

# Crivelli's Divine Materials

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EVEN THE MOST NUANCED SCHOLARSHIP on Carlo Crivelli is apt to use words like “still” and “late” when addressing his paintings from the 1470s onward because of the ways they seem to resist dominant pictorial ideals articulated in the treatise *On Painting* written by the Florentine Leon Battista Alberti.<sup>1</sup> Rather than tar the painter himself with the epithet *retardataire*, the tendency is to displace it on to his Marchigian patrons who, in their favoring of splendid gold-ground polyptychs, rich in gilded ornament, are discussed in terms of the supposed provincialism of their taste.<sup>2</sup> But concepts of taste refuse to be neatly disentangled from those of ideology and function. In the Marches of Italy, where the relative authority of the papacy, the cities, local lordships, and the monastic orders were constantly, often violently, contested, Crivelli's demanding and varied clientele saw honor and ornament as inseparable.<sup>3</sup> Just who was to be honored, in what terms, and in contradistinction to whom could look like a matter of life and death. Was it Christ as Universal King, as the inquisitor Fra Giovanni da Capestrano would have it, or the Virgin Immaculate, as the Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV insisted? And who was their chief obstacle? Was it the “heresy” in their midst of the *fraticelli*, who had named their own pope, or the Jews, or the Infidel just across the Adriatic?<sup>4</sup> Equally, was expenditure on precious materials, like gold leaf, to be viewed as symptomatic of enthrallment to luxury or as a tribute gratifying to the saints to whom lavish altarpieces were dedicated?

With this sense of the urgency of honor always present, I want to begin with the role of gold in representation, using one painting by Crivelli to undermine the polarized terms of a “modern” naturalistic approach versus gold-ground painting and to recast the issue in the hierarchical, didactic, and, indeed, dialectical ones that are likely to have counted for Crivelli and his Marchigian viewers. The imposing *Crucifixion* in the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan (fig. 1), possibly a panel from the high altarpiece of Camerino Cathedral, is a work of Crivelli's maturity.<sup>5</sup> In the lower two-thirds of the picture, the mourners around the cross are rooted in a rocky Golgotha whose highly articulated landscape stretches in depth to Jerusalem, allowing a devout gaze to trace the path to the places of the Passion and beyond. Yet as the viewer

FIG. 00  
Carlo Crivelli  
Detail of *The Crucifixion* (fig. 1),  
probably later 1480s



FIG. 1  
 Carlo Crivelli  
*The Crucifixion*, probably later 1480s  
 On panel, 218 × 75 cm  
 Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan

stationed below it raises her eyes, something exceptional occurs: well above the horizon, and halfway up Christ's body, the pictorial ground proposed in the lower part is suddenly ruptured and the field cuts, literally, to a heavenly locus that is apocalyptic and for all time. The visual shock of this theophany is that there is no transition. Instead, the gold ground, seen from below, animates in a flash of reflected light, etched with the symbolic Sun and Moon. Even as Christ's body, as in a sculpture, casts a shadow on the grainy wood of the cross, the cross itself appears lit by a different source. The message is stunningly plain—Christ's incarnate and sacrificed body on the cross is the devotee's bridge between earth and heaven, time and all-time; the Crucifixus is at once grounded in death and eternally exalted. The gold ground is therefore revealed not as a matter of taste, at least not here, but as a decision to see the *cielo* (in Italian, both sky and heaven) from a transcendent nonperspective of the heavenly.

As a vivid devotional device, the splitting of the ground between the mimetic and the iconic or symbolic is not unprecedented. A Provençal altarpiece of 1480 showing the Adoration of the Cross (fig. 2) draws the gold ground much farther down, so that the heavens seem immanent above a portrait-like view toward the bridge at Avignon.<sup>6</sup> The pilgrim demeanor of the kneeling donors and their motto, *Datum est de super* (It is given above), chime well with their upturned gazes and the suggestion that their spiritual path will lead to a heavenly city. The connection with the Crivelli panel is therefore likely to lie not in the earlier work's "influence" but in a shared approach to a theology of the cross. In terms of the investigation of Carlo Crivelli's own pictorial practice, however, a comparison for the deployment of gold in an otherwise mimetic picture field can be drawn with the path of heavenly grace represented in his slightly earlier *Annunciation* (cat. 21) for Ascoli Piceno. The altarpiece, which Daniel Arasse described so memorably as depicting "the incommensurable entering into measure" shows the descent of the Holy Spirit as a diagonal gold flight path.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the crucifix (fig. 1) bridges between the present and an iconic all-time, here a celestial intervention moves in the other direction to pierce through to the everyday of an abnormally palatial version of Ascoli. Even as the ray of the Spirit/dove's descent, emanating from God, enters the Virgin's house via a synecdochic hole (fig. 3 *author's photo*), its shell-gold matter painted on the surface refuses to enter into the perspectival



FIG. 2  
 Circle of Nicolas Froment  
 The Pérussis altarpiece, c. 1480  
 On panel, three panels each  
 138.4 × 58.4 cm  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
 New York

logic of the painting. The gilding will always appear ontologically separate from the painterly illusion of depth. One aspect of what Alberti, in his treatise of 1435, objects to in the use of actual gold on paintings, namely, its tonal instability and visual uncontrollability, is what lends gold its pictorial value as a symbol of spiritual grace in the *Annunciation*.<sup>8</sup> Tellingly, moreover, the painter does not simply confine the gold to the descending ray. Grace is scattered around the point of entry, as well as on the pilaster capitals with their Marian imagery of a vase (fig. 3). Grace seems to gild the Virgin's head and become caught up in her red robe. The Virgin, as *tabernaculum dei* (tabernacle of God) at the compressed moment of annunciation and conception, becomes dusted with gold in a very ancient image of the dissemination of *charis* (grace): in the words of the great Byzantine hymn to Mary, she has become the "Ark that the spirit has gilded."<sup>9</sup> Theologically, the Virgin dwells in God's grace because of her humble submission to his will (on the back wall her humility is figured in the unadorned woodenness of her chamber wall), and this grace, in turn, gives her power as prime intercessor (the front wall is opened like a rich *porta coeli*, or Gate of Heaven, toward the viewer). My point, however, is not so much theological or even iconographic; rather, gold here cannot be seen as a simple alternative to naturalism but instead enters, through its exceptional visual properties, into a meaningful dialogue with Crivelli's exquisitely manipulated paint. It is precisely through a kind of iconoclasm between different kinds of representation—mimetic painting and "spiritual" ornament—that the mystic message of the Incarnation emerges.

Below, I want briefly to trace some of the ways gold ornament in Crivelli's art, and especially ornament in relief, acts as a mediator



FIG. 3  
Carlo Crivelli  
Detail of *The Annunciation* (cat. 21)

within a pictorial system that forges a language adequate to the renewal of the iconic devotional image. It is, broadly speaking, the iconic function that most of Crivelli's works served, especially those supporting the Marian cult as it was instrumentalized by the Roman Church in the Marches. This was a function to which the Albertian pictorial system may well have seemed less adapted about 1470, since Alberti's "great work" was the dramatic *historia*, not the cult image, where value lies in an external divine referent for which the work serves as a conduit, and where likeness can also be expressed without verisimilitude. One model of the icon's renewal could certainly be found in the "modern manner" taught in Francesco Squarcione's workshop, to which Crivelli was exposed after his first training in Venice.<sup>10</sup> It is predominantly this Paduan approach that characterizes Crivelli's early *Virgin and Child* in Verona (cat. 1). Here a perspectively self-conscious, measurable structure articulates the devotional relationship between the positioned viewer and the various heavenly subjects, including the distant, proleptic Golgotha. Even in this spatially ambitious and stony painting, though, gold is concentrated over the dress and halo of the Virgin and Child, as well as sprinkled over the figures of the *Innocenti* and symbols of the Passion. Material transformation is also figured more indirectly in the "mystic" marbling of the parapet that offers the pictorial opportunity for a play at the border between a rather concrete verism and mimetic dissolution.

With the change of scale and function required by the high altarpiece, especially its monumental machinery in the Veneto and the Marches, the Albertian picture-field-as-window necessarily becomes more restricted in its application and often confined to the "past-tense" stories of the predella. The range of alternatives already available for assuring the apparent nearness of the heavenly company by the later fifteenth century was especially rich in the Veneto: the model of the S. Zeno altarpiece by Andrea Mantegna, the *all'antica* and celebratory naturalism of Fra Antonio da Negroponte (fig. 4), as well as, less critically acknowledged, Giovanni d'Alemagna and Antonio Vivarini's altarpieces for the nuns of S. Zaccaria, also in Venice (e.g., fig. 5). In this last instance, I would argue, it was the custodial functions of the church, especially the presence of a large and revered relic collection and the reserved sacrament, that would have encouraged the strongly embodied character of these altarpieces, in which various degrees of



FIG. 4  
Antonio da Negroponte  
*The Virgin and Child Enthroned*, c. 1455  
On panel, 300 × 235 cm  
S. Francesco della Vigna, Venice



FIG. 5  
Antonio Vivarini and  
Giovanni d'Alemagna  
The altarpiece of the Virgin, c. 1443  
On panel  
Chapel of St. Tarasio,  
S. Zaccaria, Venice



FIG. 6  
Carlo Crivelli  
The Virgin and Child with Saints, 1476  
On panel, 290 × 280 cm  
Cathedral, Ascoli Piceno

sculptural relief and abundant gilded ornament are used to signal and celebrate the real presence of the saints.<sup>11</sup> It was as much this Venetian experience as his knowledge of the Squarcione approach that Crivelli was able to apply in the Marche in a way that would prove exceptionally productive.

The conception of the altarpiece as a collection of projecting presences was certainly already valued in the Marche in the 1450s. This is testified in the record of the high altarpiece for Ascoli's *duomo*, which was originally planned by the cathedral canons as a work in stone with carved saints and a projecting tabernacle of the sacrament above. It has been argued that Crivelli himself probably provided the design for the surviving frame for the high altar painting for Ascoli Cathedral as it was actually undertaken in 1473 (fig. 6), and a comparison with the Vivarini/Alle magna altarpiece of the Madonna del Rosario (fig. 5) confirms its relationship to the workshop in which Crivelli had trained. Although no overhanging tabernacle was provided for the image of Christ in the Tomb, nor a woodworker employed to carve figures, a host of other means are used to compensate for a crucial sense of physical projection. The design of the saints in relation to the wooden arcading is exceptionally tight, recalling the Vivarini's

FIG. 7  
Carlo Crivelli  
St. Emidius, detail from *The Virgin  
and Child with Saints*, 1476  
On panel  
Cathedral, Ascoli Piceno

polyptych for the Certosa of Bologna, and allows for a new play of surface. Crivelli's earlier Massa Fermana altarpiece, though using gold for the ground as well as for the raised gold ornaments to distinguish jewel-like attributes, has a much more pronounced spatial effect not only in the predella but also in the fields allotted to the saints. At Ascoli, where the predella is not historiated, depth is, by contrast, denied in an almost programmatic way. An effect of claustrophobic density is enhanced first by various curtailments of the full-length saints by the frame, so they seem to be pressed up immediately behind it. Second, foreground features—like the foot of St. Peter or St. Paul—project over an artificially conceived threshold with the viewer, and third, any sense of background recession is blocked by the decorative tooling of the ground. Using the pattern of either a brocaded or voided silk velvet, the *cielo*, which is also the field for the figures (*campo*), is turned into a cloth of gold that is subtly differentiated for each figure. As a result, the background now exists somewhere between the heavenly and the representational and cannot be imaginatively penetrated. Like an actual cloth of gold, the material mediates the space in strongly hierarchical and liturgical terms, producing a series of sacred loci within the larger framing of the altarpiece.

The tooled “cloth” offers an appropriately honorific, feast day, foil for the saints and, by arresting the devotee's eye on the surface, makes the consistently illuminated figures appear to project more emphatically as relief. Behind the Virgin's throne, seraphim and cherubim descend over the cloth ground, but surface is then reasserted by the bright red cloth of honor, which is in turn overlaid with the suspended garland of fruit in a deliberate aesthetic of material layering. The whole ornamental fabric of the altarpiece—with its multistory structure, gold grounds, and differentiated pedestals for the saints—is emphasized by its reappearance in the orphreys or borders of the cloth-of-gold cope worn by St. Emidius, the titular of the altarpiece (fig. 7). The reiteration both redoubles and draws attention to the material interplay of paint, fabric, gold ground, and margin. Ornaments—as frames, embroidered borders, liturgical paraphernalia, and attributes (all were corralled under the terms *ornamenti* or *adornamenti* in the period)—while acutely attuned by Crivelli to the decorum of the figure represented, are also organized to catch the attention in various ways. The bishop's crozier (fig. 7), to take another instance, is so richly

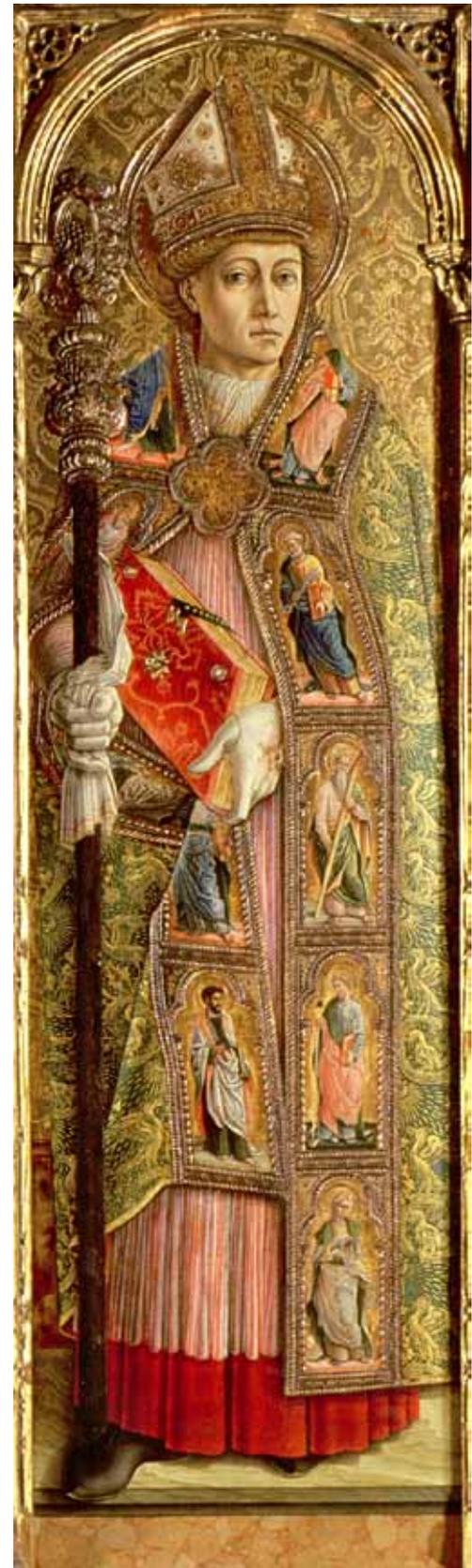


FIG. 8  
Carlo Crivelli  
*St. Stephen*, detail from the S.  
Domenico, Ascoli Piceno,  
altarpiece, 1476 (fig. 10)



built up from the panel surface in the plaster ground (*gesso*) before gilding (the contractual term used in the Marches for this technique was “*d’oro rilevato*”) as to offer itself as an actual work of sculpted relief.<sup>12</sup> Yet what Alfred Gell might have called its “technological enchantment” consists in the viewer’s simultaneous perception of the crozier as a perfectly foreshortened design in fictive space.<sup>13</sup> This effect is realizable only through the painter’s convincing draftsmanship, not the crafting of gilded plaster (*pastiglia*) of the kind admired in Italy and described in painters’ recipes about 1400 for decorating “borders.”<sup>14</sup> From this systemic clash of real and fictive dimensionality is born an awareness of the object’s presence, as much as of the artist’s virtuosity.<sup>15</sup>

A different kind of pictorial game characterizes Crivelli’s incidental rhyming of different kinds of ornament. Caught in the interplay of one kind of surface and mode abruptly abutting another, the eye is



FIG. 9  
 Carlo Crivelli  
 Three panels from the altarpiece of  
 S. Francesco, Montefiore dell'Aso,  
 c. 1471–73  
 On panel, 174 × 54 cm  
 S. Lucia, Montefiore dell' Aso

encouraged to shuttle from figure to ground and back again, and in the process ornament-as-ground and ornament-as-attribute begin to resemble one another. Such is the case with the shape described by St. Emidius's halo overlaid on his pointed miter (fig. 7) when seen next to the similarly contoured pattern of his brocade ground with its crowning ogee. The juxtaposition offers a kind of decorously sanctioned distraction. This is not an isolated effect. A similar kind of play between attributes and ornaments appears, for example, in the *St. Stephen* panel (fig. 8) from the upper tier of the high altarpiece for S. Domenico at Ascoli, where three stones of Stephen's martyrdom clearly mimic, in their neat array around his head, the triple clusters of projecting gold balls on his dalmatic, enchanting the viewer almost as strongly as the saint's gaze.<sup>16</sup> That Crivelli's ornaments are not merely eye-catching but truly systematic becomes still more obvious when we compare the Ascoli high altar with the near-contemporary polyptych (fig. 9 recomposes some of its panels) made for the Franciscans in Montefiore dell'Aso. Here, in line with the ideals of the Friars Minor, the brocaded grounds are withdrawn, haloes are simply inscribed rather than built up in relief, and the whole rich paraphernalia of

## CUT OUT



FIG. 10  
Carlo Crivelli  
Altarpiece from S. Domenico, Ascoli  
Piceno (The Demidoff altarpiece), 1476  
On panel  
The National Gallery, London

dress and ceremonial setting are more muted, with the St. Catherine in greens and grays and the Virgin and Child (not reproduced) set against a quite plain, ashen—that is to say, Franciscan—cloth of honor. St. Peter himself is dressed down in sandals and has swapped his gold key for a second silver one.

Turning to the two great altarpieces of Ascoli (fig. 10) and Camerino (see S. Campbell fig. 9) for the rival Dominican order, one sees a deliberate shift in both color volume and degree of relief. The whole ornamental system changes back up a gear or two, to project in more emphatic ways that respond to the ideology of the order in this spiritually and temporally fought-over corner of the papal state. For the first time in the Demidoff altarpiece (the larger of the two altarpieces for S. Domenico in Ascoli, fig. 10), we find that pieces of

FIGS. 11, 12  
Carlo Crivelli  
*St. Peter and his keys*, detail from the  
S. Domenico, Ascoli Piceno, altarpiece, 1476  
(fig. 10)

goldsmith work and other paraphernalia were formed in such high relief that they needed to be carved separately from wood and attached with nails before being gessoed and gilded, like the frame itself. The height of the relief and the forms of the ornament draw attention to affiliations and hierarchical relations between the saints: St. Peter as head of the Church Militant (fig. 11) and the Virgin as Ecclesia—the saints most worthy of honor—both project bossily. The Virgin's crown and necklace are protruberant and bejewelled, recalling honorific gifts attached to a cult image by devotees, whereas St. Peter's attributes seem, rather, to stake a claim expressed outward (fig. 12).<sup>17</sup> Given the rift that





FIGS. 13, 14  
 Carlo Crivelli  
 Sts. Peter and Dominics from the S.  
 Domenico, Camerino, polyptych, and  
 detail of St. Peter, 1482  
 On panel, 167 × 63 cm

was driven through Ascoli earlier in the century by Guelf-Ghibelline (papal versus imperial-leaning) factional violence and the pope's recent inquisitorial intervention against the threat of the *fraticelli* (Franciscan spirituals denying his authority), it is surely right to see Crivelli's representations of St. Peter in papal regalia and with keys fully in the round as a strong signal of papal *auctoritas*.<sup>18</sup> In the Ascoli altarpiece for the Dominicans and that for their brothers at Camerino there is undoubtedly something defensive, even anxious, about this kind of assertive relief. St. Peter is magnificent, irresistible, a clear proxy for the present-day popes, at this moment the unyieldingly princely Sixtus IV. The reification of the symbolic keys and the sphere of universal authority gifted to Peter by Christ could be read as offering salvation toward the viewer, but they could also be taken as admonishing sticks, as though to say: "Withdraw from my authority and the gates of heaven will be locked against you." So even as one admires the pictorial alchemy by which Crivelli suggests both the weight and the pliancy of his cope, the Vicar of Christ, by contrast to St. Emidius, seems to betray himself as a desiccated despot. A terrible presence inside his liturgical armor, Peter proffers his foot to invite an act of submission. At Camerino, Peter's keys are even larger (fig. 13), and the grasp on power curiously actualized by the effect of the flat, painted hand overlapping the projecting staff (fig. 14).

In Paduan painting, effects of fictive projection and the localized deployment of liminal objects had been used to suggest the presence of the devotee or, as in Pliny the Elder's *eminentia*, to indicate the surface of the painting as a site of illusion.<sup>19</sup> Crivelli seems here to be using the play between different kinds of *rilievo*, actual and mimetic, to reach out to the viewer in a more literal way. One notion of localized relief is *all'antica* and performative, like the "carved" heads that dramatize the very fact of sticking out and the authorizing inscription indented in stone (see fig. 00). A second concept of relief, as we have seen, uses a very different language of real physical presence in which heavily embossed elements stand out in direct imitation of goldsmith work. There is a third, too, that presents relief or piercing as authoritative markers on the holy body. In this case, though, the indentation or protrusion of wounded flesh, the respective attributes of the sacrificed Christ and of St. Francis, are the very objects of cult rather than its ornaments.



FIG. 16  
Carlo Crivelli, *The Madonna della  
Rondine*, from S. Francesco dei  
Zoccolanti, Matelica, after 1490  
On panel, 150.5 × 107.3 cm  
The National Gallery, London

What happens to Crivelli's system of ornament under the more recent dispensation of the *pala*, or single-field altarpiece?<sup>20</sup> The immediate effect of a company or court of saints is powerful in the case of the London National Gallery's *Madonna della Rondine* (1491–92, fig. 16) but this is still an adaptation of an established approach and not an overhaul. The gold ground remains in place, required as much by Crivelli's art as by the patron, since it enhances the effect of projection of the foreground. The layering of surfaces is similarly retained, with the brocading previously used for the tooled ground redistributed over a mimetic textile backdrop attuned to each of the saints. The patterned cloths of honor appear, by their modulated tonal surface, as convincingly draped like a temporary honorific hanging, heavy with their quality and casting shadows. Read in relation to the gilded *campo*, though, the hanging seems to "catch" the light of heaven through the application of a rain of shell-gold accents that suggests, without describing, the raised gold loops of *riccio sopra riccio* brocade. In relation to the figures to which they are the ground, they enact a form of *monstration*, a showing that honors the saintly body.<sup>21</sup> Crucially, the cloths of honor also mark places of differentiation within a spiritual hierarchy, preserving the distinction of, and between, the saints. It is this that ensures the intercessory availability of the individually framed saint that is at risk to be lost in the potential democracy of the unified *pala*. Relationships within the group are also carefully served by sympathies and contrasts of fabric design (St. Sebastian seems to wear the same fabric as the Virgin's cloth of honor on his sleeve, in a suitably knightly fashion). Crivelli, therefore, disposes and elaborates his material ornaments in a way that reaffirms the hierarchies of the polyptych, and he does so while pictorially resolving a clash between the object as "depicted" and the material value of gold.

The rejection of depth in the making of *imaghi* and the embrace of gold are not therefore necessary responses to backward-looking pictorial tastes but, rather, attempts to forge up-to-date icons or cult objects in which the divine seemed to be near at hand. To activate this sense of presence effectively involved a play on the material surface and at the juncture with the frame, along with the limitation on recession. Crivelli's textiles-as-ornaments are both naturalistic and out of this world and, as such, provide a conduit between the here and the beyond. In its function as a mediator, ornament, as Rebecca





Zorach has emphasized, can be “a point of transit between the literal and the figurative,” and in Crivelli, this mediation extends beyond the frame itself.<sup>22</sup> Crivelli’s system, which was so welcomed in the Marches, tended in the opposite direction to the *ars nova* of early Netherlandish painting, where the awareness of the surface is obliterated in favor of pictorial depth. Given the fundamental role of ornament, should we be surprised by this success? One view of ornament frequently expressed from within Observant branches of the monastic orders, including by James of the Marches, was highly critical and saw it as a source of social instability and devotional distraction. The critique could extend to the condemnation of polyphonic figured music and precious materials disposed around revered images of the saints in churches, since these risked arousing *curiositas* or luring the faithful into idolatry.<sup>23</sup> Ornaments in these altarpieces from the Marches excuse themselves on the grounds of showing “proper” honor to the divine, and they are not restricted to the margins but tailored as complete furnishings of the saints, producing frame, figure, and ground as a densely celebratory and honorific whole. Ornament, while abundant, then, is always directed and so avoids *superfluitas*. Moreover, the effect of sculptural relief is not extended to the bodies of the saints themselves. Unlike those Byzantine relief icons that seemed to imbue their gold or gilded material with divine presence, Crivelli’s saints are arguably at less risk of being confused with their divine prototypes. Instead, Carlo Crivelli’s modern icons are “courtly” and elegant to a degree, with an eloquence that seems to sit ill with Hans Belting’s reading of the “weakened authority of the holy image” in this period, which required the promoting of a return to older pictorial forms and a “retreat from the fashions of the day.”<sup>24</sup>

This is not to say, though, that ornament’s mediating role renders the sacred image *unanxious*; in fact, perhaps more than elsewhere, ornament in the Marches seems strongly defensive and compensatory. The popular sermons of James of the Marches, Observant scourge of the *fraticelli*, offer a sense of heightened spiritual and physical extremity, which he seems as keen to talk up as to remedy.<sup>25</sup> The human condition is afflicted: ordinary sinners, mired in error, are struck down by plague and faction and are in desperate need of intercession from on high. Heresies attacking the established Church offer a mortal threat: *De blasfemia* is directed against the *fraticelli*, while *De adventu Turcorum*

FIG. 15  
Carlo Crivelli  
Detail of *The Virgin and Child* from  
the S. Domenico, Ascoli Piceno,  
altarpiece, 1476 (fig. 10)

advances the lesson from the threat of Islam: “consider the crying and laments and the ruin of Italia by the Turks because of our sins and the grave offense of God and of his saints and the injury and shame that has been done therefore to the image of the Virgin Mary.”<sup>26</sup> The Turks are here instruments of God’s wrath as much as heretics, but both the causes—sin and heresy—and the effect—vengeance—end up defiling the Virgin Mary’s image. One major work for the altarpiece, we may construe from this, was to curry divine favor by pursuing the honor of the Virgin as Mother of God to the very highest degree. An expression of the same concern is manifested in the way the contested Franciscan claim for Mary’s Immaculacy becomes a recognizable theme in Marchigian altarpieces in this period (fig. 17). Emphasizing her divine or mystic qualities over her earthly ones, the framework of ornament is one of the chief ways that the iconography of Immaculacy is recognizable, and the effect is of a newly minted and powerful cult image.<sup>27</sup>

It has long been acknowledged that the later fifteenth century in Italy saw a marked reengagement with the formulation of cult images.<sup>28</sup> Attention has been given especially to the modern remaking of miracle-working paintings in Rome, a practice associated particularly with the successful native workshop of Antoniazio Romano. As Jean Campbell highlights in the case of the *Madonna della Candeletta*, once the center of a much larger altarpiece, Crivelli had a distinctive way to rechannel the efficacy and allure of an older cult image of the Virgin venerated in the same town.<sup>29</sup> But Crivelli’s art also shares a broader agenda with contemporary devotional painting to which it seems to be the stylistic antithesis. The Umbrian Pietro Perugino, for example, found ways to activate the potential of the iconic image in his devotional “close-up” panels of intercessory saints, such as the penitent Mary Magdalene or the plague saint Sebastian, where graceful simplification, isolation from narrative, and truncation within a closely drawn black picture field have a similar effect of making the figure corporeally present to the viewer. Crivelli, embracing elaboration and particularity, instead reworked the relationship between field and frame, between the object in relief and in fictive depth, emphasizing the religious image as an almost tactile conduit of heavenly presence. Neither painter makes any sacrifice of artistic skill, but Crivelli’s method might be thought to have a higher risk of looking too



FIG. 17  
Carlo Crivelli  
*The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception*, from  
S. Francesco, Pergola, 1492  
On panel, 194.3 × 93.3 cm  
The National Gallery, London

gorgeous. In a recent volume dedicated to the materials of art making and their significance in the late medieval and early modern period, Michael Cole confronts the ongoing conflict in the realm of religious art between the ideals of poverty associated with sanctity and reformed monasticism and the impulse to produce materially splendid works suggestive of the patron's magnificence.<sup>30</sup> While one way of resolving the conflict was to transfer investment from material preciousness to skill in the pictorial manipulation of cheaper materials, another was to justify material splendor as a suitable offering to God.<sup>31</sup> Crivelli's patrons have their cake and eat it: rejecting pictorial abstinence, they get pictorial brilliance too. Painstaking in the expense of skill and labor, Crivelli's painting seems to capture and redirect the labor of all the other exquisite materials it represents. In the process of heaping these transfigured riches on the saints, they are turned outward, almost beyond the surface of the painting, to capture and transfix the viewer.

## NOTES

- 1 Leon Battista Alberti, *De pictura* (1435) translated as *Della pittura* (1436).
- 2 Monnas 2008, 168, refers to Crivelli's more "provincial clientele" to account for the abundant use of figured silk fabrics.
- 3 For a rich discussion of ornament in the Marches emphasizing civic legislation and the oversight of Observant authorities, especially in the figure of James of the Marches, see Leopardi 2007.
- 4 Cacciotti and Melli 2008, esp. Bartoli 2008.
- 5 It was restored in 1987; see Daffra 2009a, 208–10, and Daffra, in De Marchi 2002a, 444–45.
- 6 The "Pérussis Retable" was commissioned by the Florentine Luigi Peruzzi, resident in Avignon, and was recorded in the eighteenth century in the charterhouse of Bonpas (Laclotte and Thiébaud 1983, 249–50, no. 75). The conceit of the divided ground may be indebted to Enguerrand Quarton's great *Coronation of the Virgin* (1453–54) at Villeneuve-les-Avignon.
- 7 Arasse 1999, 51 and 177, echoing St. Bernardino of Siena on the Incarnation as when "Eternity entered time and immensity entered into measure."
- 8 Alberti 1950, at the end of book 2, 103: "E ancora veggiamo in una piana tavola alcune superficie over sia l'oro, quando deono essere oscure risplendere, e quando deono essere chiare parere nere" (And we also see that on a flat panel some surfaces where there is gold are gleaming when they should be dark and when they should be light they appear black). See Wenderholm 2004, at 128–29; Schöne 1954, 96 and Hills 1987, 108, 116.
- 9 The Akathistos Hymn, strophe 23.8. See Peltomaa 2001, 19 and 200–203; Pentcheva 2006, 12–16, 66–69, 51.
- 10 For the contemporary reputation of Squarcione's workshop using the term "dipingnere in recente," see Rigoni 1970, 39, doc. V.
- 11 Radke 2001.
- 12 For "oro relevato," or relief gold, see Vogel 1859, 2:149–50, doc. LXVI, and cf. 1:165. The 1429 contract in which the term is used repeatedly was drawn up by the agent of Filippo Maria Visconti, duke of Milan, with a painter Alugguccio from Ancona in the Marches for an *Adoration of the Magi* for the ducal oratory at Loreto (cited by Lightbown 2004, 4).
- 13 Gell 1998, 68–83, esp. 72 and 74–76 on the captivation of the spectator induced by pattern.
- 14 Cennini 1971, 124 and 128–29 (for the application of *gesso sottile da rilevare* to be used "se volessi rilevare fregio o fogliame" [if you want to model any frieze or foliate ornament]).
- 15 The best precedent for this is the ferule cross in gilded *pastiglia* held by St. Gregory in the great triptych for the Scuola della Carità by Giovanni d'Allemagna and Antonio Vivarini, 1446.
- 16 Gell (1998, 80–81) refers to pattern (the decorated index) as producing "unfinished business," slowing down perception and so retaining attention over time.
- 17 The effect of an oversize votive crown already appears in works by the Vivarini workshop for Venice, for example, the Carità triptych and that from S. Moisè.
- 18 As Lightbown argues (2004, 289).
- 19 Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 35.127. See Trutty-Coohill 1982 for *eminentia* as that which appears "before" the surface as described in Pliny.
- 20 For the forms of the altarpiece and the introduction of the single-field *pala* in the region, see De Marchi 2002b; Gardner von Teuffel 2009.
- 21 Duits 2008, 201, refers to silk cloths used for wrapping and showing holy relics at the Burgundian court: "pour couvrir e faire la *solemnité desposés*" (my italics).
- 22 Zorach 2011, 152.
- 23 The Dominican Giovanni Dominici had cautioned, "beware of frames of gold and silver, lest they [your children] become more idolatrous than faithful" (1860, 132–33; English translation from Freedberg 1989, 12).
- 24 Belting 1990.
- 25 For James of the Marches, see Bracci 1997; Lightbown 2004, esp. 60–65 and 229–39.
- 26 *De Adventu turcorum*, autograph manuscript (Museo Civico, Montepiccolo [Ascoli Piceno], MS 46 bis). See Serpico 2007.
- 27 Francia 2004, chap. 5 and esp. 117–24 for Crivelli's Madonna for Pergola (fig. 21).
- 28 Belting 1994, 342, 441–44; Krüger 2001, 172–73; Nagel and Wood 2010, 109–10, 114–15.
- 29 See Jean Campbell's essay in this catalogue; Lightbown 2004, 425.
- 30 Cole 2015.
- 31 Baxandall 1972, 14–16, saw a trend away from the appreciation of the material expense of painting to investment in more purely pictorial quality in the course of the fifteenth century.