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"Between Renaissance and Reformation:
Grotesques and the Debate on Image"

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Between Renaissance and Reformation: Grotesques and the Debate on Images

Damiano Acciarino

> God's houses are buildings in which God alone should be glorified, invoked, and adored. As Christ says: My house is a house of prayer and you make it a murderer's cave [Matt. 21:13]. Deceitful images bring death to those who worship them […] Therefore, our temples might be rightly called murderer's caves, because in them our spirit is stricken and slain.[1]

This is the opening statement from *Von Abtuhung der Bylder* ("on the removal of images"),[2] a short treatise written in German and published in 1522 by Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt,[3] one of Luther's fellow theologians in Wittenberg. His work expressed iconoclastic views and formally gave birth to the controversy over figurative art during the Reformation.[4]

Karlstadt's opening is extremely effective. Because of the presence of deceitful images (*betrügliche bilder*) that lead to the death of the spirit, churches can be compared to murderers' caves ("gruben der morder"). This concept is drawn from the gospel of Matthew, even if the biblical text does not directly refer to images but more generally to corruption within the episode of the "cleansing of the temple." With the German word *grube* (cave), Karlstadt translated the Greek *spēlaion* (cave), from which the Latin term *speluncam* (cave) derived. During the sixteenth century, *grube* and *spēlaion* had a strong semantic relation with the Italian *grotta* (cave), from which the word *grottesche* ("grotesques") was coined.[5] This lexical convergence creates an ideal (and unexpected) bond between the two parallel movements

[1] Mangrum and Scavizzi, *A Reformation Debate*, 19–20.

[2] Karlstadt, *Von Abtuhung.*

[3] Stirm, *Die Bilderfrage.*

[4] Scavizzi, *Arte e architettura sacra*, 51–63.

[5] Acciarino, *Lettere sulle grottesche*, 61–68.

developing simultaneously in Renaissance art: grotesques in ornamental art and iconoclasm in worship.

Since its origin, Christianity has had a controversial and unstable relationship with images.[6] This is in part due to the co-existence within its ideology of two contrasting tendencies: one deriving from its Jewish background that forbade any kind of representation of the divine; the other deriving from its Gentile legacy that, instead, made ample use of images of the gods for its cults. This inherited tension produced an extensive and abundant literature on the matter throughout the centuries that sometimes engendered reformations of style and iconography based on a changing ideal of appropriateness and, at times, resulted in the destruction of statues and other types of figurative representation. Tertullian, Lactantius, and Bernard of Clairvaux are just some of the most eminent authorities taking part in this long-lasting debate. They greatly influenced the nature of sacred art and inspired later religious reformers such as John Wycliff, the Lollards, Jan Huss, Bernardino da Siena, and Girolamo Savonarola.[7]

In the early modern period visual art became a fundamental tool in the investigations and understanding of creation, as well as an instrument to help idealize and imagine the spiritual universe.[8] It was just a matter of time before all this touched the Reformation. Protestant ideas in this regard combined the traditional critique against figurative art (drawn by Sacred Scripture and patristic texts) with the abuses denounced in Luther's 95 theses. As a result, throughout the entire sixteenth century the removal of images and the issue of idolatry became battlefields on which Catholics and Protestants confronted each other in an effort to promote and re-establish doctrine and a liturgy of the Primitive Church.[9]

Grotesques were never explicitly mentioned in any of these polemics, either by Protestants or by Catholics, at least until the end of the sixteenth century. As far as written sources are concerned, it seems that Protestants did not consider this ornamental style at all in their attacks against images. However, grotesques ended up entering "naturally" into Protestant polemics against images because of their widespread presence in almost all decorated buildings of the time, including churches. It is thus reasonable to assume that,

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[6] Bettini, *Contro le immagini*; Lingua, *L'icona, l'idolo*, 27–80.

[7] Palmer Wandel, *Voracious idols*, 38; Presezzi, *Lutero: Riforma*, 53–68.

[8] Burckhardt, *L'arte italiana del Rinascimento.*

[9] Scavizzi, *Arte e architettura sacra,* 130–143; Davis, *Seeing Faith, Printing Pictures*, 45–70.

even if Protestants did not directly address their critique against this type of decorations, their rhetoric could be read by Catholics also as an attack on grotesques, which were vivid and present in Catholic imagery (especially in Italy).

In humanistic circles, grotesques stimulated a heated debate that sought to understand their nature and function within art, whether their figurations carried any symbolic, hidden and arcane meanings, or whether they simply fell into the category of deceitful images, as classical sources such as Vitruvius and Horace maintained. In this light, some of the positions advanced on the Reformation side of the debate on images coincided with those used in the debate on grotesques, creating unexpected reactions against this artistic category on the Catholic side. Curiously enough, the outburst of Protestant polemic against images coincided with the universal diffusion of grotesques in Renaissance art. In fact, just a few years before Karlstadt's book, Raphael completed the decorations of the Vatican Loggias (1516–19) with a series of grotesques that became one of the most famous and renowned examples of this style during the Renaissance.

Reformation and Images

The entire debate on the use of images in religious contexts during the Renaissance and the Reformation began with Karlstadt's treatise.[10] His polemic tract was based on the Mosaic precepts against images (*Ex*. 20:4–5; *Deut*. 5:8–9) and especially on the commandment "you shall not make for yourself an idol, nor any image of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is in the water under the earth," which essentially excluded all creatures in the world from sacred figurations.[11] Karlstadt's intention was to remove any potential medium between God and man (that is, nature) because such a medium could become an obstacle in the relationship with divinity and misdirect veneration, eventually deceiving the believer.

This Old Testament injunction was corroborated by several occurrences drawn from the New Testament, where passages from Paul's letters were used to demonstrate the absolute convergence between the Old and the New Law on the use of images in liturgy. This was especially evident in 2 *Cor*. 5:16, which specified: "Therefore we know no one after the flesh from now on.

[10] Scavizzi, *Arte e architettura sacra*, 48–82; Sider, Andreas Bodenstein.

[11] Lingua, *L'icona, l'idolo*, 19; Scavizzi, *Arte e architettura sacra,* 240–242.

Even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him so no more." In this light, if the understanding of Christ was impossible through the human senses — tied irreparably to a material dimension (that is, the flesh) — images in religious contexts lost any actual function, becoming only a deceitful device fostering idolatry.[12]

This led to a more significant and impactful conclusion, that is, images were no longer considered suitable for teaching religion:

> Since, then, images are deaf and dumb, can neither see nor hear, neither learn nor teach and point to nothing other than pure and simple flesh which is of no use, it follows conclusively that they are of no use. But the Word of God is spiritual and alone is of use to the faithful.[13]

With these words, Karlstadt targeted one of the strongest criteria for the admissibility of images in churches and cults ever developed on the Catholic side: the *Biblia pauperum* or Bible for the poor or illiterate.[14] Its creator was Pope Gregory I (r. 590–604), who formulated this theory in a pastoral letter of c. 599 to Bishop Serenus of Marseille (*PL* 77, 1128 C):

> Aliud est enim picturam adorare, aliud per picturae historiam quid sit adorandum addiscere. Nam quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotis praestat pictura cernentibus, quia in ipsa etiam ignorantes vident quid sequi debeant, in ipsa legunt qui litteras nesciunt. Unde et praecipue gentibus pro lectione pictura est.
>
> (One thing is to worship a painting, another thing is to teach through the subject of the painting [*per picturae historiam*] what should be worshipped. In fact, a painting shows to the illiterates, who look at it, that which a text transmits to the readers, since ignorant people, who do not know how to read, could understand and actually "read" what should be followed.)[15]

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[12] Mangrum and Scavizzi, *A Reformation Debate*, 6–11.

[13] Mangrum and Scavizzi, *A Reformation Debate*, 27.

[14] Corsi, *Biblia pauperum*; Nellhouse, "Mementos of things," 292–321.

[15] Here and elsewhere in this article all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

To undermine this deeply-rooted justification, Karlstadt focused on two main aspects of Christian doctrine extrapolated from the Scriptures.[16] On the one hand, he wanted to re-establish the superiority of the word (*logos*) over the image (*eikona*), because transposing God's message in images would have meant converting it into a different semiotic vehicle, thereby distorting the original sense of the message. On the other hand, the use of images to teach Scripture meant that clergy and laity were not placed on an equal footing, but that the former had some sort of pre-eminence over the latter, and this would break the unity of Christianity itself, creating two categories of the faithful: one that could directly access the message of salvation and another that instead was subjected to false rituals:

> Thus saying that likenesses are the books of the laity is precisely the same as saying that the laity ought not to be disciples of Christ, should never be free from the bonds of the Devil and should also not enter into godly and Christian life.[17]

Karlstadt's positions had a very strong impact on the ensuing debate on images and idolatry. His influence can be detected mostly in reformed environments, where it gave birth to a tradition of works by both Catholics and Protestants that were either in line with, or against his ideas.[18]

The first response is perhaps among the most meaningful. It was written in German in 1522 by the Catholic apologist Hieronymus Emser who, in his *Das man der heyligen Bilder yn den Kirken nit abthon, noch unheren soll. Und das sie in der Schriff nyndert verboten seyn*, literally explained the reasons

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[16] Mangrum and Scavizzi, *A Reformation Debate*, 9–12.

[17] Mangrum and Scavizzi, *A Reformation Debate*, 27–28.

[18] After *Von Abtuhung der Bylder*, the works published in sequence are the following: a short Latin treatise by Johannes Eck on the same topic (1522); Luther's eight sermons *Invocavit* (1522) and his *Widder die hymmelischenn Propheten, von den Bildern und Sacrament* (1525), in which he opposed iconoclastic positions and proposed a judicious use of images together with a reformation of iconography; Johannes Stumpf's collection of sermons (1523) and Huldrych Zwingli's *Vorschlag wegen der Bilder und der Messe* (1524) that is, literally, "proposal concerning images and the Mass;" up until Jean Calvin's chapter XI of the first book of his *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (1536) and Heinrich Bullinger's *De origine erroris* (1539), especially the section *De deorum falsorum religionibus et simulachrorum cultu erroneo*. For further Protestant positions, see also the *Magdeburg Centuries*, XII:863.16. For a Catholic response in the first half of the sixteenth century, see Scavizzi, *Arte e architettura sacra,* 130–153.

"why images should not be removed from churches and other religious buildings, should not be dishonoured, and were not forbidden in Scripture."[19] In Emser's view, images were allowed for three main reasons: first, because they kept track and memory of the events; second, because they could teach illiterate people, according to the scheme of the *Biblia pauperum*; and, third, because they inspired faith in the observer.[20]

Of course, Emser had to admit that sometimes images were misused, specifically in the iconography of the Virgin Mary and the saints.[21] He attributed the origin of this misapplication to the Devil, who created a series of deceitful idols with the intent of being worshipped in place of the real God ("The Devil arranged for the misuse of this and other pagan images in order to elicit divine veneration for himself").[22] In addition, Emser stated that sometimes Pagans themselves understood that these images were deleterious and noxious and openly condemned them:

> These pagan images and idols through which the Devil is invoked, and God is robbed of his divine honour, are an abomination before God and have been condemned not only by the canonical Scripture but also by wise and intelligent pagans themselves.[23]

Both Karlstad and Emser, and all their followers, had precise targets in mind when they respectively formulated their attacks on, or tried to defend the *status quo.* They referred mostly to statues and licentious paintings, but also, in more general terms, to all those artworks and furnishings that distracted people's attention from the Word of God or placed in danger the administration and reception of the liturgy.[24]

If we consider all these debates retrospectively, we find that they could be perfectly compatible with the critique on grotesques advanced in the second half of the sixteenth century in Catholic environments — the deceitful nature of images, the impossibility of teaching or transmitting a message through them, and the veneration of infernal divinities. In light of the above,

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[19] Mangrum and Scavizzi, *A Reformation Debate*, 41–88; Emser, *Das man der heyligen Bilder.*

[20] Mangrum and Scavizzi, *A Reformation Debate*, 12–14.

[21] Mangrum and Scavizzi, *A Reformation Debate*, 14.

[22] Mangrum and Scavizzi, *A Reformation Debate*, 46.

[23] Mangrum and Scavizzi, *A Reformation Debate*, 51.

[24] Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution,* 383–457.

one can further extrapolate that the attacks against grotesques developed during the Counter-Reformation came about as a direct consequence of the Protestant polemics against images.

Counter-Reformation and Images

Even if some sporadic attempts to oppose the growing iconoclastic impulses developing in Protestant regions can be seen during this time, no official Catholic response emerged before the decrees "on invocation, veneration of the relics of Saints and sacred images" (*De invocatione, veneratione et reliquiis sanctorum et sacris imaginibus*) promulgated by the Council of Trent in 1563.[25] The Tridentine pronouncements sought to restore the honour of figurative art in Christian cults and worship, basically adopting the traditional arguments that sacred art promoted memory, learning, and faith. In addition, these decrees encouraged an improvement of the iconography in order to help increase the effectiveness of the images and reinforce the reasons for their use.

> And if any abuses have crept in amongst these holy and salutary observances, the holy Synod ardently desires that they be utterly abolished; in such wise that no images, (suggestive) of false doctrine, and furnishing occasion of dangerous error to the uneducated, be set up.[26]

The Tridentine decrees set the ground rules for a re-interpretation of images by the bishops; they did not, however, discuss particular cases, thereby leaving bishops free to apply the regulations as they saw best and most appropriate for their dioceses. Guidelines, however, soon followed. The first work that gave a series of concrete examples for what should and should not be depicted in sacred art was composed by the Flemish scholar and theologian Jan Vermeulen (1533–85), also known as Johannes Molanus, who in 1570 published *De Picturis et Imaginibus Sacris*, a treatise on the correct use of images that sought to give concrete shape to the Council's more general

[25] Alberigo, "Studi e problemi," 239–298; Firpo, *Storie di immagini*; Noyes, "Aut numquid," 239–261; Pigozzi, *Il Concilio di Trento e le arti*; Prodi, *Arte e pietà*; Firpo and Biferali, *Immagini ed eresie*.

[26] The Council of Trent, *The Canons and Decrees*, 246

proclamations.[27] It also referred to the former tradition of treatises on art and iconography stemming from humanistic circles and to the strong iconoclastic tensions that had erupted in previous decades in Protestant areas.

Molanus never mentioned grotesques in his work, even if in some cases he alluded to their ornamental figurations. He referred, for example, to those mysterious hieroglyphs of the ancient Egyptians ("aenigmata pingebant Aegyptij") that were often associated with the enigmatic print of grotesques after the late fifteenth century discovery of Hermes Trismegistus and Horapollo.[28] Molanus stated that these depictions were never admitted in ecclesiastical contexts ("Numquam item Ecclesia approbabit Aegyptiorum morem") because they could serve as idols of the pagan gods ("inter Aegyptios, quosdam aenigmatum artifices qui idolis serviebant"). In fact, if hieroglyphs were considered to be profane idols bearing some kind of obscure meaning, then they should be excluded from Christian temples.

In chapter 30, entitled "Profane images must not be mixed with the sacred ones, neither in temples nor in monasteries" ("Prophana non esse sacris intermiscenda, nec in templis, nec in monasterijs"), Molanus connects the exclusion of profane iconography from churches or sacred buildings with the pronouncements of the Council, openly recalling the words of the decrees:

> Nihil prophanum, nihiloque inhonestum appareat cum domum Dei deceat sanctitudo: contra eos, qui in Ecclesijs prophana sacris admiscent.
>
> (Nothing profane nor indecent should appear, because only sanctity is appropriate in the house of God: this is against those, who mix profane things with the sacred in churches.)[29]

Molanus ended this discussion by quoting Bernard of Clairvaux's famous invective against the strange figures (*curiosas depictiones*) that were very common in medieval monasteries:

> Quid [in claustris] facit illa ridiculosa monstruositas, mira quaedam deformis formositas, ac formosa deformitas? Quid ibi

[27] Molanus, *De picturis*.

[28] Molanus, *De picturis*, 3 d. Giehlow, *The Humanist Interpretation of Hieroglyphs*; Giehlow, *Hieroglyphica*.

[29] Molanus, *De picturis*, 62–63.

> immundae simiae? Quid feri leones? Quid monstruosi centauri? Quid semihomines? Quid maculosae tigrides? Quid milites pugnantes? Quid venatores tubicinantes? Videas sub uno capite corpora multa, et rursus in uno corpore capita multa. Cernitur hinc in quadrupede cauda serpentis, illinc in pisce caput quadrupedis. Ibi bestia praefert equum, capram trahens retro dimidiam, hic cornutum animal equum gestat posterius. Tam multa denique, tamque mira diversarum formarum ubique varietas apparet, ut magis legere libeat in marmoribus, quam in codicibus: totumque diem occupare singula ista mirando, quam in lege Dei meditando.
>
> (Why is this ridiculous monstrosity represented [in cloisters], this kind of marvelous deformed beauty, or beautiful deformity? Why are foul monkeys found here? Why fierce lions? Why horrific centaurs? Why half-men? Why speckled tigers? Why soldiers in battle? Why hunters sounding their horns? You see many bodies under one head and again one body with many heads. You can see on one side a four-legged-animal with a snake as a tail, on the other side the head of a four-legged-animal on a fish. Here, a beast is half horse in the front and half goat in back; there, a horned animal gives birth to a horse. This surprising and rich variety of heterogeneous forms appears everywhere, so much so that people prefer to read statues rather than books: they prefer to waste their time staring at these images rather than contemplate the Law of God.)[30]

Bernard's words helped Molanus give a precise shape to those "mixed" figurations present in churches. His detailed description reflected an imagery made of dynamic figures combining vegetal, animal, and human features that, in the 1570s, inevitably evoked the usual iconographies of grotesques. However, beyond this significant and probably devised coincidence, greater attention should be paid to his final statement, which suggested that these images were distracting the faithful from Christian truth. Bernard's remark, though originally written in the twelfth century, echoed Karlstadt's polemic against the *Biblia pauperum* and Gregory the Great, and identified for the first

[30] Molanus, *De picturis*, 63–65.

time (on the Catholic side) the deceitful images that were to be excluded from the canon so as to avoid confusing and ambiguous messages.

Carlo Borromeo followed up this position by adding further details in his *Instructionum fabricae et suppellectilis ecclesiasticae libri duo* ("Two books of instructions for ecclesiastical buildings and furnishings"), a Counter-reformation work on images published in 1577. In chapter 17 "On sacred images and paintings" (*De sacris imaginibus picturisve*) Borromeo devoted several passages to the appropriateness of the imagery within religious environments.[31] In the first section, entitled "What should be avoided in sacred images, and what should be saved" (*Quae in imaginibus sacris cavenda, quae rursus servanda sunt*), he set a first parameter in order to reject figurations from the iconographic system still in use during his time:

> Praeterea sacris imaginibus pingendis sculpendisve, sicut nihil falsum, nihil incertum apocryphumve, nihil superstitiosum, nihil insolitum adhiberi debet, ita quicquid prophanum, turpe vel obscaenum, inhonestum procacitatemve ostentans, omnino caveatur; et quicquid item curiosum, quodque non ad pietatem homines informet, aut quo fidelium mentes oculique offendi possint, prorsus vitetur item.
>
> (Furthermore, in painting and sculpting sacred images, nothing false, uncertain, apocryphal, superstitious, must be displayed; everything profane, depraved or obscene, shameless or impudent must be avoided; similarly, everything unusual, which does not educate the people at devotion or can offend the minds of faithful, again, must be forbidden.)[32]

Borromeo then specifically explained what should be excluded from the canon of sacred images. In the secion "On side-works and marginal apparatus for ornament" (*De parergis et additamentis ornatus causa*) he issues his famous sentence on marginal decorations, thereby condemning the sort of imagery that was typical of grotesques, though he does so without mentioning them explicitly:

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[31] Borromeo, *Instructionum fabricae,* 42–45.

[32] Borromeo, *Instructionum fabricae*, 42.

> Parerga, utpote quae ornatus causa imaginibus pictores sculptoresve addere solent, ne prophane sint, ne voluptaria, ne deliciose ne denique a sacra pictura abhorrentia, ut deformiter efficta capita humana quae mascaroni vulgo nominant, non aviculae, non mare, non prata virentia, non alia id generis, quae ad oblectationem deliciosumque prospectum atque ornatum effinguntur; nisi eiusmodi sint, quae cum historia sacra, quae exprimitur, vere conveniant, aut tabulae votorum, in quibus et capita et alia, ut supra, ad eorum explicationem pinguntur. Ornamenta item, indumentave alia, quae sacris imaginibus appinguntur, nihil ineptum, nihil denique habeant, quod nihil parumve cum sanctitate conveniat.
>
> (The *parerga*, which painters or sculptors usually add to images as ornaments, should not depict birds, seas, green prairies, and in general anything that might seek to produce a pleasant landscape or delightful ornament, in order to be neither profane, nor voluptuous, neither luxury nor abhorrent of sacred art, such as those human heads usually depicted that the people call *mascaroni* [big masks]. *Parerga* should feature only those things that pertain appropriately to the sacred history represented; otherwise votive-tables, in which those heads and other things, like the above, are depicted to explain them. Similarly, ornaments or other garments, on which sacred images are represented, must not carry anything that is inappropriate and not suitable with sanctity.)[33]

If Borromeo's passages are read alongside those of Molanus, it becomes clear that, after the decrees of the Council of Trent, Catholic apologists sought to weaken Protestant positions on the matter of images by attempting to break the Protestants' unity: they argued that not all images were deceptive or distracting — as Karlstadt and most of his followers suggested — but only those that did not conform to precise iconological patterns. In this light, images could still be included in Christian liturgy; however, Catholics needed to remove those that had been improperly used and preserve those that served their purposes (memory, education, inspiration) and safeguard them from future attacks.

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[33] Borromeo, *Instructionum fabricae,* 44–45.

The Counter-Reformation and Grotesques

Even if both Molanus and Borromeo alluded to those representations that were, in their words, enigmatic and undecipherable, hybrid and monstrous, false, uncertain, apocryphal, superstitious, profane, depraved, obscene, shameless, impudent, unusual and deceitful, a definitive scapegoat for Catholic figurative art was identified only in 1582 by Gabriele Paleotti in his *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*.[34] It was here that grotesques (*grottesche*) appeared to embody all the negative aspects of art that should be left out of the canon, both in sacred and profane contexts.[35]

Paleotti devoted six chapters of the second book to this ornamental style (2, 37–42) — the most extensive section of his treatise. This part is preceded by twelve chapters (2, 25–36) in which he discussed single negative aspects of art. Here, he gradually deleted those features that required condemnation and a thorough reformation in order to not be censured. He indicated precise categories that were to be rejected and others that could be acceptable if brought in line with certain fixed parameters. He focused, as his subsections indicated, *On lying and false pictures* (25), *On nonverisimilar pictures* (26), *On inept and indecorous pictures* (27), *On disproportionate pictures* (28), *On imperfect pictures* (29), *On vain and otiose pictures* (30)*, On ridiculous pictures* (31), *On pictures that bring novelty and are unusual* (32), *On pictures that are obscure and difficult to understand* (33), *On indifferent and uncertain pictures (34), On fierce and horrendous pictures* (35), *On monstrous and prodigious pictures* (36).[36] Grotesques seemed to embody all these imperfections simultaneously (*Discourse*, 2, 41):

> If each of the defects discussed in various chapters of this treatise greatly lowers the dignity of this art, what will be upshot of this kind of work [i.e. grotesques], in which all, or the greater part of them come together? What else can one call such pictures but lying, inept, vain, imperfect, nonverisimilar, disproportionate,

[34] Hecht, *Katholische Bildertheologie*; Bianchi, *La politica delle immagini*; Prodi, *Arte e pietà*.

[35] Paleotti took active part in the Council of Trent during the years 1562–64; this means that he could access directly the discussion on images (1563) and bear in mind the guidelines established during these sessions, from which he then developed his *Discourse* in line with the spiritual and political needs that emerged during the Council.

[36] Paleotti, *Discourse*, viii, trans. McCuaig.

> obscure, and extravagant? This was the reason, as Philo writes and as we have already mentioned, that Moses drove out of his republic makers of statues and pictures who corrupted the truth with their lies.[37]

This position is perfectly in line with Renaissance critiques on grotesques that had begun almost from their re-discovery in the Domus Aurea (c. 1479) and continued throughout the entire sixteenth century. Pomponio Gaurico (1504 and 1531), Guillaume Philandrier (1544), Paolo Pino (1548) and Daniele Barbaro (1556) are some of the most significant figures who questioned these decorations with the aim of rejecting any anti-naturalistic or irrational figuration from the artistic canon.[38]

Paleotti's originality can be found, however, in his final statement where he tried to overturn the very strict Mosaic condemnation of images. By relying on Philo of Alexandria's allegorical reading of the book of Genesis (*De gigantibus*), Paleotti argued that Moses drove away artists from his community because they depicted "useless and fabulous" things and "because they vitiate truth with falsehoods, visually deluding easy and credulous souls" ("quod veritatem mendaciis vicient, illudentes per oculos animabus facilibus et credulis").[39] According to this interpretation, the function of images prevailed over the images themselves. It is not by chance that Paleotti accompanies these words with an attack on grotesques ("How could it possibly benefit anyone to look at a façade full of grotesques? […] Where is the utility […] in all those masks [*mascheroni*] and counterfeit animals?").

By linking a typically profane art (grotesques) with the issue of reception of sacred art during the Reformation (idolatry), Paleotti brought the profane dimension of grotesques directly into the debate on idolatry. In so doing, he succeeded in mitigating the inflexibility of the Mosaic precepts by orienting his focus toward the Protestant interpretation of the Old Testament, while at the same time identifying a category of profane painting on which to centre the iconoclastic fears that had emerged in the previous decades. Thus, not all sacred art was to be excluded from the liturgy, but only that art that appeared deceitful — that is to say, grotesques.

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[37] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 274, trans. McCuaig.

[38] For a general overview on the Renaissance literature about grotesques, see Barocchi, *Scritti d'arte*, 3:2621–2698.

[39] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 237, trans. McCuaig.

Then Paleotti went even further and addressed a question that implicitly pervaded his entire treatise; if images could be realized according to wrong parameters that ended up deceiving the observer, which were the correct ones to follow? The answer was straightforward: those imitating nature as accurately as possible.[40] His position, rooted both in Aristotelian precepts and scriptural passages, emerged after a long epistolary exchange with the great naturalist and antiquarian Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605).[41] The point of his argument gravitated around a statement found in Paul's letter to the Romans that proclaimed that through the visible world it was possible to see and understand the idea of the invisible ("invisibilia Dei, per ea quae visibilia facta sunt, conspiciuntur"; *Rom*. 1:20). In this light, Paleotti could easily affirm: "if art imitates nature, then grotesques fall outside the bounds of art."[42]

This was directly related to the real function of art itself. Thanks to this position, Paleotti could present the argument in favour of the *Biblia pauperum* in a new light. The imitation of nature created an alphabet that the public could understand perfectly and developed a language that could not transmit fraudulent or dishonest messages. In this regard, Paleotti's exchange with Aldrovandi is essential for our understanding of the development of Paleotti's positions because it points to Aldrovandi as the person who provided the scientific knowledge that was to be applied to a visual art. Aldrovandi put together a multiplicity of biological categories that could be drawn directly from nature and that could become a source for iconographies, thereby showing how the immense variety of natural phenomena could offer original figurative patterns that released artists from resorting to anti-naturalistic imagery.[43]

In order to support this position, Paleotti was forced to assume that in human history drawing, and hence painting, preceded writing.[44] This assumption was necessary in order to break down the hierarchy of the written word over the image. The former was indeed considered a more complex system of communication compared to the latter, and hence more proper to God. However, Paleotti tried to prove that writing had been developed by man from drawing in a subsequent phase of civilization, even if this did not exclude the existence of the written word in some early cultures. This hypothesis entailed

[40] Prodi, *Il cardinale*, 527–529.

[41] Acciarino, *Lettere sulle grottesche*, 83–107; Olmi, *L'inventario*.

[42] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 274, trans. McCuaig.

[43] Acciarino, *Lettere sulle grottesche,* 103–107; Barocchi, *Scritti d'arte*, 1:923–929.

[44] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 62–69, trans. McCuaig.

the idea that God's message could be conveyed beyond its vehicle, as actually happened in those times in which God himself spoke directly to his people, when writing (and books) were not yet available to mankind. To sustain this strong declaration — which overturned Protestant beliefs regarding the pre-eminence of the written word over images — Paleotti relied on John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus, who both defended the view that images were far more intelligible than writing as a means of communication because they were closer to the original that they represented. Thus, Paleotti could easily affirm:

> there is no people or language or class of persons that cannot easily understand the unspoken words uttered by God's created works, which […] represent his grandeur and majesty. Anyone can see how well this line of reasoning applies to images, which represent God's very creatures in their form, and consequently make themselves known to and understood by all, which books certainly cannot do.[45]

This argument helped to consolidate his critique on grotesques: if the Word of God could be understood through his creation (that is, the natural world), then whatever images fell outside of this category should be excluded from the list of admissible images. In other words, if nature could transmit God's message, then all the images that closely imitated nature were suitable for this task.

Yet, one additional problem connected to this theory had to be solved in order to protect the entire figurative system of sacred art in Catholic environments from future attacks. It was put forward by one of the apologists of grotesque paintings, Pirro Ligorio, in a letter he sent to Paleotti while his *Discourse* was still in progress.[46] Ligorio was one of the theorists of the symbolic and hieroglyphic dimension of grotesques ("Nonetheless, it is not possible, if everything is considered, that these pictures were not made for symbolic display […]"),[47] which represented a cryptic alphabet that could be decoded by initiates and which transmitted the secrets of nature. As Ligorio points out:

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[45] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 68, trans. McCuaig.

[46] Acciarino, *Lettere sulle grottesche*, 108–128.

[47] Acciarino, *Lettere sulle grottesche,* 117, trans. John Garton, below 546.

> for even though they appear false and supernatural, they are things that declare the reflection of nature, for their beauty the eyes are grateful, for the sharpness of the invention of the fabulous figures move the soul, and offer material to discuss […] and we have to believe that they are none other than things covered by the ancient poets in the things of physics.[48]

Furthermore, the fact that grotesques represented a sort of "language" allowed Ligorio to establish a meaningful parallel between their iconographic apparatus and libraries, as if they were a type of book to be read by the spectator:

> they were made and decorated with such painting as a moral thing to edify the intellects and souls of all types that inhabited them, for the same reason that villas are not without libraries and other things necessary to the needs of erudition that edify this mortal life.[49]

This passage gave shape to those concerns regarding grotesques as a potential target for Protestant polemists, especially because they incorporated a parallel medium for reading creation, a medium that required knowledge of a mystic and oneiric language from which it was impossible to deduce a clear message. Paleotti strongly rejected these positions, not only by saying that ancient authors themselves did not recognize allegorical meaning in these extravagant paintings, but also conceding that, even if they had, it would have been so impenetrable that they would have been deceptive rather than didactic:

> Never mind for now that great writers have judged that such fables must not be tolerated on the pretext of some allegory; never mind the others who have stated clearly that this is just a way of giving some people colorable excuse, or an imaginary veil, in order to cover as best they can the ugliness or foolishness of these fables, and that the Romans never allowed for such allegories. We say that when it comes to grotesques, everyone knows that

[48] Acciarino, *Lettere sulle grottesche*, 117, trans. John Garton, below 547. On the issue, see also Hansen, *The Art of Trasformation*, 219–240.

[49] Acciarino, *Lettere sulle grottesche*, 115, trans. John Garton, below 543.

> ordinarily they have no hidden, beneficial meaning and that they have produced in a desultory and capricious fashion. And even if there were, it is so recondite and abstruse that it serves very few and deceives a great many, and is therefore negligible.[50]

As a result, Paleotti admitted that, even if the pagans sometimes needed these paintings as a means to approach wisdom, Christians should follow a completely different path, because for them truth was manifested through Revelation.

> For reasons already given, it is all the more improper to display them in public, open places; and as for churches, we think there is no one so deprived of reason that he will not confess that, church being where we adore the supreme majesty, through participation in whom all things have their being and are true, there is nothing more repugnant to it than representing dream-objects and falsities there.[51]

Symbols and Grotesques

With these words, constituting an actual *pars destruens*, Paleotti provided the elements to replace grotesque imagery, with all its cryptic suggestions, and establish a *pars construens*. In the following section of his *Discourse*, he devoted a chapter entitled *On pictures of symbols* (45) to describing the correct method of portraying enigmatic imagery.[52] Here, the guidelines for arranging symbolic figurations were set according to a specific (and regulated) iconographic repertoire based on a realistic naturalism ("natural or artificial things, such as trees, plants, rivers, metals, stars, men, animals, edifices, towers, machines, and so on").[53] A symbol, properly defined, consisted of "several different images joined together to make a certain corpus of figures, whether they be humans or animals or plants, […] which represent some acts, true or verisimilar as it may be, or even feigned, from which there inwardly results another good and moral sense."[54]

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[50] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 279–280, trans. McCuaig.

[51] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 280, trans. McCuaig.

[52] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 287–289, trans. McCuaig.

[53] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 287, trans. McCuaig.

[54] Paleotti, Discourse, 287, trans. McCuaig.

If one compares the elements usually utilized to arrange symbols, it becomes clear that they could be easily overlapped with those constituting grotesques ("By grotesques we mean exclusively those forms of men or animals or other things […]"). The substantial difference lays in the way these figures were formed, that is, whether they carried some kind of "reality" or "verisimilitude," and accurately reproduced nature by avoiding any kind of supernatural hybridity ("that never did or could exist in the manner in which they are represented and are the mere caprices of the painters, vain phantasms, irrational imaginings of their part").[55]

> A symbol should not, however, be so obscure and difficult that it always requires a subtle interpreter, […] So, for the greater ease of whoever wishes to make use of them, we see fit to warn the reader that, as well as avoiding a few well-known abuses like depicting lasciviousness or monstrosity or false gods or anything else we have mentioned above.[56]

The aim of this decision was to equate the symbolic dimension of art with the symbolic discourse used by Jesus Christ in the Gospels, that is, the parable, which always conveyed a moral message. In fact, this was the sole rhetorical expedient that avoided sophistry and obscure language in forming symbols. In Paleotti's view, this must be the model to follow when adopting allegorical patterns:

> But the main thing to stress is that the symbol should convey instruction and utility for living well. Whence, […] we strongly applaud those who avail themselves of the evangelical parables told by the Savior, […] which are good, safe, charming, and of great benefit to human life.[57]

In this light, a further assumption can be made. Just as the *Hieroglyphica* published in 1556 by Pierio Valeriano served as a sort of encyclopedia of sacred and profane symbols inherited from ancient cultures and intertwined with the creative tension of the Renaissance — from which many artists and

[55] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 262, trans. McCuaig.

[56] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 288–289, trans. McCuaig.

[57] Paleotti, *Discourse*, 289, trans. McCuaig.

iconographers often benefitted — the renewed Catholic policy on images required analogous tools capable of providing similar iconographic solutions, but based on Counter-Reformation guidelines.[58] This was the case of Antonio Ricciardi's *Commentaria Symbolica* (1591) and Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593).[59]

Valeriano added uncountable meanings to traditional and innovative symbolic patterns drawn from an enormous amount of ancient literary and material sources (statues, coins, epigraphs). He moved from the assumption that hieroglyphs were used in ancient times to record "all the mysteries of nature" (*omnem naturae obscuritatem*); and, to do so, the elements used "for this kind of description were constituted by figures of animals and other things" ("descriptionem huiusmodi, animalium ceterarumque rerum figuris constitisse") in which philosophers, poets and historians "saw hidden theological messages" ("divinarum etiam disciplinarum sententias delitescere viderunt").[60] It comes as no surprise, then, that his work became one of the points of reference in conferring significance to mysterious and cryptic images and grotesques.[61]

However, Valeriano then added that this legacy served to interpret and understand the Bible and other sacred texts, merging the profane dimension of the symbols he collected with the truth of Christian wisdom. Valeriano pushed this idea even further: by comparing the reading of hieroglyphs with the parables in the Gospels he created a very dangerous contamination between two extremely delicate aspects:

> In the new law, as our Savior says, I will open my mouth in a parable and speak in dark sayings [*in aenigmate*] of old, which we have heard and known, and this I will do in hieroglyphs [*hieroglyphice*] and I will construct ancient monuments of things in allegories [*allegorice*].[62]

This obscurity could no longer be tolerated in Counter-Reformation times, especially since it could be misread and confused with the imagery of

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[58] Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica*; Gielhow, *The Humanist Interpretation*, 208–235.

[59] Ricciardi, *Commentaria*; Ripa, *Iconologia*. For the relations between Ripa and Valeriano, see the introduction of Sonia Maffei to Ripa, *Iconologia*, LXXXVIII–XC.

[60] Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica*.

[61] Morel, "Il funzionamento simbolico," 13–32; Morel, *Les grotesques.*

[62] Gielhow, *The Humanist Interpretation*, 229.

grotesques. Therefore, a thorough rethinking of the concept of symbol and its crafting was required. This was done by Antonio Ricciardi and Cesare Ripa who, moving from different premises, provided a first detailed alphabetical list of iconographies compatible with the figurative reorganization imposed by the Council of Trent.

According to the Flemish scholar Jan van Gorp van der Beke, also known as Johannes Goropius, hieroglyphs were nothing but symbols; and, "if symbols were analogous to words" ("si enim nomina symbola sint"), they must refer to a precise, clear and defined object to serve their purposes: therefore "it is necessary that they conform to visible images, and express the name signified by the figure" ("necesse est ut cum ipsis adspectabilibus imaginibus consentiant, et illud exprimat nomen quod figura demonstrat").[63]

This assertion led to a new way to perceive hieroglyphs: all symbols had to respect the object to which they referred, adapting their features to their original model. Ricciardi, for example, stated that symbols should have "necessarily some kind of likeness" ("similitudo quaedam necesse est") with what they try to express, in order to allow an "interior understanding" ("animum nostrum deducunt") through an "exterior perception" ("exteriori sensui").[64]

A comparable attitude can be found in Ripa. In his preface, he points out the methodological approach that should be followed in arranging symbolic images. Beyond the principle of similarity, which implied a relationship with the object evoked ("that these sort of figures may easily be brought to a likeness in their limitation"),[65] Ripa established four criteria for crafting any type of figuration, clearly referencing Aristotle's *Physics* (2, 3) and Metaphysics (5, 2): a material cause, an efficient cause, a formal cause, and a final cause ("from the Matter or stuff; from the Efficicus or working; from the Forme or figure; and from the Fine or end").[66] Respecting these norms would ensure a clear understanding of the symbol, without creating confusion in the spectator:

> Where these four together have been used only to express one thing; for all that, we find this in some places all together; then this must principally be noted to represent a hidden case, or an unusual manner; that the same, by an ingenious invention, be

[63] Goropius, *Opera*, *Hieroglyphica*, 13.

[64] Ricciardi, *Commentaria, ad lect.*

[65] Clark, *The Iconologia*, 4; on Ripa's method of making symbols, see Maffei, *Le radici antiche* and Gabriele, Galassi and Guerrini, *L'Iconologia di Cesare Ripa.*

[66] Clark, *The Iconologia*, 4.

> made pleasant. And it is commendable that we do that in one thing only, to cause no obscurity or displeasure, to keep too many things in memory.[67]

This new rational approach to symbolic iconography, which can ideally be opposed to the "chaos of the mind" of grotesques,[68] created a multifarious alternative to those irrational and imaginary figurations, and placed a newly re-established tolerance threshold for sacred art in Catholic environments through rationality and naturalism. This was still a shifting phase, which would lead to a totally renovated style in the application of ornamental art for the following centuries; but it guaranteed the survival of a "language" with an age-old tradition that had been questioned by renewed spiritual tensions and religious needs.

Renaissance grotesques appear to be considered an "art in transition," susceptible to external influences in defining their own style and expressive means. Grotesques reflected the cultural vibrations that manifested from time to time, internalizing them and re-arranging them according to patterns in continuous evolution. Most importantly, the meditation on grotesques by various authors contributed to the growth of Renaissance art itself.

The intent of the present volume, which gathers contributions from the conference sessions "Between Allegory and Natural Philosophy: New Perspectives on Renaissance Grotesques" held at the annual meetings of the Renaissance Society of America (New Orleans, 22–24 March 2018), is to offer a new reading of the phenomenon of Renaissance grotesques according to the new artistic guidelines that developed as a consequence of philosophical and religious debates in the Renaissance and Reformation. In fact, in consideration of the pivotal contributions made on this matter, and also of new unpublished sources recently come to light, it is possible to see how the ramifications of grotesque art between the fifteenth and seventeenth century represent a real cultural dynamic, involving multiple branches of knowledge, and not simply the passive application of a decorative feature to artworks.

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[67] Clark, *The Iconologia*, 4–5.

[68] Scholl, *Von den "Grottesken"*, 95–96. On the symbolic use of grotesques see also Conticelli and De Luca, *Le grottesche degli Uffizi*.

For this reason, this collection of articles, which includes almost all the most relevant scholars who have written on the matter in the last twenty years, attempts to reopen the question of Renaissance grotesques according to "theoretical perspectives" and "practical applications," and aims to show the interactions of this ornamental form with the ideological anxieties of the time. The final objective is to better understand which forces drove the development of this art.

The first part of the book, *Theoretical Perspectives*, includes contributions on grotesques by Alessandra Zamperini on their relationship with the antique; Dorothea Scholl on their theological readings; Philippe Morel on their comic and ridiculous intents; Clare Lapraik Guest on their original sophistic nature; Frances Connelly on the evolution of their emblematic and hieroglyphic essence; Maria Fabricius Hansen on time as one of their possible manifestations; and Simon Godart on their ideal poetic aspects in literature.

All the above mentioned general ideas — "antiquity," "theology," "amusement," "sophistry," "emblematic," "time," "poetics" — can be found in several different manifestations in the second part of the book, entitled *Practical Applications*. This section comprises specific case studies on grotesques from Kathryn B. Moore, concerning the contamination of grotesques with Marian iconographies in Rome; Liana De Girolami Cheney, regarding the apparatus of Giorgio Vasari and Cristofano Gherardi in Bologna and Arezzo; Barnaby Nygren and Patrizia Granziera, developing two different aspects of the diffusion of grotesques in the New World; Luke Morgan, investigating their presence in Italian gardens; Maria-Anna Aristova, focusing on their permanence in botanical imageries of seventeenth century Naples; and Veronica M. White, treating their potential persistence in the Carracci's grotesque heads and caricatures.

In the first section of the book, the theoretical investigation is the basis for each additional practical digression, while in the second part potential theoretical conclusions are developed mostly on specific case studies. The structure of the volume wants to establish a sort of *Ringkomposition*, which finds its exchange of information in internal circular structures. In this light, several *fils rouges* can be identified within the volume, overlapping and reacting with other thematic cores. The idea of antique as explained by Zamperini related to grotesques, for example, irradiates across all contributions, as if it were an original starting point for acknowledging the genre after the first years of development. Her reading links to Hansen's investigation of how the

antique (as a form of perception of time) featured in grotesques. Scholl's article recalls the polysemic nature of grotesques, recognizing them as a potential medium for religious heterodoxy. This finds a prefiguration in Moore's reading of Marian iconographies in interplay with grotesques ornamentations, as well as Nygren's subsequent description of the function of grotesques in specific liminal contexts — whose the counterpart emerges in Granziera's work. Unfolding the endemic tension towards laughter present in grotesques, Morel opens the way to the understanding of one of their final metamorphoses as described by White. The use of rhetoric as a matter of disposition and semantics of elements in grotesque decorations emerges in Lapraik Guest's article and finds its echo in Cheney's work, where the issue of meaning is brought about, and in Morgan's understanding of gardens. Moreover, this is connected to Aristova's ideal garden in rear-guard grotesques and forms a further core if combined with Granziera's plants. A projection of Renaissance grotesques out of the Renaissance features in the persistence of arabesque patterns, as pointed out by Connelly, and relates with the poetic approach towards grotesques as set by Godart. This offers a literary counterpart to the artistic mechanisms outlined in the other articles; in fact, through the poetic alignment, universal trends driving the compositional spark emerge more evidently.

The collection ends with an appendix of English translations of newly published sources. It contains a group of letters by several famous scholars sent to Gabriele Paleotti between 1580 and 1581, who used them to arrange the chapters on grotesques in his *Discourse*. They illustrate the views on this controversial pictorial style held by Ulisse Aldrovandi (translated by Thomas DePasquale), Pirro Ligorio (translated by John Garton), Giambattista Bombelli, Egnazio Danti and Federico Pendasio (translated by Sylvia Gaspari). The purpose of this section is to offer to the academic community a guide through very difficult artistic literature and thus facilitate interaction with the original primary source.

All three sections should be read according to three fundamental dates for a clearer understanding of the overall dynamic: first, the rise of the debate on images (1522); second, the decrees on images by the Council of Trent (1563); third, the publication of Gabriele Paleotti's *Discourse* (1582). In this light, the gradual progress of grotesques, their evolution and censorship, and their defence and transformation within Renaissance art and thought acquires new potential perspectives through which to read this global artistic phenomenon that contributed to paving the way for a new phase of modernity.

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