

DEPTH OF FIELD

DONAL COOPER AND
MARIKA LEINO (EDS)

DEPTH OF FIELD

RELIEF SCULPTURE IN
RENAISSANCE ITALY



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ALISON WRIGHT

8. 'Sculptural Values': Reading Fictive Relief in Late Fifteenth- and Early Sixteenth- Century Italy

Depth of Field at the Henry Moore Institute offered the visitor a sense of the ubiquity of sculpted relief in the experience of urban Italians in the Quattrocento. While its centrepiece, Donatello's exquisitely sophisticated *Ascension with Christ Giving the Keys to St Peter* (plate 1), has the qualities of an intimate one-off for private consumption, the public character of many of the objects such as carvings from shrines or altars reminded us that encounters with relief sculpture were not the preserve of an elite but an aspect of the everyday. Relief was visible, often touchable, in the street, the piazza, on portals and inserted into façades as well as in memorial, liturgical, even legal objects, such as seals.

Such works were also eloquent beyond the limits of their imagery. For those with a scholastic education, the raised image left in a wax seal was itself a metaphor for how the mind, following Aristotle, received 'sense impressions' and stored them in memory, taking the image (phantasm or *eikón*) from a form without partaking of the form (the matrix) itself.¹ On a more quotidian level, verbal tropes, especially humanist ones, suggest the ready use of relief as metaphor: 'your reputation', Gentile de' Becchi famously wrote to his young pupil

1 See M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge 1990, pp.16–17, 21–4, 55–6 (for Aquinas). For an account which draws the connection between sense impressions and sculpture rather tightly see M. Camille, 'Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing', in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*, ed. R.S. Nelson, Cambridge 2000, pp.197–223 (at pp.209–11).

Lorenzo de' Medici, 'once painted is now sculpted and stands out'.² In contrast to the passivity implied by the wax impression, relief shares here the double sense that we have for the word 'prominence' in English. In scholastic *and* humanist traditions—which equally valued exemplarity and cultivated memory in instruction, learning and self-betterment—relief was frequently summoned up to signify vividness, permanence, even immutable truth. Thus when, in Canto X of the *Purgatorio*, the poetic Dante of the *Divine Comedy* observes the exemplars of humility—the *Annunciation of Christ to the Virgin*, the *Justice of Trajan* and *King David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant*—they are offered to him in the form of reliefs carved by the hand of God: '[...] I perceived that the encircling bank [...] was of pure white marble, and was adorned with such carvings that not only Polycleus but Nature herself would there be put to shame'. The 'speaking image' of the *Annunciation* relief seemed to embody with complete truth the grace of the angelic message and the Virgin's responding submission:

[the Angel Gabriel] so vividly graven in gentle mien that it seemed not a silent image: one would have sworn that he was saying 'Ave' for there she was imaged who turned the key to open the supreme love, and these words were imprinted in her attitude 'Ecce ancilla Dei' as expressly as a figure is stamped in wax.³

How actual, material reliefs functioned semiotically in the visual field of early modern Italians, and how they may have addressed different audiences is a question too large for the present essay. It is a

- 2 A. Rochon, *La jeunesse de Laurent de Médicis (1449–1478)*, Paris 1963, p.128, no.346 (14 February 1471): '[...] è di scultura et rilievo la reputazione che insin qui pareva dipinta'; translation adapted from R. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, Ithaca and London 1980, pp.438–9.
- 3 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*, ed. and trans. with a commentary by C.S. Singleton, 2 vols, Princeton 1973, I (text), pp.100–4: 'quando'io conobbi quella ripa intorno / che, dritta, di salita aveva manco, / esser di marmo candido e addorno / d'intagli sì, che non pur Policleto, / ma la natura li avrebbe scorno. / L'angel che venne in terra col decreto [...] dinanzi a noi pareva sì verace / quivi intagliato in un atto soave, / che non sembiava imagine che tace. / Giurato si saria ch'el dicesse "Ave!"; / perché iv'era imaginata quella / ch'ad aprir l'alto amor volse la chiave; / e avea in atto impresa esta favella / "Ecce ancilla Dei", propriamente / come figura in cera si suggella'.

question which also runs up against problems of contemporary evidence, both the general lack and the difficulty of interpretation where it does exist. A facial likeness might be described as an *imprompta* (literally 'impress') whether or not it was three-dimensional; thus, of a bust, the Medici palace inventory of 1492 records: 'A marble head with the *imprompta* of Piero di Cosimo', but equally 'a mosaic *tondo*, with the *imprompta* of Giuliano di Lorenzo'.⁴ It is interesting that the more detailed of palace inventories might specify the relative depth of relief in a given work—whether *mezzo rilievo* or indeed *di tutto rilievo*—a routine description for sculpture in the round that indicates how even objects modelled up on all sides were measured in terms of their degree of projection. Nonetheless, the description of an inventory compiler had no connoisseurial intention and, in the case of the Medici inventory quoted above, might not specify relief consistently nor discriminate in the ways one might expect. What is very likely to be the extremely low relief of the aforementioned *Ascension with Christ Giving the Keys to St Peter* (plate 1) is described as 'a marble panel by the hand of Donatello with an Ascension in half relief' ('in mezzo rilievo').⁵ This designation makes better sense when we find that glyptic reliefs, which we think of as 'low' (and which Vasari actually categorised as 'bassi e stacciato' or 'low and flattened' relief together with similar carving by Donatello) are described in the same inventory as 'di mezzo rilievo' (half relief).⁶

4 See M. Spallanzani and G. Gaeta Bertelà, *Libro d'inventario dei beni di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, Florence 1992, p.27: 'Una testa di marmo [...] della 'mprompta di Piero di Cosimo [...] Uno tondo di mosaico, entrove la 'mprompta di Giuliano di Lorenzo', both listed in the 'camera della sala grande'.

5 Ibid. (in the same room): 'Uno quadro di marmo [...] entrove di mezzo rilievo una Accensione di mano di Donato'.

6 Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, eds R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi, 10 vols, Florence 1966–1997, I (testo), 1966, p.95 (from Vasari's introductory chapter 'On Sculpture'): 'La terza specie [of reliefs] si chiamano bassi e stacciati rilievi [...] et in questo genere ancora Donato lavorò meglio d'ogni artefice' ('The third species [of relief] called low or flattened relief [...] Donatello worked better here than did any other'; translation from Giorgio Vasari, *On Technique*, trans. L.S. Macle hose, New York 1960, p.156). See also *Le vite*, III (testo), p.218 (from the life of Donatello): 'una Nostra Donna col Figliuolo in braccio dentro nel marmo di



FIG. 59: Desiderio da Settignano, marble relief,
detail of the tomb of Carlo Marsuppini (d. 1453),
Santa Croce, Florence.

The rather deeper cut intaglio gem with the image of *Apollo and Marsyas* is consequently referred to as ‘a large cornelian with three figures carved into it in greater than half relief (‘et più che mezzo rilievo’).⁷

schacciato rilievo’ (‘a Madonna with the Child in her arms, sunk in the marble in flat-relief’; translation from G. Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. G. du C. de Vere with introduction and notes by D. Ekserdjian, 2 vols, London 1996, I, p.372).

7 Spallanzani and Gaeta Bertelà (as in fn.4), p.39 (in Piero de’ Medici’s *scrittoio*): ‘Una chorgnuola grande con tre figure intagl[i]ate di chavo et più che mezzo rilievo [...]’

Another area in which depth of relief was quite obviously discriminated, not only in Italy but also across Europe, was in the evaluation of those 'non-art' objects in which depth was an indicator of worth. A luxury cloth with a deep silk-velvet pile of the kind produced in centres such as Florence and Venice was known to be extremely costly to weave and cut and therefore to buy, and both financial and social value could communicate itself immediately to those looking at or feeling such cloth. Such luxurious depth could, in the most prestigious 'cloths of gold', be extended to two, or even three, different heights of pile. Whereas in Northern Europe the need to represent convincingly this eloquent sumptuary encouraged extraordinarily virtuoso effects of sheen, depth of colour and texture in oil paint, in Italy it produced some of the most spectacular examples of low relief carving of the fifteenth century. The tomb of the Florentine chancellor Carlo Marsuppini (d. 1453) by Desiderio da Settignano in Santa Croce is a pre-eminent example in its representation of the material-defying flow of the pall cloth (fig. 59). Meticulously worked with a pomegranate pattern to the depth of a few millimetres, the carving was originally enhanced with blue and gold to represent convincingly the decorativeness, quality and weight of this prime signifier of honour used in the obsequies of the worthy.

So significant and legible were certain kinds of relief in the evaluation of Italian audiences that some painters incorporated actual relief into their works. Perhaps the most accomplished representative of a practice especially widespread in northern Italy in the Quattrocento was Carlo Crivelli who both applied raised gesso patterns on the mantles of the Virgin and saints in his altarpieces and attached projecting 'jewels' and other sacred accessories.⁸ With a mind to a more exclusive audience, and with exceptional inventiveness, Sandro Botticelli inserted a gilded stucco relief medallion into the panel for his portrait of a man with a medal of Cosimo de' Medici.⁹ This rhetorically

8 For documentation of the appeal of this kind of ornament for patrons and its persistence in Crivelli's work into the 1480s see R. Lightbown, *Carlo Crivelli*, New Haven and London 2004, p.4.

9 Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, inv. 1488; R. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli*, 2 vols, London 1978, II, pp.33–5 (cat. no.B22). For further discussion of this portrait see

ambitious ‘double portrait’ uses the projected profile of Florence’s ‘Pater Patriae’ in order not just to thematise the relative merits of painting and sculpture in representing their subjects but to engage with such ideologically significant questions as social prominence, posthumous reputation, and the wisdom and exemplarity of old age as embodied in the *all’antica* medallion form. Such a visual claim may be compared with Gentile Becchi’s aforementioned verbal rhetoric of the 1470s, to the effect that the young Lorenzo de’ Medici was, like his revered grandfather, also now ‘outstanding’ in the political arena.

I shall return to the significance of relief in the context of both Medici power and taste (intimately related) at the end of this discussion. But the body of this essay is concerned with *fictive* relief, mostly visual but occasionally verbal, since this offers an insight into the reception of relief sculpture of a kind not easily afforded by documentary sources. Fictive relief is also of special interest as a type of artistic conceit beloved of the most sophisticated artists of the later fifteenth century: like Dante’s word picture in Canto X of *Purgatorio*, it constitutes an artful doubling, a representation of a representation. The decision to focus primarily on the depiction of figurative reliefs *all’antica* responds to the fact that this seemed to offer a specific aesthetic which became stylistically transformative in its own right. I also address the function and signification of relief in just two geographical and social milieu and in the work of a restricted number of artists. My aim is to highlight what seem to be deliberate choices made by painters in relation to particular social and patronal circumstances, and with consequent social implications: by no means all painters refer to reliefs or use a relief mode, and those who do, do so very knowingly, and often in such a way as to stake a claim for their intellectual and social standing and representational ambitions.¹⁰

A. Randolph, *Engaging Symbols: Gender, Politics, and Public Art in Fifteenth-century Florence*, New Haven and London 2002, pp.98–101.

- 10 Part of the kudos associated with fictive relief painting presumably related to a painterly claim for the superior naturalism and illusionistic power of this art over that of sculpture, as discussed by F. Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, New Haven and London 2000, pp.141–61 and esp. 153–7.



FIG. 60: Andrea Mantegna, *Arrival of the Cult of Cybele in Rome*, c.1505–1506; glue size on linen, National Gallery, London (inv. NG 902).

In painting, fictive relief evidently plays widely varying roles within the economy of the picture field. Typically it appears discretely in the representation of carved architectural and sculptural elements, such as marble frames, thrones, pedestals or arches. This was an area in which Northern European oil painting offered some of the iconographically richest, and most richly illusionistic models. But it could also transform the treatment of the figural composition as a whole as it does in the graphic inventions of Andrea Mantegna (such as the *Battle of the Sea Gods* engraving or *Calumny of Apelles* drawing). Exceptionally there are also paintings, like Mantegna's *Arrival of the Cult of Cybele at Rome* in the National Gallery in London (fig. 60) and other late paintings on exemplary themes for the palace interior painted entirely as *trompe l'oeil* reliefs.

Venice and the Veneto and Tuscany are both regions where reliefs, including casts, and drawings after them, were a familiar part of the equipment of the *bottega*, but could also be made to serve more socially ambitious ends. Famously Francesco Squarcione (erstwhile tailor and embroiderer, who is first recorded signing up a pupil as a painter in Padua in 1431) effectively advertised his use of sculpted reliefs as key to

However, in the case of artists such as Mantegna and Antonio del Pollaiuolo (also a sculptor) it must certainly have extended beyond this to encompass alignment both with the tastes and learning of patrons and with the skills of antique artists.

his means of instruction for painting ‘in the modern style’.¹¹ Acquiring reliefs after contemporary works by Donatello and very likely also of ancient sculpture, these casts were offered as *exempla* crucial to the process of learning to draw and design. Together with Squarcione’s supposed knowledge of the principles of perspective, his possession of models of ancient sculpture and reliefs, the latter specified explicitly in both his large and small workshops, served to elevate the character of his *bottega*; it underpinned his workshop’s claim to constitute a *studium*—something much more ambitious and appealing within the intellectual climate of Padua than a mere business.¹²

Another factor encouraging reliefs as models in painting training within the Veneto may well have been the relief qualities of Giotto’s frescoes in the Arena Chapel. Especially influential could have been his rendering of pure tonal depiction in the lowest zone representing the *Virtues* and *Vices*. Here the grisailles, which are formulated to contrast with the rich, full-colour rendering of the sacred histories, embody a more explicit and timeless moral message and at the same time, by their formulation as complex allegories, become associated with the display of learning. Though the virtues and vices are not represented as fictive reliefs *per se*, their tonal character lends them the status of models. In the Paduan milieu, we gain a sense of the relief mode in painting as a didactic one, both for would-be painters and devout viewers.

11 L. Rigoni, *L’arte rinascimentale in Padova: studi e documenti*, Padua 1970, p.39, doc. V: the term is ‘pignere in recente’, discussed in R. Lightbown, *Mantegna*, London 1986, p.21.

12 It has been stated that Squarcione’s second house was known as ‘of the reliefs’, see Lightbown, *Mantegna* (as in fn.11) p.21, but the wording of the document is ambiguous and might refer rather to the name of the small workshop or simply to the ‘said house’, see V. Lazzarini and A. Moschetti, ‘Documenti relativi alla pittura padovana del secolo XV’, *Nuovo archivio veneto*, new series, XV, 1908, pp.111–12. See also doc.XXXVIII at p.277: ‘[...] unum studium magnum in domo cum relevis desegnīs et alijs rebus intus, unum studium parvum in domo dita a relevis cum omnibus rebus spectantibus ad artem pictorie et picturis existentibus in eis hic non decriptis’. For further discussion of Squarcione’s workshop see Eckart Marchand’s and Beverly Brown’s essays in this volume, pp.209–12 and 284–5 respectively.

The intermarriage of painting practice and the practical and imaginative inspiration of sculpture gains ground well into the later fifteenth century. It is evoked for example by the will of Anna Bellini (25 November 1471), widow of the painter Jacopo Bellini, which included the bequest to their son Gentile of 'all works in plaster, marble and relief, as well as paintings and drawn pictures [...]'.¹³ While little evidence survives in his painted oeuvre, the drawing books of Jacopo Bellini provide one of the richest insights into the study and imaginative assimilation of reliefs. The famous pages with drawings after ancient coins and tomb inscriptions are indicative of the interests he shared with Venetian patron-humanists, often based in the *terraferma*, people like Gregorio Correr (patron of Mantegna's San Zenò altarpiece), Lodovico Trevisan (cardinal and collector of art and antiquities resident in Padua) or the Venetian noble Jacopo Marcello.¹⁴ The role of learned exchange in producing links between those of unequal status is neatly represented in the opening full-page miniatures to Strabo's *Geography* in which Marcello has himself depicted presenting the book, translated by the distinguished humanist Guarino da Verona, to King René of Anjou (fig. 61).¹⁵ This miniature of 1458–1459, considered by some to be the work of Jacopo himself, provides a very carefully nuanced image in terms of social hierarchy, a hierarchy inventively reinforced by the fictive gold relief on René's throne. This allegory of virtuous rule shows

13 H. Tietze and E. Tietze-Conrat, *The Drawings of the Venetian Painters in the 15th and 16th Centuries*, New York 1944, p.102; C. Eisler, *The Genius of Jacopo Bellini: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, New York 1988, p.532. For Anna Bellini's will see also Beverly Brown's essay in this volume, pp.285–86.

14 See the Louvre Book, fols 48 and 49, for drawings after ancient coins and inscriptions, discussed by Eisler (as in fn.13), p.197, and reproduced as plates 84 and 85; also P.F. Brown, *Venice and Antiquity: The Venetian Sense of the Past*, New Haven and London 1996, pp.121–2.

15 Bibliothèque Municipale, Albi, MS 77; for this manuscript see *The Painted Page: Italian Renaissance Book Illuminations 1450–1550* (exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy, London, 27 October 1994–22 January 1995; Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, 15 February 1995–7 May 1995), ed. J.J.G. Alexander, London and Munich 1994, pp.87–90, cat. no.29 (the miniature on fol. 4r. of *Marcello presenting the Strabo to King René* is illustrated in colour on p.88); Eisler (as in fn.13), pp.534–5.



FIG. 61: Attributed to circle of Jacopo Bellini, full page illumination to Strabo's *Geography*, showing Jacopo Marcello presenting Guarino da Verona's Strabo to Rene of Anjou, 1458–1459; Bibliothèque Municipale, Albi (MS 77, fol. 4r.).

a rabbit crouching safely at the feet of a lion with the inscription: CLEMENTIAE AUGUSTAE. Here, as so often when fictive reliefs are used to decorate thrones, the image extends the iconography of authority, and forges temporal and symbolic links beyond the picture field.



FIG. 62: Jacopo Bellini, *Effigy of a Warrior on a Sarcophagus*, before 1470, pen and ink on parchment, from the Louvre Drawing Book, fol. 2r.; Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Many of Jacopo Bellini's relief-style images in his drawing books are copies or variants of antique sculptures showing scenes of sacrifice, bacchic revels, or mythologies and are represented with or without a ground, or to suggest a very shallow foil to a frieze of figures. The majority appear in *all'antica* monument designs where they adorn plinths and although their format, thematically as well as visually, is evidently related to sarcophagi and triumphal arches, nothing like them exists from antiquity.¹⁶ Both the scale of the plinths, for example, and the elaboration of the subject give them a distinct, non-archaeological life of their own. In such drawings made without commission we find evidence for how the painter read ancient relief not just as offering compositional and ornamental solutions but also as a challenge to tackle particularly testing and novel subjects. Many of the most inventive represent memorial subjects: the Louvre book shows a naked effigy of a warrior upon a copied sarcophagus on which scenes alluding to his heroic deeds are depicted (fig. 62), while, more fantastic, paganising and more morally ambivalent is the equestrian monument of the British Museum book (fig. 63). Here a satyr carries off the corpse of a man on the back of a winged unicorn, the whole staged on a plinth of battling figures with, at centre, a human fighting a centaur. In humanist eyes such work apparently qualified Jacopo Bellini to be praised as like Phidias, the sculptor and architect (not Apelles). Ulisse degli Aleotti

16 For antiquarian interests and approaches as represented in Bellini's Paris and London drawing books see Brown (as in fn.14), pp.117–41.



FIG. 63: Jacopo Bellini, *Satyr on a Winged Horse Carrying a Corpse*, before 1470, metalpoint on paper, from the British Museum Drawing Book, fol. 4r.; British Museum, London.

called him a ‘*novelo fidia al nostro ziecho mondo*’ (‘a new Phidias to our blind age’) suggesting that, as the painter himself might have hoped, his inventions offered an example equivalent to the light of antiquity itself.¹⁷

17 Aleotti’s poem is in Modena, Biblioteca Estense, Modena, MS IX, A, fol.27r, published by C. Ricci, *Jacopo Bellini e i suoi libri di disegni*, 2 vols, Florence 1908, I, *Il libro del Louvre*, p.52, doc. XI, and Eisler (as in fn.13), p.531.

An understanding of the imaginative resonance attached to the representation of antique relief extended to those in Jacopo's family and milieu who were far from antiquarian in their interests, especially when compared to Jacopo's son-in-law Mantegna, whose work was regularly compared to that of sculptors.¹⁸ Jacopo's own son, Giovanni, seems to allude to the aesthetic of relief in his treatment of the *Pietà* theme, where, to great devotional effect, the body of Christ and lamenting intercessors are pressed into the foreground. But he too on occasion might allude directly to antique reliefs, as for example in the small, luminous pagan allegory (Stanley Moss Collection, New York) showing the figure of a supplicant before a ruler.¹⁹ Here the shell gold brushwork contrasts with a black ground to give the effect of an image carved and gilded on a valuable hardstone, perhaps black *paragone*. Like Jacopo, Giovanni might also integrate fictive relief into his devotional works. In the Pesaro altarpiece of the 1470s the distinctive *all'antica* stone frame behind the holy group, which is reminiscent of framing 'reliefs' in earlier Veneto manuscript illumination, honours the couple as in heaven, isolates the gesture of the Coronation and at the same time forms a vignette of the contemporary landscape beyond it.²⁰ Most fascinating, however, is the prominent use of what seems to be a cameo aesthetic in the partially gilded parapet reliefs behind the figure of Christ in the National Gallery's *Blood of the Redeemer* panel (fig. 64) which probably formed

18 Jean Fouquet, for example, who it is thought knew Jacopo Bellini's drawings, represents the *Marriage of the Virgin* before a temple described as a triumphal arch with solomonic columns in his exquisite *Hours of Etienne Chevalier*, 1452–1456, in Chantilly, see Eisler (as in fn.13), p.43, fig. 26.

19 R. Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, New Haven and London 1989, pp.224–5; Brown (as in fn.14), p.195.

20 The frieze shows a very low relief of naked figures and soldiers (on foot and horseback, one clearly leading a prisoner) as well as trophies in the impostes above the capitals. The central feature of a pine tree has led to its interpretation as an episode related in Herodotus, see *La pala ricostituita: l'Incoronazione della Vergine e la cimasa vaticana di Giovanni Bellini; indagini e restauri* (exhibition catalogue, Musei Civici, Pesaro, August–November 1988), ed. M.R. Valazzi, Venice 1988, pp.17–18. However, the argument is not well matched by the visual evidence, nor by the likelihood that the pine could be read as a symbol for the Sforza, rulers of Pesaro.



FIG. 64: Giovanni Bellini, *Blood of the Redeemer*, tempera on panel, c. 1460–1465; National Gallery, London (inv. NG 1233).

the door to a sacrament tabernacle. The unidentified pagan scenes, like the nearby ancient ruins, broadly refer to the ancient world overthrown by Christ's salvific intervention. But unlike those ruins the relief scenes are intact, bearing memorial inscriptions and—with the inclusion to left and right of a burning altar and a candelabrum—relating the act of the saviour to an earlier order of death and sacrificial ritual.

In the left-hand relief, Christ obliterates the declamatory gesture of the priestly figure with his own pierced hand and Bellini also contrasts the relief mode of the parapet with his treatment of the exposed body of Christ, the latter becoming more emphatically, corporally present within

the (equally fictive) realm of the picture field. Such a contrast plays with the expectations of the relief quality of Christ's body on metal tabernacle doors; in some ways it also anticipates Titian's painterly *paragoni* (notably the incorporation of a sculpted profile *all'antica* in the portrait known as *La Schiavona*, also in the National Gallery).²¹ Certainly it runs against the grain of contemporary readings of the superior naturalism of depiction in glyptic reliefs. An obvious contrast may be drawn with Bellini's Florentine contemporary Antonio del Pollaiuolo whose *Prisoner Led before a Ruler* design uses the negative silhouette associated with cameos to quite different effect. Here the intention seems to be to demonstrate how the nude male figure may be compellingly depicted in a wide range of poses which allude to, emulate and at some level seek to rival that of the ancient cameo.²²

This taste for the representational virtues of ancient glyptic reliefs provided common ground with the educated elite of Italy. Pollaiuolo shared his predilection with, and probably gained his knowledge from the collections of, his Medici patrons, and this novel aesthetic effect was arguably honed to appeal to them and their circle. Certainly the appeal of images of the nude is a major factor in accounting for the introduction of fictive reliefs into the repertoire of Italian painters. In Angelo Decembrio's *De politia litteraria* (composed in the 1440s and 1450s), Leonello d'Este, Marquis of Ferrara, is made to state that 'it would be little exaggeration to say that everything in poetry and painting is naked, and this is because it is their duty to conform to the skill of Nature'.²³ The fictional Leonello argues that obscuring draperies are omitted in figures on gems and that such draperies also hindered the

21 National Gallery, London, inv. NG5385, recently discussed by Nicholas Penny in *Titian* (exhibition catalogue, National Gallery, London, 19 February–18 May 2003), ed. D. Jaffé, London 2003, pp.80–1, cat. no.4, and referred to in the context of the *paragone* by F. Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, New Haven and London 2000, pp.159–61.

22 This argument is pursued in A. Wright, 'Dimensional Tension in the Work of Antonio Pollaiuolo', in *The Sculpted Object 1400–1700*, eds S. Currie and P. Motture, Aldershot 1998, pp.65–79 (at pp.75–6).

23 M. Baxandall, 'A Dialogue on Art from the Court of Leonello d'Este: Angelo Decembrio's *De politia litteraria*, Pars LXVIII', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXVI, 1963, pp.304–26 (at pp.320–1: '[...] ut non ab re



FIG. 65: Cosmè Tura, *Annunciation* (detail), tempera on canvas, Duomo, Ferrara, 1469.

achievement of artistic immortality since fashions in dress changed over time.²⁴ Importantly for my purposes the episode—in which Decembrio's Leonello also criticises decorative outline and rich drapery—is said to follow the arrival of certain 'engraved stones and rings' which had been brought from Venice 'as well as splendid gems and great pearls'.²⁵

dixerimus maximum omnium apud pictores et poetas in nuditate rerum. hoc est naturali artificio constare ministerium').

24 Ibid., p.308, and pp.314 and 325: 'At quod naturae praecipuum est artificium. nulla temporum novitate mutatur' ('The artifice of Nature is supreme, no period fashions change it').

25 Ibid., pp.310–11: '[...] excisos Lapillos annulosque [...] gemmasque conspicuas et uniones ad Leonellum ex Venetiis attulerant sibi ipsi anulum'.



FIG. 66: Gaspare da Padova, illuminated title page to Suetonius's *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, c.1485–1488; Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (MS Latin 5814, fol. 1r.).

What is implied here is the way in which representations in glyptic form provided a kind of education in taste within humanist circles. Thus it can surely be assumed that, in those circles, there was a new prestige attached to reproductions, or variants, of such reliefs. This would certainly seem to have been appreciated by Cosmè Tura working in the same Ferrarese milieu that produced Decembrio's *De politica*. Tura's representation of semi-naked relief figures in precious materials and *all'antica* style in his *Annunciation* for the organ shutters of Ferrara cathedral, provided a virtuosic backdrop to the sacred story (fig. 65). In their apparent allusion to the planetary gods, the figures would appeal to the knowledge and taste of the d'Este court, but by absorbing the Virgin into a cosmic and luxurious idea of the heavenly the painting may well have mystified unlettered devotees.



FIG. 67: Francesco Rosselli, illuminated title page to Aristotle's *Physics etc.* translated by Agiropoulos, c. 1473–1478; Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence (MS Plutarch. 71.7, fol. 2r.).

A more obvious place to look for the aesthetic of relief, and especially of small-scale collectibles, as addressed to privileged audiences is within the princely or humanistic study where cameos and intaglios were kept together with coins, medals and precious, expensively mounted gems. And within those studies or their related libraries, the very same objects increasingly reappeared in books both in north-eastern Italy and Florence. Roman histories are just the kind of books where one might expect illuminated decoration in an *all'antica* mode, including the coins from which Renaissance collectors drew their

knowledge of the features of famous Romans. The manuscript of Suetonius's *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* produced by Bartolomeo di Sanvito and the illuminator Guaspere da Padova c.1485–1488 (fig. 66) exemplifies this kind of decoration. It includes gilded renderings not only of numismatic portraits, but their allegorical and historical reverses and elaborate frames formed of trophies and reliefs against a 'shredded' ground—a stippled effect which itself heightens the appearance of the illuminated page as a field of relief.²⁶ In the famous manuscript of collected works by Aristotle translated by Agiropoulos with illuminations attributed to Francesco Rosselli, an illusionistic gold medal provides the profile of Piero di Cosimo de' Medici in the *bas-de-page*, his father Cosimo is portrayed in the right border and alongside them some five tiny cameo profiles of emperors are described, like the adjacent jewels, set in gold (fig. 67).²⁷ The reliefs are arranged as though part of a 'collection' and, when seen alongside illusionistic windows (framing Greek philosophers) they forge links across time aligning the wisdom of the Greeks, the power of the Roman empire, and the contemporary 'wise rulers' of Florence. Here the Medici are represented with, and one could even say 'by', their collections. Thus, despite the fact that miniaturists may not have had direct familiarity with the original sources, such fictive representations give an impression of intimacy with the authentic relics of antiquity and the values which those originals embodied. Toby Yuen's detailed examination of a range of illuminated manuscripts for the evidence they supply of the glyptic works known to and mined by Renaissance artists does not concern itself with those broader values per se.²⁸ It does, though, make the important observation that specific gems frequently appear in books whose owner did not own the gem. This suggests that the fictive depiction could provide, if not a 'virtual' extension of the book owner's own glyptic or coin collection,

26 Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS Latin 5814; for this manuscript see Alexander (as in fn.15), pp.157–8, cat. no.74, with colour illustrations of fols 1r. and 75v.

27 Biblioteca Laurenziana, Florence, MS Plutarch 71.7, fol.2r.; for this manuscript see Alexander (as in fn.15), p.98, cat. no.35.

28 T. Yuen, 'Glyptic Sources for Renaissance Art', in *Engraved Gems: Survival and Revivals*, ed. C.M. Brown, *Studies in the History of Art*, LIV, Washington 1997, pp.137–57.

then at least another forum for the exchange of antiquarian knowledge, the kind of exchange that accompanied the original gems and coins. Inventive illuminators could also produce new cameos for the enjoyment and visual possession of book owners.²⁹

The depiction of the glyptic, which becomes ever more dense and substantial in later Quattrocento manuscript borders also found its way into more monumental schemes: Luca Signorelli's paintings in the dado zone at the Cappella Nuova in Orvieto, painted shortly after 1500, function like those of Giotto at the Arena chapel, drawing a moral message related to the scenes depicted in a temporally 'present' mode directly above them. Mainly illustrating scenes from the writings of the authors they frame (such as Lucian and Dante), these images are mediated by their purely tonal and mainly nude protagonists to present a message both antique and 'timeless'. As in Tura's *Annunciation*, small-scale reliefs are apparently able to offer learned and poetic insight, having a slightly different power and meaning as representations than more obviously historical ones. The best contemporary evidence for this power of fictive relief to communicate a mystic message from a distant 'golden' past appears in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* of the humanist-trained Dominican, Francesco Colonna, which was published in Venice in 1499.³⁰ Among the exhaustively meticulous descriptions of the relics and ruins Poliphilus encounters in the first stages of his dream journey are many that discuss reliefs adorning fantastic, deserted buildings. To take the magnificent portal alone, three major relief fields are singled out for the beauty and rarity of their materials and imagery and described in terms which indicate the appreciation associated with the collector's study. The carved socles supporting porphyry columns are compared to altars and are described as being carved in translucent alabaster relief against a coral-coloured ground, a colour lending a flesh-like tint to naked figures evoked in detail. A high relief in the soffit of the portal's arch is similarly formulated in a way which is both admiring

29 See, for example, the Florentine-illuminated Livy (*Roman History*, 4th Decade); General de la Universidad, Valencia, MS 386, fol.7r., illustrated in Alexander (as in fn.15), pp.118–19, no.49.

30 Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a Dream*, ed. and trans. by J. Godwin, London 1999, repr. 2003, esp. pp.47–9, 50–2.

of the precious materials of coloured hardstones and explicitly erotic: an eagle of dense black sard is lasciviously carrying off a beautiful child whose plump, pale flesh is carved from a vein of onyx in the same stone. Finally, in the spandrels above the arch Colonna has Poliphilus describe 'a noble sculpture of a Victory, made in the manner commonly known as cameo. The wafting garments clung to the virginal body and uncovered the beautiful curves [...]'.³¹ Tellingly, this is the first time in the book that Colonna explicitly divulges the subject of the relief. Elsewhere the author leaves the reader to recognise the depiction of *Venus, Cupid and Mars at Vulcan's Forge* or *Jupiter's Rape of Ganymede* from his description, as if he (I use the masculine advisedly) had been invited into a *Wunderkammer* and offered an ancient gem to interpret. The reader is clearly supposed to be impressed by Poliphilus's own imaginative curiosity, powers of memory and recondite knowledge—iconographical, linguistic, material and connoisseurial—and through the vivid evocation of impossibly precious, rare and finely-wrought objects, wonder and desire are aroused, turning him into a vicarious consumer of the luxuries of court culture. As a literary device the meticulous descriptions of the reliefs clearly assert the poetic, imaginative capacity of Colonna in much the same way that drawn or painted reliefs of impossible richness, large scale or iconographical elaboration could assert the *inventio* and *fantasia* of artists like Jacopo Bellini or Andrea Mantegna (fig. 60).

By the later fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, fictive relief in painting was well established as a mode which could be both ornamental and authoritative, imaginative and historicising. In Northern Italian altarpieces the ever more vertiginous thrones of the Virgin accommodated them in several ways: Ercole de' Roberti's *Pala Portuense* (1480–1481) in the Brera, for example, exploits the relief fields on the elevated octagonal pedestal base, as well as on the arc of panels which form the back rest of the Virgin's throne, while another high altarpiece begun by Gianfrancesco Maineri and later completed by Lorenzo Costa (c.1499, from the Oratory of the Conception in Ferrara, now National Gallery, London) gives even greater prominence

31 Translation from Colonna (as in fn.30), p.51.

to narrative scenes in relief.³² Like Andrea Mantegna's *Madonna della Vittoria*, a relief of the *Fall* appears on the pedestal immediately below the feet of the enthroned Second Eve, in addition the *Annunciation* takes place across the spandrels of the carved arch behind her and, most unusually, scenes from the early life of Christ and the Virgin, which would conventionally have appeared in a predella, are incorporated into the Virgin's fictive marble plinth. Thus the events in Mary's life which make her worthy of enthronement in heaven become, as it were, the base or vehicle of her elevation.

In concluding I want though to turn back to two different strands in the depiction of relief *all'antica*. Both are artistically highly significant and seem especially revealing of the reception of relief by the early years of the 1500s. Evidently Mantegna's later works in a relief mode such as the *Prophet and Sibyl* (c.1495) in Cincinnati, the *Samson and Delilah* (c.1499–1500) in the National Gallery, London and the still more ambitious *Arrival of the Cult of Cybele* (c.1505–1506) also in the National Gallery (fig. 60) are exceptional in that they treat the entire picture field as a *trompe l'oeil*. The *paragone* with sculpture implied by such 'grisaille' paintings—which are far from grey, being sumptuously rich and warm colouristically—has been often noted, perhaps most compellingly on the occasion of the 1992 Mantegna exhibition at the Royal Academy in London. For Keith Christiansen, writing in the catalogue to that exhibition, these works marked the intentional 'revival of Zeuxian monochrome painting' as known through the descriptions of Pliny.³³ Still more pertinently, he noted that these paintings from the 1490s coincided both with the arrival of Isabella d'Este in Mantua, known for her habits of collecting antiquities and precious work *all'antica*, and with the rise of a classicising relief style in Venice, notably in the carvings of Tullio and Antonio Lombardo. One may argue then that

32 The peculiar character of the throne of Ercole's *Virgin* is discussed in the context of the iconography of the painting as a whole by J. Manca, 'Meaning in Ercole de' Roberti's *Pala Portuense*', *Studies in Iconography*, XI, 1987, pp.15–34.

33 K. Christiansen, 'Paintings in Grisaille', in *Andrea Mantegna* (exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 17 January–5 April 1992, and Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 9 May–12 July 1992), ed. J. Martineau, London and New York 1992, pp.394–400.

Mantegna was responding to a challenge: how to produce a work which could vie in value with contemporary sculpted works in refined and expensive materials such as marble and bronze, and with ancient works both monumental and glyptic. The implications for Mantegna's artistic and intellectual status of a work as erudite and sophisticated as the *Cybele* narrative are inescapable. But one can also imagine that his Cornaro patrons, who were keen here to associate themselves with the revered deeds of Scipio, an appropriated Roman 'ancestor', would have been delighted to own an *all'antica* frieze of a scale, richness and complexity that was unthinkable amongst the fragmentary remains of real antique reliefs. This is also a canvas which suggests the capacity of painting (like Francesco Colonna's word-pictures in the *Hypnerotomachia*) to 'work' semi-precious hardstones in a way unparalleled in modern carving since the technical means and materials to produce equivalent effects on such a scale were lacking.³⁴

Sabine Blumenröder has argued convincingly that Mantegna's grisaille treatment could be read as a metaphor for History.³⁵ Certainly the mode used by Mantegna, and later Giovanni Bellini's workshop which completed the Scipio grisaille scheme for the Cornaro, could allude to how reliefs proper accessed the moral messages of the ancient past. From the painter's perspective, relief could also be taken as a paradigm of the *illusionistic* field of painting the aim of which, since Giotto, was to produce *rilievo*. In Mantegna's hands however, relief sculptures seem to represent more than the sum of their material, financial and historical value, as though, like a fetish, they embodied a strange power of their own. Such excessive investment was clearly shared with some of Mantegna's patrons, wealthy individuals like Lorenzo de' Medici who was prepared, it seems, to pay thousands of florins for a late antique *scudella* of sardonyx-agate (the *Tazza Farn-*

34 S. Butters, *The Triumph of Vulcan: Sculptors' Tools, Porphyry, and the Prince in Ducal Florence*, Florence 1996, pp.142–4.

35 S. Blumenröder, 'Andrea Mantegna's Grisaille Paintings: Colour Metamorphosis as a Metaphor for History', in *Symbols of Time in the History of Art*, eds C. Heck and K. Lippincott, Turnhout 2002, pp.41–55.

ese) of which the subject matter remained quite obscure.³⁶ Ancient reliefs, judged by the expertise of Donatello, Mantegna or Pollaiuolo, represented a shared, semi-private currency. They constituted a type of symbolic capital that bound patrons and artists, as both groups liked to believe, with the illustrious collectors of the past.

In addressing the taste for *all'antica* relief and its longer term impact it is worth remembering that the *Cybele* frieze shortly postdates Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina* cartoon (also known as the *Bathers*) prepared for a mural in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence in 1504–1505. This monumental historical narrative would become the most famous and influential example of two-dimensional design in a relief mode ever produced. It is clear from Aristotile da Sangallo's copy (fig. 68) that the larger part of the lost cartoon evoked—without explicitly imitating—a late antique sarcophagus relief. In doing so the scheme bore testimony not only to Michelangelo's later-stated belief that 'painting seems to me to be considered better the more it approaches relief (*rilievo*)', but more specifically to his youthful contact with Bertoldo di Giovanni and the sculpture garden of 'the great lord' Lorenzo de' Medici.³⁷ It is here that he had carved the *Battle of the Centaurs* in tacit competition with both the antique and Bertoldo's strongly *all'antica* bronze battle scene installed in the Medici palace.³⁸ Similarly, Michelangelo's cartoon of Florentine soldiers interrupted by a Pisan attack whilst bathing, presents

36 For the prices of ancient hardstones and relief-carved gems see L. Fusco and G. Corti, *Lorenzo de' Medici: Collector and Antiquarian*, Cambridge 2006, pp.123–9, and esp. p.128 for the changing valuation of the Tazza Farnese which peaked in the 1492 Medici inventory at 10,000 florins.

37 Michelangelo's view was articulated in his statement on the relative merits of painting and sculpture solicited by Benedetto Varchi in 1547, see L. Mendelsohn, *Paragoni: Benedetto Varchi's 'Due Lezioni' and Cinquecento Art Theory*, Ann Arbor 1982, analysed at pp.156–9; for a recent translation of a large part of the letter see R. Goffen, *Renaissance Rivals: Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian*, New Haven and London 2002, pp.79–80.

38 See Michael Hirst's catalogue entry in *Il giardino di San Marco: maestri e compagni del giovane Michelangelo* (exhibition catalogue, Florence, Casa Buonarroti, 30 June–19 October 1992), ed. P. Barocchi, Milan 1992, pp.52–61, cat. no.12; and K. Weil-Garris Brandt, 'I primordi di Michelangelo scultore', in *Giovinetta di Michelangelo* (exhibition catalogue, Florence, Palazzo Vecchio, 6 October 1999–9



FIG. 68: Aristotile da Sangallo after Michelangelo, *Battle of Cascina*, c.1542; oil on wood, Holkam Hall, Norfolk (inv. 5).

semi-naked and nude males grouped as a condensed wall of writhing bodies, not unlike those in the Pisan sarcophagus on which Bertoldo's relief was based. For an audience familiar with antique reliefs, the composition invites a creative slippage with, for example, scenes of Romans and Barbarians in combat; it is thus able to signal 'battle' without actually showing it. Such a double-take was surely intentional and one of the most impressive aspects of Michelangelo's *inventio* in the *Bathers*. The adoption of such a relief style arguably also allowed the Florentine troops to be compared with the armies of Rome.

At first sight the *Battle of Cascina* commission would seem to testify to the suitability of the *all'antica* relief mode to a large-scale work of civic representation, opening it to a larger, more public audience and imbuing it with new ideological implications. But it is questionable whether a mode hitherto encountered in the private and connoisseurial milieu of the later fifteenth-century collector/patron

was able to sustain translation into the council hall of the newly re-founded republican government of Florence. Late Quattrocento reliefs *all'antica* such as those by Bertoldo, Antonio del Pollaiuolo or Francesco di Giorgio (plate 37) had a generic quality, inviting the viewer to intellectual speculation as to their message and provoking the search for symbolic or allegorical meaning. Related to this aspect of *inventio* they also exploited the possibilities of battle *all'antica* as a vehicle for artistic *virtù*, as the designer did battle with the difficulty of representing the male nude. This was an antiquity of the palace interior or the collector's study, scaled for an intimate and possessive gaze. Unlike Uccello's panels of the *Battle of San Romano*, such battles did not refer to specific historical moments. And in developing this aesthetic within a highly public and representational context, Michelangelo also effectively suppressed the recognisable iconography of 'modern' battle. The appeal to a sculptural paradigm was in itself potentially positive—sculpture signified durability, exemplarity, and was appropriate to the honouring of the illustrious and preserving their memory in the annals of the city. But one problem it encountered was the adaptability of the late antique relief mode to a work that was required to carry the burden of a patriotic narrative. Though Vasari refers to 'figure agruppate', the groupings and spatial relations which are preserved in the Holkham copy are not always distinct enough to draw attention away from the brilliance and *difficoltà* of the poses, and thus render the sequence of events.³⁹ The paradigm of the sarcophagus relief was arguably also ill-suited to extension over a very large picture field and one which would require spatial development in depth. Later, in the anyway smaller *Battle of Ostia* mural, Raphael achieved a far more legible effect by reducing the 'relief' element to a lower, foreground frieze with a clear narrative direction.

The eye which is invited to wander through the tangled forest of muscular, straining limbs in the *Bathers* cartoon is a connoisseurial

39 Vasari, *Le vite* (as in fn.6), VI (testo), 1987, p.25: 'V'erano ancora molte figure aggruppate et in varie maniere abbozzate [...]' ('There were also many figures in groups, all sketched in various manners [...]'); translation from Vasari, *Lives* (as in fn.6), vol.II, p.657.

one, trained to appreciate complex *contrapposti*, if not regardless of the action performed, then certainly with a belief in this kind of *difficoltà* as an artistic merit appreciable in its own right. Had the design been realised and had the government which commissioned it survived in the longer term, then perhaps the translation of this discourse to the service of the Florentine republic might have stood some chance of succeeding, overlaying the relief style *all'antica* with new associations. As it was, the very fact that the project remained in the state of a monumental drawing encouraged its collapse back into the discourse of the elite minority, experienced in and knowledgeable of antique works, interested in aesthetic discourses and capable of exercising artistic *giudizio*. The cutting up of the cartoon into individual sections, even individual figures, is emblematic of this process of 'privatisation'. Having been devoured by the aesthetically greedy eyes of painters and sculptors in the Sala del Papa, fragments of the cartoon were acquired wherever possible by private owners, such as the Strozzi in Mantua.⁴⁰ With the failure of the republic under Piero Soderini, the great design by Michelangelo, the patriotic republican, became a model of taste which would thrive under the re-founded and now absolute rule of the Medici. We rightly think of this image of battle *all'antica* as revolutionary in pictorial terms, but, already freighted with the courtly ethos of the later Quattrocento, it was destined to remain, like Mantegna's wonderfully virtuoso *Arrival of the Cult of Cybele*, a source of learned, aestheticising pleasure at the service of princely interests.

40 Vasari, *Le vite* (as in fn.6), VI (testo), 1987, p.25: '[...] questo cartone diventato uno studio d'artefici, fu condotto in casa Medici [and there] [...] stracciato et in molti pezzi diviso, talché in molti luoghi se n'è sparto, come ne fanno fede alcuni pezzi che si veggono ancora in Mantova in casa di messer Uberto Strozzi, gentiluomo mantovano, i quali con riverenza grande son tenuti. E certo che a vedere e' son più tosto cosa divina che umana' ('The cartoon having thus become a school for craftsmen, it was taken into [...] the house of the Medici [and there] [...] it was torn up and divided into many pieces, [...] and scattered over various places, to which some pieces bear witness that are still to be seen in Mantua, in the house of M. Uberto Strozzi, a gentleman of that city, where they are treasured with great reverence; and, indeed, they seem to the eye things rather divine than human'); translation from Vasari, *Lives* (as in fn.6), II, p.658.

