used in the Room of the Saints which is the most sacred room in the whole Apartment. Instead, I believe that the use of gold ground in the Room of the Liberal Arts had personal significance for the pope himself.

To find visual evidence for the connection between the gold ground and the pope's personal interest in the Room of Liberal Arts itself, one need only look up. Fritz Saxl has pointed out that the pope was depicted as a child of the sun in the iconography of the overall pictorial programme.[342] In the ceiling above, the pope's coat of arms is depicted with wavery sun rays emanating from a laurel garland around within an

[341] S. Poeschel, *Alexander Maximus Das Bildprogramm des Appartamento Borgia im Vatikan* (Weimar, 1999), p. 185.
[342] For Alexander VI as the child of sun, see F. Saxl, 'Appartamento Borgia', in *Lectures* (London, 1957), pp. 178-9.

octagon (Fig. 47). In the flanking two hexagonal blue fields, the light imagery is also eminently evident. In the double crown of Aragon, an emblem of the Borgias family as descendants of the royal line of Aragon by marriage, the rays emanate downward from the lower crown. In the blue field, there are also depictions of tiny light *species* with three long tails, looking like many meteors shot across the sky (Fig. 48).

Given this sun-light symbolism, it seems highly plausible that the gold grounds in the lunettes are simply a continuation of this iconography, which the rays of light as if emanating from above, as if from the pope himself via his heraldic imagery or presence. It is also important to note that Marsilio Ficino published both his treatises *De Sole* and *De lumine* in 1493 at the time when Pinturicchio was working on the frescoes in the Borgia Apartment, although we have no evidence that Ficino's Neoplatonism could have directly contributed to the iconography of the gold grounds in the room.[343] As noted by Leopold Ettlinger, Martianus Capella is a direct source for the iconography of the Room of Liberal Arts, so it is reasonable to propose that the golden sphere that locates the seven Liberal Arts should be the Empyrean, or, in Martianus Capella's words, 'an empyrean realm of pure understanding':[344]

> From there they rose with great effort one and a half tones; in that distance they reached the globe of the celestial sphere itself and the periphery studded with stars…Philology herself leaped down from the palanquin and saw enormous fields of light ('immensos luminis campos'), the springtime of heavenly peace ('aetheriaeque tranquillitatis verna')…she was aware that the god who was the father of such a work and so great a system had withdrawn even from the very acquaintance of the gods, for she knew that he had passed beyond the felicity that is itself beyond this world, and he rejoiced in an empyrean realm of pure understanding.[345]

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[343] For how Alexander VI could be receptive of Ficino's ideas more general, see R. Gill, *Pinturicchio's Frescoes in the Sala dei Santi in the Vatican Palace: Authorship and a New Iconological Interpretation of the 'Egyptian' Theme* (unpublished PhD thesis, Birmingham City University, 2015), p. 124.

[344] M. Capella, *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*, trans. W. H. Sthal et al (New York, 1977), Vol. II. *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury* p. 61. For Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae* as a model for the Sala della Arti Liberali in the Appartamento Borgia, see L. D. Ettlinger, 'Pollaiuolo's Tomb of Pope Sixtus IV', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1953, Vol. 16, No. ¾ (1953), p. 251.

[345] *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*, II, pp. 60-1.

Whilst keywords such as 'fields of light' and 'springtime' could refer to the hybrid combination of gold grounds and landscapes, this interpretation begs the question of how to reconcile the explicit immateriality of the Empyrean with the materiality of gold ground. According to Bruno Nardi, the concept of the Empyrean had its roots in Eastern and Near Eastern identifications of the conscious essential principle of the universe with light and fire.[346] These ideas were later assimilated into the Neoplatonic doctrine that the One, identified with the principle of light, radiates from itself as *nous* (the 'Intellectual-Principle' or 'Intelligence'), in the same way that the sun radiates light. As Nardi emphasises, the supernatural light links the eternal to the temporal, the realm of the intellect to the realm of the senses.[347]

In formal terms, we observe that gold grounds were not used in isolation in the Room of the Liberal Arts. Instead, there is dialectical relationship between the gilded sky grounds, the clothes of honour, the landscapes, and the elaborate architectural settings. On the one hand, the meaning of the sky as an immaterial empyrean is suggested by the luminosity and the metaphysical superstructure of the gold ground; simultaneously, the luxurious cloth of honour in the foreground points to the materiality of the gold ground as opaque matter.

Using gold grounds in the Room of the Liberal Arts to evoke the Neoplatonic iconography of the Empyrean characterises the paradox of the gold ground as being simultaneously material and immaterial in the same moment. A similar paradox can be seen in the pope's own identity as being both a humanist and a Christian servant of God. Alexander VI was known not only as an expert on scripture but also a humanist, a combination nurtured through his role as an ecclesiastical lawyer before his election to the papacy.[348] According to Adriana Capriotti's interpretation, the portraits in the

[346] B. Nardi, 'La Dottrina dell'Empireo nella sua Genesi Storica e nel Pensiero Dantesco', in B. Nardi, *Saggi di Filosofia Dantesca* (Florence, 1967), pp. 167-214.
[347] Ibid.
[348] On the life of Alexander VI, see A. H. Mathew, *The Life and Times of Rodrigo Borgia, Pope*

Room of the Liberal Arts include humanists like Pico delle Mirandola. I would suggest that Alexander VI could have had access to the Neoplatonic theory of light through Pico, Ficino's younger contemporary. By including such images in his *studiolo*, Alexander VI sought to be identified himself as a humanist among other humanists.[349]

2.8 Heavenly Vision and the Subject of Gold after Pinturicchio

In the early sixteenth century, the technique used for the gold grounds in the Room of the Liberal Arts began to be used to evoke Byzantine apses decorated with golden mosaics. This is seen in the most direct offspring of Pinturicchio's golden spherical *pastiglia*: Raphael's golden dome background in the *Disputa* in the Vatican (Fig. 49). Raphael seems to have appropriated Pinturicchio's idea to use gilded raised-wax *pastiglia* and applied it in the upper part of the *Disputa*.[350] According to the Seicento critic Bellori, Raphael:

> 'followed…the old custom ('il vecchio costume') of touching the splendours of Saints, clothes, ornaments with gold in order to give lustre to colours and to enrich the *istoria*, as one can see in the sphere of light ('sfera di luce') that surrounds the Christ, in which, in addition to the field of pure gold ('il campo d'oro puro'), are rays pointed with golden bubbles ('bollette') so that the radiance might stand out ('spicasse') better'.[351]

By referring to 'the old custom', Bellori must have had the use of gold by artists like Fra Angelico, Cosimo Rosselli and Pinturicchio in mind, although it was only the latter

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Alexander VI (London, 1912).

[349] A. Capriotti, 'Umanisti nell'appartamento Borgia: Appunti per la sala delle arti liberali', *Strenna Romanisti* (1990), pp. 73-88.

[350] Redig de Campos first pointed out the potential link between Raphael and Pinturicchio, see D. R. de Campos, *Raphael in the Stanze*, trans. John Guthrie (Milan, 1973), pp. 11-2; Samuel Y. Edgerton has also noted this possible link, see S. Y. Edgerton, *The Heritage of Giotto's Geometry. Art and Science on the Eve of the Scientific Revolution* (Ithaca & London, 1991), p. 217. Edgerton interprets the tiny gilded bubbles as signifying the corpuscular essence of divine substance, something of Baconian *species* or Democritus' 'atoms'.

[351] Translation is mine. See G. P. Bellori, *Descrizzione delle imagini dipinte da Raffaello* (Rome, MDCXCV), pp. 13-4: 'Seguitò egli ancora il vecchio costume di toccar d'oro gli splendori de'Sainti, gl'habiti, gli ornamenti per dar lustro à i colori, & arrichirne l'istoria, come si vede nella sfera di luce che circonda Cristo, nella quale, oltre il campo d'oro puro, accioche meglio spicasse il fulgore, sono puntati li raggi con bollette dorate'.

who used the *pastiglia* technique that Raphael also adopted. Of course, seen through the eyes of Bellori, Raphael would have seemed a bit old-fashioned by adhering to such aspects of a late fifteenth-century style. However, unlike Pinturicchio, Raphael did not use a 'campo d'oro', or gold ground, in the *Disputa*. Rather, he used *pastiglie* to depict a golden Byzantine apse, even though Bellori mistakenly appears to have assumed that Raphael had used a more general gold ground more generally.[352]

Two further examples in which a Byzantine golden apse was revived are Giovanni Bellini's *San Giobbe Altarpiece* of 1487 and the *San Zaccaria Altarpiece* dated 1505. In his *San Giobbe Altarpiece* (Fig. 34), Bellini refers back to the Byzantine tradition of golden mosaic semi-domes, evoking in particular the ducal chapel of San Marco.[353] It has also been suggested by Gervase Rosser that Giovanni Bellini's golden conch could have been directly inspired by Antonello da Messina's gold ground in his *San Gregoria Polyptych* of 1473 (Fig. 50).[354] By referring to the Byzantine *Madonna della Ciambretta* in the Sicilian town of Messina, the use of gold ground in Antonello da Messina's *San Gregorio Polyptych*, according to Rosser, indicates that 'the development of new forms of altarpiece in this period was rooted in a keen awareness of older historical models and cultural prototypes'.[355] However, Bellini further developed Antonello's pictorial idea in his own altarpiece. Rather than using real gold leaf, Bellini used oil paint to represent the shimmering quality of the golden mosaic apse, thus following Alberti's advice to represent gold through colours. In contrast, Pinturicchio had evoked the medium of mosaics by applying the protruding gilded *pastiglia*, which had much more of the physical qualities also seen in the individual

[352] For Raphael's geometrization of the heavenly space in his *Disputa*, see in particular S. Edgerton, *The Heritage of Giotto's Geometry: Art and Science on the Eve of the Scientific Revolution* (Ithaca and London, 1991), pp. 193-222.
[353] For the typological link between the church interior of the *San Giobbe Altarpiece* and the ducal chapel in San Marco, see R. Goffen, 'Bellini, S. Giobbe and Altar Egos', *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 7, No. 14 (1986), pp. 57-70.
[354] G. Rosser, 'Antonello da Messina, the devotional image, and artistic change in the Renaissance', in M. W. Kwakkelstein and B. Talvacchia (eds), *Around Antonello da Messina. Reintegrating Quattrocento Culture* (Florence, 2014), p. 114.
[355] Ibid.

tesserae of mosaics which likewise protrude at least somewhat into the viewer's own space.

A new interest in finding ways to represent heaven may be a key reason for the re-use of gold grounds in late fifteenth-century Italian paintings. Fra Filippo Lippi's *Coronation* (Fig. 44), painted between 1467 and 1469, is an early example of this trend.[356] Another prominent example is Botticelli's *Coronation of the Virgin* (Fig. 51). Significantly, this painting, which is dated 1489-1490 and is now in the Uffizi Gallery, was originally commissioned by the guild of goldsmiths for the newly rebuilt chapel of their patron Sant'Eligio in the convent of San Marco in Florence. The goldsmiths were a branch of the Arte di Por Santa Maria (later known as the Arte della Seta), which from 1427 had been the guild responsible for the fabric and adornment of San Marco. In Florence, the guild of goldsmiths may well have requested a large quantity of gold to be used in Botticelli's *Coronation of the Virgin* in order to reflect both their wealth and the source of their wealth.[357]

Botticelli's *Coronation of the Virgin* is based on a bipartite composition divided into heavenly and terrestrial zones. Gold, here, is used in an anti-illusionistic way in the heavens, as opposed to the painted landscape below, which represents the earth in an illusionistic manner there. Gold is used in the dome-like upper part to symbolise the heavens in what is ultimately a Byzantine mode, while the lower part is a 'very modern' representation of a landscape and the four saints standing before it. Here, the gold ground is not much of a 'ground' as a positive radiance as of a pictorial and theological subject, a glory of the Godhead, dependent on and adapted from Fra Angelico's S. Egidio *Coronation* (Fig. 52).[358] In that painting, the gold ground does not function as a flat ground, but Botticelli has incorporated different levels of reality to achieve a visionary staging of the subject. In a similar way, the use of the painted gold ground as

[356] J. Ruda, *Fra Filippo Lippi: Life and Work with a Complete Catalogue* (London, 1993), pp. 292-6.
[357] R. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli. Life and Work*, vol. 1. (London, 1978), p. 108-9.
[358] For a catalogue entry of this altarpiece, see G. Bonsanti, *Beato Angelico. Catalogo complete* (Florence, 1998), p. 131.

a glory of the Godhead behind Christ in Raphael's *Disputa* (Fig. 49) was aimed to represent complex and meaningful spatiality.

Baxandall suggests that there is another kind of eye, one opposed to the 'Albertian eye', in the late fifteenth century, which defines vision in spiritual terms. Bartholomew Rimbertinus' *On the Sensible Delights of Heaven* printed in Venice in 1498, for instance, deals only with this second type of enhanced visual experience to describe how heaven could be sensed. Rimbertinus distinguishes three kinds of improvement on human visual experience: 'a greater beauty in the things seen, a greater keenness in the sense of sight, and an infinite variety of objects for vision'.[359]

In Celso Maffei's *On the Sensible Delights of Heaven* of 1504, the author claimed that in the celestial realm: 'Vision will be so keen that the slightest differences and variations in colour will be discernible, and it will not be impeded by distance or by the interposition of solid bodies.'[360] Rimbertinus text anticipates Maffei's position:

> An intervening object does not impede the vision of the blessed…If Christ, even though himself in heaven after his Ascension, saw his dear Mother still on earth and at prayer in her chamber, clearly distance and the interposition of a wall does not hinder their vision. The same is true when an object's face is turned away from the viewer so that an opaque body intervenes…Christ could see the face of his mother when she was prostrate on the ground…as if he were looking directly at her face. It is clear that the blessed can see the front of an object from the back, the face through the back of the head.[361]

Here, the physical mechanisms of sight cannot explain celestial or metaphysical vision; rather, the impediments of earthly vision have become precisely what enables spiritual vision. Baxandall calls this type of looking 'an eschatological glimpse of beatitude'. However, Baxandall seems to have found it difficult to incorporate this type of vision into the 'cognitive style' of the fifteenth century, which he sees as based on the

[359] Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, p. 104.
[360] Ibid.
[361] Ibid.

Albertian visual pyramid, though he later conceded that 'it is proper to end this chapter on a faltering note'.[362] The kind of vision alluded to by the continuation of gold grounds in the later fifteenth century speaks precisely to the kind of vision that could find no place in Baxandall's exclusively Albertian fifteenth-century universe.

2.9 Savonarola and the Gold Ground in Filippino Lippi's *Pala Valori*

The final example I will discuss in this chapter is Filippino Lippi's *Pala Valori* (Fig. 22) of c. 1498-1500. According to Jonathan Katz Nelson, the location of Botticelli's *Coronation of the Virgin* in the church of the Dominican monastery of San Marco in Florence had provided opportunities to Savonarola, Francesco Valori, and also Botticelli's pupil, Filippino Lippi, to observe how the master used gold to represent Paradise in the upper part of the *Coronation*.[363] In the Valori altarpiece, unlike the gold used in the *Coronation* only to symbolise heaven in the upper panel, in the Valori altarpiece, gold has been applied all over the background. The earliest description of the Valori altarpiece can be found in Raffaello Borghini's *Il riposo* (1584):

> [Filippino] fece molte altre tavole come in San Brocolo alla Cappella de'Valori, nella facciata dirimpetto all'altare maggiore, una in cui si vede Christo in Croce, in campo d'oro, con tre Angelic he ricevono il Sangue dale pieghe in alcuni Calici, e a pie'della Croce, la Madonna e un San Francesco dimostrante grandissimo affetto.[364]

It is evident from Borghini's description that the gold ground, or *campo d'oro*, was already seen as a prominent feature of the panel in the sixteenth century. Vasari might have seen this altarpiece as well, as he described an unidentified altarpiece by Filippino Lippi as 'un Crocifisso e due figure in campo d'oro'.[365]

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[362] Ibid., p. 108.
[363] P. Zambrano, J. K. Nelson, *Filippino Lippi* (Milan, 2004), p. 500.
[364] Borghini, *Il riposo*, pp. 358-9.
[365] Vasari, *Vite*, III, pp. 561-2.

The altarpiece was originally located in the Cappella Valori in the Church of S. Procolo in Florence, where Borghini presumably saw it *in situ*. The central panel with a gold ground, *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint Francis*, was unfortunately destroyed in 1945 in Berlin and is now known only via a black and white reproduction (Fig. 50). The side panels of *Mary Magdalen* and *John the Baptist*, however, are still extant in Florence (Figs. 53, 54).

The altarpiece was commissioned from Filippino by Nicolò Valori after the death of his uncle Francesco Valori in April 1498. It has been argued that Savonarola directly influenced Nicolò Valori, who, in collaboration with the painter, chose the gold ground as the material support of the central image.[366] Nicolò Valori appears to have been a follower of Savonarola, a so-called *piagnone* (weeper) himself, which makes it likely that Filippino too was in fact a follower of Savonarola and his doctrines.[367]

According to a sermon of 1495 by Savonarola, works of art should be considered in two ways. One way is to 'contemplate the earthly work for the image of God as you do the Crucifix and the Cross representing God and pulling man into contemplation of God'.[368] The other way is to evaluate the image in terms of its craftsmanship and the skill of its maker. Savonarola continues: 'I shall give you a piece of good advice. Shun the works of art which are counted among the riches of the world. Today they are invented for churches with such expense that they eclipse the light of God,' tempting us 'to contemplate in them not God but art.'[369] In other words, one should admire God, who created the beauties of the world, not the artist, who merely copies them. It was an

[366] Zambrano and Nelson, *Filippino Lippi*, pp. 494-502.
[367] Ibid.
[368] Savonarola, *Prediche italiane ai Fiorentini*, ed. F. Cognasso, (Perugia, n.d.), 2, p. 161.
[369] Ibid., pp. 161-62: 'Queste cose terrene si possono considerare in due modi. Primo, come immagine che rappresentano colui che l'ha create, e questo è contemplare le cose terrene per immagine di Dio come tu fai il Crucifixo e la Croce che ti rappresentono Iddio e tirono l'uomo in contemplazione di Dio. L'altro modo è considerare la immagine di queste cose quanto rapresenta l'artificio che vi è dentro, come è quando tu di': questo fu buono maestro, che ha fatta questa immagine, cioè quando tu non consideri se non le cose artificiali. E però io ti voglio dare uno buono consiglio: fuggi le cose artificiali, come sono le ricchezze. Vedi che oggi si fa le figure nelle chiese con tanto artificio e tanto ornate e tirate che guastono il lume di Dio e la vera contemplazione e non si considera Iddio, ma solo lo artificio che è nelle figure.'

error, he contended, to seek the artist's hand in a work, instead of seeing an image as ultimately derived from God himself. From this sermon, it seems that Savonarola was cognizant of the medieval theory of images, according to which the painter can produce a work only by virtue of the model that generates an image of itself in the painter. The painter does not create the image but depends on the model. The ultimate model or archetype of all images is, of course, Christ himself. Savonarola deplored the art of his own time as a contradiction of the simplicity and frugalness that he associated with proper Christianity. This doctrine eventually led him to advise his devotees to cast away works of art altogether.[370]

The gold ground in the Valori altarpiece may have been inspired by some of Savonarola's ideas. A gold ground was, of course, luxurious. At first glance, this seems very much against the spirit of Savonarola's calls to reject the vanities of the world. However, Savonarola, like some of his contemporaries, believed that sacred images and objects should be enshrined by precious materials such as gold, as can be seen in the friar's own practices.[371]

We have plenty of contemporaneous accounts for Savonarola's use of gold. Piero Parenti wrote that during the vast Palm Sunday procession of 1496, Savonarola's followers carried a panel depicting 'the crown according to the vision of Fra Girolamo, but before this they carried two real crowns dedicated to the King and Queen of eternal life.' During the Carnival procession of February 1496, Savonarola's followers marched through Florence while holding a gold bejewelled cross and paintings under silk canopies. For the feast of the Assumption in 1495, Savonarola decorated a chapel with metalwork, silks and tapestries. On the altar, there was a sculpture of the Virgin Mary with the sleeping Christ Child on a throne embellished with gold letters. And during a 1498 re-enactment of the Adoration of the Magi, Savonarola and other friars

[370] For Savonarola and visual arts more general, see R. M. Steinberg, *Fra Girolamo Savonarola, Florentine Art, and Renaissance Historiography* (Athens and Ohio, 1977).
[371] J. K. Nelson, 'The Later Works of Filippino Lippi: From His Roman Sojourn until His Death (ca. 1489-1504)', (PhD dissertation, New York University, 1992), p. 191.

dressed up in silk and gold robes.[372] All these examples suggest that the use of gold ground in the Valori altarpiece as a mark of honour and respect towards the divine was not as antithetic to Savonarola's ideals as might initially appear.

Nelson asserts that there are no archaising tendencies in the Valori altarpiece, as other scholars have claimed when assessing the gold ground. Instead, according to Nelson, the gold ground was just reused 'in a modern context to further the pious purpose of art'.[373] The naturalistic depictions of the figures are evident in the altarpiece. For instance, the figures of both the Virgin and Saint Francis in the central panel are depicted naturalistically with cast shadows and as if standing firmly on the earth, while in one of the side panels, Saint John's toes illusionistically extend beyond the edge of a classicizing niche (Fig. 55). For the late fifteenth-century viewer, however, the gold ground, which was related to the devotional functions of the painting, could apparently co-exist unproblematically with naturalistic elements such as anatomically-convincing bodies and cast shadows. Moreover, the devotional function of the gold ground could perhaps also be revealed in the graffiti marking on the panel, which is even visible in the black-and-white photograph (Fig. 56). The scratch marks on the gold ground between the legs of the Christ and the Virgin indicate an intensive devotional engagement between the object and the devotee, suggesting that the *Pala Valori* was very much a working altarpiece.

At same time, if the Valori altarpiece is not seen in isolation, but rather is assessed together with other gold ground religious paintings produced in approximately the same period, it becomes more likely that it falls into the group interested in using the conventional forms of gold ground to evoke the divine presence. As Cecilia Filippini has argued, renewed interest in gold grounds in the late fifteenth century had became 'a general trend in a group of artists that gave rise to the religious images of great

[372] These examples are summarised by J. K. Nelson in Nelson, 'The Later Works of Filippino Lippi', pp. 222-4.
[373] See Nelson, 'The Later Works of Filippino Lippi', p. 230. Most recently, see J. Nelson, *Filippino Lippi: an abundance of invention* (London, 2022), p. 184.

devotional and symbolic position, while agreeing to the decorative preciousness of the most refined Florentine workshop, such as that of Ghirlandaio.'[374] This group of paintings, according to Filippini, not only include Botticelli's *Coronation of the Virgin* of 1489-1490, but Botticelli's *Mystic Nativity* of 1500 (Fig. 57), Ghirlandaio's *Coronation of the Virgin* of 1486 (Fig. 58), and the *Resurrection* attributed to Sebastino di Mainardi (Fig. 59). We can add Pinturicchio's paintings in the Vatican into this group as well. The Valori altarpiece thus appears to belong to a taste for gold ground painting in the years just before and including 1500 in central Italy, including in both Florence and Rome. Terms such as 'archaism' or 'anachronism' are too strongly teleological to define the temporality of these examples.

According to Georg Weise, the second half of the fifteenth century witnessed a more general revival of late Gothic styles and ideologies, which lead to the 'reaffirmation of spiritual values together with a transitory phenomenon of a retrospective nature'.[375] In the *Pala Valori*, the gold ground is thus 'grafted' on—or better, behind or beneath—naturalistic figures in a way that resonates with other artists working in this period. Besides this 'spiritual-revival' thesis of Weise in explaining this taste in the second half of the fifteenth century, we should also read a strong political message in the revival of mosaics under the patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici.[376] In F. W. Kent's words, this reflects the 'Laurentian desire to historicize and domesticate…Tuscan achievements in painting'.[377]

At the same time, for more sophisticated viewers in the late fifteenth century, gold grounds must have seemed to belong in the revered tradition of Byzantine icon or mosaics. Gold ground is used as a formal strategy to re-emphasise the religious image

[374] Filippini, 'Il Recupero del Fondo d'Oro e Altre Tendenze Archaizzanti', p. 183.
[375] G. Weise, *Il Rinnovamento dell'arte Religiosa nella Rinascita* (Florence, 1969), p. 29
[376] For the involvement of Lorenzo de' Medici in the revival of the craft of mosaic painting in the late fifteenth century, see Laurie Fusco and Gino Corti, *Lorenzo de' Medici. Collector and Antiquarian* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 136-40.
[377] F. W. Kent, *Lorenzo de' Medici and the Art of Magnificence* (Baltimore and London, 2004), pp. 40-1.

as a precious object. This conception only appears to clash with a new understanding in the fifteenth century of religious images as works of art made by an artist's hand. In fact, in Belting's words, 'old pictorial forms could be quoted to represent an old concept of the image and to defend it against advancing disintegration.'[378] Alison Wright's recent study on the use of gold in Crivelli's altarpieces takes issue with Belting's interpretation and argues instead that the rejection of depth and the embrace of gold in Crivelli's paintings are not 'responses to backward-looking pictorial tastes' but 'attempts to forge up-to-date icons or cult objects in which the divine seemed to be near at hand'.[379] In the Valori altarpiece, the gold ground is in a dialogue with naturalistic depictions of the figures. Such dual visual stimulation evidently satisfied contemporary devotional concerns as voiced by Savonarola.

2.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that gold can refer back to the classical past as well as the Byzantine heritage, but crucially also forward to Renaissance modernity. Above all, one should separate in discussion the moral criticism of gold from the continuing use of gold in paintings. The artistic interest in gold in the second half of the fifteenth century could be both spiritually and politically motivated. Gold symbolises the divine assistance in saving the Church from existential threat and ultimately the triumph of the Church on earth. One sees this in the gold commonly used in frescoes in Vatican Rome by Cosimo Roselli and Fra Angelico. The use of gold ground in the Room of Liberal Arts has its iconographical root in how to depict Heaven or the Empyrean in a symbolic way. The use of the golden arch in the Borgia Apartment (and perhaps also the practice of gilding more generally in earlier frescoes in the Vatican) is a key example that reflects the anxiety of the papacy in having to defend itself against the Turkish threat of forty years.

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[378] H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott (Chicago and London, 1994), p. 432.
[379] Alison Wright, 'Crivelli's Divine Materials', in S. J. Campbell, ed. *Ornament and Illusion: Carlo Crivelli of Venice* (London, 2015), p. 70.

Stylistically and semiotically, the use of a gold ground in Filippino Lippi's *Pala Valori*, and other works produced in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, argues for what one might call a deliberate historicism which makes visible contemporary devotional beliefs and practices. However, whilst the use of gold grounds in the works by Pinturicchio and Raphael can be seen in part as a continuation of an Umbrian tradition, but also at the same time an adaptation or even transformation of that same tradition, they also represent a transformation of that same tradition: an adaptation combining a gold ground with a more 'modern' system of perspective and naturalism. It is this particular hybrid temporality, this malleable materiality of gold ground, which provided new and imaginative possibilities for fifteenth-century Italian artists.

It is interesting to note that Lorenzo di Credi repainted the entire gold background of Fra Angelico's Fiesole altarpiece (Fig. 60) with landscapes to fit in with the contemporary taste of the patron. This well-documented event marks, as I believe, the earliest evidence of conscious understanding of landscape backgrounds as something entirely new and gold grounds as archaic and old-fashioned.[380] This is the subject of the next chapter.

[380] For the original appearance of this altarpiece, see U. Baldini, 'Contributi all'Angelico: il Trittico di San Domenico di Fiesole e Qualche Altra Aggiunta' in Ugo Proacci et al (eds), *Scritti di Storia dell'Arte in Onore di Ugo Procacci* (Milan, 1977), vol. I, pp. 236-46.

Chapter Three

Grounding the Secular and Sacred: Landscape Backgrounds in Italian Renaissance Art

At the very beginning, let me define what I mean by 'landscape background' in Italian Renaissance art. The closest contemporary equivalent to 'landscape background' in Italian is *lontano*, which literally means 'distant view'.[381] But a 'landscape background' is certainly more materially dynamic than an immaterial view. It extends between the near object and the farthest distance. Take Giovanni Bellini's *St Francis in the Desert* (Fig. 61) at the Frick Collection for instance, there is certainly a continuation between foreground and background in the picture. The foreground is defined by the figure of St Francis standing on a rock terrain, whereas the background consists of a donkey, a grass field, trees, branches, a walled city, mountains and clouds. The rock terrain, though functioning as a kind of background to the figure, strikes the beholder as foreground, or the near view.[382] At the same time, the rock ground is spatially connected to the grass field, which extends into the far distance. The standing donkey, because of its frontal posture, can even come forward and disturb the serene stillness of the *lontano*. Actually, in this painting, the hierarchy of nature and culture is interestingly reversed, as is the case of many of Bellini's devotional paintings.[383] Normally, a landscape background is literally at the back of the principal figure. But here in this painting, the landscape has come to the foreground, demonstrating a tenacious grip of the unruly nature over the picture field.

This painting throws many questions into relief. When and how were images of landscape first theorised and deployed as backgrounds? How is the meaning of Italian

[381] For a study of this term in Venetian art, see B. Blass-Simmen, '"Qualche lontani": Distance and Transcendence in the Art of Giovanni Bellini', in C. C. Wilson (ed.), *Examining Giovanni Bellini: An Art 'More Human and More Divine'* (Tournhout, 2015), pp. 77-91.
[382] Interestingly, in David Kim's recent discussion of this painting, the rock formation is considered as a kind of ground rather than background. See Kim, *Groundwork*, pp. 83-128.
[383] For the reversal of the hierarchy of nature and culture, see H. Belting, 'St. Jerome in Venice: Giovanni Bellini and the Dream of Solitary Life', *I Tatti Studies*, 2014, Vol. 17 (1), pp. 5-33.

Renaissance art defined through landscape paintings? How could the oscillation of a landscape between foreground and background be exploited in thematic terms? The current chapter will address these questions through case studies ranging from examples in Florence, Urbino, Bologna, Mantua and Venice.

The current chapter consists of three parts. Having discussed Alberti's concept of *copia*/*varietà* as an indication of the emergence of landscape backgrounds in Renaissance art in Chapter 1, the first part of the current chapter will further elaborate on Alberti's concept and, in particular, focus on the last term, 'province', in Alberti's list of *copia*. In parallel to Alberti's theorisation of landscape as 'background', I will discuss how 'ground' (understood as a material layer beneath or behind the figure and metaphorically evoking the earth in nature) is related to the Northern practice of landscape painting.

In correspondence to Alberti's theory and Northern practice, the second part will discuss a small number of paintings produced in the 1470s in Florence and Urbino that include landscape backgrounds imagined from a 'bird's-eye view', which, significantly, could be understood as being seen from 'God's viewpoint'. In some cases, as a few scholars have shown, landscape backgrounds in early Renaissance paintings in central Italy could also represent local sites of cult or family territory.[384] Such landscape backgrounds can work very closely with linear perspective, conjointly creating an awe-inspiring view behind a sitter in the foreground. The beholder is then effectively invited to share with the sitter, who is often the work's patron, a commanding view over what lies behind or beyond the foreground figure.

The third part of the chapter will complicate the Albertian paradigm of Florentine landscape painting by looking at the use of clothes of honour in some Marian images

[384] A. Lillie, 'Memory of Place. *Luogo* and Lineage in the Fifteenth-Century Florentine Countryside', in G. Ciappelli and P. Rubin (eds), *Art, Memory and the Family in Renaissance Florence* (New York, 2000), pp. 195-214; L. Freedman, 'The Arno Valley in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Painting', *Viator*, vol. 44, 2 (2013), pp. 201-42.

and portraits with landscape backgrounds. As we have also seen in Chapter 1, landscape backgrounds are a contested zone in Renaissance art theory after the revival of the Plinian notion of *parergon* as an art discourse. Their representational value was either reaffirmed or decried in the sixteenth century. Unlike the previous section which looks at the practice of deploying landscape backgrounds more generally in Florence, the third part will address this ambivalent attitude towards landscape backgrounds more fully by looking at the use of textile backgrounds in the middle-ground to mediate between foreground figure and background landscape in Venice. The question, in Italian pictures, is whether the material connotation of the concept *campo* has been problematised in pictorial terms. An artistic understanding of the *campo* can be seen as a polemic: it could be dematerialised to suggest an immaterial depth behind the figure (as seen in Alberti's notion of the painting surface as a transparent window) or re-materialised as a painted hanging curtain that provides a new material surface within the composition itself. Such contrasts suggest that Renaissance landscape painting is a dialectical form, which oscillates between form and dissolution.

As becomes evident in the end, the tension arising from choosing a secular subject or a sacred one in the foreground contributes to how a landscape background should be depicted. From gold to paint, Alberti facilitates a shift from visualising the social identity of the patron of the object to alluding to the image's reception in the beholder's eye. Nevertheless, paint is not inert matter. Indeed, over the course of the late fifteenth and first decades of the sixteenth century, the landscape can eventually replace the primacy of the figure altogether by moving from the background to the foreground—or primary subject—of the picture, as seen particularly in Venice.

3.1 From *Weltanschauung* to *parergon*: Interpreting Renaissance Landscapes

The emergence of landscape backgrounds in Renaissance paintings has been associated with a new worldview, or *Weltanschauung*, concerned with an engagement with nature. In his chapter entitled 'Discovery of the Beauty of Landscape' in Part IV, 'The

Discovery of the World and of Man' in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt points out the historical links between the development of a 'modern' approach towards nature in general and the emergence of landscape backgrounds in Renaissance paintings.[385] As Burckhardt interestingly observes, 'a genuine, hearty enjoyment of the external world' can already be seen in texts as early as 1200, but these descriptions 'are all foreground without perspective'.[386] More poetic descriptions of distant views that evoke particular moods only emerge with Dante, and are further developed in Boccaccio and Petrarch. As Burckhardt put it, Dante's writings offer 'unmistakable proof of the deepening effect of nature on the human spirit'.[387] For Petrarch, there is no better text than the famous one describing his ascent of Mont Ventoux to demonstrate the deep impression nature exerted upon him. After he finally struggled to the top of the mountain, he opened the *Confessions* of St Augustine and his eye fell on a passage that read:

> …and men go forth, and admire lofty mountains and broad seas, and roaring torrent, and the ocean, and the course of the stars, and forget their own selves while doing so.[388]

Afterwards, Petrarch said no more and closed the book. He had become absorbed into the sublimity of nature. This Renaissance longing for a panoramic vision of nature as seen in Petrarch is, according to Burckhardt, a 'genuine modern enjoyment, not a reflection of antiquity', and it symbolized for him the idea of the discovery of the outside world in the Italian Renaissance.[389] It is clear that Burckhardt aimed to

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[385] Although Burckhardt's understanding of the Renaissance has been rightly contested—for instance, his views on gender relations have been subjected to intense critique ever since Joan Kelly Gadol asked provocatively whether women had a Renaissance—in the case of the depiction of landscape, his work can still provide some helpful insights. See J. K. Gadol, 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?', in R. Bridenthal and C. Koonz (eds), *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston, 1977), pp. 137-64.

[386] J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Oxford, 1945), p. 178.

[387] See, for instance, D. Aligheiri, 'Io son venuto al punto de la rota', in G. R. Kay, ed. and tr. *The Penguin Book of Italian Verse* (Harmondsworth, 1965), pp. 85-8.

[388] Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance*, p. 179.

[389] Ibid., pp. 178-84.

emphasise the subjectivity of Renaissance beholders in relation to the discovery of perspective and landscape backgrounds.

Burckhardt's interpretation of Renaissance painted landscapes is largely informed by his interest in perspective as a historical paradigm. As noted by Michael Ann Holly, the emergence of landscape backgrounds provided Burckhardt with a historical vantage point to project a perspectival vision into the past, and this teleological position later influenced Erwin Panofsky's interpretation of linear perspective as what he called a 'symbolic form'.[390] What matters here is the debatable relationship between landscape background and perspective. Should we align Renaissance painted landscapes with perspective? This is a larger question which other scholars have already addressed at length and their arguments will not be reiterated here.[391] Instead, I would argue that the Flemish interest in depicting landscapes evokes different artistic concerns to those of Italian painters, if not the tradition of linear perspective alone. I argue here that we need to re-examine the relationship between painted landscape foregrounds and backgrounds and the perspective paradigm through a comparison between the Italian and Northern approaches toward landscape painting.

Another useful reference point for our discussion is Gombrich's seminal essay 'The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape' first published as 'Renaissance Artistic Theory and the Development of Landscape Painting' in 1953.[392] Sidestepping the question of perspective, Gombrich sees the rise of landscape painting as being linked to the emergence of a new critical category in sixteenth-century Italy from an institutional perspective.[393] In this article, Gombrich deliberately conflates 'landscape

[390] See, in particular, M. A. Holly, 'Burckhardt and the ideology of the past', in *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 47-73.
[391] For a helpful summary, see G. Lehman, 'Measure and the Unmeasurable: Perspective and the Renaissance Landscape' (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2010).
[392] E. H. Gombrich, 'Renaissance Artistic Theory and the Development of Landscape Painting', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 41 (1953), pp. 335-60. Reprinted as Gombrich, 'The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape', in E. H. Gombrich, *Norm and Form. Studies in the art of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1966), p. 107-21.
[393] Ibid.

background' with 'landscape painting', because the term *paese* was more often used in the Renaissance period to denote the subject—rather than the background—of a painting. It is in Venice in the sixteenth century, according to Gombrich, that the term 'paese' is first used to denote landscape painting as a recognised genre, as seen in the writings of Marcantonio Michiel. As early as 1521, Michiel commented in his *Notizie* on the 'molte tavolette de paesi' in the collection of Cardinal Grimani, with the landscape background evidently becoming so prominent a feature in those *tavolette* that it could be identified as their subject itself. In describing Giorgione's *Tempesta*, Marcantonio wrote about 'a small landscape ('paesetto'), on canvas, with a thunderstorm, a gipsy and a soldier', without even mentioning the Madonna and Child, which one would otherwise presume as the main subject of the painting.[394]

Gombrich argues that the root cause of a new demand for landscape painting in Italy is a new conception of art itself: an 'aesthetic attitude…which prizes works of art for the sake of their artistic achievement rather than for their function and subject-matter'. [395] Because Italians had developed this type of aesthetic attitude in which landscape painting enjoyed a certain independence, by the mid-sixteenth century, also influenced by increasing knowledge of antique precedents, viewers could appreciate Northern landscape paintings for qualities other than their figurative or narrative subject matter. Northern art thus offered the practice of landscape paintings, while Italy provided a market and a theory for such works.

But this hierarchy could be transgressed and turned into a productive gain for the Italian artists and patrons. As we have seen earlier in Chapter One, Thomas Blount's definition of landscape, or 'landskip', as *parergon* indicates the inherent subsidiary status of landscape as a convention compared to the figurative tradition of Western art. However, Paolo Giovio's account of Dosso Dossi's landscape as *parergon* indicates that, in the

[394] See Gombrich's discussion of this painting in 'The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape', p. 109. The original text can be found in Theodor Frimmel, ed. *Der Anonimo Morelliano*, in *Quellenschriften zur Kunstgeschicte* (Vienna, 1888), p. 106

[395] Gombrich, 'The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape', p. 110.

Renaissance period, the artist's genius and reputation could derive from the *parergon* or extraneous elements instead of the rendering of what would have traditionally been considered a work's primary subject matter. In a sense, then, the hierarchy of subject as having precedence over setting was being questioned or even reversed by the sixteenth century in Italy. Further elaborating on the relation between *ergon* and *parergon* in Renaissance landscape paintings, Christopher Wood observes:

> The disclosure of the mutual dependency underlying the notional hierarchy of object and supplement is one of the central and most characteristic operations of Deconstruction. Recreation in Western pictorial culture, then, is meant to follow work and therefore stand outside it. It is, perhaps, a reward for work completed. But pleasure also prepares one to resume work by restoring or recreating the spirit. The danger is that the interlude of recreation will not only restore the labourer, but ultimately provide a superfluity of pleasure, and even replace work. It is easy to see how the pleasure taken in outdoor scenes, first in the mere representation of a venue associated with retreat and leisure, eventually in the painterly effects achieved in those representations, could generate both enthusiasm for, and resistance to, landscape painting in the Renaissance.[396]

Dosso Dossi provides an explicit example showing how a background landscape can take over the foreground figure in terms of relative importance.[397] Although providing 'a superfluity of pleasure' in Wood's words, landscape elements will ultimately be seen as a *parergon* in the Italian theory of art. It is in the North in the same period that the landscape background can come forward and really become the subject in itself.[398] A prime Flemish example is Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, in which the subject of Icarus is reduced to a corner of the composition whereas the rest of the pictorial field is occupied by the landscape (Fig. 62).

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[396] C. Wood, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (London, 1993), 55.

[397] On Dosso as an important figure in the development of landscape painting in Italy, see R. Colby, 'Dosso's Early Artistic Reputation and the Origins of Landscape Painting', *Papers of the British School at Rome*, Vol. 76 (2008), pp. 201-231, 357-360.

[398] For the development of landscape painting in Germany, see Wood, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape.*

Despite that the hierarchy between foreground and background can be transgressed, the boundary between figure and ground was established in the process when the landscape became institutionalised as *parergon*. It was inconceivable during the Middle Ages when the *campo* was understood as ground and covered by gilding. This institutional cut determines the boundary between figure and *campo* and establishes the hierarchy of foreground and background. But this boundary itself has been questioned in the critical tradition of aesthetics in modern times. Having discussed the original meaning of the Plinian term *parergon* and its use and reception in Renaissance art theory, I will revisit this important notion and consider its general character.

At this juncture, let us bring in Kant and Derrida, the two modern commentators on the question of *parergon*. For Kant, the *parergon* no longer denotes the background of an artwork. Rather it primarily means the frame.[399] In Kant's critique of *parergon*, the boundary between figure and ground is replaced by that between the frame and the work seen as a homogenous whole. Derrida pushes the boundary further. In a sense, he even intends to dissolve the boundary between the frame and the outside world. In Derrida's famous account of what *parergon* is and what it implies in *The Truth in Painting*, he draws our attention to the positive contribution of *parergon* to constituting the so-called 'internal meaning' of a work of art. For Derrida, meaning is relational and is conditioned by what divides *the interior* from *the exterior*. *Parerga*, according to Derrida, 'have a thickness, a surface which separates them not only…from the integral inside, from the body proper of the *ergon*, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung, from the space in which statue or column is erected, then, step by step, from the whole field of historical, economic, political inscription in which the drive to signature is produced'.[400] Derrida's important contribution to the question suggests that the *parergon* is related not only to the *ergon* but to the general context outside the aesthetic sphere of the artwork.

[399] Discussed in section 14 in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, see Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford, 2007), p. 57.
[400] J. Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. Mcleod (Chicago and London, 1987), pp. 60-1.

Both Kant and Derrida have implied that the status of *parergon* is very unstable. Following their general claim that *parergon* is very unstable, the current chapter will initiate a cultural critique of landscape backgrounds as *parerga* seen within the historical framework. In other words, I will confine the meaning of *parerga* to 'landscape backgrounds', while keeping the boundary between figures and landscape backgrounds intact. It is this productive boundary that can have landscape backgrounds engaged with the larger social-religious world. I argue that landscape backgrounds can be seen as reflecting not only the *Weltanschauung* of a period but the 'point of view' of a specific patron or a specific class of consumers. At the same time, I will see landscape backgrounds embodying the dialectic between *ergon* and *parergon* that reveals the different meanings and functions of images and the varied consumption habits of different classes.

Although much has been written about Renaissance theories of landscape painting, little has been said explicitly about how Italian landscape paintings work as a kind of *campo* entangled in social-historical networks.[401] In what follows, I would like to revisit Gombrich's thesis that the birth of landscape painting in Italy is linked to both artists and patrons, who developed a taste for the intriguing landscape backgrounds of Northern painters. The Northern 'contribution' to the development of Italian landscape paintings has always been downplayed or misunderstood in previous scholarship. For instance, in Jodi Craston's most recent revisiting of this topic, the *topos* that Northern painters are more gifted in representing landscape backgrounds has been seen as reinforcing the dominance of the human figure in Italian Renaissance art theory.[402] In

[401] Apart from Gombrich's seminal essay, the most thorough study of the Italian Renaissance theory of landscape is K. H. Goodchild's unpublished doctoral dissertation, 'Towards an Italian Renaissance Theory of Landscape' (PhD dissertation, The University of Virginia, 1998). For the recent ecological turn in Renaissance landscape studies, see in particular Jodi Cranston, *Green Worlds of Renaissance Venice* (University Park, 2019). Also see Chloé Pelletier's unpublished doctoral thesis, 'From Gold to Green: Visualizing the Environment in the Italian Renaissance' (PhD dissertation, The University of Chicago, 2021), which is underway but not yet available.

[402] See J. Cranston, *Green Worlds of Renaissance Venice*, pp. 13-4. It will be useful to revisit this traditional *topos* especially in the recent growing interests in examining both the depicted and actual physical environment of human beings in the early modern world.

what follows, I will show the real historical scene is more complicated than this implies. Rather than following Gombrich's steps by arguing that landscape backgrounds are of little iconographical significance, the current chapter probes deeper into the question of meaning and function. How much were Italian artists aware of the iconography and compositions of Northern landscape paintings and to what extent does it matter whether they were aware or not?

Despite the affinity between the Italian and Northern schools in their shared interests in the quest for pictorial mimesis, I would argue that their approaches toward how to represent landscapes are distinctive from, but also related to, one another. One can perhaps even argue that the general move away from gold grounds in Italy was in part the result of the growing popularity of collecting Netherlandish oil paintings. As Paula Nuttall has pointed out, Alberti's advice to artists on avoiding using gold to depict golden objects could be derived from the Northern practice of oil painting, which Alberti should have been aware of.[403] However, as will be shown in the end, the actual historical situation is more complicated than that.

3.2 Alberti's Dilemma: Toward a Humanistic Theory of Painted Landscapes

With Alberti, landscape is more about the visible than the invisible. Before Alberti, depicting landscape was not exclusively about what is visible, but instead assumed that beholders would have to use their imagination or *fantasia*. For instance, in his *Libro dell'arte*, Cennino Cennini had suggested to painters a limited repertoire of landscape elements: mountains, trees, buildings and water. The artist is then furnished with simple visual formulae for the representation of each of these elements. Trees are basically black skeletons ('corpi neri') decked with layers of foliage which are limited to tones of light and dark green touched with highlights of *giallorino*.[404] Water should be

[403] P. Nuttall, *From Flanders to Florence. The Impact of Netherlandish Painting, 1400-1500* (New Haven and London), p. 35.
[404] Cennini-Broecke, pp. 122-3, Ch. 86.

enlivened with lime-white highlights and represented 'with or without fish' ('o con pescie o sanzo'), as the artist pleases.[405] For mountains, which are key elements of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century fresco backgrounds, Cennini suggests that the artist will achieve a 'natural' effect if he copies some 'pietre grande' from nature, concentrating on the contrasts between 'i lumi e schuro'.[406] Cennini's method is largely based on the artistic language of Giotto, such as seen in his *Miracle of the Spring* (Fig. 63). Here we see rocks with a few trees growing on them resembling schematic stage scenery and representing only the most primaeval form of natural landscapes. Giotto's landscape elements thus serve primarily as the conventional symbols of the natural world, rather than attempting to describe nature topographically, and are more a product of his *fantasia*, a term Cennini uses repeatedly in his treatise, than the result of the close study of actual natural phenomena.[407]

In Alberti's anthropocentric universe, the method of depicting landscape elements is similar to that of depicting human figures because both involve the process of circumscribing an object within its background. Although not using the term *campo*, Alberti does discuss the relationship between figure and ground (or 'place' to be more exact), when he opines '…in the first place, when we look at a thing, we see it as an object which occupies a space'.[408] This had largely resulted from his promotion of a new way of perception, which he correlates to a new way of painting. How, then, to distinguish the figure from its background or place? Alberti states: 'The painter will draw around this space, and he will call this process of sketching the outline, appropriately, circumscription.'[409] This space is usually equated by Alberti with the space occupied by the figure. However, this raises the question of whether the distant

[405] Ibid., pp. 193-4, Ch. 163.
[406] Ibid., p. 125, Ch. 88.
[407] For a detailed discussion on the term *fantasia* in the fifteenth century, see M. Kemp, 'From Mimesis to Fantasia: The Quattrocento Vocabulary of Creation, Inspiration and Genius in the Visual Arts', *Viator*, 8, 1977, pp. 347-398. On Cennini's use of the term *fantasia*, see especially pp. 368-9. Also see S. Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo. Fiction, Invention and Fantasìa* (London, 1993), pp. 29-37.
[408] Alberti-Grayson, p. 67.
[409] Ibid.

objects have contours that can be circumscribed or, indeed, are even properly visible or recognisable at all. As we will see, this poses a knotty problem for Alberti.

Alberti discussed the theory of landscape painting in both his *Della pittura* and the *Ten Books on Architecture*, but with different emphases. According to Alberti in *Della pittura*, painting's chief objective is the depiction of *historia*, the narrative picture which concentrates on human actions and emotions. The role played by landscape is thus clearly subordinate to that of narrative by implication. Alberti praises pictures that contain figurative elements, which he sees as examples of 'abundance' (*copia*), such as 'old men and men in their prime, youths, boys, mature women and maidens, young children, pet animals and puppy-dogs, small birds, horses, cattle, buildings and stretches of country'.[410] It is worth quoting his famous passage on *historia* in *Della pittura* in full:

> The *historia* you might justly praise and admire will be of a kind to show itself so pleasant and *ornata* with allurements that it long holds the eyes of the *doctus* and *indoctus* beholder with a certain *voluptas* and *animi motus*. For the first thing to bring *voluptas* in a *historia* is precisely *copia* and *varietas* of things. As in the case of food and music the new and the abundant always delight, because they differ from the old and ordinary; so too in all things the mind is much delighted by *varietas* and *copia*. In painting, therefore, *varietas* both of bodies (*corpora*) and of colours is pleasant. I will declare that the *historia* is most *copiosa* in which there are mingled together in their places old men and men in their prime, youths, boys, mature women and maidens, young children, pet animals and puppy-dogs, small birds, horses, cattle, buildings and stretches of country (*aedificia, provinciaeque*); and I will praise all *copia* provided that it is appropriate (*conveniens*) to the event that is being represented there. For it is usually the case that, when the beholder lingers over his examination, then the *copia* of the painter gains favour. But I should wish its *copia* to be *ornata* with a degree of *varietas*, and also *gravis* and *moderata* with *dignitas* and *verecundia*. I certainly condemn those painters who, because they wish to seem *copiosi* or because they wish nothing left empty, on that account pursue no *compositio*. But indeed they scatter

[410] Alberti-Mallè, pp. 91-2, 'Dirò io quella istoria essere copiosissima in quale, a suo luoghi, sieno permisti vecchi, giovani, fanciulli, donne, fanciulle, fanciullini, polli, catellini, ucciellini, cavalli, pechore, hedifici, province et tutte similie cose.' /'Et loderò io qualunque copia quale s'apartenga a quella istoria et interviene, dove chi guarda sopra sta rimirando tutte le cose, ivi la copia del pittore acquisti molta gratia.'

> everything round in a confused and *dissolutus* way, on which account the *historia* seems not to enact but rather to disorder its matter.[411]

For Alberti, landscape backgrounds are included in what is called 'pictorial copiousness', or *copia*, which is an ornament of *historia*. But if a landscape background doesn't only mean a stretch of countryside but can include animals, secondary figures and buildings, then I will identify landscape backgrounds with Alberti's notion of *copia* more generally. The primary function of landscape backgrounds, or *copia*, is to hold the eyes of the beholder both giving them pleasure ('voluptà') and moving their soul.[412] Certainly, Alberti's conception of pictorial copiousness and variety is very much heir to the medieval literary and poetic convention of the *locus amoenus* and more generally to fifteenth-century humanistic interest in ekphrasis. Hermogenes defines ekphrasis in his second century *Progymnasmata* as follows:

> Ekphrasis is an account with detail; it is visible, so to speak, and brings before the eyes that which is to be shown. Ekphrases are of people, actions, times, places, seasons, and many other things…The special virtues of ekphrasis are clarity and visibility;…expression should fit the subject: if the subject is florid, let the style be florid too, and if the subject is dry, let the style be the same.[413]

The *Progymnasmata* were well known in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, through Priscian's *Praeexercitamenta*, a sixth-century translation. Humanistic interest in ekphrasis at the end of fourteenth century was very much focused on this earlier tradition. It is best reflected in the person of Manuel Chrysoloras and his followers. When praising with enthusiasm Pisanello's mimetic abilities, Manuel's pupil Guarino da Verona wrote:

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411 Alberti-Grayson, p. 79, II, 40; the English translation is from Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, p. 136.

412 It should be noted here that *voluptà* can also be translated as 'love'. On the notion of *voluptà* as a key term in Alberti's theory of *istoria*, see D. Arasse, 'Alberti et le Plaisir de la Peinture: Propositions de Recherche', *Albertiana*, I, 1998, pp. 143-52.

413 Translation from Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford, 1971), p. 85. On ekphrasis in art historical practice more generally, see especially J. Elsner, 'Art History as Ekphrasis,' *Art History*, v. 33 (2010), pp. 10-27.

> …you equal nature's works, whether you are depicting birds or beasts, perilous straits or calm seas; we would swear we saw the spray gleaming and heard the breakers roar. I put out a hand to wipe the sweat from the brow of a laboring peasant; we seem to hear the whinny of a war horse and tremble at the blare of trumpets...If you paint a winter scene everything bristles with frost and leafless trees grate in the wind. If you set the action in spring, varied flowers smile in the green meadows, the old brilliance returns to the trees, and the hills bloom; here the air quivers with the song of birds.[414]

There are two aspects that have been mentioned in this description: the peasant's activity and the change of season. Guarino's passage depends largely on a Virgilian vocabulary and the medieval Latin convention of the *locus amoenus*.[415]

Despite being static and motionless, and thus seemingly opposed to the movement implicit in the requirements of *historia*, the main function of *copia* or landscape backgrounds is to make *historia* more eloquent and persuasive in accordance with humanist prescriptions.[416] But it is interesting to find that, in presenting his theory of *copia*, Alberti articulates it rather critically. As Baxandall noted, the passage on *copia* and *varietas* reflects Alberti's critique of humanistic writings of the 1430s such as found in the ekphrastic descriptions of Pisanello's paintings by Guarino da Verona.[417]

Alberti's criticism of the potential danger of *copia* resulting in a disorderly style may have been in part influenced by George of Trebizond. In *De Rhetorica libri V* published in 1435, George of Trebizond criticised the literary style of Guarino da Verona, who had been his Latin teacher. He found Guarino's sentence structure 'bad, disjointed and weak'.[418] Alberti may have transferred such negative assessments of late medieval literary style to the visual arts when he critiqued the *dissolutus* style of artists. He was

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[414] Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, pp. 92-3.
[415] Ibid., p. 94.
[416] For the relationship between descriptive detail and the narrative art of *historia*, see J. K. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio. Artist and Artisan* (New Haven & London, 2000), pp. 85-7. Also see P. Rubin, 'Domenico Ghirlandaio and the meaning of history in Fifteenth Century Florence', in W. Prinz and M. Seidel (eds), *Domenico Ghirlandaio 1449-1494* (Florence, 1996), pp. 97-108.
[417] Ibid., p. 135-9.
[418] *Georgii Trapezuntii Rhetoricum libri V etc.* (Venice, 1523), 68 a-b, 'Compositione nihil fere viriliter colligatur, ac ideo supina quaedam, et futilis oratio sit'; discussed in Baxandall, *Giotto*, p. 138.

presumably thinking of Pisanello and Gentile da Fabriano who included very detailed landscape backgrounds in their paintings. For instance, in Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of Magi*, there are depictions of dogs, birds and secondary figures mounted on the horses which are walking them into the distance in a zigzag manner (Fig. 64). Or, in a painting by Pisanello dated around 1438-42 now in the National Gallery, London, animals proliferate all over the picture field (Fig. 65). While rejecting such accumulative abundance as seen in Pisanello's and Fabriano's paintings, Alberti still promotes the value of visual pleasure as a sort of *captatio benevolentiae* to the dedicatee of *Della pittura*, the Mantuan marquis Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, who commissioned a set of frescoes showing *copia* and *varietas* from Pisanello.[419]

According to Daniel Arasse, Alberti's attitude towards *copia* and pleasure in painting could be largely based on Quintilian's discussion of 'digression' in Book IV of his *Oratory Institution*. Known as an *egressio* or *excursio*, the digression, as noted by Arasse, is an authorised means to achieve the following: to 'embellish and adorn speech'; to 'sooth the judge, to warn him, to appease him, to sway him, to flatter him'; and, it is 'one of the charms of speech, a tool of its persuasive effectiveness'.[420] But Quintilian also pinned down its limitations of its employment. Digression should be brief, otherwise it would become a vice and render the listener tired and bored. Its excessive use, although brilliant, should be rigorously condemned, because it is then only a 'declamatory ostentation', a 'personal value of the speaker', and an abuse of the 'pleasure of speech'.[421]

Despite promoting *copia*, Alberti emphasises that *copia* should maintain the dignity of the main subject matter, which should be the *historia*. One the one hand, 'when the spectators dwell on observing all the details, then the painter's richness will acquire

[419] This is discussed in Arasse, 'Alberti et le Plaisir de la Peinture: Propositions de Recherche', p. 148.
[420] Arasse, 'Alberti et le plaisir de la peinture', p. 150 : 'un moyen autorisé pour « embellir et orner le discours », pour « délasser le juge, l'avertir, l'apaiser, le flechir, le flatter »; c'est un des charmes du discours, un outil de son efficacité persuasive.'
[421] Arasse, 'Alberti et le plaisir de la peinture', p. 150. Also see D. Arasse, ' « Ut Retorica Pictura? » Digression oratoire et transgression de peinture', in 'Textuel', n. 28 : *La Digression* (1994), pp. 130-40.

favour'; on the other, this abundance, or *copia*, in Alberti's words, should not only be 'furnished with variety, but restrained and full of dignity and modesty'. Alberti continues:

> Perhaps the artist who seeks dignity above all in his 'historia', ought to represent very few figures; for as paucity of words imparts majesty to a prince…I do not like a picture to be virtually empty, but I do not approve of an abundance that lacks dignity.[422]

An example of the kind of distant landscape Alberti might have approved of could be the mountainous background in Masaccio's *Tribute Money* of 1424-8 (Fig. 66). Masaccio was praised in *Della pittura* as one of the most important painters in Alberti's time.[423] It is an early example of what one might term an Albertian landscape but without depictions of animals and other secondary figures. The gravity of the figures is decorously echoed in the gravity of the stark mountainous background. But the primary focus clearly remains on the figures in the foreground who are elaborated directly or indirectly from Roman-Greco models. The landscape in Benozzo Gozzoli's *Adoration of Magi* fresco (Fig. 67) might represent the other extreme, in which there is an overwhelming profusion of details that often detract from, rather than enhance, the foreground narrative. Vasari, rather unsurprisingly, would later describe Gozzoli as 'very rich in invention, and very copious ('molto copioso') in the painting of animals, of perspectives, of landscapes and of ornaments'.[424]

Alberti specifies instead that background details should be used only if they are congruent with ('conveniens') the narrative in the foreground. In other words, Alberti

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[422] Alberti-Grayson, pp. 78-9.

[423] It has been suggested by some scholars that the name 'Masaccio' in Alberti's *Della pittura* didn't refer to Masaccio, the famous painter, but rather to Maso di Bartolommeo, a bronze sculptor, cannon-founder and engineer. See M. Pardo, 'On the Identity of "Masaccio" in L. B. Alberti's Dedication of *Della pittura*', Joseph Marino and Melinda W. Schlitt (ed.), *Perspectives on Early Modern and Modern Intellectual History. Essays in Honor of Nancy S. Struever* (Rochester, 2001), pp. 223-58. But here, I follow the Krautheimer's earlier objection to this theory. See R. Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti* (Princeton, 1970), I, p. 319n.

[424] Vasari, *Vite*, III, p. 375: 'di grandissima invenzione, e molto copioso negli animali, nelle prospettivi, ne'paesi e negli ornamenti'.

deploys a theory of decorum to suggest that landscape details are only acceptable if they are appropriately related to the foreground. Although Alberti did not fully explain the notion of *convenientia* in his treatise, his likely intended meaning may be gleaned from Leonardo's writings by implication. Observing decorum ('decoro'), according to Leonardo, is about:

> …the appropriateness ('convenientia') of the action, clothing, and place, and respect[ing] the high or low rank of that which you represent; that is, a king should have a beard, and a serious expression and attire, and the place depicted be adorned…Common people should be shown unadorned, disarrayed and abject…The acts of an old man should not be similar to those of a young one, nor those of a woman like those of a man, nor those of a man like those of a child.[425]

Aside from providing the beholder with pleasure, the background and other secondary details must therefore provide an appropriate context for the actions taking place in the foreground. This also accords with Hermogenes' discussion about decorum in relation to ekphrasis in his second-century *Progymnasmata*.

A closer link between landscape and classical theories can be found in Alberti's later work, the *Ten Books on Architecture*, which was written in about 1450 and first printed in 1486. If *copia* and *varietà* were discussed more as rhetorical terms in *Della pittura* with their relevance to landscape only being implicit, it is in Alberti's architectural treatise that he first explicitly discusses landscape as a genre. Taking up the Horatian motif of *ut pictura poesis*, Alberti writes:

> Both Painting and Poetry vary in kind. The type that portrays the great deeds of great men, worthy of memory, differs from that which describes the habits of private citizens, and again from that depicting the life of the peasants. The first, which is majestic in character, should be used for public buildings and the dwellings of the great, while the last mentioned will be suitable for gardens, for it is the most pleasing of all.

[425] Leonardo, *Treatise on Painting*, Vol. 1, p. 147.

> Our minds are cheered beyond measure by the sight of paintings depicting the delightful countryside, harbours, fishing, hunting, swimming, the games of shepherds—flowers and verdure…[426]

Here, representations of different kinds of men have been accorded different kinds of locations. It is a further statement of Alberti's theory of *decorum* in relation to the stylistic settings that are appropriate for different subjects. Most importantly, life in the countryside has been distinguished from that in the city. For the former, Alberti seems to be alluding to what could be called a 'pastoral' mode of decoration, as pastoral is based on the distinction between city and countryside.[427] Just as *copia* can bring the viewer pleasure as explained in the *Della pittura*, depicting the life of peasants on the walls of a garden, or a view of the countryside, or places such as harbours, can also bring pleasure to the beholder.

Alberti's key antique sources for such claims, especially in regard to subject matter, are Vitruvius and Pliny. That different subjects or genres of painting should be matched with different locations and audiences undoubtedly comes from Vitruvius' discussion of landscape painting in his treatise *On Architecture*. After advising that 'great painting' (*megalographia*) such as images of Gods or famous deeds should not be positioned in winter dining rooms where they will become damaged by soot, Vitruvius discusses the enjoyment of landscape painting by the ancient Greeks. In Chapter V of Book Three, Vitruvius says:

> …in covered promenades, because of the length of the walls, they used for ornament varieties of garden landscapes, finding subjects in the characteristics of particular places; for they paint harbours, headlands, shores, rivers, springs, straights, temples, groves, hills, cattle and shepherds.[428]

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[426] Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, Book IX, chap. 4. Translation is from Gombrich, 'The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape', p. 111.
[427] For an historiographical survey of the 'pastoral', see P. Alpers, 'What is Pastoral', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring, 1982), pp. 437-460. For the tradition of pastoral landscapes in Venetian art, see D. Rosand, 'Giorgione, Venice, and the Pastoral Vision', in R. C. Cafritz, L. Gowing & D. Rosand, *Places of Delight. The Pastoral Landscape* (Washington, D. C., 1988), pp. 21-81.
[428] Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, pp. 102-3.

A promenade suggests a place where people can walk and talk. The viewer does not need to stand in front of the painting, but rather can walk past it while enjoying it. Also, a painting in such a location can be less costly than a 'great painting'. Elsewhere in the treatise, Vitruvius discussed the three modes of the theatre. The proper settings for tragedy and comedy should be architectural, while the third scenic type, the satyr play, was to be 'decorated with trees, caverns, mountains, and other rustic objects delineated in a landscape style'.[429] Alberti might have been well aware of Vitruvius' discussion of theatre as well as painting.

Another antique source that Alberti used to define what should be included in the landscape paintings comes from Pliny's discussion of Studius in the *Natural History*. The fame of Studius, also known as Ludius, was well-known in the Renaissance. In his *Commentaries*, Ghiberti wrote that Ludius 'dipingeva paesi, marine, pescatori, navigli, lidi, verdure'.[430] Informed by these types of antique literary sources and perhaps a familiarity with Northern paintings that included landscapes, Alberti put forward a new concept for the painted background, one that lies in its ability to please the beholder and cheer up viewers. In the hierarchy of genres, landscape lies at the bottom and is associated with what might be called the 'life of the peasant', although Alberti only formulates these ideas in his book on architecture.[431] But already in the context of Alberti's earlier *Della pittura*, there seems to be an inherent contradiction between the foreground and the background.[432] How could the morally and iconographically less serious landscape background decorously complement the moral and iconographic significance of the *historia* in the foreground? Although it is clearly the artist's responsibility to adhere to notions of decorum, Alberti's theory of landscape and how background and foreground intersect are potentially irreconcilable when put into practice. Such a paradox can produce a tension between detailed naturalism and ideal

[429] Discussed in Rosand, 'Giorgione, Venice, and the Pastoral Vision'.
[430] *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, XII, p. 351.
[431] For the 'life of peasants', see my previous discussion of Guarino da Verona's ekphratic description.
[432] The idea that the foreground and the background are arguably in conflict in Alberti's *Della pittura* is also shared by Giovanni Romano. See G. Romano, *Studi sul Paesaggio. Storia e Immagini* (Torino, 1991), p. 40.

corporality, between *parergon* and *ergon*, foreground and background. This productive contradiction prepares the ground for the later independence of landscape as a self-evident pictorial genre.

Having discussed Alberti's theory of landscape painting, one can now turn to his proposed method for depicting landscape elements. As already noted, according to Alberti, *copia* includes 'old men and men in their prime, youths, boys, mature women and maidens, young children, pet animals and puppy-dogs, small birds, horses, cattle, buildings and stretches of country'. What counts as 'landscape' thus consists of figures unrelated to the main (by implication, figurative) subject, such as animals, buildings and stretches of countryside. But how should we interpret the phrase 'buildings and stretches of countryside' ('aedificia, provinciaeque')? Alberti has not differentiated between different kinds of places in the *Della pittura*. According to Daniel Arasse, *province* should be subdivided into fields and uncultivated nature.[433] Fields are the countryside adjacent to the city and in its control. They are the place for the 'life of the peasant'. Uncultivated nature, or *lontano*, according to Arasse's interpretation, is the much more distant area that is out of human control.

A painting that can helpfully illustrate this differentiation is Giovanni di Paolo's *Saint John the Baptist Retiring to the Desert* (Fig. 68), in which the architectural structures and cultivated fields in the foreground and middle distance are juxtaposed with more distant and clearly untamed rocky outcrops and jagged peaks in the background. The indication of perspectival order as seen in the building and the cultivated fields does not work for the rocky outcrops in the middle ground and background. These two kinds of backdrops provide two worlds (civilised world vs. wild nature) for the main character that appears twice in the picture, indicating that it is a medieval convention of the so-called 'continuous narrative'.

[433] D. Arasse, 'L'Espace de la Perspective et le Lieu du Paysage', in F. Furlan et al. ed. *Leon Battista Alberti: actes du congrès international de Paris* (Torino & Paris, 2000), pp. 589-97.

Arasse, interestingly, reads the term *lontano* as something opposed to the certainty and rationality implicit in linear perspective. Instead, it constitutes for him a place with an outcrop that is 'unexpected, bizarre, irrational and monstrous'.[434] Thus, for Arasse, the place of Renaissance landscape painting should be seen as an alternative to Alberti's perspective. Based on Arasse's reading of the terms *provincia* and *lontano*, one can further argue that, in Alberti's system, in depicting landscape backgrounds, the artist needs to adopt a bird's eye view or, implicitly, the view of God himself. This viewpoint is necessarily at odds with a human viewpoint when standing on the earth.

But what kind of distance can be depicted in the framework of Alberti's linear perspective? Is it a moderate or immoderate distance? If one extends one's understanding of Alberti's perspective from linear perspective to optical science, the answer is probably both in regards to moderate and immoderate distance. The Renaissance conception of 'perspective' can be divided between *perspectiva naturalis* and *perspectiva artificialis*, with the one being intuitive while the other is mathematical and carefully constructed.[435] Narrowly defined linear perspective, or *perspectiva artificialis*, is thus a limited tool for the artist to use to depict landscape. Depicting a landscape background, especially a distant view, or *lontano*, has to take into consideration other optical concerns, such as aerial perspective and luminosity.[436] If linear perspective is about geometrical construction, then aerial perspective, in contrast, is implicitly more empirical and closer to human visual sense.

In an interesting passage related to the so-called 'dimostrazione' from the pseudonymous 'Biography' of Alberti written in 1437 or 1438, (in fact written by Alberti himself) we learn that:

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[434] Arasse, 'L'Espace de la Perspective et le Lieu du Paysage', p. 597, n. 24.
[435] It should be noted that in the Renaissance, the term *perspectiva* means 'optics', not specifically linear- and geometrically-constructed perspective. I'm thankful to Martin Kemp for providing me with this information.
[436] A. R. Turner, *The Vision of Landscape in Renaissance Italy* (Princeton and London, 1966), p. 7.

> In the art of painting Alberti did unheard of things, incredible to those who saw them, which he showed in a little box with a small opening. There you might have seen huge mountains, vast ('vasta') provinces, the immensity ('immenso') of the surrounding sea, and regions so distant ('più lontana') that the eye was dimmed ('perdervi l'occhio'). He called these things 'demonstrations' ('dimostrazione'), and they were such that expert and layman alike would swear they saw, not painted things, but real ones in nature.[437]

It seems from this passage that Alberti used some form of 'peep-box' to show panoramic images of the Italian landscape and the heavens above.[438] The significance lies more in the *things seen* rather than in the perspectival representations of things, because beholders would consider these images not as 'painted things' but rather 'real ones in nature'. The adjectives 'vasta', 'immenso' and 'più lontana' reveal that Alberti's 'peep-box' succeeded in producing expansive images of such depth that the eye eventually lost itself in the distance. At first glance, it seems that these images are directly associated with painting in Alberti's *Della pittura*, for they are called 'miracula picturae'. They are mentioned in the Italian version of the treatise in connection with reflections, and in both the Italian and Latin texts are directly linked to Alberti's exposition of the principles of linear perspective.[439] Here, Alberti explains:

> Besides, no learned person will deny that no objects in a painting can appear like real objects, unless they stand to each other in a determined relationship. We will explain the theory behind this if ever we write about the demonstrations of painting, which our friends marveled at when they did them, and called them 'miracles of painting'; for the things I have said are extremely relevant to this aspect of the subject.[440]

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[437] 'Vita di Leon Battista Alberti di autore anonimo'—in *Opere volgari*, ed. A. Bonucci (Florence, 1843), vol. 1, pp. ciii-cv: 'Scrisse…alcuni libri di Pittura, e si fece nelle medesime cose inaudite, le quali in una cassetta rinchiuse, per piccolo pertugio poi mostrava. Vaste pianure quivi veduto avresti intorno a immenso mare distendersi, e più lontane regioni da perdervi l'occhio, le quali cose chiamavale 'dimostrazioni'; e tali si erano che dotti ed indotti sostenevano, non veder quivi cose di pennello, ma si vive e vere. E delle dimostrazioni due sorte ve n'erano; le diurne e le notturne. In queste Orione, Arturo, le Pleiadi ed altre fulgenti spuntante e le antilucane stelle. Nell'altre sfolgarare per tutto quegli che al dire d'Omero spende appresso l'irigena Aurora.' The English translation is from R. N. Watkins, 'L. B. Alberti in the Mirror: An Interpretation of the *Vita* with a New Translation', *Italian Quarterly* 30 (1989), p. 11. About the authorship of the original Latin text, see R. Fubini and A. M. Gallorini, 'L'Autobiografia di Leon Battista Alberti', *Rinascimento*, 68 (1972), pp. 21-78.

[438] Whether Alberti was showing images through a peep-box, or camera obscura, is still debated, see N. Pastore and E. Rosen, 'Alberti and the *Camera Obscura*', *Physis*, 2, (Florence, 1984), pp. 259-269.

[439] Alberti-Mallè, p. 64; Alberti-Grayson, I, pp. 54-6.

[440] Ibid., pp. 54-7.

The association of Alberti's *dimostrazioni* with reflections and 'the correct mathematical correlation of objects in a painting established from a fixed point of view' suggests, as Cecil Grayson points out, experiments with mirrors.[441] They are probably related to Brunelleschi's perspective demonstrations, as described by Antonio Manetti and Vasari.[442] In his *Vita di Filippo Brunelleschi* written around 1480, Manetti applies perspective, or *prospettiva*, to the depiction of landscapes and buildings, claiming that the painter's *prospettiva* is:

> …the 'right placement of the diminutions and increases that appear to human eyes, of things at a distance and near at hand, buildings ('casamenti'), plains ('piani'), mountains and landscapes ('paesi'), and in every place the figures and other things with that measure belonging to the distance at which they are seen; and from him was born the rule that is essential to everything concerning [the painter's perspective] that has been done from then until now.'[443]

Here, landscapes are treated as objects that can be depicted through perspective and grouped together with buildings, just as in Alberti's *Della pittura*. We can postulate that buildings and plains are placed near to hand, while mountains and landscapes are placed in the distance.

But there is further evidence suggesting that 'miracula picturae' are not identical to the precepts set up in the *Della pittura*. In *Della pittura*, Alberti briefly discusses the problem of aerial perspective, which is similar to the idea that 'the eye was dimmed' ('perdervi l'occhio'). When discussing the distant sky, Alberti observes, 'it is suffused around the horizon with whitish mist, it gradually changes back to its true colour'.[444] However, as Samuel Edgerton noted, Alberti's colour theory still adopts Aristotle's

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[441] Ibid., pp. 112-3.
[442] Vasari, *Vite*, III, pp. 142-5. A. Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi by Antonio di Tuccio Manetti*, ed. H. Saalman (Pennsylvania, 1970), pp. 42-44. On Filippo Brunelleschi and the invention of linear perspective, see M. Kemp, *The Science of Art. Optical themes in western art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* (New Haven and London, 1990), pp. 9-21.
[443] Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi by Antonio di Tuccio Manetti*, pp. 42-43.
[444] Alberti-Grayson, pp. 46-7.

tenet that the rays of sight become weakened in the distance, causing a negation of sight and the sensation of darkness.[445] In his own treatise on painting, Alberti presents a medieval Aristotelian optical explanation for distant darkness:

> Since (the median rays) carry both the colours and lights on the plane from where they touch it up to the eye, they should be found lighted and coloured in a definite way wherever they are broken. The proof of this is that through a great distance they become weakened. I think the reason may be that weighted down with light and colour they pass through the air, which being humid with a certain heaviness, tries the laden rays. From this we can draw a rule: as the distance becomes greater, so the plane appears hazier ('fusca').[446]

The distant mountain and sky in Masaccio's *Tribute Money* of 1424-8 (Fig. 66), for instance, are still very much part of an Albertian scene. The painter used grey and violet in the background mountains, and blue and grey in the sky, while the foreground colours are red, yellow and green. Closer to the horizon, Masaccio added white pigment just as Alberti advised. So, the background is tonally darker than the foreground, except for the whitish horizon. Masaccio's panoramic landscape delivers the same impression as described by Alberti in the words such as 'huge mountains, vast ('vasta') provinces, the immensity ('immenso') of the surrounding sea'. But the key thing is the 'whitish horizon'. I believe Masaccio could have directly observed this phenomenon in nature or learned such lessons from Northern masters. Indeed, the artistic ability of depicting whitish horizon has already been shown in the *Turin-Milan Hours* dated around 1420. I would argue that Alberti's 'miracles of painting' and his precepts in the *Della pittura* respectively belong to the traditions of *perspectiva naturalis* and *perspectiva artificialis*.

3.3 '…to Plunge Deeper': Ground as a Metaphor in the Practice of Northern Landscape Painting

[445] S. Y. Edgerton, 'Alberti's Colour Theory: A Medieval Bottle without Renaissance Wine', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 32 (1969), pp. 119-30.
[446] Alberti-Grayson, I, p. 43; translation is from Alberti-Spenser, p. 48.

Are landscape backgrounds really only about vision? If they are, what justifies how they are seen? If Alberti's theory provides a basic, but not comprehensive, framework for the development of landscape backgrounds in fifteenth-century Italy, what other aspects encourage the use of landscape backgrounds? In order to better understand these questions, it is helpful to confine the discussion not only to Italy but to cast the net wider. Doing so suggests that Alberti's conception of *copia*, specifically in regards to landscape elements, should be recognised as linked to, rather than be distinguished from, the contemporary Northern practices of landscape painting, such as seen in the work of Jan van Eyck.[447] Doing so suggests that Northern practices actually complement and even further develop Alberti's theory.

Depicting landscape backgrounds of Italian paintings of the second half of the fifteenth century exploits the materiality of such backgrounds. But where does this materiality come from? Is there a Flemish style in depicting landscapes which could be termed a prototype? In the sixteenth century, it has become axiomatic that the Italians were good at painting figures and the Northerners excelled at painting landscapes. On the one hand, this *topos* reinforces the discourse that Italian art is superior to Northern art just as *ergon* is superior to *parergon*. On the other, this division of labour indeed suggests that Northern artists were better landscape painters. This section discusses why Northern artists could be termed as more excellent in landscape painting by digging deep into their understanding of the picture ground, which is different from the Italian notion of *campo*. Despite Alberti's all-encompassing theory, it is the practical aspect of landscape painting that was most praised in the sixteenth century. When discussing the practice, or *praxis*, of landscape paintings in Renaissance Italy, it becomes insufficient just to focus on the Italian theory. I believe that the Northern European emphasis on the

[447] On the difference and affinity between the Jan van Eyck's and Alberti's image conception, see G. Wolf, 'Jenseits des Flusses. Affinitäten und Differenzen in den Bildkonzepten Jan van Eycks und Leon Battista Alberits', in C. Kruse & F. Thürlemann (eds), *Porträt-Landschaft-Interieur. Jan van Eycks Rolin-Madonna im ästhetischen Kontext* (Tübingen, 1999), pp. 13-29.

involvement of the artist's hands in depicting landscapes highlights the notion of authorship in the process of faithfully rendering the external nature.[448]

Singling out landscape as a particular field in which Flemings in particular were believed to be more gifted and experienced than Italians first became *topos* as early as 1509, although there were earlier writings focusing on landscape elements, the comparison between the two schools only took place in the early sixteenth century. Indeed, by the early sixteenth century, landscape as a genre in European art had become effectively synonymous with the Flemish landscape. In his *Tractato di pictura*, which was published in Rome in 1509 and dedicated to the Florentine nobleman Francesco Tommasi, the Florentine Francesco Lancillotti stated frankly:

> In order to paint the landscapes ('paesi'), both in the near and the distant views ('dapresso e a'lontani'), a certain aptitude and discretion ('un certo ingegno e descretione') are needed, which are peculiar to the Flemish, more than to the Italians.[449]

These lines are rich in connotations. Above all, the key word here is 'discretion', which means prudence and circumspection. This notion seems not a category common in Italian art criticism but rather very peculiar to Northern European art. For instance, Dürer admonishes his contemporary artist to use 'discretion' ('Bescheidenheit') in depicting small figures.[450] The notion 'Bescheidenheit' was very popular in medieval German folk culture, as Freidank, a medieval German poet, composed a collection of aphorisms by using this notion as the title. Second, there must have been connoisseurs and collectors of Northern landscapes in Italy, with Lancillotti being one such connoisseur dating back already to the fifteenth century, as discussed earlier in the present chapter. Third, Italian painters must have studied Northern landscapes very

[448] For the tension between the rising status of the artist and the impartial representation of nature, see P. Parshall, 'Imago Contrafacta: Images and Facts in the Northern Renaissance', *Art History*, Vol. 16. No. 4 (1993), pp. 554-579.
[449] F. Lancillotti, *Trattato di pittura*, ed. R. Raffaelli (Recanati, 1885), p. 4, 'A'paesi dappresso e a'lontani / bisogna un certo ingiegno e descretione / che me'l'hanno e fiandreschi che italiani.' Translation is mine.
[450] E. Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1943), p. 269.

carefully by the beginning of the sixteenth century, if not earlier. Although Lancillotti was a well-travelled soldier, it is unclear whether he travelled across the Alps or not. But it is thus reasonable to assume that what he recorded in his writings most likely reflects general Italian attitudes towards the Netherlandish paintings that were present in Italy before 1509, such as Jan van Eyck's *St Francis* and Hugo van der Goes' Portinari altarpiece, or Northern prints [for example, Michelangelo mentions studying Schongauer's *St Anthony* in his youth or the presence of Lucas van Leyden in Italy]. It has been observed that up until the mid-sixteenth century very few Northern artists had actually crossed the Alps, so it would have been through their work (whether painted or printed) rather than through the artists themselves that Italians would have known about Flemish landscape painting.[451] Most importantly, Lancillotti's words testify to the notion that by 1509, landscape painting in Italy was being conceived within a comparative framework that self-consciously contrasted Flemish and Italian modes.

Lancillotti's text undoubtedly suggests that already well before 1509, a division between must have been developing. According to Luciano Bellosi, it is with Verrocchio that the earliest evidence of division between the Flemings being seen as excelling in landscapes and the Italians in figures began to take shape.[452] One key example is Verrocchio's *Virgin and Child with two angels* (Fig. 69), which is dated around 1470 and is now in the National Gallery in London. The landscape background in Verrocchio's painting is characterised by the rich vegetation and an outcrop in the middle-ground, which can be compared to a landscape drawn by Leonardo in 1473 (Fig. 70). Both Verrocchio and Leonardo could, in turn, have referenced an earlier source, Jan van Eyck's *Saint Francis Receiving Stigmata* now seen in versions in Turin and Philadelphia (Fig. 71). In both versions, the landscape fills both the foreground and background and has become significant compositional element in itself.

[451] B. Aikema and B. L. Brown (eds), *Renaissance Venice and the North. Crosscurrents in the Time of Dürer, Bellini and Titian* (London, 1999), p. 24.
[452] L. Bellosi, 'The landscape "alla fiamminga"', in V. M. Schmidt et al. ed. *Italy and the Low Countries—Artistic Relations. The Fifteenth Century* (Florence, 1999), pp. 97-108.

Bellosi seeks to push the visual demonstration of such differences backward to the very moment when Italian interest in Netherlandish painting had first started to grow.[453] This further implies that it is through Verrocchio's workshop that Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Perugino and Leonardo first encountered the Flemish idea of landscape. Most importantly, unlike Gombrich's assumption that the idea of landscape as an independent genre first emerged in Venice in the early sixteenth century, Bellosi proposes that already in the 1470s, Florentine artists had started to imitate and appropriate Flemish landscape painting, the accepted paradigm of landscape painting at that time, into their backgrounds, which would implicitly mean this had already become the accepted paradigm for landscape painting by that time, while, at the same time, establishing their own artistic primacy as figural painters in their foregrounds. This means that, before becoming a subject in its own right, landscapes as spatial entities in the backgrounds of Florentine paintings referred to Northern examples such as Jan van Eyck's *Saint Francis Receiving Stigmata* that appear to go beyond the Albertian humanistic framework of seeing landscapes only as localised ornamental features.

The perception that Netherlandish artists were more proficient than Italian painters in depicting landscape had undoubtedly become a *paragone* of 'Flemish landscape' versus 'Italian figure' by the time the *Pictorum Aliquot Celebrium Germaniae Inferioris Effigies* was published in 1572. This consisted of portraits of Dutch and Flemish painters accompanied by Latin verses composed by the Netherlandish humanist Domenicus Lampsonius. Lampsonius states in a verse beneath the portrait of Jan van Amstel:

> The proper glory of Belgians is to paint well fields ('rura'); that of the Italians, men and gods; this is why one says, with reason, that the Italian has his brain in his head, and the Belgian, in his skillful hands.[454]

[453] The 1470s is a watershed decade for the impact of Netherlandish painting on Italian art, especially in the field of landscape painting, see R. Cocke, 'Piero della Francesca and the Development of Italian Landscape Painting', in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 122, No. 930 (Sep., 1980), pp. 626-628+631.

[454] 'Propria Belgarum laus est bene pingere rura: / Ausoniorum, homines pingere, sine deos. / Nec mirum

Here, Gilio's position is echoed. The division between mental and manual work has been linked with the division of labour between making human figures and producing landscapes.[455] Lampsonius' words recall a painting from the workshop of Quentin Matsys (Fig. 72), in which the figures are adapted from Leonardo's Saint Anne altarpiece (Fig. 73), while the background evokes a Patiniresque landscape.[456] Lampsonius' association of handicraft with landscape painting also appears earlier in a letter he wrote to Vasari in 1564, which was reprinted in the second edition of the *Vite*. While admitting that he had made excellent progress painting nudes and draperies, Lampsonius adds:

> I have not had courage enough to plunge deeper ('intromettermi più oltre'), as for example, to paint things more hazardous ('incerte') which require a hand more practiced and sure ('la mano più esercitata e sicura'), such as landscapes, trees, waters, clouds, splendours, fires, etc.[457]

In this letter, painting landscapes is distinguished from painting nude figures, opining that it is painting landscapes that is more difficult. Lampsonius' list also includes 'splendours' and 'fires', which could have reminded attentive readers of Pliny's praise of Apelles, who 'even painted things that cannot be represented in pictures—thunder, lightening and thunderbolts'.[458] It also recalls Raphael's virtuosity in painting similar effects, as described by Vasari in the *Vite*. It is evident from his letter that Lampsonius was writing from the point of view of the Flemings, Venetians and Raphael, since as we have seen earlier, for Michelangelo and his circle the more difficult thing was to paint figures.

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in capite Ausonius, sed Belga cerebrum / Non temere in guava fertur habere manu'. The text can be found here: http://www.courtauld.org.uk/netherlandishcanon/image-tombstone/14.html.

[455] Quoted in W. S. Gibson, *'Mirror of the Earth:' The World Landscape in Sixteenth Century Flemish Painting* (Princeton, 1989), p. 40.

[456] For a discussion of this painting, see V. Delieuvin et al, *La Sainte Anne : L'Ultime Chef d'œuvre de Léonard de Vinci* (Paris, 2012), pp. 318-21.

[457] Vasari, *Vite*, VI, p.228: '…non mi essendo bastato l'animo d'intromettermi più oltre, come dire a dire a dipigner cose più incerte che ricercano la mano più esercitata e sicura, quali sono paesaggi, alberi, acque, nuvole, splendori, fuoci, ec.'

[458] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, XXXV, 96.

The association between the artist's hand and landscape is linked to the more general association between landscape painting and the painter's brushwork, as well as the link between landscape painting and execution rather than invention. In the sixteenth century, a word more often used to describe landscapes is *macchia*, which comes from the Italian *macchiare*, 'to blot or stain'. For instance, Dolce describes two landscapes by Titian as 'una macchia di paese con certi arbori di sambuco' and 'una macchia d'un paese di qualita'.[459] This type of language degrades landscape painting to a form of mere *empiastrare* or 'smearing'. In Pino's dialogue, for example, Fabio says 'smearing about (*empiastra*) to display skill of hand…is an infamous approach'.[460]

In 1549, Antonio Francesco Doni, a Florentine living in Venice, wrote that Flemings could paint silks and velvets better than any other painters because they excelled at subjects that do not require *disegno*. This attitude is also seen in the proverb referring to Northerners *che gl'hanno il cervello nelle mani* (they have their brains in their hands) a sentiment that is echoed in Lampsonius' words.[461] Silks and velvets are not landscape elements, of course, but what Doni's statement suggests is a belief that depicting what might be termed 'decorative' features merely requires the emulation of surface appearance, which requires manual dexterity ('solerte'), while figure-drawing requires much more mental effort. Here we witness the growing tendency to see landscape painting as an artisanal practice, which is bound with the painter's body rather than his mind.

To some extent, Gilio and Lampsonius continued the tradition of comparing and contrasting Italian and Netherlandish paintings. As a Northerner, Lampsonius aimed to

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[459] M. Roskill, *Dolce's Aretino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento* (New York, 1968), pp. 191, 216.

[460] Quoted in R. Klein and H. Zerner (eds), *Italian Art: 1500-1600: Sources and Documents* (Evanston, 1994), p. 59.

[461] *Scritti d'Arte*, 1, p. 575: 'Perche in queste cose di leggier disegno gl'oltramontani ci aplicano più l'ingegno et la pratica, che gl'Italiani non fanno; onde si dice in proverbio, che gl'hanno il cervello nelle mani.'

rebalance the relationship of figure to landscape by considering the respective merits of the Italian and Netherlandish schools of painting. Lampsonius' efforts at even-handedness can be contrasted with the uniformly negative attitudes towards Flemish painting found in the circle of Michelangelo. The key difference between Lampsonius and the latter is that for Lampsonius such comparisons were imbued with a more heightened state of artistic self-awareness based on a subtle understanding of the differentiation of *disegno* from *colore*.

The dichotomy rather than the affinity between Italian and Northern paintings has been theorised in the scholarly literature. In an essay entitled 'Light, Form and Texture in Fifteenth-Century Painting North and South of the Alps', which was originally published in 1964, Gombrich provides us with an optical basis for a dichotomy between Italy and the North.[462] Gombrich at first distinguishes Italian *lume* (illumination) from Northern *lustro* (lustre or gleam) as seen in Leonardo's writings, and then concluded that 'Masaccio's methods of clarifying the position of forms in unified illumination coincide with the first application of scientific perspective', but the Northern tradition is good at 'the accumulation of fine detail, picking out the flowers of a meadow or the leaves of a tree'. But only the new attention to reflections and highlights could lead the Van Eyck brothers to their transformation of landscape detail 'into a microcosm of the visible world'.[463]

The distinction between Italian and Northern art as a paradigm is further developed in Svetlana Alpers' influential book, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*.[464] For the first time, Alpers develops two modes of picture-making and representation based on the relationship between vision and painting. For Alpers, an Albertian picture 'begins not with the world seen, but with a viewer who is actively

[462] E. H. Gombrich, 'Light, Form and Texture in Fifteenth-Century Painting North and South of Alps', in *The Heritage of Apelles. Studies in the art of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 19-35.
[463] Ibid., p. 28; 32.
[464] S. Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983).

looking out at objects—preferably human figures—in space'.[465] On the contrary, the northern descriptive mode, like the photographic image, is characterised by 'fragmentariness; arbitrary frames; the immediacy'.[466] In other words, Northern art lies outside the perspectival paradigm of Italian art.

Instead of perspective, the idea of ground lies at the heart of the Northern theory of art, particularly in the field of drawing on coloured grounds.[467] In Karel van Mander's *Foundation of the Noble, Free Art of Painting* (or *Grondt der edel, vry schilderconst*) composed in 1605, the idea of *grondt*, or ground, is the matrix that gives birth to the near, middle and the distant parts of a landscape picture. It could be the case that the paradigm of coloured-ground drawings informs the practice of landscape paintings in Northern Europe. As implied by Christopher Wood, the emergence of independent drawings on coloured grounds in the North prefigures the development of independent landscape paintings in the same area.[468] However, in Renaissance Italy, the practice of coloured-ground drawing is confined to the workshop tradition, which is distinguished from the practice of painting. As van Mander notes:

> Let us now descend to the earthly depths, / Nimbly sallying forth to the Landscape-grounds, / Which men were wont to subdivide on canvases and panels / For the most part into thirds and fourths.
>
> Above all, it shall befit our foreground / Always to be forceful, in order to make everything else recede…
>
> If we weave together our [fore-, middle-, and back-] grounds, / Letting the one issue from the other / in the manner that twisting serpents creep…[469]

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[465] Ibid., p. 41.
[466] Ibid., p. 43.
[467] For the role of ground in Northern practice of drawing, see J. Keizer, 'Free Ground. The Structure of Drawing in the Dutch Republic', in I. Brahms (ed), *Gezeichnete Evidentia: Zeichnen auf kolorierten Papieren in Süd und Nord von 1400 bis 1700* (Berlin and Boston, 2021), pp. 173-93.
[468] C. S. Wood, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (London, 1993), pp. 76-9.
[469] K. van Mander, *Foundation of the Noble, Free Art of Painting*, trans. W. S. Melion (Leiden and Boston, 2023), p. 295.

Here, the material ground informs the pictorial grounds in plural (including foreground, middle ground and background). More importantly, the pictorial concept of ground has become a metaphor to denote landscape-earth as a compound. In other words, ground here literally means earth. Van Mander could have envisioned the Italian style of *figura serpentinata* in the form of Northern landscape paintings by claiming that different grounds issue from each other in a serpentine manner, such as seen in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's landscape (Fig. 74). But how far this Northern idea of *grondt* could have been informed by the Italian equivalent of *campo* or, vice versa, remains an open question. The closest equivalent to van Mander's division of landscape into three grounds comes from Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo. This is best exempliefied in Lomazzo's theorisation in his *Trattatto dell'arte della pittura, scultura et architetettura* of 1585. Lomazzo claims:

> It is certain that the representation of landscapes is very difficult work with the skill one requires for it, for the view and its perspectives, which is a particular gracefulness ('grazia') given to the painters; because the landscapes need to be seen separately in three parts. The first part should be visible from the foreground; the second more obscured ('abbagliata'), and the third almost completely lost and disappearing in infinitude, so that the second is composed in effect according to the perspective with the first. In order to express this well, it is necessary to have particular gracefulness and a divine gift, because, although one may be good at creating figures, one cannot acquire that art if one does not have the natural gracefulness to demonstrate it, as it happened to the greatest painter that has been amongst the moderns, and to the many other excellent ones that have been excluded.[470]

Here, Lomazzo notes that painting landscapes requires from the painter a particular gracefulness ('grazia') and a divine gift ('dono divino'). It is important to see that, for

[470] My translation. See G. P. Lomazzo*, Scritti sulle arti*, ed. R. P. Ciardi (Florence, 1973-75), vol. 2, p. 408: 'Per certo difficilissima opra è il rappresentare i paesi con l'artificio che si gli ricerca, per il vedere e sfuggimenti suoi la quale è una grazia particolare data a i pittori; perché i paesi vogliono essere distinti in tre parti. La prima vuol esser visibile d'appresso; la seconda più abbagliata, e la terza che quasi si smarrisca affatto e perda in infinito, sì che la seconda si componga in effetto giusta di prospettiva con la prima. Et a ciò bene esprimere, bisogna avere una grazia particolare et un dono divino, perché, per principale che sia uno nel fare le figure, non può acquistare questa arte se non ha grazia naturale di dimonstrargli, come è avvenuto al maggior pittore che sia stato fra moderni, et a molti altri eccellenti che sono restati esclusi.'

Lomazzo, a painter cannot paint landscapes well without this divine gift even if he or she is a good figure painter. This position is quite different from the primacy of the figure seen in Vasari's writings. Moreover, Lomazzo divides landscape into three layers: the visible foreground, the obscured middle ground, and the background that is lost from sight. Such a layered understanding of landscape is very Leonardesque, such as seen in his *Virgin of the Rocks* (Fig. 75). This can be seen as a gesture to complement Alberti's linear perspective and to emphasize the two-dimensionality of the pictorial ground. The foreground group of figures is depicted in a strong light with distinctive features, while the middle rocky ground started to lose its distinctiveness and is cast into shadow. However, the distant bluish background is, instead, represented as if behind a veil of mist and receding from visibility.[471] One notes that the relationship between the first and second layers is in accordance with Alberti's notion that darkness is equal to distance. This connection is further emphasised by the fact that, according to Lomazzo, the second part is depicted according to perspective with the first.

Van Mander might have read Lomazzo's discussion of landscape paintings. But even if this is the case, I would argue that their perceptions of landscape painting are distinctive from each other. For van Mander, the foreground, middle ground and background should be intertwined with each other in a continuum, while in Lomazzo the three parts should be treated distinctively as if there are no mutual connections in between. Lomazzo's layered understanding is totally in accordance with Alberti's notion of the picture plane and with optical principles more generally. On the contrary, van Mander's conception is derived from the formal organisation of the gaze, which has little to do with the mechanism of natural vision.

I argue that van Mander's conception can be seen as the very paradigm or prototype of Northern landscape painting in theory. It seems Lomazzo's spatial paradigm of the

[471] On Leonardo's layered understanding of landscape as being divided between visible foreground, dark middle-ground and luminous background, see J. Bell, 'Leonardo's *Prospettiva delle Ombre*. Another Branch of Non-Linear Perspective', in F. Fiorani and A. Nova (eds), *Leonardo da Vinci and Optics: Theory and pictorial practice* (Venice, 2013), pp. 79-112.

painted landscape has been visualised as early as in Masaccio's landscape painting. As seen in Masaccio's *Tribute Money* of 1424-8 (Fig. 66), the foreground, middle ground and background have clearly depicted through perspectival lens. But it is Jan van Eyck's use of a serpentine river to guide the beholder's gaze into the far distance (Fig. 76) is germane to Van Mander's conception of landscape painting.

Perhaps the best textual witness to these differentiated approaches towards landscape painting comes from the Venetian art writer, Paolo Pino. In 1548, Paolo Pino specifically recommended that Italian painters study nature '…to gain experience and become skilled in distant views ('lontani'), in which the painters north of the Alps are particularly gifted, because they portray the scenery of their own homeland, which offers most suitable motifs by virtue of its wildness ('selvatichezza'), while we Italians live in the garden of the world, which is more delightful ('dilettevole') to behold in reality than in a painting'.[472] For Pino, Northern paintings are characterized by their picturesque qualities. The wildness ('selvatichezza') noted by Pino might refer to landscape paintings made by Joachim Patinir, in which one finds fantastic rock formations, or to those by Albrecht Altdorfer, in which forests grow ferociously. From Michiel's descriptions, we know there was a *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* by a Northern painter in the collection of Cardinal Domenico Grimani (c. 1461-1523), who was the most brilliant Venetian collector of the first half of the sixteenth century.[473] Joachim Patinir painted several similar-looking versions of this subject, including a good example now in the Prado, *St. Jerome in a Rocky Landscape* of 1516-1517 (Fig. 77). Patinir was the first 'modern' painter to be mentioned as a specialist in landscape painting in early sources. Dürer called him 'der gut landschaft mahler' ('the good landscape painter') after he was invited to attend Patinir's second wedding on 5 May 1521. Lampsonius described what Patinir painted as 'landscapes, cottages and cliffs'

[472] P. Pino, *Dialogo di pittura* (Milano, 1954), p. 56, 'farsi pratico e valente nelli lontani, d'il che ne sono molto dotati gli oltramontani, e quest' avviene perchè fingono I paesi habitati da loro, i quali per quella loro selvatichezza si rendono gratissimi; mà noi Italiani siamo nel giardin del mondo, cosa più dilettevole da vedere, che da fignere'.
[473] Aikema and Brown (eds), *Renaissance Venice and the North,* p. 86.

with no mention at all of the associated narratives. And Van Mander said of him: 'He has a certain individual way of making landscape paintings—most subtle and precise, the trees somewhat stippled—in which he also painted deft little figures.'[474]

While advising Italian painters to study nature in order to be better able to paint landscapes, Pino also acknowledged the shortcomings of Italian artists in painting landscapes. His explanation was that because they lived in the garden of the world, the landscape was more delightful to behold in reality but less interesting to depict in painting. Implying that for Italian artists, including a landscape in their paintings was optional could perhaps indicate that the landscape for Southern painters was still confined to the hierarchy of *ergon* and *parergon*, while in Northern painting it played a more central or even independent role. Nevertheless, by promoting Northern landscape painting, Pino seems to suggest that *parergon* could trump *ergon* under some specific circumstances.

The distinction between garden and nature could reveal the inherently different approaches that Italian and Flemish painters adopted to portray landscapes. The former focuses on the use of perspective and the latter concentrates on the ground both as the pictorial ground and as the natural world's actual ground. The differentiation between the Northern and Italian modes of landscape representation as seen through the eyes of Karel van Mander and Lomazzo basically reflects the real differences in practice.

At the same time, it should be emphasised that the Northern idea of *grondt* or ground appears to have informed the Venetian practices of landscape paintings. It has been pointed out that Jan van Eyck's *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (Fig. 71) may have served as a prototype for Bellini's Frick *Saint Francis* (Fig. 61).[475] Both artists

[474] A. Vergara (ed), *Patinir: Essays and Critical Catalogue* (Cat. exh. Museo Nacional del Prado, July 3 – October 7, 2007), pp. 39-40; 54-5.

[475] For Bellini's interest in Flemish landscape paintings more general, see, for instance, M. Lucco's 'Bellini and Flemish Painting', in P. Humfrey (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 75-94; for how Bellini responded to Jan van Eyck's prototype by starting to use rocks as pictorial motifs from the mid-1470s onwards, see in particular, pp. 82-85.

are interested in depicting the rock formations. In the Trecento, rocks are usually used to define the foreground. But this Trecento motif was depicted in a naturalistic manner in the fifteenth century. As seen in Bellini's Frick *Saint Francis*, rocks are spatially and iconographically more identified with the evocation of the sacred. In Bellini's painting, the rock foreground alludes to La Verna, the sacred place St Francis received the stigmata, as well as indirectly to the Rock of Golgotha.[476] Indeed, there is a close association between the body of Christ and the Rock of Golgotha to be found in late medieval exegesis.[477] The parallel between the clefts of Mount La Verna and the Rock of Golgotha is epitomised in the figure of St Francis himself, because by receiving the wounds of the Stigmata, Francis was re-assured as the *alter christus*.

3.4 The Possessive Gaze: Courtly Culture, Jan van Eyck and the Development of Landscape Backgrounds in Renaissance Italy

When commenting on the *dissolutus* style of Pisanello and Gentile da Fabriano, Alberti adopts a humanistic point of view which has rich stylistic and ideological implications. As Alberti emphasised, 'I should wish its *copia* to be *ornata* with a degree of *varietas*, and also *gravis* and *moderata* with *dignitas* and *verecundia*'.[478] Here, Alberti opts for a 'middle style' between what Cicero called the 'vigorous style' and 'plain style'.[479] Praising the regulating function of linear perspective symbolises the emerging power of the bourgeois class, which is informed by the culture of classical antiquity. But by promoting *copia* as a value, Alberti reveals his taste as an aristocrat immersed in Franco-Burgundian culture. Here, I am going to link the use of landscape backgrounds with the consumption habits of a certain class of beholders.

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[476] For the evocation of the Christian motif of the Rock of Golgotha in Bellini's picture, see Kim, *Groundwork*, p. 109.
[477] Discussed in Y. Rachman-Schrire, 'Christ's Side-Wound and Francis' Stigmatization at La-Verna: Reflections on the Rock of Golgotha', in I. Augart et al (eds), *Steinformen: Materialität, Qualität, Imitation* (Berlin and Boston, 2018), p. 50-2.
[478] Alberti-Grayson, p. 79, II, 40; the English translation is from Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators*, p. 136.
[479] Discussed in H. Wohl, '"Puro senza ornato": Masaccio, Cristoforo Landino and Leonardo da Vinci', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 56 (1993), p. 257.

A detailed contract reflecting the relationship between what should be included in the background and the patron's social status is Giovanni Tornabuoni's contract with Domenico Ghirlandaio for the frescoes in the chancel of S. Maria Novella in Florence. The artist here agreed to include details illustrating nature in all its variety including, '…figures, buildings, castles, cities, mountains, hills, plains, rocks, costumes, animals, birds, and beasts of whatever kind as seems proper to the said Giovanni [Tornabuoni]'.[480] While quoting all those landscape elements in the contract, Giovanni Tornabuoni consciously adopts an Albertian approach that deploys visual description or ekphrasis, which also resonates with the antique authority of Pliny's describing the work of the ancient landscape painter Studius.

Owning paintings with landscape backgrounds arguably became a new form of artistic consumption during this time, especially among families of the mercantile class, to which Giovanni Tornabuoni belonged. Such families commissioned artists to depict landscapes to show off their cultural knowledge and justify their own daily experience of the world in visual terms. To the best of my knowledge, the link between the rise of landscape painting and the rise of the mercantile class has not been studied in depth yet.[481] It recalls Denis Cosgrove's notion of landscape as an ideological term. Landscape, according to Cosgrove, '…represents a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature, and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to external nature'.[482]

Like the greater amount of labour and skill lavished on backgrounds, depictions of *parerga* also required a more engaged viewer to appreciate them. In the scene of the

[480] D. S. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance* (London and Basingstoke, 1970), p. 175

[481] It is likely that what one might call 'middle-class' patrons, in purchasing or commissioning landscape paintings, were seeking to imitate the lifestyle of aristocrats such as Leonello d'Este.

[482] D. E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison, 1984), p. 15.

Visitation in Ghirlandaio's frescoes in the Florentine church of S. Maria Novella which is related to the contract cited above (Fig. 78), we can find three anonymous figures standing behind the city walls behind the main foreground narrative. These three figures, with their backs turned towards us, stand idly against the ledge, gazing attentively into the far-off landscape or cityscape. They mimic the real beholders in front of the scene who likewise would have looked into the painting's deep background as their eyes meandered beyond the foreground. These figures thus seem to invite us to join them in looking beyond the Biblical narrative in the foreground in order to gaze into the distance. These figures have reminded some scholars of Jan van Eyck's *Madonna with Chancellor Rolin* of 1435 (Fig. 79), in which there are also two small figures in the background who turn their backs to the external viewer and look beyond the battlements into the distance.[483] Incorporating such figures into pictures would have made the beholder resist focusing their attention solely on the main scene in the foreground.[484] Such landscape backgrounds may also, like taking a photograph or buying a postcard of a significant place one has visited, have had special significance for the patrons, for example, by recalling the lay of the land near their home town.

However, a landscape background, in its origin, is an art form of aristocracy. It is crucial to note that the original audience for landscape paintings is the landed nobility rather than the mercantile class. The fashion for Franco-Burgundian culture was a pervasive factor in Italian court life. In Italy, above all, it was the aristocratic patronage that set the taste for Netherlandish paintings more general.[485] Secondly, the Italian mercantile class seemed to have imitated the social attitudes of the aristocratic class by commissioning Netherlandish art. The acquisition of Flemish tapestries by the Medici

[483] According to Paula Nuttall, the three standing figures in Ghirlandaio's frescoes might be a direct quotation of Jan van Eyck's original motif through a model drawing, see P. Nuttall, *From Flanders to Florence. The Impact of Netherlandish Painting 1400-1500* (New Haven & London, 2004), p. 140.
[484] These secondary figures can also be seen as episodes anticipating so-called 'modern life'. There seems to be no better verbal descriptions than Huizinga's to understand these idle figures. According to Huizinga, 'modern man is in a position to seek individually the confirmation of his view of life and the purest enjoyment of his *joie de vivre* during any moment of leisure in self-chosen relaxations.' See Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1996), p. 303.
[485] See Belozerskaya, *Rethinking the Renaissance*.

could be explained in this way. Indeed, the Burgundian ideal of 'living nobly', or 'vivre noblement' involved making one's considerable resources visible.[486] Depicting a landscape background in a portrait might therefore have been motivated in part by the fact that land ownership was a key signifier of nobility. According to Martin Warnke, the inception of early landscape painting bears witness '…not to a new feeling for nature, but to the ruler's hold over his territory; they are political tableaux that register rights and duties, dispositions and functions.'[487]

Having established the link between the development of landscape backgrounds and the aristocratic class (and the rising mercantile class that emulates the former), I should now turn to the formal aspects of such development. Seen through the period eye of the fifteenth century, Netherlandish realism works well with Alberti's theory of *copia* and *varietà*. The earliest testimony of Netherlandish paintings in Italy is that of Ciriaco d'Ancona, the great classicist of his time, who was writing in the mid-fifteenth century. In his *Commentari delle antiche cose*, there is a detailed description of the triptych by Rogier van der Weyden owned by Leonello d'Este, lord of Ferrara. Ciriaco d'Ancona was stunned by:

> Garments prodigiously enhanced by purple and gold, blooming meadows, flowers, trees, leafy and shady hills, ornate halls and porticoes, gold really resembling gold, pearls, precious stones, and everything else you would think to have been produced, not by the artifice of human hands but by all-bearing nature herself.[488]

This passage is characterized by its documentary and descriptive focus. Ciriaco's words reflect the taste of the courts at this time. According to Torresan, this was 'an eclectic

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[486] On the notion of 'vivre noblement', see J. C. Wilson, *Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages. Studies in Society and Visual Culture* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 13-86.

[487] M. Warnke, *Political Landscape. The Art History of Nature* (London, 1994), p. 9.

[488] Cited in P. Torresan, *Il Dipingere di Fiandra. La pittura neerlandese nella letteratura artistica italiana del Quattro e Cinquecen*to (Modena, 1981), p. 24, 'ci sono varie vesti e mantelli di svariati colori, resi con oro e porpora con cura straordinaria, e piante prati alberi fiori e colli verdeggianti e ombrosi, e portici ornati e porte d'oro simile all'oro, e perle e gemme, e tutto il resto diresti generati non dalla mano di un artista ma dalla stessa natura creatrice'.

but open taste' in which the enthusiasm for Netherlandish painting is tinged with a hint of exoticism.[489] Although not primarily an art critic, Ancona, with a scholar's eye, has grasped some key aspects of Netherlandish painting: the mimetic representation of visible reality and the rendering of landscape. As if being deceived by the illusion and thus entering into the painted world himself, the author describes being astonished by the verisimilitude, as though the artist himself is absent.

Another early comment comes from Bartolomeo Fazio, a Ligurian intellectual active in Naples. For him, the greatest European painters of his day were Gentile da Fabriano, Pisanello, Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden. In his *De viris illustribus* (*On Brilliant Men*) written between 1454 and 1455, Fazio described a Jan van Eyck painting of *Women Bathing* owned by Ottaviano Ubaldini della Carda, nephew of Federico da Montefeltro. The continuing fame of this fifteenth-century painting was attested to by Vasari at a time when Netherlandish painting in general had fallen out of favour. In his *Vite*, Vasari claimed that the painting was made for Federico himself, which might indicate that he initially acquired it. Fazio's description suggests that he was particularly amazed by its representation of distance:

> …women of uncommon beauty emerging from the bath…of one of them he has shown only the face and breast but has then represented the hind parts of her body in a mirror painted on the wall opposite, so that you may see her back as well as her breast. In the same picture there is a lantern in the bath chamber, as if it had just been lit, and an old woman seemingly sweating, a puppy lapping up water, and also horses, minute figures of men, mountains, groves, hamlets and castles carried out with such skill you would believe one was fifty miles distant from another.[490]

For Panofsky, Fazio here came 'very close to the great secret of Eyckian painting: the simultaneous realization, and, in a sense, reconciliation, of the "two infinites", the infinitesimally small and the infinitely large'.[491] I would suggest that this Eyckian skill

[489] Torresan, *Il Dipingere di Fiandra*, p. 25.
[490] M. Baxandall, 'Bartholomaeus Facius on Painting: A Fifteenth-Century Manuscript of the De Viris Illustribus', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 27 (1964), p. 102.
[491] E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting. Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge, 1966), I, p. 3.

in depicting two infinites matches well with Alberti's 'miracles of painting', mentioned in his 'Biography', rather than what is described in the *Della pittura*.

Like Ciriaco, Fazio's comments reflect the taste of the courts, this time the Aragonese court in Naples. The number of Netherlandish paintings in Naples increased during the time of Alfonso I. The King of Naples, for instance, possessed two paintings by Jan van Eyck. One was the *Lomellini Triptych* of the *Annunciation*, described by Fazio, which had *Saint John the Baptist* and *Saint Jerome in his Study* on its wings, and on the reverse, portraits of the original owners, Battsita Lomellini and his wife. Lomellini, a Genoese merchant, presumably presented the painting to the King whilst on a diplomatic mission to Naples in 1444.[492] The second painting is a *Saint George and the Dragon* by van Eyck costing 2,000 Valencian *soldi reyals*, which Alfonso acquired directly from Bruges.[493] The rich and flamboyant patronage of King Alfonso, which seems to have been also motivated by a desire for political prestige, had a broad, pan-European vision. In painting, the prevailing taste of his court was for Flemish art, continuing the tradition begun earlier by René d'Anjou.[494]

It was in the 1470s that landscape backgrounds became more common and more expressive in Italian Renaissance painting.[495] Interestingly, it coincides with a growing interest in Flemish painting in Italy. In what follows, I will discuss briefly a group of images produced in the 1470s in which the landscape backgrounds can be stylistically traced back to the prototypes of Jan van Eyck's *Virgin and Child with Chancellor Rolin* (Fig. 79). The patron of this painting, Nicholas Rolin, was born to a bourgeois family in Autun and trained as a lawyer. By 1422 Rolin had been named the post of the chancellor of Burgundy and elevated to knighthood by Philip the Good, whose father,

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[492] Ibid.
[493] R. Weiss, 'Jan van Eyck and the Italians', *Italian Studies*, XI, (1956), pp. 11-12. About the presence of Jan van Eyck's paintings in Italy more generally, see P. Nuttall, 'Jan van Eyck's Paintings in Italy', in S. Foister, S. Jones & D. Cool (eds), *Investigating Jan van Eyck* (Belgium, 2000), pp. 169-182.
[494] Torresan, *Il Dipingere di Fiandra*, p. 25.
[495] For 1470 as a turning point, see A. Richard Turner, *The Vision of Landscape in Renaissance Italy* (Princeton, 1966), p. 3.

John the Fearless, also had employed him.[496] Here, I aim to point out, in particular, the link between the landscape background and the elite status of Rolin. The so-called *Rolin Madonna* presents a framed and distant landscape which is reminiscent of Alberti's concept of a painting as a window. This framed landscape is not without political meanings associated with the elite commission of this painting itself. Behind the figure of Chancellor Rolin, there are vineyards which are believed to be his own landed properties. Indeed, as James Snyder has pointed out, much of Rolin's wealth was attained through the ownership of vineyards and the verdant slope behind him.[497] The landscape background will even come forward if we follow the continuity between the landscape and Rolin's hands, the latter of which might imply an analogy between seeing and touching. It is primarily the meaning and form of the framed landscape background of the *Rolin Madonna* that will be the key reference point for the following discussion. As will be shown later, Jan van Eyck also provided Italian artists with a technical means for depicting those far-off or distant lands owned by the patrons in a naturalistic manner.

Key early examples of this phenomenon are the landscape backgrounds in Piero della Francesca's *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza* (Fig. 80), which were undoubtedly painted with the Eyckian paradigm in mind. Like the Eyckian landscape background of the *Rollin Madonna*, Piero della Francesca not only adopts a bird's-eye view analogous to the viewpoint of God but deploys an unprecedented technique of depicting the far-off mountains as if being veiled in a bluish white. However, unlike the relationship between the figure and landscape that the former *owns* the latter in Jan van Eyck, here the figure *rules* the land.[498] Normally, it is a Renaissance practice to depict female sitters indoors while placing their male counterparts outdoors. But here Battista Sforza is depicted before a landscape and, most importantly, occupies

[496] Discussed in A. Acres, *Jan van Eyck within His Art* (London, 2023), p. 122.
[497] J. Snyder, 'Jan van Eyck and the Madonna of Chancellor Rolin', *Oud Holland*, 82, no. 4 (1967), p. 169.
[498] For an in-depth discussion about the relationship between foreground figures and landscape backgrounds in Piero's double portraits, see M. Warnke, 'Individual as Argument. Piero della Francesca's Portrait of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino', in N. Mann and L. Syson (eds), *The Image of the Individual. Portraits in the Renaissance* (London: British Museum, 1998), pp. 81-90, especially pp. 84-5.

the dexter side, the beholder's left. It is known that she acted wisely as a regent in Federico's name during his absences from Urbino.

Interestingly, there is a stronger affinity between Battista and the landscape than that between Federico and the landscape. On Battista Sforza's side (Fig. 81), we can discern a subtler interplay amongst the landscape, Battista's body and her jewellery. Almost appearing to emerge from the topmost string of pearls around her neck is a vertical mountain ridge that points up towards Battista's chin, thus closing off the view into the distance immediately to the right of her neck. The second string of pearls is linked to city walls that circle around the terrain and curve back towards the necklace, on which hangs a medallion, again moving the eye back towards the foreground despite the presence of a distant landscape in parts of the background. On either side of Federico da Montefeltro (Fig. 82), we see a wide river running from left to right across the painting, cutting into the landscape with a tributary, so that one can imagine the ships venturing far into the distance, our eye likewise encouraged to wander deep into the depicted landscape along the waterways that stretch out to either side the sitter. While the landscape behind Federico leas the beholder's eye deep into the distance vertically, the landscape in Battista's portrait guides the eye across the composition horizontally, which encourages us to examine Battista's dress and necklace closely thereby stressing the surface more than the depth.

Aside from reflecting the aristocratic status of Battista Sforza, the choice of landscape backgrounds could be certainly motivated by the dynastic concern of the male sitter, Federico da Montefeltro. According to Eugenio Battisti, the portraits were commissioned to mark the legitimation of the dynasty and preserve for the couple's son and heir, Guidobaldo, the memory of his parents.[499] Although not depicting explicitly an identifiable place, the landscape behind Federico da Montefeltro has been seen symbolising the urban space of Urbino which the duke often frequented, as described

[499] E. Battisti, *Piero della Francesca*, 2 vols (Milan, 1992), I, pp. 278-91; II, pp .514-18.

by the Florentine book dealer Vespasiano da Bisticci.[500] Both figures are heroically depicted as if occupying the *campo*, which has become emblematic of the family pride of the Montefeltro family. To some extent, we can term the Eyckian landscape background as a depiction of a kind of possessive gaze in which the figure possesses the landscape background in both formal and thematic terms. Also, this pictorial possession deeply resonates with the medium, oil paint. As noted by John Berger, there is an 'analogy between *possessing* and the way of seeing' in oil painting.[501] It is particularly evident in Jan van Eyck and Piero della Francesca, both of whom used oil as the medium of painting.

Later, in the 1470s, Antonio del Pollaiuolo returns to this paradigm again in the background of his *Martyrdom of St. Sebastiano* (Fig. 83). Further developing Jan van Eyck's formula, Pollaiuolo's background consists of a plain traversed by a river and enclosed by the little hills in the distance that gradually are dissolve away into the far distance. It is Pollaiuolo's panorama that provided a reference point for the young Leonardo as well as other artists.[502] It is not a great stretch of the imagination to posit that it was the formula of Flemish landscape painting that made it possible to depict deep space in Italian paintings. Most importantly, although appearing in a religious painting, Pollaiuolo's landscape background could also have a secular meaning for the patron, Antonio Pucci.[503] As a faithful supporter of the Medici family, Pucci's choice of landscape background could indirectly reflect the interest of the Medici. As pointed out by Luba Freedman, Pollaiuolo's example reflects a general topographical impulse of representing the Arno Valley in the backgrounds of Florentine paintings in the second half of the fifteenth century.[504] This interest in depicting the Arno Valley has been seen as the Florentine citizens' love and fear of the Arno River as both being

[500] Discussed in Warnke, 'Individual as Argument', p. 86.
[501] J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 2008), p. 83.
[502] On the development of landscape backgrounds after 1460 in Florence, see P. Zambrano and J. K. Nelson, *Filippino Lippi* (Milano, 2004), pp. 245-50.
[503] For Pucci's commission of this altarpiece, see A. Wright, *The Pollaiuolo Brothers: The Arts of Florence and Rome* (New haven and London, 2005), pp. 208-25.
[504] L. Freedman, 'The Arno Valley in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Painting', *Viator*, vol. 44, 2 (2013), pp. 201-42.

subject to human control and the cause of their city disasters under the aegis of the Medici.[505]

Pollaiuolo's innovative panorama that provided a reference point for Francesco Botticini's *Palmieri Altarpiece* (Fig. 84), dated between 1475 and 1477. In this altarpiece, the artist included a quite sophisticated panoramic view of the cityscape of Fiesolo with Florence beyond, as is the case in real life, behind the figure of Matteo Palmieri, and one landscape view behind his wife, Niccolosa (Figs. 85, 86).[506] The inclusion of the city view of Florence is to compare it to a 'New Jerusalem'. Certainly, this comparison is to echo the depiction of Heaven at the top of the altarpiece. But by including a city view of Florence, the patron could possibly emphasise his non-aristocratic status. Palmieri was a prominent civic leader of Florence, humanist and ambassador to Alfonso's court in Naples. Unlike aristocrats possessing their territories shown behind, as discussed previously, Palmieri does not possess the city, despite his elite status. It has been pointed out that behind his wife Niccolosa Serragli are farms in the hills of the Val d'Elsa.[507] Although not having a Florentine tradition as ancient as the Palmieri, the Serragli family of S. Spirito were descended from an old feudal clan by the name of Buonaiuti. Given Niccolosa's aristocratic lineage, it is tempting to suggest that the still unidentified fortified city immediately behind her in the painting could be the castle of Pogna in the Val d'Elsa, the original seat of the Serragli family.[508] Although these farms had been sold by Matteo Palmieri when this painting was made, they could still be depicted to underline the aristocratic status of his wife.

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[505] Ibid.

[506] For a reading of the landscape behind Niccolosa de' Serragli as her dawry farms, see C. King, 'The Dowry Farms of Niccolosa Serragli and the Altarpiece of the Assumption in the National Gallery London (1126) Ascribed to Francesco Botticini', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgechichte*, 1987, 50, Bd., H. 2 (1987), pp. 275-278.

[507] Ibid., p. 277.

[508] This fortified city has not been identified in a recent catalogue of this altarpiece, see J. Sliwka, *Visions of Paradise. Botticini's Palmieri Altarpiece* (London, 2015), p. 73. For the original seat of the Serragli family, see L. Martines, *Social World of Florentine Humanists*, 1390-1460 (Princeton, 2015), p. 230.

Behind Palmieri, the hill at the far left of the panel is the district of Fiesole, which is distinguished by its old abbey, known as the Badia Fiesolana. In 1456, Cosimo de' Medici took over the patronage of the Badia and gave Palmieri the patronal rights to the third chapel in the left aisle of the Badia dedicated to Saint Francis. So, the Badia held special spiritual significance to Palmieri. More interestingly, the landscape behind Palmieri also depicts Palmieri's personal properties: his *podere* (farm) and his *villa*, known as the Villa della Fonte ai tre Visi. These are depicted below the Badia. The villa was originally built by the noble Fini family in the fourteenth century and acquired by Palmieri from the Solosmei. The farm, or *podere*, provided food and revenue, as it was rented out to farmers who paid Palmieri income. In his *Della Vita Civile*, Palmieri even dedicated one section to a discussion of the 'usefulness' of crops, livestock, servants, and labourers as key sources of an individual's wealth and beneficial for the society at large.[509] As Amanda Lillie has pointed out, the idea of place, or *luogo*, appealed to the Florentine elite, both merchantile and noble, as a mnemonic device, reminding them of the prestige of their actual and (in some cases) invented ancestors.[510]

It is significant that in all the landscape backgrounds produced in the 1470s, the panoramic landscape view is not open to the viewer freely but obstructed by the formidable foreground figures. Beyond Piero della Francesca, this compositional innovation is particularly associated with Pollaiuolo. In order to confirm this, one can turn to two earlier panels by the same artist. In his *Hercules and Hydra* (Fig. 87), there are two conflicting spatial systems: the landscape background and the foreground figures. Through aerial perspective and meandering rivers, the landscape recedes into the distance. However, a clear view of the landscape is denied to the viewer by the two imposing figures in the front. Unlike the landscape that recedes from the beholder, the foreground figures are pushed towards the viewer, highlighting the inherent dynamics of the material surface or the *campo* of the panel. The same composition is evident in Pollaiuolo's *Hercules and Antaeus* (Fig. 88). Pollaiuolo's panels were commissioned

[509] Sliwka, *Visions of Paradise*, p. 64.
[510] Lillie, 'Memory of Place', pp. 195-210.

by Cosimo de' Medici. As was the case in Piero della Francesca's double portrait of Federico da Montefeltro and his wife, this kind of relationship between a dominant figure and an environing landscape could reflect the politics of the contemporary expectation of a princely way of patronising a work of art.

3.5 Hidden from Sight: Landscape, Cloths of Honour/Curtains and the Materiality of Seeing

I argue that the landscape backgrounds from the 1470s onward, although being informed by Albertian theory, are largely a borrowed form from Northern art. So far, we have seen how this 'borrowed form' has been evoked to visualise the visible resources possessed by the patrons. This secular aspect of landscape backgrounds can be identified with what was meant by Lancillotti as *dapresso* or 'near view' because of their proximity and accessibility to both the beholder and the depicted patrons. In what follows, I will focus on the sacred aspect of the so-called *lontano*, or 'distant view'.

As discussed in Chapter 2, it has become an art-historical commonplace to claim that Alberti provided a strong impetus for replacing gold with paint in the historical development of painting as a new medium in the fifteenth century.[511] Both that chapter and the present one argue that Alberti strongly influenced the general trend of changing the *campo* from a gold ground to a painted one (particularly in fifteenth-century Florence), in the process of dematerialising the background so that it could be seen through as though it were a transparent plane, although there are moments when a gold ground was newly aligned with a landscape background or re-evoked as a historical form.[512] In medieval paintings, as shown in Chapter 2, gilding was used in the field of

[511] This transition has been discussed thoroughly in Chapter 2. But for more general literature, also see O. Bätschmann, 'Kunstgenuß statt Bilderkult. Wirkung und Rezeption des Gemäldes nach Leon Battista Alberti', *Historische Zeitschrift. Beihefte*, 2002, New Series, Vol. 33, Macht und Ohnmacht der Bilder. Reformatorischer Bildersturm im Kontext der europäischen Geschichte (2002), pp. 359-375. For the critique of gold and, more generally, the spiritual impulse in Alberti's *De pictura*/*Della pittura*, see S. Stowell, *The Spiritual Language of Art. Medieval Christian Themes in Writings on Art of the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden and Boston, 2015), pp. 62-3; pp. 71-117.

[512] As noted in Chapter 2, a key text on Alberti and the shift from gold to painted backgrounds, the use

painting externally to the figure depicted in tempera. With the decline of gold grounds in use, the pictorial subject was expanded from being the figure alone to being a combination of the figure and the background. Indeed, Alberti introduced a theory of decorum in narrative images (or *historia*) that demands that what is depicted in the background be congruent with the subject in the foreground.[513]

But a key question remains: how can one evoke the divine after Alberti's moral critique of the materiality of gold as mere ornamentation? If Alberti's theory of landscape background is more about the visible, how to represent what lies beyond the natural world? In the case of devotional pictures, how to evoke the invisible and the divine in the wake of Renaissance naturalism?[514]

It has also been argued that gold ground as a model continues to inform the aesthetics of painted backgrounds of Renaissance paintings in Venice. Blass-Simmen first observed that the ground as the site of the divine is still seen in the development of the so-called 'distant view', or *lontano*, in Venetian landscape paintings.[515] This position is echoed in Kim's most recent revisiting of Giovanni Bellini's landscape paintings. Kim suggests that the Byzantine tradition of gold ground informed Bellini's practice of landscape painting.[516]

What follows will focus on the motif of 'veiled landscape' or 'veiled *lontano*' in Venetian art. Unlike a landscape as seen through a rectangular frame, which is part of a lager architectural setting, a veiled landscape is seen *through* a curtain, which

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of gold grounds in the fifteenth century cannot be termed as 'anachronic' in general. The situation is more nuanced, depending on the context in which it is deployed. Chapter 2 has shown the reunion of materiality, transparency and gold ground in Pinturicchio's Rome as well as the invocation of the historicism of gold ground in Filippino Lippi's Valori altarpiece in Florence.

[513] For the link between the development of landscape backgrounds and the theory of decorum, see, in particular, A. Cole, 'Aspects of Quattrocento Landscape Depiction' (MPhil thesis, Warburg Institute, 1981), pp. 94-127.

[514] About Renaissance naturalism, see Summers, *The Judgment of Sense.*

[515] See B. Blass-Simmen, '"Qualche lontani": Distance and Transcendence in the Art of Giovanni Bellini', in C. C. Wilson (ed.), *Examining Giovanni Bellini: An Art 'More Human and More Divine'* (Tournhout, 2015), pp. 77-91; esp. p. 88.

[516] Kim, *Groundwork*, pp. 83-128; in particular, see pp. 90-3.

functions like a soft architecture. Using curtains, above all, is to visualise the poetics of veiling and unveiling, which has both Christian and classical roots. In Christian art, an important paradox in artistic representation is how to represent the invisible in visible forms. Incarnation is the quintessential example given that it addresses Christ's double nature of being simultaneously corporeal and transcendental. This paradox became more prominent from the fifteenth century onwards as the perspectival method increased pictorial emphasis on developing plausibly naturalistic approaches to depicting visible realities. The motif of the veil thus plays an important role in linking what is invisible to what is visible in Renaissance sacred art.[517] In the classical tradition, the veil was commonly used as a poetic device to suggest the invisible that is hidden beneath (or beyond) the veil's materiality. Timanthes' veil is perhaps the most famous example of how such veiling functions.[518]

Gold ground is the best medium to evoke the invisible through visible and material means. The link between veils and gold grounds has already been noted by Paul Hills. According to Hills, the spreading veils on the gold field in Duccio's paintings '…evoked a mysterious compound, a shared potential, and this sense of something existing *in potentia* accorded with Aristotle's influential account of how the transparent medium, or diaphane, is activated by light'.[519] The diaphanous element creates suspense between the visible and invisible. I suggest that the motif of the curtain complicates the Albertian notion of picture as 'una finestra aperta', which supports the argument I will make that the 'gold ground effect' seen in cloth of honour compositions subverts key aspects of perspective.[520] I argue that using a textile background before a landscape underlines the potential of paintings to both show and conceal, which is thus very close to the dynamism of gold ground.

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[517] W. T. Woodfin, 'Sacredness', in Anika Reineke et al. (ed.), *Textile Terms: a Glossary* (Emsdetten/Berlin, 2017), pp. 205-10.
[518] See, in particular, P. Alei, '"*Intellegitur Plus Semper Quam Pingitur*:" The Renaissance Heritage of Timanthes' Veil' (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2002).
[519] P. Hills, *Veiled Presence. Body and Drapery from Giotto to Titian* (London, 2018), pp. 86-7.
[520] The notion 'gold ground effect' was introduced to me by Prof Alison Wright in a private correspondence.

A typology of curtains and other textiles used in sacred and secular images in the Renaissance is helpful to understand the implication of using such materials in connection with (partial) landscape backgrounds. According to the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, *cortina*, or curtain primarily means '…part of bed curtains, which is an ornament, with which the bed is swathed like a tent, of which the superior part is called canopy (*sopraccielo*)'.[521] It also refers to the lower part of a baldachin, which like a bed, would have been enclosed on several sides by curtains. Another type of curtain runs straight across a surface or area, such as a window frame or, on occasion, a painting. Such curtains could be drawn apart into two halves, one on each side. The curtains in Fra Angelico's *San Marco Altarpiece* (Fig. 89) and Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* (Fig. 90) could be seen as examples of this latter type of curtain. In iconographical terms, the use of a curtain in the Annunciation scenes could instead belong to the former category, because the Virgin is usually represented in her bed chamber.

Another type of curtain serves as a *spalliera* or screen on either side of the throne of the Virgin Mary, hiding part of the background, such as seen in the *San Marco Altarpiece* (Fig. 89). The curtain simultaneously serves as a foil to set off the figure and as a screen that makes what the beholder might have imagined was behind the figure visible or invisible to the viewer. In Bellini's devotional pictures, for instance, the curtain functions as a cloth of honour behind the Madonna and Child and, at the same time, can cover up to half of the landscape in some cases (Fig. 91). In some other examples, the cloth of honour covers the whole area of *campo* (Fig. 92). As an alternative to Albertian perspectival 'looking through', the curtain generates two possibilities of spatial representation. Like a screen, the curtain can obscure the landscape or sky that a beholder would imagine would be behind the figure, thus shifting the focus to the more intimate and shallow space at the front, and in the case

[521] *Vocabolario*, II, p. 424: 'Cortina: parte di cortinaggio, che è un'arnese, col quale si fascia il letto, a guisa di tenda, alla cui parte superior diciam sopraccielo'.

when the textile covers the entire background, evoking an interior opposed to an exterior space. Without the curtain, beholders would be likely to expect that the figures would be situated directly in front of a landscape or other background setting.

It should be pointed out emphatically that what is meant by *cortina* is essentially different from what is called 'cloth of honour'.[522] The so-called 'cloth of honour' is normally a piece of precious gold brocade hanging vertically behind a saint or the Virgin Mary. Indeed, the hieratic presentation of a cloth of honour is usually seen as a formal extension of the Virgin's throne in heaven. The motif of the cloth of honour is already found in fourteenth-century Florentine paintings but was further developed in the following century. In the North, the cloth of honour motif can already be found in the fifteenth century in Jan van Eyck's various Madonnas (Fig. 93). In Italy, the cloth of honour as an iconographical and spatial device became more common in this period.

But there was a tendency to replace cloth of honour with *cortina* in the 1480s, which is particularly evident in Giovanni Bellini's Marian images. It indeed can be argued that the practice of using curtains either to relegate landscapes to the margins or by implication cover them completely are particularly Venetian practices.[523] One purpose of transforming a cloth of honour into a curtain could be intended to remind the beholders of customs of unveiling altarpieces during ceremonial occasions.[524] Claudia Blümle claims the replacement of gold grounds with painted curtains in many Renaissance Marian images testifies to a shift from representing the gaze of God through gold grounds to the strategies of unveiling and veiling that correspond to the

[522] For cloth of honour, see A. Hollander, 'Cloth of Honour', in *Fabric of Vision. Dress and Drapery in Painting* (London, 2002), pp. 13-36; A. Wright, 'Cloth of Honour', in *Frame Work: Honour and Ornament in Italian Renaissance Art* (New Haven, 2019), pp. 151-83. For Jan van Eyck's depictions of cloths of honour, see D. M. Cottrell, 'Unraveling the Mystery of Jan van Eyck's Cloths of Honor: The *Ghent Altarpiece*', in D. G. Koslin and J. E. Snyder (eds), *Encountering Medieval Textiles and Dress: Objects, Texts, Images* (New York, 2008), pp. 173-94.

[523] See the examples provided by S. Settis, *Artisti e committenti fra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Torino, 2010), pp. 179-206.

[524] For a study on the hangings and curtains of Renaissance altarpieces, see A. Nova, 'Hangings, Curtains, and Shutters of Sixteenth-Century Lombard Altarpieces', in E. Borsook and F. Gioffredi (eds), *Italian Altarpieces 1250-1550. Function and Design* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 177-89.

practices associated with staging of images that the Church regulated throughout the liturgical year.[525]

Seen within Bellini's depictions of the Madonna, there is a clear shift from emphasising the material aspect of the cloth of honour to its visual or immaterial aspects. This shift is signalled in the composition that moves the cloth of honour from the central position of the picture to its one side. Or to put it another way, Bellini replaced the cloth of honour with a curtain. If one compares the so-called *Madonna dell'Orto* in the Kimbell Art Museum (Fig. 94) with a later Madonna such as Bellini's Marian painting now in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 91), the difference is obvious. In the former case, the artist used the 'pomegranate' cloth of gold against a gold ground to suggest a certain kind of magnificence. In the latter, the artist, instead, used a monochromatic cloth and pushed it to one side in order to give the beholder a glimpse of the landscape view behind. The gilded margin of this red cloth certainly indicates that it works also like a cloth of honour. It might be the case that the cloth of honour was retained out of a sense of convention, even as a new interest in depicting the sky and landscape began to become more fashionable. Rona Goffen notes that a lack of spatial continuity between foreground and background could have been intended to leave the beholder with an impression of a transcendental vision beyond empirical definition.[526] Indeed, Bellini's use of a curtain-cum-cloth-of-honour results in the figure being more clearly connected to a far-off landscape.

Bellini's use of a curtain to veil the landscape background actually transforms the landscape view into a meta-landscape painting. It is both a self-reflection upon how landscape painting originated from a framed view as well as on the nudity of the Christ Child, signifying the Incarnation, in the process of the *relevatio*. The curtain can

[525] C. Blümle, 'Glizernde Flaten. Goldgrund und Vorhang in der frühneizeitlichen Malerei', G. Brandstetter and S. Peters (eds), *Szenen des Vorhangs – Schnittflächen der Künste* (Freiburg, 2008), p. 57.
[526] R. Goffen, 'Icon and Vision: Giovanni Bellini's Half-Length Madonnas', in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Dec., 1975), p. 492.

pictorially visualise what still remained concealed in the Old Covenant came to be revealed through Christ's redemption of mankind. A phrase in the widely employed Marian sequence, *Ave praeclara maris stella* makes it clear: 'what the figural type [of the Old Testament] has formed, first the veil must be pulled aside in order to see it' ('…quod typus figurabat, iam nunc abducto velo datur perspici').[527] The meta-landscape could also play upon the role of the Virgin as the 'window to heaven' (*fenestra coeli*), through which the believer/beholder hopes to enter paradise. The window metaphor is referred to in the Virgin's dual role as a medium of the incarnation of the divine *logos* and as the *mediatrix* and intercessor for the believer/beholder.[528] The Virgin's confrontational gaze also seems to invite the beholder to look at her, the Christ Child, the curtain, and the revealed landscape background while contemplating the cycle of redemption.

The pleated curtain can be an independent meditational form as well. In his analysis of the pleats on the textile backgrounds in Northern devotional images, Alfred Acres draws a link between the materiality of the pleated textile and temporality.[529] As noted by Acres, the 'material past of the unfolded cloth embeds a small yet sure sliver of human time among these immortal spans, intervening gently among the grand acres of theology to accommodate the palpable experience of time-bound observers'.[530] Facilitated by the folded curtain in Bellini's Metropolitan Marian painting, for instance, a devout Christian might think of the landscape background as alluding to Christ's death and resurrection themes, echoing the quince held by the Child as a symbol of Redemption. The road leading from the green field and the town in the background to the barren foreground might be a motif suggesting the life of the soul, which appears in many of Bellini's landscapes.[531] Caroline Bynum suggests that only medieval art is

[527] R. Huygens, 'Deux commentaries sur la sequence Ave praeclara maris stella', *Cîteaux : Commentarii Cistercienses*, 2-3 (1969), pp. 108-69.
[528] Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, pp. 24ff.; Goffen, 'Icon to Vision', p. 505.
[529] A. Acres, 'Small Physical History: The Trickling Past of Early Netherlandish Painting', in C. Heck and K. Lippincott (eds) *Symbols of Time in the History of Art* (Turnbout, 2002), pp. 15-7.
[530] Ibid, p. 17.
[531] A. Gentile, 'Bellini and Landscape', in P. Humfrey (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini* (Cambridge ,2004), pp. 167-81.

characterised by a self-conscious sense of its own objecthood.[532] However, I would claim that Bellini's pleated curtain is a pictorial device that reflects the painter's self-awareness of the materiality of the painting itself and his aim to transcend it.[533]

Colour symbolism was meaningful in Bellini's work. Bellini often uses green and red curtains. The combination of a green baldachin and the red curtain in his *Barbarigo Altarpiece* (Fig. 95) is an example that combines both colours. Bellini used red curtains alone in works such as his Metropolitan *Madonna and Child* (Fig. 91) and *The Virgin and Child* of c. 1475 in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. Bellini (and his workshop) used green curtains even more often. Unlike Fra Angelico's pleated cloths of gold, Bellini's monochromatic curtains, though could have been made from previous materials, are characterised by their formal simplicity, which can reflect Bellini's Franciscan belief. Aside from its colour symbolism (as seen in the red curtain in his Metropolitan Marian image used to relate to Christ Child himself), Bellini's monochromatic curtains, because of their seeming flatness, can become conflated with the practice of *campeggiare*, laying in of colour. Coloured *campi* would have reminded the beholders of the mediality and materiality of painting itself, as well as would have evoked particular types of coloured cloth. Johannes Grave's commentary on the window motifs in Venetian paintings provides a valuable perspective. The beholders could not 'grasp the picture simply by looking at it' in comprehending images that are not wholly accessible.[534] In similar terms, Bellini's Marian images with curtain backdrops are images oscillating between optical illusions and two-dimensional painting, given that they imply that 'something' lies behind or beyond the textile background behind the principal figures. As Grave further notes:

[532] Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, p. 58.
[533] For the fused mode connecting the material/sensible seeing to the immaterial comprehension in early Renaissance devotional paintings, see G. Rosser, 'Beyond Naturalism in Art and Poetry: Duccio and Dante on the Road to Emmaus', *Art History*, vol. 35, 3 (June, 2012), pp. 475-97.
[534] J. Grave, 'Reframing the "Finestra Aperta". Venetian Variations on the Comparison of Picture and Window', in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 72, Bd., H. 1 (2009), p. 68

> For the picture itself, this strategy implies that the ultimate goal is not to achieve transparent visibility, but to keep something in 'reserve'. If what the viewer initially thinks is an opening with a view turns out to be a two-dimensional picture, the revocation of transparency would make the viewer revert to the basic conditions of pictorial representation.[535]

Bellini's curtains are just such ambivalent devices that keep Alberti's 'transparent visibility' in reserve by making the viewer conscious of the 'basic conditions of pictorial representation'. It could even be argued that the pleated curtains in the *Barbarigo Altarpiece* could be self-consciously referring to the most material support of the painting, the canvas itself.

Curtains can also be used in secular images. A counterexample of Bellini's Marian images is Ercole de' Roberti's *Portraits of Ginevra Bentivoglio and Giovanni II Bentivoglio* of c. 1474/1477 (Figs. 96, 97). Here, the landscape background has been transformed into a view by a luxurious dark green curtain, which occludes a large part of the view. The panoramic view as opened by Jan van Eyck and later adapted by Piero della Francesca raises a further challenge. Ginevra was the half-sister of Battista Sforza, for whom Piero della Francesca had painted the famous diptych now in the Uffizi. It has been observed that Piero's invention of having the couple depicted in profile and set against a background of their territories was the obvious model for Roberti.[536]

Roberti departed from Piero in placing his subjects against a flat, dark green backdrop, recalling early profile portraiture and coins. The presence of the gold pin that holds up the curtain and the golden highlighting in the curtain's inner side all contribute to the notion that the curtain works like a cloth of honour. A closely related picture, analogous in composition, is the *Portrait of a Young Man* attributed to Baldassare D'Este, which is now in the Museo Correr, Venice (Fig. 98). The still-unidentified sitter is placed

[535] Ibid.
[536] M. Boskovits and D. A. Brown et al., *Italian Paintings of the Fifteenth Century. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue* (New York and Oxford, 2003), p. 603.

directly within a marble frame. The 'window metaphor' as indicated by the frame is, however, detracted by the presence of a green curtain behind.

But why would Ercole de' Roberti have painted a curtain/cloth of honour behind the two figures as a conscious gesture to depart from Piero's model? Above all, this casual composition could be a curtain across a window before which the sitter is only passing by or standing in front of in a general setting of a fairly grand palazzo or villa. But the meaning of this composition is more profound than this. If you pay attention to a detail appearing in both pictures at the margin, it is easy to find a gesture of human intervention. A corner of the fabric has been raised and pinned to the upper hinge in order to reveal a glimpse of the landscape beyond. But this material implication indicates the previous state, that is when the fabric naturally falls and covers the whole pictorial field. In that state, the portrait looks more like a conventional profile view with a dark and neutral background. In the light of Gombrich's theory of the so-called 'beholder's share', the beholder would project this previous status into the painting and compare these two states of the image.[537] In this sense, this pair of portraits becomes self-referential because it refers simultaneously to two histories of portraiture making. Piero della Francesca's double portraits with landscape backgrounds certainly reflect the contemporary fashion of incorporating figures into landscape settings. But Ercole de' Roberti is different. By using a hanging curtain that divides figures from landscapes, he decontextualises his paintings from this current fashion—just as, in formal terms, he decontextualises his figures from their natural settings—in order to reflect upon a more ancient tradition of image-making. I argue that Ercole de' Roberti aimed to remind the beholder of the tradition of coins or medals, in which the figure is usually depicted against a neutral and material ground.

As the godson of Leonello d'Este, Giovanni II Bentivoglio often sought guidance from the d'Este in Ferrara in artistic matters, which might be able to explain the use of

[537] For Gombrich's theory of 'beholder's share', see E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London, 1962), pp. 154-245.

curtains.[538] In the Ferrarese tradition of painting, treating the picture ground or picture more generally as if it can be (un)veiled or folded is not without precedents.[539] In a fifteenth-century Ferrarese painting of *The Virgin Mary and Christ Child with Two Angels* now stored in Edinburgh (Fig. 99), the artist similarly plays with the materiality of the picture ground itself. Given the trompe-l'oeil representation of the remnants of the parchment on the wooden frame, it is easy to imagine that the parchment has been torn away in order to reveal an image of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child. According to Klaus Krüger's interpretation of this painting, these torn parchments exhibit 'a reflexive stance toward the mediatory quality of painting'.[540] However, this 'mediatory quality of painting' is dialectical in that a painting is both a material thing and an illusion. As Krüger noted, in the light of the hermeneutics of the Christian Middle Ages, religious images can make the invisible, immaterial reality of the heavenly beings visible. On the other hand, the image, because of its lower status, can only serve as a means, a medium for the divine.[541] However, given the growing 'mimetic transparency' (in Louis Marin's term) ever since Alberti described a painting as a window, a painting is getting more difficult to open up a view to 'a meta-pictorial reality'.[542] Just as in the Edinburgh panel, the picture grounds of Roberti's portraits are treated both material and transparent in order to reflect upon the 'mediatory quality' of paintings. By evoking the medium of coins and medals, Roberti intends to remind the beholder of the tradition of *Acheiropoieta* ('images made without hands'), in which the image is analogous to the prototype.[543] At the same time, the artist introduces a human dimension of time into an otherwise timeless and static profile view, also evoking the Albertian metaphor of painting as a transparent window.

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[538] C. M. Ady, *The Bentivoglio of Bologna. A Study in Despotism* (Oxford, 1937), p. 155.
[539] For the ideas of folding and veiling images in the humanistic context of the Ferrara court in the fifteenth century, see L. Clark, 'Intertexuality and Collection at the Court of Ferrara: Roberti's Diptych', in L. Clark, *Collecting Art in the Italian Renaissance Court: Objects and Exchanges* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 112-57.
[540] K. Krüger, 'Andrea Mantegna: Painting's Mediality', *Art History*, vol. 37, 2 (2014), p. 226.
[541] Ibid., p. 223.
[542] Ibid., p. 224.
[543] About the relationship between coins and the image tradition of *Acheiropoieta*, see G. Wolf, *Schleier und Spiegel: Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance* (Munich, 2002), pp. 3-42.

This ‘mediatory quality’ of painting, as seen in the dialectic between transparency and opaqueness, is addressed to evoke the dual nature of the person of Giovanni II Bentivoglio himself, who is simultaneously humane and divine. In his lifetime, Giovanni has always been compared to the deified and venerable Augustus, the famous Roman emperor who transformed his city Rome ‘from brick to marble’.[544] As praised by Giacomo Poggi, Bologna under the rule of Giovanni II Bentivoglio is the same as Rome under Caesar Augustus.[545] The equation between Giovanni and Augustus is made more explicit in two rare *all’antica* portrait roundels on the capitals of two porticos in Via Galliera, which are respectively inscribed ‘DIV IO[HANNES] B[ENTIVOLUS] II P[ATER] P[ATRIAE]’ and ‘DIVUS AUGUSTUS PATER’.[546] Hans Belting has drawn a valuable distinction between ‘image’ and ‘art’. As paraphrased by Jas Elsner, ‘art’, for Belting, is ‘an autonomous aesthetic category’ belonging to the era of post-Renaissance theory and of famous individual artists whereas ‘…the image, by contrast, not only represented a person but also was treated like a person, being worshipped, despised, or carried from place to place in ritual processions’.[547] By functioning as a cloth of honour, the curtain bestows honour to the real persons serving as the prototype of the images. This notion of adoration through proxy is epitomised in the words of St. John of Damascus, according to whom: ‘…the honour shown to the image is transferred to the prototype, and whoever honours an image honours the person represented by it’.[548] The honour, symbolised by the curtain, is actually directed toward Giovanni-Augustus rather than the depicted image itself.

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[544] For Suetonius’ account of the emperor Augustus, who was said to have found Rome and turned it from a city of brick into a city of marble, see Suetonius, *De vita caesarum*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, 2014): 2.28.
[545] Discussed in G. Clark, ‘Magnificence and City: Giovanni II Bentivoglio and Architecture in Fifteenth-Century Bologna’, *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1999), p. 400.
[546] Ibid., p. 401.
[547] J. Elsner, Review of Hans Belting’s *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, in *The Classical Review*, New Series, Vol. 45, No. 2 (1995), pp. 373-75.
[548] Discussed in Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, p. 11-2.

The equation between Giovanni and Augustus could have been further emphasised by the curtain, which could be an elaboration on the classical motif of *capite velato* ('with veiled head'). In the figure of Giovanni (as is in the figure of his wife Ginevra Sforza), the curtain is depicted to coincide with the contour of the figure's body as if implying that the body, or primarily the head, has been veiled and protected by the curtain. In the famous statue commonly known as the *Via Labicana Augustus*, the emperor Augustus himself is depicted as *Pontifex Maximus* with his head veiled. It seems not a coincidence that, in the backgrounds of both portraits (Figs. 96, 97), there were motifs of bridges prominently depicted, with a city view of Bologna depicted in the distance. The motif of bridges (evoking the ecclesiastical notion of 'pontiff') could certainly allude to the role of Augustus as *Pontifex Maximus*. The inclusion of the city views as well as the allusions to 'bridge-building' in the backgrounds all point to the urban renovation project of Bologna initiated already in the 1460s.[549] For Giovanni himself, it is known that it was in 1477 that he personally first got involved in a civic architectural project in the rebuilding of the portico of S. Giacomo.[550]

Moreover, by placing a figure before a painted curtain, the artist emphasises that the image both produces a pictorial illusion and provides a material and potentially tactile presence. The curtain alludes to the different pictorial realities of the painted portrait. On the first level, the curtain will induce the viewer to ponder what is hidden behind, so that the background functions as if it is an actual curtain. The *locus classicus* of depicting curtains to evoke illusion can be found in a competition between Zeuxis and Parrahsius as recorded in the *Natural History* by Pliny the Elder. As told by Pliny, Parrahsius designed a curtain which was so life-like that it fooled his competitor Zeuxis, who earlier had painted a picture of grapes which fooled only the birds.[551] For a sophisticated beholder who was familiar with this Plinian trope, the motif of the curtain

[549] For the project of renovating the city of Bologna in the 1460s, see Clark, 'Magnificence and City', p. 405.
[550] Ibid.
[551] For a thorough analysis of this Plinian episode, see S. Bann, *The True Vine: On Visual Representation and the Western Tradition* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 27-40.

would have reinforced the painting as a painting, rather than reality, because in the end it is acknowledged that the curtain was painted. So, the presence of the curtain simultaneously evokes painting as an object and painting conceived as a transparent window through which one sees the real world. Tristan Weddigen has brilliantly provided an alternative to the paradigm of Renaissance perspectives by drawing our attention to the 'textile image'. According to Weddigen, the '"visiology" of perspective disregards the physical and phenomenological space and dynamics of viewing as much as the materiality of the medium'.[552] Deploying a cloth backdrop, Ercole de'Roberti has evoked the dynamics of the viewing process as well as the materiality of the image. The revealed landscape relativizes or marginalises an otherwise centrally placed vanishing point, indicating the mobility of viewers and viewpoints.

3.6 Depicting *lontani*: Bellini, Perugino and the *Vaghezza* of Landscape Painting

The Venetian interest in using textiles to create a sense of ambiguity, both spatial and symbolic, is in accordance with the later development of landscape paintings in Central and Northern Italy. As we have seen, the influence of Jan van Eyck's empirical realism on Italian landscape painting was short-lived. It disappeared in Italy around 1500 and was soon replaced by the so-called 'Ideal Landscape' and the 'Landscape of Fantasy' in the sixteenth century.[553] This new taste for images of 'foreign lands' represented in its idealised form can be best seen in Perugino's landscape backgrounds. The verisimilitude of a recognisable (and sometimes even identifiable) Tuscan citys within a locally-familiar landscape as seen in the works of the Pollaiuolo brothers gave way to fantastical gothic turrets and spires silhouetted against a limpid sky and densely lush vegetation, evoking the more humid weather of the North rather than more arid Italian landscapes.[554] An example of this is Perugino's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* of 1495 (Fig. 100). When discussing this work, Vasari notes that, 'For the nuns of S.

[552] T. Weddigen, 'Space', in A. Reineke et al. (eds), *Textile Terms: A Glossary*, p. 236.
[553] K. Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London, 1986), pp. 33-71.
[554] First noted by Sir Kenneth Clark but further discussed in P. Nuttall, *From Flanders to Florence. The Impact of Netherlandish Painting 1400-1500* (New Haven & London, 2004), p. 203.

Chiara he painted a "Dead Christ" on a panel…[and] he made therein a landscape that was then held most beautiful ('bellissimo'), because the true method of making them, such as it appeared later, had not yet been seen.'[555] Alison Cole suggests Vasari's reference to beauty implies a quality that refuses to be reduced to identifiable rules but instead emerges from a 'mysterious order in Nature' that the human intellect cannot begin to grasp, something also seen in Firenzuola's discussion of female beauty.[556] According to Cole, the landscape backgrounds of Perugino and his pupil Raphael mark the beginning of a new century that is characterised by what Vasari termed 'grazia'.

It seems that Flemish paintings with dream-like landscape backgrounds such as seen in the work of Hans Memling (see for example, the idealistic landscape background in Memling's *Portrait of a Man with a Roman Medal*, Fig. 101) now provided the impetus to inform a new kind of landscape associated with a new ideal of elusive beauty. Like this new ideal of beauty in landscape painting, Giovanni Bellini asserted a new kind of artistic freedom to indulge in his own 'fantasia' as regards his choice of landscape background. We see this expressed in the correspondence he had with Isabella d'Este and Giovanni Bellini. In 1501, Isabella hoped to obtain a painting from Bellini of his own invention—a narrative or mythological fable ('qualche historia o fabula antiqua') or a pictorial idea that would depict subject matter from antiquity ('cosa antiqua') and have an attractive meaning ('bello significato').[557] Perhaps because he did not want to be compared publicly with his brother-in-law, Andrea Mantegna, who excelled in narrative paintings, Bellini argued that it would be better for him instead to paint a devotional picture of the Madonna and Child with St John 'and some distant views and other fantasies' ('et qualche luntani et altra fantaxia').[558] Realising that Bellini still had

[555] Vasari, *Vite*, III, p. 599: 'Lavorò alle Donne di S. Chiara in una tavola un Cristo morto…che vi fece un paese che fu tenuto allora bellissimo, per non si esser ancora veduto il vero modo di fargli come si è veduto poi.'
[556] A. Cole, 'Beauty in Landscape in the Quattrocento', in F. Ames-Lewis and M. Rogers (eds), *Concepts of Beauty in Renaissance Art* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 46-7.
[557] M. Barausse, 'Giovanni Bellini: I documenti', in *Giovanni Bellini*, eds. M. Lucco and G. C. F. Villa (Rome, 2008), p. 343.
[558] G. Gaye, *Carteggio inedito d'artisti dei secoli XIV, XV, XVI: Pubblicato ed illustrato con documenti pure inediti* (Florence: Molini, 1840), II, p. 71. On the notion of 'lontani' in Bellini's landscape painting, see B. Blass-Simmen, '"Qualce lontani": Distance and Transcendence in the Art of Giovanni Bellini', in

not produced a picture for Isabella four and half years later, Pietro Bembo intervened by reminding Isabella that Bellini would rather 'wander at will in his pictures' ('…vagare a sua voglia nelle pitture') instead of being tightly tied to a closely-defined iconographic programme with a 'bello significato'.[559]

I would contend that the term *vagare* used by Pietro Bembo actually recalls Bellini's earlier reference to 'qualche luntani', which seems to imply an approach that goes beyond what can be defined by Alberti's linear perspective.[560] *Lontano* can also convey the meaning of 'vague, not certain or clearly definite', which echoes the meaning of *vagare*, 'charm' or a kind of wandering beauty.[561] What Bellini meant by 'some distant viewers and other fantasies' most likely refers to a type of composition that Kenneth Clark called the 'Landscape of Fantasy'.[562] This might have looked something like the fantastical and bizarre landscape background in his *Sacred Allegory* (Fig.102) dated around 1500, which seems to be very self-consciously set in contrast to the perspectivally-rendered foreground. This painting seems to call for a new manner of looking—or better, visually wandering through an image—that is suggested by Bembo's use of the term *vagare* in relation to the work of Bellini. As seen not only in Bellini's *Sacred Allegory*, but also in his Frick *Saint Francis* (Fig. 61), the eye is drawn to the different features of the landscape, such as vegetations, stone cracks, and most importantly, animals. These features animate the ground as well as the background of the picture and thus encourage beholder's eye to wander ('vagare') through the depths of the scene depicted. For instance, in Bellini's *Saint Francis*, the eye could be led to focus not only on the figure of St Francis himself, but on background elements such as rocks, trees, and a donkey, given the less conspicuous scale of the figure. It has been

C. C. Wilson, ed. *Examining Giovanni Bellini: An Art 'More Human and More Divine'* (Belgium, 2015), pp. 77-91.

[559] Gaye, *Carteggio inedito*, II, p. 71: 'la invenzione, che mi scrive V. S. che io truovi al disegno, bisognerà che l'accomodi alla fantasia di lui chel ha a fare, il quale ha piacere che molto signati termini non si diano al suo stile, uso, come dice, di sempre vagare a sua voglia nelle pitture, che quanto in lui possano soddisfare a chi le mira.'

[560] For a historical study of the term *vagare*, see A. Castellano, 'Storia di una parola letteraria: it. *vago*,' in *Archivio glottologico italiano* 48 (1963), pp. 126-96.

[561] http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/lontano/.

[562] K. Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London, 1979), pp. 73-108.

argued that Bellini's landscape paintings deviate from Alberti's conception of the landscape which is confined to framing the *historia*.[563] In Grave's interpretation, Bellini's landscape paintings, characterised by their *vaghezza* qualities, belong to the medieval culture of 'associative meditation' and 'allegorical thinking' described by Saint Bonaventura and spiritual manuals of the late Middle Ages.[564]

A related case about the relation between a landscape background and the notion of *vagare* or *vaghezza* appears in a letter from Isabella d'Este to Perugino dated 19 January 1503 in which iconographical significance is assigned to the landscape background. When commissioning the *Battle between Love and Chastity* (Fig. 103) for her *camerino* in Mantua's Ducal Palace, Isabella provided Perugino with extremely detailed and specific instructions in which the significance of the landscape background is made explicit:

> And to give more expression and decoration ('d'expressione et ornamento') to the picture, beside Pallas [Athena] I want to have the olive tree sacred to her, with a shield leaning against it bearing the head of Medusa, and with the owl, the bird peculiar to Pallas, perched among the branches. And beside Venus I want her favourite tree, the myrtle, to be placed. But to enhance the charm ('per maggior vaghezza') a distant view ('lontano') must be included, such as a river or the sea, where fauns, satyrs and more cupids will be seen, hastening to the help of Cupid, some swimming through the river, some flying, and some riding upon white swans, coming to join such an amorous battle. On the bank of the said river or sea stands Jupiter with other gods, as the enemy of Chastity, changed into the bull which carried off the fair Europa; and Mercury as an eagle circling above its prey, flies around one of the Pallas' nymphs, called Glaucera, who carries a casket engraved with the sacred emblems of the goddess. Polyphemus, the one-eyed Cyclops, chases Galatea, and Phoebus chases Daphne, who has already turned into a laurel tree; Pluto, having seized Proserpina, is bearing her off to his kingdom of darkness, and Neptune has seized a nymph who has been turned almost entirely into a raven.[565]

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[563] For the most recent discussion about how and why Bellini deviates from Alberti's *istoria*, see J. Grave, *Giovanni Bellini: The Art of Contemplation* (Prestel, 2018), pp. 163-85.

[564] Grave, *Giovanni Bellini*, p. 68; p. 263.

[565] Chambers, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance* (London and Basingstoke, 1970), pp. 136-7; F. Canuti, *Il Perugino* (2 vols, Siena, 1931), vol. 2, pp. 212-13: 'et per più d'expressione et ornamento della pittura dallato di Pallade li vuol essere la oliva arbore dedicata allei, dove lo seno li sia riposto col capo di Medusa, facendoli posare fra quelli rami la civetta, per essere ucciello proprio di Pallade; dallato

As stated in the letter, in the middle ground there were to be two trees symbolically linked to the foreground figures and serving as attributes of Pallas and Venus. The types of trees that should be depicted are also specified: the olive tree sacred to Pallas and the myrtle sacred Venus.[566] Although serving as attributes of the figures of Pallas and Venus, the trees actually provide a context for the battle depicted in the foreground. The background scene requested by Isabelle is to include a river or the sea. Given the level of detail provided for the background, by implication it must have been considered It at least as iconographically significant as the trees in the middle ground. Significantly, one sees in what the background several episodes of actual and attempted sexual violence from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* including the stories of Europa, of Apollo and Daphne, of Mercury and Glaucera, of Polyphemus and Galatea, and of Pluto and Proserpina. The background thus makes visible the lust that drives the foreground figures into battle, with one of the latter figures supporting the sexual violence depicted, while the other opposes it (as would befit Isabella, the decorous married woman who commissioned the work in the first place). That the landscape background occupies more than half of the entire panel also indicates its peculiar significance. Like the landscape in Bellini's *Saint Francis*, Perugino's landscape is also an animated landscape, as further emphasised by the putti scattered all over the foreground. The landscape background in Perugino's *Battle between Love and Chastity* thus approximates what Panofsky termed a *paysage moralisé*, in which there is a direct moral message imbued into the landscape whether in the fore- or background.[567]

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di Venere si debbe farli el mirto arbore grattissimo allei. Ma per maggior vaghezza li vorebbe uno acomodato lontano, cioè una fiume overo mare, dove si vedesero passare in sochorso d'Amore fauni, satiri e altri amori, e chi da loro notando passare el fiume, e chi volando e chi sopra bianchi cigni cavalcando , se ne venissero a tanta amorosa impresa'.

[566] About the religious-magical meanings of trees in the North, see M. Baxandall, *Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven and London, 1980), p. 31.

[567] On Panofsky's notion of 'disguised symbolism', see in particular Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting.* pp. 131-148. For an excellent discussion about 'paysage moralisé', see P. Emison, 'The Paysage Moralisé', *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 16, No. 31 (1995), pp. 125-137.

The correspondence related to Isabella's attempts to commission a work from Perugino may be the first Renaissance discussion relating landscape middle-ground and background to the concepts of both ornamentation and charm (*vaghezza*). The term *vaghezza* usually indicates the so-called elusive charms that marked the seductive powers of women.[568] The sixteenth-century understanding of the term can be deduced from Angelo Firenzuola's *Dialogo della bellezza delle donne* (written in 1542, published in 1548). According to Firenzuola, the word *vaghezza* had come to have connotations of 'bello, e vaghezza bellezza', but *vaghezza* signifies that beauty that leads the beholder to become desirous through *vago* (wandering) since when seeking it out and enjoying it, 'he is always on the move at heart, traveling in thought, and with his mind becomes a vagabond'.[569] In the discussion of Perugino's composition, the more literal meaning of *vaghezza*, which is 'charm', is alluded to by what is happening in the background. In the background, the results of lust are depicted, with the male characters chasing the women because they are desirous of their beauty.[570] Adding a background that emphasises the *vaghezza* in the painting must have been intended, at least in part, to titillate or even arouse the viewer. Indeed, it could be argued that it is this enraptured gaze that is the real 'subject' of the background scene.

The background landscapes of Bellini and Perugino anticipated the theoretical differentiation between figure and landscape later formulated by sixteenth-century art writers. It seems that such a theoretical differentiation only began to be more consciously formulated in response to the growing significance of Northern landscape painting as an independent genre and the emergence of a new figural style that marks the beginning of the so-called High Renaissance in early sixteenth-century Italy. It is in Florence around 1500 that we find Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael initiating this new figural style.[571] Moreover, a clear theoretical differentiation between figure and

[568] P. Sohm, *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 110-1; 194-200.
[569] D. Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton, 1981), p. 169.
[570] On the relation of *vaghezza* to the concepts of the body and colour in sixteenth-century art criticism, see in particular S. Lingo, *Federico Barocci. Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting* (New Haven and London, 2008), pp. 126-35.
[571] S. Hager, *Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael in Renaissance Florence from 1500 to 1508*

landscape becomes possible only after the division of labour between painting figures and landscapes has been rendered ever clearer in the sixteenth century.

The most prominent case reflecting a new attitude toward Northern landscape paintings can be found in the writings associated with Michelangelo and his circle.[572] Although he did not write any theoretical texts himself, Michelangelo's opinions on Flemish landscape painting appear to be summarised in the *Tractado de Pintura antigua*, a dialogue written between 1547 and 1549 by the Portuguese art theorist Francesco da Hollanda.[573] In the text, Hollanda reports that Michelangelo condemned Flemish landscape painting as follows:

> Flemish painting will please the devout better than any painting in Italy…It will appeal to women, especially very old and very young women, and also to monks and nuns and to certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony. In Flanders they paint, with a view to deceiving sensual vision…They paint fabrics and masonry, the green grass of the fields, the shadows of trees, and rivers and bridges, which they call landscapes, with many figures on this side and that. And all this, though it pleases some persons, is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skillful selection or boldness and finally, without substance or vigor.[574]

According to Philip Sohm, the criticism of Flemish painting through the shortcomings of its beholders is 'constructed on the conventional juxtaposition of reason and sense, imitation ('skillful selection') and copying, the determinate and the transitory (shadows of trees).'[575] In a conventionally misogynist statement, 'woman' is associated with sensuousness and desire while 'man' is associated with the intellect.[576] What Flemish

(Washington D. C., 1992).

[572] F. Hollanda, *Four Dialogues on Painting*, trans. A. Bell (London, 1928), p. 15. For a most recent historicising of this issue, see James Hall, 'Under Siege: The Aesthetics and Politics of Michelangelo's Attack on Flemish Painting', *Simiolus. Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 42, (2020), No. ½, pp. 45-88.

[573] For a critical reading of the famous passage comparing Flemish and Italian painting in Francisco de Holanda's *Da Pintura antigua*, see L. C. Agoston, 'Male/Female, Italy/Flanders, Michelangelo/Vittoria Colonna', *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2005), pp. 1175-1219.

[574] F. Hollanda, *Four Dialogues on Painting*, trans. A. Bell (London, 1928), p. 15.

[575] P. Sohm, 'Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia', in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Winter, 1995), p. 776.

[576] Ibid., p. 777, n. 46.

paintings supposedly lacked, reason, symmetry, proportion, boldness, vigour—were all considered in the period 'masculine' attributes associated by default with the Italian style, which found its supreme expression in Michelangelo's art. In contrast, Flemish painting pleases women 'who have no sense of true harmony'. The assumption that women were the irrational sex appears already in Cennini's *Libro dell'Arte*, written in about 1395. 'Take note,' he writes, 'that…I will give you the exact proportion (*misura*) of a man. Those of a woman I will disregard, for she does not have any perfect proportion (*misura*).'[577] To have no perfect proportion was tantamount to having no reason, as Cennini continues in the concluding sentences of this chapter: 'I will not tell you about the irrational animals, because you will never discover any system of proportion (*misura*) in them. Copy them and draw as much as you can from nature, and you will achieve good practice in this respect.'[578]

It is the indiscriminate (if technically highly skilled) copying of nature without apparently being selective as exemplified in Netherlandish painting, that Michelangelo seemed to have found most difficult to accept. Having discussed the development of landscape painting from Piero della Francesca to Perugino, it is logical to conclude that what offended Michelangelo most is likely the 'near view' or the objective parts of landscape painting, such as fabrics, grasses, shadows and so on. At the same time, the subjective aspects of landscape backgrounds as exemplified in the aesthetics of *vaghezza* were also worrying in the eyes of Michelangelo. As the cases of Bellini and Perugino have shown, depicting *lontani* (or the 'distant views') had been a form of inaccessibility and desire as elaborated in the backgrounds of Italian Renaissance paintings.

3.7 Conclusion:

[577] Cennini-Broecke, pp. 108-9, Ch. 70: 'Nota che, innanzi più oltra vada, ti voglia dare a littera le misure dell'uomo. Quelle della femmina lascio stare, perché non ha nessuna perfetta misura.'
[578] Ibid., p. 83: 'Degli animale irrazionali non ti conterò, perché non n'apparai mai nessuna misura. Ritra' ne e disegna più che puoi del naturale, e proverrai in ciò a buna pratica.

This chapter has charted the changing relationship between figure and background in both the theory and practice of Italian Renaissance landscape painting. It argues that the painted landscape backgrounds are freighted with layers of political, aesthetic and geographical meanings. The practice of landscape painting in Italy took the lead from the paradigm of Northern landscape art, which even informed Alberti's theory of landscape painting. In Alberti's theory, it is the unrestricted *copia* of the landscape paintings by the late Gothic painters such as Pisanello and Gentile da Fabriano that is criticised. But by promoting *copia*, Alberti is promoting the Northern value of art in general.

However, there was also a shift over time that allowed different types of landscape backgrounds to become increasingly appreciated in central Italy. Starting around 1470, as seen in the work of Piero della Francesca, the bird's-eye panorama became increasingly popular. At this time, the landscape usually is depicted as a background evoking local geographical sites that were known to both the patron and the implied viewer. Soon afterwards around 1480, a more idealised version of the landscape seen from a lower viewpoint started to replace the bird's-eye panorama composition, and it was soon transformed into the *lontano* in the second stage after 1480, as seen in the works of Bellini. The use of curtains to (un)veil landscape backgrounds in many fifteenth-century paintings aims to not only play upon the mediality of Italian Renaissance art between objecthood and illusion but also make landscape backgrounds oscillate between the visible and invisible.

To conclude, landscape background is an important but understudied issue in the Italian theory and practice of painting. In theory, Alberti wants to steer the canon of Italian painting away from the mimetic profusion of Northern painting, in which it is the ground of the picture lies at the heart of its practice.[579] However, fuelled by the elite tastes toward Northern paintings in Florence and Urbino more generally, Jan van

[579] For Northern interest in the idea of ground or *grondt*, see Joseph L. Koerner, *Bosch & Bruegel: from Enemy Painting to Everyday Life* (Princeton and Oxford, 2016), pp. 260-1; 297-8.

Eyck's landscape backgrounds became increasingly popular in the 1470s. In the Eyckian paradigm, it is the tactile proximity and objective illusions that were celebrated, which made it appropriate to be adopted in the backgrounds of fifteenth-century Italian paintings to visualise the visible resources of the patron. However, in the 1480s, a new interest in depicting the *lontano* or distant view soon replaced this Eyckian empirical fashion. In this new fashion, landscape backgrounds have been transformed into a form of subjectivity and inaccessibility.

Chapter Four

Foregrounding the Background: Depicted Architecture, Artist's Perspective and the 'Ideal City' Panels

In Alberti's *Della pittura*, the significance of architectural backgrounds has grown increasingly prominent. According to Alberti, the architects took from the painters 'architraves, capitals, bases, columns and pediments, and all the other fine features of buildings'.[580] Given the *paragone* between painting and architecture as already evident in Alberti, scholars have previously studied the development of depicted architecture in chronological terms or the artistic challenge of depicting architecture in the Renaissance period through case studies of architectural typologies.[581] A number of scholars have noted that artists almost always modified actual architectural models when depicting such structures in their paintings.[582] However, it should be noted that insufficient attention has been given to the social-historical dimensions of the emergence of architectural backgrounds as a new genre within paintings. What is the relationship between the discovery of architectural perspective and the rising status of the Artist? The emergence of painted interior scenes and the development of new forms of actual interior decoration are key cultural moments during the Renaissance in Italy and beyond.[583] But what is the link between the painted and real interiors during the Renaissance period?

In order to address such questions, the current chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section, I look at how perspective is theorised to regulate architectural elements or *casamenti* in relation to colour and the external beholder's position. Having

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[580] Alberti-Grayson, pp. 60-1.

[581] For instance, see especially G. Massobrio and P. Portoghesi, *L'Immaginario Architettonico nella Pittura* (Rome, 1988); S. Frommel, *Peindre l'architecture durant la Renaissance italienne. Origines, évolution, transmission d'une pratique polyvalente* (Paris, 2020). For an earlier contribution to this literature, see K. Clark, 'Architectural Backgrounds in Renaissance Pictures', in *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* (10 February, 1934), pp. 325-38.

[582] For instance, see F. Benelli, *The Architecture in Giotto's Paintings* (Cambridge and New York, 2012).

[583] For a useful study on the Renaissance interior, see P. Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior 1400-1600* (London, 1991). Also see M. Ajmar-Wollheim and F. Dennis, *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (London and New York, 2006).

discussed both the practical and theoretical aspects of painted architectural backgrounds, the second section discusses the relationship between architectural perspective and backgrounds in Renaissance portraits. It will address how elements such as windows and niches were visualised as architectonic motifs to construct Renaissance women's social identities.

After the discussion of the representations of the architectural interior, the third section will revisit the three so-called 'Ideal City' panels, in which the architectural elements come forward and effectively move from background to foreground. It aims to try to reconstruct the original sites of the panels and discuss how these settings could have contributed to contemporary beholders' understanding of the panels' meanings. At the same time, it will focus on the practical aspect of painting these panels in relation to the technique of intarsia and discuss how the demonstrations of perspective in these three panels can be related to the emerging discourse of artist as a concept. In the final section, I discuss the reception of painted backgrounds in the eyes of Vasari. As is known, Vasari's 'period eye' is embedded in the aesthetics of Mannerism, an approach that places emphasis on artistic virtuosity. I argue, in a nutshell, that the development of architectural backgrounds in Italian Renaissance paintings not only is an artistic or aesthetic concern but also a social one.

4.1 Depicting *casamenti* and *piano*: Architectural Perspective in Cennino Cennini, Ghiberti and Alberti

According to the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, the term *casamento* originally referred to 'a large building divided by several quarters of habitation, although not luxurious but decorous'.[584] The first systematic discussion of how to depict *casamenti* in the painterly medium comes from Cennino Cennini. In his *Libro*

[584] *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, II, pp. 826-7: 'vasto edificio diviso in parecchi quartieri di abitazione (non di lusso, ma decorosi)'.

dell'Arte, Cennino Cennini explains the normative procedure for depicting buildings, or what he calls the 'arte della mazonaria', in wall frescoes. As he says:

> If you want to do buildings, include them in your drawing in the size that you want and snap the lines. Then lay them in ('campeggiali') with verdaccio and with green earth, whether in fresco or secco, which should be thoroughly runny. And you can do some in violet, some in ash grey, some in green, some in tawny colour and so on, in whatever colour you want. Then make a long, straight, slender ruler with one of its edges rounded off so that it does not press on the wall, so that if you rub with it or go along it with the brush and with the paint it will not ruin anything for you. And you will work up the decorative masonry with great pleasure and enjoyment, and likewise plinths, columns, capitals, facades, swags, tabernacles and all the art of painting buildings ('tutta l'arte della mazonaria'), which is a lovely facet of our profession and should be carried out with great enjoyment…And apply the buildings entirely by this system, such that the ledges which you do at the top of the building should hang from the side by the roof downwards; the ledge along the middle of the building, half-way down the façade, should be completely even and level; the ledge at the base of the building should rise upwards from below; in the opposite way to the ledge at the top, which hangs down.[585]

As Wolf-Dietrich Löhr has pointed out, Cennino Cennini's 'arte della mazonaria' belongs to the category of colouring, or *colorire*.[586] But more importantly, the affinity between *casamenti* and colour realigns paintings of architecture with the *campo*, or field of painting. This alignment is important for understanding *when* buildings became depictable in the medium of painting and *how* depicted buildings are related to the internal logic of the *campo*.

Architectural perspective is very much related to the material qualities of the depicted architecture. Before Alberti, depictions of architecture were more related to *colore* than *disegno*. As early as in Cennino Cennini's *Libro dell'arte*, architectural elements were considered an important feature in the pictorial repertoire of painters.[587] In Cennini's

[585] Cennini-Broecke, pp. 123-4.
[586] Löhr, Wolf-Dietrich, 'Handwerk und Denkwerk des Malers. Kontexte für Cenninis Theorie der Praxis', in Wolf-Dietrich Löhr and S. Weppelmann (eds), *'Fantasia und Handwerk'. Cennino Cennini und die Tradition der Toskanischen Malerei von Giotto bis Lorenzo Monaco* (Berlin, 2008), p. 161.
[587] Cennini-Broecke, p. 123, Ch. 87.

book, little is said about the mathematical-geometric aspects of depicting architecture. Instead, architectural features appear to be more closely related to the practice of *campeggiare*, or the laying-in of colour. For instance, in Chapter 87, Cennini discusses the problem of 'how to colour the buildings' ('come si de colorire i casamenti'), only with a brief mention of perspective or foreshortening at the end.[588] This gesture is at odds with the later emphatic association between painted architecture and perspective. Following Cennini, we know that colour is essential in depicting architecture. However, Cennini's writings suggest a strong earlier tradition in which the practice of painting *casamenti* was linked to colouring, rather than to drawing.

The enactment of Cennini's texts can be found in Giotto's paintings (Fig. 104). In Francesco Benelli's important study of the painted architecture in Giotto's frescoes, the author treats depicted buildings as though they were figures on the basis of Alberti's analogy between architecture and the human body and shows how Giotto's depicted buildings simultaneously build on and deviate from the actual classical buildings.[589] For Benelli, Giotto initiates what he calls a new age of 'painting in Latin' ('dipingere in latino').[590] However, given that the majority of the illustrations in Benelli's book are in black and white, it is not surprising that the question of colour escapes Benelli's attention. Neither does he discuss how architectural backgrounds are positioned within the compositions and how different positionings of such structures could have a range of psychological effects on the viewers.

In Dagobert Frey's pioneering study of the force of the picture-fields (or in Frey's own words '"prospektiven Potenz" des Bildfeldes') in Giotto's paintings, the author points out that it is the positioning of the figures within the field that determines the psychological power of each narrative painting, with painted architecture only accentuating that figure-and-ground relationship. In the Italo-Byzantine tradition, the

[588] Ibid.
[589] Benelli, *The Architecture in Giotto's Paintings*.
[590] Ibid., p. 6.

architecture encloses the figure, which, usually occupying the axial position, has a priori 'transcendental principle of higher reality'.[591] However, in Giotto's pictorial fields, the figures 'not only signify being, but also contain a change, a potential changeability, in that what precedes and follows in time is also encompassed'.[592] It should be pointed out Frey largely omitted painted architecture and other background details altogether in analysing various examples. The exception is the scene *Renunciation of Worldly Goods* from the Life of St Francis in the Bardi Chapel of the Santa Croce in Florence (Fig. 105), in which the polarity of the two groups is further emphasised by the background architecture rendered in an oblique view.[593] Without architectural backgrounds, Giotto's scenes would become hollowed out. Indeed, both Francesco Benelli and earlier John White reinforce that Giotto's depicted architecture is reliant upon actual prototypes, which thus bestows certain credibility to the scenes.[594] But in most cases Giotto's use of colour in painted architecture is invented rather than based on reality. This all lends to the internal logic of the picture field itself rather than drawing a parallel between the painted and the real. But Frey's disinterest in architectural settings points out that the painted architecture is subordinate to the figure in Giotto's paintings.

While Cennini appears to have understood architectural perspective as one decorative element amongst many others, in other Renaissance writings on art, perspective can be related to the notion of the depiction or representation of the world as a whole. This can be traced back to Brunelleschi's understanding of perspective. According to Manetti in his life of Brunelleschi, *prospettiva* is defined as the 'right placement of the diminutions and increases that appear to human eyes, of things at a distance and near at hand, buildings ('casamenti'), floors ('piani'), mountains and landscapes ('paesi'), and in every place the figures and other things with that measure belonging to the distance at

[591] Frey, 'Giotto und die Maniera Greca', p. 75.
[592] Ibid.
[593] Ibid., p. 78.
[594] For John White's discussion of Giotto's painted architecture, see J. White, 'Giotto's Use of Architecture in "The Expulsion of Joachim" and "The Entry into Jerusalem" at Padua', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 115, No. 884 (Jul., 1973), pp. 439-447+449.

which they are seen'.[595] Most importantly, here, inanimate objects like buildings and mountains have been placed side by side with human figures, as all of them have become depictable in *prospettiva*.

As we have seen in the first chapter, linear perspective had been considered the foundation of painting in a metaphorical way by authors like Alberti. According to Alberti, a painting is an intersection of a visual pyramid at a given distance. But how could the horizontally extending perspective be associated with the vertically oriented architecture? It is highly likely that this analogy grows out of seeing the pavement, or *piano*, as an integral or even the most important part of a perspectival construction. Above all, the *piano* provides the ground plane on which all depicted objects can be anchored solidly and in parallel to the picture plane. Second, it is the means through which the artist can integrate the background with the figure. Last but not least, it makes the *historia*, encompassing both the figure and the background, measurable by the beholder's eye.

For the first function, the exact precedence can be found in contemporary architectural practice. At the beginning of Book Twenty-Three focusing on the construction of one-point linear perspective, the architect and theorist Filarete compares constructing the *piano* for *casamenti* in paintings to digging the ground when raising a building. Here he wrote:

> Now in this one I should like to show you how these lines are extended to make a building ('casamento') or any other thing located in its place with its rule on a plane [surface] ('piano'), whether figures or animals. Now you should pay attention and open the eyes of your intellect, for what I have to say is subtle and difficult to understand. When you wish to build a building ('edificio'), it is necessary to prepare the things needed for its construction. When they are prepared, the foundations are dug ('si cavano i fondamenti'), and then arrangements are made for walling it up ('murare'). We will do the same with this. As it is necessary to have a site in order to build and to dig the foundations, so we too will first make the site ('questo sito') in which we wish to make our

[595] Manetti, *Life of Brunelleschi by Antonio di Tuccio Manetti*, pp. 42-3.

> drawing. First of all our site must be a plane that is made by rule ('ch'è piano si faccio con ragione'). Then the things drawn here will also be according to a rule and measures.[596]

But how to reconcile the act of 'excavating the grounds' ('cavare i fondamenti') and a plane 'made by rule' ('faccio con ragione')? Their relationship, which is only touched upon briefly by Filarete, had already been addressed thoroughly by Alberti in Book Three of his *Ten Books on Architecture*.[597] The method of 'defining the foundations', according to Alberti, is to:

> …trace out several lines, known as baselines, in the following manner. From a midpoint at the front, we extend a line right to the back of the work; halfway along it we fix a stake into the ground, and through this, following the rule of geometry, we extend the perpendicular. We then relate all the measurements to these two lines.[598]

Unlike Filarete who compares depicting buildings in paintings and actual buildings, Alberti admonishes that the rules he has spelled out should be applied when laying the foundations just for actual buildings. This rule is important. According to Filarete, making squared *piano* or pavement was the invention of Brunelleschi, so one might then argue that Alberti could have learned that rule from Brunelleschi.[599]

For the second and third functions of the *piano*, the best source is Lorenzo Ghiberti. Complementing the function of the *piano*, architectural backgrounds, or *casamenti*, also have a fundamental role to play. In his *Commentaries*, Lorenzo Ghiberti claims that architectural backgrounds can help the eye measure the *istoria* and provide the relations that allow the relative proportions of the figures and the represented objects to be measured. Here is the passage in full:

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[596] Filarete, *Filarete's Treatise on Architecture*, trans. J. R. Spencer (New Haven and London, 1965), vol. 1, p. 302. Also discussed in Jeroen Stumpel, *The Province of Painting. Theories of Italian Renaissance Art* (PhD dissertation, Utrecht University, 1990), p. 219.
[597] L. B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. J. Rykwert, N. Leach, and R. Tavernor (Cambridge and London, 1988), pp. 61-4.
[598] Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, p 62.
[599] Discussed in Elkins, *Poetics of Perspective*, p. 62.

> There were ten stories, all in architectural settings ('casamenti') in relation with which the eye measures them, and real to such a degree that if one stands far from them they seem to stand out in high relief ('appariscono rilevati'). [However] they have very low relief and on the standing planes ('piani') one sees the figures which are near appear larger, and those that are far off smaller, as reality shows it. And I have carried through this whole work these said rules [of measurement and proportion].[600]

In this passage, there is a descriptive inaccuracy that in reality there are only three scenes in architectural settings. By claiming all his depicted *istorie* are in *casamenti*, Ghiberti must have boasted the *difficultà* with which the *casamenti* were executed all in perspective, which was a technique difficult to master in Ghiberti's time. Here, the idea of measuring the *istoria* through *casamenti* is derived from Alberti. In Book Two of his *On painting*, Alberti uses the metaphor of a 'visual pyramid' to set up a measurable relationship between the beholder's eye and the depicted object.[601] When depicting monumental objects such as 'buildings and giant statues' a new method must be sought after, although the 'visual pyramid' is still applicable. Here Alberti explains:

> On the pavement that is divided up into parallels, you have to construct the sides of walls and other similar surfaces which we have described as perpendicular…I begin first from the foundations…So in drawing the foundations of the walls I take care that I outline only those sides that are visible; and I always begin from the nearer surfaces, and particularly from those that are equidistant from the intersection. I draw these before the rest, and I determine what I wish their length and breadth to be by the parallels traced on the pavement, for I take up as many parallels as I want them to be *braccia*.[602]

In this passage, one can see that the pavement or *piano* (*pavimentum* in Latin) has become a checkerboard ground, on which the parallel lines determine, in geometric terms, how the depicted architectural objects (or in Alberti's words 'all surfaces containing angles') are measurable to the eye. Thus, the pavement has become a new

[600] R. Krautheimer and T. Krautheimer-Hess, *Lorenzo Ghiberti* (Princeton, 1956), p. 14. For a useful discussion about this passage, see Krautheimer and Krautheimer-Hess, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, pp. 229-33.
[601] Alberti-Grayson, pp. 68-9.
[602] Ibid., p. 71.

and key component of the construction of an architectural perspective. Ghiberti must have learned the lessons from Alberti at least on theoretical levels, as evidenced in the former's interest in the idea of measure. For Alberti, the basic unit of measuring is a *braccio*. In Book Two, Alberti defines the average height of a man's body as 'three *braccia*'.[603] This measuring unit is fundamental in establishing what Alberti called the 'centric point', which determines the distance between the beholder and the picture. According to Alberti, 'the suitable position for this centric point is no higher from the base line than the height of the man to be represented in the painting, for in this way both the viewers and the objects in the painting will seem to be on the same plane'.[604] Basically, the measurable height of a human figure—and also of the beholder's own body—has been integrated into the pictural order of a painting. In this sense, the depicted buildings are not only visible to the beholder, but in his or her presence.

Having explained this Albertian method of constructing the pavement and depicting buildings, one can go back to two of Ghiberti's examples: the *Jacob and Esau* panel (Fig. 106) and the *Solomon and Queen of Sheba* panel (Fig. 107). The panel of *Jacob and Esau* has consistently been considered a standard Albertian picture, in which space has become measurable and the distance between the beholder and the picture has been clearly defined. The Albertian spatial recession has been indicated by the different techniques used to depict the foreground figures and background architecture. In the former high relief is used to suggest forms protruding into the viewer's space, while in the latter low relief is deployed, which aims to push the buildings back into depth. This spatial continuum between the picture and the beholder is further emphasised by a blurred distinction between the foreground and the background as a result of some secondary figures being positioned within the depicted architecture.

In the *Solomon and Queen of Sheba* panel (Fig. 107), such perspectival clarity disappears. The demarcation between the foreground and background is more emphatic

[603] Ibid., p. 54-5.
[604] Ibid., p. 55.

and there is no sign of spatial fluidity between figures and architecture. Here, Ghiberti must have thought of the composition as a two-dimensional surface rather than a three-dimensional space.[605] Indeed, there are architectural details in the background approximating Donatello's *schiacciato* technique, which aims to produce a fuzzy and disappearing effect.[606]

How should one understand Ghiberti's deviation from Alberti? One could argue that putting Albertian rules into practice is difficult so that in the *Solomon and Queen of Sheba* panel, Ghiberti reverted to an older and easier method. I would argue that this is too simplistic an explanation. Instead, it seems possible that Ghiberti may have deliberately departed from Alberti and turned to the Sienese tradition. It is highly probable that Ghiberti would have had the opportunity to visit Siena between 1416 and 1417. According to Scott Nethersole, Ghiberti could have been inspired by the architecture depicted in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Presentation at the Temple* of 1342 (Fig. 108).[607] Interestingly, this compartmentalisation of foreground figures and background architecture even foreshadows the composition of Raphael's *School of Athens* (Fig. 109), in which the painted architecture has assumed a more prominent and independent role and, similarly, the stairs have been covered by figures just like in Ghiberti's bronze panel.[608]

Indeed, the Albertian method should not be seen as normative at the time of Ghiberti. An anti-Albertian method for composing a picture as evident in Ghiberti has already been pointed out by Arasse in the pictorial development of the Annunciation scenes in

[605] For Ghiberti's medieval tendency in composing scenes not according to Alberti's rules, see K. Bloom, 'Lorenzo Ghiberti's Space in Relief: Method and Theory', in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (June, 1969), pp. 164-9.
[606] These details in low relief have been observed in A. Bloch, *Lorenzo Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise: Humanism, History, and Artistic Philosophy in the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 259.
[607] S. Nethersole, 'Traditional Rivals? Artistic Dialogues Between Florence and Siena in the Second Quarter of the Fifteenth Century', in A. Schumacher (ed), *Florence and Its Painters: from Giotto to Leonardo da Vinci* (Munich, 2018), p. 117.
[608] C. L. Frommel, 'L'Architectura Picta da Giotto a Raffaello', in S. Frommel and G. Wolf (eds), *Architectura Picta nell'Arte Italiana da Giotto a Veronese* (Modena, 2016), p. 91.

Siena.[609] The Sienese tradition of seeing 'place' as an architectural enclosure attributed to the figure is at odds with the Florentine innovation which sees 'space' as a unified whole. In Arasse's own words, 'what is then constructed by means of the perspectival grid is not a "space" in the modern sense of the term (continuous, homogenous and infinite); it is the "spaciousness" unified by the place which, in good Aristotelian logic, is the "container" of the *historia* conceived as the "body" which occupies it'.[610] Alberti's 'spaciousness' extends all over the pictorial field and precedes the composition of the *historia*. In other words, the figure is dependent on the ground in Alberti's *historia*.

A good comparison of Albertian space with Lorenzettian place can be found between Ambrogio Lorenzetti's pavement in his *Annunciation*, which is rendered as a localised ornament against a gold ground, against Piero della Francesca's rendering of a spatial depth implied by a large number of columns in a painting with the same subject matter. But Ambrogio Lorenzetti introduces something entirely new by taking advantage of the materiality of the image carrier, whether that is the lower ledge of the panel, or the gold ground itself, or the intrusion of a real window into a fictive scene, to dramatise the moment when the infinite was found in the finite, the very theme of Incarnation.[611] This kind of divine intervention is rendered, on the contrary, by a painted mimesis of a closed door or a translucent stone slab in the Florentine school as represented by Piero.[612] In Albertian anti-materialism, the divine is evoked through the painted forms of the material rather than the material itself.

From the above analyses, one can argue that Alberti has expanded the repertoire of depictable things from figures alone to figures and their surroundings. By replacing

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[609] D. Arasse*, L'Annonciation Italienne: Une Historie de Perspective* (Paris, 1999), pp. 19-92; for Arasse's comparison between Florentine-Albertian innovation and Sienese tradition as exemplified in Lorenzetti, see in particular pp. 91-2. Also see J. Spencer, 'Spatial Imagery of the Annunciation in Fifteenth Century Florence', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Dec., 1955), pp. 273-80.
[610] Arasse, *L'Annonciation Italienne*, p. 91.
[611] Ibid., pp. 64-83.
[612] Ibid., p. 92.

gold with paint, a dynamic relationship between figure and ground has been replaced by an intentional relationship between *historia* (which includes figures and buildings) and the beholder's eye. Yet how far Alberti's theory can reach other artistic traditions in the first half of the fifteenth century remains in question. Albertian interest in depicting settings is a new artistic phenomenon. More than functioning as architectonic devices to ground figures in their *loci* firmly, Albertian architectural backgrounds carry independent social and aesthetic values. It is the sociology and aesthetics of architectural backgrounds that will become the focus of the next two sections.

4.2 Constructing the Interior: The Development of Architectural Perspective into a Socially Meaningful Background in Renaissance Female Portraits

In the first place, it should be noted that Alberti's so-called 'window metaphor' has nothing to do with any actual transparent windowpanes. Instead, Alberti's window is more like an opening or a doorway without a material mediator between the depicted scene and the implied external beholder. It is evident that Alberti's 'window metaphor' is part of his theory of architectural perspective. I argue that the visual evocation of the Albertian window is also not neutrally transparent. Rather, its construction is semiotically opaque and laden with social meanings. There is no better genre to unravel this issue in the Renaissance than portraiture. It is in this particular genre that the architectural perspective works as the backgrounds or spatial attributes of the depicted figures.

At approximately the same time as Alberti was writing about his window, Italian artists from both the Northern and Central areas of Italy were exploring different ways of depicting backgrounds in profile portraits. In mercantile Florence, Fra Filippo Lippi was experimenting with how to stage patrician women within appropriate architectural settings in portraits. The earliest example is *Woman with a Man at a Window* (Fig. 110) now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which, stylistically, has been dated to the late 1430s or early 1440s. The two sitters in Lippi's portrait have been plausibly

identified as Lorenzo di Ranieri Scolari and Angiola di Bernardo Sapiti, who were married in 1436.[613] The portrait is thought to commemorate the couple's wedding or the birth of their son in 1444. It could also be a 'dowry portrait', showing the wealth and splendour of the Sapiti-Scolari alliance. During the Renaissance period, marriage involved payment of a dowry, which could involve an enormous financial outlay by the bride's family, while providing new capital gain for the groom's family. The dowry was accompanied by the material gift of a trousseau, called the *donora*, which was reciprocated by the counter-*donora* provided by the groom.[614]

In Lippi's portrait, the woman's hair appears to have been dyed blond, reminding viewers of the Petrarchan poetic tradition of the beloved's golden locks. Binding her hair is a heavy and fashionable headdress, dyed in the most expensive crimson and further embellished by a ruby and pearl head brooch. She wears a pearl necklace around her neck and an overgarment (*giornea*) with the dark figured velvet of the dress (*gamurra*) showing beneath. On her sleeve there is a chivalric motto LEALTÀ, proclaiming the wife's fidelity to the husband. The most prominent jewellery worn by the female figure is a shoulder brooch consisting of a diamond surrounded by pearls. According to *ricordanze*, a hybrid of diary and account book, brooches were extremely popular as counter-*donora* gifts.[615]

Lippi's portrait is perhaps the first Italian example in which a couple has been depicted in a domestic setting, with the female figure explicitly positioned in front of a window that opens onto a landscape. In order to add a narrative dimension to this otherwise static and rigid portrayal of a patrician woman in profile, Lippi used two windows. On the left, a man (presumably Lorenzo di Ranieri Scolari) enters from outside through a window, gesturing to the woman in a fashion that recalls the gestures of the Angel

[613] J. Breck, 'A Double Portrait by Fra Filippo Lippi', *Art in America* 2 (1913), pp. 44-55.
[614] There is an extensive literature on dowries and the trousseau in Renaissance Italy. A key figure in initiating the study of the gendered implications of such practices is Christine Klapisch Zuber. See her influential volume C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, 1985).
[615] J. Woods-Marsden, 'Portraits of the Lady, 1430-1520', p. 76.

Gabriel in scenes of the Annunciation. A more articulated window, drawn in perspective with a vanishing point located in the view of a city, is centrally placed in the very background as if to evoke the idea of a 'painting within a painting'. This idea seems to have captured Lippi's imagination because he used a similar architectural setting in his *Portrait of a Woman* now in Berlin (Fig. 111). Both could be typologically linked to niche backgrounds that appear in earlier Marian reliefs, such as Donatello's *Pazzi Madonna* (Fig. 112).[616]

From the fifteenth century onwards, there was a general tendency in both profane and sacred images to depict subjects in increasingly communicative ways with ever more convincing spatial effects. In Lippi's double portrait, the Marian connotations are also implicit in the composition of the husband and wife, in which the former's gesture, as noted, recalls that of an Annunciation scene which usually takes place in an interior often with a landscape view in the distance. This is seen in a work by Lippi himself, the *Annunciation with two Kneeling Donors* (Fig. 113) now in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome. It also should be noted that Lippi first used a domestic setting with a window in an image of the Madonna and Child (the so-called *Tarquinia Madonna*), which was unprecedented in Italian art and thus has often been assumed to show the influence of Jan van Eyck, as seen in works such as his *Lucca Madonna* now in Frankfurt (Fig. 114).[617] But Although Martin Davies noted an affinity between the gesture of the woman in Lippi's double portrait and that of Giovanna in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (Fig. 115), with both figures using their left hand to hitch up their robes.[618]

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[616] I am very grateful for Prof. Geraldine Johnson's suggestion about the formal affinities between the backgrounds in some Marian reliefs and those in some Renaissance female portraits, such as seen in the architectural background in Fra Filippo Lippi's *Portrait of a Woman* in Berlin. For an excellent study on the fifteenth-century Marian reliefs, see G. A. Johnson, 'Art of artefact? Madonna and Child reliefs in the early Renaissance', in Stuart Currie and Peta Motture (eds), *The Sculpted Object: 1400-1700* (Aldershot, 1997), pp. 1-24.

[617] M. Meiss, 'Jan van Eyck and the Italian Renaissance', *The Painter's Choice. Problems in the Interpretation of Renaissance Art* (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London, 1976), p. 25. For the relationship between Lippi and Flemish art, also see F. Ames-Lewis, 'Fra Filippo Lippi and Flanders', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 42. Bd., H. 4 (1979), pp. 255-273.

[618] M. Davies, *National Gallery Catalogues. Early Netherlandish School* (London, 1968), p. 52.

However, Jeffrey Ruda has refuted any suggestion of a Northern influence on Lippi's painting.[619]

More importantly for the present argument, these are possible imaginative sources for Lippi's painting of a window in the background, with a carved moulding that joins a passepartout-like ledge. The social ramifications of the motif of 'a woman at a window' are linked to a 'pictorial paradox' according to Adrian Randolph. On the one hand, modest women were advised to stay away from windows or doors facing the exterior world by contemporary writers. For instance, in his treatise on the *Reggimento e costumi di donna* (*The Comportment and Habits of Woman*, 1348), Francesco da Barberino advised daughters of emperors and kings to spend 'almost no time at windows or balconies'; other women should 'use windows and doors as little as possible'.[620] On the other hand, windows appear in and serve compositionally as internal framing devices in numerous portraits of women in the fifteenth century. Joanna Woods-Marsden notes that 'only by confining his womenfolk, indoors, out of sight, could a woman's father or husband ensure her chastity, the virtue on which the family's honor depended.'[621]

If the piazza was the preferred domain for the male elites who ran the city, then the private palazzo could be the space for their wives and daughters. But these male/female, public/private restrictions found in real life could be ignored or subverted in paintings. According to Alison Wright, such images of noble women were, in fact, not simply 'private' pictures but could be put on semi-public display in *palazzi* to be admired and eventually to serve commemorative functions.[622] Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni* (Fig. 116) is an example of the latter type of portrait since the

[619] J. Ruda, 'Flemish Painting and the Early Renaissance in Florence: Questions of Influence', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 47. Bd., H. 2 (1984), p. 224.
[620] A. Randolph, *Touching Objects. Intimate Experiences of Italian Fifteenth-Century Art* (New Haven and London, 2014), p. 92.
[621] Woods-Marsden, 'Portraits of the Lady, 1430-1520', p. 72.
[622] A. Wright, 'The Memory of Faces: Representational Choices in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Portraiture', in G. Ciapelli and P. Rubin (eds), *Art, Memory and Family in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 86-113, esp. p. 88.

sitter had died by the time the work was produced. It was listed, according to an inventory of 1498, in the chamber of her husband Lorenzo Tornabuoni in his Florentine palace. As stated in the inventory, 'nella chamera del palcho doro': 'un quadro chon chornicione mess'oro chon testo e busto della Giovanna degli albizi' ('in a room of golden stalls': 'a panel with a gold frame with the head and bust of Giovanna degli Albizzi').[623]

The location of Giovanna's portrait in her husband's chamber raises the issue of the male gaze. In Ghirlandaio's portrait (Fig. 116), the perspectival construction of the painting has been carefully calculated. According to infrared reflectography and x-radiography, the orthogonals and other lines were incised by the painter to guide him.[624] Within the original gilded external frame, another brown frame was painted inside the border of the composition, thereby treating the picture plane like a transparent window as recommended by Alberti. According to Patricia Simons in an influential article first published in 1988, the female sitter 'is forever absorbed as part of the Tornabuoni heritage, displayed in their palace to be seen by their visitors and themselves, including her son who bore their name'.[625] As implied by Simons, the sitter is passively contained within an architectural surrounding and objectified by the male gaze. Further developing Simons' argument that the profile forms of 'framed' Renaissance female sitters de-naturalise the invisible nature of Renaissance women, I argue that the architectural backgrounds positively acted as theatrical *loci* to act out the painted visibility of Renaissance women in perspectival clarity and control.[626] When discussing Florentine female portraits in profile after 1440 in general, she uses the notion of 'display culture' to designate 'a culture where the outward display of honour, magnificence and wealth was vital to one's social prestige and definition'.[627] In this

[623] Quoted in J. K. Cadogan, *Domenico Ghirlandaio. Artist and Artisan* (New Haven and London, 2000), p. 278, No. 46.
[624] See Cole, *Leonardo, Michelangelo, and the Art of Figure* (New Haven and London, 2014), p. 40.
[625] Discussed in Simons, 'Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture'.
[626] For Simons' original argument in regard to the profile form of Renaissance women at or near windows, see in particular Simons, 'Women in Frames', pp. 4-15.
[627] Ibid., p. 8.

culture, the 'profile, presenting an averted eye and a face available to scrutiny, was suited to the representation of an ordered, chaste and decorous piece of property'.[628] This 'display culture', directed to an implied male gaze, is also evoked in the still-life within the framing Brunelleschian niche consisting of the coral beads, a closed religious book, and a large ruby surrounded by a sapphire-encrusted winged dragon, objects that could well be part of the *donora* or counter-*donora* of the female sitter.

The most fascinating socio-cultural aspect of this portrait is the inscription written on a velum parchment attached to the background niche that frames the sitter: 'Would that art could represent character and mind ('mores animumque effingere')! / There would be no more beautiful painting on earth.'[629] Appropriating a text by the Roman poet Martial, Ghirlandaio's inscription provides an important lens through which we can better understand some fundamental concerns regarding female portraits and ideals of female behaviour in late fifteenth-century Florence. At first glance, the interest in the unseen 'character and mind' of the sitter seems to contradict the 'display culture' of the time and the visibility of the portrait itself. But it is evident that the quotation actually reflects, indeed, contributes to, the contemporary feminine ideal.

Similar sentiments were expressed in contemporary writings about women. 'Beauty in a woman', wrote Leon Battista Alberti,

> must be judged not only by the charm and refinement of her face, but still more by the grace of her person and her aptitude for bearing and giving birth to many fine children…In a bride…a man must first seek beauty of mind ('le belezze dell'animo'), that is, good conduct and virtue.[630]

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[628] Ibid., p. 7.

[629] The original Latin text reads: 'Ars utinam mores animumque effingere posset! / Pulchrior in terries nulla tabella foret.' The English translation comes from John Shearman, see J. Shearman, *Only Connect…Art and Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, 1992), p. 112.

[630] L. B. Alberti, 'I libri della famiglia' in his *Opere volgari*, ed. C. Grayson (Bari, 1960), vol. 1, pp. 110-11. Translation from Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, trans. R. N. Watkin (Columbia, S.C., 1969), pp. 115-6.

In the voice of an elderly husband addressing his new, young wife, Alberti writes in terms which are even more closely related to portraits:

> Nothing is so important for yourself, so acceptable to God, so pleasing to me, and precious in the sight of your children as your chastity ('onestà'). The woman's character is the jewel ('ornamento') of her family; the mother's purity has always been a part of the dowry she passes on to her daughters; her purity has always far outweighed her [physical] beauty.[631]

Having died whilst pregnant in 1488, the dead Giovanna née Albizzi is here immortalised and commemorated through the profile format, the background objects and, most importantly, the inscription written in the voice of her husband, Lorenzo Tornabuoni, rather than by the artist.[632] Being presented in a portrait intended to be displayed in their palace, she has become part of the Tornabuoni heritage.

In Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni*, the *parerga* are emblematic of the sitter's moral and psychological state. As such they are not marginal elements but lie at the very core of the portrait's meaning for contemporary viewers. Part of the *parerga* is the field, or background, of this portrait. The Brunelleschian niche frames the upper body of Giovanna, with the rectangular angle of the lower left corner echoing the posture of the sitter's L-shaped arms. I would suggest that this 'L' shape, appearing both in the stonework background and in the sitter's arm posture, alludes to her husband, Lorenzo's initial, thus reinforcing a masculine control. Unlike a real window opening into a real landscape as seen in Ghirlandaio's *An Old Man and his Grandson* (Fig. 117), a portrait produced at approximately the same time, the *pietra serena* stonework in the background of the *Portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni* creates a dark interior, which might be intended to allude to the female sitter's premature death.

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631 Alberti, 'I libri della famiglia', p. 224; translated in *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, p. 213.
632 On Lorenzo as the implied author of the inscription, see M. DePrano, '"No painting on earth would be more beautiful": an analysis of Giovanna degli Albizzi's portrait inscription', *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (2008), pp. 617-41.

This functions similarly to the reverse side of a Renaissance portrait medal or painted portrait. The inscription affixed to the niche that frames the sitter could, in fact, have been appropriately located on the reverse had the portrait been in the form of a medal rather than painting. The background of the portrait of Giovanna thus seems to collapse front and reverse into a single image. Leonardo seems to have been aware of the play between the portrait background and the reverse side of a portrait medal. In his *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci*, not only does a dark bush of juniper appear in the background of the portrait, but a sprig of juniper appears again in a wreath on the actual back of the panel (Fig. 118).

A closely related example is the *Portrait of a Young Woman* of c. 1490/1500 (Fig. 119) attributed to Domenico Ghirlandaio, which is paired with a portrait of her husband sitting in front of a landscape background (Fig. 120). Despite the continuous landscape backgrounds behind the couple, the social meanings of the male and female sitters each are encoded in the different ways in which they are framed by the background setting. While the man appears to stand outside the world, his wife is located indoors. The landscape behind her is framed by classicising architectural elements. An enclosed space considered appropriate for a woman is juxtaposed with an exterior associated with the masculine public realm.

The details convey socio-cultural meaning for the contemporary viewer. Significantly, the landscape behind the husband includes a city filled with overly tall towers and a busy harbour. The ships ready for departure may well symbolise the cosmopolitanism of the man, suggesting travel and international trade. In contrast, there is open shelving behind the woman to one side. Each object displayed there alludes to her virtuous female character: the water-filled glass carafe alludes to purity, and, in the middle, the open prayer book symbolises the sitter's religious devotion. On the lowest level, there is a brooch and a ring on the lid of a box (*gofannuccio*), in front of which there is a hairpin that protrudes beyond the edge of the chest. The jewellery hints at the wealth of

the sitter, or, more likely, of her husband and probably alludes to the dowry or trousseau associated with her marriage.[633]

The single protruding hairpin in particular underscores the illusionism of the entire picture which allows the background to function as an independent still life. It evokes a sense of touch, with the feeling that one could almost reach over the sitter's shoulder to grasp each object. In this pair of portraits, there thus seems to be a contrast between a small-scale domestic interior with a still life that encourages the implied (male) beholder to come into close proximity with the female sitter and the objects directly behind her, seemingly able to touch both the woman and the objects at will, and the busy far-off landscape for which the male sitter appears to act as guardian, his body blocking off the implied viewer's direct physical access to the external world of men depicted in microcosm.[634]

The final example to be considered in this section is Botticelli's *Portrait of a Lady known as Smeralda Bandinelli* now in the V&A Museum, London (Fig. 121). In terms of the composition, this painting is closely related to his teacher Fra Filippo Lippi's prototype. It can be seen as a version of Lippi's Metropolitan Museum portrait of a lady, but turned through 90 degrees. In Botticelli's homage to his teacher, the attention of the female sitter is thoroughly interrupted by the presence of the viewer. She looks directly into the beholder's eyes. She is holding her right hand against the door frame that is the foreground area. The proximity of the figure of Smeralda Bandinelli to the beholder is emphasised by her gesture. There are two windows. The one on her right lets the light flood in, while the one in the background provides a monochromatic blue ground to set her head. Rather than domesticating the female sitter, these windows function as thresholds through which a vital dialogue between the sitter and the beholder is

[633] Regine Timm, in Peter Bloch et al. *Bilder vom Menschen in der Kunst des Abendlandes*, exh. cat. (Berlin, 1980), pp. 162-3. Also see P. Kathke, *Porträt und Accessoire: eine Bildnisform im 16. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1997), p. 70. For a more detailed interpretation of these objects in relation to multisensory be-holding, see Randolph, *Touching Objects*, pp. 106-14.
[634] I am grateful to Professor Geraldine Johnson for suggesting this point to me.

established. However, this 'dialogue' is checked by a form of inaccessibility of the sitter, as implied in the background. Botticelli introduces a thematic contrast between an enclosed space and an open space in the background of this portrait, both of which are elaborations on Alberti's window metaphor. The open door revealing a glimpse of the sky at the back of the sitter is a spatial emulation of the open space opened to the beholder. However, echoing the materiality of the door itself, the side window with a column in the middle aims to evoke the idea of an enclosed space. This spatial *contrapposto* can be made to further the claim that the female sitter is simultaneously accessible and inaccessible to the beholder.

While revisiting some key examples discussed by Randolph in his *Touching Objects*, I aim to question the transparency of painted surfaces by focusing on architectural backgrounds in early Renaissance female portraits. Through using varied architectonic devices including columns, windows and niches, Renaissance artists were interested in constructing the social identities of the sitters by taking advantage of the agency of backgrounds. The agency of architectural backgrounds will become even more clearly articulated in the following examples when backgrounds have become foregrounds.

4.3 '…una prospettiva anticha ma bella': Classical Antiquity, Humanism and Architectural Perspective in the 'Ideal City' Panels

Whereas landscape painting in Northern Europe moved to focus on the landscape as a subject in its own right, in Italy it was architectural backgrounds that came to possess a more independent agency. This, I believe, results from the growing status of the artist. It is interesting to find that the rediscovery and codification of linear perspective coincides with the development of the concept of the artist as a discourse. Brunelleschi famously depicted Florence's Baptistry and Palazzo Vecchio on a pair of panels in c. 1410-15, in which painted images of architecture often combined classical orders with

the rules of linear perspective.[635] The key question is: what is the inter-relationship between the growing variety of painted architecture in the background, the artistic interest in perspective, and the classical allusions in the decades after Brunelleschi's experiment?

Brunelleschi's prototype paved the way for the development of the three so-called 'Ideal City' panels now stored in Urbino, Baltimore and Berlin (Figs. 122, 123, 124), in which the depicted architecture moves into the foreground as the very subject of the paintings.[636] The three 'Ideal City' panels have recently been re-attributed to Giuliano da Sangallo.[637] Previously, they had been associated with Piero della Francesca, Luciano Laurana, Francesco di Giorgio, Baccio Pontelli and others. That the authorship of these panels has elicited so much scholarly attention merits consideration. However, rather than making yet another attempt to pin down the author of these three panels, I will raise some broader questions about authorial presence and artistic virtuosity by illuminating the link between the panels' foregrounding of architecture and Brunelleschi's fame as a predecessor.

The relationship of figures to background becomes more complicated in paintings like the three 'Ideal City' panels where there are few, if any, figures at all and no discernible narrative. Can the term *campo* even be used in regard to those paintings without subjects or sometimes even without figures, as is the case for a still life or an unpopulated landscape or architectural view? In the case of the three 'Ideal City' panels, only the Baltimore panel has any figures who might suggest some sort of iconographical theme or possible narrative. But in the Urbino and Berlin panels, the

[635] In much of the previous literature, Brunelleschi's perspectival panels were considered as the starting point for the Renaissance discovery or invention of linear perspective. For instance, see S. Edgerton, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York, 1975). But some obvious classical allusions can already be found in Giotto's painted architecture, see F. Benelli, *The Architecture in Giotto's Paintings* (Cambridge and New York, 2012).

[636] The link between Brunelleschi's panels and the three 'ideal city' views has been particularly emphasised by Hubert Damisch. See H. Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. J. Goodman (Cambridge and London, 1994).

[637] C. L. Frommel, 'Le tavole di Berlino, di Urbino e di Baltimora', *Architettura e committenza da Alberti a Bramente* (Florence, 2006), pp. 337-366.

figure-and-ground dichotomy becomes completely untenable given the total lack of figures of any type. To some extent, one could argue that the ground has become the figure. Or, to put it in another way, it is the architectural *veduta* that has itself become the subject, as if figure and ground have collapsed into a single unity. But could a work of art be commissioned in the Renaissance without a subject? The fact that the panels may have been embedded within or closely connected to domestic furniture suggests that, at least on one level, they may have been inherently *decorative* objects.

Based on the content of the panels, however, they are anything but 'merely' decorative. The experimental character of these three panels might connect them more plausibly to the two lost perspectival panels by Brunelleschi.[638] Each building and its specific positioning in the panel could have iconographic significance. Here, Brunelleschi's prototype becomes particularly pertinent. It is interesting to find that, based on descriptions of one of Brunelleschi's lost panels, the first pictorial demonstration of linear perspective retains the traditional gold ground, which is usually considered the antipode of Renaissance naturalism. Retaining the gold ground in the Baptistery panel is, above all, pragmatic. It aims to reflect the moving clouds in the sky, which were difficult to paint by using the perspectival method in the time of Brunelleschi. On the other hand, the gold ground would remind people of those fourteenth-century Italian paintings, in which the depicted holy subjects are visually present in front of the gold grounds. This compositional scheme seems to suggest that Brunelleschi might have aimed to present the Baptistery panel as a sacred or iconic image. It is a portrait or *imago* of the Baptistery itself.

The relevance of Brunelleschi's example is revealed more conspicuously if we consider the beholder's position in relation to these panels. We know Brunelleschi's two lost panels presuppose the presence of an immobile viewer in the front of them. But how might the original location of these objects shed light upon the perspectival

[638] Damisch's book *The Origin of Perspective* certainly plays down the technical relevance of the three panels' original function in interpreting their meaning.

configuration of the image itself? This question leads us to consider a particular moment when the history of perspective intersected with the history of furniture: how could the rigorous application of perspective in the three panels relate to their own qualities as material objects intended for specific physical and social locations?

Previous studies on these three panels have been focused primarily on their dating, style and attribution.[639] Due to the lack of documentary evidence, few scholars have studied the possible original function and location of these three panels. The first scholar to suggest their most likely original destination was John Shearman, who, in an article published in 1975 in the *Burlington Magazine*, identified the Berlin panel in particular as probably being a *spalliera* painting.[640] The term *spalliera* is derived from the word *spalla*, meaning 'shoulder'. Originally, the term referred to a kind of painting that is set into the wall panelling in an elite home at head or shoulder height above the backrest of a piece of furniture. But the term remains somewhat elusive because exactly how and where *spalliera* paintings were actually displayed is still not fully understood given the paucity of surviving *in situ* examples and of clear documentary evidence.[641]

Nonetheless, following Shearman's promising lead, Chastel also suggested that the three panels were originally *spalliera* panels (or possibly *cassone* panels made to

[639] The scholarly literature on the three 'ideal city' panels is vast. Some of the important publications on these panels include the following (in chronological order): F. Kimball, 'Luciano Laurana and the "High Renaissance"', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Dec., 1927), pp. 125-151; R. Krautheimer, 'The Tragic and Comic Scene of the Renaissance: The Baltimore and Urbino Panels', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XXXIII (1948), pp. 327-46; P. Sanpaolesi, 'Le prospettive architettoniche di Urbino, di Filandelafia e di Berlino', in *Bollettino d'Arte* (1949), pp. 322-37; H. Saalman, 'The Baltimore and Urbino Panels: Cosimo Rosselli', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 110, No. 784 (Jul., 1968), pp. 376-381+383; A. Conti, 'Le prospettive urbinati. Tentativo di un bilancio ed abbozzo di una bibliografia', *Annali della scuola normale superior di Pisa. Classe di lettere e filosofia*, 3rd ser. 6/4 (1976), pp. 1193-234; H. Damisch, *L'origine de la perspective* (Paris, 1987); translated as *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge and London, 1994); G. Morolli, 'Nel cuore del palazzo, la città ideale. Alberti e la prospettiva architettonica di Urbino', in P. Dal Poggetto (ed.), *Piero e le corti rinascimentali* (Venice, 1992), pp. 215-29. C. L. Frommel, 'Le tavole di Berlino, di Urbino e di Baltimora', *Architettura e committenza da Alberti a Bramente* (Florence, 2006), pp. 337-366; A. Marchi and M. Rosaria Valazzi (eds), *La città ideale: L'utopia del Rinascimento a Urbino tra Piero della Francesca e Raffaello* (Milan, 2012); J. Grave, *Architekturen des Sehens. Bauten in Bildern des Quattrocento* (Munich, 2015), pp. 169-329.

[640] J. Shearman, 'The Collections of the Younger Branch of the Medici', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 117, No. 862 (Jan., 1975), p. 18.

[641] On this genre of painting, see A. B. Barriault, Spalliera *Painting of Renaissance Tuscany. Fables of Poets for Patrician Homes* (Pennsylvania, 1994), pp. 9-49.

decorate the sides of chest), in the process rejecting Richard Krautheimer's influential claim that these panels, in Krautheimer's words, 'reflect' the theatrical backdrops described by Sebastiano Serlio in his *Trattato di architettura* of 1537.[642] The sizes and landscape formats of all three panels do support the suggestion that they belonged to the category of *spalliera* paintings made in late fifteenth-century Florence.[643] Yet, I believe it is worth reconsidering the possible link after all between these *spalliera* paintings and Renaissance theatre

The three 'Ideal City' panels are not isolated artistic endeavours. In fact, a number of *spalliera*, *cassone* and *deschi da parto* (birth tray) paintings were produced for domestic settings in the mid- to later fifteenth century, in which artists were likewise interested in depicting idealised architectural backgrounds as opposed to documenting real architectural settings.[644] Botticelli's four surviving *spalliera* panels of the life and miracles of Saint Zenobius (Fig. 125) are prime examples of this phenomenon, although in this case the architecture serves as a backdrop for narratives taking place in the foreground, rather than being the sole focus of each panel, as in the three 'Ideal City' panels.[645] Compositions featuring architecture alone, as seen in the three 'Ideal City' panels, are also seen in contemporary intarsia woodworks, especially the architectural views found on the doors of the Ducal Palace in Urbino (Fig. 126).[646] If one accepts

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[642] For Chastel's comments on these three panels, see in particular A. Chastel, '"Vues Urbaines Peintes" et Théatre', in *Fables, Formes, Figures* (Paris, 1978), I, pp. 497-503; and A. Chastel, 'Maqueterie et Perspective au XVe Siècle' in the same volume, pp. 317-32; For Krautheimer's original article, see R. Krautheimer, 'The Tragic and Comic Scene of the Renaissance: The Baltimore and Urbino Panels', originally published in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XXXIII (1948), pp. 327-46, reprinted in R. Krautheimer, *Studies in Early Christian, Medieval, and Renaissance Art* (London, 1971), pp. 345-59. Krautheimer later revised his original thesis in R. Krautheimer, 'The Panels in Urbino, Baltimore and Berlin Reconsidered', in H. A. Millon and V. M. Lampugnani (eds), *The Renaissance from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo: The Representation of Architecture*, cat. exh. Venice (New York, 1994), pp. 233-257.

[643] The Urbino panel is 67x238 cm; the Baltimore panel is 83x219.8 cm; the Berlin panel is 140x234 cm.

[644] On *cassone* panels, see C. L. Baskins, *Cassone Painting: Humanism and Gender in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1998). Birth trays are discussed in J. Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, 1999).

[645] Note that in the Baltimore panel, the architectural view is not completely devoid of human figures.

[646] For the relationship between perspective and *intarsia* works, see Chastel, 'Maqueterie et Perspective au XVe Siècle', *Fables, Formes, Figures* (Paris, 1978), I, pp. 317-32. For the architectural views on the doors of the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, see M. T. Honorati, 'Prospettive architettoniche a tarsia: le porte del Palazzo Ducale di Urbino', in *Notizie da Palazzo Albani*, vol. 12, ½ (1983), pp. 38-50.

the hypothesis that these three 'Ideal City' panels were indeed *spalliera* panels, the possible link between them and their domestic settings needs to be explored further, including in relation to other painted furnishings and objects. Consideration should also be given to the fact that *spalliera* painting, unlike *cassone* painting, had grown more independent from furnishings by the late fifteenth century, which may also have had an impact on how such paintings were understood by contemporary viewers. The fact that *spalliera* paintings were intended to be viewed head-on, a position associated with one-point linear perspective compositions like those seen in the three panels, while *cassone* panels were located on floor-level chests seen from above, is also highly relevant when considering the original reception of the 'ideal city' views.

It is generally assumed that all three panels originated from the principality of Urbino, although only one of the pictures has a full provenance confirming this.[647] The Urbino panel, before entering the collection of the National Gallery of the Marches, had once been displayed in the Clarissan convent of Santa Chiara in Urbino. Founded by Federico da Montefeltro himself or possibly his daughter Elisabeth in 1482, the same year that the duke died, the convent served as a *conservatorio* for widows of noble birth. The Baltimore panel originally belonged to the Massarenti collection in Rome before it was acquired in 1902 by the Walters Art Gallery. This painting may match a description in an inventory of 1599 from the ducale palace: 'Un quadro longo di una prospettiva anticha ma bella di mano di Fra Carnevale'. The suggestion is that 'antique perspective' in this entry might refer to the classicising elements in the Baltimore panel.[648] As for the Berlin panel, it was acquired in 1896 on the Florentine market. In another inventory of the Urbino palace, this one undertaken in 1582, another 'quadro…con una prospettiva' is located above the door of one of the Duke's rooms.[649] Could this imply that all three panels were originally intended for such elevated positions? If nothing else, this inventory entry might suggest a possible link between

[647] H. Belting, *Florence and Baghdad, Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge and London, 2011), p. 198.
[648] Ibid., p. 76.
[649] F. Sangiorgi, *Documenti urbinati. Inventari del palazzo ducale* (Urbino, 1976), p. 43.

the perspectival paintings like the 'ideal city' panels and the architectural views in the *intarsia* on the doors below in the ducal palace (Fig. 126).

It is relevant that in the inventories listed above, 'perspective', as a prominent stylistic factor had been picked out for particular attention in the descriptions. Could it be that the rigorously applied perspective in these three panels and what might be termed a 'perspectival style' more generally in *spalliera* paintings was intended to be linked to the *intarsia* architectural views which necessarily privilege what one might call a 'linear' style? As Haines has convincingly pointed out, the discovery of perspective *intarsia* in the second half of the fifteenth century in Florence goes hand in hand with the discovery and application of artificial perspective at the same time.[650] Brunelleschi and Alberti are two figures at the back of this development of perspective *intarsia* works. Even Vasari associates Brunelleschi's perspective inventions with the art of *intarsia*.[651] Nonetheless, given its association with perspective, *intarsia* architectural views also presuppose the presence of beholders gazing directly at them.

One element clearly setting these three 'Ideal City' panels apart from the *intarsia* works is the fact that the former are not monochromatic, but painted in naturalistic colour. When comparing Tasso's poetry to *intarsia*, Galileo Galilei made an interesting comparison between oil painting and *intarsia*:

> …for, as marquetry is a combination of small wooden pieces of different colours, with which they can never be so softly coupled and united that their boundaries do not remain sharp and harshly distinguished by the diversity of colours; whereas in oil colouring, as the boundaries are softly blurred, they pass from once colour to another without harshness, so that the painting is soft, rounded, with strength and relief. [652]

[650] M. Haines, *The 'Sacrestia delle Messe' of the Florentine Cathedral* (Florence, 1983), pp. 99-109.
[651] Ibid., p. 101.
[652] Translation is mine, see G. Galilei, *Scritti letterari* (Florence, 1970), pp. 493-4: '…perché, essendo le tarsie un accozzamento di legnetti di diversi colori, con i quali non possono già mai accoppiarsi e unirsi così dolcemente che non restino i lor confini taglienti e dalla diversità de' colori crudamente distinti;

Here, Galileo has drawn a clear distinction between painting and *intarsia* by referring to the *disegno* versus *colore* debate. Moreover, this distinction actually characterises the stylistic differences between the fifteenth century and sixteenth century. His point of departure is the transition from one plane to another as determined by the different media of painting and *intarsia*. For Galileo, *intarsia* was a crude and less refined artistic medium than oil painting. Here, Galileo seemed to have privileged *colore* over *disegno*, an attitude that would have been antithetical to Vasari. However, unlike wooden *intarsia* paintings, the three 'ideal city' panels are characterised by their rich and wide chromatic range, with details of how the sky and clouds have been handled used by some scholars to try to identify the hands of individual artists.[653] Here in the inventory, the term *prospettiva* has become synonymous with an architectural view as opposed to landscapes executed in oil painting. It would thus be appropriate for their emphasis on *disegno*, which is also seen in the *intarsia* panels, to be a key stylistic feature.

Thus far, the themes (if not the subjects) of these three panels have not been directly considered. It has long been suggested that the painter(s) of these three panels might have been informed by Alberti's writings on architecture.[654] In addition to considering a possible link to Alberti, I will discuss how the legibility of architectural forms mattered for the contemporary viewers in Urbino and beyond. Previous studies have treated these architectural views as representations of particular architectural types, in the process linking them to Albertian and Vitruvian theories of architecture.

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dove nel colorito a olio, sfumandosi dolcemente i confini, si passa senza crudezza dall'un all'altra tinta, onde la pittura riesce morbida, tonda, con forza e rilievo.'

[653] A. Conti, 'Le prospettive urbinati. Tentativo di un bilancio ed abbozzo di una bibliografia', pp. 1200-1.

[654] See, for instance, Kimball, 'Luciano Laurana and the "High Renaissance"' and G. Morolli, 'Nel cuore del palazzo, la città ideale. Alberti e la prospettiva architettonica di Urbino'.

Alessandro Parronchi has tried to identify real places (Florence, Rome, and Pisa) in these three panels.[655] In 1484 in Rome, it is known from Vasari that Pinturicchio was commissioned by Innocent VIII to decorate the large loggia of the Villa Belvedere with views of present-day Milan, Genoa, Florence, Venice and Naples.[656] Naming the genre 'Ideal City' may therefore be misleading if it incorrectly suggests that such idealised architectural types are meant to evoke solely abstract ideals. It is also possible, as suggested above, that the panels were intended to evoke future architectural projects for real places, a sort of prospective blueprint blurring contemporary reality with future (idealised) ambitions. Given this ambiguity, I would like to propose that the three panels should be dated between late 1480s and 1500, thus foreshadowing some Mannerist aesthetics of architectural perspective in the sixteenth century. More important than seeking to fix definitely these three panels to some historical specific time and spatial frameworks, I would argue that they serve as theoretical objects with explicit moralising agendas and knowingly oscillating on the threshold between the real and the imaginary.

One iconographical motif that could perhaps link all three panels together is that of water. At first glance, the city and piazza depicted in the three panels all seem to be 'deserted places' without human habitation. But after looking at them carefully, the traces of human activities become apparent, especially activities connected to water. The ships in waters in the centre of the Berlin panel (Fig. 124) is a common motif in the backgrounds of many Renaissance portraits of men, as seen in the background of Piero della Francesca's portrait of Duke Federico (Fig. 82). The depiction of two wells symmetrically-placed wells in the Urbino panel (Fig. 122) links it to the Baltimore panel, which has a fountain in the centre (Fig. 123). The motif of a well on an octagonal base is not that uncommon in fifteenth-century painting. Damisch notes that Piero della Francesca, in his *De prospectiva pingendi*, taught Renaissance artists how to depict

[655] Discussed in Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, pp. 192-3.
[656] Pinturicchio was commissioned to paint 'una loggia tutta di paesi; e vi ritrasse Roma, Milano, Genova, Fiorenza, Venezia e Napoli, alla maniera de' Fiamminghi', see Vasari, *Vite*, III, p. 574.

such wells in elevation.[657] The well motif also had been used earlier. One example is found in the so-called *Adimari Wedding* panel of c. 1450 (Fig. 127). In this *spalliera* or possibly *cassone* painting, an octagonal well made from pink marble is positioned in the centre behind the figures. In the Baltimore panel, three figures surround the fountain. One woman approaches the fountain carrying a large ewer on her head. Lower down, one can see another woman drawing water from the fountain. On the left side of the piazza, there is a third figure: a man who walks with a stick and carries a barrel on his shoulder, possibly yet another allusion to liquids. Given that the provenance of the Urbino panel is a Clarissan convent and the presence of the central circular building topped by a cross, Maria Grazia Ciardi Dupre Dal Poggetto has proposed that this painting in Urbino should be interpreted as an image of the *civitas Dei* as defined by Saint Augustine. Further, she proposes that the Baltimore panel should be understood as a representation of the *societas christiana* endowed through baptism with the virtues associated with the *civitas Dei*.[658]

Another iconographic approach emerged in 1948 when Krautheimer has proposed that the architectural types in the panels in Urbino and Baltimore anticipated Sebastiano Serlio's designs for stage sets. According to Krautheimer, the panels are 'the first representations of the *scena tragica* and the *scena comica* in the Renaissance'.[659] As stated in Vitruvius' *De architectura*'s fifth book in which the stage set for a tragedy is described, the Baltimore painting shows the requisite stately buildings with classicising architectural language characterised by columns, a colosseum and a triumphal arch. In contrast, the panel in Urbino is more akin to Vitruvius' description of a comic stage, as it shows more everyday buildings and signs of incipient decay.

[657] Damisch, *Origin of Perspective*, pp. 255-6.
[658] M. G. C. D. Dal Poggetto, 'La "Città Ideale" di Urbino', in M. G. C. D. Dal Poggetto and P. Dal Poeggetto (eds), *Urbino e le Marche prima e dopo Raffaello* (Firenze, 1983), pp. 71-5.
[659] Krautheimer, 'The Tragic and Comic Scene of the Renaissance: The Baltimore and Urbino Panels', p. 345.

In his section on theatre in *Ten Books on Architecture*, Alberti divides drama into three types: 'tragedy, recounting the misfortunes of tyrants; comedy, unfolding the cares and anxieties of the head of a family; and satire, singing of countryside delights and pastoral romance'. Immediately afterwards, Alberti talks about how a rotating machinery in the ancient times would present 'a painted backdrop' ('frons expictus'), or reveal 'an atrium, house, or even a wood, according to the type of drama and the action of the play'.[660] The division into three theatrical types is clearly based on Vitruvius's *De architectura* in which he similarly divides theatrical scenery into three types[661]:

> There are three styles of scenery: one which is called tragic; a second, comic; the third, satiric…The tragic are designed with columns, pediments and statues and other royal surroundings; the comic have the appearance of private buildings and balconies and projections with windows made to imitate reality, after the fashion of ordinary building; the satiric settings are painted with trees, caves, mountains and other country features, designed to imitate landscape.[662]

Although known in manuscript form in the Middle Ages, Vitruvius' *De architectura* gained much more widespread frame after it was 'rediscovered' in the Abbey of St. Gallen in 1414 by Poggio Bracciolini. It was eventually published in 1486 by Fra Giovanni Sulpitius, which led to commentaries and translations appearing throughout the sixteenth century.

But Krautheimer, in a later article, revised his observations by claiming that, in the Urbino panel, the central building with a cross on the top is not a market hall but a church.[663] Consequently, he loosened the literary associations between the panels (now

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[660] L. B. Alberti, *L'Architettura:* '*De re aedificatoria*', trans. G. Orlandi (Milan, 1966), Vol. 2, VIII, vii, p. 739. The English translation is from L. B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge and London, 1988), p. 273.

[661] On the revival of Vitruvianism in Renaissance theatre, see, in particular, R. Klein and H. Zerner, 'Vitruve et le théâtre de la Renaissance italiene', in R. Klein, *La Forme et l'intelligible* (Paris, 1970), pp. 294-309.

[662] Vitruvius, *De architectura*, V, vi; Loeb Classical Library, trans. Frank Granger (London, 1970), I: pp. 288-9.

[663] Krautheimer, 'The Panels in Urbino, Baltimore and Berlin Reconsidered'.

including the Berlin one) and Vitruvius' scenic types but instead highlighted the humanistic influences in all three of them.

However, Krautheimer's original dictum holds significant value if one contexualises these three panels within the production of domestic art in the period. In the late fifteenth century, a painting's setting had become as important an indicator of its genre as its subject. This was particularly true of paintings in the domestic sphere, such as *spalliera* and *cassone* paintings, because, unlike devotional paintings that were usually oriented in portrait mode, the rectangular or oblong format of the former two types gave artists new opportunities to explore backgrounds in a more expansive manner. One can find testimony of this in Lorenzo de' Medici's writings describing what he considers perfection in painting to be:

> …because three things, according to my judgement, are appropriate to a perfect work of painting, namely, a good subject, or wall, or wood, or cloth, or whatever it may be, on which the painting is to be applied; a perfect master of drawing and colour; and, in addition to this, that the things painted be of a nature that is pleasing and pleasant to the eye: because even if the painting were perfect, the quality of what is painted could be such that it would not be in accordance with the nature of those who should see it. Therefore, since some delight in cheerful things, such as animals, greenery, balls and similar feasts; others would like to see battles or land or sea and similar martial and ferocious things; others countries, houses and views and proportion of perspective; others some other different thing: and therefore, wanting a painting to be entirely pleasing, this part must be added: that the painted thing still delights in itself.[664]

[664] L. de' Medici, *Opere*, ed. A. Simioni (Bari, 1913-4), vol. I, p. 68: '…perché tre cose, secondo il giudizio mio, si convengono a una perfetta opera di pittura, cioè il subietto buono, o muro, o legno, o panno, o altro che sia, sopra la quale distenda la pittura; il maestro perfetto e di disegno e di colore; ed oltre a questo che le cose dipinte sieno di lor natura grate e piacevoli agli occhi: perché, ancora che la pittura fussi perfetta, potrebbe essere di qualità quello che è dipinto, che non sarebbe secondo la natura di chi debbe vedere. Conciosiaché alcuni si dilettano di cose allegre, com'è animali, verzure, balli e feste simili; altri vorrebbono vedere battaglie o terrestri o marittime e simili cose marziali e fere; altri paesi, casamenti e scorci e proporzioni di prosepettiva; altri qualche altra cosa diversa: e però, volendo che una pittura interamente piaccia, bisogna adiungervi questa parte: che la cosa dipinta ancora per sé diletti.' Translation mine.

Lorenzo provides a taxonomy of subjects and settings, including animals, plants, festival scenes, and battles on sea and land. Significantly, he groups 'landscapes, buildings and foreshortenings and measured perspectives' into a single category. There is good reason to believe that the paintings Lorenzo had in mind for all these subjects were works made for domestic settings such as *spalliera* and *cassone* panels.[665] This passage also hints at the reception of domestic art, which is above all characterised by a desire to provide viewers with pleasure and variety and to create images that cater to a variety of tastes, from the joyful to the martial.

Anne B. Barriault, in her study of *spalliera* paintings, also notes that narrative cycles of such works can reflect in their backgrounds the rhetorical variety of ancient dramatic genres as discussed by both Vitruvius and Alberti.[666] Barriault also suggests that the flourishing of these paintings coincides with the revival of classical theatre in Rome, Mantua, and Ferrara in the 1470s and 1480s.[667] The renewed interest in tragedy, comedy, epic, pastoral and other dramatic genres found their expression in late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century plays and paintings alike. This adds to the classical resonances of many of these domestic paintings. As Jacqueline Musacchio notes, there is also a formal affinity between Roman sarcophagi and the oblong formats of *cassone* marriage chests and *spalliere*.[668]

Lorenzo de' Medici's list of subjects falls into three groups: the first including animals, verdure, dances and other festive events; the second group including battles on land and sea; and the third group consisting of landscapes, buildings, foreshortenings, and measured perspectives. The three groups may well correspond to the audiences belonging to three different social classes. The list also makes a distinction between

[665] A. B. Barriault, Spalliera *Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany. Fables of Poets for Patrician Homes* (Pennsylvania, 1994), p. 51.
[666] Ibid., p. 98.
[667] Ibid., p. 99.
[668] J. M. Musacchio, 'The Triumph of Everyday Life', in Cristelle Baskins et al. *The Triumph of Marriage. Painted Cassoni of the Renaissance* (Boston, 2008), p. 32.

perspectival painting and non-perspectival painting. It is clear, in any case, that the three 'ideal city' panels would belong to the third group.

Barriault notes, but does not theorise, a transition happening in the late 1460s and early 1470s, but already anticipated in the 1440s and 1450s, when 'tapestry like structure' of space in *cassone* panels was transformed into a kind of Albertian space as evident in *spalliera* paintings.[669] I theorise that this emergence of perspectival space might be a reflection of or a reaction to changes in the physical location of these types of domestic paintings. This theory, as far as I know, has not been considered in any previous history of perspective. I argue that the spatial shift from *cassone* displayed at ground level to *spalliera* paintings displayed at or near eye level on a wall suggests that Renaissance viewers would quite literally have looked differently at these two types of images. Leonardo made explicit the need to take into account the beholder's position when composing a picture when he stated that 'you must set out the foreground with its point of sight on a level with the eye of the spectators of the scene'.[670] The development of wooden panelling in sacristy settings in Florence in the second half of the fifteenth century similarly presupposes a specifically-situated viewer. The same phenomenon is seen in palazzi, as evidenced by Uccello's lost perspective *intarsia* that accompanied the Battle of San Romano panels in the Bartolini Salimbeni palazzo.

Furthermore, I would argue that this growing interest in using perspective to position the viewer somatically was linked to an interest in positioning the viewer (and vision itself) morally as well. This ocularcentric move is also reflected in a more general change in subject matter. According to Ellen Callmann, there was a sharp increase in depicting gender distinctions in visual media in the second half of the fifteenth century, shifting away from images of personal female virtue to ones highlighting masculine civic duty.[671] This shift, I would suggest, was in accord with the elite taste in a patrician

[669] Barriault, Spalliera *Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany*, pp. 58-61.
[670] McMahon, p. 110, Part 2, 47-47v, no. 265.
[671] E. Callmann, 'Spalliera', Grove Art Online, https://www-oxfordartonline-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/groveart/display/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-

society which emphasised civic virtue and the Roman ideology of *patria*, or country, as opposed to an aristocratic society which had its roots in early Flemish-Franco courts. Since the four cardinal virtues depicted as a theme on the piazza of the Baltimore panel (Fig. 123) thematically are identical to those visualised on the reversed side of Piero della Francesca's portrait of Federico da Montefeltro (Fig. 128), it is thus very likely that Federico could have been the intended beholder of the Baltimore panel, or more possibly of the three panels as a group. Already in Chapter 3, it was suggested that Renaissance perspectivism is also related to patrons' ideological outlook. In the dedication of his Latin version of *On Painting* (*De pictura*) to his patron Giovan Francesco, the Prince of Mantua, Alberti particularly singles out the prince's virtue ('your virtue' or 'tua virtute').[672] The association between perspective and *virtù* has long been neglected in previous scholarship, but it is interesting to see how civic *virtù* as a humanistic value is visualised in the Baltimore panel in particular. However, unlike the affinity between the patron's outlook and the choice of landscape backgrounds discussed earlier, the patron's interest seems to be less evident or central in the case of painted architecture. Instead, the key figure appears to be the painter and their concerns. In the end, I argue that the notion of virtue is a key concept relevant to both the intended audience and the artist.

According to Barriault, the epithalamia of Tuscan *spalliera* paintings 'encouraged the institution of marriage to perpetuate family lineage' and the 'painted histories and myths were themselves heroic fictions for good behaviour that embodied lessons of justice, honesty, and goodness believed by their patrons to be for the sake of patrilineal families, kinsmen, friends, neighbours, and the *patria*'.[673] Using linear perspective to compose such scenes could have presented an explicit moralising agenda. Significantly, in his treatise on architecture, Serlio condemns morally licentious landscapes of satiric scenes and lauds the morally uplifting perspectival view in tragic scenes.[674]

7000080430?rskey=NEhoCZ&result=1 (2003).

[672] Alberti-Grayson, pp. 34-5.

[673] Barriault, Spalliera *Paintings of Renaissance Tuscany*, pp. 101-3; 139.

[674] Discussed in J. Onians, *Bearers of Meaning. The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and*

The link between Alberti and the three panels was further elaborated by Gabriele Morolli. Morolli sees the paintings not only being inspired by the cultural milieu of the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, but deeply related to the ideology of the Roman *renovatio urbis* under Pope Nicholas V.[675] According to Morolli, the painting in Baltimore shows a vision of a restored *Forum Romanum*, the Berlin panel shows an idealised proposal to construct a broad axis between St. Peter's Basillica and the Tiber near Castel Sant' Angelo, and the panel in Urbino shows the design for a new St. Peter's Church. Morolli believes that such ideal representations of a Rome renewed could be linked to the Jubilee Year of 1450 and suggests that only Alberti could be the mastermind behind such a project.[676]

The stylistic features of the Urbino panel also suggest the influence of Alberti. On the ground floor of the first classical/modern building on the left in the Urbino panel, one can find that the arcades rest on pilasters (not columns), while in the first building on the left, the columns are depicted supporting the entablature (not an arcade). Although this was unlike the architectural style of most fifteenth-century buildings and this type of design only came into fashion at the very end of the century in the circle of Sangallo, Morolli believes that the quotations from antique architecture show the influence of Alberti, whether directly or indirectly.

The most significant insight from Morolli relates to the 'hidden drawing' in the Urbino panel and its association with Alberti's theory and practice of *disegno*. As seen in the first chapter, the notion of background, or *campo*, is strongly associated with the practice of *campeggiare*, and thus with *colore* and matter, rather than with *disegno* and mind. However, the Urbino painting presents a counter example. Beneath the chromatic surface of this panel, evidence has been found of extensive graphic work, which was

the Renaissance (Princeton, 1988), pp. 282-6.
675 G. Morolli, 'Nel cuore del palazzo, la città ideale. Alberti e la prospettiva architettonica di Urbino'.
676 Ibid., p. 224.

made independently from the painted surface. Both the marble pavement and the elevations of buildings are minutely defined by innumerable horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines, which 'not only determine the general lines of the composition, the overall dimensions of the perspective vision, but describe with implacable and touching geometric precision down to the smallest "constructive" details of such an *imago urbis*'.[677]

The evidence of this preparatory drawing is then linked by Morolli to Vasari's *Vite* in which Alberti was said to have been responsible for 'three small stories' ('tre storiette') conserved in the chapel dedicated to the Virgin at the entrance of the Ponte alle Grazie in Florence 'con alcune prospettive; che da lui furono assai meglio descritte con la penna, che dipinte col pennello'.[678] Here, Vasari hints that Alberti was a better draftsman than a painter. Alberti himself commented on his habit of conjuring up architectural fantasies in his mind at night: 'composi a mente o edificai qualche compostissimo edificio, e disposivi più ordini e numeri di colonne, con varii capitelli e base inusitate, e con legami convenienti e nuova grazia di cornici e tavolati'.[679] Alberti appears to have been closely involved in in Nicholas V's programme of *Renovatio urbis* and may have dedicated to the pope his *Descriptio urbis Romae* (1445-1448) and definitely dedicated his *Ten Books on Architecture* to Nicholas V in 1452. In his treatise on architecture, Alberti suggested that a house ('domus') must be conceived as a small city and a city must be understood as a great house.[680] These Albertian 'theoretical-graphic elocutions', according to Morolli, would have presumably been shared with Federico da Montefeltro's circle in Urbino when Alberti went to Urbino in 1464.[681] For Morolli, the execution of the three 'ideal city' panels should be divided into two stages: first design and then the application of colour. His insight is that Alberti should be credited with the *disegno*, at least conceptually, if not necessarily in its actual execution.

[677] My translation. Ibid., p. 223.
[678] Vasari, *Vite*, III, p. 289.
[679] Discussed in Morolli, 'Nel cuore del palazzo', p. 219.
[680] Alberti, *L'Architettura: 'De re aedificatoria'*, trans. G. Orlandi, Lib. I, cap. IX; Lib. V, cap. II; Lib. V, cap. XIV.
[681] Morolli, 'Nel cuore del palazzo', pp. 220-3; pp. 224-5.

Alberti himself, in his treatise on architecture, made a distinction between the *disegno* of the architect and that of painter:

> The presentation of models that have been colored and lewdly dressed with the allurement of painting is the mark of no architect intent on conveying the facts, rather it is a conceited one, striving to attract and seduce the eye of the beholder, and to divert his attention from a proper examination of the parts to be considered, toward admiration of himself. Better than that the models are not accurately finished, refined and highly decorated, but plain and simple, so that they demonstrate the ingenuity of him who conceived the idea, and not the skill of the one that fabricated the model.[682]

Given Alberti's own words and the underdrawings on the panel in Urbino, it is at least possible that he was involved in the conception of these panels and that for him, *campo* could indeed be linked to *disegno* rather than exclusively associated with *colore*. More importantly, Alberti distinguishes the artist's concept from his technical skill to reinforce the *ingenium* of the artist in conceiving the architectural ideas.

Unlike landscape backgrounds which were imported or at least descended from the North, architectural backgrounds express the autochthonous nature of Italian Renaissance art as well as a new discourse of autochthonous artist. Brunelleschi devised the rules of perspective and his demonstration panels provided a strong reference point for the three 'Ideal City' panels. The central temple in the Urbino panel certainly bears a resemblance to Brunelleschi's depiction of the baptistery of San Giovanni as described in detail by Manetti. Soussloff points out that the role of measure used by painters to represent their surroundings recalls the role of measure in Boccaccio's phrase 'the beauties of the vulgar tongue have been set to fitting numbers' in his praise of Dante.[683] Like Dante who adds measure to his poetry, Brunelleschi adds measure to his painting. Soussloff further contends that these contributions are 'entwined with a

[682] Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, Book 2, Ch. 1, p. 34.
[683] C. M. Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist. The Historiography of a Concept* (Minneapolis and London, 1997), p. 61.

dense matrix of interrelated topics that can be called distinctly indigenous to Florence, her citizens, and artists.'[684] By emulating Brunelleschi, the artist(s) of the three panels reflect their own authorial presence.

4.4 Vasari's 'campi di prospettiva': A Mannerist Discourse of Perspective

Scholars have also often suggested that perspective is one of European artistic culture's most important—even defining—pictorial ideas. Perspective has been interpreted as expressive of Renaissance culture in particular and has been linked to the desire to bridge the historical distance that exists between the Renaissance and classical antiquity.[685] In his *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Erwin Panofsky sees the mathematization of space in the fifteenth century as the culmination of a teleology of pictorial space that unfolds from the classical period to the Renaissance when Brunelleschi and Alberti invented the so-called perspectival 'costruzione legittima'.[686] The identification between perspective and pictorial space was further considered by John White in *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*.[687] White's book begins with Cimabue and Giotto, thus placing significant weight on pre-Brunelleschian examples in the history of the development of the depiction of pictorial space. But according to White, perspective was not used dogmatically in the Renaissance. Instead, it was deployed more as a compositional tool to negotiate between the two-dimensional materiality of the surface and the desire to create an illusion of spatial depth.[688] Unlike Panofsky, White has started to emphasised the material and practical aspects of using architectural perspective in paintings. More recent scholarship has further contested

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[684] Ibid., p. 69; for a discussion about the rising discourse of artist/poet and perspective/measure, see pp. 59-69.

[685] The foundational text in the history of perspective is Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. Following Panofsky's lead, Belting also considered perspective as a symbolic form that is 'expressive' of Renaissance culture. See Belting, *Florence and Baghdad. Renaissance Art and Arab Science* (Cambridge and London, 2011). On perspective and historical distance, see also E. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (London and New York, 1972), p. 108.

[686] Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* is divided into four sections in teleological terms. The 'invention' of linear or mathematical perspective in the fifteenth century was discussed in section three. See Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, pp. 62-66.

[687] J. White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (London and Boston, 1987).

[688] Ibid.

simplistic interpretations that equate linear perspective with a transparent window onto reality.[689] For instance, in his revisiting of Alberti's concept of perspective as a transparent window through his consideration of how actual windows are depicted in fifteenth-century Italian painting, Adrian Randolph considers the window as 'a contested zone, a sensitive orifice separating and joining inside and outside, "private" and "public", domestic and urban'.[690] Perspectival space can even be interpreted in gendered terms, according to Randolph.[691] For the purposes of the present dissertation, a crucial component of Randolph's argument lies in the fact that perspective not only objectifies but enacts. Through various examples of depictions of female figures within architectonic frames, Randolph reads activity, agency and presence in female figures who had previously been interpreted in passive ways.[692] Taking Randoph's suggestions a further step, I have demonstrated previously that the perspectival representation of a figure within an architectonic frame not only *reflects* social reality but *constructs* or *comments on* it.

To some extent, perspective is overdetermined. This is particularly evident in the relationship between perspective and depictions of architecture. As we saw in Chapter 1, Vincenzio Borghini maintained that the function of perspective had become quite limited by the sixteenth century. For Borghini, perspective should not only be used to depict 'houses and buildings' but also 'men, animals, woods, trees, fields, huts'.[693] In an indirect manner, Borghini's comments reveal that by his time perspective had become largely identifiable with *casamenti*, or buildings, if not other things as Borghini wished to be. Vasari further confirms this through his interchangeable use of the terms *casamento* and *prospettiva* in his *Vite*. When Vasari comments on the architectural

[689] Even Panofsky has contested earlier on that perspectively-rendered space in paintings is only an abstraction of reality. See Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*.
[690] Randolph, *Touching Objects*, p. 76.
[691] Ibid., pp. 81-101.
[692] For Randolph's innovative reading, see in particular his opening interpretation of Botticelli's *Smeralda Bandinelli*, see Ibid., pp. 69-71. For a famous reading of women in frames as an object of display, see P. Simons, 'Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture', *History Workshop: Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians* 25 (1988), pp. 4-30.
[693] Barocchi, ed. *Scritti d'arte*, I, p. 649.

backgrounds of Donatello's tondi in the Old Sacristy, he uses the phrase 'backgrounds of perspective' ('campi di prospettiva').[694] As I will discuss later, this phrase reflects more on the technical difficulty in depicting a particular scene rather than its illusionistic qualities. Indeed, the sixteenth century witnesses a transition: perspective turned from being a mimetic tool for accurately and convincingly depicting the world to a skilled technique used by a few specialists to show off their artistic prowess within one specific genre, namely, paintings that focus on depictions of architecture. One prime example is the depicted architecture in Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin* of 1504 (Fig. 129). This move, I believe, is tantamount to a shift from *Ars est celare artem* ('true art is to conceal art'), as when perspective was used to create the illusion of looking through a transparent window onto a (fictive) reality, to *Ars est ostendere artem* ('art is to demonstrate art'), as seen in paintings in the sixteenth century that depicted architecture perspectively in order to show off the artist's own skill in this technique.[695] But harking back to the very origin of linear perspective in Brunelleschi, depicted architecture in perspective was already at that time a demonstration or *dimostrazione*.[696] The crux of the matter lies in, I believe, whether one should see architectural perspective as *theoria* or *praxis*, and this further begs the question of whether perspective only should be used in the background of a picture or whether it can transform the entire pictorial space.

Interestingly, scholars have debated whether the *campo* should be considered in opposition to perspective. In David Kim's book on what he calls the 'groundwork' of Italian Renaissance painting, ground is primarily understood as a material substrate and thus is antithetical to perspective, which negates a painting's surface materiality.[697] There is, in fact, a change in Alberti's terminology in his *Della pittura* when the author

[694] Vasari, *Vite*, vol. III, p. 217.
[695] For a discussion of these two models of early modern art, see N. Suthor, *Bravura: Virtuosity and Ambition in Early Modern European Painting* (Princeton, 2021), p. 1.
[696] For a discussion of perspective as an art form of 'showing' in relation to the terms *mostrare* and *dimostrare* in Manetti's description of Brunelleschi's two lost panels, see Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, pp. 89-98.
[697] For David Kim's discussion on the opposition between perspective and ground (or *campo*), see Kim, *Groundwork*, pp. 8-10.

uses *superficie* instead of *campo* used by earlier writers such as Cennini, which may reflect a shifting period understanding more generally of the pictorial surface in this period.[698] The same logic is seen when Alberti uses the term *edificio* instead of *casamento*, again used by authors such as Cennini in his *Il Libro dell'Arte*, although the latter term continued to be used by later writers such as Filarete and Vasari.[699] The difference between the two terms is that *casamento* usually refers to a depicted building whereas *edificio* generally refers to a building that actually exists. By replacing *casamento* with *edificio*, Alberti appears to treat the pictorial world depicted beyond the picture plane as an extension of or a mirroring of the real world.

The Cennini-Giotto system of seeing painted architecture as a business of artisanship has a real heir, namely, Vasari. Elkins has argued that perspective should be seen more as an ornament within a pre-existing fictive space, which is related to the practice of *difficultà*.[700] For instance, Vasari wrote about the architectural *veduta* in the *School of Athens* (Fig. 8) that '(Raphael) further adorned this work with a perspective ('prospettiva')', after describing the famous figures depicted in the fore- and middle ground of the work.[701] Vasari also explicitly uses the phrase 'with perspectival backgrounds' ('co' campi di prospettiva') when describing the four medallions in the sacristy of San Lorenzo in his earlier comments on Donatello (Fig. 130).[702] The notion of a 'spatial unity' between fore- and background—specifically, between foreground figures and background architecture—as Panofsky understood it is untenable here, with comments like those made by Vasari instead suggesting a clear demarcation between the one and the other.[703] Perspective, as described by Vasari in these examples, is not applicable to the entire picture plane; rather, it has become a decorative element *within*

[698] For Alberti's first use of the term 'surface', see Alberti-Grayson, II, 35.
[699] For Alberti's use of the term *edificio* (*aedificio* in Latin) in both his Latin and Italian editions, see, for instance, Alberti-Grayson, pp. 78-9.
[700] J. Elkins, 'Renaissance Perspectives', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Apr. – Jun., 1992), pp. 209-230.
[701] Vasari, *Vite*, vol. IV, pp. 166-8.
[702] Ibid., vol. III, p. 217. The perception that perspective is 'a local ornament' is not only a mid-sixteenth-century sensibility, but a fifteenth-century one as well, see Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective*, p. 56.
[703] According to Panofsky, linear perspective renders the picture into a homogenous space, which suggests a unity between the figure and ground.

the picture. Although he may have subordinated painting landscapes to depictions of male nudes, Vasari did confer some importance on the depiction of architectural views in his teleological history of art. In the Preface to the third section of the *Vite*, for example, Vasari singled out the artists of the third generation for deepening their 'knowledge of buildings' ('la universalità ne' casamenti').[704] However, it is interesting to note that *casamenti* were not mentioned in the inventory of background details listed in the Preface to the section on fifteenth-century artists in the *Vite*. Vasari's more restricted notion of *prospettiva* should be understood in this context. In Vasari's case, therefore, both *casamenti* and *prospettiva* appear to be *parergon* in the painting.

The best case representing the tension between the materiality of the ground colour and the transparency of a perspectival window is Vasari's coinage of the term 'perspectival backgrounds', or *campi di prospettiva*. When commenting on Donatello's four medallions in the sacristy of San Lorenzo of c. 1439-1443, Vasari used the term 'perspectival backgrounds' ('campi di prospettiva') to describe architectural features in the background of those tondi.[705] This interesting term, however, has escaped the scholarly notice that it deserves in the most recent revisiting of the question about ground and background in Italian Renaissance art.[706] One probable reason is that the medium Donatello used is not paint but stucco. Immediately afterwards, Vasari said that they were 'partly painted and partly in low relief'. Perhaps Vasari should have highlighted the significance of the medium when he coined the term? This question is relevant because *campo* mainly means a kind of materialistic space behind or around the figure.

A further perusal of Donatello's stucco tondi reveals that the backgrounds are quasi-monochromatic and cover almost the whole area. Being monochromatic suggests a degree of uniformity as well as a certain emptiness. Interestingly, *campo* is defined in

[704] Vasari, *Vite*, vol. IV, pp. 5-6.
[705] Vasari, *Vite*, vol. III, p. 217
[706] For instance, it has escaped the attention of David Kim in his *The Groundwork*. Stumpel first draws our attention to this Vasarian term, but does not analyse it in aesthetic or historical terms.

many literary sources as being a void or empty area, especially seen in Pinturicchio's contract discussed in Chapter 1. In fact, figures in Donatello's tondi are subordinate to their architectural settings. This formal hierarchy is also found in the procedure of the execution process since it is the background that is created first before the figures.[707] Also, due to their monochromatic qualities, the architectural backgrounds do not seem to penetrate the picture surface. For instance, in the *Ascension of St John to Heaven* (Fig. 130), the two receding lines of the two central buildings do not join in a vanishing point, but are instead met by a central axis, an effect that reinforces the two-dimensional materiality of the picture plane. Moreover, when seen *in situ* when standing below on the floor, a field of brownish red will take over the structural rigour of the perspectival scheme. But, despite the priority of colour, Donatello's perspectival scheme implies the presence of a beholder standing on the ground below.[708] Vasari must have known what the term *prospettiva* implied when he used the phrase, namely, the beholder was implicitly being invited to engage with the architectural backgrounds.

Vasari's 'period eye' of the sixteenth century must have also been informed by the more general understanding of perspective in the same period. Payne traces the emergence of *licentia* or artistic license through sixteenth-century architectural theory.[709] It is a means of individual expression and freedom, but must also be tempered by a commitment to *imitatio* of classical models. Rather than being a tool for establishing a measurable relationship between the *historia* and the beholder, architectural perspective has been thematised and relativised as only one among many kinds of ornament found in the backgrounds.

Further elaborating on Vitruvius' theories about theatrical backdrops, Serlio discusses the relation between artistic licence and rural life in Book II of his treatise on architecture:

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[707] F. Petrucci, *La scultura di Donatello. Techniche e linguaggio* (Florence, 2003), p. 172.
[708] A. Parronchi, *Studi su la dolce prospettiva* (Milan, 1964), 218ff.
[709] A. Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance. Architectural Invention, Ornament, and Literary Culture* (Cambridge, 1999).

> The satiric scene is a setting for satires in which are presented (or rather mocked) all those who live licentiously and without inhibition (*rispetto*). In ancient satires immoral and evil-living people were shown. Nevertheless, one can understand that such licence was permitted to those who talked without inhibition, that is, to rustic people (*gente rustica*); hence Vitruvius, discussing stage design, says that this scene should be decorated with trees, rocks, hills, mountains, grass, flowers, and fountains, and he also wishes there to be some cabins in rustic style (*alla rustica*).[710]

Here, Serlio criticises the licence granted to perspective to depict landscape backgrounds in satiric scenes (Fig. 131). In contrast, a tragic scene should be given an urban background with all the apparatus of arcades and colonnades, pediments and niches, and sculptures and inscriptions fit for great personages (Fig. 132). As an intermediary between the tragic and the rustic (or 'satire'), the comic scene should be filled with houses of 'private people, that is of citizens, lawyers, merchants, parasites, and other such persons' as well as 'a brothel and an inn, and a temple' (Fig. 133).[711] This suggests that morality has become a category against which the meaning of particular types of perspective can be judged. Even if not strictly tied to Serlio's theories, the rich repertoire of architectural types in the three 'Ideal City' panels must have been informed largely by the visual culture of this Mannerist discourse about perspective. In the Mannerist discourse, perspective is seen as a rhetorical ornament—and, implicitly, part of the background—rather than a universal organising principle. However, the three 'Ideal City' panels, at the same time, differ from this later development of architectural perspective in that the 'Ideal City' panels are unusual not because they too allude to the *virtù* of the artist, but because they do so by bringing the background architecture into the foreground, in effect making the background itself the subject of the paintings.

4.5 Conclusion

[710] Quoted in John Onians, *Bearers of Meaning. The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance* (Princeton, 1988), p. 282-3.
[711] Ibid., pp. 284-5.

To conclude, I have argued that the deeper meaning and authenticity of an *historia*, or more generally a Renaissance picture, is derived as much from the background as from the figure. Since the background depicts the location of an *historia*, some reliable information about the *locus* was crucial for a Renaissance beholder to understand the depicted scenes. From Cennino Cennini to Vasari, architectural perspective had been seen as a practice associated with *colore* and was usually confined to the background of a painting. In theoretical writings by figures such as Alberti and Ghiberti, architectural perspective, including *casamenti* and *piano*, came to assume a more prominent role. It was used to forge a measurable relationship between the *historia* and the implied beholder. This pictorial measure has its equivalence in the literary world, as seen in Dante's *volgare* poetry, and as praised by Boccaccio. This emphasis on 'indigenous' sources rather than the classical past or a foreign 'other' as seen in the assimilation of Northern landscapes in the backgrounds of Florentine paintings endows an autochthonous character to the discovery of linear perspective. In accordance with the Roman ideology of *patria*, the perspective rigour in the backgrounds of Renaissance portraits of patrician women and in the architectural foregrounds of the 'Ideal City' panels all contribute to a sense of civic pride. In fourteenth-century Italy, architecture was the earliest visual media to be associated with the term 'art' (*arte*) instead of being understood as a vocation (*mestiere*).[712] Manetti justifies painting by focusing on Brunelleschi's demonstration panels of painted architecture in his biography of Brunelleschi. Consequently, the concept of 'the artist' emerges alongside the elevation of the media of painting and architecture.[713]

A crucial issue explored in the present chapter is the tension between seeing perspective as a localised ornament that is a feature of backgrounds (as seen in writers from Cennino Cennini to Vasari) or a universal principle that animates the foreground and infuses the

[712] See the discussion in L. Ettlinger, 'The Emergence of the Italian Architect during the Fifteenth Century', in S. Kostof (eds), *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession* (New York, 1977), pp. 96-123.
[713] Soussloff, *The Absolute Artist*, p. 67.

picture as a whole, as conceived of by Alberti. The architectural backdrops in Renaissance female portraits can all be seen as 'localised' ornaments, which are used to fashion the social identities of the foreground figures. Although the depicted architectural forms in the 'Ideal City' panels can align them with architectural backgrounds as localised ornaments, these are unique in that they become foregrounded as architecture itself becomes the very subject of the painting. Consequently, I argue that these three unique panels evoke the notion of 'architectural presence' more than a form of 'architectural seeing'.[714] This presence is made manifest when depicted architecture becomes a work's main subject in the foreground.

[714] For 'architectural seeing', see J. Grave, *Architekturen des Sehen: Bauten in Bildern des Quattrocento* (Paderborn, 2015). The idea of 'presence' has been addressed in recent scholarship in relation to animated object or object-oriented ontology, as seen in C. van Eck, *Piranesi's Candelabra and the Presence of the Past: Excessive Objects and the Emergence of a Style in the Age Neoclassicism* (Oxford, 2023). However, my understanding of 'architectural presence' is specifically inspired by Michael Ann Holly's discussion of the presence of painted backgrounds in early modern paintings. See M. A. Holly, 'Back of the Painted Beyond', *Art History*, Vol. 42, No. 5, (November 2019), pp. 892-913.

Conclusion

From Gold to Paint: The Development of Backgrounds of Italian Renaissance Paintings

This dissertation has demonstrated that a period understanding of the key term *campo* (meaning 'background' or 'ground') sheds new light on the making, meaning and reception of Italian Renaissance painting. I argue that the volatile and unstable status of *campo* as a term and concept affects the shifting meanings and functions of Italian Renaissance painting and enriches our understanding of Renaissance pictures that previously have been considered primarily or only within perspectival paradigms. As a result of revisiting the complicated relationship between varied backgrounds and perspective, the current dissertation argues that studying backgrounds can yield richer results than if one only focuses on perspective. Rather than providing a general history of the evolution of pictorial backgrounds in Italian Renaissance paintings diachronically, a synchronic and case-study approach has been adopted that regards painted or gilded backgrounds as strategies adopted by artists to address diverse audiences and concerns within a variety of contexts. I also argue that such an approach provides new insights into the shift from skilled artist-artisans to the notion of the autonomous 'Artist'.

To sum up, there are five main types of backgrounds used in Italian Renaissance paintings: dark grounds, gold grounds, landscapes, clothes of honour and architectural backgrounds. The dissertation's main focus is the fifteenth century, although some later fourteenth-century texts and images, as well as sixteenth-century art theories are also discussed in order to provide a broader historical and theoretical framework for the case studies. Given that the main focus is on the fifteenth century, I have considered only those representational backgrounds that depict the world in a natural or supernatural manner. As I have shown in Chapter 1, dark grounds, in theory, are more relevant to the practice of painting in the second half of the sixteenth century, although occasionally they were used in small-scale paintings earlier such as in portraits and

devotional images, but I have chosen not to focus on this type of background in a separate chapter given that most examples date to this later period and also in light of the word limitations imposed on this dissertation. I have considered in depth the question of representation in Renaissance painting—or, in other words, how backgrounds can serve as images in their own right rather than merely as image-carriers. However, fascinating questions remain to be addressed such as how a dark ground can achieve a *rilievo* effect, enhance an image's devotional focus, and 'push' the figure into the viewer's space, or how the development of dark grounds could be linked to painting as a medium. There thus remains for future scholarship important questions to consider about the relationship between depicted backgrounds and dark grounds, and consequently, on the theory of backgrounds more generally as this developed in the sixteenth century.

The question of gold ground turns out to be more complicated than previously thought. As shown in Chapter 2, *campo d'oro* could be interpreted either as gold ground or gold background. 'Gold ground' as a concept is largely derived from the German term *Goldgrund*, which is considered antithetical to perspectival paintings in that the ground is the foundation for the figure that can 'push' the figure into the beholder's space and evoke the presence of the sacred. However, in the Italian context, the term *campo* largely means the area external to the figure, so that *campo d'oro* should be understood as gold background or gold field as well besides gold ground.

In order to address these two aspects of *campo d'oro*, Chapter 2 concentrated on two moments in the later development of gold ground paintings in late fifteenth-century Rome and Florence. The case of Pinturicchio's use of golden *pastiglia* in gold backgrounds in the Borgia Apartment suggests that, when used as a pictorial reference to depict the golden sky, there is no contradiction between using a gold background and Alberti's linear perspective. On the other hand, the re-appearance of a gold ground in Filippino Lippi's Valori altarpiece accords with the Byzantine and late medieval tradition of using a gold ground to evoke the divine presence and address the devotional

function of the image. But in both cases, gold grounds are considered precious and rich in their own right in a material sense. Depending on a viewer's sensibilities, the material connotations of gold as a highly-valuable substance could be either related to the high status of the patron or the divine status of the Godhead, or both.

Landscape backgrounds are usually considered in opposition to gold grounds. However, as I have shown in Chapter 3, the use of clothes of honour in devotional images by Giovanni Bellini is certainly an exceptional case when the cloth of honour is integrated into a landscape vista in order to emulate the dynamism of gold ground in the devotional context. However, besides Venetian and some Northern Italian examples (such as seen in works by Ercole de' Roberti), landscape backgrounds are usually aligned with perspectival paradigms. Within this Albertian and humanistic context, landscape backgrounds are sometimes chosen to present to viewers the extent of the patrons' landed properties. The development of landscape backgrounds in Italian Renaissance paintings also shows evidence of influences from beyond Italy. Indeed, since the 1470s, Italian artists had adopted and appropriated Northern landscape paintings into the backgrounds of their portraits and altarpieces. This Italian interest in non-Italian sources was theorised in the sixteenth century. The contemporary *topos* was that Northern painters were seen as more skilled in depicting landscapes while Italians were more gifted in portraying figures. I argue that the notion of ground, or *grondt,* lies at the heart of the practice of Northern landscape painting. After the 1480s, however, the development of the aesthetics of *vaghezza* and *lontano* (or 'distant view') in Venetian/Northern Italian art indicated that a more idealized and transcendental version of landscape replaced the Florentine secular paradigm of landscape painting in which the 'near view' of Northern landscape paintings was exploited to address the patrons' concerns to visualize their earthly resources.

Architectural backgrounds function very differently to landscape backgrounds. Chapter 4 demonstrated that the development of architectural backgrounds is deeply connected with the rising status of both the beholder and the artist. Alberti lies at the heart of this

transformation. The establishment of a new system of *piano* and *casamenti*, as seen in Ghiberti and Alberti, had replaced the traditional way of depicting buildings in colour as described by Cennino Cennini. However, the hitherto accepted view that Alberti's perspectival theory has rendered the pictorial surfaces 'transparent' was shown to be problematic. Chapter 4 also focuses on the use of architectonic elements in Renaissance female portraits to show that the Albertian 'window' is freighted with social meanings. That a perspectival view is not neutrally transparent is most explicitly shown in the three so-called 'Ideal City' panels in which the depicted architecture has come into the foreground—in other words, in these panels, backgrounds have themselves become the subjects of paintings.

In addition to addressing contemporary concerns of the patrons of these 'Ideal City' panels, such as the question of virtue, these panels also foreshadow the moment when perspective becomes a theatrical backdrop and is theorised within Vitruvian/classical theories of theatrical decorum. Vasari's Mannerist discourse of perspectival backgrounds further belies the idea that architectural backgrounds in the sixteenth century are not simply a continuation of the so-called Albertian window, but rather are social constructions opaque with new, period-specific meanings that, like dark backgrounds, undoubtedly merit further study in a Cinquecento context. Unlike landscape backgrounds that evoke 'foreign' influences, the development of architectural backgrounds reflected the autochthonous character of the Italian Renaissance more generally and discourses about the rising status of the artist more specifically.

To conclude, by questioning the transparency of the Albertian perspectival paradigm, I argue that backgrounds are bearers of rich layers of meaning and should be understood as being no less important than foreground figures. Issues such as medium, composition, genre, patronage, iconography, gender, class and function are what Renaissance artists and their patrons must have taken into account when commissioning and producing a particular picture. Although most art historians have tended to consider these factors

only in relation to the figure(s) depicted, I have evaluated the role of all these factors in relation to how backgrounds are depicted in Italian Renaissance paintings in the fifteenth century. By foregrounding the background, I have demonstrated the crucial role played by what surrounds figures in Renaissance art. From gold grounds to architectural backgrounds, the choices afforded by this compositional element, while clearly influenced by individual patrons' demands, also are signposts of the embryonic emergence of increasingly independent artists, thus marking a significant step towards the modern understanding of the 'Artist' as an autonomous agent.

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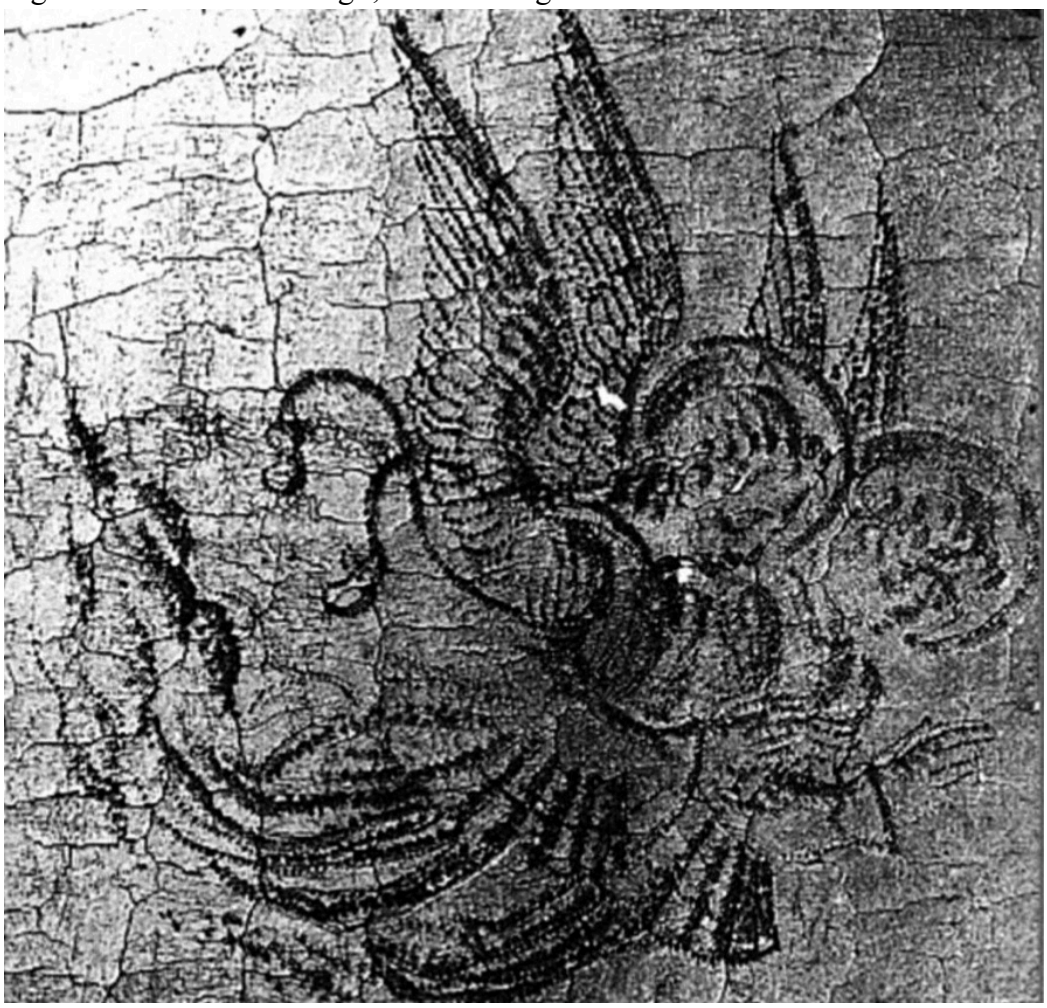

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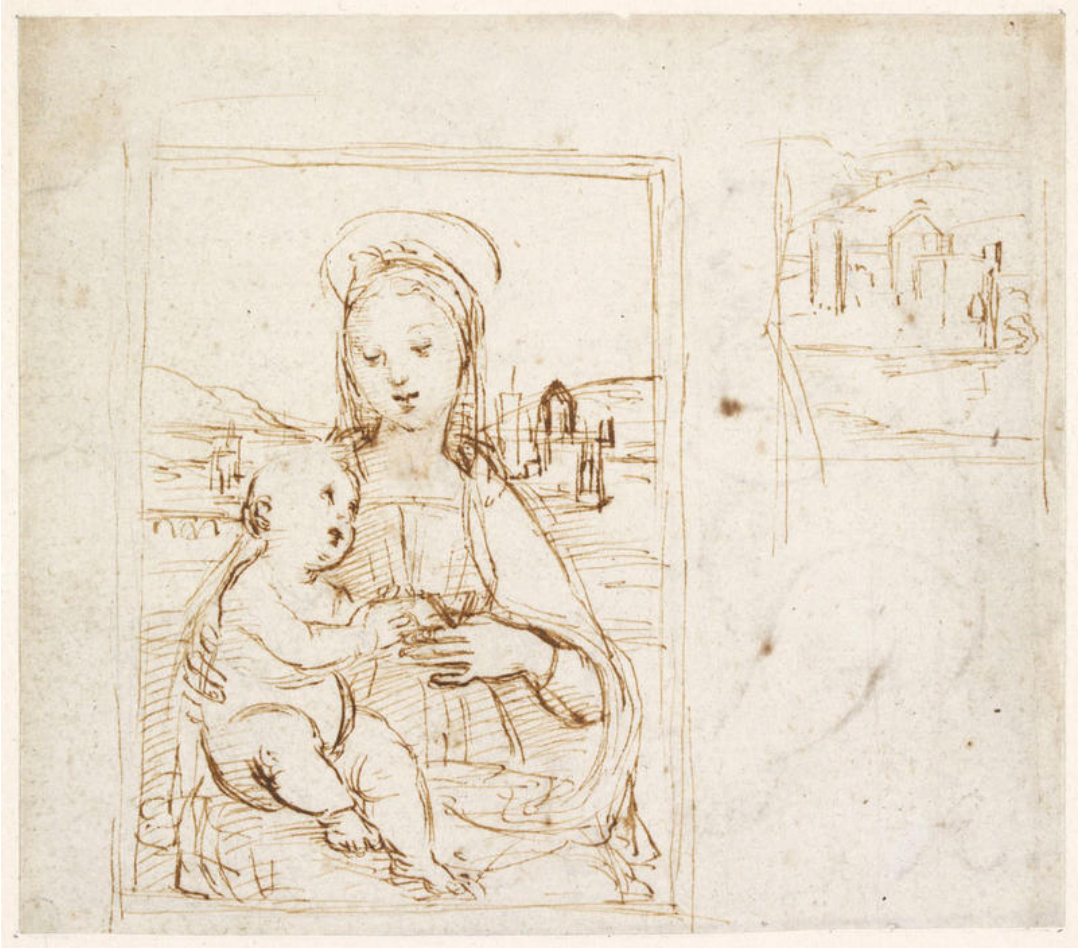

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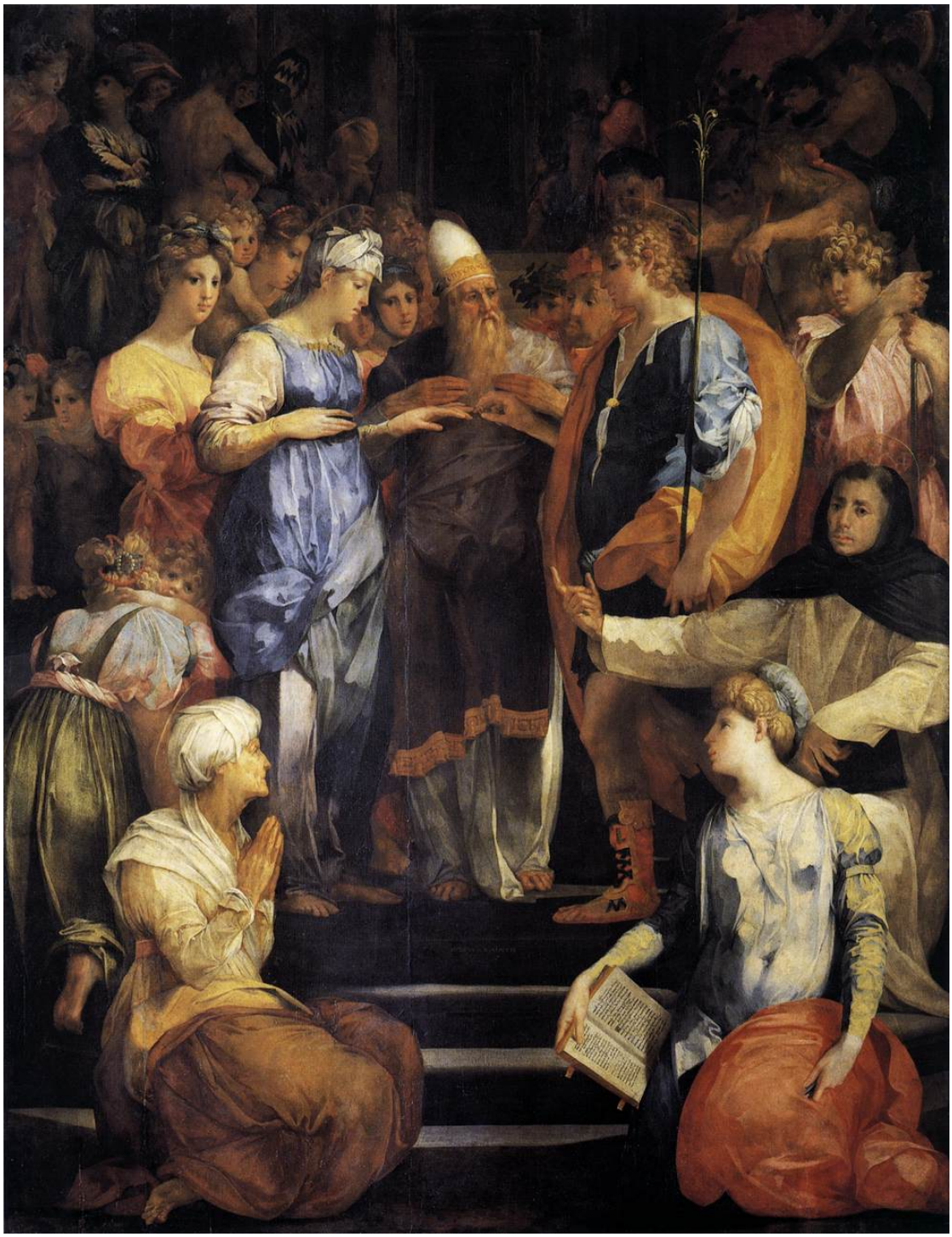

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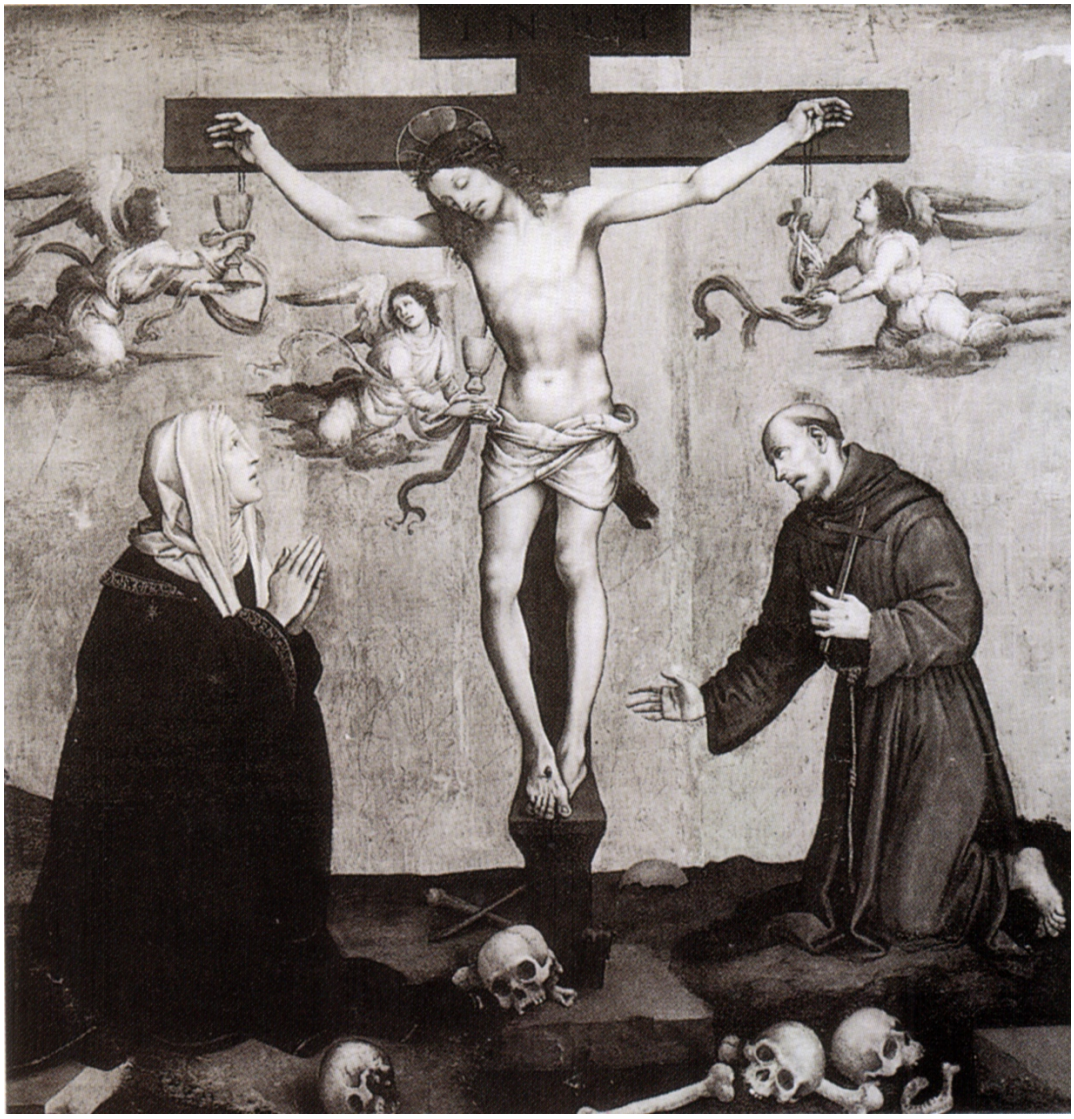

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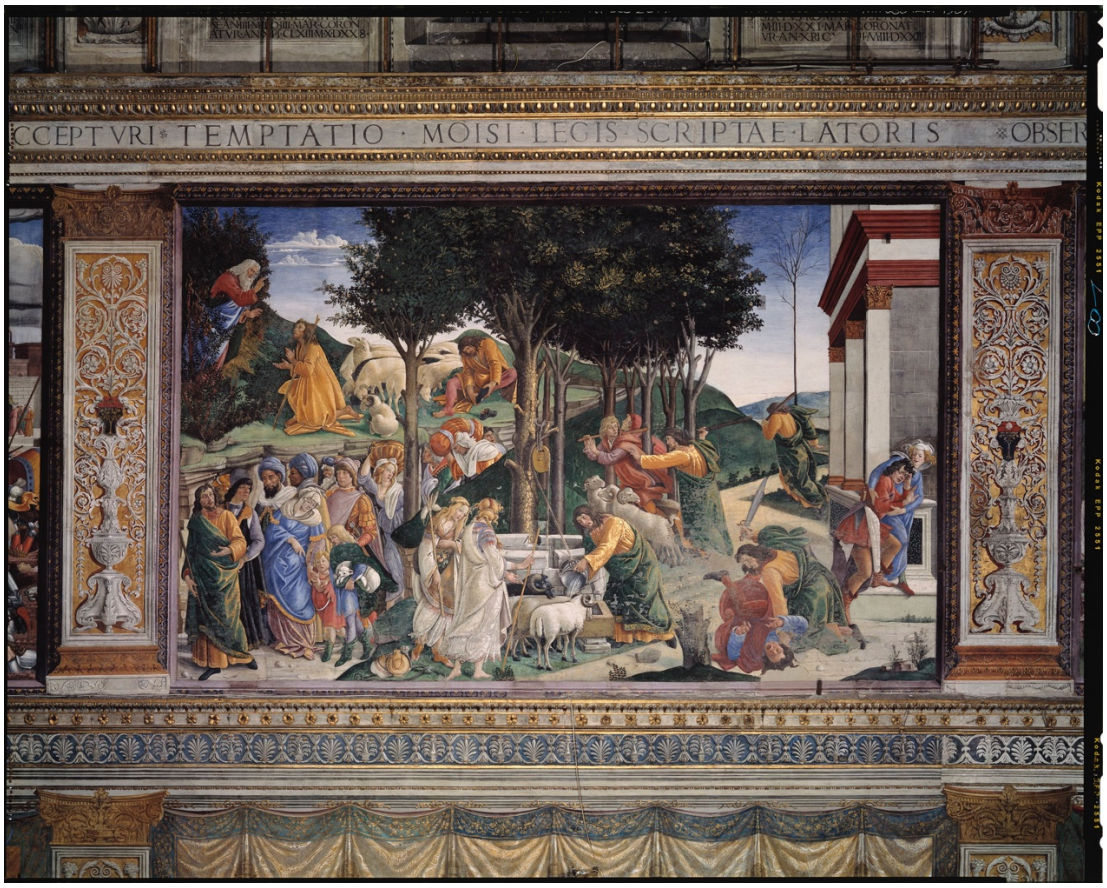

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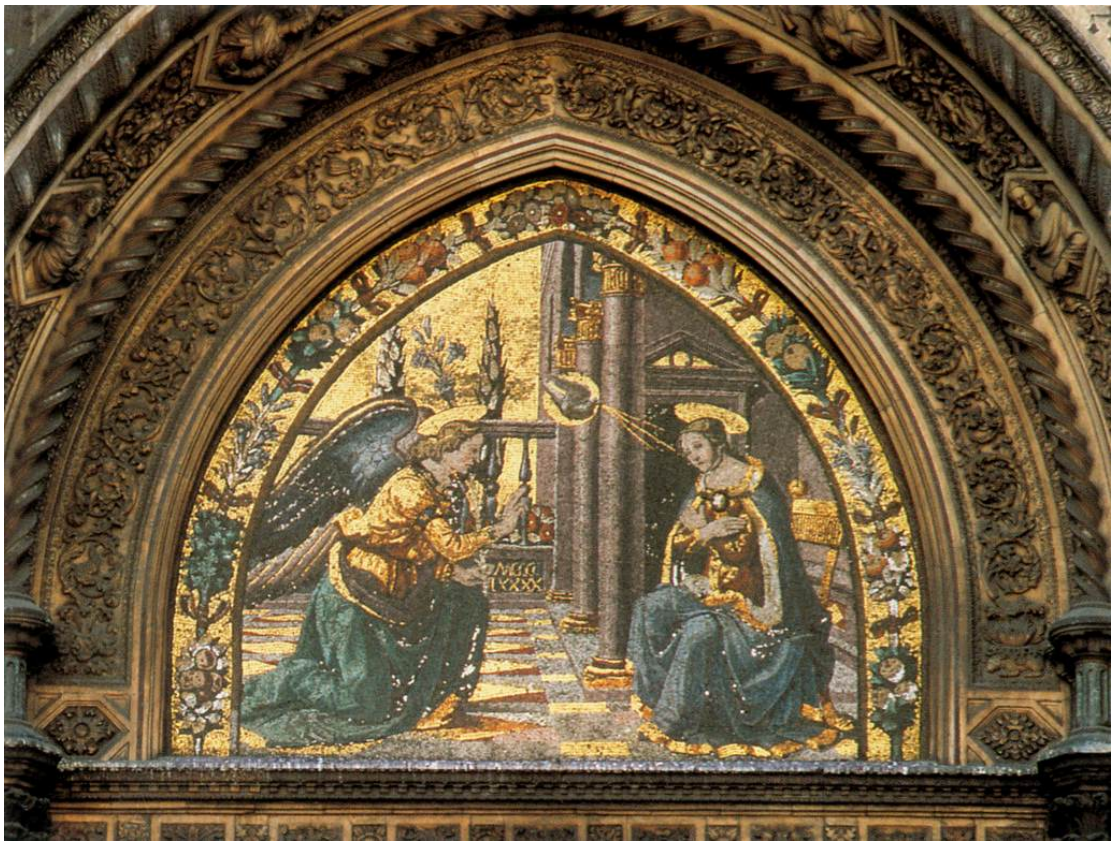

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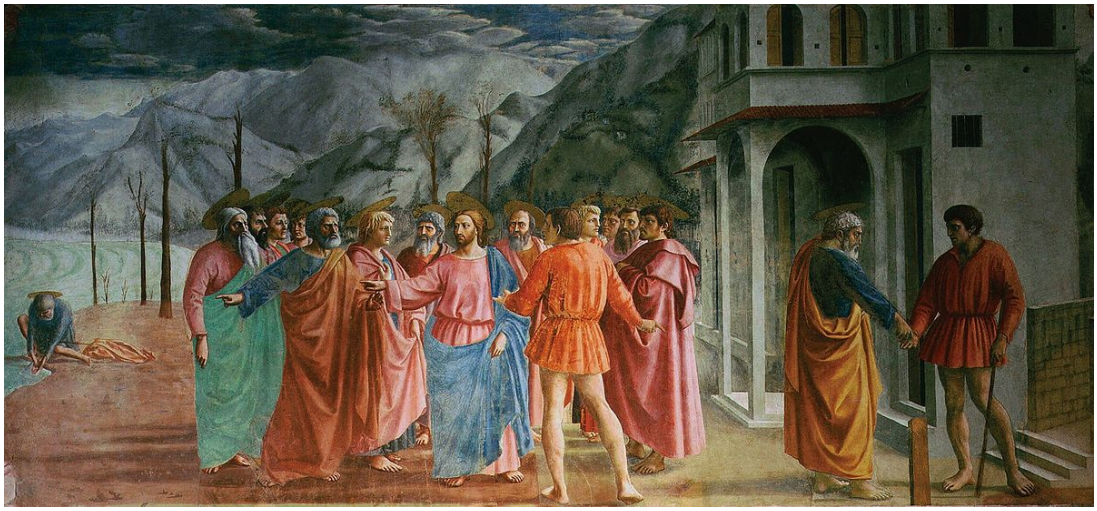

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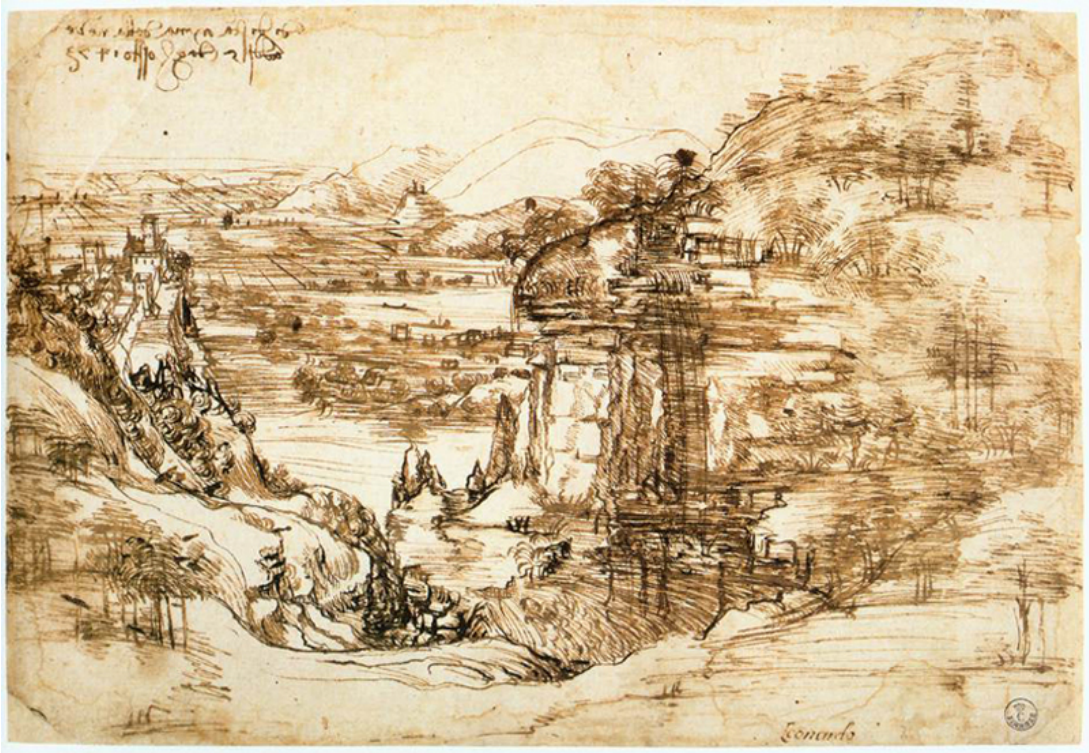

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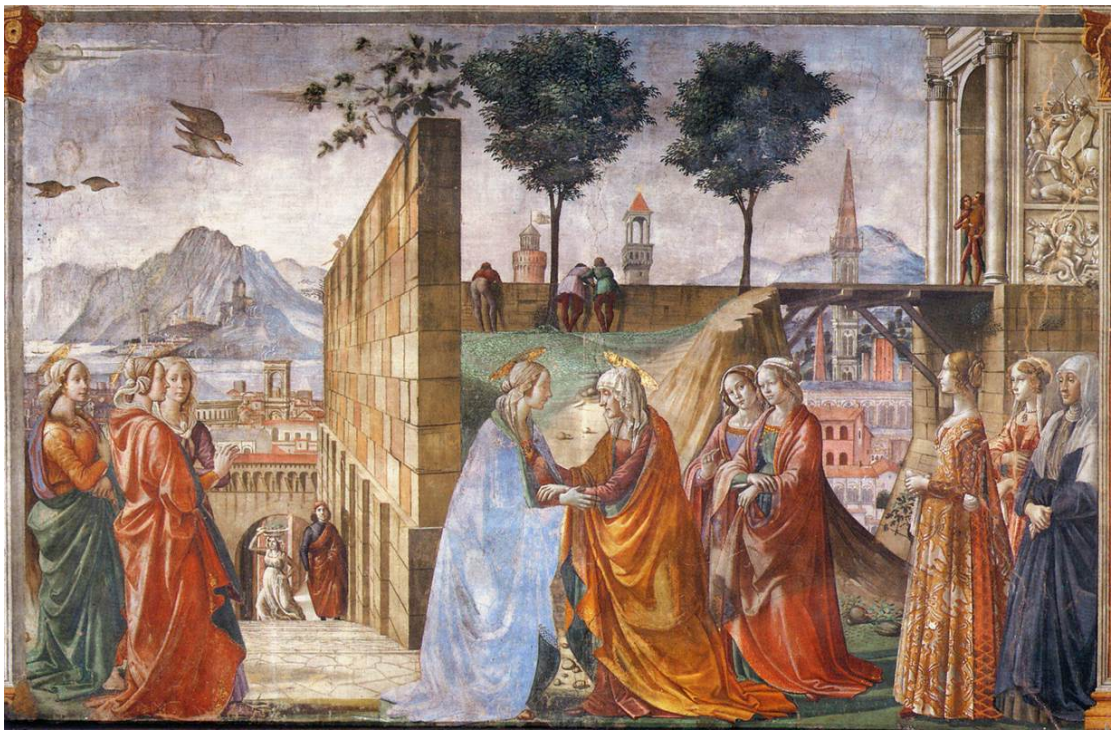

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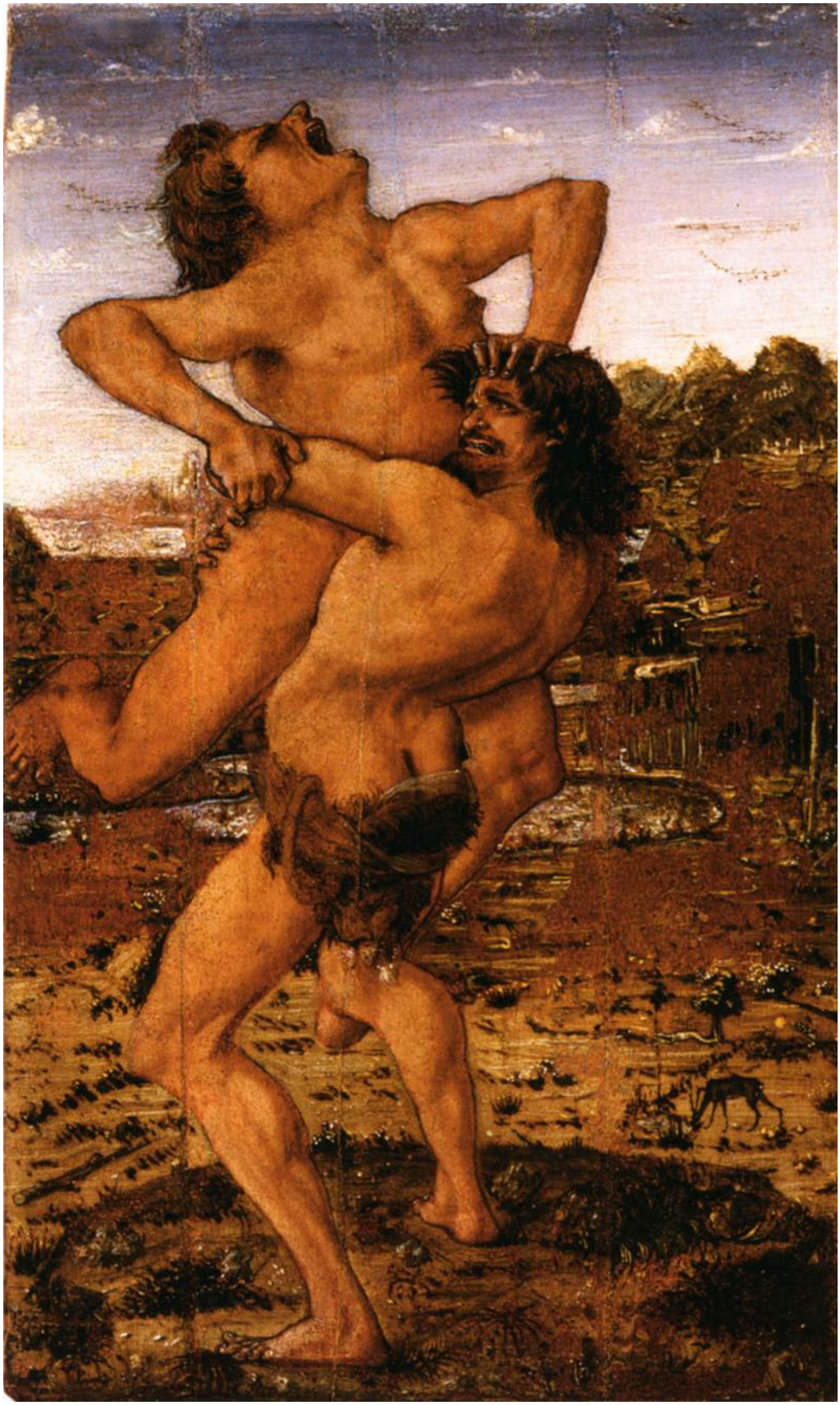

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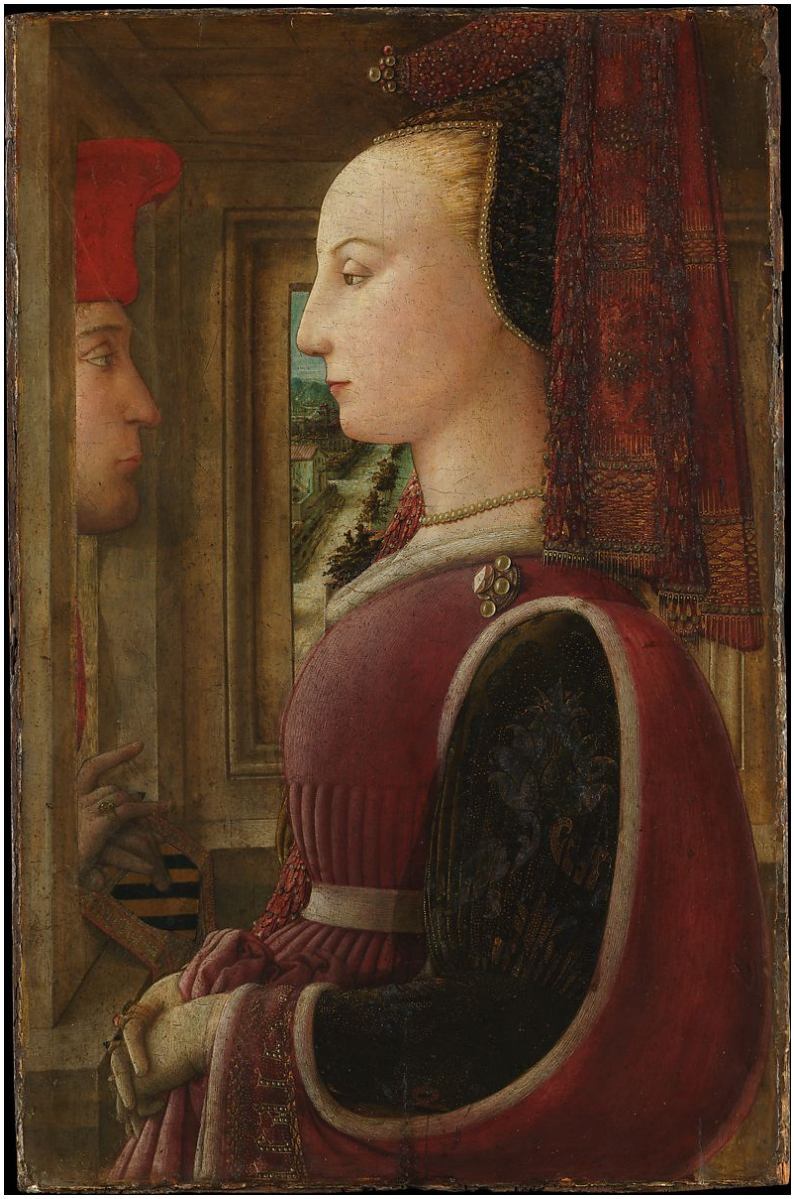

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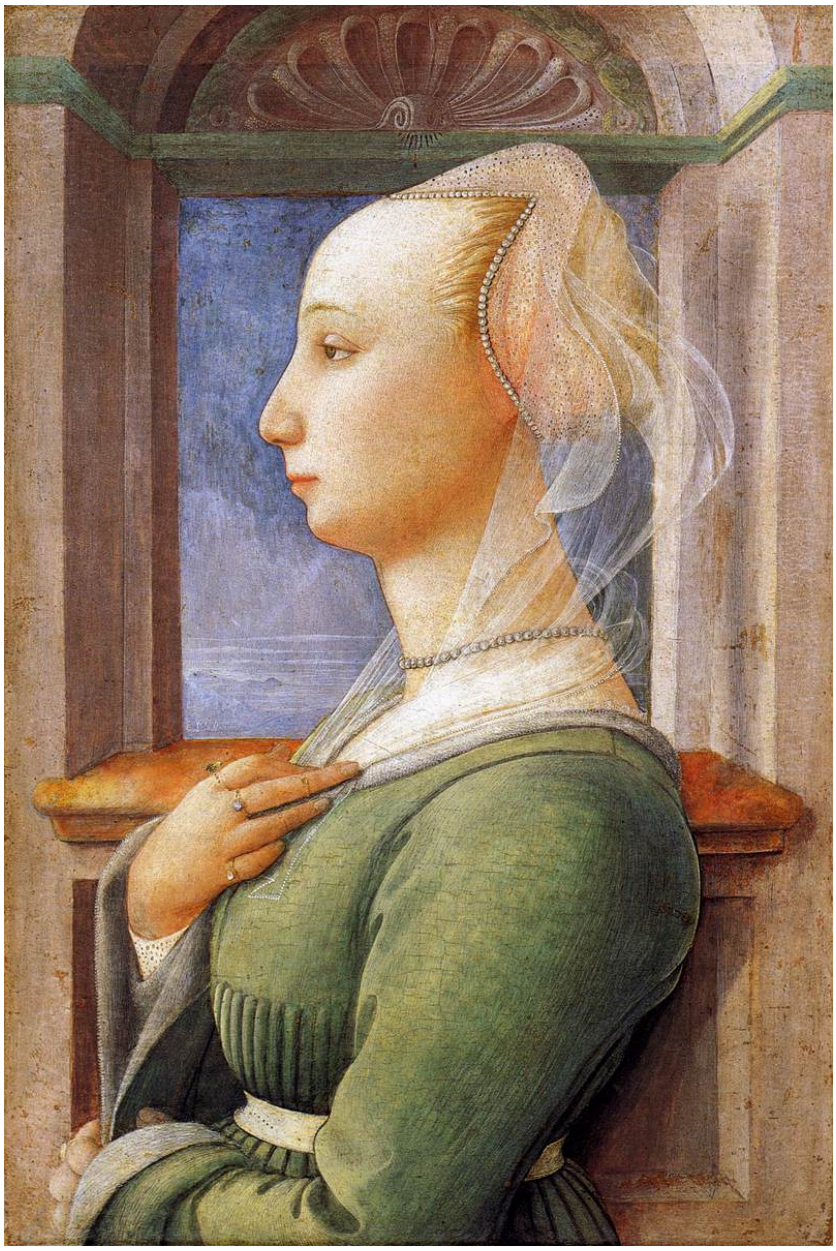

Figure 112. Donatello, *Pazzi Madonna*, 1420 or 1422, Marble, 74.5 cm × 73 cm × 6.5 cm, Bode Museum, Berlin.



Figure 113. Fra Filippo Lippi, *Annunciation with Two Keeling Donors*, 1440-5, Tempera on panel, 153 cm × 144 cm, Palazzo Barberini, Rome.



Figure 114. Jan van Eyck, *Lucca Madonna*, 1436, Oil on panel, 65.7 cm × 49.6 cm, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt.



Figure 115. Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434, Oil on oak, 82.2 cm × 60 cm, National Gallery, London.



Figure 116. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni*, 1489-90, Mixed media on panel, 77 cm × 49 cm, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.



Figure 117. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *An Old Man and his Grandson*, c. 1490, Tempera on poplar panel, 62.7 cm × 46. 3 cm, Louvre, Paris.



Figure 118. Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci* (reverse), c. 1474-78, Oil on panel, 38.1 cm × 37 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

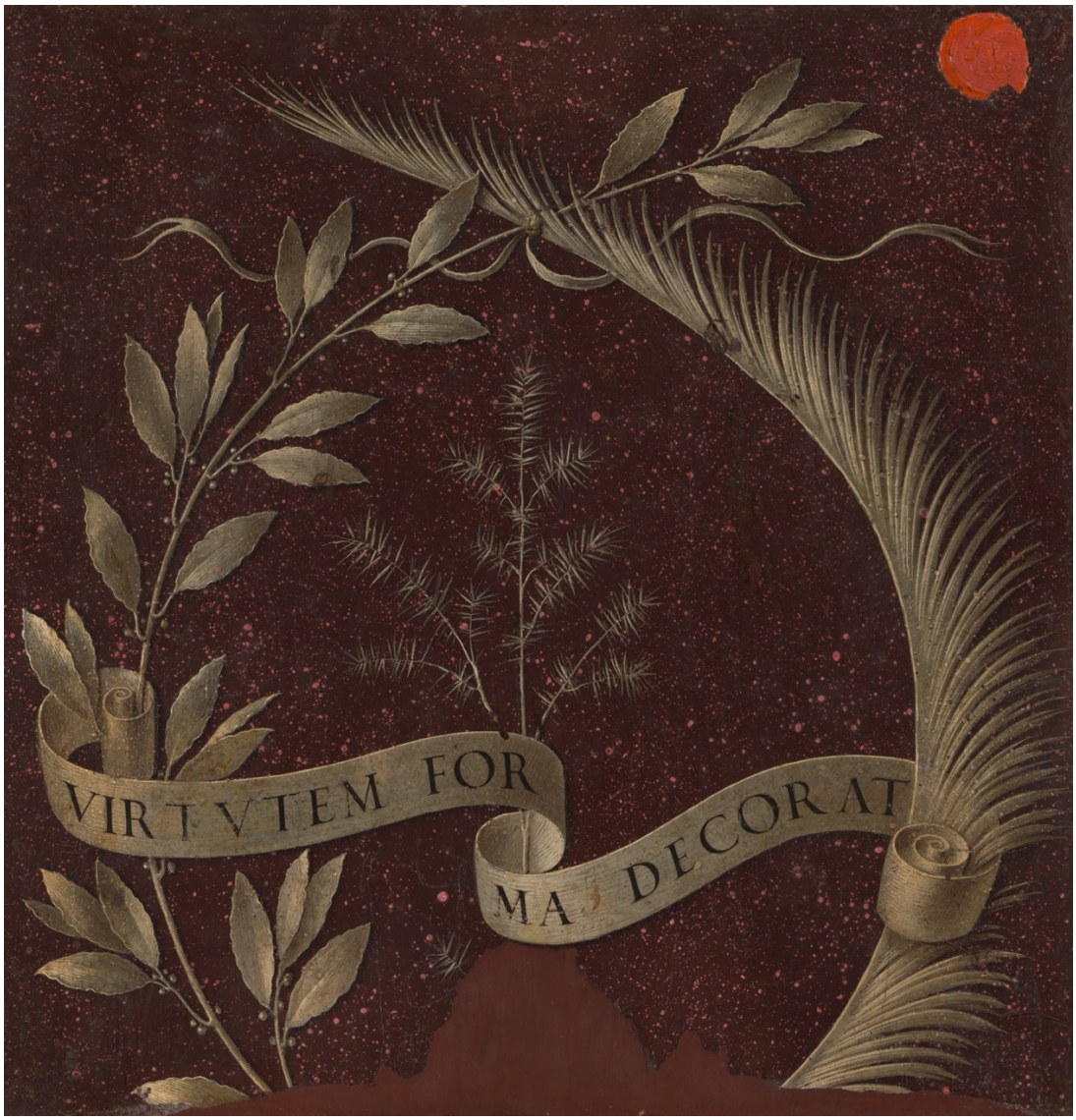

Figure 119. Domenico Ghirlandaio (attributed to), *Portrait of a Young Woman*, c. 1490/1500, Tempera on wood, 45 cm × 34 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

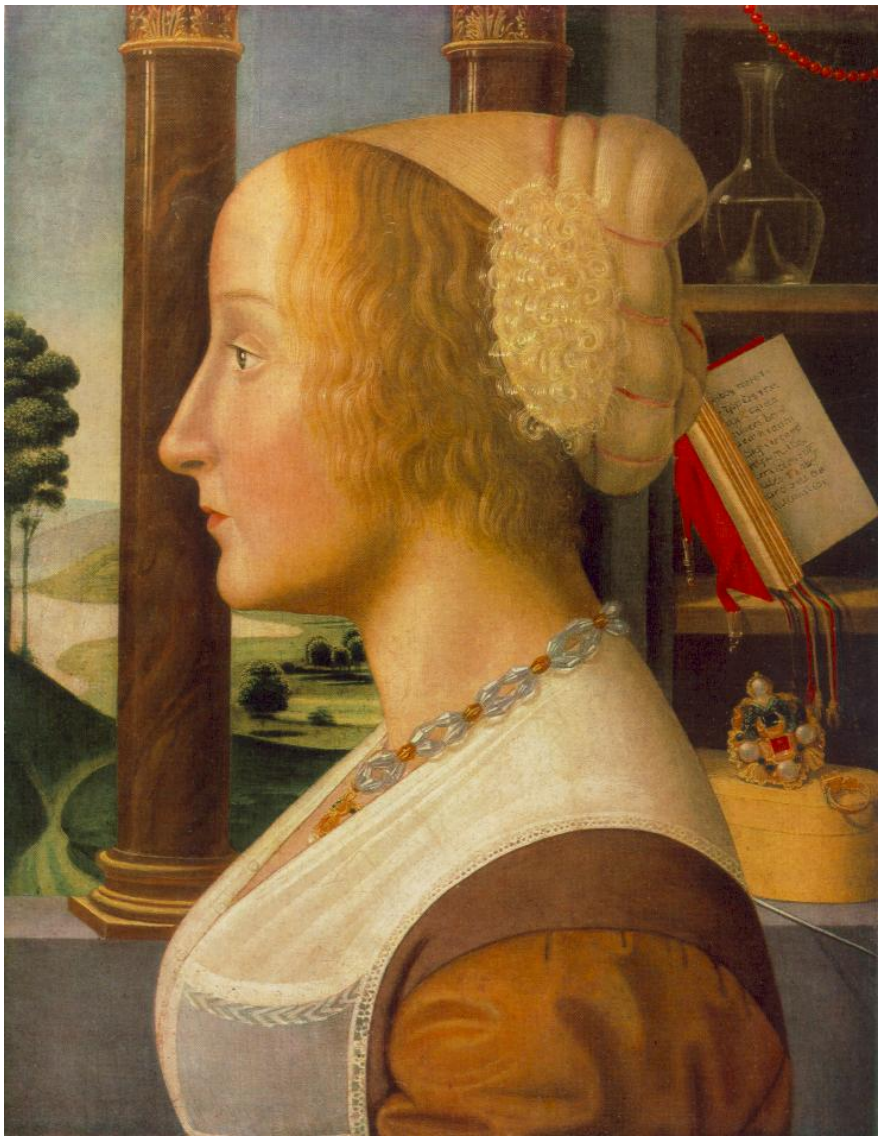

Figure 120. Domenico Ghirlandaio (attributed to), *Portrait of a Young Man*, c. 1490/1500, Tempera on wood, 45 cm × 34 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.



Figure 121. Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of a Lady known as Smeralda Bandinelli*, c. 1475, Tempera on panel, 65.7 cm × 41 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 122. Giuliano da Sangallo (attributed to), *Ideal City*, 1480-1490?, Oil on panel, 67.7 cm × 239.4 cm, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.



Figure 123. Giuliano da Sangallo (attributed to), *Ideal City*, 1480-84, Oil and tempera on panel, 80.3 cm × 220 cm, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.



Figure 124. Giuliano da Sangallo (attributed to), *Ideal City*, c. 1492, Oil and tempera on panel, 131 cm × 233 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.



Figure 125. Sandro Botticelli, *Four Scenes from the Early Life of Saint Zenobius*, c. 1500, Tempera on wood, 66.7 cm × 149.2 cm, National Gallery, London.



Figure 126. Florentine artist, Intarsia *Door*, 1474/1482, Stanza da Letto of the Ducal Palace, Urbino.



Figure 127. Giovanni di Ser Giovanni (called ‘lo Scheggia’), *Cassone Adimari*, c. 1450, Tempera on panel, 88.5 cm × 303 cm, Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence.



Figure 128. Piero della Francesca, *Portrait of Federico da Montefeltro (reverse)*, c. 1473-5, Oil on wood, 47 cm × 33 cm, Uffizi, Florence.

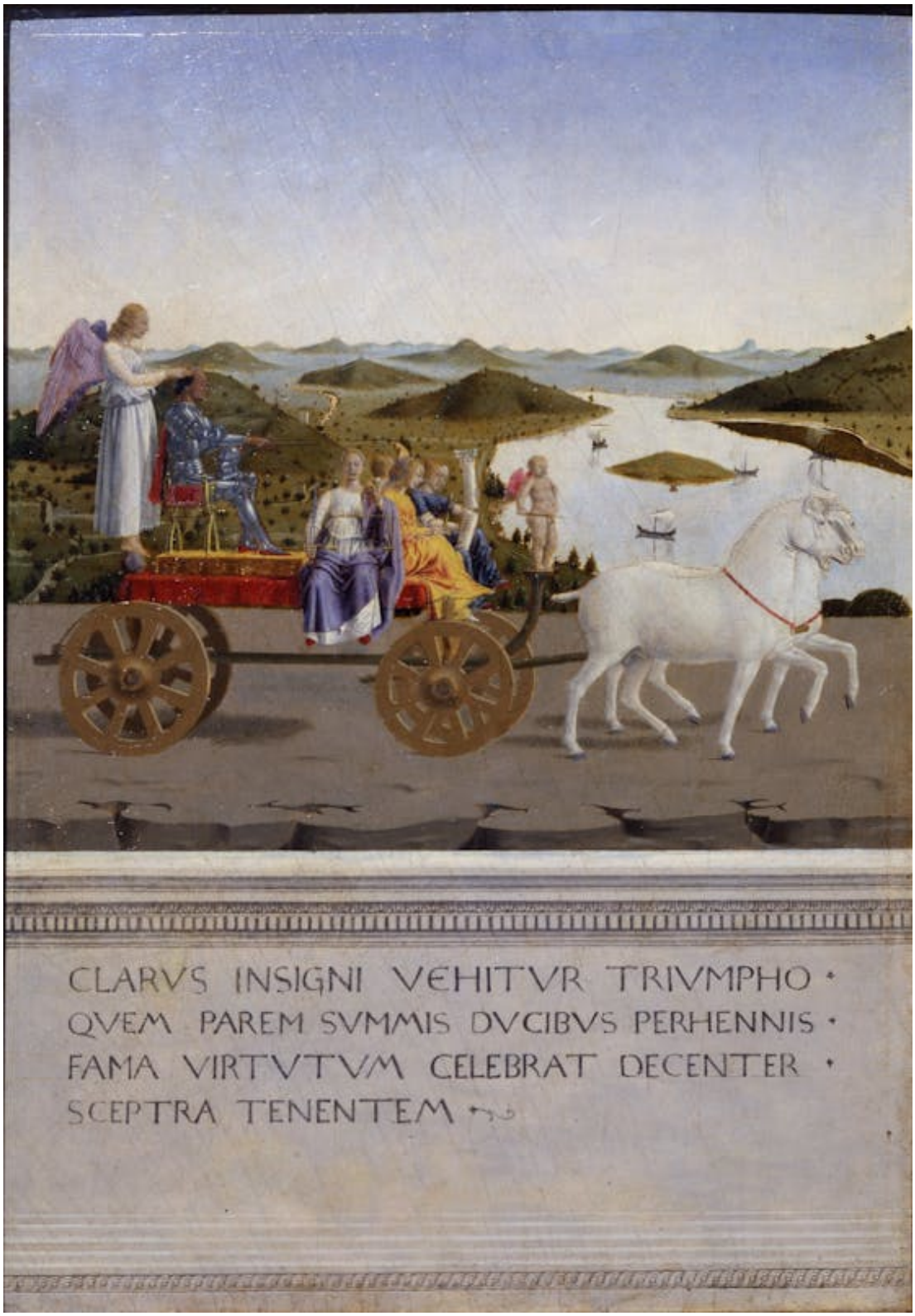

Figure 129. Raphael, *The Marriage of the Virgin*, 1504, Oil on roundheaded panel, 174 cm × 121 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.



Figure 130. Donatello, *The Assumption of St. John*, c. 1439-1443, Polychrome stucco, 215 cm diameter, Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo, Florence.

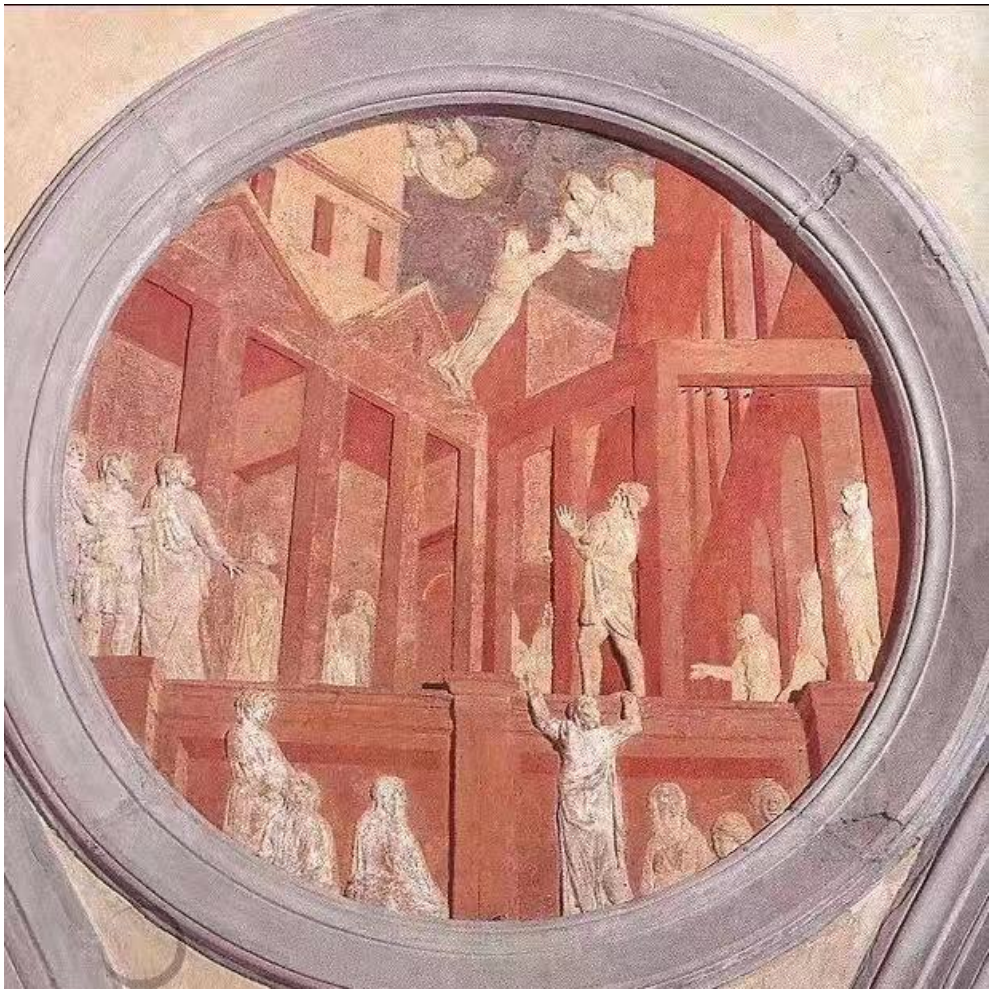

Figure 131. *Della Scena Satirica* [Satiric Scene] (from Serlio, *On Architecture*), c. 1584, Print, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University.

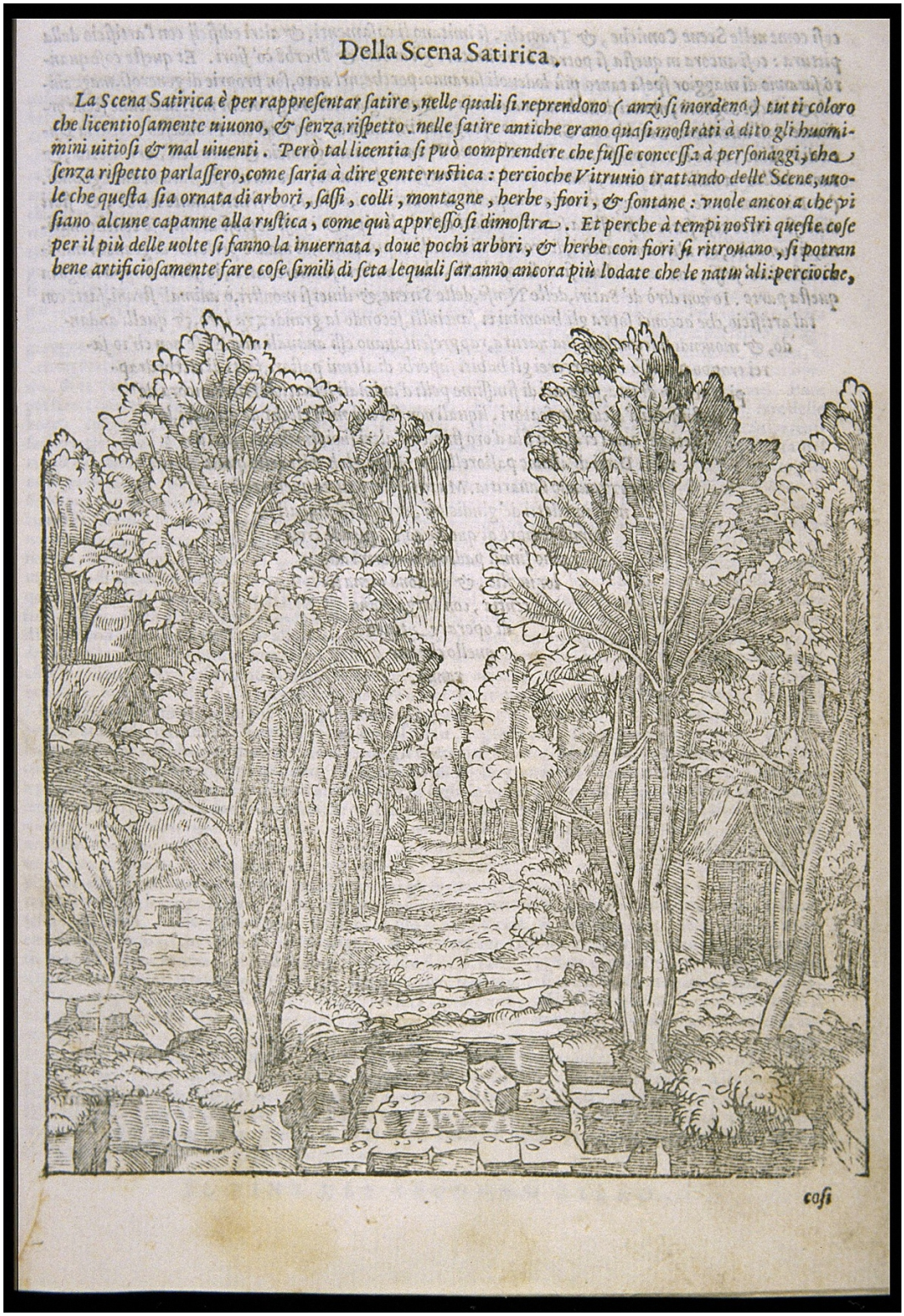

Figure 132. *Della Scena Tragica* [Tragic Scene] (from Serlio, *On Architecture*), c. 1584, Print, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University.



Figure 133. *Della Scena Comica* [Comic Scene] (from Serlio, *On Architecture*), c. 1584, Print, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University.



DI M. SEBASTIAN SERLIO

Della Scena Comica.

Quanto alla disposition de' Teatri, & delle Scene circa alla pianta io ne ho trattato quì a dietro: hora delle Scene in prospettiua ne tratterò particolarmente, & perche (come io dissi) le Scene si fanno di tre sorte, cioè la Comica per rappresentar comedie: la Tragica per le tragedie, & la Satirica per le Satire. questa prima sarà la Comica, i casamenti della quale uogliono essere di personaggi priuati, come saria di cittadini, Auocati, mercanti parasiti, & altre simili persone. Ma sopra il tutto che non ui manchi la casa della ruffiana, nè sia senza hostaria, & uno tempio ui è molto necessario, per disporre li casamenti sopra il piano, detto suolo: io ne ho dato il modo più à dietro, sì nel leuare i casamenti sopra i piani, come nella pianta delle scene, massime, come & doue si dee porre l'Orizonte. Nientedimeno accioche l'huomo sia meglio instrutto circa alle forme de' casamenti; io ne dimostro quì à lato una

figura