Figuring the Mosaic Image Prohibition in Early Modern Italy

Nathanael Price

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of History of Art
University College London
March 2017
Declaration

I, Nathanael David Ignatius Price, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed:

Dated: 28 March 2017
Abstract

In his description of Michelangelo’s statue of *Moses* (c.1513-1545), Giorgio Vasari alleges that Roman Jews would abandon their religious observances to “adore” the image of the iconoclastic Hebrew lawgiver on the tomb of Pope Julius II. The Mosaic prohibition of “graven images” is recognised in Judaism as the original antithesis to pagan image-worship, but its authority has been undermined in Christianity by the idea of God incarnate. As Vasari’s tale helps to illustrate, Michelangelo’s *Moses* embodies an enduring conflict of religious and cultural ideals, originally encapsulated by the biblical prohibition. This thesis examines how aspects of that conflict – especially the perceived opposition between Christian and Jewish attitudes to figural representation – were visualised in Italy during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

Vasari’s allegation of Jewish apostasy – wherein the Jews establish their own image-cult of Moses – seems to epitomise the Freudian concept of the return of the repressed; the “inexorable” rule by which repressed psychic or cultural material (in this case idolatrous worship) re-emerges through the agent of repression; here, the forbidding figure of Moses, destroyer of the Golden Calf. The central idea of this thesis is that Freud’s psycho-cultural rule has unexploited potential as a tool for understanding not only Michelangelo’s *Moses* (which is horned, like a species of pagan idol), but Renaissance art and culture in more general terms.

While developing this idea, the thesis also explores Jewish cultural reactions through visual media, including printed books, ritual objects and portrait medals, to the oppressive anti-Judaism of Counter-Reformation popes. The isolation of Jews in Italian ghettos was expected to induce mass conversion to Roman Catholicism, but Jews remained largely resistant to assimilation, and visual evidence of Jewish acculturation often involves symbolic reassertions of religious integrity. This thesis examines the complex interactions between Christian and Jewish (visual) cultures in early modern Italy, and challenges received ideas about a lack of agency in the latter.
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Introduction

In his *Life of Michelangelo* (1550 & 1568), Giorgio Vasari embellishes his description of the artist’s statue of Moses (c.1513-45; fig. 1) with a peculiar account of its early reception. Every Sabbath, according to Vasari, Jewish men and women would flock “like starlings” to the Roman church of San Pietro in Vincoli. They came, we are told, to visit the colossal figure of the Hebrew Law-giver that dominates the tomb of Pope Julius II, adoring it as though it were something “not human, but divine.” The story has an odd ring to it, to say the least. What business had these Jews visiting a papal tomb, on the Sabbath, or any other day? And why were they adoring a graven image, such as the Law handed down to them by Moses – and represented here by the tablets the figure holds – expressly forbids? Taking the imaginary perspective of the Jews in Vasari’s story, we are reminded that to admire Michelangelo’s statue is to confront a paradoxical embodiment of the image prohibition; the stern interdiction contained in the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, that Moses received from God at Mount Sinai: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of *any thing* […] thou shalt not bow downe thy selfe to them, nor serve them.” As Vasari helps to illustrate, Michelangelo’s statue of Moses embodies an enduring conflict of religious and cultural ideals, originally encapsulated by this biblical prohibition. This project examines aspects of that conflict as it was visualised in early modern Italy.

Although the essence of Mosaic Law is shared by the Jewish and Christian religions, the former adheres, usually, to a stricter sense of the image prohibition, particularly with regard to sculpture, or “graven images.” The reason for this seems clear enough. Since Christianity embraced an idea of God incarnate, and the corporeality it implies, the effect of the image prohibition

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1 While the statue was begun *circa* 1513-15, the papal tomb was not completed until 1545 – five years before the first edition of Vasari’s *Lives* was published.


3 “E seguitino gli Ebrei di andare, come fanno ogni sabato, a schiera maschi e femmine, come gli storni, a visitarlo ed adorarlo, che non cosa umana, una divina adoreranno.” Ibid.

4 *Exodus*, 20:4-5. Biblical quotations in English are from the King James Version, unless otherwise stated. I avoid referring to the image prohibition as the “Second Commandment”, since the division of the Decalogue (*Exodus*, 20:1-17, and *Deuteronomy*, 5:6-21) varies, and the image prohibition is not necessarily discrete.
was inevitably reduced.\textsuperscript{5} Judaism, by contrast, continued to recognise it as safeguarding the singularity of an invisible and immaterial God – the original antithesis to polytheist image-worship. As such, the contrary attitudes to the image prohibition that prevail in Judaism and Christianity – the latter most consistently in the Roman Catholic Church – evince a fundamental religious difference; one that is trespassed entirely by the Jews in Vasari’s story.

The specific theme of my dissertation is the perceived conflict between Christian and Jewish attitudes to the visual – especially the figural and the religious image – as it pertains in Italy during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Both Michelangelo’s Moses, and Vasari’s now legendary (but scarcely reliable) anecdote concerning it, epitomise the complex relationship of Christianity to Judaism, and more particularly, the way this was enacted in and around religious images in Italy at the beginning of the early modern period. The colossal image of the biblical iconoclast asserts the power of the Christian image over the Hebrew word, an idea supported in Vasari’s account by the Jews’ cultic attraction to the statue (and thereby to the Roman basilica containing it). Recent publications identify a topical connection between Vasari’s anecdote and the designs of Counter-Reformation popes to convert Jews en masse, while the role of images more generally in Roman Catholic proselytising to Jews is beginning to attract scholarly attention.\textsuperscript{6} Underlying this largely uncultivated field of research is the old idea of a dichotomy between Jewish iconophobia, or “blindness” (an alleged proof of “spiritual blindness”), as directly opposed to Christian iconophilia. This crude, received idea (whose roots are found in the letters of Saint Paul) has increasingly been rejected, often vehemently, by historians of Jewish art and culture, but it is less often interrogated, as it will be here.\textsuperscript{7} An important aim of this project is to expose,


\textsuperscript{7} See, for example: Kalman P. Bland, \textit{The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual} (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000). It is significant that, in advancing his thesis that the idea of Jewish “iconophobia” is a largely modern invention, Bland makes selective use of Vasari – citing, uncritically, the latter’s dismissal of the Mosaic image prohibition (in the \textit{Proemio} to the \textit{Vite}), while ignoring
and explore, the complex involvement between Jewish and Christian visual cultures in Italy at a time of widespread religious and secular upheaval.

Although an apparent dichotomy between Christian and Jewish attitudes to the visual, and especially the figural, might seem obvious in theological terms, its effect historically has not always been clear. This is seen in the abundant use of figuration in a religious context among Jewish communities in late-antique Rome and Palestine and, more broadly, in medieval Europe. In Christianity, meanwhile, ambivalence towards religious images gave rise to episodes of institutional iconoclasm, most notably in eighth and ninth-century Byzantium. Christian iconophobia might have abated in the later Middle Ages – culminating in the materialisation of God’s image in Renaissance art – but the age of Protestantism brought with it a resurgence of Christian iconoclasm, and a re-affirmation of Judaic attitudes towards devotional images, in particular the representation of the divine. Against this backdrop, Michelangelo’s Moses – described by Vasari as unrivalled by any modern or ancient work – stands out as both an “anti-image” of Judaism, and a monument to the visual tradition of Christian worship maintained by the Church in Rome.

At the same time, the conception of Moses as a graven image – and immediate object of (un-Christian) worship – betrays the preoccupation with idolatry that pervades the religious art and polemics of the Renaissance and the Reformation era. In the epilogue to his seminal book, *The Gothic Idol* (1989), Michael Camille proposed that the idols of pagan antiquity had been effectively “rehabilitated” in the art of Renaissance Italy, where they reappeared in the guise of saints and Old Testament heroes. For me, Camille’s formula expresses the Freudian psycho-cultural concept of “the return of the repressed” – according to which elements of pagan polytheism that were repressed by Christianity later re-emerged within Christianity itself. (Freud accidentally

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10 According to an example used by Freud himself, not only did the Christian religion (re)materialise the Jewish God, it turned out not to be strictly monotheistic: “it took over from the surrounding peoples numerous symbolical rites, re-established the great mother-goddess and found room for numerous deities of polytheism in an easily recognisable disguise, though in
exemplified his own concept of repression by refusing to admit this idea in his own, intriguing analysis of Michelangelo’s *Moses*.\footnote{Sigmund Freud’s essay, “Der Moses des Michelangelo” was published anonymously in the psychoanalytic journal, *Imago*, in 1914 (followed by a “Postscript” in 1927). Freud’s pupil, Theodor Reik, came closer to the logical Freudian understanding of the statue, in an essay discussed in chapter two of this dissertation.} As Camille goes on to suggest, the rehabilitation of the idol did not occur in Northern Europe, hence the violence of Protestant iconoclasm. Alexander Nagel has since shown that the iconoclastic impulses acted on in Protestant parts of Europe were, in Italy, “directed back into art,” resulting in a range of artistic self-critiques that he has termed “soft iconoclasm.”\footnote{Nagel, Alexander: *The Controversy of Renaissance Art*, Chicago: London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 2. Joseph Leo Koerner had taken a similar approach to Lutheran religious images, in which iconic and iconoclastic elements coexist, resulting in what he calls “iconoclash.” Koerner, Joseph Leo: *The Reformation of the Image*, London: Reaktion, 2004} Strangely, Michelangelo’s statue of *Moses* – notoriously horned, like a species of pagan idol – has not yet been examined in this light, as it will be here. Further, drawing on recent art historical scholarship, as well as Freudian psychoanalytic theory, I use Michelangelo’s *Moses* as the focus of a broader argument about the role of Moses in Christian image making.

My project, however, is not limited to how the supposed Jewish “iconophobia,” embodied literally by Moses, was conceptually implicated in the crisis of Christian identities; I am as much interested in coeval developments in Jewish visual culture in Italy, and how these reflect broader cultural developments both within and without the Jewish sphere. I argue that the same kind of tensions and contradictions that are discernible in the Christian art of the period can be seen to inhabit (if not to inhibit) the production and use of images in Judaism too.

It is already well documented that in Italy, from the mid-sixteenth century, there emerged in Jewish culture an interest in forms of visual representation that Judaism had traditionally disdained. This is clearly manifest in an abundance of bronze Hanukkah lamps with three-dimensional figural ornament – the production, let alone the popularity of which is unprecedented in the history of Jewish ritual art. Increasingly, printed Hebrew books incorporated figures from recognisable non-Jewish sources: a figure resembling Michelangelo’s *Jeremiah* (Sistine Chapel, 1508-12) appears in Haggadot printed at Mantua (1560 &
1568) and Venice (1599), while pagan deities appear on the title pages of Hebrew books, including holiday prayer books (mahzorim) and commentaries on the Torah (figs. 54 & 70). In the same period, there are signs of an emerging Jewish interest in portraiture, including the appearance during the 1550s of the first portrait medals of Jews – a century after such medals became fashionable among Christians. For some mid-twentieth-century historians of Jewish culture (Cecil Roth, Moses Shulvass and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, to name a few), this greater openness to figurative art was epitomised by the attraction that Michelangelo’s Moses allegedly held for the Jews of Rome.\footnote{Roth, Cecil: The Jews in the Renaissance, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1959, p. 203. Shulvass, Moses: The Jews in the World of the Renaissance (translated from the Hebrew), Leiden: Brill, 1973, p. 234. Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim: Haggadah and History, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975, p. 38.} In spite of being uncorroborated, Vasari’s anecdote, when combined with the visual material, seemed to constitute hard evidence not only of Jewish sensibility to Renaissance aesthetics, but moreover, of the unparalleled success of Jewish acculturation in Italy. This general view of Italian Jewish acculturation has since been thoroughly revised – and yet, reappraisal of the visual evidence has scarcely begun.

The idea, nurtured by the prolific Roth in particular, that Italy during the Renaissance was a place of exceptional tolerance, where it was uniquely possible to achieve the “successful synthesis” of Jewish and non-Jewish cultures,\footnote{Roth, The Jews in the Renaissance, p. xii} is one that has been challenged in recent decades, most directly by Robert Bonfil.\footnote{Bonfil, Robert: “The Historian’s Perception of the Jews in the Italian Renaissance: Towards a Reappraisal,” first published in the Revue des études juives 143 (1984), pp. 59–82. For a balanced view of Roth’s and Bonfil’s positions, see David Ruderman, “Cecil Roth: A Reassessment,” in The Jewish Past Revisited, ed. David N. Myers and David B. Ruderman, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. See also, the introduction (“In Search of a Jewish Renaissance”) to Giuseppe Veltri, Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb: Foundations and Challenges in Judaism on the Eve of Modernity, Leiden: Brill, 2009.} In attacking Roth’s image of cultural harmony (which, in the 1940s, seemed to represent “the unfulfilled hope of many today”), Bonfil contends that in Italy, as elsewhere in pre-modern Europe, Jewish life was “a perennial struggle for survival,” not the “carousel of servile imitation” that he saw in Roth’s depiction.\footnote{Bonfil, op. cit, pp. 70-71}

As for the visual evidence that Roth produced (and which his successors, including Bonfil, have largely ignored), the most striking examples – the
Hanukkah lamps, printed books and portrait medals – actually pertain to a period, beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, when the general circumstances of Jewish life in Italy had considerably worsened. The first of a series of events that reshaped Jewish life in Italy was the expulsion from the Kingdom of Naples (1541) – that is, most of the peninsula south of Rome. In the following decades, the Roman Church’s reaction to the threat of Protestant Reform, which officially began with the Council of Trent (1545-64), had serious repercussions for Jews living in Italy. Sephardic Jews who had adopted Christianity to avoid expulsions from Spain and Portugal (1492 & 1496), and later fled from the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, were persecuted in Italy as heretics. The Talmud was banned and burned throughout Italy, beginning in Rome in 1553; three years later, twenty-four Jews were convicted of heresy, and burned to death in Ancona. After the papal bull of 1555, the scattered Jewish communities that remained in the northern half of the peninsula were increasingly confined and concentrated into ghettos, and interactions with Christian society were strictly controlled. Kenneth Stow in particular has shown that the policies of social and religious oppression emanating from Rome were largely driven by the aim of mass Jewish conversion. Therefore, the reality for Jews in mid-sixteenth century Italy was a struggle to preserve a unique cultural identity based on the Jewish religion, in spite of intense pressure to assimilate. The visual material that has so far been used as positive evidence of acculturation – for which there was certainly a strong tendency among Jews in Italy – seems charged with the tension exerted by these two opposing forces.

When Jewish ritual objects and books are decorated with imagery that is manifestly at odds with the religious tradition, what might that tell us about Jewish cultural identity and its relation to the non-Jewish world? As well as human and mythological figures, a number of Italian Hanukkah lamps even incorporate ecclesiastical heraldry; can we accept Roth’s explanation – until now unchallenged – that these were signs of individual Jews’ friendliness towards their patrons and protectors in the Church? It was hardly in the spirit of friendliness that the title pages of Hebrew books acknowledged the authority of the cardinals who licensed their printing – so ought we not to question the incongruous appearance of strange gods and mythological figures in the same...
contexts? Could idols really be so cleanly divested of meaning as to become mere ornament – as Yerushalmi asserted forty years ago, an assertion that remains unchallenged?\textsuperscript{18} We should not forget that this visual material is related to religious observances that necessarily excluded those of surrounding non-Jewish (pagan or Christian) cultures; more particularly, the Hanukkah lamps are essential to a festival that commemorates historical resistance to forced assimilation. So how do we account for the apparent compromise between Jewish and non-Jewish culture that these objects seem to embody?

The case of portraiture only heightens the manifest complexity of Jewish (visual) culture in the period. Portraiture was regarded with suspicion in traditional Judaism, and remained controversial in Northern European communities even in the eighteenth century,\textsuperscript{19} and yet, in sixteenth-century Italy there were influential rabbis who lauded Christian portrait painters, and individuals of high rank in Jewish society who commissioned portrait medals. These medals might well have been intended for circulation among Christian associates (the men appear bareheaded, according to Christian, but not Jewish custom), but far from effacing Jewish identity they deliberately assert it in their inscriptions. What this suggests is a nascent (and defiant) sense of a secular Jewish identity, in an era when Jewishness still necessarily connoted a religious way of life. Through consideration of the visual evidence in its proper context, this dissertation traces the contours of religious and secular identities. What is discernible is undeniably a synthesis of the Jewish and the non-Jewish, the religious and the secular – but more is at stake in this synthesis than has so far been appreciated.

Structure of the thesis

This main body of the thesis is divided into two thematic parts; the first is concerned primarily with Christian images and attitudes towards them, the second with Jewish ones, although the two themes are not mutually exclusive.


In part one, the first chapter revisits the role of Moses in Christian art and thought, where he stands as both a pre-figuration of Christ and the leader and legislator of the Jews. More specifically, I show how in Renaissance Christian art, the ambivalent status of Moses led to the symbolic use of his “graven image” as an anti-image of Judaism, something that has been largely overlooked in studies of iconography. As a symbol of Christian fulfilment, it plays an important – and until now, unappreciated – part in Michelangelo’s conception of the Hebrew Law-giver.

The second chapter deals with the notion of Moses as idol, prompted by Vasari’s allegation of Jewish statue-worship. The circumstances of the Jews’ (imaginary) conversion – wherein they establish their own image-cult of Moses – seems to epitomise the Freudian concept of the return of the repressed; the “inexorable” rule by which repressed psychic or cultural material – in this case idolatrous worship – re-emerges through the very agent of repression; here, the forbidding figure of Moses, destroyer of the Golden Calf. Vasari’s story might be a fiction, but I maintain that he recognised something inherent in Michelangelo’s statue, something that Freud would not admit when, four centuries later, he retraced the steps of the imaginary Jewish pilgrims. Here I propose that the psychoanalytic concept of repression has unexploited potential as a tool for understanding not only the Moses, but Renaissance art and culture in more general terms. I present evidence, both literary and visual, that Michelangelo and his contemporaries were as conscious of the cultural mechanisms of repression and recurrence as was Freud himself.

Part one concludes by examining the representation of Jews in relation to Christian images, especially in the context of Counter-Reformation proselytising. Throughout the Middle Ages, Christianity had promoted a stereotype of Jews as iconoclasts, their hostility to images a manifestation of their hostility to Christ. This stereotype was exaggerated at times when the use of images in Christian worship was especially threatened; hence the revival, in the sixteenth century, of a legend involving the torture of a crucifix by a group of Jews in Beirut. The legend, which culminates in the Jews’ conversion, had been invoked at the Second Council of Nicaea (AD 787), which ended the first Byzantine Iconoclasm, and would be frescoed eight hundred years later in the apse of San Pietro in Vincoli (1577) – three decades after the installation of
Michelangelo’s *Moses* in the same church. As Marina Caffiero has suggested, the inversion of the popular libel formula by Vasari – in whose account the Jews are worshipful of the Christian image, rather than hostile to it – is emblematic of the way in which images were used, by the Church in Rome, to address potential converts and neophytes. Furthermore, Vasari inverts Protestant indictments of Roman Catholic image cults, in which Jewish restraint with regard to images was contrasted favourably with Roman Christian “idolatry.” Ultimately, the case is representative of the way in which attitudes to images were seen as indices of religious belief.

Part two begins with chapter four – an examination of attitudes to visual representation in Judaism, with a focus on early modern Italy. I highlight the ambiguity of the biblical statutes on images, and the taboos surrounding the representation of human faces and figures. With reference to Jewish legal codes, and rulings written by influential rabbis like Samuel Archivolti (c. 1515-1611) and Leon Modena (1571-1648), I emphasise that the rejection of such images or image-related activities as might be associated with non-Jewish worship, was as much a concern for Jews in early modern Italy, as it is a feature of biblical tradition. What I also mean to show is that Jewish attitudes to forms of visual representation were strongly conditioned by an awareness of external (i.e. non-Jewish) perceptions of Judaism; Jews were as wary of the accusation of idolatry, as they were of the charge of iconoclasm. In sixteenth-century Italy, this self-awareness was heightened by the scrutiny to which Jewish rites were subjected by proselytising Christians, as well as the censorship of Hebrew texts by the Roman Inquisition.

In this context, the sculpted figures and pagan motifs that appear frequently in Hanukkah lamps and printed Jewish texts appear startlingly incongruous. They seem to trespass the traditional limits of visual representation in Judaism, and even to defy prevailing rabbinic attitudes. Evidence that objects with three-dimensional human figures were unlikely to have been made by Jews for religious reasons, as much as social and economic ones, further complicates their status as Jewish artefacts. My contention, in chapter five, is that these objects were used to construct an image of Jewish acculturation, intended not

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20 Jacopo Coppi, 1577  
21 Caffiero, op. cit.
least for Christian eyes. In a sense, they symbolically resolve the tension between the Jewish struggle to preserve religious integrity, and exterior efforts to destroy it. Within the resulting interpretative framework, portrait medals of individual Jews – the subject of chapter six – may be understood as a more assertive declaration of a (nascently secular) Jewish identity that would continue to resist these cultural pressures.

Chapter seven serves to bring the two parts of the thesis together, and to expose further the complexity of the subject matter. I have mentioned how Vasari’s provocative anecdote about Michelangelo’s Moses has been regularly (mis)used as evidence of Italian Jewish acculturation. It is sometimes accompanied in the literature by a passing reference to another legendary, albeit less famous Moses, that stood over the wall fountain in the Ghetto of Siena. For anyone who has chanced upon this art-historical footnote, the empty niche of the fountain, near the entrance to the city’s synagogue, still testifies to the absence of the marble Moses, removed from its pedestal some two hundred years ago. The statue, which survives in obscurity, is represented striking water from the rock, in reference to the biblical miracle. The circumstances and date of the statue’s placement on the fountain are obscured by a lack of documentary evidence – it is first recorded in 1679 – although it is often assumed that the figure was commissioned, as much as two centuries earlier, by the Jews of Siena. In this chapter, I draw on the conclusions of the preceding chapters, as well as specific circumstantial evidence, to assess the likelihood of whether the statue was indeed commissioned or appropriated by the Sienese Jews, or was rather imposed by the civic authorities who controlled the Ghetto. In other words, should this statue of Moses be seen as a proud symbol of Jewish identity, or as an oppressive reminder of Christian authority?

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PART I.
Chapter 1) Moses and Michelangelo

“And well may the Jews continue to go, as they do each Sabbath, men and women flocking like starlings, to visit and adore [the Moses of Michelangelo], since it is not something human, but divine that they adore.”

Giorgio Vasari, Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1550

Since the tomb of Julius II was completed in 1545, its centrepiece, Michelangelo’s statue of Moses, has provoked strong, and often contentious opinions. Giorgio Vasari immediately identified it as an unparalleled masterpiece – and an object of distinctly un-Jewish worship. Since then, scholars from the fields of art history, and latterly Jewish cultural history and psychology, have continued to contest the significance of the statue, to project onto it biblical or invented narratives, to disagree among themselves, and to wrestle with personal feelings of ambivalence. The Moses has thus gained an extensive and diverse literature of its own that is rare for a single work of art, particularly one that was never intended to be more than one part of a much larger scheme. In this and the subsequent chapter, I examine what it is about the subject, Moses, and Michelangelo’s treatment of it, that underlies the peculiar controversy surrounding this image.

As noticed in the introduction, Michelangelo’s statue, which paradoxically defies the biblical, or “Mosaic” injunctions against “graven images,” exposes the ambivalent Christian status of Moses and the Law he handed down to the Jews. Here, I identify ways in which this ambivalence is made deliberately manifest in Christian images beginning in the late medieval period, and examine what is negotiated through images of this kind as they proliferate in Italian painting and sculpture of the Reformation era. Ultimately, I show how widespread religious controversies are inscribed in Michelangelo’s marble figure, as well as in imaginative responses to it in art and literature. While shedding new light on the Moses, these chapters reflect on more general complexities of Christian and Jewish visual cultures in early modern Italy, and beyond.

When Vasari first wrote his Life of Michelangelo (1550), the statue of Moses that the artist began carving some three decades earlier (c. 1515) had only

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23 “E seguitino gli Ebrei di andare, come fanno ogni sabato, a schiera e maschi e femmine, come gli storni, a visitarlo ed adorarlo, che non cosa umana, una divina adoreranno.” Vasari, Vite (1550), p. 891
recently been finished and installed on the papal tomb (fig. 2). Michelangelo had received the commission for the tomb in 1505, when he was still young and hoping to monumentalise his reputation, as much as the pope’s, in a great sculptural work.\(^{24}\) After many years of frustration, he would bemoan “la tragedia della sepoltura,”\(^{25}\) for when it was at last completed, it was a much abbreviated version of earlier designs and, being installed in a basilica minor near the Colosseum, was far removed from the grandeur of Saint Peter’s in the Vatican.\(^{26}\) The tomb dominates the south transept of San Pietro in Vincoli, to the right of the high altar with the relic of the chains that the church was built to house.

The Moses was likely one of three figures that Michelangelo began for the second scheme, drawn up after Julius’s death in 1513; the other two figures are the “Slaves,” now in the Louvre. Conceived as part of a huge configuration of statues on a freestanding monument, the counterpart to the Moses, according to Vasari’s second version of the Lives (1568), was to have been a figure of Saint Paul.\(^{27}\) In the final wall tomb, Moses – a colossal figure, more than twice life-size – is placed centrally, and flanked by the biblical sisters, Rachel and Leah, who stand for the Active and Contemplative Lives.\(^{28}\) Directly above Moses is a reclining effigy of the pope, flanked by a prophet and a sibyl, both seated, and surmounted by a standing Virgin and Child. The extent of Michelangelo’s direct involvement in carving these several figures is debatable, and among them, Moses has always stood out as a singular masterpiece.\(^{29}\)


\(^{25}\) The phrase is attributed to Michelangelo by Condivi (Ibid. p. 35).

\(^{26}\) The decision to erect the monument in San Pietro in Vincoli, which was Julius’s titular church as a cardinal, was taken in 1532, and work began on the tomb in 1533-34. See Claudia Echinger-Maurach: “Michelangelo’s Monument for Julius II in 1534,” The Burlington Magazine, Vol. 145, No. 1202 (May, 2003), pp. 336-344

\(^{27}\) Vasari, Giorgio: Delle vite de’ piu eccellenti pittori, scultori et architettori (Part 3; volume 2), Firenze: Giunti, p. 717

\(^{28}\) Condivi, op. cit, p. 36.

\(^{29}\) Ulisse Aldrovandi, for example, was unimpressed by the monument (which he described as “una parte del sepolcro di Iulio II”), paying scant attention to its several other figures, but comparing the Moses favourably to antique sculpture: “È opera di Michele Angelo, ma da star con qual si voglia, de le antiche a fronte.” (p. 291). Aldrovandi, Ulisse & Lucio Mauro: Le antichità della città di Roma, Venice: Ziletti, 1556 (p. 291). According to Condivi (op. cit.), the tomb comprised three works by the master’s hand (Moses, the Active Life and the Contemplative Life), but recently Antonio Forcellino has argued that the head and hands of the pope are also Michelangelo’s. See Appendix 1 in Forcellino, Antonio: Michelangelo Buonarroti: storia di una passione eretica, Torino: Einaudi, 2002.
Despite the failure of Michelangelo and Julius’s grand designs, it seems appropriate that Moses came to dominate the finished tomb. As Michelangelo’s appointed biographer Ascanio Condivi recounts, Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga, visiting the artist’s workshop with Pope Paul III (1534-49), remarked on seeing the Moses that “this statue alone is enough to honour the tomb of Julius.” The anecdote, which probably came from Michelangelo himself, is meant to vindicate the perceived failure of the tomb project, while recognising Moses’s pre-eminence as a papal type. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a number of popes commissioned works of art that identified them, more or less explicitly, with Moses: Sixtus IV (1471-84) had episodes from the life of Moses frescoed in his re-founded (“Sistine”) chapel in the Apostolic Palace, Clement VII (1523-34) ordered Benvenuto Cellini to show Moses striking water from the rock on the reverse of his portrait medal, while Sixtus V’s (1585-1590) restoration of an ancient Roman aqueduct – renamed the Acqua Felice, after the pope’s given name – was marked by a colossal statue of Moses at the terminus. The typology of Moses might have seemed especially apt for Julius II: in his treatise On Principalities (c. 1513, published 1532), Niccolò Machiavelli had recommended the princely virtues of both Moses and Julius, the warrior pope.

As the centrepiece of the tomb, Michelangelo’s statue of Moses is set in a shallow recess between two architectural elements containing the smaller, allegorical figures of Rachel and Leah. Moses is seated, contrapposto, his left foot drawn back, toes pressing the edge of a narrow plinth. A mass of drapery is gathered over the right thigh, exposing the knee, and below it an all’antica stocking and sandal. Powerful arms are bared by a sleeveless tunic. Pressed between the figure’s right arm and flank are the stone tablets commonly associated with the lawgiver, and represented here by a flat, rectangular

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30 Condivi, op. cit, p. 35: “[Il] Reverendissimo Cardinale di Mantova, ch’era presente, vedendo quel Moise […] disse, que sta sola statua, è bastante a far honore alla sepoltura di Papa Giulio.”
31 Cellini tells the story of the commission in his autobiography.
32 The fountain was designed by the aptly named Domenico Fontana, while the statue of Moses (1588) is the much derided result of a collaboration between Leonardo Sormani and Prospero Bresciano. See: Steven F. Ostrow, “The Discourse of Failure in Seventeenth-Century Rome: Prospero Bresciano’s Moses,” The Art Bulletin, Vol. 88, No. 2 (June, 2006), pp. 267-291
33 Machiavelli, De Principatibus, parts XXV & XXVI. According to Condivi, when Michelangelo was modelling his lost bronze papal statue in Bologna, and suggested a book as an attribute, Julius retorted “better a sword.” Condivi, op. cit, p. 20
volume, incised along its edges to indicate a pair. Moses’s head, massively bearded, is turned left, casting his gaze towards the entrance to the basilica, but a large portion of the beard is pinned to the opposite breast by the fingers of the right hand, which reaches over the upper edge of the tablets. The left hand rests against the lower abdomen, where it meets the trailing ends of the beard. Moses’s mouth is set, and his brow furrowed. Emerging from the thick curls of hair above his forehead are two blunt, asymmetrical horns.

Such is the volume of literature surrounding Michelangelo’s Moses that it seems natural to approach the work by recalling some of what has been written about it. Let us begin with Vasari, whose extravagant praise for the statue would set the tone for many later eulogies. It is also dense with scriptural allusions; he declares that no work, ancient or modern, could ever stand comparison to this statue:

“every part of the work is so well finished, that Moses may now more than ever be called the friend of God [cf. Exodus, 33:11], since before all others He [God] wanted to reconstitute and prepare his body for the Resurrection [I Corinthians, 15:12-22], by the hands of Michelangelo.”

The statue’s face in particular appeared “so splendid and dazzling” to Vasari, that he suggested one might want a veil to cover it. This is an oblique reference to Exodus chapter 34, when Moses came down a second time from Mount Sinai, with two tablets of Law to replace those he had angrily destroyed on witnessing the adoration of the Golden Calf. On the second descent, Moses’s face appeared so transfigured from his encounter with the Lord that the children of Israel were afraid to come near, and after he had given them “in commandment all that he had heard of the Lord on Mount Sinai […] he put a veil upon his face” (Ex, 34:32-33).

Vasari’s idea that the statue might need a veil as much as the “Holy and most terrible prince” of Exodus epitomises the classic impression of divinità and

34 “Et ha si bene ritratto nel marmo la divinità che Dio aveva messo nel santissimo volto di quello […] et è finito talmente ogni lavoro suo, che Moisè può più oggi che mai chiamarsi amico di Dio, poiché tanto innanzi agli altri ha voluto mettere insieme e preparargli il corpo per la sua ressurrezione, per le mani di Michelagnolo.” Vasari, Vite (1550), p. 891
35 “…et inoltre alla bellezza della faccia, che ha certo ario di vero Santo e terribilissimo principe, pare che mentre lo guardi abbia voglia di chiedergli il velo per coprirgli la faccia, tanto splendida e tanto lucida appare altrui.” Ibid.
terribilità in Michelangelo’s art. Condivi likewise observed that the face of the statue, “full of spirit and vivacity, is apt to induce both love and terror, as might have been true [of Moses himself].” The effect would prove to be enduring: four centuries later, Sigmund Freud, a first-generation secular Jew, sensed a stirring of the same (filial) ambivalence towards the Jewish patriarch when he contemplated the figure; his essay “The Moses of Michelangelo” (1914), published anonymously in the psychoanalytic journal *Imago*, and only later claimed as his “Kind der Liebe” (“love-child”), attempted to explain through analytical interpretation the powerful effect the work had on him – a love to which he dared not lend his name.

If Michelangelo’s *Moses* could thus be seen as a perfect embodiment and psychological portrait of the biblical personality, the statue also epitomises Christian theological ambivalence towards the leader and lawgiver of the Jews, as commonly manifest in his visual representation. As we shall see, the image of Moses – in Christian art generally, and this statue in particular – has been apt to inspire contempt as well as respect. In the particular case of Michelangelo’s *Moses*, ambivalence is heightened by ambiguity concerning the statue’s narrative or symbolic content, which has so far resisted definitive interpretation. Freud acknowledged the enigma in the opening paragraphs of his essay: “There is not the slightest doubt that [the statue] represents Moses, the Law-giver of the Jews, holding the Tables of the Ten Commandments. That much is certain, but that is all.” Alas for Freud, we will later find cause to question whether even this much is certain. For the sake of a coherent discussion, we must defer any objection for now.

The uncertainties with which Freud was familiar relate especially to the question of narrative content. Opinion has long been divided over whether the *Moses* represents a particular moment in the biblical narrative, or whether the figure should rather be understood as a timeless portrait of the lawgiver. When Freud

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36 “E’ la faccia piena di vivacità et di spirito, et accomodata ad indurre amore insieme et terrore, qual forse fu il vero.” Condivi, op. cit, p. 36.


was essaying on the statue, it was generally agreed that Michelangelo imagined Moses on his first, ill-fated descent from Sinai when, having been forewarned by God that the people had fallen into idolatry – and having interceded for them to preserve the covenant – he heard their singing from the mountain. Then, “as he came nigh unto the camp [...] he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses’ anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount” (Ex, 32:19). On Moses’s orders, the Levites then killed three thousand of the faithless people.

In spite of the incongruity of a seated and unsuspecting Moses with the biblical account, visitors have long imagined the colossal figure disturbed by the frenzy of the idolaters, upon whom he turns his terrible gaze (fig. 3). Freud imagined as much on his many visits to the church: “Sometimes”, he tells us, “I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior as though I myself belonged to the mob upon whom his eye is turned – the mob which can hold fast no conviction, which has neither faith nor patience, and which rejoices when it has regained its illusory idols.”

With the left foot drawn back, toes pressing the plinth, an eager mind’s eye might see the seated figure rise and, letting fly his wrath, dash the flouted tablets to the ground. Under Freud’s level gaze, however, “nothing of the kind happened”; instead, “the stone image became more and more transfixed, an almost oppressively solemn calm emanated from it, and I was obliged to recognise that something was represented here that would stay without change; that this Moses would remain sitting like this in his wrath forever.”

Seeking to affirm his sense of the figure’s stasis, Freud imagined an apocryphal Moses – one “superior” to the biblical one – who managed to conquer his passionate impulse: “he remembered his mission and for its sake renounced an indulgence of his feelings.”

Despite his vivid evocation of the statue’s “affect,” there are serious problems with Freud’s analysis, not least his total distortion of the biblical account. The essay perhaps says more about its author than Michelangelo, or Moses,

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39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., pp. 220-221
41 Ibid., pp. 230 / 233
Freud’s interest in the statue caused the art-historical literature to be supplemented by contributions from the field of psychoanalysis, some of which will prove valuable to the present discussion.

Since the mid-twentieth century, art historians have, on the whole, been dismissive of narrative readings of Michelangelo’s statue. It has become more common to see in the figure, as Charles de Tolnay (1951) did, “the symbol of an eternal attitude,” not intended to represent any one “determinate moment of [Moses’s] life.”\footnote{Tolnay (pp. 84-5) still saw Moses as “trembling with indignation: a human cataclysm” and “[expressing] his supreme distain for human depravity” – a hangover from the Golden Calf narrative reading. As such, he only differs from Freud in the sense that for the latter, the “eternal attitude” was cast at a particular moment. Charles de Tolnay, Michelangelo: Sculptor, Painter, Architect, translated from the French by Gaynor Woodhouse, Princeton & London: Princeton University Press, 1975} Such a reading is in better agreement with Vasari, whose description of Moses as “seated in a very grave attitude, [resting] an arm on the tablets” does not anticipate the explosion of rage augured by other artists and commentators, nor even the superhuman restraint of Freud’s Moses.\footnote{Vasari, Vite (1550), p. 890: “[…] avvenga che egli con gravissima attitudine sedendo, posa un braccio in su le tavole che egli tiene con una mano e con l'altra si tiene la barba.”} The same may be said of Condivi’s description of Moses as “in the attitude of a contemplative thinker,” which Erwin Panofsky (1962) said did “infinitely more justice” to Michelangelo’s sculpture than any narrative reading.\footnote{Panofsky, Erwin: Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance, New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1962 (p. 193)} Panofsky attributes this characterisation, and the pairing with Saint Paul mentioned by Vasari, to the influence of the Florentine Neoplatonists, who recognised Moses and Paul as visionaries, both having seen “with the inner eye” the face of God.\footnote{“Con questo viso vidde Moyse vidde Paolo, viddono molti altri eletti la faccia de Dio, et questo e quello che nostri Theologi [viz., the Neoplatonists] chiamano la cognizione intelleutale, cognizione intuitiva.” Panofsky (Studies in Iconology, p. 140) cites Pico della Mirandola, Opere di Giovanni Benivieni Fiorentino … con una canzona dello amor celeste & divino, col commento dello Ill. S. conte Giovanni Pico Mirandolano, Venice: 1522.} In Panofsky’s view, Michelangelo’s Moses “sees nothing but what the Neoplatonists would call the ‘splendour of the light divine.’”\footnote{Panofsky, op. cit, p. 193. According to Panofsky (ibid.), the persistent “erroneous interpretation” of Moses’s action (which would never have suggested itself had the statue appeared on the tomb as originally planned) “seems to have originated in the late Baroque period, when popular interest was focused on the dramatic, and the Neoplatonic tradition [evidenced by Condivi’s reading] had fallen into oblivion.”} Thus, views of Michelangelo’s statue remain polarised: some, like Vasari and Panofsky, see Moses’s face as reflecting the glory of God; others, like Freud, the abomination of the Golden Calf.

\footnote{Tolnay (pp. 84-5) still saw Moses as “trembling with indignation: a human cataclysm” and “[expressing] his supreme distain for human depravity” – a hangover from the Golden Calf narrative reading. As such, he only differs from Freud in the sense that for the latter, the “eternal attitude” was cast at a particular moment. Charles de Tolnay, Michelangelo: Sculptor, Painter, Architect, translated from the French by Gaynor Woodhouse, Princeton & London: Princeton University Press, 1975}
These contrary perceptions reflect the essential paradox of Michelangelo’s statue. It embodies a conflict between what it seems to epitomise, that is, the great biblical iconoclast, and the way in which it is epitomised, as a masterpiece of sculpture. If Michelangelo managed to petrify the fearsome iconoclast, it was only by reflecting his divinità and terribilità. Vasari’s description of the statue proclaims the sculptor’s victory: it is this image, of the forbidding Moses, that finally surpasses the example of the ancients: “so well has [Michelangelo] portrayed in marble the divinity which God had put into that most holy face.”

How can one hope to reconcile this paradox? An image which is seen as an embodiment of Moses, but which is fundamentally at odds with him – even alleged to inspire the image-worship that Moses meant to eradicate?

The problem is inherent in the traditional status of Moses and Mosaic Law in the Church. In spite of Jesus’s declaration that he had “not come to destroy [the law], but to fulfil” (Matthew, 5:17), the Apostles, especially Saint Paul, diminished its authority by insisting that faith in Christ was the only requisite for salvation. The Pauline Epistles must have affected the way Vasari saw the statue of the lawgiver. As Paul Barolsky has noticed, the “saintliness” of Moses and his supposed readiness for the resurrection are allusions to the Epistles, so when Vasari “speaks of the veil needed to cover the face of the Moses,” he must have in mind “Paul’s rewriting of Exodus as the unveiling of Jesus.” The “rewriting” to which Barolsky refers is in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians in which he contrasts the “old testament” of Moses with the “new testament” of Christ. In this letter, Paul refers to a metaphorical “epistle of Christ,” that is written “not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God: not in tables of stone, but in the fleshy tables of the heart” (II Corinthians, 3:3). Here, the law of Moses is disparaged as something dead (stone), in contrast to the epistle of Christ, which is living. The bodily metaphor entails an allusion to the Incarnation.

According to Paul, the Jews’ inability to look upon the glory in Moses’s face prefigures their blindness to Jesus’s divinity (a blindness from which the apostle

48 “…et inoltre alla bellezza della faccia, che ha certo aria di vero Santo e terribilissimo principe, pare che mentre lo guardi abbia voglia di chiedergli il velo per coprirgli la faccia, tanto splendida e tanto lucida appare altrui.” Vasari, op. cit. p. 891

himself recovered at Damascus), and their failure to recognise the prophetic truths of their own Scripture: “for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ” (2 Corinthians, 3:14). To the medieval Christian mind, this metaphorical blindness underlay the Jews’ literal aversion to (Christian) images.  

As I outlined briefly in the introduction, the debasement of the image prohibition in the Church derives from the theological premise of Christianity, the idea of God incarnate. As Herbert Kessler has described, the enduring Christian attitude to the image prohibition that emerged in the twelfth century, after a millennium of controversy and two periods of Byzantine iconoclasm, held that its strict observance was at odds with belief in the Incarnation. In short, the prohibition upheld the principle of God’s unrepresentability, so to continue to adhere to it was tantamount to denying that God had now been represented in the physical body of Christ. For the Christian consensus in support of images, those who condemned them with an appeal to Mosaic Law were guilty of a “Jewish literalism” that denied the spiritual content of the Scripture. Thus, as Kessler puts it, the prohibition was effectively “transmuted into its own converse,” becoming a provocation for Christian images.

The idea is neatly encapsulated by the Ferrarese painter Cosmè Tura, in his Virgin and Child Enthroned (fig. 4), originally the central panel of a polyptych altarpiece for the Roverella chapel in San Giorgio fuori le Mura, Ferrara (1470s). In Tura’s image, the Ten Commandments are inscribed in Hebrew on two stone tablets that flank the throne of the Virgin and Child. The body of the sleeping infant is contorted to eclipse part of the phrase signifying the second edict—which, according to the Talmudic division of the Decalogue, incorporates the image prohibition. The result is that the part of the Law that forbade the

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51 Kessler, Spiritual Seeing, p. 29

52 Ibid.

53 See Stephen Campbell’s discussion “‘Adversus Iudaeos’: The Metaphor of Painting,” in Campbell, Stephen: Cosmè Tura of Ferrara: Style, Politics, and the Renaissance City, 1450-1495, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997 (Chapter IV). The Ten Commandments are a formulation of several more or less distinct edicts recorded in Exodus (20:2-17) and Deuteronomy (5:6-21); they are referred to as being ten* but never explicitly demarcated as such. *Ex. 34:28, Deut. 1:13, Deut. 3:14 & Deut. 10:4.
making of images, and thereby preserved God’s unrepresentability, is obliterated by an image of God incarnate.

Statues of Moses in the Jewish Temple

The iconography of Cosmè Tura’s panel might be highly unusual, but it is conceptually related to a formula in late medieval and Renaissance painting that has so far been overlooked or misunderstood by iconologists. It involves the appearance of Moses in the form of a fictive statuette or relief figure in scenes from the New Testament, especially those set in the Temple of Jerusalem. The two scenes in which the fictive image of Moses appears most frequently, The Presentation in the Temple and The Circumcision, both involve the infant Jesus being brought by his parents to the Temple, to satisfy the requirements of Mosaic Law. A survey of related images leaves no doubt that the intrusion of the sculpted image of Moses in the Jewish Temple stands for the Christian supersession of Judaism and the redundancy of the Law. As will be shown here, this symbolic usage was prevalent in sixteenth-century Italian art, which must affect our understanding of Michelangelo’s Moses, and more broadly, the concept of Judaism in Christian image making.

The representation of Moses as a fictive sculpture emerged as a standard usage in and around Cologne from the mid-fifteenth century, and later in Northern Italy, but it seems to originate in fourteenth-century Siena, in an influential altarpiece by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, dated 1342. In Lorenzetti’s Presentation in the Temple, painted for the altar of San Crescenzo in Siena Cathedral, Moses, nimbed and horned with light, appears in the upper left border of the panel, holding a scroll prescribing the ritual purification of the mother (fig. 5); opposite Moses, the prophet Malachi foretells Jesus’s coming to the Temple. In the pictorial space below, Moses appears again as a grisaille statuette atop an architectural column, while a corresponding column to the right supports a figure of Joshua, who led the Israelites to the Promised Land.


55 For an extensive discussion of this altarpiece, see Péter Bokody, Images-within-Images in Italian Painting (1250-1350): Reality and Reflexivity, Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, chapters 4 & 5.
after Moses’s death. After Lorenzetti, statuettes of Moses and Joshua were painted by later Sienese masters Benedetto di Bindo (1409-12), Sano di Pietro, and Giovanni di Paolo (1447-49), in various scenes set in the Jewish Temple.  

Like Moses and Malachi, the pairing of Moses and Joshua evidently symbolises the passage from the Old Law to the New; but their appearance in the guise of sculptures adds an important metaphysical dimension, to be considered below.

A century after Lorenzetti, in an altarpiece by the German painter Stefan Lochner (1447), the ritual presentation takes place before a gold altar decorated with a fictive relief of Moses holding the tablets of Law (fig. 6), while a slightly later treatment of the subject, on a panel from the Liesborn Altarpiece (c. 1470-80), includes a statuette of Moses standing on a Gothic column in the Temple architecture. The Master of the Aachen Altarpiece (1485), like Lochner, staged the Presentation before a golden reredos, the central image of which is the Binding of Isaac (at once recalling the old covenant of Abraham and prefiguring Christ’s sacrifice); the reredos supports a Moses statuette.

There is no sense in supposing, as Panofsky did, that these painters put figures of Moses in the Temple of Jerusalem simply as part of an imagined Jewish iconography. They would have been aware, as would any Christian image-maker, that the Jews’ strict observance of Mosaic Law kept their Temple free of images, let alone sculpted human figures, with the exception of the ornaments prescribed for the Tabernacle in Exodus (chapters 25 to 31). So why, when Christian artists had available the authentic description of the Temple furnishings, including the Ark of the Covenant, the cherubim, and the iconic seven-branched lampstand, should they persist with an invented iconography based on the (forbidden) image of the lawgiver?

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56 Bokody, op. cit, pp. 107-108
58 National Gallery, London. Two other statuettes represent King David, who signifies Jesus’s royal descent, and Malachi, who prophesied his coming to the Temple.
59 Panofsky explains the appearance of Moses in Lochner’s painting (and, by inference, others like it) as follows: “[The] Presentation of Christ was a Jewish ritual, and the altar at which it was performed stood in the Temple of Jerusalem. Stephan Lochner imagined its shape and ornaments after the fashion of Christian altars he knew, but he wished to characterize its iconography as Jewish by placing Moses in the central panel.” Panofsky, Erwin: “Once More The Friedsam Annunciation and the Problem of the Ghent Altarpiece,” The Art Bulletin, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Dec., 1938), pp. 419-442 (p. 430)
What is implied by these incongruous images of Moses is made explicit by the St Severin Master, whose Presentation (c. 1490) takes place before an altar with a golden statuette of Moses on an isolated column (fig. 7). In Christian tradition, statues on freestanding columns bring with them an inevitable association with idolatry, since idols, including the notorious Golden Calf, are commonly represented in this way (fig. 8). Furthermore, in the painting of the St Severin Master, the golden “Moses-idol” is placed in front of, and thereby partly obscuring a scroll with the Decalogue – including the prohibition of images – in Hebrew; the Law of Moses, in a literal, or explicitly figurative sense, is thereby eclipsed. The device is comparable to the one used by Cosmè Tura in his Virgin and Child Enthroned, in which the Law is overshadowed by the body of Christ, but there is an additional recursive aspect here in the use the lawgiver’s own image to negate the Law. In the paradoxical framework of the image, the Holy Family’s observance of the Law seems only to confirm its abrogation, but such an idea could not be articulated by a simple disregard for the image prohibition (which permitted the making of Christian images in general), so the painter gave it emphasis by deliberately inverting the prohibition within the image itself. Moses, who forbade idols, becomes one.

It is clear that in the examples just cited, the (fictively) sculpted figure of Moses is a symbol of Christianity’s supersession of Judaism, but why should this device have proliferated where it did: first in late-medieval Siena, and then in Cologne? Péter Bokody examines Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Presentation (1342), in his recent study of medieval Italian meta-painting, the titular theme of which is “images-within-images.” In the context of Bokody’s discussion, the fictive statues of Moses and Joshua in the Presentation exemplify how Ambrogio (like the Florentines Giotto and Bernardo Daddi) “actively engaged in the pictorial re-evaluation” of the new realism that was emerging in Italian painting between the mid-thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In a sense, this preludes the deeper re-evaluation of sacred images that occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The “self-reflexive tendencies” that Bokody identifies in images from the trecento would become endemic in Italian painting and sculpture as

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60 See: Camille, *The Gothic Idol*
61 Bokody, op. cit, p. 2
62 Ibid, p. 111
concerns about the legitimacy of sacred images were caught up in a wider religious controversy.

In his study, Bokody cites examples of monochrome images being juxtaposed with polychrome ones, which he identifies as a means to “distinguish the era of the Old Testament from the era of [Grace]”⁶³ (an idea developed by Stephen Campbell in relation to Cosmè Tura’s Roverella altarpiece, to which we will return). Bokody, however, does not identify the allusion to sculpture that grisaille painting naturally entails as having any special importance in terms of Mosaic Law; neither does he acknowledge the significance of Moses as legislator against (sculpted) images – although he does notice that Lorenzetti’s figure of Moses, which he relates to Giovanni Pisano’s statue on the façade of Siena Cathedral (fig. 32), is more statue-like than the figure of Joshua, whose cape blows in an imaginary wind.⁶⁴ Ambrogio was, I suggest, conscious of the particular self-reflexivity that is inherent in a sculpted figure of Moses, just as Michelangelo would be two centuries later. In both cases, this consciousness may be related to a general interest in antique sculpture – a theme to which we will return in the following chapter.

“Slay them Not” – Jews in Medieval Christendom

After several Sienese examples, which seem to emanate from Lorenzetti’s Presentation, a fictive sculpture of Moses appears in an altarpiece of the same subject by Stefan Lochner (1447), and after him by several other painters of the Cologne school, including the St Severin Master (c. 1490), whose statuette eclipses the Decalogue in Hebrew. The latter’s careful rendering of the Hebrew text, and of the tallit (prayer shawl) worn by the mohel (circumciser) implies some direct experience of Jewish ceremonies – and yet, at the time the St Severin Master painted his altarpiece, the Jews of Cologne had long since been expelled from the city, and their synagogue converted into a Marian chapel (1426).⁶⁵ Stefan Lochner’s most celebrated commission, the Altarpiece of the

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⁶³ Ibid, p. 45. For example, the early-fourteenth century murals in the chapter house of Pomposa Abbey, near Ferrara, which are divided into monochrome and polychrome registers.
⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 106
City Patrons, was commissioned for this chapel in the 1440s, and in 1500, two panels were placed in the building, remembering the supersession of the Jewish cult, and anticipating the general conversion of the Jews. An enduring concern with Jews and Judaism, notwithstanding their absence from the city, is also evident in Lochner’s Last Judgement (c. 1435), in which a group of Jews, identified by the contemporary knobbed “judenhut,” feature prominently among the damned. This apparent fixation on Jews and Judaism is by no means peculiar to Cologne; it pervades medieval Christian art and thought, and has its roots in the theological foundations of Christianity.

Early Christianity defined itself by opposition to the religion from which it emerged, and it continued to do so long after it achieved predominance in Europe in Late Antiquity. The hugely disproportionate incidence of polemics, libels and pejoratives against Jews in medieval Europe, relative to the minority of actual Jewish populations, testifies to Christian reliance on a concept of Jewish otherness. The importance of Jewish posterity was articulated by Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who recommended that Jews should be permitted to live in Christian lands, to bear witness to the historical authenticity of Hebrew scripture and its supposedly Christian prophesies. Augustine’s argument – encapsulated by his paraphrase of Psalm 58; “slay them not, lest they forget thy law” – underpinned centuries of Church policy on the Jews, with numerous popes issuing bulls for their protection against violence or forced conversion.

As Gilbert Dahan has observed, the two principal arguments given by post-Augustinian theologians for tolerating the presence of Jews in Christendom are first, their preservation as a “witness race”, and second, their eventual

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67 Chapuis, op. cit, pp. 58-66


69 The Psalm in question is number 58 according to the Greek (Septuagint or Vulgate) numbering, or 59 according to the Hebrew numbering.

conversion as foretold in the scriptures.\textsuperscript{71} The emphatic shift in Church policy from preservation to conversion that occurred in mid-sixteenth century Italy is reflected in the establishment of ghettos, which isolated Jews without banishing them altogether, and in compulsory sermons aimed at Jewish conversion (of which more in chapter three). Until then, tolerance of Jews in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, depended largely upon their economic utility as usurers – an activity despised by Christians – balanced against their perceived threat to Christian morality. Paradoxically, in both social and theological terms, Jews were largely tolerated for the same reason for which they were despised.

This situation is exemplified in the city-state of Ferrara at the time Cosmè Tura painted the \textit{Roverella Altarpiece} (c. 1474), whose central panel shows the prohibition of images in Hebrew eclipsed by the image of Christ. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Jewish population of Ferrara flourished under the rule of the Estense Dukes, whose economy relied heavily on Jewish loan banking.\textsuperscript{72} In 1473, a year or so before the Roverella altarpiece was painted, Ercole I d’Este controversially relieved the Jews of Ferrara from paying the \textit{vigesima}, a papal tax demanding one twentieth of Jewish property values (he also exempted some loan bankers from wearing the sign of Jewish alterity imposed by the popes). Meanwhile, the general population of Ferrara had to rely on Jewish loans to meet the high taxes imposed by the Este, a circumstance that fuelled popular resentment and libels against the Jews – who were protected from violent retribution only by the strong arm of the Este.

In this climate, Stephen Campbell has interpreted the imagery of Tura’s polyptych altarpiece as a visual polemic against Judaism (as well as a politically subversive gesture by the Roverella family, who supported allegiance to the pope).\textsuperscript{73} Among the surviving panels of the altarpiece is a small roundel, probably from the predella, whose subject is the \textit{Circumcision of Christ} (fig. 9). In it, Tura shows the infant Jesus turning away from the priest who performs the

\textsuperscript{71} Dahan, Gilbert: \textit{The Christian Polemic Against the Jews in the Middle Ages}, translated from the French by Jody Gladding, Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, p. 16

\textsuperscript{72} See: Balletti, Andrea: \textit{Gli Ebrei e gli Estensi}, Reggio Emilia: Poligrafica Emiliana, 1930

ritual, a symbolic denial of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, of which circumcision is the bodily sign.\textsuperscript{74} Furthermore, the ritual is performed in front of a reredos with a monochrome image of Moses, kneeling with raised hands in the central panel, while the upper panel frames the head of God the Father. Campbell interprets the “colourless outline drawing” on the fictive reredos as an allusion to John Chrysostom’s metaphor of the Old Testament as a sketch to be completed, and at the same time obliterated, by the colours of the New Testament – a conceit that would be consistent with the central panel.\textsuperscript{75} In describing the atmosphere of aggressive polemicizing and proselytising in which the altarpiece was commissioned, Campbell recalls an unusual event that would be commonplace in Italy a century later; namely, a Jewish convert preaching in the Cathedral to a reluctant congregation of Jews.\textsuperscript{76} As Campbell argues, the Roverella altarpiece “speaks to those [Jews] about to convert or recently converted, convincing them […] of the faith of the Christian majority and its ascendancy over theirs.”\textsuperscript{77}

As we have seen, the key to the visual polemic of the Roverella altarpiece is the idea of the Christian image eclipsing the Hebrew word. In these terms, the Jews’ strict observance of the second commandment indicates their denial of the divinity of Jesus. So, Tura’s arrangement of the infant Christ in the central panel does more than undermine the Mosaic prohibition of images; it encapsulates the most persuasive argument in defence of Christian images in general. Admittedly, as Campbell remarks, a defence of Christian images (as opposed to an attack on Jewish iconophobia) would have been “somewhat redundant” in the 1470s,\textsuperscript{78} but the following century, when the threat of Christian iconoclasm was renewed by Protestant reformers – who upheld the authority of Mosaic Law – similar iconographic devices would be employed to support the essential role of images in Christian worship.

\textsuperscript{74} The Child turns away from the priest in an earlier \textit{Circumcision} by Mantegna (Mantua, c. 1460-64), which includes a gold relief of Moses delivering the Law to the people at Sinai (Florence: Galleria degli Uffizi). As an allusion to the Abrahamic covenant, \textit{The Binding of Isaac} appears in a lunette opposite the one containing Moses in Mantegna’s painting.

\textsuperscript{75} Campbell, \textit{Cosmè Tura of Ferrara}, pp. 117-18

\textsuperscript{76} Campbell (ibid, pp. 125 & 186) cites Zambotti, \textit{Diario Ferrarese}, 12, 2 July 1476.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, p. 125

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, p. 118
An example of this move is the Italianate Flemish painter Jan Gossaert’s *St Luke Drawing the Virgin* (fig. 10), which was made in the 1520s, around the time of the first rash of violent iconoclasm in Zurich (1523). In Gossaert’s painting, Luke – patron saint of artists, and the first icon painter, according to medieval legend – kneels before an apparition of the Virgin and Child. His right hand is guided by an angel, while above him, on an architectural pedestal, a statuette of Moses displays the tablets of Law, indicating with a finger the position of the first edict (assuming that the edicts are read as Hebrew, from right to left). Clifton Olds has recognised this as an allusion to the Augustinian division of the Decalogue, favoured by the Roman Church, which reduces the strength of the image prohibition by incorporating it with the primary assertion of monotheism.\(^\text{79}\) As Olds describes it, Gossaert’s Moses statue makes the point that “there, and only there, does one find God’s admonition about image making, and that in that context He refers only to the images of false gods.”\(^\text{80}\)

The same idea is elaborated by painters in Northern Italy, notably the Milanese Bernardino Luini (c. 1480-1532), and his Ferrarese contemporaries, Lodovico Mazzolino (c. 1480-1530) and Benvenuto Tisi, known as Garofalo (c. 1481-1559). In the architectural background of Luini’s *Presentation in the Temple* (Saronno, 1525-32), Moses appears in a lunette above an altarpiece, the subject of which is the first woman, Eve.\(^\text{81}\) The inscribed tablets held by Moses appear at first to contain only illegible pseudo-Hebrew (a common degradation of the Law in medieval art), but on closer inspection, the words “UNUM DEUM” are legible at the top of the left-hand tablet, effectively reducing the Law to its assertion of monotheism. The Law is similarly treated by Garofalo in his *Last Supper* (1544), painted for a religious refectory in Ferrara.\(^\text{83}\) Here, a grisaille


\(^\text{80}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{81}\) The pairing of Moses and Eve alludes to Paul’s letter to the Galatians (4:4-5): “…when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law.” Bernardino Luini, *The Presentation in the Temple*, fresco, 1525-32, Saronno, Santuario, della Beata Virgine dei Miracoli.

\(^\text{82}\) See: Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*, University of California Press, 1993 (p. 100)

figure of Moses appears in a lunette above the Apostles’ table; the inscription on the two large tablets he supports reduces the Law to a single verse of *Exodus* (34:14): “Adore not any strange god. The Lord, his name is jealous, he is a jealous God.”

Breaking the Law

A fictive statuette of Moses appears in a highly original design made by Michelangelo for an *Annunciation to the Virgin*, painted by his follower Marcello Venusti in 1547. The design (fig. 11), which Vasari called “[una] cosa nuova,” has, I suggest, a particular pertinence to the artist’s statue of Moses – also completed and installed in the mid-1540s – that has not yet been appreciated.

In Michelangelo’s drawing, the appearance of the angel with its seminal message causes the Virgin to turn away from the cabinet at which she is sitting, upon which there is a faintly outlined statuette of a seated Moses, holding the tablets of Law. The hovering angel extends its hand – not to indicate the Virgin, or heaven, according to convention; instead, it points towards the Moses statuette, now behind the Virgin and out of her sight. In light of our iconographic survey, we may suppose that the ostensibly sculpted figure, which represents Moses and the Law, also indicates their obsolescence. This is confirmed by two other details in the design: first, the Virgin’s exaggerated turning away from the figure, towards the new arrival from heaven; and second, the particular attitude of Moses, who wields his tablets as though to hurl them to the ground.

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84 Douay-Rheims. The Vulgate reads: “Noli adorare deum alienum; Dominus Zelotes nomen eius”


87 The unusual design of the tablets of Law – which have finger holes, like a painter’s palette – seems to derive from Fra Angelico’s *Vision of Ezekiel* on the Armadio degli argenti (c. 1455, Museo di San Marco, Florence), where Moses is placed at the top of the circular composition. Ezekiel’s vision of “wheels within wheels” was explained by Gregory the Great (pictured opposite Ezekiel in this image) as standing for the Old Testament and the New, since the latter is encompassed by the former. Fra Angelico’s *Vision* is followed by a series of New Testament scenes, captioned with their Old Testament prophesies – the first of which is the Annunciation.
The arrangement of the statuette refers to the narrative in *Exodus*, where Moses reacts to the adoration of the Golden Calf by casting the tablets out of his hands, and breaking them beneath Mount Sinai (Ex, 32:19). This only increases the unsettling effect of the statuette’s appearance at the Annunciation: not only does the graven image of Moses subvert the Law of Moses, as in the imaginary Temple of Jerusalem; in this case, it is seen actively to destroy it. If one imagines the scene before the arrival of the angel, with Mary paradoxically observing the Law of Moses by contemplating his graven image, it is hard to accommodate the violent attitude of the statuette. When the implicit meaning of a graven Moses is made as explicit as this, the effect is too disturbing to the fiction of Jewish worship. As such, we must suppose that the figure of Moses in the *Annunciation* had moved, from holding the tablets securely, and that its movement was prompted by the arrival of the angel, which also caused the Virgin to turn away from her observance. In this case, the destruction of the tablets is not precipitated by idol-worship, as it was in *Exodus*, but by the announcement that God himself will appear in human form.

In the context of Michelangelo’s design, Moses’s destruction of the tablets recalls the traditional interpretation of the episode that was advanced by Augustine of Hippo. Augustine, whose commentaries remained highly influential throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, understood the breaking of the tablets as a symbolic act of abrogation. He inferred that Moses had symbolically (and necessarily) broken the “Old” Law in order to facilitate its renewal. For Christians, after Augustine, the Law is renewed literally in the narrative of *Exodus*, with two new tablets, and figuratively in the events of the New Testament. The basis of Augustine’s interpretation was perhaps more than a Christian exegetical bias; as Robert Alter has observed, there is “a good amount of evidence that in the ancient Near East smashing the tables on which a binding agreement was written was a legal act of abrogating [that]


89 “And the LORD said unto Moses, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest.” (Exodus, 34:1) “Certe [...] repetitio Legis Novum Testamentum significat”. Augustine of Hippo, *Questiones in Heptateuchum*, Book 2 (*Questiones in Exodum*) 166 http://www.augustinus.it/latino/questioni_ettateuco/index2.htm (accessed October 2016)
This knowledge might have affected Augustine’s reading of the
episode; in any event, it became authoritative: the fateful apostasy at Sinai
continued to be understood by Christians as the event that precipitated the end
of Israel’s exclusive covenant with God, and laid the way for the new, universal
covenant of Christ.

The idea of Moses’s destruction of the tablets as a deliberate act of abrogation
is articulated in an image that accompanies a passage on the Ten
Commandments in a popular medieval moral treatise known as the Somme le
roi. In the image (Paris, c. 1295), Moses appears twice in a narrative
progression: first receiving and then breaking the tablets in reaction to the
adoration of the Golden Calf (fig. 12). Here, Moses is seen to act on the
explicit instruction of God, who appears (with cruciform nimbus) holding a scroll
with the message “break these tablets,” and pointing towards Moses with his
right forefinger. Instead of turning in anger towards the idolaters below him,
Moses turns away from them, to take direction from God. Clearly, the breaking
of the tablets is not to be seen as a simple physical (mis)deed, resulting from an
angry human impulse, but rather as a symbolic fulfilment of divine will.
Likewise, in Michelangelo’s Annunciation design, the self-abrogating Moses
statuette seems to act on the direction of the angel, who points towards it, and
not to the Virgin.

The particular agency of Michelangelo’s angel is underpinned by a clear visual
analogy between its right, “pointing” hand, and God’s gesture towards Adam in
the Sistine Chapel Creation (fig. 13). The analogy was remarked upon by

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90 Alter, Robert: The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary, New York &

91 The Somme le roi was written in Paris in the late-thirteenth century, and disseminated
throughout medieval and Renaissance Europe. It was usually accompanied by a set of
prescribed illustrations.

92 London, British Museum, MS Add. 28162, fol. 2v (Somme le roi, Picture I). In an image from
another version of the treatise (Picardie, 1311), Moses is supplanted in the second narrative
frame by the allegorical figure of the Synagogue. For a discussion of the iconography of this
and related manuscripts, see: Nathanael Price, Moses or Synagoga? Metaphorical
Transposition in an Illuminated Somme le roi Manuscript (Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal MS
6329), MA Dissertation (unpublished), Courtauld Institute, 2011.

93 The inscription is literally “BRIZE CES TABLES” [sic.].

94 Another, similar drawing for the Annunciation (whose attribution to Michelangelo Tolnay
doubted) shows more clearly the Moses statuette, but the angel’s gesture is directed towards
the Virgin. See Tolnay, Corpus dei disegni, Vol. III, No. 393, pp. 56-57
Charles de Tolnay, and later elaborated by Paul Barolsky.\textsuperscript{95} As the latter recalls, it is commonly understood that the divine hand in the \textit{Creation of Adam} embodies the Holy Spirit (as in the medieval hymn, “Come Creator Spirit ... finger of the right hand of the Father”), so the extended finger is the breath (“\textit{spiritus}”) that gives life to Adam.\textsuperscript{96} According to Barolsky, Michelangelo’s use of a similar gesture in the \textit{Annunciation} – in which the angel descends from the right, just as God does in the \textit{Creation} – establishes a typological connection between the inspiriting of Adam, and the spiritual incarnation of the “new Adam,” Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{97}

Significantly, the right index finger is also understood to be the instrument God used to inscribe the original tablets of Law, which are described as being “made by the work of God” (\textit{Ex}, 32:15), and written “with the finger of God” (\textit{Ex}, 31:18). After Moses breaks the tablets, however, the pair that is made to replace them differs in an important respect. First, God instructs Moses “hew thee two tables of stone like unto the former, and I will write upon them the words which were in the tables, which thou brokest” (\textit{Ex}, 34:1), only to contradict himself later, by ordering Moses “Write these words,” which Moses goes on to do (\textit{Ex}, 34:27-28). This inconsistency is interpreted by Augustine as a means by which the Jewish covenant is diminished, in anticipation of the Christian one. As Augustine argues, with reference to Saint Paul, the first set of tablets, inscribed by the finger (“that is to say, the Spirit”) of God, foreshadowed his grace in sending Christ, of which the Jews proved themselves undeserving when their “nostalgia for Egypt” led them to make themselves an idol.\textsuperscript{98} With the God-given tablets destroyed, the Jews would continue to honour the second set (“written by the work of man”), prefiguring “those men who boast of their own works, and not that of [the Spirit].”\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{95} Barolsky, Paul: \textit{Michelangelo and the Finger of God}, Athens: Georgia Museum of Art, 2003
\textsuperscript{96} As Raymond Tallis suggests, “the slightly awkward encounter between God and man through their index fingers depicted by Michelangelo, and indeed the theological idea behind it, was influenced by an intuition of the central role of the index finger in making us so different [from animals].” Tallis, Raymond: \textit{Michelangelo’s Finger: An Exploration of Everyday Transcendence}, London: Atlantic Books, 2011, p. xvi
\textsuperscript{97} Barolsky, \textit{Michelangelo and the Finger of God}, p. 44. See also: \textit{Corinthians}, 15:45
\textsuperscript{98} Augustine of Hippo, \textit{Quaestiones in Exodum}, 166.1 http://www.augustinus.it/latino/questioni_ettateuco/index2.htm (accessed October 2016)
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
It should be noticed that Michelangelo’s emphasis on the opposition between the Spirit and the Law in his *Annunciation* design is consistent with his own religious convictions during the 1540s. Recent scholarship on Michelangelo has been attentive to the artist’s sympathies with reformist elements within the Roman Church; in particular, his association with a covert group of reform-minded Roman Catholics, of which his close friend, the poet Vittoria Colonna, was an active member. Michelangelo privately espoused the group’s belief that salvation could be achieved through faith and faith alone – a position shared by Protestant reformers, and directly opposed to the Church’s insistence on justification through good works. The group’s manifesto, the *Beneficio di Cristo* (published in 1543, and almost immediately suppressed by the Inquisition) took its lead from Saint Paul: “we account a man to be justified by faith, without the works of the law” (*Romans*, 3:28). The first chapter of the *Beneficio di Cristo* is dedicated to Paul’s idea that God established the Law of Moses to instil man’s awareness of the original sin. Humankind was only delivered from the “malediction” of the Law when God sent his son, the “new Adam,” Jesus Christ. I suggest that Michelangelo’s 1540s design for the *Annunciation* could be seen as a visual manifesto for this group of reform-minded individuals, whose “urge to reveal the Holy Spirit as the force conveying [God’s] grace” led them to be known as the *Spirituali*. As I will go on to argue, the same concerns are inherent in Michelangelo’s statue of *Moses*.

**Re-analysing Moses**

At the start of this chapter, I introduced Sigmund Freud’s peculiar relationship with the *Moses*. In the hundred years and more since his essay appeared in *Imago*, it has provoked numerous critical responses in the literature of psychoanalysis. Art historians, however, have shown scant interest in Freud’s essay (apart from the customary passing reference), and likewise neglected the

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102 *Galatians*, 3:13

supplementary literature, presuming, perhaps, that the authors, not least among them Freud, lacked the knowledge of Christian iconography, exegesis or the context of production that is essential to understanding Michelangelo’s art. That is as may be – and Freud would dismiss his own efforts as “a fun [sic]” – but the analytical approach he recommended has its own merits. The method of connoisseurship pioneered by Giovanni Morelli (1814-91) was, as Freud saw it, “closely related to the technique of psychoanalysis,” relying as it did on the value of unappreciated or unnoticed features, retrieved “from the [refuse] heap, as it were, of our observations.”¹⁰⁴

Freud’s own “Morellian” approach might have been rewarding had he himself not left so much of import on the refuse heap. In an article published in 2003, in the American successor to *Imago*, two critics of psychoanalysis, Malcolm Macmillan and Peter Swales, examined the flawed interpretation of *Moses*, with the aim to shed light on Freud’s fundamental error of “valuing plausibility over correctness in psychoanalytic interpretation.”¹⁰⁵  Freud certainly had ulterior motives in writing his essay, and it is questionable how much a “correct” interpretation actually mattered to him (whether or not it was possible), but in aiming to redress his errors, scholars like Macmillan and Swales – though self-professed “laymen in matters of art,”¹⁰⁶ have approached the statue with an analytical rigour that art historians may do well to notice. Some of their contributions will be of use to us in this and the following chapter.

As we recall, Freud’s essay placed the *Moses* in an apocryphal narrative, in which the hero resists the angry urge to destroy the sacred tablets: “he remembered his mission and for its sake renounced an indulgence of his feelings.” Whether or not Freud was aware of the traditional, Augustinian view of the broken tablets, his imaginary preservation of the Mosaic Law reads transparently as a metaphor for his own “Mosaic” determination in the face of his psychoanalytic followers’ – most notably Jung’s – recent “apostasy.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Freud, “The Moses of Michelangelo,” p. 222. Although Freud used the English word “refuse” in the original German essay, it was replaced with “rubbish” in Strachey’s English translation.


¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 95

¹⁰⁷ Freud’s essay on “The Moses of Michelangelo” has been consistently interpreted as an allegory for the defence of his own psychoanalytic principles. Ibid, p. 90.
Moreover, Michelangelo’s manifest appreciation of the Augustinian reading is enough to dismiss Freud’s fanciful interpretation; to imagine a Moses who refuses to break the Law is to deny the supposed Christian symbolism of Hebrew Scripture – which in that case, loses its value in a Christian context. Still, the details that Freud followed to his errant conclusion are important ones, and usefully introduced within the context of his argument.

Freud’s analysis of Moses concentrates on two unnoticed, or at least unappreciated, features; first, the attitude of the right hand – which diverts the cascade of the figure’s massive beard – and second, the position of the two tablets of Law, which are resting on one corner, and apparently upside-down; “a singular way to treat such sacred objects.” With the help of a series of drawings, Freud explains these details as traces of previous actions: Moses, seated with the tablets held safely beneath his arm (using the notch on the inverted upper edge as a grip), is startled by the noise of the Hebrews’ revelry; he wheels in indignation, clutching his beard in a contraction of rage; at this point, the sacred tablets begin to slip from beneath his arm, and Moses draws back his hand to check them, so dragging his retreating right-hand fingers through his beard.

Freud’s revision of Exodus only amended the prevailing opinion that Moses was reacting to the worship of the Golden Calf. Later, Panofsky and others would dismiss such literal readings altogether, asserting instead the timelessness of Michelangelo’s conception of Moses; an idea accepted by most contemporary scholars, if not by Roman tourist guides. One voice of dissent, unheard or unheeded by art historians, was raised in 1976 by a Dutch scholar named Rudy Bremer, also in American Imago. Bremer contested the one point on which Freud and all art historians could agree: “There is not the slightest doubt that [the statue] represents Moses, the Law-giver of the Jews, holding the Tables of the Ten Commandments.” He points out that the tablets held (with a singular lack of reverence) by Michelangelo’s Moses contain not so much as a letter of Mosaic Law; something that, as far as I am aware, has gone completely unremarked in the art historical literature.

Not one jot or tittle of the Law

The peculiar blindness that seems to afflict scholars when faced with Moses’s blank tablets is epitomised by Peter Armour (better known for his work on Dante) whose ingenious interpretation of the statue made much of the idea that it should be read as “a text in stone” — going so far as to say that “[the] figure rests his arm upon what is literally a text in stone” — without once noticing that the tablets in question are quite bare. Freud also was attentive enough to the tablets to notice their position, but if he noticed their lack of an inscription, he did not see fit to mention it. Once noticed, we are bound to ask why should the lack of an inscription — the raison d’être for Moses’s tablets — be taken for granted in the case of Michelangelo’s statue, and what, if any, is the significance of this absence?

When scale permits, the tablets of Moses in Christian art usually contain some form of inscription, whether pseudo-Hebrew, a Latin paraphrase, or — in examples from the late-fifteenth and sixteenth centuries — the Decalogue in carefully copied Hebrew. Inscriptions of any sort are admittedly uncommon in Michelangelo’s art, particularly his sculpture; the tombs of Lorenzo and Giuliano de’ Medici (1520-34), like that of Julius II, are devoid of inscriptions, even in their architectural elements. Michelangelo’s general reluctance to include inscriptions, especially in his later work, has been ascribed to an increased emphasis on pure sculptural form, but in the case of the Moses, the inscription would not have been extraneous. The stone tablets of Moses are supposed to be inscribed (whether by God or Moses), but Michelangelo made a conscious decision to leave them blank. As I will argue, the blank

111 Peter Armour, “Michelangelo’s Moses: a Text in Stone,” Italian Studies, Volume 48, 1993, pp. 18-43 (p. 36). Armour argues that Exodus 35 is “the precise moment in [the biblical] text which Michelangelo is depicting” — i.e. when Moses relays to the people the instructions to make and ornament the Tabernacle; thus, “Michelangelo is portraying Moses at the very moment when, inspired by God, he acted as the first patron of art known to mankind.” (Ibid., p. 40)

112 The only two sculptures attributed to Michelangelo that include inscriptions are from the 1490s; they are the Santo Spirito Crucifix (the attribution for which is uncertain) and the Vatican Pietà (1498-99), which bears the fabled signature across the Virgin’s sash. The form of the signature has been interpreted as a complex “visio-verbal pun” with archaic and theological resonances. Lavin, Irving: “Divine Grace and the Remedy of the Imperfect: Michelangelo’s Signature on the St. Peter’s Pietà,” Artibus et Historiae, No. 68, 2013, pp. 277-328

113 “As the dialectic between form and meaning evolved […] all inscriptions became excessive and inadequate.” Weil-Garris, Kathleen: “On Pedestals: Michelangelo’s David, Bandinelli’s Hercules and Cacus and the Sculpture of the Piazza della Signoria,” in William E. Wallace (ed.), Michelangelo: Selected Scholarship in English, Hamden, CT: Garland, 1995 (p. 391)
tablets of Michelangelo’s Moses may be seen to manifest not only the dialectic of form and meaning in Italian Renaissance art, but more importantly, the Judeo-Christian dialectic of word and image. As I proposed in the introduction, the two are intimately related.

Michelangelo’s decision to align Moses’s tablets, so that they lie flat against each other, does offer the potential that the text they are expected to contain might be hidden on their inner faces (the tablets being effectively closed, like a book), but the arrangement is anyway unusual for a sculpted or painted representation of Moses with the tablets of the Law. Usually, the faces of the tablets are displayed overtly, as in a panel by Lorenzo Monaco (c. 1405-10), where a seated Moses supports the flat volumes by their upper edges, one in each hand (fig. 14). Indeed, Michelangelo’s early (1505) design for the tomb of Julius II includes a figure of Moses that is posed almost identically to Lorenzo Monaco’s (fig. 15). This is in marked contrast to the statue Michelangelo completed forty years later, where the tablets appear edgways when viewed from the front of the tomb, and are largely obscured by Moses’s leg and torso when the monument is approached via the nave aisle. Whichever way one looks at them, the importance of the tablets, and the words that may be supposed to appear on them, is effectively diminished.

The lack of an inscription on Moses’s tablets is, I would argue, consistent with the treatment of another sign of the Jewish covenant by Michelangelo, and earlier by Donatello. When they made their nude statues of David – the shepherd boy destined to be King of Israel – and when Michelangelo carved his Risen Christ (1519-21), they elected not to circumcise the figures’ exposed penises. By omitting this essential mark of the Abrahamic covenant, these sculptors did more than to bring their heroic figures into conformity with the Hellenic ideal (an ideal historically anathema to Judaism); they effectively erased the bodily inscription of their Jewishness – notwithstanding that Christ’s circumcision is attested by the Gospels, or that David scorned Goliath as an “uncircumcised Philistine” (I Samuel, 17). Michelangelo’s and Donatello’s disregard for circumcision reflects the Church’s disdain for the usage, beginning

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114 It may be objected that some text should always be visible, if these are the tablets described in Exodus (32: 15-16) as being written “on one side and the other,” but for reasons of legibility this detail has been ignored in Christian and Jewish iconography, where the Decalogue tends to be divided between two uniface tablets.
with Saint Paul’s avowed preference for a metaphorical “circumcision of the heart” (Romans, 2:29).

In another of his Epistles, mentioned earlier, Paul describes a symbolic epistle of Christ, that is written not with ink, or in “tables of stone,” but rather, “with the Spirit of the living God,” in “fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Corinthians, 3:3). Michelangelo’s statue of Moses, whose stone tablets bear no inscription, testifies to the continuity of Christian faith, as well as the supposed obsolescence of the Mosaic Law. In my view, the Pauline Epistles not only conditioned Vasari’s reading of Michelangelo’s Moses, but more fundamentally, they informed Michelangelo’s conception of the statue.

Rudy Bremer, who noticed the blankness of the tablets held by Michelangelo’s Moses, went on to argue that this was not necessarily at odds with the biblical account. Bremer recalled that in Exodus, Moses made not one, but two ascents of Mount Sinai, and came down with two different sets of stone tablets. On the first ascent (in Exodus, 32), he received tablets made and inscribed by God, which he broke on witnessing the adoration of the Golden Calf. Bremer reminds us that later, when Moses climbs the mountain again to repair the covenant, it is with “two blank stone tables in his hand, tables he had hewn himself at God’s command.”

This leads Bremer to conclude that Michelangelo imagined Moses at a particular moment, before the second set of tablets was inscribed.

On the second ascent of Sinai, not only was the Law reissued to Moses; before that he became, in Bremer’s words, the first human “permitted to see the glory of God’s posterior parts.” In the preceding narrative (Exodus 33), we read that “the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man is wont to speak to his friend,” although, as Robert Alter points out, these idioms for direct communication “cannot be literally true because the burden of what follows in this chapter is that no man, not even Moses, can see God’s face.” When Moses pleads with God to show him his glory, God replies, “Thou canst not see my face: for man shall not see me and live” (33:20); and yet, he does offer Moses a restricted view: “I will set thee in a hole of the rock, and protect thee

115 Bremer, op. cit, p. 62
116 Ibid, pp. 62-3
117 Alter, op. cit, p. 503.
with my right hand till [my glory passes]: And I will take away my hand, and thou shalt see my back parts.” After this limited revelation (in Exodus, 34), Moses’s own face is so transfigured by the reflected glory of God that the people are afraid to come near. According to Bremer, the encounter with God’s glory is the precise moment Michelangelo intended to represent: “Not Moses at the nadir of his career – literally and figuratively breaking the Law, violating God’s word – but Moses at the peak of that career – finding grace in God’s eyes.”

Bremer, however, seems oblivious to how the events described in Exodus might be understood in a Christian context. There is a prefigurative aspect to God’s (partial) revelation to Moses, which foreshadows the Incarnation, and there is the significance of the new tablets’ being man-made. The revelation on Mount Sinai might be the “peak” of Moses’s career, as Bremer suggested, but in Christian terms, it runs steadily downhill thereafter. Still, this ambivalence does not undermine Bremer’s framing of the statue within the narrative of Exodus 34. The “inferior,” man-made tablets that Moses holds, even while the glory of God is reflected in his face, encapsulates Moses’s Christian dichotomy. His fleeting, “pre-figurative” experience of God’s grace would identify him as a type of Christ, even while he continued to uphold the Jewish covenant.

There may be no precedent in art for a monumental, seated Moses holding tablets yet to be inscribed, but there is one such figure that comes directly after Michelangelo’s example. The marble screen for the Santa Casa di Loreto – the purported scene of the Annunciation, transported miraculously to Italy – incorporates a statue of Moses by Girolamo Lombardo (c. 1568). The figure, whose seated contrapposto, all’antica dress and brawny arms recall Michelangelo’s Moses, holds a blank stone tablet in his lap, and a stylus poised in his right hand (fig. 16). The identification of the second tablets, which is hinted at by Michelangelo, is made explicit here. Evidently, the sculptor recognised the significance, or diminished importance, of the second set of tablets.  

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118 Bremer, op. cit, p. 63. Another narrative argument was put forward by H. W. Janson (1968), who argued that “[Moses] is shown in a state of détente after the high drama of facing the Lord” in Exodus 34 (p. 245). Janson, however, did not challenge the new consensus of “timelessness;” for him, the “post-encounter” aspect of the figure is only an aspect, and not even the dominant one, of Michelangelo’s conception.” Janson, H. W: “The Right Arm of Michelangelo’s Moses” (1968), in Michelangelo: Selected Scholarship in English (William E. Wallace, ed., 5 volumes), Volume 4: Tomb of Julius II and other works in Rome, Hamden CT: Garland, 1995

stone tablets in contrast to the first, and in relation to the Annunciation, which heralded the new, Christian era.\textsuperscript{120} The lack of inscription on the tablets is underwritten by Saint Paul: “God […] hath made us fit ministers of the new testament, not in the letter but in the spirit” (\textit{II Corinthians}, 3:5-6).

The beard of Moses, and the Epistles of Saint Paul

While the blank tablets of Michelangelo’s \textit{Moses} have remained largely unnoticed, much has been made of the prophet’s huge beard and the way that he appears to handle it. The beard grows superabundantly in thick strands, some of them reaching as far as the figure’s waist. While Moses’s head is turned to his left, the bulk of the enormous beard is twisted and pinned to the opposite breast by the right hand, which reaches over the upper edge of the tablets. The left hand rests against the lower abdomen, where the thumb and index finger engage loosely with the trailing ends of the beard. There is a subtle visual interplay between the hands, which pass in opposite directions, but it is the activity of the right hand in relation to the beard that has attracted particular attention, especially from psychoanalysts (fig. 17).

It was originally Freud, being dissatisfied with descriptions given by art historians such as Thode, Burckhardt and Justi (who had Moses “grasping” his beard, or playing with it as an agitated man with his watch chain), who pointed out that “the index finger alone is in effective contact with the beard:

“It is pressed so deeply against the soft masses of hair that they bulge out beyond it both above and below […]. It cannot be denied that to press one’s beard with one finger is an extraordinary gesture and one not easy to understand.”\textsuperscript{121}

Certainly, if the activity of the right hand is to be understood as a gesture, in the sense that it expresses an idea or meaning, there is nothing obvious or ordinary about it; although, admittedly, this is no ordinary beard. In naturalistic terms, the pressure applied by the finger is clearly responsible for the diversion of the beard, which would otherwise fall straight over Moses’s chest and stomach. By

\textsuperscript{120} The same is true of Pietro Francavilla’s monumental \textit{Moses} (1592), in the Niccolini Chapel at Santa Croce in Florence; the figure is as heavily indebted to Michelangelo, but in addition to a stylus, Francavilla’s \textit{Moses} holds a pair of tablets inscribed with the Decalogue in Hebrew.

\textsuperscript{121} Freud, “The Moses of Michelangelo,” pp. 222-223
creating such a diversion, Michelangelo perhaps meant to add visual interest to the beard, and to moderate its ponderous form.

Still, the idea of employing just one finger to detain the massive volume of hair (the middle finger is also extended, but lies beneath the tresses) is so peculiar that I suspect, as Freud did, that the sculptor had more than formal considerations in mind. Freud fancied that the “extraordinary gesture” was an aftereffect of Moses’s wrathful beard-tugging: the hero, having regained his composure, drew back his hand to save the slipping tablets, inadvertently dragging the beard with it.¹²² Freud’s “cinematographic” analysis of Moses, which conceives the figure as though in the last frame of a projected sequence, does not read as a plausible account of a monumental statue.¹²³ As I will argue, the arrangement of Moses’s hands and beard is better understood in terms of formal composition, but it involves a number of allusions to biblical episodes and exegeses that are consistent with the representation of Moses in a Christian, and especially mid-sixteenth-century Roman context.

Fifteen years ago, the conservator and Michelangelo scholar Antonio Forcellino published important new insights into the production of the Moses, and in particular the idiosyncratic treatment of the figure’s beard. The Moses was, we recall, probably blocked out around 1515, as part of Michelangelo’s second scheme for the papal tomb, although it was not completed until three decades later, around 1545. In the meantime, the proposed site for the tomb was moved from San Pietro in the Vatican to San Pietro in Vincoli; the early plans for a gigantic, freestanding monument were abandoned, and Moses was eventually appointed to a central position on the relatively modest wall tomb that survives. During the conservation of the tomb in 2000, the conservator, Forcellino, found evidence indicating that the composition of the Moses had been radically altered at a late stage of completion. He concluded that these alterations were

¹²² Ibid, p. 228
¹²³ In her analysis of Freud’s “Moses of Michelangelo,” Mary Bergstein notes how the popular perception of Myron’s Discobolus as representing “the moment before the throw” was transformed by the appearance of the discus thrower sequence in Eadward Muybridge’s Animal Locomotion series (1887), which “revealed” that the pose of Myron’s figure was rather “a synthesis of a number of distinct sequential positions.” Bergstein, Mary: Mirrors of Memory: Freud, Photography, and the History of Art, Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press, 2010, pp. 77-78
made when Michelangelo resumed work on the statue around 1542, with the new design and location for the tomb in mind.\textsuperscript{124}

In particular, Forcellino found compelling evidence that Michelangelo originally carved the head of the Moses in a front-facing position, later reworking it so that it faced left, despite the extraordinary technical difficulty this entailed. His claim is supported by an anecdote from a contemporary of the artist that had hitherto been dismissed as a fantasy.\textsuperscript{125} Forcellino’s examination of the statue revealed numerous traces and inconsistencies that could only result from limitations imposed by a pre-worked block. Viewing the neck from the (hidden) left side and rear, he noticed an unnatural rigidity and asymmetry with respect to the shoulders, with the latter also appearing strangely unaffected by the turn of the head, which itself appears small in relation to the body.\textsuperscript{126} As for the forceful diversion of the huge beard, Forcellino explained it as resulting from “a lack of marble” directly below the chin, after the head had been turned to its new position.\textsuperscript{127}

To explain these alterations, Forcellino conceived the idea, with Christoph Frommel, that Michelangelo’s complete reworking of Moses’s head was a response to the tomb’s new location in San Pietro in Vincoli; a response driven by the artist’s personal religious convictions, and in particular his association with the Spirituali. According to their hypothesis, Michelangelo redirected


\textsuperscript{125} Shortly after Michelangelo’s death in 1564, an unidentified person wrote to Giorgio Vasari from Rome, with several anecdotes about the dead artist. In one of them, the correspondent recalls a visit to Michelangelo’s workshop, where (s)he saw the statue of Moses – “which was […] almost finished in the time of Pope Julius II” – and suggested that the figure could be improved by turning the head to one side. The sculptor made no immediate reply, but when the visitor returned soon afterwards, he said, “You know, Moses heard us speaking the other day and, in order to hear us better, turned his head.” The visitor was amazed to see that Michelangelo had reoriented the figure’s head within the “almost impossible” confines of the remaining marble. The letter to Vasari is transcribed in Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasaris / herausgegeben und mit kritischem Apparate versehen von Karl Frey (vol. II, 1930), München: Georg Müller, 1923-1940. See also: Paul Barolsky, The Faun in the Garden: Michelangelo and the Poetic Origins of Italian Renaissance Art, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, pp. 142 & 151

\textsuperscript{126} There are further inconsistencies below the trunk, from which Forcellino concluded that Michelangelo had brought the left leg back from a position parallel to the right one. The statue’s seat is lower by as much as eight centimetres on the affected side than on the proper right, while a disparity of scale between the two legs (the left one having been reworked entirely) is disguised by the abundance of drapery over the right knee. Forcellino, Antonio: Michelangelo Buonarroti: storia di una passione eretica, p. 208.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid, p. 209
Moses’s gaze to avert it from the high altar containing the miraculous relic of St Peter’s chains. As Forcellino argues, “[that] altar was the very symbol of Catholic superstition and the foundation of the temporal power that continued to uphold a Church in which Michelangelo no longer believed.” But that was not all: “the astonishing alteration” turned Moses’s gaze not only away from the altar, but towards the light that descended from a window to his left, which today is blocked up: “The ray of light that illuminated his ‘horns’ at sunset must have been the most refined complement to that spiritual suggestion to which the whole monument tended.” This, perhaps, was how Vasari remembered the polished face of the statue, which he described as “splendid and dazzling” as Moses’s own face when it reflected the glory of God.

While Forcellino’s idea that Michelangelo scorned the high altar is too conjectural to be convincing, his basic argument is persuasive that the sculptor altered the attitude of the Moses by turning the head, as well as dropping the left knee. Still, there are problems that Forcellino fails to address. According to his account of the alterations, in which the reorientation of the figure’s head was paramount, the final positions of the beard, the right hand and the peculiar index finger are all supposed to have been incidental. In supposing that the displacement of the beard was a result of its having been blocked out originally for a front-facing head, Forcellino does not acknowledge that the locks diverted by the right hand do not fall in the

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128 Forcellino, Michelangelo: una vita inquieta, p. 309
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid, p. 310
131 Vasari, op. cit. p. 891
132 The idea was sensational enough to have interested the mainstream Italian press, and even a US television network, resulting in a documentary film Secrets of the Dead: Michelangelo Revealed (2009), which illustrates Forcellino and Frommel’s hypothesis regarding the Moses. Alexander Nagel appears, discussing Michelangelo’s association with the Spirituali, although he does not explicitly endorse Forcellino’s hypothesis.
133 For example, while using the plan for the 1505 tomb scheme as evidence for an original, frontal pose for the Moses, Forcellino fails to acknowledge quite how different the statue is to the sketched figure. In Michelangelo’s plan, Moses is posed in a manner almost identical to that in the panel painting by Lorenzo Monaco (c. 1405-10), where the tablets are held by their upper edges, one to each side of the seated figure. Had Michelangelo blocked out his Moses in anything like that attitude, the eventual arrangement of the arms would not have been possible.
134 “Per risolvere il problema della mancanza di marmo nella parte inferiore della barba, Michelangelo la spostò tutta a destra con quel gesto [...] dell’indice che nella realtà non potrebbe mai avere le conseguenze che origina nella scultura.” Forcellino, Michelangelo: una vita inquieta, p. 311
centre of the chest, but rather, over the figure’s right breast. This suggests that
the beard was already displaced, albeit less conspicuously, even before the
reworking of the head. Since there is no suggestion that either hand was re-
positioned, we may assume that both hands, and particularly the right hand
index finger, were already engaged with the beard. So it seems that, while
Michelangelo did dramatically alter the figure at a late stage, the motif formed
by the beard and hands originates in an earlier phase of production.

I suggest that when Michelangelo resumed work on the Moses in the 1540s, he
did not set out to alter the figure as radically as Forcellino supposed. In
deciding to reorient the head to the left, the sculptor might have wanted to
exploit the light from the lost window, but I will argue that in doing so, he
accentuated subtle gestural allusions, inherent in the beard and hands, that had
gained importance in his re-conception of the Moses. My reading of these
allusive gestures confirms the statue’s “spiritual” aspect, as discerned by
Forcellino; it also happens to accommodate his view of the offending altar, but
does just as well without it.

The abundant, flowing beard of Moses, which tumbles over his breast in thick
streams, has been compared to a “torrential river,” or a waterfall,\footnote{E.g. Tolnay, Michelangelo, vol. 4, p. 41: “The man is a volcano, and the elements of fire and water are unleashed in him…” Forcellino (Michelangelo: una vita inquieta, p. 311) describes the beard as “come un fiume in piena.”} and in this it
rivals the beard of Giulio Romano’s river god in the Palazzo del Te (1526-27;
fig. 18); but the impressive cascade is choked midway by the pressure from the
right hand index finger – at which point, as Freud described it, “a kind of whorl
of hairs is formed;

“strands of hair coming from the left lie over strands coming from the
right, both caught in by that despotic finger. It is only beyond this place
that the masses of hair, deflected from their course, flow freely once
more.”\footnote{Freud, “The Moses of Michelangelo,” p. 223}

From here on, the beard flows less abundantly, separating into two main
rivulets, and eventually disappearing into the space behind the left hand.

The fluidity of the beard, and the way it is channelled, then seemingly liberated
by the finger, brings to mind the water that sprung from the desert rock when
Moses touched it with his staff (Numbers, 20; Exodus, 17). This, and other miracles enacted by Moses, are seen as important prefigurations of Christian salvation. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul suggested that the biblical Hebrews were “baptised” by Moses when he led them through the Red Sea, and that in the desert, they “drank of the spiritual rock that […] was Christ” (1 Corinthians, 10:4). From this passage, a long tradition of eucharistic readings of the desert miracle would emerge. As the brazen serpent was seen to foreshadow the Crucifixion, the striking of water from the rock came to prefigure the wounding of Christ by Longinus’s lance, which caused blood and water to flow. It is apt that the intervention from Moses’s forefinger occurs on the right side of the torso, corresponding with Christ’s wound. The allusion to the striking of water from the rock would be fitting for a papal tomb, since this particular Mosaic miracle was used by popes, including Clement VII (1523-34) and Sixtus V (1585-90), to typify their role in providing (spiritual) sustenance to their subjects. Michelangelo’s Moses, a type of Pope Julius II, as well as Christ, seems with a touch of his finger to summon water out of his own stony mass. The strong visual emphasis on Moses’s forefinger, which is accentuated by its interference with the beard, and the deep impression it makes in it, also recalls the function with which the index finger (Italian: indice) is synonymous: indicare, to point. Significantly, Moses’s index finger was construed as pointing, in a meaningful sense, by at least two early observers of Michelangelo’s statue. In Federico Zuccari’s posthumous portrait of Michelangelo posed as Moses (c. 1600) – versions of which survive in ink and in oils – the painter repeated the statue’s prominent forefinger, despite there being no beard to hold (Michelangelo’s being less abundant than Moses’s. fig. 19). Zuccari also picked up and repeated a subtle rhyme between the fingers of Moses’s right

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137 This idea was developed in conversation with Alison Wright.
138 The typological association is illustrated by the pairing of the two subjects in the Biblia pauperum, and was exploited by Bronzino in his frescoes (1540-45) for the Chapel of Eleonora di Toledo in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. See: Janet Cox-Rearick, Bronzino’s Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio, Berkeley; Oxford: University of California Press, 1993, p. 224
139 Cf. Benvenuto Cellini’s portrait medal for Clement VII, and the terminus for the the Acqua Felice aqueduct, commissioned by Sixtus V (both examples are cited at the start of this chapter).
140 See Julian Brooks (ed.): Taddeo and Federico Zuccaro: Artist-brothers in Renaissance Rome, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007 (p. 36; cat. no. 22; fig. 5). In addition to the oil painting on leather in the Pinacoteca Comunale, Macerata, there is a version on paper at the the Cabinet des Dessins (4388), Musée du Louvre, Paris.
and left hands: the index finger of the (proper) left, when transposed to the portrait of Michelangelo, indicates the open end of a paper scroll that the artist holds in his palm. This may be an allusion to the divine origin of disegno – the foundation of the arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, which are represented by the instruments lying at the feet of Michelangelo, so-called “divine” master of all three arts. While the right-hand finger is angled heavenwards (in the painted version, the trajectory is emphasised by the upward arc of a crease in the fabric of the shirt), the tip of the left index finger rests on the paper – the medium of disegno.

The right hand of Michelangelo’s Moses was interpreted along similar lines by the seventeenth-century priest and theologian Giovanni Andrea Borboni. In his treatise On Statues (Rome, 1661), Borboni describes Moses as seated, “leaning his right arm on the tablets of the Law, and pointing with his finger.” For Borboni, Moses seemed “to command the offering [of the Law] to his people, as though writing with the finger of the Almighty.” His exegesis of the statue considers that it was with his finger that God first inscribed the tablets of Law, as well as issuing the first commandment to Adam. (Thus, in Condivi’s description of Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam, God has “his arm and hand extended, as though giving the commandments to Adam, for what he should and should not do.”) If Moses’s right hand recalls the work of the Holy Spirit – to which the index finger may be seen as analogous – the “sinister” left points back towards the stone tablets, which, since the first pair was destroyed, represent the work of man.

The interpretation of Moses’s hands by Borboni and Zuccari lends support to my view that the hands of the statue involve deliberate gestural allusions, relating to the artist’s highly developed conceit. The interplay of hands, which seem to point in opposite directions, is a motif that appears in the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes (1508-12), most obviously in God’s creation of Adam,

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141 “Tiene egli stando a sedere, appoggiato il braccio dritto alle tavole della Legge, e accennando col dito, e rimirando fisso con lo sguardo, pare che egli n’intimi l’offerenza al suo Popolo, come col dito Onnipotente scrivendola, ne ordinò a lui l’Altissimo la pubblicazione, e il prenderne sempre, come ei fece, la difesa.” Borboni, Giovanni Andrea: Delle statue, Roma: Iacomo Fei d’And. F., 1661, pp. 139-40

142 Ibid.

143 “[...] si vede Iddio col braccio et colla mano distesa, dar quasi i precetti ad Adamo, di qualche far debbe et non fare, et col’altro braccio, racoglie i suoi agnolini.” Condivi, op. cit, p. 22
but also in the figure of Jonah, whose hands may be seen to indicate the opposition of light and darkness, death and resurrection. More particularly, the disposition and subtle interplay between Moses’s hands, which is exposed in the Zucchi portrait, is anticipated in Michelangelo’s early sculptural relief, The Madonna of the Stairs (c. 1491), a connection noticed by Charles de Tolnay. In the relief, the hands of the Madonna, who sits in profile, holding the Christ child in her lap, pass in opposite directions; the upper hand—the proper right—grips the hem of her cloak (in a way that isolates the index finger), while the left hand, which lies in her lap, engages with the trailing fabric (fig. 20). This is similar to the relationship between the hands of Moses and his beard. Tolnay does not elaborate on his observation (except to remark that the hands “[transcend] their immediate function to become expressive gestures”), but the analogy to the pose of the Madonna has been used by at least two psychoanalytic writers to argue for the “maternity” of Michelangelo’s Moses.

One of these analysts, Jerome Kavka (1980), photographically superimposed the Madonna on the Moses and “got the baby in the bosom” of the latter. For Kavka, this was a clue to a “hidden pregenital aspect” to the statue, which he suggested underlay Freud’s passionate response to it: “It seemed that the beard of Moses could represent a fetishistic substitution of the mother’s garment. The left arm is the baby-holding arm, and the right arm is used for uncovering the garment to expose the underlying breast.” Here Kavka abandons iconological reason in pursuit of psychoanalytic sensation, but his ideas have recently been developed by another analyst, Moshe Halevi Spero: “Moses Lactans: Evidence in Support of the Latent Mythic Value of Freud's 1914 "Moses of Michelangelo,"” American Imago, Volume 67, Number 2, Summer 2010, pp. 183-242.
observation about the exposed breast is surprisingly pertinent – at least, when applied to the Moses.

Since the *Madonna* holds a child in her lap, it is not the breast, but the child, that is exposed. She draws up her shawl to reveal the back of his body and the lower part of his head. In the child’s limp arm, there is certainly an allusion to a *Pietà* (a foreshadowing of Christ’s Passion),\(^{150}\) but the unusual back and lost-profile view entail, I suggest, an allusion to something else. The privileged glimpse being offered of the infant Christ’s back resonates with Moses’s limited view of God in *Exodus 34*, where he is permitted to see the Lord’s “back parts,” but not his face. This restricted view of God prefigures the incarnation, when Jesus became, in the words of Saint Paul, the “image of the invisible God.”\(^ {151}\)

In the *Madonna of the Stairs*, Michelangelo’s Madonna literally unveils the image of God, in Christ.

How, then, might this unveiling motif translate from the *Madonna*, to the *Moses*? The beard may not be what Kavka proposed, namely, a “fetishistic substitution of the mother’s garment,” but it could be seen to represent another kind of garment. With its theme of unveiling, Kavka’s description is unwittingly resonant with Saint Paul’s reading of *Exodus 34*, where Moses’s veiled countenance, reflecting the glory of God, anticipates the unveiling of Christ. And yet, it is not Moses’s face that is “unveiled” by the displaced beard, but rather his breast, which while lightly clothed, is emphatically exposed in gestural terms; only one flat strand of hair escapes the sideways pull of the right hand, while the heavy swag across the chest resembles a *reggicortina*. The exposed breast could be seen as an allusion to Paul’s metaphorical epistle of Christ, which is written “not in tables of stone but in the fleshly tables of the heart”:\(^ {152}\) for “even until this day, when Moses is read [by the Jews], *the veil is upon their heart*. But when they shall be converted to the Lord, *the veil shall be taken away*” (3:15-16).\(^{153}\)


\(^{151}\) *Colossians*, 1:15

\(^{152}\) *II Corinthians*, 3:3

\(^{153}\) *II Corinthians*, 3:15-16
The reading I propose is supported by another marble figure of Moses, carved by the sculptor and Servite friar Giovanni Angelo Montorsoli, for the high altar of Santa Maria dei Servi in Bologna (1558-61, fig. 21). Montorsoli, who was Michelangelo’s assistant in the Medici Chapel in Florence (1521-34), as well as for the 1532 project for the tomb of Julius II, makes clear visual reference to the figure of Moses that he must first have seen lying unfinished in the master’s workshop. Montorsoli’s Moses holds two blank tablets in his lap, while with his left hand, he lifts the lower part of his long beard to his shoulder, effectively exposing his breast. The ends of the beard trail on the stone tablets, which the beard would otherwise largely obscure. Thus the unveiling motif conceived by Michelangelo is exaggerated by Montorsoli – although in both cases, the trailing beard implies that there can be no complete revelation in Moses.

It should be noticed that the Pauline reading of Exodus 34 is the one to which Vasari alludes in his description of Michelangelo’s Moses, and it is one that would have remained fresh in the sculptor’s mind through his association with the Spirituali, and his attendance of sermons on the Epistles of Saint Paul. The last phase of work on the Moses also coincided with Michelangelo’s frescoing of Paul III’s new chapel in the Apostolic Palace; his Conversion of Paul (1542-45) represents the moment when the Apostle was struck blind by Christ’s revelation on the road to Damascus – where he recovered his sight, and was converted, by the grace imparted by the Holy Spirit.

It seems likely that, when Michelangelo started work on his Moses around 1515, he was acutely aware of the paradox inherent in a monumental statue of Moses. He was also accustomed to seeing Moses through the lens of Saint Paul, who figured strongly in his own spiritual life. As I have argued, the teenaged Michelangelo used the Pauline idea of revelation in the Madonna of the Stairs, and he might have consciously transposed the unveiling motif from the Madonna to the Moses. Work on the statue was abandoned on the eve of the Protestant Reformation, and when Michelangelo returned to it nearly three

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154 The altar’s central figure is a statue of the risen Christ, and the counterpart to Moses is Adam. The two figures, which physically bookend the altarpiece, symbolically bookend the era of the Law.

155 In his Dialogues, Francisco de Holanda describes attending, with Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna, sermons on the Pauline Epistles given by Fra Ambrogio Catarino Politi (1484-1553) at San Silvestro on the Quirinale. The Dialogues purport to record conversations that took place at Rome in late 1538, and were published in Portugal in 1548.
decades later, the Counter-Reformation was set to begin with the Council of Trent, convened by Paul III in December 1545. The controversy over images that the Reformation had precipitated would not be addressed by the Council until its twenty-fifth and final session in 1563, but it was at the sixth session, in January 1547, that the Council addressed the highly contentious issue of justification, whether by faith or good works. This pressing concern for Roman Catholic and Protestant Reformers is, I have suggested, an aspect of Michelangelo’s complex conception of the Moses.

The Tridentine Decree on Justification acknowledged the role of faith in conjunction with good works, but declared anathema the position occupied by the Spirituali – and by Michelangelo – that justification could be achieved by faith alone. If Michelangelo’s statue of Moses involves an allusion to the doctrine of sola fide, as I have suggested it might, the work might even have been construed as heretical. This would add further interest to Michelangelo’s recollection (through Condivi, in 1553) that it was Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga – a close friend to several leading Spirituali, despite his own relative conservatism – who suggested that the Moses alone would make a fitting monument to Julius II. In the mid-to-late 1530s, when the encounter in Michelangelo’s workshop is supposed to have taken place, Ercole Gonzaga exchanged empathic letters with Cardinal Gasparo Contarini, a leading member of the Spirituali, and influential reformer under Paul III, regarding the Pauline Epistles, and particularly the question of sola fide. Perhaps it was around the same time that Michelangelo resolved to develop the subtle gestural allusions of the Moses, creating an emphatic pose befitting the central figure of a papal tomb.

The report of Ercole Gonzaga’s endorsement, in the presence of the Pope and

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156 The canons and decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent, celebrated under the sovereign pontiffs Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV, London: Burnes & Oates, 1888, pp. 30-49
158 Murphy, op. cit, pp. 124-125
159 Since Condivi reports that on the same visit the Pope examined designs for the Last Judgement (1536-41), the visit must have occurred between the Pope’s coronation in 1534, and 1536.
other cardinals, might have offered an insurance against such criticisms as were levelled, for other reasons, against Michelangelo’s Last Judgement.\footnote{See: Melinda Schlitt, “Painting, Criticism, and Michelangelo's Last Judgment in the Age of the Counter Reformation,” in Marcia B. Hall (ed.): Michelangelo’s Last Judgement, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005}

In any case, the gestural allusions of Moses's beard and hands, which may not be the single, or even the most important aspect of the statue, could only have been noticed through the intuition of erudite observers like Vasari, Borboni or Montorsoli (the latter perhaps initiated by Michelangelo himself). Whether or not these signs are noticed, the key to Michelangelo’s conception of Moses is, I have argued, contained in the Epistles of Saint Paul, and in particular his second letter to the Corinthians: for “even until this day, when Moses is read [by the Jews], the veil is upon their heart. But when they shall be converted to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away.” In the denouement to Vasari’s passage on the Moses, the contemporary Roman Jews have their own Damascene moment, overcoming their biblical blindness when they come to “visit and adore” the statue of the fearsome iconoclast. In the following chapters, I will explore the tension of such (imaginary) encounters with Moses, for Christians, as well as for Jews.
Chapter 2)  
Michelangelo’s Moses-Idol: “Renaissance” as return of the repressed

The guidebook to Rome used by Sigmund Freud in 1913, contains a reference to Vasari’s tale of Roman Jews “adoring” the Moses of Michelangelo. There is no mention of Vasari’s anecdote in Freud’s own essay on the Moses, published anonymously in 1914, but it must have interested him, for in his copy of the guidebook the reference is underlined. Indeed, what Vasari describes – no less than a Jewish image-cult of Moses – seems to epitomise the important Freudian concept of the return of the repressed; that is, the “inexorable” rule by which repressed psychic or cultural material, in this case idolatrous worship, re-emerges through the agent of repression; here, the forbidding figure of Moses himself.

The concept is most engagingly illustrated by Freud in his analysis of Wilhelm Jensen’s novella, Gradiva: A Pompeian Fantasy (1903). Here, Freud also elaborates the archaeological metaphor that he used regularly to introduce his vision of psychoanalysis to his patients (the antiquities displayed in his consulting room manifest the deep connection he saw between his own work and that of archaeology). These important Freudian ideas – repression, recurrence and the archaeological metaphor – have, I suggest, unexploited potential as tools for understanding not only the special case of Michelangelo’s Moses, but Renaissance art and culture in general terms. That Freud failed to develop this understanding in his Moses essay – which necessarily resists the weight of his own teaching – only testifies to the strength of his ulterior motives in writing it. It is not my intention to go into these motives here, since we are

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161 Gsell-Fels, Theodor: Rom und die Campagna, Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1912, p. 754
162 Bergstein, Mirrors of Memory, pp. 54-5.
163 The “archaeological metaphor” has been neatly summarised by Donald Kuspit: “Freud directly compared the discoveries of psychoanalysis with those of archaeology: the primitive aspects of the psyche, at least in their gross features, resembled primitive worlds, and vice versa [...] just as archaeology reminded us of the continuing influence in our civilisation of past modes of social organisation and outlook (most notably for Freud in religion), so psychoanalysis reminds us of the continuing influence on our intimate lives of primitive psychic forms of experience and points of view. Both deal with the unexpected presence and power of the past.” Kuspit, Donald: “A Mighty Metaphor: The Analogy of Archaeology and Psychoanalysis,” in Lynn Gamwell & Richard Wells (eds.), Sigmund Freud and Art: His Personal Collection of Antiquities, Binghamton: State University of New York; London: Freud Museum, London, 1989 (p. 134)
presently more concerned with Michelangelo than with Freud. (In any case, the matter has been discussed quite extensively already.)

What I will show is how, from an art-historical perspective, Freud’s essays on literature and religion – notably the analysis of *Gradiva* (1907), *Totem and Taboo* (1913), and his final work, *Moses & Monotheism* (1939) – compensate abundantly for the deficiencies of his monograph on the *Moses*. Although Freud described his attempt to analyse the statue as “a fun” (sic), it could not be taken too lightly. The essay prompted a response from one of his faithful disciples, Theodor Reik, whose own discussion of the *Moses* (1922) has for a long while gathered dust in obscurity, but reads, I suggest, as a deliberate corrective to Freud’s “Moses of Michelangelo,” reconciling the errant analysis (or “non-analytical” love-child) with the Freudian corpus.

These ideas should interest not only historians of psychoanalysis, or biographers of Freud, but also historians of Renaissance art and culture. As we shall see, there is evidence, both literary and visual, that Michelangelo, Vasari and their contemporaries were as conscious of the cultural mechanisms of repression and recurrence as was Freud himself, and that they applied this knowledge to making and writing about art, especially figurative sculpture. Vasari’s story of the idolatrous Roman Jews has probably little basis in fact, but read in its historical context as an allegory of repression and recurrence, it

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164 See, for example, Ernest Jones: *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* (Volume II), London: Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 407-11. Also, Bergstein, *Mirrors of Memory*, pp. 110-114. Briefly, Freud’s interpretation of Michelangelo’s *Moses*, in which he imagines the lawgiver’s refusal to break the tablets of the Law (in spite of the biblical narrative), works as an allegory for Freud’s preservation of psychoanalytic “law” in the face of his followers’ perceived apostasy. It became clear at the Psycho-Analytical Congress in Munich, 1913, that Jung was following Adler and Stekel into apostasy; “The Moses of Michelangelo” – in which Freud lends his own voice to the tenacious lawgiver – was written later that year. For Jung and his fellow apostates, the anonymous voice (Mosaic, yet unmistakably Freudian) must have struck a chord: did they perhaps belong to the errant “mob,” that “can hold fast no conviction”, possessing “neither faith nor patience”? (“The Moses of Michelangelo,” p. 213)

165 “Why disgrace Moses by putting my name to it? It is a fun and perhaps no bad one.” Sigmund Freud, letter (in English) to Ernest Jones, 16 January 1914. Transcribed in Paskauskas, R. Andrew (ed.); *The Complete Correspondence of Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993 (p.256)

166 “My feeling for this piece of work is rather like that towards a love-child. For three lonely September weeks in 1913 I stood every day in the church in front of the statue, studied it, measured it, sketched it, until I captured the understanding for it which I ventured to express in the essay only anonymously. Only much later did I legitimatize this non-analytical child.” Freud, quoted in Jones (op. cit., p. 367). Aviva Briefel has criticised the place of “The Moses of Michelangelo” in the Freudian corpus, but he seems unaware of Reik’s response to the essay, let alone its significance. Briefel, Aviva: “Sacred Objects/Illusory Idols: The Fake in Freud’s “The Moses of Michelangelo,” *American Imago*, 60 (1) (2003), pp. 21-40
reveals important aspects of how Vasari and his contemporaries understood their own culture, and so enhances our understanding of theirs.

At the entrance to Freud’s study at Maresfield Gardens (now the Freud Museum), hangs a plaster copy of Wilhelm Jensen’s muse: an excavated Graeco-Roman bas-relief representing a young woman, walking, in full-length profile; as she walks, she raises her gown lightly in her hand to reveal her sandaled feet (fig. 22). Jensen’s story, as Freud recounts, concerns a young German archaeologist, Norbert Hanold, who — in spite of his complete indifference to the female sex — becomes mysteriously infatuated with the girl in the bas-relief: “she possessed something rare in antique sculpture, a realistic, simple, maidenly grace which gave the impression of imparting life to the relief.” Having acquired a cast of the sculpture for his study, Hanold becomes particularly enthused by the girl’s elegant manner of walking; he names her Gradiva — “she who walks splendidly.” Under the pretext of scientific enquiry, the archaeologist discovers a keen interest in the feet of his female contemporaries.

Now the young man nurtures a fantasy, which places a living Gradiva in Pompeii, before the eruption of Vesuvius. The author describes a vivid anxiety dream, wherein the dreamer is transported to that city on the day of its destruction — here he witnesses Gradiva’s death and petrifaction: “from Vesuvius, the red glow flared over her countenance, which, with closed eyes, was exactly like that of a beautiful statue.” Thus, Gradiva is buried by the rain of volcanic ashes.

In waking life, an unconscious compulsion leads Hanold to the excavated ruins of Pompeii, where he seems to encounter the Gradiva of his fantasy. However, it emerges that this girl (who so closely resembles the bas-relief) is no Graeco-Roman phantom, but a living German girl; moreover, she is (as reader and hero discover simultaneously), none other than Hanold’s childhood playmate, Zoë.

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167 Rome, Vatican Museums. The bas-relief is Roman, after a Greek original.
168 Freud, Sigmund & Wilhelm Jensen: Gradiva (Jensen) / Delusion and Dream in Wilhelm Jensen’s Gradiva (Freud), translated from the German by Helen M. Downey, Copenhagen & Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2003, p. 8
169 Gradivus is the epithet of the Roman war-god, Mars, advancing into battle. Gradus = step.
170 Jensen, Gradiva, p. 18
Bertgang – the hitherto forgotten object of his repressed eroticism.171 In Pompeii, the scene was set quite perfectly for this kind of psychological excavation; indeed, remarks Freud, “there is no better analogy for repression, which at the same time makes inaccessible and conserves something psychic, than the burial which was the fate of Pompeii [and of Zoë-Gradiva], and from which the city was able to rise again through work with the spade.”172

In the terms of Freud’s analysis, the fate of Jensen’s hero exemplifies the inevitable recurrence of repressed material. He uses the case of Hanold to remark on the typical manner of such a recurrence, “which is accomplished as if by malicious treason; the very thing which has been chosen as a means of repression [in Hanold’s case, archaeology...] becomes the carrier of the thing recurring [his love for the light-footed Zoë]; in and behind the agencies of repression, the repressed material finally asserts itself victoriously.”173 To illustrate his meaning, Freud uses a drawing by the Belgian artist Félicien Rops: an ascetic monk seeks refuge from carnal temptations in the image of the crucified Christ – to his horror, Christ is usurped before his eyes by a vision of a voluptuous, naked woman, who assumes a similar attitude of crucifixion (fig. 23).174 We will do well to bear Rops’s drawing in mind, as well as Jensen’s story and its Pompeian theme. In the case of the latter, Freud reckoned the author had “a good right to linger over the significant resemblance [...] between a bit of psychic occurrence in the individual and a single historical event in the history of man.”175

Freud notably applied this analogy to the history of religion, and in particular the development of Judaism and Christianity. In his apocryphal history of the Jews, Moses and Monotheism (1939), he develops a current idea that the religion of the biblical Hebrews (the proto-Judaic religion) was given to them by an Egyptian prince named Moses, who had been inspired by the novel, and short-

171 “Bertgang” approximates to “She who walks splendidly.”
172 Freud, Delusion and Dream, p. 196
173 Ibid, p.189. Fantasies (the preliminaries of a delusion) “are substitution for and remnants of different repressed memories, which a resistance does not allow to push into consciousness, which, however, become conscious by heeding the censor of resistance, by means of transformations and disfigurements.”
174 Félicien Rops, La Tentation de saint Antoine, pastel and gouache, 1878, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Cabinet des estampes.
175 Freud, Delusion and Dream, p. 196
lived monotheism of Akhenaton IV.176 After the Pharaoh died, his subjects reinstated their sundry deities, but Moses identified the Hebrew slaves as potential adherents to the monotheist ideal, if only he could lead them out of bondage. Thus, Freud explains the unusual conception – one peculiar to Judaism – of a god choosing a people (as opposed to a people choosing a god); the undistorted truth, he suggests, is that the Jews were the chosen people of Moses. To exorcise the Hebrews of their own (Egyptian) polytheism, Moses imposed upon them a religious doctrine which was systematically antithetical to it, and still more uncompromising than that of Akhenaton: further to the denial of an afterlife, Moses’s monotheism prohibited all visual representation of its God.

Whether or not one subscribes to this idea of the Jews as the chosen people of Moses, their unique monotheism must, as Freud suggests, have relied on a doctrine of antitheses. The Egyptologist Jan Assmann identifies clearly what Mosaic monotheism entailed as a “distinction between true and false in religion” – a distinction that did not exist in the world of polytheism.177 Because polytheism (like polygamy) does not imply exclusivity, it permits the sort of intercultural translation exemplified by the ancient Greek and Roman religions (where Jupiter is equivalent to Zeus, and Venus to Aphrodite). Monotheism could not allow the same, because “False gods cannot be translated.”178

What Assmann calls the “Mosaic distinction” created a new type of religion (or “counter-religion”) that “rejects and repudiates everything that went before and is outside itself as ‘paganism.’”179 This primary distinction came to underlie further ones – between Jews and Gentiles, Christians and pagans, and eventually “Catholics and Protestants, Calvinists and Lutherans,” and so on –

176 Freud’s ideas were influenced by the American archaeologist and historian James Henry Breasted. It is known that Akhenaton (an Eighteenth Dynasty Pharaoh) attempted to impose a strict monotheism on his polytheistic subjects, as an asset to the expansion of his Empire. Originally Amenhotep, the Pharaoh adopted the moniker Akhenaton in deference to his elected deity, Aton (the sun god), and as a rejection of the now proscribed god, Amon.

177 Assmann, Jan: Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism, Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1997

178 Ibid, p. 3

179 Ibid. Assmann acknowledges that Akhenaten, not Moses, was probably the first to draw such a distinction; however, “Moses is a figure of memory, but not of history, while Akhenaten is a figure of history but not of memory. Since memory is all that counts in the sphere of cultural distinctions and constructions, we are justified in speaking not of Akhenaten’s distinction, but of the Mosaic distinction.” Ibid., p. 2.
but in cultural memory, the original, “Mosaic distinction” is represented by the opposition of Israel and Egypt, and illustrated by the grand narrative of Exodus. Egypt thereby came to symbolise “the rejected, the religiously wrong, the ‘pagan’”, and “Egypt’s most conspicuous practice, the worship of images, came to be regarded as the greatest sin.” The basic antitheses of the Mosaic religion, relating to polytheism and image-worship, are expressed in the first two edicts of the Decalogue – no false gods, and no images; two edicts that have not been easily separated, even in literal terms. The Mosaic distinction thus created an enduring equation of wrongful worship with idolatry, even when the former involved no actual image-worship.

I alluded in passing to an analogy between polytheism and polygamy – one that must logically involve their opposite terms, monotheism and monogamy. This analogy deserves our further attention, because it underlies the essential metaphor for idolatry in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament), where the repeated infidelity of the Israelites is described as “whoring,” and in similar terms. The Biblical marriage metaphor, which is only implicit in the Pentateuch, is made explicit by the Hebrew prophets Hosea, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, who lament the infidelity that continued even after the people reached the Promised Land. The prophets cast God in the role of a jealous husband “torn between […] feelings of shame and disgrace,” and the love he retains for Israel, “his faithless wife.”

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180 Ibid, pp. 3-4
181 Ibid, p. 4
182 See the discussion of divisions of the Decalogue in chapter one.
183 E.g. Leviticus, 17:7, where the people are forbidden to “go whoring” after goat-demons. As Robert Alter (The Five Books of Moses, p. 617) explains this deliberate choice of sexual language, “monogamy […] is a reiterated biblical metaphor for monotheism, and so worship of the goat-demons and other deities is an act of promiscuity.”
184 Halbertal, Moshe & Avishai Margalit: Idolatry (translated from the Hebrew by Naomi Goldblum), Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992 (p. 12). Halbertal and Margalit (p. 10) identify marriage as the “root metaphor” for the biblical understanding of the concept of idolatry. See, for example, Jeremiah, 3:1: and 3:6-8. The marriage metaphor would provide ammunition for Christian anti-Jewish polemics. Luther, in his diatribe against the Jews (1543) refers to them constantly as a “corrupt wife” and a “whore,” who would treat God as a fool, and remain unfaithful to Moses. Martin Luther: Von den Juden und ihren Lügen. I consulted an Italian edition: Martin Lutero, Contro gli Ebrei; Versione latina di Justus Jonas (1544), a cura di Attilio Agnoletto; traduzione italiana, note e appendici di Vittorio Dornetti, Milano: Terzaria, 1999 (eg. pp. 40-41). The sexual connotation of “idolatry” in the early modern period is evidenced by John Florio who, in his dictionary (1611), translates the Italian word Idalatria as “Idolatry, spiritual fornication.”
This marriage metaphor is so apt because the Mosaic covenant affirms an exclusive relationship between one God and a single, chosen people. When God renews the Law, after threatening to end the covenant over the affair with the Calf, he admonishes the people, through Moses: “Adore not any strange god. The Lord, his name is jealous, he is a jealous God” (Ex, 34:14). In this respect, Jahveh differs entirely from the pagan gods, who did not make jealous demands of exclusive fidelity. As we have already noted, pagan worship was image-centric, and Mosaic monotheism made God unrepresentable, so the prohibition against (graven) images was in effect a ban on other, necessarily “false” gods. In the terms of the metaphor, the prohibition safeguarded the monogamous marriage of God and Israel.

Freud, seemingly, was unimpressed by the marriage metaphor, but as he saw it, the Mosaic image prohibition had implications beyond the preservation of the monotheistic ideal. The dematerialisation of God marked “a triumph of spirituality over the senses,” instilling in the Jewish people a preference to “spiritual endeavour” that helped set them apart from other nations. For Freud, the subsequent triumph of Christianity also “marked a progress in the history of religion: that is to say, in regard to the return of the repressed.” According to him, not only did the Christian religion re-materialise God, it turned out not to be strictly monotheistic: “it took over from the surrounding peoples numerous symbolical rites, re-established the great mother-goddess and found room for numerous deities of polytheism in an easily recognisable disguise, though in subordinate positions.” In other words, it transgressed the original Mosaic distinction.

In this rather generalised view of Christianity as a form of polytheism, the fact of its emergence as a Jewish sect is understood to signal the return of the repressed within the monotheist tradition of Moses. It may be objected that

185 Halbertal, Moshe & Avishai Margalit, Op cit., p. 11
186 Freud, Moses & Monotheism, p. 146-7
187 Ibid, p. 113
188 Ibid, p. 112. This is exemplified by the name and location of the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome, which was built on the site of a temple to the virginal goddess Minerva. As Leonardo da Vinci remarked, “Many who hold the faith of the son only build temples in the name of the mother.” Richter, Irma A: Selections from the Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 248
such a reductive representation elides the fact of Christianity’s own direct opposition to polytheism. After all, its triumph in Late Antiquity was achieved at the expense of the gods of ancient Rome. The Christian supersession of paganism is of particular interest to observers of Italian Renaissance culture, which attempted at last to reconcile the virtues of Christianity with those of Classical antiquity. The result might be aptly described in Freudian terms as a compromise-formation, in which a repressed and a repressive trend both find an incomplete expression. According to the Freudian tenet, “Religion demands later the introduction of [a] forbidden thing in altered form, while it bitterly combats it in undisguised form.”¹⁸⁹ The idea is well illustrated by the antics of Pope Sixtus V (1585-90), who declared war on pagan idols, exorcised the ancient columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius – and surmounted them with bronze statues of saints Peter and Paul.¹⁹⁰

Renaissance, or return of the repressed?

See, the Cirque falls, th'unpillar'd Temple nods,
Streets pav'd with Heroes, Tyber choak'd with Gods:
’Till Peter’s keys some christ'ned Jove adorn,
And Pan to Moses lends his pagan horn…
Alexander Pope, The Dunciad (1728), Book III

In fifteenth-century Florence, the sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti had lamented the destruction of idols under Constantine, the pagan Emperor who embraced Christianity a thousand years earlier. As Ghiberti imagined it, the official “persecution” of idolatry resulted in the total destruction of art itself; the temples were rendered “bianchi” (“white,” or “bare”), in which base condition they would remain for “six hundred years.”¹⁹¹ Ghiberti’s sentiments are echoed a century later by Vasari, who identifies the primary cause for the (perceived) decline of the arts in the medieval period as being “the fervent zeal of the new Christian


¹⁹¹ “Finita che fu l’arte stettero e templi bianchi circa d’anni 600.” The excerpt from Ghiberti’s Commentarii is quoted in Italian and English translation by Tilmann Buddensieg in “Gregory the Great, the Destroyer of Pagan Idols. The History of a Medieval Legend Concerning the Decline of Ancient Art and Literature” Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, Vol. 28, 1965, pp. 45-65
religion,” which “after long and bloody struggle, [...] supressed and abolished the old faith of the Gentiles [i.e. pagans].” In the effort “to remove and utterly extirpate the smallest things from which errors might arise,” not only were the “marvellous statues, sculptures, pictures and ornaments of the false, gentile gods cast down or destroyed, but also the memory and honour of countless excellent persons.”

In a passage that seems to anticipate Freud’s archaeological metaphor for repression, Vasari describes how “the admirable sculptures and paintings buried in the ruins of Italy were [...] inaccessible or unknown to men engrossed in the rude productions of their own age.”

What Vasari would call the “rinascita” (rebirth, or renaissance) of the arts in Italy was epitomised by the excavation and emulation of antique statues. A defining moment in Renaissance archaeology was the unearthing of the Laocoön group in a Roman vineyard (1506, fig. 24) – an event witnessed by Michelangelo and the young Francesco da Sangallo, soon after the former received the commission for the tomb of Julius II (1505). The influence of the excavated image of Laocoön and his sons’ agonising death by sea serpents is evident in the three figures Michelangelo began for the 1513 tomb project. The so-called Dying Slave recalls the lethargic struggle of the younger son (who succumbs to a venemous bite), while its brother-figure, the Rebellious Slave, resembles the more vital, older son, whose efforts to escape the serpents’ coils are unabated. There is something of Laocoön himself in the huge muscularity of the seated Moses.

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192 "Ma quello che sopra tutte le cose dette fu di perdita e danno infinitamente a le predette professioni, fu il fervente zelo della nuova religione cristiana; la quale, dopo lungo e sanguinoso combattimento, avendo finalmente con la copia de’ miracoli e con la sincerità delle operazioni, abbattuta et annullata la vecchia fede de’ Gentili, mentre che ardentissimamente attendeva con ogni diligenzia a levar via et a stirpare in tutto ogni minima occasione donde poteva nascere errore, non guastò solamente o gettò per terra tutte le statue maravigliose et le scolture, pitture, musica et ornamenti de’ fallaci dii de’ Gentili, ma le memorie ancora e gl'onori d'infinite persone egregie." Vasari, Proemio delle vite (1550), op. cit, p. 96

193 "Le sculture e le pitture similmente buone state sotterrate nelle rovine d'Italia, si stettono insino al medesimo tempo rinchiusi o non conosciute dagli uomini ingrossati nelle goffezze del moderno uso di quell'età." Vasari, Proemio delle vite (1568), Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori: nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568 (Bettarini & Barocchi, eds.), Firenze: Sansoni, 1966 (Vol. II, p. 28)

194 The Laocoön is a first-century AD Roman copy after a Hellenistic original. For a discussion and transcript of a letter by Francesco da Sangallo, describing the discovery of the Laocoön, see: Leonard Barkan, Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999
The Italian interest in excavated statues had been aroused earlier, in the fourteenth century, but the effects of such discoveries were not felt to be wholly therapeutic. Ghiberti, in his *Commentarii* (1450s), describes a statue attributed to the ancient Greek sculptor Lysippos, that was unearthed in Siena around 1340, and installed, to great acclaim, on the city’s legendary fountain. The statue was much admired by local sculptors and painters – Ghiberti knew it from a drawing made by Ambrogio Lorenzetti – but it was soon blamed for Siena’s misfortunes in war with Florence, the (Mosaic) prohibition against idolatry was invoked, the statue broken, and its pieces superstitiously reburied, this time on enemy soil.\(^{195}\) The citizens’ fear of the perils of idolatry – effectively repressed, for as long as the idol remained buried – is in contrast to the artists’ aesthetic appreciation of the statue, and Ghiberti’s evident regret for its loss. As I hinted in chapter one, Lorenzetti’s inclusion of a fictive Moses statue in his *Presentation in the Temple* (1342), while serving an immediate iconographic purpose, may have been prompted by an anxious desire to legitimise artistic developments that were partly informed by an interest in antique, pagan statuary.\(^{196}\)

The example of pagan art would reinvigorate the Christian image-making of Ghiberti and his contemporaries. In the process, the once-anathemised symbols of polytheism appear to have undergone, to some extent, a sort of rehabilitation; a phenomenon that Michael Camille described as the “renaissance of the pagan idol.”\(^{197}\) As Florence sought to reinvent itself as a new Rome, the city’s preeminent sculptor, Donatello, made what was arguably the first freestanding bronze nude since antiquity. His statue of *David*, the Jewish giant-killer (c. 1440, fig. 25) stood in triumph on a column, formerly the preserve of pagan idols. In an ominous echo of the Sienese Lysippos affair,

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\(^{196}\) An insight into contemporary Sienese anxieties about the increasing realism of sacred images, and especially three-dimensional ones, is offered by inscriptions on parchment found, aptly enough, inside the head of a crucified Christ made by Lando di Pietro in 1338. The inscriptions (which were found when the head was split open in the bombing of the Basilica dell’Osservanza in January 1944), give thanks to God for enabling Lando to make so life-like an image of Christ, and include a caution – reading like a disclaimer – that “it is [Christ] one must adore and not this [piece of] wood.” Bagnoli, Alessandro (ed.): *Scultura dipinta: maestri di legname e pittori a Siena, 1250-1450*, Firenze: Centro di, 1987, pp. 66-8

\(^{197}\) Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, p. 339
Donatello’s totemic bronze, Judith – another Old Testament idol (c. 1460), would be blamed for the Florentine Republic’s misfortunes in war. In this case, however, the offending statue was neither broken nor buried, but ceded its place outside the town hall to Michelangelo’s gigantic nude David (1504, fig. 26), a figure more Graeco-Roman god than Jewish shepherd boy.\textsuperscript{198}

Speaking of the proliferation of statues all’antica in the period dominated by Michelangelo, Alexander Nagel has remarked that “It remains a real question whether the antique-inspired marble and bronze statues so enthusiastically revived in Italy during this period were persistences of pagan cult statuary or rather self-conscious citations of what might be called the iconography of idolatry.”\textsuperscript{199} That kind of self-consciousness is exhibited by Vasari who, in his Life of Donatello (1550), imagined the sculptor chiding his own lifelike statue of the Hebrew prophet Habukkuk (c. 1423-25), “speak, speak or may you shit blood!” – a challenge to the prophet himself, who condemned “dumb idols,” and declared “woe unto him” who speaks to them.\textsuperscript{200} This kind of exaggerated awareness of idolatrous appearances betrays, I suspect, an underlying anxiety related to this kind of image-making; an anxiety heightened in Vasari’s time by the new iconoclastic controversy of the Reformation.

From the early-sixteenth century, the Protestant challenge to the corruption and “idolatry” of the Church in Rome brought with it an iconoclastic threat of a magnitude not previously felt in Western Christendom. Those Reformers most hostile to images, statues in particular, wanted to restore the Church to that state of “whiteness” disdained by Ghiberti. Although a range of views on images existed among Protestant (and Roman Catholic) reformers, most addressed it as a central concern, and some espoused outright iconoclasm.\textsuperscript{201}

\textsuperscript{198} It was suggested by the First Herald of the Signoria that Michelangelo’s statue of David (1504) replace Donatello’s Judith: “la iuditta e segnio mortifero e non sta bene havendo noi la + [croce] per insegnia et el giglio non sta bene che la donna uccida l’uomo et maxime essendo stata posta chon chattiva chonstellatione perche da poi in qua siete iti di male in peggio e perdessi poi pisa.” Levine, Saul: “The Location of Michelangelo’s David: The Meeting of January 25, 1504,” The Art Bulletin, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Mar., 1974), pp. 31-49. In conformity with the Hellenic ideal, but at odds with Jewish tradition and biblical description (cf. I Samuel, 17:26), Michelangelo’s David is evidently uncircumcised.

\textsuperscript{199} Nagel, Alexander: Review of The Idol in the Age of Art (Cole and Zorach, eds) in Renaissance Quarterly, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Summer 2010), pp. 584-587.

\textsuperscript{200} Habukkuk, 2:18-19. This connection was made by Bennett & Wilkins (Donatello, 1984, p. 206). Rubin, Patricia Lee: Giorgio Vasari: Art & History, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1995, p. 338

\textsuperscript{201} Luther himself was not opposed to images per se: he argued against iconoclasm and
Protestantism also reprised the Judaic taboo against representing God the Father in human form, which had never been so fully compromised as it was in Renaissance Italy.

Of course, these anxieties about image-making, and the imminent peril of idolatry were nothing new; the Reformation only intensified concerns that inhabited (and occasionally inhibited) Christian art. Although the iconoclastic controversies of eighth- and ninth-century Byzantium had been resolved, in doctrinal terms, in favour of images, the spectre of idolatry still lingered, and so did the latent threat of (Mosaic) iconoclasm. That threat had been briefly realised in late-fifteenth century Florence, where the reformer and self-proclaimed prophet Savonarola condemned idolatry as “the most vain of all things.”

While Savonarola did not espouse total iconoclasm, his bonfires of material vanities mirrored the burning of the Golden Calf.

In such moments of religious upheaval, common anxieties gave rise to violent purgation (and sometimes, as in the Reformation, lasting divisions) but ordinarily, any incendiary effects would be directed at those outside the faith. A common practice in medieval Christian culture (visual art, letters and orations) was to project such anxieties onto visible Others – Muslims, and especially Jews, from whose religion Christianity emerged, and whose precarious survival in Christian lands depended on their role as “witness” to those origins. For example, when the Eucharistic miracle of transubstantiation became dogma in the early thirteenth century, Christian doubts about its efficacy were assuaged by stories of Jewish host desecration – understood by simple Christians to be credulous reenactments of deicide. Similarly, concerns about the cultic use of images were projected onto Jews, who were accused not only of iconoclasm,
but also idolatry.\textsuperscript{205} Certainly the most recognisable image of idol-worship in medieval Christian art is the adoration of the Golden Calf, in which the biblical idolaters are conflated with contemporary Jews by their distinctive medieval costumes (fig. 27). The reality that Jewish tradition was restrained in its use of images made no odds to Christian accusers.\textsuperscript{206} For Christian iconophiles, the term “idolatry” signified religious error in more general terms, so accusations of idolatry in the etymological sense could be deflected by pointing out the greater theological error of adhering to Jewish beliefs.

At the time of Vasari’s writing (c. 1550), Roman Christians would have been less concerned about Jewish accusations of image-worship than the real threat of Protestant iconoclasm. These heightened sensitivities are voiced by Michelangelo’s Roman acquaintance, Francisco de Holanda (1548), in his treatise \textit{On Antique Painting}:

> “let not the Jew and the infidel imagine that in honoring sacred paintings on our altars as all Christendom does we are committing idolatry in the manner of the pagans […] because even in this the difference between ourselves and the idolatrous is as great as it is between darkness and light, for they worshipped the work of their own hands for themselves, without attributing any further meaning to them, neglecting the honor and praise of the Supreme Inventor and Master of these things.”\textsuperscript{207}

Here, the category “Jew and infidel,” as opposed to “all Christendom” must include the Reformers who condemned the “idolatry” of papal Rome. It is remarkable the extent to which Jews and Judaism feature in Christian polemics of the Reformation era; the term “judaizing” is used on both sides of the debate, to frame a concept of religious error that all Christians could understand.\textsuperscript{208}

Seen in this light, Vasari’s story of the idolatrous Jewish “starlings” flocking to \textit{Moses} invites a more cynical reading. Among the most aggressively

\textsuperscript{205} See Camille, \textit{The Gothic Idol}, pp. 65-75 “Idols of the Jews.”

\textsuperscript{206} As Debra Strickland (\textit{Saracens, Demons, & Jews}, p. 95) has observed, “It is this discrepancy between the real and the imaginary that has prompted modern scholars to interpret medieval portraits of Jews as imaginary embodiments of everything medieval Christians dreaded and feared about themselves, their society, and their own religion.”

\textsuperscript{207} de Hollanda, Francisco: \textit{On Antique Painting} (translated by Alice Sedgwick Wohl), University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013, p. 80

iconoclastic reformers, the Wittenberg theologian Andreas Karlstadt (1521) had already conjured an image of birds flocking to idols, flying in the face of the Mosaic prohibition – but his “ravens” were Roman Christians, who seemed to him like the faithless biblical Jews.²⁰⁹ Vasari would have been aware of such criticisms, if not this particular avian analogy.²¹⁰ In any case, when he described the flocks of Jewish statue-worshippers, it seems apt that he similised another bird renowned for mimicry.²¹¹

This is one light in which, surprisingly, neither Michelangelo’s statue nor Vasari’s story has been properly considered. The traditional accusations of Jewish idolatry did not, for obvious reasons, involve images made for Christian consumption. On the contrary, Jewish attitudes toward Christian images were historically portrayed as iconoclastic, as evidenced by allegations of image abuse in Florence and Mantua as recently as the 1490s.²¹² Vasari’s inversion of a popular libel formula suggests a further topical connection, with Counter-Reformation efforts to convert Italian Jews. These efforts began in earnest in 1543, with the founding of the Roman House of Catechumens, a conversionary institution that the Jews themselves were forced to finance. This was followed by the ghettoisation of Jews in Rome (1555) and Tuscany (1571-2), and later their compulsory attendance of sermons in Rome, Florence and elsewhere.²¹³

²⁰⁹ “…God might in all justice say to our supposed Christians what he said to the Jews. For they run to the idols like crows and ravens after a carcass and fly to a lifeless cadaver.” Karlstadt quoted in translation in Richardson, Woods & Franklin (eds.), Renaissance Art Reconsidered: An Anthology of Primary Sources, Malden, MA; Oxford; Carlton Victoria: Blackwell, 2007, p. 411. NB. The raven is an unclean fowl according to the Law of Moses (Leviticus, 11:13-15; Deut., 14:12-14). There is also an allusion to Luke, 12:24: “Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them.”

²¹⁰ Barolsky (Michelangelo’s Nose, p. 95) suggests that that Vasari’s language is informed by Dante’s description of sinners in Inferno, Canto V: “È come li stornei ne portan l’ali / nel freddo tempo, a schiera larga e piena, / così quel fiato li spiriti mali.

²¹¹ Starlings imitate other avian species and, like ravens, they sometimes mimic man-made sounds.


²¹³ Kenneth Stow argues that the conversion of the Jews en masse was the central goal of papal Jewry policy in the later sixteenth century, and that the ghettos were conceived as an incentive to Jews to convert. Stow, Kenneth: Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy, 1555-1593, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977
While he does not make explicit this historical dimension – as Gerd Blum does, in a recent paper (2013)\textsuperscript{214} – Paul Barolsky recognises Vasari’s anecdote as a metaphor for Jewish conversion. By turning to the forbidden image of the lawgiver, the Jews, as Barolsky put it, “turned away from their laws […], and turned toward Christ.”\textsuperscript{215} In this case of what might be called “malicious treason” (comparable to the scene imagined by Féliçien Rops), we recognise the typical manner of the return of the repressed. Whereas Barolsky and Blum attribute the idea of Moses betrayed by his own image to Vasari, I contend that the idea was already there in Michelangelo’s statue, and advertised by his use of a particular motif.

Moses as Idol

...And you, his rabble, a base calf did you raise?
Had you raised an image with this to compare!
A lesser sin might have been to worship the same…

Giambattista Felice Zappi (1667-1719), Sonnet for Michelangelo’s Moses.\textsuperscript{216}

In the previous chapter, I remarked on a common attitude of ambivalence towards Michelangelo’s statue of Moses, and related it to the religious paradox that the figure embodies. Such an affect, however, cannot derive solely from religious sensitivity, as suggested by the profane expressions of some secular, art-historical criticisms. Michelangelo’s nineteenth-century English biographer, John Addington Symonds – who called the Moses “the eminent jewel of this defrauded tomb” – admitted that we “may not be attracted by [the figure],” indeed, “[we] may even be repelled by the goat-like features, the enormous beard, the ponderous muscles, and the grotesque garments of the monstrous statue.”\textsuperscript{217} Symonds wondered how Condivi, who felt only “love and terror”

\textsuperscript{215} Barolsky, \textit{Michelangelo’s Nose}, p. 43
\textsuperscript{217} Addington Symonds, John: \textit{The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti, Based on Studies in the Archives of the Buonarroti Family at Florence}, London: John C. Nimmo, 1893 (p. 83)
before the statue, did not feel “the turbulence and carnal insolence which break our sense of dignity and beauty now.”

Since the early-eighteenth century, the Moses, which had hitherto been praised without reserve, began to attract the sort of disparaging remarks that Symonds made. The figure’s beard (which Vasari commended for its beauty and technical virtuosity) was now described as excessive; the sleeveless tunic and brawny arms likened to those of a baker, or a galley slave. Symonds’s first assessment, however – that there is something “goat-like” about the Moses – is the one that recurs most frequently in the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the opinion of the painter Jonathan Richardson (1722), “this Moses has so much the Air of a Goat, that either [Michelangelo] intended it […] or he Mistook his Air, and instead of raising it to the top of Human Nature as he ought, has sunk it towards Brutality.” Likewise, the Victorian critic William Watkiss Lloyd (whose monograph on the Moses would be of special interest to Freud) suggested that not only the form of the head, but “the movement given to it” were caprine; for him, the figure exhibited “the solemnity and the caprice of the horned and bearded goat, haunter of rocky peaks and mountain-tops.”

The goat-like “movement” or “air” that Lloyd and Richardson discerned might be attributed to the asymmetry of the neck in relation to the shoulders, and the way the former articulates without visibly affecting the latter. The strange articulation of the neck might give an impression of “caprine” alertness – but only perhaps if one already had goats in mind. Unbeknownst to Lloyd and Richardson, the anatomical defect likely resulted from Michelangelo’s late alterations to the head and neck of the statue, discussed in chapter one. Still, it seems unlikely that these writers, or anyone else, would have identified the form of the head (and thereby thought of its movement) as caprine, were it not for the pair of horns that protrude from the hair above the prophet’s brow. For Symonds, the horns were so essential to the repellent, or “monstrous” effect of the statue, that they

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218 Ibid.
219 Etienne Falconet describes the Moses as “un homme [qui] ressemble plutôt à un Forçat qu’à un Législateur.” Œuvres d’Étienne Falconet Statuaire; contenant plusieurs écrits relatifs aux beaux arts…, Lausanne, 1781, p. 324
went without saying – but remove the horns, and his allusion to “goat-like features” would demand some elaboration (fig. 28).\(^\text{222}\)

Properly examined, the horns do not even look especially caprine, let alone do they compare to those of a mature goat (fig. 29). A goat’s horns typically point backward from the brow, not forward, as do Moses’s, and while goats’ horns may vary between breeds, they usually follow a gradual convex curve toward the beast’s rear, and their length is marked by a ribbed pattern. We will look at how the horns of Moses compare to other animals’ horns shortly, but already I might suggest that the critical habit of comparing Moses to a goat derived from a general association of horned men with certain mythical man-goat hybrids. In this case, the association distracts from an indeterminate sense of unease that the horns of Moses continue to arouse.

Alexandre Dumas (père) acknowledged the effect of the horns well when he wrote that “this emblem of savage energy and animal force adds something [*je ne sais quoi*] of the strange and redoubtable to the physiognomy of the colossus.”\(^\text{223}\) Dumas’s “*je ne sais quoi,*” as much as Symonds’s pronounced ambivalence, betrays a feeling, connected to the horns, that might have interested Freud; one that we might describe as uncanny. Curiously, though, Freud ignored the horns entirely in his essay on the statue – and when reminded of them in private correspondence, had only this to say:

> “The misunderstanding out of which arose the horns of Moses has long been known and clarified. It is not the responsibility of Michelangelo, since all representations of Moses before him show the same horns. Thus I would have no reason to concern myself with this conventional attribute in the discussion of Michelangelo’s *Moses.*”\(^\text{224}\)

With the possible exception of the first statement, everything Freud says about the horns is demonstrably false. Before we redress these assertions, we should

\(^{222}\) Also Richardson (op. cit, p 295), who said that Moses had “so much the Air of a Goat” neglected even to mention the horns.

\(^{223}\) “Le double rayon, que la vision de Jehovah a laissé, comme une marque indélébile, sur la front du prophète, ressemble d’une manière frappante à la double corne acérée qui vien de percer la tête d’un bouc. Cet emblème d’énergie suvage et de force animale ajoute je ne sais quoi d’étrange et de redoutable à la physionomy du colosse.” Dumas, Alexandre: *Michel-Ange et Raphael,* Paris, 1846, p. 93

\(^{224}\) Macmillan & Swales (“Observations from the Refuse Heap,” pp. 80-81) quote a letter (dated 24\(^{\text{th}}\) January 1915) from Sigmund Freud to the artist Hermann Struck, in response to some (unknown) remarks of the latter’s. Box 42, Sigmund Freud Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
clarify the “misunderstanding” Freud mentions, and its legacy in Christian (iconographic) tradition.

The etymological roots of the horns are to be found in Jerome’s Vulgate translation of Exodus 34, when Moses descends a second time from Mount Sinai with two new tablets replacing those he had destroyed on witnessing the dance around the Golden Calf. “And when Moses came down from the Mount Sinai, he held the two tables of the testimony, and he knew not that his face was horned [quod cornuta esset facies sua] from the conversation of the Lord.”

The Douay-Rheims Bible (1609), quoted here, follows Jerome’s notorious (mis)translation of the Hebrew qaran, a verb found nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible, whose proper meaning remains obscure, but which probably shares its etymology with the noun qeren, meaning cornu, “horn.”

Other vernacular translations, including the King James Version (1611), restore the sense that was probably intended in the Hebrew, that “the skin of his face shone.”

Although the “horned” Moses as a written concept originates in the second century CE, there is no evidence of an iconographic usage any earlier than the eleventh century (when a horned Moses first appears in an English manuscript), and the horns did not become a pictorial convention until the twelfth century. Ruth Mellinkoff has argued that the innovation in England represented a transposition to Moses of “an ancient Anglo-Saxon-Scandinavian motif implying […] honor, power, and dignity.” From England, the horned Moses appears to have spread to the Continent, and had become commonplace in northern Europe by the mid-thirteenth century (fig. 30).

225 For a detailed discussion, see MacMillan & Swales, p. 98. Briefly: In the Hebrew verse, qaran, יַרְאָן is a verb, and so appears in the Bible only in the Exodus story, whereas qeren, יֶרֶן, is a very common biblical noun always meaning “horn.” That they have some relation is attested by their deriving from the root qrn, יָרַן. Aquila and Jerome treated qaran, יַרְאָן, as if it were a verb form of qeren, יֶרֶן, the noun.


227 In his second century Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, Aquila also translated qaran as “horned”, but rendered the phrase less evocatively (“horned the skin of his face”). (MacMillan & Swales, p. 98)

228 Mellinkoff (The Horned Moses, p. 13) cites the Aelfric Paraphrase of the Pentateuch and Joshua (BM Cotton Claudius B. IV) as providing the earliest extant image of a horned Moses.

229 Ibid, p. 139

230 Ibid, p. 70
this time, a symbolic meaning had also accrued: aligned with Augustine’s view that the second set of stone tablets (with which Moses appeared “horned”) prefigured the New Testament, the horns – naturally assumed to be a pair – were understood to symbolize the Old Law and the New. Curiously, the iconographic usage did not take hold in Italy until much later, with only isolated examples of a horned Moses to be found until the fifteenth century. Even then, there remained a preference to show the “horns” as two rays of light (fig. 31).

It should be noticed that since their emergence as an artistic convention, Moses’s horns were not necessarily confined to their place in the biblical narrative, but were employed in general as an identifying attribute. Beyond their convenience as such, the horns had powerful and quite ambivalent connotations. As Mellinkoff has shown, horns generally had more negative than positive associations in the eyes of medieval Christians. During the Middle Ages, they had become well established as demonic attributes in art, and the imaginary Gothic idol is often shown with horns. Since adherents to Judaism were commonly imagined to be idolaters in league with the Devil, the horns of Moses could, in some cases, have been seen as testament to that.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the horns of Moses in general, and those of Michelangelo’s statue in particular, have been seen as evidence of “Christian anti-Semitism” – an anachronism relying on a simplistic conflation of medieval

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231 For example, an illuminated roundel in an early thirteenth century Bible Moralisée (Vienna ÖN Codex Vin. 2554, fol. I, 26v) shows Moses “horned” with light. The explication reads: “That God gave Moses two rays of light signifies Jesus Christ who gave the II laws to His prelates to speak to his people.” Gerald B. Guest, Bible Moralisée: Codex Vindobonensis 2554. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1995, p. 83. In the image, the horns of Jerome’s Vulgate are translated back to rays of light, but the duality implied by horns is retained for symbolic purposes. Ruth Mellinkoff’s argument (The Horned Moses…, pp. 94-106) that the bishop’s mitre (which was adopted in the eleventh century) signified knowledge of the Old and New Testaments, and could be derived from the horns of Moses, is supported by the image in the corresponding lower roundel, where the prelates’ mitres seem to reference the horns of light in the image above.

232 See for example Giovanni Pisano’s Moses (1284-99) for the façade of Siena Cathedral, Fra Angelico’s Transfiguration (San Marco, Florence, c. 1446), the frescoed scenes from the life of Moses (1481-2) in the Sistine Chapel, and the figure of Moses in Raphael’s La disputa del sacramento (1509-10).

233 Mellinkoff (The Horned Moses, p. 66) provides examples from the early thirteenth century.

234 Camille, The Gothic Idol, p. 131

235 In some late-medieval images, the Devil appears as a horned and goat-legged Jew (See Schreckenberg, Die Juden in der Kunst Europas, 1996, pp. 347-349). For an example contemporaneous to Michelangelo’s Moses, see the frontispiece of Luther’s anti-Jewish diatribe, Von den Juden und Ihren Lügen (1543), which features a Jew with large goat horns. I am not aware of any Italian images of horned Jews.
anti-Judaism with modern racism. More often, though, the statue’s horns are dismissed in the manner that Freud dismissed them, as a “conventional attribute,” and therefore not Michelangelo’s responsibility. These suppositions are shown to be false by two examples that Freud himself cited in his discussion of Moses’s pose: one, a painting by Parmigianino (c. 1535), which shows Moses with three darts of light at each side of his head; the other, a small Romanesque bronze (then attributed to Nicholas of Verdun) in which Moses’s head has no adornments at all. On Freud’s own evidence, his assertion that “all representations of Moses before [Michelangelo’s] show the same horns” is manifestly wrong.

Since our discussion concerns an Italian horned Moses, we ought to be most attentive to the scarcity of that type in Italian art, although it has received little interest from iconologists. Mellinkoff, in her study of the horned Moses, does little more than notice this scarcity and the late appearance of the horns in Italy; that it was Michelangelo who gave Moses “his most famous horns” is mentioned only in passing. To my knowledge, the closest there has been to a critical examination of the Moses horn or light motif in Italy is in the work of two critics of psychoanalysis, both self-confessed “laymen in matters of art.” In their 2003 essay for American Imago, Malcolm Macmillan and Peter Swales contest another scholar’s assertion that the horns of the Moses are just a conventional attribute, and as such, “not specific to any textual episode or moment.” As Macmillan and Swales point out, the late-quattrocento scenes from the life of Moses in the Sistine Chapel, which Michelangelo would have known as well as anyone, show him with rays of light only where it is consistent with the biblical narrative: the motif is confined to events that follow the second ascent of Mount

236 See, for example, Stephen Bertmann: “The Antisemitic Origin of Michelangelo’s Horned Moses,” Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies, Volume 27, Number 4, Summer 2009, pp. 95-106. NB. Although it is often mentioned in the literature that there was a popular medieval fantasy that horns were part of the Jewish anatomy, I have seen no clear evidence of any such fantasy. Mellinkoff (The Horned Moses, 1970, p. 135), Strickland (Saracens, Demons, & Jews, 2003, pp. 106, 133, 134), and Bertman (op. cit.) all cite Trachtenberg (The Devil & the Jews, 1943) as an authority, although he discusses only a couple of images/grotesques from the Late Middle Ages (as though they constituted evidence of a popular fantasy), and one anecdotal example from the twentieth-century in the USA.

237 Parmigianino, Moses, c. 1535, fresco, Santa Maria della Steccata, Parma.


239 Mellinkoff, The Horned Moses, pp. 71-74

240 Macmillan & Swales (“Observations from the Refuse Heap,” p. 82) quote Bremer (1976, 63n11)
The authors identify this narrative conformity as an “artistic convention […] already implicit” in Ghiberti’s bronze relief of Moses receiving the Law (1425-52), which seems to depict the first ascent, and in which Moses has no rays, or horns.\(^{241}\)

The usefulness of these observations is, however, limited. Macmillan and Swales are interested only in images of Moses for which the narrative context is clear, and where the appearance or absence of “horns” is explicable in those terms. Their motive is to support the narrative interpretation of Michelangelo’s statue proposed earlier in the same journal by Rudy Bremer (discussed in chapter one). In doing so, they do not properly acknowledge the scarcity of Moses’s horns in Italy. They suggest that Michelangelo’s decision to give his figure horns, rather than the rays familiar to him from the Sistine frescoes, was due to the constraints of the medium: it being “impossible to render rays or beams in an artistically satisfying way in a three-dimensional sculpture.”\(^{242}\)

Whether the rays or beams with which Giovanni Pisano dignified his Moses (1284-97; fig. 32) for the façade of Siena Cathedral may be judged “artistically satisfying” by cinquecento standards might be questionable,\(^{243}\) but still there were other means of representation available: when Girolamo Lombardo made his Moses (1568) for the Santa Casa di Loreto, he rejected a literal interpretation of the Vulgate, choosing instead to suggest horns or rays through the upward curl of the hair that frames the prophet’s bald brow (fig. 16).\(^{244}\) In view of these alternatives, we must accept that the horns of Michelangelo’s Moses – which are no mere cyphers, but embedded in the figure’s anatomy – were no more inevitable in this case than they were conventional in Italian iconography. In short, they are very much the responsibility of Michelangelo.

Unusual as they were in Italy, the horns are scarcely mentioned in contemporary accounts of the Moses (and studiously ignored by Borboni a

\(^{241}\) Ibid, p. 83. Ghiberti’s scene, for the North door of the Baptistery in Florence, must be understood to represent the first ascent, since his Moses receives the tables of the Law from God, whereas the tables for the second inscription were prepared by Moses himself. Indeed, when Ghiberti depicted Moses in the Transfiguration, he gave him two rays of light.

\(^{242}\) Ibid.

\(^{243}\) This work also would have been familiar to Michelangelo, who carved four figures for the Piccolomini Altar in the cathedral in Siena (1501-04).

\(^{244}\) Lombardi was not the first Italian artist to use the arrangement of Moses’s hair to suggest horns or rays; a panel painting (c. 1408-10) by the Florentine Lorenzo Monaco in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, shows Moses with two evocative curls of hair on his brow.
century later), leading one to suspect that these animal features were not easily
countenanced, even while the human aspects of the figure were greatly
admired. Condivi, unlike Vasari, does mention the horns, but only to explain,
with seeming ingenuousness, that the artist gave them to Moses “according to
the way he is usually described” – an explanation that today is commonplace,
but no less incorrect for that. The horns are conspicuously absent from a small
but carefully observed copy of the Moses, made before 1570 and usually
attributed to Bartolomeo Ammannati, who was an avowed admirer of the
statue in all other respects (fig. 33).

If Michelangelo’s contemporaries were on the whole reluctant to acknowledge
the horns of his Moses, later commentators have been more forthright. As the
Scottish writer Joseph Forsyth remarked (c. 1802-3), “Much wit has been
levelled of late at [the statue’s] flowing beard, and his flaming horns.” “One
critic,” he continues, “compares [Moses’s] head to a goat’s.” As we saw
earlier, whichever critic Forsyth had in mind was hardly the first or the last to
make the connection, although there is nothing inherently goat-like in the
anatomy of the figure. The reason that the association was made and persisted
is probably that this image of a horned and heavily bearded man brought to
mind another creature both hirsute and notoriously horny – namely, the satyr.
These mythical hybrids (once horse-tailed) appeared originally in ancient
Greece, as the hedonistic companions of Dionysus and the goatish Pan; later,

245 Aldrovandi (Le antichità della città di Roma, 1556, p. 291) does mention them, in his
description of “un Mose maggiore del naturale con le corna in testa, con barba lunga.”

246 The copy attributed to Ammannati is accurate in all other details, in spite of its diminutive
size (60 cm). It is known to have been given by Antonio da Casteldurante to Guidobaldo II
Della Rovere in 1570. It may now be seen in the Bargello, where it has been since 1871. An
old photograph, reproduced in Charles de Tolnay’s Michelangelo, vol. IV (1954) shows the
replica with horns. The crude form of these horns (which are more suggestive of rays)
compared to those of the original, as well as the two pin-holes that remain in the head of the
statuette, indicate that the horns were added at some point between the sixteenth and twentieth
centuries (presumably when the lack of horns was no longer desirable), and latterly removed.
I am grateful to Dr. Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi at the Bargello for her help in establishing these
details.

247 Ammannati praised the Moses in a famous letter to the Accademia (dated 22 August 1582),
written in the spirit of the Council of Trent, in which he denounced the nude, and exhorted
members of the Accademia to represent their figures clothed. “Il Moisè non è egli lodato per la
più bella figura ch’abbia fatto Michelagnolo Buonarroti? e pure è vestita del tutto.”

248 Forsyth, Joseph: Remarks on Antiquities, Arts and Letters During an Excursion in Italy, in the
Years 1802 and 1803, London: John Murray, 1824 (p. 224)

249 Ibid. Forsyth was probably alluding to Jonathan Richardson.
they became attached to the equivalent Roman gods, Bacchus and Faunus, and evolved the goat-like features that now identify them.

Indeed, Michelangelo’s horned Moses has sometimes been compared explicitly to Pan, or a member of the bacchic entourage. In the late-eighteenth century, there was even a popular legend that the artist had taken the distinctive gesture of Moses’s right arm from a once-famous statue of Pan or a satyr in the gardens of the Villa Ludovisi in Rome.\textsuperscript{250} In the same decades, the Roman art historian Francesco Milizia derided the Moses as having “a satyr’s head with the hair of a pig” \textit{[una testa da satiro con capelli di porco]}\textsuperscript{251} While Milizia’s mention of pig hair seems apt only as an insult to the Jewish lawgiver, the horns and beard must be to blame for the satyric association – notwithstanding that the figure of Moses otherwise is more Hyperion than a satyr.

Still, the satyric connection was pursued by William Watkiss Lloyd, whose (1863) monograph on Michelangelo’s Moses Freud claimed anticipated and confirmed his own interpretation of the statue’s pose. While admiring its “mystic embodiment of sublimity,” Lloyd found it “utterly impossible with candour to deny” that the head of Moses “appertain[s] to the satyr type” (the comparisons with goats being “but an inflection of the same charge”).\textsuperscript{252} We will indulge Lloyd here, in spite of strong reservations, because the meaning he gave this “satyric” aspect of the figure – an aspect he supposed was intentional – leads us to make some important connections.

Recalling Michelangelo’s Humanist education in the household of Lorenzo de’ Medici (whom he impressed with his first sculptural essay on the antique head of a faun), Lloyd suggested that by adding “Bacchic elements” to the figure, the

\textsuperscript{250} A sketch by Antonio Canova (1780), shows clearly the resemblance between the arm and hand of the hybrid figure, holding a goat’s pelt slung over its shoulder, and that of the Moses, who reaches in a similar manner to touch his beard. The painter Henry Fuseli, exaggerating the legend of the Ludovisi satyr (a figure “wrongly believed to be antique”), suggested that Michelangelo might have “studied also the [satyr’s] head to give its character to that of his Moses, because one [head] as much as the other resembles a billy-goat’s. Fuseli’s letter is quoted in Bottari & Ticozzi’s \textit{Raccolta di lettere sulla pittura, scultura ed architettura, escritte da’ più celebri personaggi dei secoli XV, XVI e XVII}, Milano: Giovanni Silvestri, 1807. Canova’s sketch and an old photograph (captioned “Il Pan di Michelangelo”) are reproduced in \textit{La collezione Boncompagni Ludovisi: Agardi, Bernini e la fortuna dell’antico}, a cura di Antonio Giuliano, Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1992

\textsuperscript{251} “Si caratterizza così un legislatore che parla da tu a tu con Messer Domenedio?” Milizia, Francesco: \textit{Dell’arte di vedere nelle belle arti del disegno secondo i principi di Sulzer e di Mengs}, Venezia, 1798, p. 10

\textsuperscript{252} Watkiss Lloyd, pp. 3 & 30
artist meant to identify Moses with the Graeco-Roman god of wine. Beyond the fact that the only other horned figure in Michelangelo’s sculptural ouevre is the panisc in his Bacchus group (1496-7), it is true that the identification of Moses with Bacchus was popular in the sixteenth century. Here, it even seems congruent with Michelangelo’s particular use of antique references.

As Alexander Nagel has argued (with specific reference to images of the dead Christ), Michelangelo habitually recycled the imagery of bacchic mysteries in his efforts to “restore the spirituality of Christian art.” As Nagel explains this seeming contradiction, “Where other artists found in antique art models of purposeful narrative action, Michelangelo found bodies possessed by forces larger than themselves. [His] efforts were designed to reanimate a ‘dead’ Christian art on the one hand while harnessing and neutralizing the demonic forces of pagan art on the other.” Taking entusiasmo in its original sense – evoked in John Florio’s Italian dictionary (1611) as “a poetical or prophetical fury, a ravishment of senses from above” – could Michelangelo have imagined the “prophetical fury” of Moses as a type of bacchic enthusiasm?

Here, we should bear in mind that the typological connection between Moses and Bacchus entails a risk of slippage far more pronounced than in their mutual typological connections with Christ. The typology of Christ relates his person or deeds to antetypes or prefigurations in the Hebrew Bible, and sometimes Graeco-Roman mythology. In both cases, the exposure of profound connections implies Christ’s supersession of the ancient antetype; but when there is insufficient distance (temporal, or theological) between two figures, there is a risk that their difference becomes elided, and the two figures become conflated.

In the case of Moses and Bacchus, their connection derives from coincidences in their mythical, pre-Christian origins, as well as the type of miracles ascribed


254 Nagel, Michelangelo and the Reform of Art, p. 18. Nagel acknowledges that to modern eyes, this approach may seem “hopelessly abstruse and even overtly fraudulent,” but to take such a view “is simply to rehearse the condemnations of Counter-Reformation critics and to fail to see these works in the context of early sixteenth-century humanist culture.”

255 Nagel (ibid.) calls this “a highly motivated adaption of what Aby Warburg called antique ‘pathos formulas,’ one that differed markedly from the practices of several other antique-inspired Renaissance artists.”
to them. As Lloyd notices, Bacchus had a propensity to bring forth “springs and founts of water, wine, or any other refreshing form of humidity [milk, honey, etc.] by a stroke of his thyrsus for his following of errant enthusiasts.” This description resonates with Moses’s miraculous provision of water and manna in the desert, and with God’s promise that the followers of Moses would be brought “unto a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus, 3:17).

Sometimes the errant enthusiasm of Moses’s own followers has a distinctly bacchic flavour, most notably in the adoration of the Golden Calf. In Robert Alter’s reading of the episode, which describes eating and drinking, nakedness and playing, “The strong implication is a bacchanalian celebration” involving song and dance, “and probably orgiastic activity as well.”

Egypt, the land from which Moses led the children of Israel, retained a strong imaginary connection with magic and idolatry, and the lure of false gods is described as a constant threat to Moses’s authority during the Exodus. Here we may recall Assmann’s “Mosaic distinction” and its grand narrative (so readily evoked by Vasari in the Preface to the Lives). The Mosaic religion, which made its one God distinct from false, pagan gods, necessarily resists the typological slippage that occurs in polytheism; Dionysus could become Bacchus (or any other god), but Moses, supposedly, could not.

This seemingly clear distinction is confounded in an image of Moses, made by Andrea Riccio in Padua (1513, fig. 34) at around the time that Michelangelo blocked out his own statue in Rome. Riccio’s freestanding bronze Moses, which reenacts the miraculous striking of water from the desert rock for a font in a Cassinese-Benedictine monastery, has the ram’s horns of Zeus-Ammon, “the form in which the Greek god was venerated in Egypt.” The same Zeus-

256 Watkiss Lloyd, op. cit, p. 33.
257 Alter, The Five Books of Moses, p. 495. As noticed by the disarray of the female worshippers in Daniele da Volterra’s treatment of the subject (1540s). Also by Nicolas Poussin, who transposed a group of dancing figures from his Bacchanalian Revel before a Term of Pan (1632-3) to his Adoration of the Golden Calf (1633-4).
258 Like the bacchic entourage (and the ancient Egyptians, according to Herodotus*), his followers remained in thrall to goat-like deities, or demons, to whom they offered sacrifices until they were expressly forbidden (see Leviticus, 17:7).
259 Andrea Riccio, Moses / Zeus Ammon (bronze, 1513), Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris.
Ammon is reputed to have saved Dionysus and his entourage from dying of thirst in the Egyptian desert. As Nagel remarks (in his extensive discussion of the statue), without the inscriptions on the font that relate the figure to the Mosaic book of Numbers, there would be no way of proving that this was Moses at all: “The two identities, Zeus-Ammon and Moses, are each fully developed and yet fused.”

What could have motivated Riccio to profane the Mosaic miracle in this way? As Nagel recalls, in the account of the striking of water from rock in Numbers (20:7-12), Moses seems to claim the divine miracle as his own feat of Egyptian magic, and is “severely chastised” by God, who intimates that he will die before reaching the Promised Land. Conscious of Moses’s “unstable” identity, especially at this moment, Riccio represents him (according to Nagel) “not as the stable type to Christ’s antitype but, so to speak, as he might have appeared to a still superstitious community of Israelites [...] – as a hero invested with special powers, who occasionally flickers into recognizability as a quasi-deity.” In Nagel’s words, Riccio’s Moses “not only looks forward to Christ but backward to Egypt,” the land he is struggling to leave behind, and from whose “proliferating divinities” he has yet to distinguish himself.

Nagel’s understanding of Riccio’s ram-horned Moses (of which he could find no other example in art) is apparently supported by a type of cast silver medal originating in the Bohemian mining town of Joachimsthal in the 1530s. On the obverse of these medals, of which several versions exist, a horned Moses appears in all’antica profile, and on the reverse a Hebrew paraphrase of Exodus 20:3: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” In the most common version, Moses has the ram-horns of Zeus-Ammon, and is only distinguishable

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261 Nagel (Ibid, p. 157) cites Vincenzo Cartari: Le imagini de i dei de gli antichi (1556), who cites Ovid and Herodotus.

262 Ibid, p. 157

263 Ibid, p. 161

264 Ibid, p. 162

265 Ibid, pp. 156 / 162

266 The medals were evidently popular, being widely reproduced and circulated. The English polymath Thomas Browne (1605-82) describes such a medal (“upon one side Moses horned, and on the reverse the commandment against sculptile Images”), which he understood to be “a coynage of some Jews, in derision of Christians, who first [portrayed Moses with horns].” Browne, Thomas: Pseudodoxia Epidemica: Or, Enquiries into very many received tenets and Commonly Presumed Truths, London, 1688 (Book V, Chapter IX: On the Picture of Moses with horns, p. 300).
from the forbidden Egyptian god by the inscription of his name in Hebrew on his collar (fig. 35). The sculptural medium of the medal, as much as that of Riccio's statue, makes mischief with the prohibition against images that preserved the original Mosaic distinction. In these cases, a particular “anti-Mosaic” distinction is reasserted, for among those Christians who resisted iconoclasm – as did the Lutheran population of Joachimsthal267 – word and image are two sides of the same coin. Riccio’s Moses was made on the eve of the Reformation when, as Nagel has shown, “image-making had [already] entered into a phase of intensive self-reflexivity.”268 This condition persists in the Bohemian Moses medals, and is embodied, I suggest, in the Moses of Michelangelo, whose genesis (c. 1513-45) spans the Reformation era, as far as the opening of the Council of Trent.

Nagel’s discussion of Riccio’s Moses leads him to describe the idolatrous lapses of the Israelites in terms of a “repetition compulsion.”269 He reminds us that their worship of the Golden Calf has been understood as a reversion to the Egyptian cult of the divine bull, Apis – an idea that endured in Renaissance Italy.270 Nagel, however, declines to take the Freudian path that he signals; a path that leads us inevitably back to Michelangelo, Vasari, and the (fictional) image-cult of Moses. In the case of both Riccio’s and Michelangelo’s Moses statues, it is the horns that destabilise the identity of the lawgiver, and in the former case, they readily evoke the idolatrous repetition-compulsion of his followers. According to Freud, whatever reminds us of these inner repetition-compulsions is perceived as uncanny – a perception we have already come to


268 Nagel, The Controversy of Renaissance Art, p. 156. Although Nagel discusses Riccio’s Moses as an “avatar of the Golden Calf,” he has nothing to say about an analogy to the Moses of Michelangelo.

269 Ibid, p. 162

270 This is apparent in two panels designed, if not painted, by Filippino Lippi (c. 1500): the companion piece to his Moses Striking the Rock is an ambiguous image that might represent the Egyptian cult of the Apis bull, or equally the worship of the Golden Calf. The panels are discussed by Nagel, Ibid, p. 163
associate with Michelangelo’s statue.\textsuperscript{271} We are perhaps too far removed from Italian Renaissance culture (deeply Christian, but with a deep interest in the pre-Christian) to know how strong was the uncanny effect produced by the horns of either Moses.

The distinctive ram-horns of Riccio’s Moses are a clear allusion to those of Zeus-Ammon, but what about the horns of Michelangelo’s figure? Little effort has been made to determine the archetype of these horns, or even to decide if there is one. Dumas found them “strikingly similar” to the emergent horns of a young billy-goat,\textsuperscript{272} but while they appear somewhat underdeveloped, there is nothing especially caprine about them. In fact, there is little to choose between the horns of kids, lambs and calves (although the formers’ tend to terminate in sharper points), but the vertical striations – which Michelangelo might easily have erased, instead of leaving to contrast with the high polish of Moses’s forehead – resemble a naturalistic detail more consistent with bovine horns than with caprine or ovine ones. As for their arrangement, they are rooted closer together on the head than usually occurs in nature (in this, at least, they are like a satyr’s), but that only serves to increase their visibility from a frontal view, becoming a salient feature of the statue’s distinctive silhouette.\textsuperscript{273}

There are other ways in which the horns of the Moses differ from animal archetypes: they tilt slightly forward, and they diverge asymmetrically; the left one being angled sideways, to the figure’s left. When viewed from directly in front of the tomb, the irregularity of the horns is barely discernable, but when Moses is confronted face-to-face, the effect is visually disconcerting (fig. 36). Forcellino suggested this asymmetry resulted from there being insufficient marble to carve symmetrical horns after the head was turned from its original,


\textsuperscript{272} “Le double rayon, que la vision de Jehovah a laissé, comme une marque indélébile, sur la front du prophète, ressemble d’une manière frappante à la double corne acérée qui vien de percer la tête d’un bouc.” Dumas, Alexandre: Michel-Ange et Raphael, Paris, 1846, p. 93

\textsuperscript{273} Earl E. Rosenthal argued that the Moses, having been conceived for the upper register of a freestanding tomb, was intended to be seen “di sotto in sù,” which would render “the offensive horns on his forehead […] less prominent because, when seen from below, they are more deeply recessed in the mass of the hair.” For all his good intentions, Rosenthal does not consider that if Michelangelo had recognised the horns as “offensive” he could easily have altered or removed them when the figure was installed on the lower register of the existing wall tomb. Rosenthal, Earl E.: “Michelangelo’s Moses: dal di sotto in sù,” The Art Bulletin, Vol. 46, No. 4 (December 1964), pp. 544-550 (p. 546).
front-facing position, but the arrangement seems less accidental when read in connection with the figure’s eyes (and here we might notice that the asymmetry is only noticeable from within Moses’s imaginary field of vision). A slight divergence in the alignment of the pupils – the right eye looks straight, while the left is slightly averted – is reflected in the precise alignment of the horns, suggesting, perhaps, a symbolic dimension related to Moses’s sight, or even his intellect.

We will return to this idea shortly, but first we should conclude our discussion of animal archetypes. It has proved difficult to identify the horns of the Moses with those of any particular animal, and perhaps we should accept that Michelangelo deliberately avoided any traceable model in nature. Still, in choosing to give the figure horns whose appearance inclines towards animal naturalism, he must have known that they would be seen as bestial attributes. In destabilizing the human anatomy of the figure in this way, Michelangelo left Moses open to a variety of animal associations and insinuations, involving goats, satyrs, horned gods and idols.

The suggestiveness of the horns might underlie the popular idea (discussed in chapter one) that Moses’s stern countenance reflects the adoration of the Golden Calf, the arch-idol of Exodus. It must be admitted that the statue’s budding horns are as much like a bull-calf’s as those of any other animal, let alone a billy-goat’s. Moreover, the calf connection was insinuated by Michelangelo (and others) elsewhere. In several surviving paintings made by Marcello Venusti after Michelangelo’s Annunciation design, the law-breaking Moses statuette is both horned and golden, like the idol that caused the literal and symbolic abrogation of the Law (fig. 37).

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274 Forcellino, Michelangelo: una vita inquieta, p. 311: “la strana asimmetria dei due corni [...] sembra dovuta alla necessità di seguire la sagoma digradante del primo abbozzo della testa.”

275 Michelangelo perhaps had in mind Machiavelli’s ideal prince (of which Moses was an exemplar), who was in nature both man and beast (chapter XVIII), but the idea would be too obscure to govern his conception of the figure alone.

276 There are versions in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam and Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Rome.
The Horns of the Cuckold

*Misero chi corna porta per insegna, che l'huomo non può haver cosa più indegna.* [Wretched is he who has horns for his crest; there can be no greater shame for a man]

Sixteenth-century Italian proverb

The idea that Michelangelo transposed the horns of an idol, or false god, to the graven image of Moses, evokes a significance of horns that has so far been overlooked in discussions of Moses’s iconography. In Italy, since the Middle Ages or earlier, to give a man horns (“fare le corna”), or to describe him as horned (“cornuto”), has meant to call him a cuckold. While the horns of the cuckold have appeared elsewhere in Europe, and their origin is lost in conjecture, they are rooted most deeply in Mediterranean cultures, where the two-fingered horn gesture remains in use today. The horns of the Italian (and Iberian) cuckold were often identified as specifically caprine (“cornuto” had the same connotation as “becco,” billy-goat), but the idea of horns was, and remains, more broadly generic. The cuckold’s horns could be those of a ram, a bull, or even a snail. In any case, slurs such as these were not taken lightly: in early modern Rome, “becco,” sometimes compounded by “cornuto,” was the insult most commonly prosecuted as libel.

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277 Florio, John: *Giardino di ricreatone nel quale crescono fronde, fiori e frutti, vaghe, leggiadri, e soave, sotto nome di sei mila proverbii, e piacevoli italiani, colti e scelti da Giovanni Florio* (London: Tomaso Woodcock, 1591), 155

278 Morris, Desmond et al: *Gestures: Their Origins and Distribution*, London: Cape, 1979 (p. 129). The authors present no less than fourteen different explanations for the origin of the horn gesture. Although horns were a source of infinite jest in Elizabethan England, Morris et al (p. 132) suggest that the gesture arrived “probably from Italy,” in the sixteenth century. Hitherto, they suggest, horns in England tended to connote honour. See also: Claire McEachern, “Why do Cuckolds have Horns?” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (December 2008), pp. 607-631

279 Not only in Italian, but also in European Spanish and Portuguese, the word for billy-goat, “becco,” has precisely the same connotation as “cornuto.” As the anthropologist Anton Blok has shown, the infamous sign of the horns in Mediterranean cultures pertains to an originally pastoral code of honour that identifies the deceived husband with a billy-goat. Blok, Anton: “Rams and Billy-Goats: A Key to the Mediterranean Code of Honour”, *Man*, New Series, Vol. 16, No. 3 (September 1981), pp. 427-440

280 E.g. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act IV, Scene I, in which the snail’s “horns” symbolise a cuckold’s. Giovanni Battista Modio offers an extensive discussion of the cuckold’s horns and the significance of their various types, in *Il Convito overo del Peso della Moglie, Dove ragionando si conchiude, che non puo la Donna dishonesta far vergogna à l’Huomo*, Firenze, 1554.

281 According to Peter Burke’s examination of the records of the Tribunal of the Governor of Rome (dating from 1565-1666), concerning defamatory libels in the city. Burke, Peter: “Insult & Blasphemy in Early Modern Italy”, in *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 (p. 96)
The association of Moses’s horns with a cuckold’s need not have been consciously made by Italian readers of the Vulgate (nor of early vernacular translations, which preserved Jerome’s idiom\textsuperscript{282}), since the Latin or Italian adjective in its feminine form, “cornuta,” refers to Moses’s face, and the image of a “horned face” is an abstract one. But once translated to a visual medium, with the horns naturally protruding from the top of the head, Moses becomes literally “cornuto” (= horned). Can we suppose that the description or image of a horned Moses (“un Mosè cornuto”) could have escaped these shameful associations altogether? And if not, might this help explain the general aversion to Moses’s horns in Italy, and to the horns of Michelangelo’s Moses in particular? These conjectures are worth entertaining, not least because the analogy between Moses’s horns and those of the cuckold runs far deeper than appearances.

This seems to have been realised by Michelangelo’s contemporary Pietro Aretino – poet, playwright, and sometime pornographer – who, despite famously censuring the nudity in the artist’s Last Judgment (1536-41), was not usually one to shy from innuendo.\textsuperscript{283} In Aretino’s comic play, Cortigiana (1525), Ercolano the drunken baker bemoans his wife’s extramarital adventures: “He who keeps goats will have horns!” [\textit{Chi ha capre ha corna!}], and “I’m not so blinded by wine that I don’t see I’m from Corneto…”\textsuperscript{284} Following a public rant at his wife, Ercolano receives some sardonic advice from the steward Valerio: “make the best of it and keep your horns visible, for they are worn these days by the greatest of men. Indeed, if you knew your history, you’d know that horns

\textsuperscript{282} Malermi’s vernacular translation from the Vulgate (1471) retains “cornuta,” while the woodcuts in the early prints of the Malermi Bible show Moses with horns (as opposed to rays of light) – an unusual usage in Italian art. Readers of Tuscan Italian translations made in the 1530s by Antonio Brucioli (1532) and the Dominican Santi Marmochino (1538) would not have encountered horns at all. Brucioli (1532, p. 29): “…Mose non si accorse che risplendesse la pelle de la faccia sua del parlare con quello.” Marmochino (1546, p. 30): “…Moyse non cognobbe lo splendore de la faccia sua quando parlava con quello il Signore.”

\textsuperscript{283} Although Aretino’s criticism of the Last Judgement set the tone for the Counter-Reformation debate on propriety in religious art, it is likely that he was motivated by personal malice, having been repeatedly snubbed by Michelangelo, who refused to satisfy his requests for the gift of a drawing. See: Waddington, Raymond B: \textit{Aretino’s Satyr: Sexuality, Satire and Self-Projection in Sixteenth Century Literature and Art}, University of Toronto Press, 2004

\textsuperscript{284} Aretino, Cortigiana, p. 77 (Act IV, scene 10) “… non mi acceca tanto il vino ch’io non vegga ch’io son da Corneto.” Corneto, an obvious play on corna or cornuto, is the former name of the ancient city of Tarquinia (the ancient name was restored in the Fascist era).
come from heaven, and that Moses wore them for everyone to see."\(^{285}\)

Valerio’s (i.e. Aretino’s) mischief is to play on the biblical description of Moses’s second descent from Sinai, when he “knew not that his face was horned” (“ignorabat quod cornuta esset facies sua”) from his conversation with the Lord.

Since it was the Vulgate and Christian tradition that made horns of the divine light, it was Aretino’s prerogative to make light of the horns: according to him, it was “with his own hand” that God adorned the head of Moses (“although he was the best friend he had in the Old Testament”).\(^{286}\) A contemporary audience would have known well what is implied by the furtive, two-fingered gesture: that a beast, or cuckold, cannot see its own horns – while everyone else can (fig. 38).\(^{287}\)

There is reason to suppose that Michelangelo was as mindful of Moses’s ignorance with respect to his “horns.” The statue’s twin protuberances, the blunt tips of which point forward over Moses’s brow, could even be seen as finger-like. The idea is conjectural, of course, but not preposterous. Innuendo of this sort was not foreign to Michelangelo’s art (as critics of his Last Judgement could testify\(^{288}\)), and it is conceivable that he played with Moses’s horns as much as Aretino. We noticed that the horns of the statue follow the direction of the eyes – rather like the seeing “horns” of a snail\(^{289}\) – while

\(^{285}\) Aretino, Cortegiana, p. 101 (Act V, scene 21). “E tu, Ercolano, piglia el panno per il verso e tieni in visibilium le corna, perché le s’usano oggidì per maggiori maestri. E se tu fusse cronichista sapresti che le corna vennero dal cielo, e Moises le portò, ch’ognuno le vidde.”

\(^{286}\) Ibid. Et anche te ricordo che le donne con due belle corna andavano a marito, perché Domenedio di sua mano ne ornò, come ho detto, il capo a Moises, e fu il maggiore amico ch’egli avessi nel Testamento Vecchio.” The ironic sense in which “ornare” (to ornament or adorn) is used by Aretino is reflected in Andrea de Jorio’s description of the gesture: “La mano cornuta portata verticalmente verso la fronte denota quello, che da taluni chiamasi un ornamento, ma che infatti è l’effetto di una vera infidelità.” de Jorio, Andrea: La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano, Napoli, 1832 (p. 93)

\(^{287}\) Claire McEachern has also related Moses’s ignorance of his horns in the Vulgate to the ignorance of the cuckold. McEachern, Claire: “Why do Cuckolds have Horns?”, Huntington Library Quarterly, Vol. 71, No. 4 (December 2008), pp. 607-631

\(^{288}\) I am thinking in particular of the figures of Saints Blaise and Catherine, which were heavily reworked by Daniele da Volterra after Michelangelo’s death, apparently to deny a suggestion of intimacy between the two figures. On the censorship of the fresco, see: Melinda Schlitt, “Painting, Criticism, and Michelangelo’s Last Judgment in the Age of the Counter-Reformation,” in Marcia B. Hall (ed.), Michelangelo’s Last Judgment, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

\(^{289}\) In a series of drawings by the Florentine Baccio del Bianco (1604-1657), cuckolds shed snails like dandruff, while the King Cuckold wears a snail headdress and is towed by a pair of gigantic snails. Rice, Louise: “The Cuckoldries of Baccio del Bianco,” in Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th-17th Century), Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (ed.). Farnham: Ashgate, 2014
remaining behind, and thereby out of, Moses’s line of sight. These unseen attributes might then suggest a “higher” perception to which Moses is not privy, but which (Christian) viewers of the statue ought to be – that is, knowledge of the New Testament, which the horns of Moses were understood to prefigure. As Aretino (at least) seems to have recognised, beneath the visual and verbal agreement, there lies a deeper analogy between the horns of Moses and those of the cuckold. As we saw, the analogy between Mosaic monotheism and monogamy, idolatry and marital infidelity, is elaborated in the metaphorical language of the Hebrew Bible. The extension of the metaphor to Moses’s horns would seem to fit with the first sojourn on Sinai, when his followers used the opportunity of his absence to consummate a sensual desire for the forbidden idol – but it was on the second descent, not the first, that Moses appeared horned. This might seem to confound the analogy, until we recall that it was also on the later occasion that God, in Christian eyes, undermined the authority of Moses by renewing the Law with inferior, man-made tablets, the original ones having been made and inscribed by his own hand. This time, God used his hand only to prevent Moses from seeing the full glory of his face – a privilege reserved for Christians. In the terms of our analogy, it is not just the idolaters who deceive Moses, but God Himself. As a theologically informed Christian would have seen it, the Hebrews’ infidelity during Moses’s first ascent had already effected the annulment of the Jewish covenant, and in light of the Gospels, the renewal appears to be a sham.

Since the prohibition against graven images was meant to safeguard the marriage of God and Israel, the affair with the Golden Calf, in the crude terms of the biblical metaphor, made a cuckold of God. Christianity, however, understood the marriage of God and Israel to have been annulled when God revealed his image in Christ, so image-making became acceptable, even

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290 See the general iconographic discussion of horns, above.

291 It is notable that Moses, having burnt the golden calf and ground it to a powder, scattered it over water, which he then made the idolaters drink (Exodus 32:20-21); Robert Alter, among others, has noted “the (approximate) analogy to the ordeal by drinking to which the woman suspected of adultery is submitted [in Numbers 5:11-31].” Alter, The Five Books of Moses, p. 497
desirable, in spite of Moses. The “cuckold’s horns” were thus transferred from God, who allowed images – including his own – to Moses, who did not.292

The Return of the Repressed (and a Freudian “fun”)

It is remarkable that Freud in his essay ignored not only the horns, but also Vasari’s tale of the Jewish statue-worshippers, of which he was demonstrably aware.293 Had he acknowledged either, he would have been forced to confront the uncomfortable paradox that the Moses embodies. If Freud effectively repressed the potential of the Moses to become an idol, or false god – while continuing to admire the statue under a pretext of scientific enquiry (like the hero of Jensen’s Gradiva) – we may fairly expect to see the repressed idea reemerge, “as if by malicious treason.”294

We need not be disappointed. The first published response to Freud’s “Moses of Michelangelo” was in a volume of psychoanalytic studies on Ritual by his pupil, Theodor Reik (1919), who readily entertained the idea that the horns of the Moses derived from a repressed object of worship.295 In Reik’s essay, which is heavily indebted to Freud’s Totem and Taboo (1913), he commends Freud’s analysis of the Moses (“a model for our own investigation”), while respecting his anonymity as author.296 Since Freud himself wrote the Preface to Reik’s volume, as well as shaping much of its content, we begin to appreciate the “fun” that he had with the Moses of Michelangelo.

292 In the metaphorical terms of Augustinian exegesis, this transference occurs on the second ascent of Sinai, when the renewal of the Law prefigures the new covenant. The horns were attributes Moses unwittingly received in the translation of the Bible from Hebrew.

293 As well as the Roman guidebook, in which he underlined the reference to Vasari’s anecdote, Freud owned a copy of the Lives in German translation (Bergstein, Mirrors of Memory, pp. 54-5). There is no mention of Vasari in Freud’s essay, although he does quote Condivi.

294 “Critics tend to account for Freud’s conflicted relation to ‘The Moses of Michelangelo’ by invoking a scenario of the ‘return of the repressed,’ ostensibly treating it as a nonpsychoanalytic aberration in his corpus, only to reclaim it in the course of their discussions as an unquestionably Freudian work.” Aviva Briefel: “Sacred Objects/Illusory Idols: The Fake in Freud’s “The Moses of Michelangelo,” in American Imago, 2003, Vol.60(1), pp.21-40


According to Reik’s (Freudian) interpretation, Michelangelo had recognised the true origin of Moses’s horns: they came from an ancient totem god, which Moses himself had destroyed and thereby usurped, appropriating its bestial features. Moreover, Moses and the totem god (later replaced in biblical tradition by the “higher concept” of Jahveh) are both identifiable with the Golden Calf. In this way, Reik explained the ambivalent effect of Michelangelo’s statue, which “[oscillating] between attraction and repulsion,” assumed “In the eyes of some […] the shape of an enormous animal, in those of others […] the figure of the Deity himself.” For Reik, “The Vulgate and Michelangelo are right: Moses is horned; he bears the symbol of the animal-god feared and admired of old in the primitive period.”

How or to what extent Michelangelo might have shared this realisation, Reik does not say. Still, he uses the sculptor’s Moses and its legendary reception to support his own idea (directly informed by Totem and Taboo) that by destroying the totem god, yet identifying himself with it by adopting its horns, Moses became God in its place: if “the golden animal which the Jews worship [in Exodus] is really an image of Moses […, the] cult of this young animal, which has taken the place of the paternal bull, would correspond somewhat with the ‘adoration’ of Michelangelo’s statue of Moses by the Jews in Rome […] mentioned by Vasari.” The words of the latter resonate here: “well may the Jews go […] to visit and adore [the Moses], since it is not something human, but divine that they adore.”

We need not subscribe to Reik’s argument (which would take a degree of faith), to appreciate a connection between the horns of Michelangelo’s statue, which he sees as befitting a young bull, and those of the Hebrews’ idol. The uncanny effect produced by the re-emergence of the idol’s horns in the image of the lawgiver is the mark of what Reik – after Freud – would call the return of the repressed; according to Freud, “the uncanny is something which is secretly

297 Reik, The Shofar, p. 309
298 Ibid, p. 308
299 Ibid, p. 310. The italic is mine. Reik’s argument relies upon his (apparently unfounded) supposition that of the two [possible] meanings for the Hebrew verb נַרָק – “to shine” as well as ‘to be horned” – “the meaning to shine is the later and more developed one.” The Shofar, p. 309
300 Reik, The Shofar, p. 328
301 Vasari, Vite (1550), p. 891
familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it.”

But can we credit Michelangelo with such a precociously “Freudian” idea?

In fact, we are in a position to supply a proof that Reik, if he had known it, would certainly have claimed to be conclusive. This comes in the shape of a small (69 cm) terracotta figure of Moses (fig. 39), made by a contemporary of Michelangelo, most recently identified as Francesco da Sangallo (who, as a child, had accompanied Michelangelo to witness the excavation of the Laocoön). Although the figure is standing, part of its pose is a direct quotation from Michelangelo’s figure. The hand of the muscular right arm, resting on the tablets, drags snake-like coils of beard across the chest, counteracting the left-turn of the figure’s head. The drama of the pose is heightened by the declamatory gesture of the left hand, and the figure’s upward gaze. From the waist down, however, the effect is altogether different: the legs are arranged in a graceful and sensuous attitude reminiscent of Donatello’s bronze David (fig. 25). Just as the foot of the giant-killer treads on the severed head of Goliath, this Moses tramples his own archenemy, the Golden Calf. His triumph, however, is unsettled by a strange, yet somehow familiar phenomenon. Making explicit the suggestion of Michelangelo’s figure, the horns that emerge from the head of the terracotta Moses are identical to those of the calf beneath its foot.

As we have noticed, the terracotta Moses recalls not only Michelangelo’s statue, but Donatello’s bronze David, a conspicuously antique figure regarded, like the Judith and Holofernes group (c. 1460), as a totem of the Florentine Republic. These Old Testament “idols” conform to a type of visual psychomachia whose theme is triumphal decapitation. In an ode to its former owner, Piero di Cosimo de’ Medici, the bronze David is described as “an armed one” on a column, who inspires “fear and love” for what he did “to overcome Goliath.”

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302 Freud, “The Uncanny,” p. 368
same “love and terror” in Condivi’s characterisation of Moses, who killed three thousand of his followers for their infidelity at Sinai. In the terracotta Moses statuette, the Golden Calf, an idol decapitated from its own column, takes the place of the head of Goliath, recalling the terrible punishment enacted on the Hebrews. This image, however, confuses the result of the encounter by making Moses an idol in spite of himself.

Moses is thus betrayed by his own position of eminence, becoming just like the false gods he sought to destroy – or, in the terms of Freud’s essay on Mosaic Monotheism, Moses is revealed as identical with the God of the Jews. Our (Freudian) perception of the horned Moses differs crucially from Theodor Reik’s in that, for him, Moses knowingly took the place of the calf-idol, whereas we – like Michelangelo, and the maker of the terracotta figure – are mindful of the biblical account, which says that when Moses came down from Sinai he “knew not that he was horned.”

In the case of Moses, in fact, the Freudian idea of “malicious treason” has some basis in biblical exegetical tradition. The account of Moses’s death, in the last chapter of the Pentateuch, describes how he was buried by God, so that “no man hath known of his sepulchre until this present day” (Deuteronomy, 34:6). According to a long exegetical tradition, “the occultation of the grave of Moses serves to prevent any possibility of a cult of Moses, with pilgrimages to his gravesite.”

This theme of burial and repression brings to mind Freud’s archaeological metaphor, as much as Vasari’s idea of pagan idols buried beneath Christian Rome. We are prepared to recognize, as Vasari seems to have done, that an all’antica statue of Moses, dominating the tomb of Moses’s Roman Christian antitype, Pope Julius II, provides an ideal setting for the return of the repressed.

The idea we have credited to Vasari is elaborated by the seventeenth-century theologian, Giovanni Andrea Borboni, in his treatise On Statues (1661), a major concern of which is the “lure of the idol” inherent in any effigy. In his

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Lirici Toscani, 2: 379 [Song in praise of Piero di Cosimo de' Medici]: “in mezzo una colonna ed uno armato, / ch’assembra fare a tuoi nimici gramì, / perché tu temi ed ami / quel che fé superare a lui Golia.” I am grateful to Alison Wright for alerting me to this, and making this connection to Condivi’s description of Michelangelo’s Moses.

305 Alter, p. 1,058

discussion of Michelangelo’s statue, Borboni recalls the hiding of Moses’s body from the Israelites, suggesting that they, being “so dedicated to idolatry […] would have worshipped him as their own God.”

Borboni was perhaps thinking of the brazen serpent, the image that God instructed Moses to make, to save the Israelites from the plague of snakes he had sent to punish their apostasy (Numbers, 21); the serpent was later destroyed by King Hezekiah, after the Israelites had misused it as an idol (2 Kings, 18). In any case, Borboni, like Vasari, was apparently sensitive to the “return of the repressed,” and even the typical manner of such recurrences. He goes on to elaborate Vasari’s claims concerning contemporary Roman Jews:

“The Jewish people, while remaining unwilling to witness that the Messiah has come, and having been forced to abandon idolatry, would, on seeing the Moses of [Michelangelo], bow down to it, as though their liberator from long and hard servitude under Pharaoh, and the leader of their ancestors to the Promised Land were resurrected, and they would readily worship him as their God.”

According to Borboni’s elaboration of Vasari, the Jews had finally rediscovered the body of Moses in the sepulchre of Julius II. He imagines a typological extension – Moses rising from the tomb, like Christ – but the effect, while flattering to Michelangelo, is less-than-flattering to Moses, and still less so to the Jews. The imagined profanity of Moses becoming an incarnate deity, in place of the numinous God of the Hebrew Bible, is a realisation of the duality inherent in Michelangelo’s statue. While Vasari and Borboni both saw divine radiance

The publication of Borboni’s Delle Statue was occasioned by the refusal by Alexander VII (1655-67) of the honorific statue he was offered by the Roman Senate. The book’s allegorical frontispiece shows Modesty preventing Sculpture from completing the Pope’s statue (the hand of which is raised in demurral) – an event which is broadcast by Fame. According to Borboni, the statue was substituted by the likeness of the Pope that all Romans “carry in their hearts,” and by an inscription in the place on the Campidoglio where his statue would have stood. In reality, Alexander had less cause to worry that his statue would occasion idolatry, than that it might suffer the iconoclasm enacted on the statues of some of his predecessors, including Paul IV. Ibid, pp. 28-30

307 Borboni, delle Statue, p. 140. “Si raccoglie dal Testo sacro, che il corpo di Mosè, doppo che morì in osculo Domini [Deut, 34:6], fu nascosto dagli Angeli, perche altrimenti gl’Isdraeliti erano così dediti all’ Idolatria; che se l’havessero havuto nelle mani, dicono gl’ Interpreti, che l’haverebbero adorato per loro Dio.”

308 Borboni, p. 140. “Che fine si avesse il Buonaruota in scolpirlo, io nol sò; so bene, che la Gente Ebreea, se non fosse che per far testimonianza ancor non volendo, del già venuto Messia, è forzata ad haver dismesso l’idolatrare; in vedendo il Mosè del Buonaruota, l’inchinarebbe come se fosse risorto; anzi come suo Liberator dalla dura schiavitudine di Farraone, e come Condottiere de’ loro Antenati alla Terra promessa, l’adorarebbe facilmente per suo Dio.”
reflected in its polished marble face, their imaginary Jews (like so many irreverend critics) failed to see beyond the horns of the idol.

We have come to appreciate that Michelangelo’s statue of Moses – like the book of Exodus according to Saint Paul – has the potential to be read in one way or another: as a relic of ancient Egypt, or as a prefiguration of Christ. It might appear as the former to imaginary Jews, or “judaizers,” and as the latter to “true Christians.” In this image, Michelangelo masters the return of repressed paganism, and ‘cuckolds’ the biblical lawgiver – at least, in a figurative sense. It might be some consolation to Moses that the artist, in old age, would regret the error of a “passionate fantasy,” by which his own divine art became his idol.\footnote{Michelangelo Buonarroti, poem no. 285. “Onde l’affetüosa fantasia / che l’arte mi fece idol e monarca / conosco or ben com’era d’error carca / e quel c’a mal suo grado ogn’uom desia”}
Chapter 3)
“Renaissance” Jews, Christian Images and the Historical Imagination

“The Jews, overcoming their reluctance [to countenance] the reproduction of human effigies, rushed in droves to admire the Moses of Rome. In it, they recognised for the first time the figure of their legislator, represented with those superhuman traits of physical strength and moral imperiousness that continuous reading of the first books of the Bible had sculpted in their minds.”

This imaginative paraphrase of Vasari was written not, as might seem, by an early modern apologist for Christian art, but by a twentieth-century Roman-Jewish historian, Attilio Milano (1907-69). Considering how Michelangelo’s Moses embodies defiance of Mosaic Law, Milano’s sculptural metaphor sits awkwardly, yet he is by no means the only scholar to be seduced by Vasari’s tale. Whether or not an image of the biblical Moses was graven in the minds of sixteenth-century Roman Jews, their alleged encounter with the marble Moses would certainly remain impressed on their written history.

In retrospect, Vasari’s suggestion that the Jews “may [well] continue” (“seguitino di andare”) to visit the Moses could be read as a self-fulfilling prophesy: Sigmund Freud, who marked the reference to Vasari’s anecdote in his guidebook to Rome, would become the most famous of Moses’s latter-day Jewish pilgrims. In the same generation, Ermanno Loevinson (1863-1943), a naturalised Roman, held that Michelangelo’s statue had the power to reaffirm Jewish faith. For him, perhaps it did, but the inherent paradox is hard to

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311 A recent study by Asher Biemann considers the literary attraction of Michelangelo to modern Jewish – primarily German-speaking – intellectuals, including Sigmund Freud, Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber. He identifies a modern Jewish “self-recognition” in Michelangelo’s work, especially in the statue of Moses and the Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes. Biemann, Asher D: Dreaming of Michelangelo: Jewish Variations on a Modern Theme, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012

312 “Not seldom is it the case that the image [of the Moses] forces tears of repentance into the eyes of many a renegade, who is contemplating complete severance with Judaism, and now regrets such a thoughtless step! For he sees the power and might of the old faith, the invisible thrust of a hearty race embodied in the Lawgiver before him… The people he despised and from whose veins he sought to separate himself – how ennobled this people appears at the hand of the genius who did not hesitate, and did not consider it below his dignity, to give the utmost of his skill in order to represent the founder of Judaism in a dignified manner.” No wonder, Loevinson concludes, that Jewish pilgrims of all times would treat the tomb as though it were that of their great leader. Loevinson, Ermanno: Roma israelitica: Wanderungen
ignore. Especially in view of a recent argument that the statue of Moses was used by proselytising Christians to affirm the opposite: the renunciation of Judaism, and confirmation of Christian faith.\textsuperscript{313} In this chapter, I re-evaluate the conception of Jews in relation to Christian images in sixteenth-century Italy, beginning with alleged Jewish encounters with the Moses of Michelangelo. In doing so, I aim to show how pervasive was the idea, encapsulated by Vasari, that attitudes to images evinced a fundamental opposition between Judaism and Christianity.

From the mid-twentieth century, Vasari’s anecdote has been regularly invoked as proof of Jewish interest in the visual arts, and moreover, Jewish assimilation of Italian Renaissance culture.\textsuperscript{314} The prolific historian of the European Diaspora, Cecil Roth (1899-1970) described how, “When Michelangelo was at work [on the Moses...] the Jews would stream out of their quarter on the Sabbath afternoon [...] to admire his progress and gaze on the features of their venerated lawgiver as they emerged from the marble under his chisel.”\textsuperscript{315} Roth writes this with some assurance, given his own unflinching admission that Vasari is “our [only] authority” (the latter says nothing about the Jews watching Michelangelo at work).\textsuperscript{316} Like Roth, the rabbi-historian Moses Shulvass (1909-1988) cites Vasari’s story without raising any question as to its veracity, even when the matter at stake is Renaissance Jewry’s “unmistakable” interest in


\textsuperscript{314} See, for example, Ermanno Loevinson (1927), Israel Zinberg (1929-37), Hermann Vogelstein (1940), Cecil Roth (1946), Attilio Milano (1963 & 1964), Moses A. Shulvass (1973), Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1975), Chimen Abramsky (1978), and Colin Eisler (1999). The latter goes so far as to suggest that Sabbath visits to the papal tomb could have “supplemented synagogue services.” Eisler, Colin: “The ‘Rabbi’ of the Sobieski Hours: Jewish Scholarship and the Spell of Christian Art”, Artibus et Historiae, Vol. 20, No. 40 (1999), pp. 117-124 (p. 118)

\textsuperscript{315} Roth, The Jews in the Renaissance, p. 203

\textsuperscript{316} Ibid. In an earlier essay, Roth has the Jews risking “skin and soul” to admire the statue: “Tale era la sensibilità artistica degli ebrei di Roma, che mentre Michelangiolo [sic] lavorava presso la tomba di Giulio II in S. Pietro in Vincoli, essi rischiavano la pelle e l’anima per entrare nella chiesa ogni sabato nel pomeriggio ad ammirare la famosa statua del Mosè.” Roth, Cecil: “Nel ghetto italiano,” La Rassegna Mensile di Israel, Vol. 2, No. 3/4, Chislev-Tebheth 5687 (1926), pp. 99-112 p. 111
art. So too Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932-2009), who endorses Vasari’s “eyewitness report.” Curiously, he and Shulvass both repeat Roth’s fantasy that the Jews saw Michelangelo at work on the Moses. None of these writers seems concerned in the least that it was the work of the “divine” Michelangelo that allegedly forced the Jews to overcome their resistance to images, or that it was Vasari, the high priest of Christian image-worship, who said so.

The retelling of the Moses legend is symptomatic of efforts made since the mid-twentieth century to eradicate the myth of Jewish aniconism, while countering the claims of racist propaganda, according to which the Jewish contribution to Western culture had been “entirely negative.” Cecil Roth and Franz Landsberger, the exiled former head of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, wrote the first histories of “Jewish art” (a category that still resists definition, even while the study of Jewish visual culture remains a growing field). The providential discovery, in 1932, of the third-century synagogue at Dura-Europos, with its narrative fresco cycles, helped to underpin counter-claims for the wealth and antiquity of Jewish visual culture. Less constructive is the use of Vasari (by Roth and others) to evince Jewish “interest in art,” since it ignores the far more complex theological claims that underlie Vasari’s narrative, as well as the Christian work of art to which it refers.

While intending to disprove crude assumptions of Jewish iconophobia, historians who perpetuate the idea of a Mosaic image-cult veer inadvertently towards another, libellous extreme. The passage from Milano’s Storia degli

317 Shulvass, The Jews in the World of the Renaissance, p. 234
318 Yerushalmi, Haggadah and History, p. 38.
319 “It is alleged by modern anti-Semites, in order to justify a prejudice which, in these ostensibly tolerant times, they hesitate to base on theological grounds, that the Jew is essentially a middleman, who has produced nothing; that he is an alien excrescence on Western life; and that the influence which he has had on the world’s culture, during the past two thousand years, has been entirely negative, if not deleterious.” Introduction to Cecil Roth’s The Jewish Contribution to Civilization, New York; London: Harper & Bros, 1940, p. ix. Of the other historians quoted above, Milano and Shulvass were refugees from the murderous racism of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, respectively, while Ermanno Loevinson was caught between the two, and did not survive.
321 When the synagogue at Dura-Europos (modern-day Syria) was discovered, its abundance of figurative representation posed a challenge to accepted art historical categories. See: Olin, Margaret: “‘Early Christian Synagogues’ and ‘Jewish Art Historians.’ The Discovery of the Synagogue of Dura-Europos,” Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft, 27. Bd. (2000), pp. 7-28
ebrei in Italia (quoted above), resonates unfortunately with the claims of the Roman Catholic theologian Giovanni Andrea Borboni (1661), for whom the Jews, in forgetting their usual resistance to images, exposed themselves as inveterate idolaters:

“having been forced to abandon idolatry, [they] would, on seeing the Moses of [Michelangelo], bow down to it, as though […] the leader of their ancestors to the Promised Land were resurrected, and they would readily worship him as their God.”

In recent years, credulity regarding the Moses legend has largely given way to tacit skepticism. Leading historians of Italian Jewish culture in the early modern period – notably Robert Bonfil and Kenneth Stow – have nothing to say about it.

Neither does the intellectual historian Kalman Bland, who challenges the myth of Jewish aniconism by arguing that the idea is for the most part a modern construction. Bland does, however, quote Vasari’s discussion (in the preface to the Lives) of the ornaments prescribed by God for the Tabernacle (Exodus, 25-30) as evidence of a “pre-modern consensus” that Judaism enjoyed an “intimate association with the visual arts.” In his selective, or cursory reading of the Lives, Bland fails to appreciate that Vasari’s remarks on art in Judaism (or rather, art in the Old Testament) amount to no more than a time-honoured apology for art in Christianity. A more critical reading of Vasari shows that he saw an inherent conflict between art and Judaism – this being a truer reflection of a “pre-modern [Christian] consensus” on their relationship. As to the question of a Jewish consensus on visual representation, this will be addressed in part two of this study.

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322 Borboni, Giovanni Andrea: Delle Statue, Roma, 1661, p. 140. “… so bene, che la Gente Ebreà, se non fosse che per far testimonianza ancor non volendo, del già venuto Messia, è forzata ad haver dismesso l'idolatrare; in vedendo il Mosè del Buonaruota, l'inchinarrebbe come se fosse risorto; anzi come suo Liberatore dalla dura schiavitùdine di Farraone, e come Condottiere de’ loro Antenati alla Terra promessa, l'adorarrebbe facilmente per suo Dio.”

323 Bonfil, Robert: Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1994. Stow, Kenneth R: Theater of Acculturation: The Roman Ghetto in the Sixteenth Century, Seattle; London: University of Washington Press, 2001. If Stow, in particular, had considered the Jewish visits to the tomb of Julius II to have actually occurred, he might have mentioned them in at least one of his numerous publications on Roman Jews and the papacy during the Catholic Reformation (e.g. Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy, 1555-1593, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977)


325 Ibid, p. 68
As with any imaginative representation, we are well advised to treat Vasari’s writing cautiously as a source of historical evidence, but its value to historians should not be underestimated. Recent scholars, most notably Paul Barolsky and Patricia Rubin, have demonstrated the value of the *Lives* as purposeful constructs, not just an agglomeration of facts and falsehoods. There is, so Barolsky insists, a deeper significance to any Vasarian fiction (whatever measure of fact it might contain), for such fictions are “born of the historical imagination, that faculty essential to one’s larger vision of history.” Quite recently, this depth has been tested by several scholars interested in the immediate historical context of the Moses anecdote – one of whom argues that this supposed fiction contains far more than a grain of truth.

**Between fact and fiction (Vasari in context)**

As we saw in the previous chapter, Vasari’s allegation of Moses-worship not only satirises Judaism but can be read as an allegory of Jewish conversion to Christianity, reflecting a major topical concern in Counter-Reformation Rome. The installation of the Moses on the papal tomb, in late-1544, came two years after the foundation of the Roman House of Catechumens, and a papal bull insuring “the material well-being, and, indeed, betterment of [Jewish-to-Christian] converts.” These were deliberate steps in a new direction for Church Jewry policy, which led ultimately to the issuing of the bull *Cum nimis absurdum* by Pope Paul IV in 1555. The bull is known by its opening phrase, which sets the tone for the restrictive measures that follow:

“... it is absurd and improper that Jews – whose own guilt has consigned them to perpetual servitude – under the pretext that Christian society receives them and tolerates their presence, should be ingratiates to

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326 Taking for an example Vasari’s account of the *Rucellai Madonna*, carried in solemn procession through Florence and fêted by a visiting king, Barolsky warns that by dwelling on the author’s misattribution of (the Sienese) Duccio’s work to (the Florentine) Cimabue, we miss the full historical implications of his story: “its mythic, civic and theological dimensions.” Paul Barolsky: “Fear of Fiction: The Fun of Reading Vasari,” in Barrault, Anne B. et al. (eds.): *Reading Vasari*, London: Philip Wilson, 2005, p. 32

327 Ibid.

328 For discussion of the bull, *Cupientes Iudaeos* (issued on 21 March 1542), and the foundation of the House of Catechumens, see: Stow, Kenneth R: *Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy*, p. 51
Christians, so that they attempt to exchange the servitude they owe to Christians for dominion over them…”

Henceforth, Jews in the city of Rome, and “all other states, territories and dominions of the Church,” were compelled to live in separate, enclosed quarters, with only a single exit. The inhabitants of these ghettos were to be allowed no more than one place of worship, with any other synagogues to be destroyed. Furthermore, the bull prohibited Jews from owning fixed assets, engaging in trades other than rag-picking, from fraternising or eating with Christians, or employing them in any capacity. It accented this separation by requiring that Jewish men and women wear some evident sign, “yellow in colour,” by which they might be recognised. The explicit condition that “[Jewish] physicians, even if summoned and inquired after, cannot attend or take part in the care of Christians,” ended a tradition of Jewish intimacy with the popes: Julius II (1503-13), Leo X (1513-21), Clement VII (1523-34), as well as several quattrocento popes, had had personal physicians who were Jews.

As Kenneth Stow has argued quite persuasively, this sudden and violent change in papal Jewry policy, which for centuries had ensured that Jews could live in relative peace and tolerance among Christians, was primarily motivated by a new urgency in seeking mass conversion to Christianity. This primary motive – “the core to which all of [the new] Jewry policy was united” – is intimated in Cum nimis absurdum, which claims that “the Roman Church tolerates the Jews in testimony of the true Christian faith and to the end that they, led by the piety and kindness of the Apostolic See, should at length recognise their errors, and make all haste to arrive at the true light of the Catholic faith…” In reality, only those Jews who sought conversion would benefit from any sort of kindness, while those who upheld their faith were now condemned to the meanest of circumstances.

Historically, papal Jewry policy upheld the Augustinian principle that the Jews were essential witnesses to the origins of Christianity, and to Christian fulfilment of Jewish prophesies – an idea encapsulated by Augustine’s paraphrase of Psalm 59: “slay them not, lest they forget thy law.” A secondary reason for tolerating the Jews’ presence in Christendom was the idea, also advanced by

329 Ibid, p. 5
330 Ibid, pp. 5-6
Augustine, that they would be converted *en masse* before the Last Judgement. As Stow has shown, the renewed efforts to convert the Jews – and the conversionary ardour of Paul IV in particular – were conditioned by widespread eschatological speculation, and the belief that the mass conversion of the Jews was now not only desirable, but eminently feasible.

Without making explicit the historical context regarding the Roman Jews, Paul Barolsky noticed the eschatological allusion in Vasari’s description of the *Moses*, which sets up his remarks on the Jewish “starlings”:

> “every part of the work is so well finished, that Moses may now more than ever be called the friend of God, since before all others He wanted to reconstitute and prepare his body for the Resurrection, by the hands of Michelangelo; and well may the Jews go, as they do every Sabbath, men and women flocking like starlings, to visit and adore [the statue], since it is not something human, but divine that they adore.”

The historical and theological context of this passage is explored in a recent article by Gerd Blum, which involves the first real effort to measure the truth of the anecdotal element. Describing how Vasari’s *Lives* tell the story of art “in the manner of Christian salvation history” and “as a history of the overcoming of [...] supposed Jewish aniconism,” Blum relates the *Moses* story directly to “the theological topos of the eschatological Jew.”

Seeing how neatly it encapsulates Vasari’s creative vision of art history, the story might seem too apt to be true, but Blum still considers a possible basis in fact. The existence of a Jewish “*Moses-cult*” might not be corroborated by any Christian or Jewish sources, but the idea that individual Jews might have visited

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331 Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, Book XX, Chapter 30.
334 “Et ha sì bene ritratto nel marmo la divinità che Dio aveva messo nel santissimo volto di quello [...] et è finito talmente ogni lavoro suo, che Moisè può più oggi che mai chiamarsi amico di Dio, poiché tanto innanzi agli altri ha voluto mettere insieme e preparargli il corpo per la sua resurrezione, per le mani di Michelagnolo; e seguirono gli ebrei di andare, come fanno ogni sabato, a schiera, e maschi e femine, come gli storni a visitarlo et adorarlo: che non cosa umana, ma divina adoreranno.” Vasari, op. cit. p. 891.
336 Ibid., p. 557
the tomb in San Pietro in Vincoli cannot easily be dismissed. The fact that in May 1566 voluntary visits to churches were explicitly forbidden to Roman Jews, on pain of forfeiting their right to synagogue worship, implies, as Blum argues, that such visits were not unusual in the preceding decades. By the same token, however, when Vasari published his amended *Life of Michelangelo* in 1568, the suggestion that the Jews “may continue” to visit the Moses had become effectively nonsensical: in reality, the Jews could only have continued to visit the papal tomb if they abandoned Judaism and embraced Christianity; in other words, if they ceased to be Jews. That Vasari left his remarks unchanged suggests that the sense in which he intended them was not strictly bound by circumstances.

Arguably, before the edict of 1566, prospective Jewish visitors to San Pietro in Vincoli might have been more conscious of the disapproval of their own coreligionists than that of Christian authorities. As far as I am aware, there are no documented Jewish visits to Roman churches in the sixteenth century, other than those involving coercion or baptism. The regularity of coerced visits increased rapidly from around the time of the ban on voluntary ones, Roman Jews being increasingly obliged to witness the baptism of new converts, and to attend sermons designed to effect their own conversions.

The coincidence of prohibitive and coercive measures might appear contradictory, but the sum effect was that Jews were no longer free to enter churches on their own terms. Blum mentions an incident in 1566, when representatives from the Roman Ghetto were obliged to attend the baptism of five former coreligionists in Saint Peter’s Basilica; the ceremony involved the unveiling and veneration of the *Volto Santo*, or Veil of Veronica. In an earlier baptism ceremony in Saint Peter’s (1561), a delegation of Jews had been forced to stand with “eyes closed and countenances turned to the floor.” Here, the Jews were forced to engage in a humiliating choreographed spectacle

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337 The edict, issued by the cardinal vicar of Rome, Giacomo Savelli, also forbade Jews to admit Christians to their synagogues. Blum, op. cit, p. 563, and idem, Appendix 1, pp. 570-571.


340 Ibid.
of their “blindness” to Christian truth. Such humiliations were the price Roman Jews were accustomed to pay – in addition to heavy financial ones – for the relative tolerance and protection afforded by the papacy.

Meanwhile, efforts to effect Jewish conversions were heightened by the introduction of compulsory sermons in Rome, and later elsewhere in Italy. Conversionary sermons became official Church policy in 1577, when Gregory XIII issued a bull to that effect, but there is evidence that they were occurring regularly a decade earlier.341 A letter from Cosimo Bartoli to Francesco I de’ Medici in January 1568, relays news from Rome of how “the [Catholic] Reformers have determined that every feast day, the Jews should attend a sermon, for which last Sunday there were many [Jews] in Sant’Agostino.”342

The Basilica of Sant’Agostino, which stands close to the original House of Catechumens, seems an appropriate venue for such sermons. As we have seen, its titular saint was influential in shaping Church policy concerning the Jews: the sermons themselves evinced an important shift in emphasis, from the Augustinian principle of toleration, to the Augustinian ideal of mass-conversion. It seems reasonable to suppose that, during visits to the basilica in the 1560s, Jewish audiences were enjoined to consider the Hebrew inscription displayed by Raphael’s painted Prophet Isaiah (1512, fig. 40), on a pier overlooking the nave: “Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in” (Isaiah, 26:2).

The fresco was commissioned by the humanist Johann Goritz, to accompany Andrea Sansovino’s celebrated marble group of the Virgin and Child with Saint Anne on the side altar beneath it. The pairing of subjects owes to Isaiah’s elevated Christian status among the Hebrew Prophets: Saint Jerome described him as almost an Evangelist, so well did his prophesies seem to describe the Gospels, and in particular, Christ’s birth to a virgin. The form and composition of Raphael’s seated figure, with its attendant putti, is a homage to Michelangelo’s Sistine prophets, while the portentous Hebrew inscription was

341 Gregory XIII issued two bulls – Vices eius nos, on 1 September 1577, and Sancta Mater Ecclesia on 1 September 1584 – requiring that a delegation of Jewish men and women attend the Saturday sermons. Milano, Attilio: Il Ghetto di Roma: Illustrazioni Storiche, Roma: Staderini editore, 1964, pp. 269-70

342 “Che i Riformatori hanno determinato che ogni festa gli Hebrei vadino alla predica, al che domenica passata ne furono molto in S. Agostino.” Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Mediceo del Principato 3080, fol. 10 (17 January 1568)
likely provided by the humanist and Hebraist Egidio da Viterbo, an intellectual advisor to Raphael (and possibly Michelangelo), who shared the eschatological concerns that would shape Paul IV’s new Jewry policy.

These connections deserve our attention because they contextualise Jewish encounters with Christian art of the period, and show how Jewish themes were woven into the fabric of contemporary Christian culture. Two decades later, as we shall see, a Hebrew inscription from *Isaiah* was used to amplify an altarpiece commissioned by, and likely directed towards, Jewish converts in a church connected to the House of Catechumens. While there is no evidence that San Pietro in Vincoli was used for conversionary preaching, let alone as early as the 1540s, Vasari seems to have anticipated the (involuntary) Jewish congregations that would take place later in other Roman basilicas, while composing his vignette around a work of Christian art.

**Christian art and “Jewish blindness”**

We need not suppose that Vasari had any special interest in Judaism, beyond using it to assert the validity and efficacy of sacred art. Since the history of art in the Christian era is conceived as a Christian history, it is not surprising that contemporary Jews are seldom mentioned in the *Lives* (although biblical Jews appear quite frequently within the images discussed). There is, however, one other anecdote that deserves some consideration. It concerns the only Jewish individual to be represented in the *Lives* (1568) – a certain Dattero, resident of Bologna and “friend of [Vasari’s promoter] M. Ottaviano de’ Medici,” who appears in the biography of Vasari’s sometime assistant, Cristofano Gherardi. The significance of Dattero’s appearance – or rather, the narrative

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345 Besides the account of the Jewish “starlings” in the *Life of Michelangelo* (1550 & 1568), contemporary Jews are mentioned only three times in Vasari’s *Vite,* and in two of those cases only in passing.

346 This individual may be Dattilo di Mosè da Rieti, who is known to have been banking in Bologna in 1544. Muzzarelli, Maria Giuseppina: “Ebrei, Bologna e sovrano-pontefice: la fine di una relazione tra verifiche, restrizioni e ripensamenti,” in *Verso l’epilogo di una convivenza: gli*
in which he appears – is far greater than has been appreciated. As I will show, it epitomises the prevailing sixteenth-century Christian conception of Judaism in relation to art, and to Christianity more broadly.

Dattero is introduced as a banker commissioned to make material provisions for Cristofano and his fellow painter Battista Cungi, whom Vasari had sent to Bologna to prepare a refectory wall and three panels he was to paint in the monastery of San Michele in Bosco. The two men were often seen in the banker’s company, he being “gentilissimo, e cortese molto,” and since Cristofano had “a large pin or web [una gran maglia] in one eye” and Battista’s eyes were “large” or “coarse” [grossi], the two were believed by the locals to be Jews, “as Dattero in fact was.”

On the face of it, the anecdote might seem inconsequential, but the remarks about the two men’s physical appearance are obscure enough to suggest a hidden depth. As it happens, a simple lexical enquiry confirms the existence of a deeper meaning, but I will begin by putting the episode in an historical context.

The second edition of the Lives, which includes Cristofano’s, was published in the three-year period between the completion of the Ghetto in Bologna (1566), and just before the Jews’ expulsion from the city (1569); the narrative precedes that timeframe by nearly thirty years. The painters’ visit to Bologna can be dated to 1539, sixteen years before the issuing of Cum nimis absurdum (1555), which not only compelled Jews in the Papal States to live in ghettos, but reinforced the medieval requirement for them to wear sartorial signs (in this case, yellow hats and badges), so that they “should be recognisable everywhere”; that is, so that they might not be taken for Christians (or vice versa). Although the Jewish sign of alterity was prescribed at the Fifth Lateran Council of 1215, it had not been consistently enforced by the papacy during three and a half centuries – but after 1555, no exceptions, even for itinerant individuals, would be tolerated.

ebrei a Bologna nel XVI secolo (Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, ed.), Firenze: Giuntina, 1996 (p. 24)

347 “…per che andando alcuna volta costoro in compagnia di lui per Bologna assai domesticamente, et avendo Cristofano una gran maglia in un occhio e Battista gli’occhi grossi, erano così loro creduti ebrei, come era Dattero veramente.” Vasari, Vita di Cristofano Gherardi (1568), Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori scultori e architetti: nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568 (Bettarini & Barocchi, eds.), Firenze: Sansoni, 1966 (Vol. V, p. 289)
When Vasari was preparing the expanded version of the *Lives* for publication, signs of Jewish alterity had thus become a fact of everyday life in Bologna, as in Rome, but three decades earlier, Jews commonly looked and dressed like their Christian neighbours.\(^{348}\) While they were also free to fraternise and eat together, it seems understandable that two strangers who kept company with a Jewish loan banker (while Jewish loan banking was allowed) might be assumed to be Jews themselves. Even so, the artists’ friendliness with Dattero is not the only reason Vasari gives for that assumption, which he attributes also to Cristofano’s “*gran maglia in un occhio,*” and Battista’s “*occhi grossi.*”

The notion that these should be considered typically “Jewish” features does seem puzzling, and has not so far been accounted for. For Roth, Vasari’s anecdote constituted “adequate evidence” that Jewish patronage and appreciation of art led on occasion to “personal intimacy” between Jews and Christians – although he was evidently amused that “exceptionally large” eyes, or casts should be considered “Jewish characteristics!”\(^{349}\) As I have suggested, there is more to these descriptions than meets the (modern) eye.

With recourse to the earliest dictionary of the Italian language – the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, whose first edition was published in 1612 – it becomes clear that the phrases Vasari used to describe the two artists were very carefully chosen. Not only do they both pertain to the organs of sight, they are both idioms for excessive pride (“*superbia*”). In early modern Italy, “*fare [or, stare con] gli occhi grossi*” was understood to suggest haughtiness, disdain, or “feigning not to see for pride,”\(^{350}\) while a “*maglia*” (pin or web) in the eye – being a medical condition that causes dimness of sight\(^{351}\) – had a similar symbolic aspect. The idiomatic sense of the latter is derived from a passage in Gregory the Great’s (c. 540-604) moral reflections on the book of Job:\(^{352}\) “*pride grows in

\(^{348}\) Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, p. 104.

\(^{349}\) Roth, *The Jews in the Renaissance*, pp. 202-203


\(^{351}\) John Florio’s (1611) Italian to English dictionary lists a “Máglia degl’ócchij” as “a pin and web or other spots in the eies.” Pin and web refer to two diseases of the eye: caligo and pterygium, both of which cause dimness or obscurity of sight.

\(^{352}\) Book XXIV, chapter 23. The moral reflections of Gregory the Great were translated into the Italian vernacular by Zanobi da Strata (1312-61) and first printed in Florence in 1486 by Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna. The precise phrase from the vernacular *Morali* (“La superbia
the mind, like a pin or web in the eye [*come la maglia negli occhi*], decreasing the vision the greater its extent:

“Pride then grows up gradually in the heart, […] until it closes entirely the sight of the mind which suffers from it, so that the captive mind can both suffer from the swelling of pride, and still not […] see that from which it suffers.”

The combination of afflictions that induce blindness and stand metaphorically for the obstinacy of pride epitomises the common Christian attitude towards Jews established by Saint Paul. Throughout his morals on *Job*, Gregory censures the Jewish people for their haughtiness in rejecting the new covenant, and for adhering boastfully to the Law of Moses. According to Vasari, Cristofano’s “*gran maglia*” – read: haughtiness – was naturally seen by the Christian folk of Bologna as a sign of his Jewishness.

The uncovering of this layer of meaning demands a re-evaluation of Vasari’s anecdote in allegorical terms. Taking it at face value, Blum used it to demonstrate not only that Jews were free to enter churches in the Papal States in 1539 (since “no one seemed to have any problem with their presence in a sacred Christian environment”), but also the plausibility of the idea that “Jewish artists had frescoed a monastic refectory.” These inferences seem rather less logical when one considers that the two painters’ imaginary afflictions would make them (as Jews) eminently unsuited to their art – an idea that is borne out in the rest of the story.

Learning of their presumed Jewishness from a local shoemaker (who asks after the “Jewish painters”), Cristofano retorts “I am a good man and a better

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353 “La superbia così si genera nella mente, come la maglia negli occhi, la quale tanto più diminuisce la vista, quanto più distende per l’occhio. Così la superbia a poco a poco cresce nel cuore: e quanto si dilata per esso, chiude in tutto la vista della oppressata mente: intanto che l’animo imprigionato può patire il gonfiamento della superbia, e nientedimeno non può patire di vedere quello, che egli patisce.” *I Morali di San Gregorio Magno Papa, volgarizzati del secolo XIV da Zanobi da Strata*… (Volume III, p. 69), Verona 1852

354 E.g. *Romans*, 11:8-10: “God hath given them the spirit of insensibility; eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, until this present day […] Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see: and bow down their back always.” Cf. the numerous references to blindness and arrogance in Luther’s polemic, *The Jews and their Lies* (1543).

355 E.g. Book XXV, chapter 31.

Christian than you are.” “Be as you please,” the shoemaker replies, “you are known as Jews by everyone, and those airs of yours, which are not of this place, confirm it.” “Enough,” says Cristofano, “you will see that we do the work of Christians.” Crucially, the “work of Christians” is the painters’ work in producing sacred images. More particularly, in this case, it involved priming the panel for Vasari’s *Supper of Gregory the Great* (fig. 41); it was Gregory who imagined the metaphorical “gran maglia” that caused Cristofano to be mistaken for a Jew in the first place.

The latent presence of Gregory the Great in Vasari’s anecdote tempts further analysis. In some ways, Gregory epitomises historical ambivalence about the role of art in Christian worship, or even the extent to which art might be considered “the work of Christians.” According to a legend familiar to Vasari, Gregory the Great was largely responsible for the debasement of art in the Christian era, by destroying ancient art in his efforts to eradicate idolatry. In the Preface to the *Lives*, Vasari (like Ghiberti a century earlier) expresses regret for Gregory’s destruction of pagan idols – but the latter also condemned indiscriminate iconoclasm, articulating a defence of sacred images as “books for the illiterate,” which had an enduring influence throughout the Middle Ages and well beyond. The distinction Gregory made between adoring images (i.e. idolatry) and what the images represented would be reiterated at the last session of the Council of Trent (1563), and invoked repeatedly in Gabriele Paleotti’s *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* (Bologna, 1582). In Vasari’s painting, Gregory appears in the guise of the late Medici pontiff,

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357 “Io sono uomo da bene e migliore cristiano che non sei tu”. «Sia come volete voi, - replicò il calzaiuolo - io diceva così perciò che, oltre che voi sete tenuti e conosciuti per ebrei da ognuno, queste vostre arie, che non sono del paese, mel raffermavano». «Non più, - disse Cristofano - ti parrà che noi facciamo opere da cristiani». Vasari, *Vita di Cristofano Gherardi*, p. 289

358 The subject is a story according to which Gregory the Great would customarily invite twelve poor men to share his supper; one evening, a thirteenth person appears at the table, who is revealed to be an angel, or Christ himself. Two of the panels painted by Vasari – *The Supper of Saint Gregory*, and *Christ in the House of Martha* – are now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna, while the third – *Abraham in the Valley of Mambre* – is lost. In addition, he and his assistants painted a frieze with twenty stories of the Apocalypse.

359 Buddensieg, “Gregory the Great” (op. cit.)


361 Paleotti, Gabriele: *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* (translated by William McCuaig), Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2012
Clement VII (died 1534), who had ordered the painting of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement* (1536-41).

If Vasari’s assistants were really mistaken for Jews at any point during their time in Bologna, it is not the incident itself, but Vasari’s embellishment of it that makes it meaningful. As it now appears, his telling of the story is in keeping with the general role of the Jews in the *Lives* as described by Blum, who (while missing the particular significance in this case) identified the overarching theme of Christian art overcoming Jewish aniconism. The presumed Jewishness of Cristofano and Battista is ultimately confounded by their artistic activity, which Jewish pride – a metaphorical blindness – would supposedly not permit.

The metaphor of blindness pervades Christian thinking about Jews and Judaism (for which the allegorical figure of the Synagogue is symbolically blindfolded), and it was seen to underlie the Jews’ supposed animosity towards (Christian) images. To take an example pertinent to Bologna, the creation of the Jewish ghetto meant the appropriation of houses owned and inhabited by Christians, many of which had sacred images painted directly onto their walls. A legal deed of April 1557 lists all such images in the quarter assigned to the Jews, stipulating that they be whitewashed rather than exposed to contemptuous treatment by the prospective residents. Similar measures were taken when ghettos were established in other Italian cities. The obscuring of the images protected them from the supposed threat of Jewish “imagocide,” belief in which was reinforced by legends such as the Crucifix of Beirut, which involves a group of Jews torturing an image they discover in a house formerly inhabited by Christians. At least two altarpieces incorporating this legend were painted in Bologna during the sixteenth century; one before and one after 1557.

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363 Such measures were taken in Cremona (1580) and Mantua (1613), but it has not yet been established if this was standard practice for the establishment of ghettos. Aron-Beller, Katherine: “The Inquisition, Professing Jews and Christian Images in Seventeenth-Century Modena,” *Church History*, Volume 81, Issue 03 (September 2012), pp. 575-600 (p. 584)

A decade later (when Vasari was preparing the expanded edition of the Lives for publication), the restrictive measures of Cum nimis absurdum, as well as constant proselytising, had failed to achieve the scale of Jewish conversion that the Roman Church might have anticipated. The heightened anti-Jewish activity of the Roman Inquisition gave rise to a series of allegations against the Jews of Bologna, the city with the largest Jewish population in the Papal States outside Rome. Among the dangerous accusations made by a fanatical Jewish-to-Christian convert named Alessandro, were that rabbinic tradition regarded Christians as idolaters, and taught Jews to abominate images, especially the crucifix. These charges were refuted by a respected Bolognese rabbi, Yishma’el Haninah da Valmontone, who explained that the images condemned by the rabbis were pagan (i.e. pre-Christian) idols, and certainly not all images, since man was made in the image of God.

A parallel (or formative) defence against the same charges was written by Yishma’el’s fellow rabbi, Solomon Modena. As David Ruderman has shown, Solomon cleverly identified common ground on the definition of idolatry with the Roman Catholic polemicist Agostino Steuco (1497-1548), who was “both a competent Semitics scholar and a staunch defender of the Catholic faith against the excesses of the ‘Lutheran plague.’” In spite of Rabbi Yishma’el’s successful defence against the charges, he and his coreligionists were expelled from Bologna in 1569, as were all Jews in Papal territories, with the exceptions of Rome and Ancona.

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365 Perani, Mauro: “Appendice documentaria. Documenti sui processi dell’Inquisizione contro gli ebrei di Bologna e sulla loro tassazione alla vigilia della prima espulsione (1567-1568),” in Verso l’epilogo di una convivenza (p. 186)

366 Ibid.

Roman Catholic art and Jewish conversion

In recent years, much scholarly attention has been paid to the controversies surrounding art in the Reformation era, as well as to Catholic and Protestant conceptions of “Judaizing,” but little attention has been paid to how contemporary Jews are implicated in these polemics. In particular the role of images in Jewish-to-Roman Catholic conversionary events is an area that remains largely unexplored, as Marina Caffiero has remarked. In light of Gerd Blum’s essay on Vasari, Michelangelo’s Moses and the Jews, Caffiero revisits a legendary case of conversion-by-image, that took place in Rome in the early-1700s. The story concerns the family of a wealthy merchant from Livorno, Angelo Vesino, a Jewish convert to Christianity who had travelled to Rome for baptism. Angelo’s wife, Bianca, converted en route, but their fourteen-year-old daughter, Anna, who “with [her mother’s] milk had sucked in every Jewish superstition,” remained “obstinate.” On arrival in Rome, the teenager was taken on a tour of the city’s churches and, on the feast of the conversion of Saint Paul, was at last moved to convert by the contemplation of two images in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria: namely, the eponymous Byzantine icon, and Bernini’s marble Ecstasy of Saint Teresa (1647-52). So Anna’s “Jewish superstitions,” which implicitly involved iconophobia, were exorcised by the celebrated Roman Catholic images. A description of her conversion was published to coincide with a bull issued by Clement XI, granting further privileges to neophytes.

370 Caffiero (ibid.) quotes Francesco Posterla: Istorico Ragguaglio della solenne Funzione fatta nel darsi il Battesimo dalla Santità di Nostro Signore Papa Clemente XI a tre persone ebree convertite alla nostra Santa Fede, Roma, 1704.
371 The two images involved in Anna’s conversion, and the church where it took place, have a particular significance for the Catholic Reformation. The church had been rededicated to the Madonna of Victory following the triumph of Roman Catholic forces at the Battle of White Mountain (1620), where the Marian icon had been captured; Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was the preeminent Counter-Reformation saint (as well as being the granddaughter of a Jewish convert to Christianity).
372 Caffiero, ibid., p. 445.
Considering the important role of Bernini’s (nearly contemporary) masterpiece in the story of Anna Vesino’s conversion, Caffiero makes a case for a reevaluation in literal terms of Vasari’s remarks on Michelangelo’s Moses. She offers evidence that a Jewish connection with San Pietro in Vincoli endured in the decades following the installation of the Moses on the papal tomb: in 1577, the apse of the Basilica was decorated by Iacopo Coppi with a fresco cycle depicting the legend of the Beirut Crucifix (Coppi would paint the same subject in Bologna, two years later). In the frescos, the Jews who discover the crucifix proceed to abuse it by crucifying the sculpted figure anew, whereupon it bleeds miraculously from its side, the blood is discovered to have curative powers, and the abusers are inspired to seek baptism (fig. 42). The legend clearly elaborates the typological connection between Christ’s sacrifice and the brazen serpent, the biblical archetype of the miraculous image. In view of the coincidence between the theme of the fresco cycle and that of Vasari’s story – namely Jews succumbing to the power of a Christian image – Caffiero suggests that both were inspired by conversionary events involving Jews that took place in San Pietro in Vincoli.

What Caffiero proposes, however, is not that the visits alleged by Vasari were made by practicing Jews, but rather by Jewish converts to Christianity, who were led to the basilica from the newly founded House of Catechumens. According to Caffiero’s hypothesis, the neophytes presented themselves before the statue of Moses on the Sabbath in order to consummate their abandonment of their Jewish beliefs. This, she claims, would resolve the paradox of Jews adoring “the effigy of the champion of aniconism.” As for Vasari’s hyperbolic image of Jewish men and women “flocking” to the Basilica “like starlings,” Caffiero suggests an allusion to the “continuity of the [supposed] visits,” and to the symbolic value, for Christians, of converted Jews proclaiming the truth of Christian faith before a masterpiece that defies Jewish (and Mosaic)

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373 The possible pertinence of the apse frescoes to the Moses was earlier conjectured by Massimo Moretti: “La frequentazione della chiesa da parte di ebrei sembra confermata dalla presenza nell’abside di San Pietro in Vincoli di un ciclo di affreschi rappresentante le storie del miracoloso Crocifisso di Beirut.” Moretti, Massimo: “«Glauci coloris». Gli ebrei nell'iconografia sacra di età moderna,” Roma moderna e contemporanea, XIX, 2011, 1, pp. 29-64

374 “Tale ipotesi, inoltre, consente di superare anche il problema e il paradosso costituiti dall’adorazione da parte di ebrei dell’effigie del campione dell’anticonismo per eccellenza, Mosè.” Caffiero: “La fascinazione delle immagini,” p. 451
aniconism.\footnote{Ibid, p. 450} If the alleged crowds of Jewish visitors to the Moses were in fact Christians, albeit new ones, this might account for the lack of documentary evidence to corroborate Vasari. Instances of Roman Jewish conversion were, if not numerous, at least fairly regular in the years surrounding the completion of the Julius tomb: in 1544, there were twenty-three conversions, and in 1545 eighteen – among them was a rabbi, Salomone Romano, of whom there will be more to say shortly. Each case, moreover, involved the neophyte’s entire nuclear family.\footnote{Caffiero (ibid) cites Archivio Storico del Vicariato di Roma, Pia casa dei catecumeni e neofiti, 175, Battesimi, 1545-1563.}

One famous, or infamous convert was Rabbi Joseph Zarfati, known as Andrea del Monte following his baptism by Julius III (Giovanni Maria Ciocchi del Monte) in 1552. He held a position as Hebrew translator in the Vatican, and was appointed in 1576 to preach conversionary sermons to his former coreligionists, which he did until 1582, when church officials judged that “his virulence in the pulpit was alienating rather than attracting the city’s Jews.”\footnote{Wood, Carolyn H. \& Peter Iver Kaufman: “Tacito Predicatore: The Annunciation Chapel at the Madonna dei Monti in Rome,” The Catholic Historical Review, Volume 90, Number 4 (October 2004), pp. 634-649 (p. 643)} Andrea’s legacy, besides his anti-Jewish treatises, was his patronage of the Annunciation Chapel at the new church of Madonna dei Monti, established by Gregory XIII in 1580. The church, which had been built to accommodate a miracle-working fresco of the Madonna and Child with Saints,\footnote{“… so it pleaseth God to blesse this people [of Rome] and to feede their devotion now and then with some glorious miracle […] even this yere also 1580 April 26 was there a miraculous Image of our Lady disclosed and discovered by divine revelation […] where the lame and blind have been presently cured.” Martin, Gregory: Roma sancta (1581), edited from the manuscript by George Bruner Parks, Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1969} was assigned to the Confraternity of the Catechumens and Neophytes (the conversionary institution founded in 1542).\footnote{Wood \& Kaufman, p. 636}

The commission to decorate the Annunciation Chapel in the Madonna dei Monti was undertaken by the painter Durante Alberti, just after Andrea del Monte’s death in 1588.\footnote{The executor of Andrea del Monte’s will was his nephew by marriage, Ugo Boncompagni, another neophyte who, as Solomon Corcos, was formerly one of the richest Jewish bankers in Italy. Ibid, p. 644} The large, frescoed altarpiece represents the Annunciation to the Virgin, presided over by God the Father and the heavenly host (fig. 43). As is typical in the iconography of the scene, the approach of the angel appears to
have interrupted Mary’s reading. What is unusual, however, is that her 
discarded book falls upright into the foreground, its pages facing the viewer to 
display five lines of enlarged Hebrew text. Those equipped to read it would 
recognise the verse from Isaiah (7:14) that Christians ordinarily associate with 
the Annunciation: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call 
his name Emmanuel.”

They would also encounter the subsequent verse – “Butter and honey shall he eat” – a “seldom specified” part of Isaiah’s prophesy, 
whose inclusion here has been traced by Carolyn Wood and Peter Kaufman to 
Andrea del Monte’s polemical treatise La confusione dei giudei.

As Wood and Kaufman quite sensibly propose, the Hebrew inscription was 
included in the image as a persuasive example of Christianity’s fulfilment of 
Jewish prophesy. The unusual prominence of words in an altarpiece “depicting 
the Word made flesh” was likely conceived with formerly observant Jews in 
mind: “Within the precincts of the Madonna dei Monti, the altarpiece’s reminder 
of Isaiah’s “behold” urged recent converts to complete the passage from 
Judaism to Christianity.”

According to Wood and Kaufman, the composition 
of the altarpiece involved a “special application” of the Tridentine decree on 
images as expounded in Paleotti’s Discorso, which had recently been circulated 
in Rome. Paleotti, after Gregory the Great’s example, characterised images 
as scripture for the illiterate, but Alberti’s Annunciation, with its Hebrew script, 
extends a further invitation to literate Jews already familiar with the scripture. It 
seems reasonable to suppose that Raphael’s Isaiah, with its Hebrew message 
– “Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may 
enter in” – had been enlisted to the same cause during conversionary sermons 
in Sant’Agostino some two decades earlier.

The idea that an image may be used to confirm Christian faith is one that 
Caffiero brings to bear on the Moses of Michelangelo. Her argument, which is 
obviously conjectural (but cannot easily be dismissed), adds to the range of 
imaginary Jewish responses to the statue, some of which we considered earlier.

381 Wood and Kaufman (ibid, pp. 640-41) claim to have made an extensive survey of the 
Annunciation iconography, and found no other example of the text from Isaiah being rendered in 
legible Hebrew.

382 Ibid, p. 642

383 Ibid, p. 640

384 Ibid, p. 636
Borboni (1661) was in no doubt that Jewish attraction to the figure exposed the idolatrous “repetition-compulsion” of Judaism. With (secular) hindsight, Loevinson and Milano held that the apparent violation of the Mosaic prohibition offered an affirmation of Jewish faith, while the identical attraction to the Moses is construed by Caffiero as a manifestation of Christian faith. These contradictory views, and the well-documented ambivalence of Sigmund Freud, who identified with both the terrible lawgiver and the terrified idolaters, suggests a further possibility, where the wavering neophyte is repelled by the (sometimes magnetic) force of Moses’s forbidding image, and intimidated into retreat from the church.385

There is at least one documented example of images being used by Christian authorities in the way that Caffiero proposes. An edict issued in 1478 in Seville required all Christians to keep images of the Virgin, saints and the crucifix at home, ostensibly to arouse devotion, but effectively as a proof of their faith.386 This edict – reckoned by Felipe Pereda and David Nirenberg to be without parallel in medieval or early modern Europe – was issued in response to a controversial pamphlet condemning Christians’ use of images as idolatrous, and amid general concerns that converts from Judaism were continuing to practice the Mosaic religion in secret.387 It came just fourteen years before the Jews of Spain were given the ultimatum of conversion or expulsion. Following the edict, new Christians and their descendants were brought before the tribunal of the Inquisition as suspected crypto-Jews, for neglecting or misusing the prescribed images. By this means, Nirenberg writes, art was explicitly “impressed into the service of differentiating Christianity from ‘Judaism’” – by which he implies “judaizing,” as much as the actual practice of the Jewish religion.

If there were no precise parallels to the Seville edict in medieval or early modern Europe, its premise was commonplace, especially in Italy, and there

385 “Sometimes I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior as though I myself belonged to the mob upon whom his eye is turned – the mob which can hold fast no conviction, which has neither faith nor patience, and which rejoices when it has regained its illusory idols.” Freud, “The Moses of Michelangelo,” p. 213


are some arresting examples of its application. In 1558, a priest named Filippo Herrera – formerly Rabbi Salomone Romano – was sent by Paul IV on a mission to the Jews of Romagna and the Marche. Finding himself in the town of Recanati on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish year, he forced his way into the local synagogue and planted a crucifix on the Torah ark – violently superimposing the corporeal image of Christ on the (aniconic) vessel of the Word. Two Jews who dared to oppose him were thrown in chains and whipped through the streets.

Filippo Herrera’s behaviour might have been exceptional, but his intentions were not. As we have seen, the idea that images were the most potent manifestation of Christian faith motivated the patronage of church art by the Jewish-to-Christian convert and proselytiser, Andrea del Monte. The obverse of this idea – that iconophobia betrayed the fundamental error of Judaism – underlies accusations of Jewish iconoclasm, cases of which were sometimes redressed by the commission of new images, as in a famous case in late-fifteenth-century Mantua. It will be instructive to look at the details of this and one or two other cases, and the ways in which they were prosecuted.

The case in Mantua involved the Jewish loan banker Daniele da Norsa who, in 1493, made the innocent mistake of buying a house on whose façade was a fresco of the Madonna and Child with Saints. Daniele (1448-1528) applied for, and was granted, permission from the Vicario of the Bishop of Mantua to whitewash the image, which he duly did, only to find his property defaced by angry citizens, who saw the whitewashing as a deliberate affront to Christianity. The care taken to secure episcopal permission ultimately did nothing to safeguard Daniele’s reputation, or his property, from Christian vigilantes. The fact that his decision to whitewash the fresco anticipates the official treatment of images in houses destined for Jews in Bologna demonstrates the hopelessness of his efforts to do the right thing. Indeed, so

388 The identification of Herrera with Salomone Romano was made by Shlomo Simonsohn: “Some well-known Jewish converts during the Renaissance,” Revue des études juives, CXLVIII (1989), pp. 17-52


anxious were Italian Jews who found themselves in proximity to Christian images, that some employed notaries to prove that they neither intended or had caused any harm to them.\textsuperscript{391}

Popular resentment of Daniele Norsa and his fellow Jews was evidently still simmering in Mantua two years later (May 1495), when blasphemous images and slogans appeared on the façade of the Norsa house, where they were seen by participants in an Ascension Day parade. The house was pelted with stones, and if Daniele’s absence from Mantua at the time did not serve him as an alibi, it perhaps saved him from serious harm.

Although Daniele Norsa was formally acquitted (twice) of any blasphemous intention, the Marquis of Mantua, Francesco II Gonzaga, imposed a series of financial and symbolic sanctions on him and his family. Having first ordered that Daniele replace the original whitewashed image with a “more ornate and more beautiful” one, the Marquis altered the directive, so that Daniele was obliged to pay the considerable sum of 110 gold ducats for Andrea Mantegna to paint an altarpiece, the \textit{Madonna della Vittoria} (1496), commemorating Francesco’s (less than consummate) victory over French forces at the Battle of Fornovo.\textsuperscript{392} In the image, the kneeling Marquis raises his eyes toward the Virgin and Child, and receives their blessings. The price of Mantegna’s painting was evidently too little to satisfy the Marquis or the mob: the house of Daniele Norsa was demolished and on its site was built a new church, Santa Maria della Vittoria, which would house the celebrated altarpiece.\textsuperscript{393}

A further example was made of Daniele Norsa around 1499, when a second altarpiece, including defamatory portraits of him and his family, was commissioned from a now-unidentified painter, and installed in the new church. (This altarpiece remains in a religious environment in Mantua, the chapel of San Sebastiano in the Basilica of Sant’Andrea; Mantegna’s was stolen, with some poetic justice, by Napoleon, and remains in the Louvre). The subject of the later altarpiece is the Madonna and Child with Saints, including Jerome, who

\textsuperscript{391} See the examples cited by Katz, op. cit., p. 54.
\textsuperscript{392} Katz, op. cit., p. 41 & 174, n. 7.
\textsuperscript{393} As Dana Katz has argued, the exceptionally harsh treatment of Daniele Norsa by the Marquis (who otherwise was known for offering tolerance and protection to Jews), amounts to a “quiet and insidious form of violence,” designed to placate the angry mob, while helping to distract from the Marquis’s unpopular and only modestly successful military campaign. Katz, p. 45
holds a dedicatory model of the new church, but it is most remarkable for the row of four bust-length Jewish portraits; an identity parade that includes, perhaps, Daniele’s wife and son (fig. 44).

In contrast to the figure of the Marquis in Mantegna’s altarpiece, the four Jews appear at the lower margin of the image, the women’s eyes are downcast, while the two men look out despondently at the viewer. They wear on their chests the yellow “O” that had been imposed in Mantua in the wake of the image-libels, when the Gonzaga court decreed that Jews should be made “distinct from Christians in their dress, as they are in their faith.” The words *Debellata hebraeorum temeritate* – “the temerity of the Jews subdued” – appear at the top of the panel. In part two, I will contrast this infamous image and inscription with a dignified portrait of a Norsa family member – commissioned, moreover, on his own terms.

The case of Daniele Norsa, which Dana Katz discusses in terms of politically sublimated violence towards Italian Jews, is one of several arising from allegations of Jewish sacrilege in the decades around 1500. A case in Empoli (1518), analogous to the one in Mantua, resulted in the Jewish-funded commission of a tabernacle of the Madonna and Child from Andrea della Robbia; the tabernacle includes a comparable inscription: “From the price paid by the Jews for their error, this [tabernacle] was made in praise of God.”

The idea for the Empoli tabernacle may have derived from the *Madonna of the Rose*, a late-trecento marble sculpture that occupied an exterior niche at Orsanmichele in Florence, and to which was added, in the mid-1490s, an inscription recording an alleged violent assault upon it by a Jew. The original sculpture is now preserved inside the Museo di Orsanmichele, while the exterior niche contains a copy, complete with inscription.
incident, which is described in two contemporary chronicles, involved a homeless Iberian Jew named Bartolomeo de Cases. He is described as a *marrano*, the derogatory term used by Spanish Christians to refer to (suspect) converts from Judaism, so he would have been a refugee from the expulsion of 1492. In August 1493, on or about the feast of the Ascension, Bartolomeo is alleged to have desecrated a painted pietà and an image of the Virgin, before attacking the *Madonna of the Rose* with a knife, scratching the face of the Virgin and the eye of the Child. Having confessed to these crimes under duress, he was condemned to have a hand amputated before each of the first two images, before being blinded literally, and of course symbolically, in front of the statue at Orsanmichele. In the event, the prisoner was murdered by a bloodthirsty crowd before he could receive his official punishment, a fate recorded in an inscription beneath the *Madonna of the Rose*: “A Jew attacked this statue with a knife and, confessing, was torn to pieces by the crowd and perished, 1493.” The inscription is the only trace that remains of the alleged attack, since the statue itself is unscathed.

These allegations of Jewish image-abuse emerge from a long tradition of imagined Jewish hostility towards Christian images, which continued into the seventeenth century. As Herbert Kessler describes, “legends about Jews’ destroying as idols Christian paintings and statues – part and parcel of similar claims about host desecration and the blood libel,” were generated by the belief “that Jews could see only the physical form of sacred images, and not the archetype beyond them.” This was the same blindness that made Jews unable to see the Christian truth foreshadowed in their own scriptures.

Blindness towards images was seen by medieval Christian exegetes to have afflicted even the biblical Jews. The example of Moses’s brazen serpent was an important one, not only because it prefigured the Crucifixion, but because it

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397 The Spanish word *marrano*, from the Arabic *muharram* (forbidden, anathematised) was first used in the fifteenth century to refer to pigs, which are unclean beasts according to Muslim as well as Jewish law.

398 Katz, op. cit., p. 101. The Latin inscription reads: *HANC FERRO EFFIGIEM PETIIT IUDAEUS ET INDEX / IPSE SUI VULGO DILANIATUS OBIT / MCCCCLXXXXIII*


400 Kessler, Herbert: “Shaded with Dust: Jewish Eyes on Christian Art,” in *Judaism and Christian Art*, p. 97
“invested the opposition of true faith and false belief in the very act of looking at an object sanctioned by God.”\(^{401}\) In medieval art, the brazen serpent is often represented, not on a cross (as in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel pendentive), but on the sort of column that is usually reserved for idols (fig. 45), making the point that “while the people who believed (i.e. Christians) are able to see beyond the material object itself to find its spiritual message, those who lacked faith (Jews and others) cannot because they remain locked in literal reading and seeing.”\(^{402}\) It is here that the sacred image becomes an idol. As we saw in the previous chapter, the horns of Michelangelo’s Moses point to precisely the same religious dichotomy as the brazen serpent’s column. The fate of the serpent, ultimately destroyed as an idol, would be used by Christians to indict the Jews for the religious error that underlay their iconophobia: idolatry engenders iconoclasm.

The representation of Jews as hostile to Christian images, as well as the consecrated host, entails a paradox of a kind often inherent in anti-Jewish thinking. Jews attack images, or hosts, because they fail to recognise their spiritual archetypes – but the Jews’ hostility still implies a superstitious interest on their part. Paradoxes of this kind betray Christian doubts or insecurities, which were habitually projected onto contemporary Jews. In this way, Christian doubts about the Eucharistic miracle of transubstantiation were assuaged by stories of Jewish host desecration – understood by simple Christians to be credulous reenactments of deicide.\(^{403}\) Very often, legends of Jewish attacks on consecrated hosts or sacred images end with the Jew inadvertently proving a material potency that had seemingly not been manifest to Christians. Such is the case in the legend of the Beirut crucifix, where the reenactment of deicide on the inanimate figure results in the miraculous issue of blood, and the Jews’ conversion.

The complexity of the relationship between Christian worship and sacred images is epitomised by the legend of the Beirut crucifix, and its representation in sixteenth-century Italy. As Paleotti notes in his *Discourse on Sacred and

\(^{401}\) Ibid., p. 92.

\(^{402}\) Kessler (ibid.) makes this point with particular reference to Abbot Suger’s brazen serpent roundel at St-Denis (twelfth century).

\(^{403}\) See Miri Rubin: *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1999
Profane Images (1582), the legend was invoked at the ecumenical council that ended the first Byzantine Iconoclasm (787), to exemplify the efficacy of sacred images. Paleotti composed his discourse in the long aftershock of another seismic image controversy – brought on by the Reformation – and it was around the same time (1577) that Iacopo Coppi was commissioned to fresco the legend of Beirut in the apse of the basilica where Michelangelo’s horned Moses presides. In Coppi’s fresco, two Jews kneel over the horizontal crucifix, raising hammers to drive nails into the hands of the figure (fig. 42). The method by which the Jews torture the image – a method implicit in the making of a crucifix – evokes Leonardo da Vinci’s disparagement of sculptors, by whose hands “the Saviour [is] crucified anew.” Coppi’s figures are also visually reminiscent of earlier sixteenth-century images of sculptors and iconoclasts.

In a frescoed window embrasure in the Sala di Costantino in the Palazzo Apostolico (1520-24) – where the overarching theme is the triumph of Christianity over paganism – Gregory the Great (defender and destroyer of images) appears seated at his desk, while in the corresponding image a figure armed with a hammer destroys an idol, in a way that is deliberately evocative of a sculptor’s work (fig. 46). This particular figure, which recalls David beheading Goliath, as frescoed by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, was adapted for a woodcut illustration in Sigismondo Fanti’s Triompho di Fortuna (Venice, 1527), where the figure represents Michelangelo himself (fig. 47), engaged in a creative assault on a block that partly reveals the recumbent figure of Dawn for the tomb of Lorenzo de’ Medici (the rough-edged block appears too small for even Michelangelo to produce an intact figure).

404 Paleotti, p. 78

405 “Omè, chi vedo! Il Salvatore di nuovo crocifisso.” MS I, 65r. Institut de France, Paris. In a similar vein, Leonardo wrote of crucifixes for sale, “I see Christ sold and crucified afresh, and his saints suffering martyrdom,” and of those who worship images, “they will offer light to one who is blind, and to the deaf they will appeal with loud clamour.” Richter, Notebooks of Leonardo, p. 249

406 The first phase of the Sala’s decoration was begun under Leo X, and completed under Clement VII. The ceiling fresco – which shows an antique statue broken at the foot of a crucifix – was painted by Tommaso Laureti around 1582.


408 Lavin, op. cit, p. 40
recursive relationship between these several images and their themes – making and breaking, idolatry and iconoclasm, the sacred image and the idol – exposes the complexity and ambivalence of Christian attitudes to images, and especially statues, in the Reformation era. As we have seen, this in turn relates to the more profound insecurities exposed in Counter-Reformation efforts to convert Jews to Christianity.

These are the complex issues that underlie the making of Michelangelo’s statue of Moses, and Vasari’s representation of it. The imaginary Jews’ failure to recognise the spiritual content of the image (or idol) they “adore” is a pretext for Vasari to describe it as “something not human, but divine.”409 When Attilio Milano, Cecil Roth and others suspended disbelief to compose their own historical vignettes – taking care to avoid the explicit language of idolatry (they permit their Jewish visitors to “admire,” but not to adore) – they attempted to appropriate the negative image of the Jews that Vasari’s anecdote entailed. In the second part of this thesis, I examine the reality of how Jews in early modern Italy negotiated, for themselves, the occasionally treacherous potential of images.

409 This is the only instance in the Vite where Vasari speaks of a Christian image being “adored.”
PART II.
Chapter 4
Re-figuring the Image Prohibition: Jewish Perspectives on Images in Early Modern Italy

In his History of Jewish Rites (c. 1615), the Venetian Rabbi Leon Modena informs his Gentile reader that “[The Jews] keep no figures, nor images, nor statues in their houses, and much less in the synagogues and Holy places, due to what it says in Exodus, 20 […] and elsewhere.” But in Italy, he continues, “many license themselves to keep portraits and paintings at home, especially if they are not in relief or full body.” The biblical authority cited by the Rabbi is the edict best known as the Second Commandment, which forbids the making of “any graven image, or any likeness of any thing.” According to Leon Modena, respect for this categorical prohibition did not preclude his Italian coreligionists from enjoying some forms of figurative art; in fact, as we know from his autobiography, Leon himself owned and commissioned painted portraits, while his Hebrew adaption of the Fiore di virtù, published in 1600, is illustrated with figurative woodcuts.

As these biographical details suggest, Leon Modena embodies the complexity of Jewish cultural experience in his own lifetime (1571-1648), and in the decades preceding it. In this chapter, I use him as a medium through which to explore Jewish attitudes to figurative art – in particular, the representation of the human figure – in early modern Italy. By tracing developments in Jewish

410 “Figure, ne imagini, ne statue non tengono in casa, e tanto meno nelle sinagoghe, e luochi Sacri, a loro, per quello, che é detto nell’ Esodo cap. 20. Non sarai à te scultura, ne niuna imagine, &c. & in molte altri luochi: Ma in Italia molti si fanno lecito tener ritratti, e piture in casa, massime non essendo di rilievo ne di corpo compito.” Leon Modena: Historia de Riti Hebraici. Vita & osservanze, de’gl’ Hebrei di questi tempi, Venice, 1638, Parte Prima, Capitolo II, p. 16.


visual culture, and examining how they reflect a broader cultural experience, my aim, ultimately, is to shed new light on aspects of the latter.

One of the main concerns for historians of Jewish culture in pre-modern Italy has been to measure the extent of acculturation to Italian (Christian) society, and what it implies for the evolution of Jewish religious and secular identities – a theme that will be taken up here and expanded in the following chapter.⁴¹³ So far, scholarship in the field has drawn almost exclusively on documentary material, while neglecting a rich seam of visual evidence, as well as evidence pertaining to the visual. The forms of visual art and ornament that Italian Jews commissioned – or, no less importantly, did not – as well as their attitudes to non-Jewish visual culture, reveal much about how Jews conceived themselves, either as a part of, or apart from, a larger non-Jewish society.

For their part, historians of Jewish art have, in my view, been insufficiently concerned with the broader cultural context of images and objects produced for Jews in the Reformation era; an era that, in art historical terms, is defined by Christian controversy over religious images, and the continued loosening of the medieval bond between art and religion. While Protestant reformers condemned the immoderate use of images in Christian worship – reprising traditional Jewish attitudes to image-based worship – religious art in Roman Catholic Italy entered a phase of intense self-reflexivity, as explored in part one of this thesis. Since art in Judaism continued, as it had since the medieval period, to exist in relation to, or in tension with, Christian aesthetics and Old Testament iconography (i.e. Christian representations of the Hebrew Bible),⁴¹⁴ it should, I suggest, be viewed properly within this larger cultural context. So too should Jewish attitudes to visual representation.

We will find these points exemplified by Leon Modena’s approach to visual art, the literary evidence for which is summarised in an essay by Shalom Sabar


⁴¹⁴ Although the iconography of Jewish manuscript illumination often corresponds to Christian iconography, and the religious identity of the illuminator is often unclear, the former cannot be described as merely imitative. See: Epstein, Marc Michael: Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997
Some of the material presented in Sabar’s essay deserves to be revisited, starting with a sermon delivered in 1593 by the twenty-two-year-old rabbi (from which Sabar borrowed his title phrase, “the right path for an artist”). The sermon refers to a passage in the Talmud, in which God is compared to a figurative artist: “It is in the capacity of a human being to draw a figure on a wall, but he cannot invest it with breath and spirit…” God, however, “shapes one form in the midst of another [i.e. a foetus in the body of a woman], and invests it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines.” In his reading of the passage, the rabbi describes a painter’s capacity to make “perfect images” by correcting defects as they appear, something that a sculptor is unable to do: “[he] who cuts stone to make a statue may make a mistake that is irreversible and he will throw away the stone for he cannot finish his undertaking.” Leon compares the sculptor’s most serious limitation to that of a preacher, who is unable to erase errors in the way that painters or writers can; and yet, “there is none like G-d who can succeed in both fully […] There is […] no artist like Him whether it is in painting or carving.” Sabar uses this passage to prove the young rabbi’s “knowledge of Renaissance art,” noticing the allusion to arguments once used by Leonardo da Vinci to assert the superiority of painting to sculpture. For Sabar, this constitutes evidence that Leon Modena “encouraged the various forms of art,” even while he maintained a traditionally strict attitude to “the production and design of ceremonial artifacts for the home and for the synagogue.” We will explore the rabbi’s views on Jewish ceremonial artifacts in due course, but there is more to say about his particular manner of engaging with Renaissance discourses on art.

415 Sabar, op. cit.
417 Babylonian Talmud, Berahkhot 10a.
418 Sabar (op. cit. p. 276) quotes Leone Modena (Midbar Yehudah, Venice 1602, p. 5a) in his own translation from the Hebrew.
419 Ibid.
420 Ibid.
421 Ibid, p. 277
According to Joanna Weinberg’s reading of the sermon, Leon Modena uses the theoretical comparison (paragone) between painting and sculpture to express “the vulnerability of the preacher who takes on the awesome task of imitatio dei, but can never ensure the perfection of his art.”

The rabbi recognises the expediency of painting as a means to making “perfect images,” but as he seems to acknowledge, in terms of the paragone, mastery of an unforgiving medium (stone) may be seen as proof of the sculptor’s greater artistry.

It is notable that Leon Modena’s conception of sculpture conforms to the distinction made by Michelangelo, in a letter published by Benedetto Varchi in 1550, in which he defines sculpture as that which is made “by the effort of taking away [per forza di levare],” as opposed to anything made “by means of building up [per via di porre],” which is explicitly likened to painting.

Michelangelo’s letter is appended to the second of Varchi’s Due lezione (addressed to the Accademia Fiorentina), in which he considers whether sculpture or painting is the “nobler art.”

The first lecture concerns Michelangelo’s sonnet Non ha l’ottimo artista alcun concetto, according to which any form conceived by a sculptor may be found within a block of marble – though only a hand that “obeys the intellect” can discover it.

The accomplished sculptor (l’ottimo artista) is able to imagine “one form in the midst of another,” to borrow a phrase from the Talmud. It may be that God’s creation of Adam, whom he “fashioned […] from the soil,” actually implies via di porre, not forza di levare – but as we shall see, Jewish law is not concerned with theoretical distinctions between carving or modelling the human form. In any case, what is paramount for Leon Modena, as a rabbi, is the principle that no paragone can be drawn between visual artists and the Divine.

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422 Weinberg, op. cit., p. 113.


424 Varchi canvassed the opinions of other artists, including Bronzino, Pontormo, Benvenuto Cellini and Vasari.

425 “Non ha l'ottimo Artista alcun concetto, / Ch'un marmo solo in sé non circonscriva / Col suo soverchio, e solo a quello arriva / La man, che ubbidisce all'intelletto.” [The greatest artist does not have any concept which a single piece of marble does not itself contain within its excess, though only a hand that obeys the intellect can discover it.] Varchi, Due lezziioni, p. 13

426 Genesis, 2:7 (Alter, p. 21)
Certainly, Modena was aware of the “divinity” attributed to Christian artists such as Leonardo, Raphael, and especially Michelangelo, for whom, and for whose art, “divino” had become a common epithet, even before the publication of Vasari’s *Vite* (1550 & 1568).\(^{427}\) Perhaps he had heard the story of how the “divine” sculptor took a gigantic block of marble, abandoned by blundering lesser-mortals, and revealed a perfect image of the Jewish hero, David. Vasari describes how, in sculpting David, Michelangelo revived “one who was dead” (the biblical hero, or the abandoned stone).\(^{428}\) Leon Modena’s sermon, for all its talk of artistic perfection, denies this kind of rhetoric, reasserting the limits of human creativity with reference to the Talmud: “It is in the capacity of a human being to draw a figure on a wall [or to carve one from stone], but he cannot invest it with breath and spirit.”

Leon Modena’s sermon epitomises the issues dealt with in this and the following chapters. The rabbi’s novel, quasi-secular approach to an ancient Jewish text displays an educated interest in figurative art, but importantly, a refusal to elevate art or the artist to the level of the sacred, which would be tantamount to reducing the sacred to the level of art. Although the sermon was given in a synagogue – and Leon must have expected his Jewish audience to understand his allusions – the synagogue itself (in Venice, at least) afforded no material examples of figurative art. In what follows, I will consider Jewish attitudes to figurative art, especially anthropomorphic sculpture, in a larger cultural environment where examples of it were abundant, venerated, and often contested. I will consider some objects made for Jews in Italy, before and during Leon Modena’s lifetime, that seem to trespass the limits described in his *History of Jewish Rites*. This needs to be framed by a more generation description of what the Mosaic image prohibition has meant historically to religious Jews, which interior or exterior forces might have conditioned its

\(^{427}\) Ariosto’s epic poem *Orlando Furioso* (1532), which contains the famous line “Michel più che mortal, Angelo divino” (Canto XXXIII), was at the time of Leon Modena’s sermon a literary favourite among Jews in Northern Italy.* At the age of twelve, Leon translated its first canto into Hebrew verse.**

\(^*\)Baruchson Arbib, Shifra: *La culture livresque des juifs d’Italie à la fin de la Renaissance*, translated from the Hebrew by Gabriel Roth, Paris: CNRS, 2001 (pp. 129-136 and 163-182)

interpretation, and the extent of its authority in secular as well as religious spheres.

The ambiguity of the Law

It is commonly supposed that the prohibition against images in *Exodus* 20 established a tendency in Jewish culture towards aniconism. Leon Modena implies as much in the remarks quoted at the start of this chapter. The truth, however, is that in spite of the categorical emphases of the prohibition (which is amplified elsewhere in the Pentateuch, or Torah), it has seldom been construed as demanding avoidance of all visual representation. Even in its scriptural context, the edict is somewhat ambiguous. The Ten Commandments are a formulation of several more or less distinct edicts recorded in *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy* that are referred to as being ten, but never explicitly demarcated as such. The image prohibition follows the assertion of monotheism (“I am the Lord thy God”) and the prohibition of false gods, but it is not inherently obvious whether any of these edicts should be regarded as discrete. The supplementary clause, “Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them” (pertaining to false gods, as well as to images), allows the inference that “graven images” are permissible, so long as they are not used as objects of worship. As Philip Alexander remarks, the biblical statutes on images exemplify a notorious paradox in the drafting of laws, “namely that the more precise and full legislators try to be, the wider, sometimes, they open the door to differences of interpretation.” In Leon Modena’s assertion that the Jews keep “no figures, nor images, nor statues in their houses,” and “much less in the synagogues,” a hint of self-contradiction betrays something of the scriptural ambiguity and its legacy in Jewish culture.

These ambiguities are exposed in the wider biblical context. In *Exodus*, the prohibition of “graven images” is juxtaposed with a requirement for figurative sculpture – the two cherubim of beaten gold that surmount the Ark of the

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429 The edicts are given in *Exodus* (20:2-17) and *Deuteronomy* (5:6-21), and referred to as the “Ten Words” in Ex. 34:28, Deut. 1:13, Deut. 3:14 & Deut. 10:4.

Covenant (Exodus, 25:18-21),\(^{431}\) while in Numbers (21:8), God orders Moses to make a brazen serpent and set it on a pole. These were exceptions attributed to God himself, but according to biblical descriptions of the first Temple of Jerusalem, built by Solomon, the massive basin in which the priests performed their ablutions was supported by twelve cast bronze oxen, and there were lavers adorned with lions, oxen and cherubim.\(^{432}\)

The ambiguity of the image prohibition is representative of a more general difficulty in observing the strict, but often ambiguous, commandments of the Torah, which regulate every aspect of Jewish life. In response to this difficulty, the written Law of Moses is supplemented in Judaism by an oral law (the Mishnah), which was recorded for posterity in the second century CE, after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans had denied Judaism a centre of religious authority. The Mishnah and rabbinic commentaries on it (Gemara), together comprise the Talmud, the basis for all later codes of Jewish law (Halakha).

The oral laws on images are expounded in chapter three of the Talmud tractate Avoda Zarah, literally “foreign worship,” which regulates Jewish interactions with Gentiles, including the avoidance of idolatry and resistance to assimilation. The chapter begins with the opinion of Rabbi Meir, that “All images are forbidden because they are worshipped [at least] once a year.”\(^{433}\) Had Rabbi Meir’s pronouncement been considered authoritative, the chapter might have ended there. As it is, exceptions and clarifications are introduced through diverse rabbinic voices, with a result that is neither prescriptive nor totally proscriptive, but rather a conversation of learned opinions. Christine Hayes uses this passage to illustrate “the degree to which the study of Talmud is not a

\(^{431}\) As Robert Alter (The Five Books of Moses, p. 28) describes, the Cherubim are “not to be confused with the round-cheeked darlings of Renaissance iconography […] they are the winged beasts, probably of awesome aspect, on which the sky god of the old Canaanite myths and of the poetry of Psalms goes riding through the air.”

\(^{432}\) See: 1 Kings, chapter 7 & 2 Chronicles, chapter 4

matter of passive acquisition [, but rather] an exercise in active and critical thinking through carefully orchestrated dialectics."  

In the absence of any comprehensive, universal prescription on visual representation, rabbis have often decided the legality of images ad hoc, as evidenced by a large body of written rulings (known as responsa, “answers”) on the subject. Often, these deal with the permissibility of existing objects or images, meaning that the rabbis were not consulted in advance, but asked to respond later to concerns raised by a member, or members of a religious community. The rabbis’ decisions involve a range of considerations, such as who or what an image was intended to represent, in which medium it was made, on what scale, for which use or context, and sometimes who was responsible for making it.

During the two-thousand-year diaspora that followed the Roman destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), religious Jews have exhibited attitudes to visual representation that range almost, if not quite, as widely as the ambiguity of Mosaic Law permits. Certainly, the Law has sometimes been very strictly interpreted, but at other times visual representation was abundant, as it was among Jewish communities in late-antique Rome and Palestine, and more generally in late-medieval Christendom. A widespread hiatus in figural representation in Judaism coincides, significantly, with the emergence of Islam and the iconoclastic controversies that beset Christianity in the early medieval period. As Cecil Roth reasons, it was unthinkable “for the traditional leaders of the protest against image-worship to allow their neighbours [i.e. Christians and Muslims] to be more zealous in this respect than they were themselves.”

Indeed, Judaism generally exhibited its strongest tendency towards aniconism in Muslim lands, where resistance to visual representation was a cultural norm.

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434 Hayes, Christine: The Emergence of Judaism: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011, p. 117

435 For a selection of these responsa in English translation, see: Mann, Jewish Texts.


438 For visual representation in Islamic culture, see: Allen, Terry: “Aniconism and Figural Representation in Islamic Art” in his Five Essays on Islamic Art, Sebastopol, CA: Solipsist
That is not to say that diaspora Jews have merely toed the disparate lines set by their non-Jewish neighbours. Since the discovery, in 1932, of the third-century Dura-Europos synagogue (which stood near a smaller, Christian place of worship), art historians have reckoned with the possible influence of Jewish iconography on early Christian art.\footnote{Kessler, Herbert and Kurt Weitzmann: \textit{The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art}, Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990} The synagogue’s frescos, depicting scenes from the Hebrew Bible, feature the divine hand motif that was used in Christian art for as long as the Judaic taboo against representing God (the Father) endured (fig. 48). Since the re-emergence of figurative art in twelfth-century Hebrew manuscript illuminations, there are no examples of such a grand scale of human figuration as is found at Dura-Europos. This means, in effect, that after the general resolution of the Christian image controversies in the mid-ninth century, opposing attitudes to visual representation remained a point of difference, albeit imprecise, between Judaism and Christianity.

In the introduction to his edited volume \textit{Jewish Art: An Illustrated History} (1961), Cecil Roth suggested that Jewish attitudes to visual representation were historically “conditioned by two opposing forces – on the one hand by revulsion and on the other by attraction” to surrounding visual cultures.\footnote{Roth, \textit{Jewish Art}, p. 12.} A force of attraction is certainly evident in the Roman Jewish catacombs, as it is in Hebrew illuminated manuscripts from fifteenth-century Italy, which are often abundant in human figuration and vernacular ornament (fig. 49). An opposite force, of “revulsion,” is harder to measure, although it underlies the original biblical prohibition of “graven images” (which outlawed the idols of polytheism), and it is vehemently expressed by the Hebrew prophets. There was a highly politicised expression of aniconism in first-century Roman-occupied Judea, but the extent to which Imperial image cults conditioned Jewish iconophobia, or merely provoked expressions of it, is arguable.\footnote{This is attested in first-century accounts, including those of Tacitus and Flavius Josephus.} In any case, the received idea that a tendency toward aniconism is characteristic of Jewish culture is untenable. As David Freedberg has pointed out, in spite of the strictures
against images, Jews historically have tended more towards the use of visual representation than not.\textsuperscript{442}

Sometimes, as in Christian art, the tension between the prohibition of images, and the inclination toward representation is evident within images themselves. This is exemplified by a famous illuminated Haggadah, produced in Germany around 1300, which is lavishly illustrated with scenes from \textit{Exodus} and images of the Passover Seder, all of which are populated by human-bird hybrids in contemporary Jewish dress.\textsuperscript{443} The hybrid figures of the “Birds’ Head” Haggadah were no doubt conceived from a reluctance to represent the complete human form – of which the face is the outstanding characteristic – but also a strong desire to express ideas and narratives pictorially (fig. 50).\textsuperscript{444}

The widespread use of (fully) human figures in illuminated manuscripts in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe shows a general relaxation of attitudes to visual representation, but some important limits remained. In pre-modern times, Jewish culture generally denied the three-dimensional representation of human figures, even in environments where the biblical edicts were liberally interpreted.\textsuperscript{445} There are some exceptions to this rule to be found among Jewish communities in late antique Rome and Palestine (fig. 51),\textsuperscript{446} and as we shall see, in early modern Italy.

According to the great philosopher and codifier of Jewish law, Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), it is absolutely forbidden to make only two kinds of image: those of the heavenly bodies (“sun, moon, stars, planets and angels”) in whatever medium, and that of the human figure in relief – even if such images are made “for beauty alone.”\textsuperscript{447} Likewise Joseph Caro (1488-1575), in his


\textsuperscript{443} Jerusalem, Israel Museum, MS 180/57


\textsuperscript{445} Ibid, p. 12


authoritative code of Jewish Law (Shulchan Aruch, published in Venice in 1565), allowed that it was permissible to sculpt images of animals, birds and fish in relief, but never the complete human form. The strength of the aversion to anthropomorphic sculpture is evident in Leon Modena’s qualified statement that, in Italy, many Jews “keep portraits and paintings at home, especially if they are not in relief or full body.”

The image of God and the human form

Judaism’s suspicion of human figuration, and especially anthropomorphic sculpture, stems from its conception of God as invisible and immaterial – notwithstanding that humans were made in his “image and likeness” (Genesis, 1:27). As Maimonides explained in his Guide of the Perplexed, the word “image” in relation to God refers not to “the outward shape and contours of a thing,” but to an intellectual perception, while the human “likeness” to God is derived from the divine intellect. Maimonides scorned the “crass anthropomorphism” of those to whom it seemed that “they would deny Scripture, nay, the very existence of God would be called into question unless they imagine Him as a body with face and hands like themselves in shape and design.” So while the categorical ban on images denied the potential of any image to become a god, the taboo against sculpted human figures suppressed the one image most liable to be seen as god-like, especially in its pristine form. In other words, the taboo resists the impulse of humans to (re-)create God, or gods, in their own image; an inversion of Genesis, 1:27.

The Jewish rejection of the sculpted human figure on grounds of the false perception of god-likeness would be reaffirmed by encounters with Greek and

448 Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 141:1, translated from the Vilna edition (1911) by Vivian Mann (Jewish Texts, p. 30).
449 Modena, Riti, p. 16
450 In this respect, the symbolic appearance of a divine hand in the Dura-Europos synagogue, and in some late-medieval manuscripts, stretches the limits of visual representation in Judaism. Historical surveys of Jewish art have exposed a few instances of the taboo being broken, but these rare exceptions – and the exception often taken to them – only prove the general rule. See: Saltman, Ellen S: “The ‘Forbidden Image’ in Jewish Art,” Jewish Art, Vol. 8 (1981), pp. 42-53
452 Ibid.
Roman polytheists, who imagined – and often sculpted – their gods in human form. As the Roman historian Tacitus reported, the Jews “regard as impious those who make from perishable materials representations of gods in man's image [...] Therefore they set up no statues in their cities, still less in their temples; this flattery is not paid their kings, nor this honour given to the Caesars.”453 Naturally, the lack of conceptual distance between man and god that was characteristic of Graeco-Roman culture (as implied by Tacitus) culminated in the apotheosis of earthly rulers. The Seleucid Emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BCE), who regarded himself as an embodiment of Zeus, and violently suppressed Judaism, imposed an idol (probably a statue of the god) in the Temple of Jerusalem.454 Later, the Roman Emperor Caligula (37-41 CE) attempted the same with a colossal golden statue of himself.455

The advent of Christianity, whose followers saw Jesus as “the image of the invisible God,” entailed the erosion of Judaism’s essential taboo.456 Early-medieval Christian art imposed a figure identical to Jesus – youthful, with a cruciform nimbus – on the imageless God of the Old Testament (figs. 27 & 30). Although Maimonides did not say as much, those who were guilty of “crass anthropomorphism” through a misunderstanding of Hebrew scripture might easily be identified with Christians. In Leon Modena’s own polemical treatise against Christian dogma, Magen Wa-Hereb (“Shield and Sword,” begun in 1645 and unpublished in his lifetime), he dismisses the Christian inference from Genesis “that God was destined to make Himself matter and to reveal Himself in the image and likeness of man.”457 Leon agreed with “all the commentators” that the “essential image and likeness of God is not the human form, but it refers to the intellectual soul, for that is in the image of the divinity.”458 Although Christian theologians on the whole supported the view that man’s likeness to God was intellectual, or spiritual, the art of the later Middle Ages, in which God

455 Josephus, Antiquities, XVIII, viii. (pp. 389-92)
456 Colossians, 1:15
458 Ibid.
the Father emerged as iconographically distinct from Christ, belies this theological position.

Ultimately, the image of man achieved its Christian apotheosis in Renaissance Italy, where it was restored to a central place in (religious) aesthetics. Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel *Creation* cycle incorporates no fewer than six representations of God the Father in human form, including the creation of Adam and Eve, and the creation of the heavenly bodies. As representations of the Hebrew Bible, these images are, I suggest, as antithetical to Judaism as any earlier image in the history of art. The audaciousness of Michelangelo’s *Creation* as a symbolic inversion of *Genesis* 1:27 is confirmed rhetorically by Vasari, who describes the images of God as “figures of such beauty and refinement of genius such as could only be made by the most divine hands of Michelangelo.”

It is significant, of course, that Protestant Reformers who condemned Roman Catholic “idolatry” but did not necessarily espouse aniconism, were generally quick to reinstate the Judaic taboo against the representation of God in human form. Francisco de Holanda was seemingly conscious of this when he wrote the argument attributed to Michelangelo in his *Dialogues* (1548): “if it was the will of God the Father that the ark of His law should be skilfully adorned and painted, how much more must it be His will that care and judgement should be bestowed on copying His serene countenance…” Fifteen years later (1563), the Council of Trent decreed that “the images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and the other saints, are to be had and retained particularly in temples” – but the image of God the Father is conspicuous by its (renewed) absence.

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461 Hollanda, *Four Dialogues on Painting*, rendered into English by Aubrey F. G. Bell, London: Humphrey Milford; Oxford University Press, 1928 (pp. 65-66)

462 The canons and decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent, celebrated under the sovereign pontiffs Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV, London: Burnes & Oates, 1888, p. 234
A question that has received only cursory attention from historians of art, and of Jewish culture, is the extent to which polarised Christian attitudes to images – which always conceptually implicated Judaism – might have affected the attitudes of Jews to visual art, within and without their own religious tradition. The answer to such a question cannot be at all straightforward, let alone conclusive, but it is one that must be considered when dealing with the correspondences between Christian and Jewish visual cultures that are the theme of this dissertation.

While Protestant Christians reprised Jewish attitudes to image-based worship, Roman Catholics in Italy continued the conscious revival of ancient Graeco-Roman culture, including the archaeological excavation and aesthetic emulation of pagan antiquity. This cultural activity cannot have gone unnoticed by Jews in Italy, and one cannot assume their indifference to it. In Rome, the Jewish community had roots that predated the destruction of Jerusalem, of which the Arch of Titus was an enduring reminder. We saw in part one how Michelangelo, Vasari and others reimagined Moses as a potential object of “pre-Christian” (pagan or Jewish) worship. Roman Jews might not have seen Michelangelo’s statue of Moses at first hand, but their coreligionists in Florence could not have missed his colossal figure of David, conceived as a naked, uncircumcised giant. These sculpted figures embodied not only the surpassing of ancient, pagan art, but also the Christian supersession of Judaism.

Historical Jewish encounters with Old Testament (i.e. Hebrew) figures in Renaissance art can only be imagined, since references by Jews to Christian images are scarce. A lack of manifest interest might signal discretion, rather than indifference, since explicit comments on Christian art would be liable to attract censure from both Jews and Christians. In this connection it is notable that Jewish intellectuals scarcely engaged with pagan philosophy and mythology, a reticence that Moshe Idel explains with reference to the fact that many Christian humanists “coupled their interest in pagan thought and literature

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463 The relief image of the Temple Menorah (the seven-lamp candelabrum) that appears on a Torah ark made in 1522/3 for the Catalan synagogue in Rome (discussed below) was evidently modelled on the representation of the Menorah on the Arch of Titus, where it is prominent among the sacred objects looted from the Temple. Rodov, Iliia: *The Torah Ark in Renaissance Poland: A Jewish Revival of Classical Antiquity*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, p. 185
with a missionary attitude towards the Jews.”464 There is, in any case, visual
evidence of (indirect) Jewish engagement with Christian art to be found in the
borders and title pages of Jewish books. For example, a woodcut figure plainly
adapted from Michelangelo’s *Jeremiah* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling appears in
a number of printed Hebrew books, beginning with the Mantua Haggadah of
1560 (cf. figs. 52 & 53), and including a Haggadah printed in Venice in 1599.465
This figure is not merely recycled as a decorative element, but is assigned a
role that corresponds to the text of the Haggadah, and is redressed as a
“contemporary” Jew by the addition of a knobbed hat.466

Such direct visual quotation from a work of Christian art is rare (we will return to
it in the next chapter), but there is abundant use of *all’antica* imagery, even in
contexts where it would seem particularly inappropriate. An example is the
appearance of the Roman gods Mars and Minerva on the title page of several
Hebrew books, including an edition of Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*
printed at Sabbioneta in 1553 (fig. 54). Since Maimonides’s philosophical
treatise begins with a thesis against religious anthropomorphism, we have every
right to be perplexed by the choice of title page.467 Certainly, the received idea
expressed by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, that “[such] ‘pagan’ motifs seem hardly
to have troubled Jews and were regarded merely as decoration” is an
assumption that deserves to be challenged.468

Steps have been taken in this direction for the study of medieval Jewish
manuscript illumination, with Marc Epstein challenging the pervasive attitude
that non-biblical appropriations from Christian visual culture are “merely
decorative” and effectively meaningless.469 As Epstein shows, certain symbols
were not only adopted, but meaningfully adapted to express the protests and

464 Moshe idel, “Prisca Theologia in Marsilio Ficino and in Some Jewish Treatments,” in *Marsilio
Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, edited by Michael J. B. Allen, Valery Rees,
Martin Davies, Leiden: Brill, 2002 (p. 157)
465 Yerushalmi, *Haggadah and History*, pp. 38-39
466 In the Mantua Haggadah (1560), the figure is identified with the “wise son,” one of four sons
in the Passover Seder – the others are characterised as “wicked,” “simple,” and “the one who
does not ask” – whose role is to prompt a retelling of the Exodus story.
467 More specifically, the chapter on idolatry cites pagan women who wear bucklers and other
armour when standing before Mars to exemplify the need for the biblical injunction that “[a]
woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man” (*Deut*, 22:5).
468 Yerushalmi, op. cit, notes to plate 28.
469 Epstein, *Dreams of Subversion*, pp. 11-12
“dreams of subversion” of an oppressed minority; in short, Epstein calls for medieval Jewish iconography to be viewed as “reactive rather than merely assimilatory, as meaningful rather than decorative.” Meanwhile, study of the printed Hebrew book continues to accept implicitly the received idea expressed by Yerushalmi. A recent volume of essays on the Hebrew book in early modern Italy, which deals extensively with the suppression and censorship (both external and internal) of Hebrew volumes, offers no interest at all in their decorative features – that is, their external appearances – even while using an example of the Mars and Minerva title page for its own cover illustration.

This general lack of discernment will be redressed to some extent in the next chapter. For now, it should be noticed that the images in printed books, even when they appear to be symbolically at odds with the written content, do not necessarily contravene Jewish law, since although the woodblocks used in printing are effectively relief images, their results are limited to the flatness of the page. More remarkable, then, is the appearance from the second half of the sixteenth century of cast bronze lamps for Hanukkah – the holiday commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple of Jerusalem at the tiime of the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids – that are decorated with raised all’antica motifs, pagan mythological creatures, and even the fully rounded human figure, which had been absent from Jewish visual culture since late antiquity.

The Stieglitz Collection at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem contains a dozen cast bronze lamps dating to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, half of which are decorated in relief with mythological creatures, including centaurs, mermaids, dragons, and grotesques (figs. 55). Among these, four include

470 Ibid, p. 12
472 Cf. Maimonides, Mishneh Torah: “It is forbidden to wear a ring that has a seal on it in the form of a human being if the form is in relief, but one may use it for sealing [because the impression it made would not be in relief].” Mann, Jewish Texts, p. 24
complete human or humanoid figures, some of them winged.\textsuperscript{474} Three others lamps in the collection have backplates decorated with rampant lions, which have some pedigree in Jewish ritual art (to be discussed below).\textsuperscript{475} The Victoria and Albert Museum has another five examples of Hanukkah lamps from the same period decorated with mythological and human figures in relief (figs. 56).\textsuperscript{476}

Two nearly identical cast bronze wall-hanging lamps (in collections in Jerusalem and New York) are particularly striking examples of Italian Hanukkah lamps of the period (figs. 57 & 58).\textsuperscript{477} The relatively large (27cm wide) backplates comprise a relief image of Judith killing Holofernes, framed by scrolls and symmetrically posed putti, and surmounted by a downward-looking, mask-like human face, whose framing elements give it a horned appearance. Either side of this face are two reclining figures of sages or prophets bearing long scrolls; these figures, like the putti, are modelled in the round. The eight oil lights, aligned horizontally at the base of the lamp, are alternated with grotesque faces, and flanked by bare-breasted, harpy-like figures. One of the lamps has been modified, and is surmounted by a figure of the Jewish high priest.\textsuperscript{478}

These and two other cast bronze lamps in the Israel Museum, whose openwork backplates comprise a triangular arrangement of three naked putti, are attributed by Charles Avery to the workshop of Giuseppe (or Joseph) de Levis (1552-1611/14), a Veronese bronze-founder whose Jewish connections will be

\textsuperscript{474} Ibid. Cat. nos. 123-126.
\textsuperscript{475} Ibid. Cat. nos. 118, 121 & 129.
\textsuperscript{476} Keen, Michael: \textit{Jewish Ritual Art in the Victoria and Albert Museum}, London: HMSO, 1991 (cat. nos. 19, 21, 22, 23 & 26). A brass lamp in the V & A, ornamented with winged and goat-legged hybrids, and surmounted by a lightly clad figure of Judith (identifiable by the sword in her hand) is dated by Keen (cat. no. 25, pp. 41-42) to the late-sixteenth or seventeenth century; however, the lack of detail in the figure of Judith, which resembles closely a more detailed figure on a nineteenth-century lamp in the Jewish Museum, New York (\textit{Luminous Art}, cat. no. 48), suggests that the V & A lamp is from the same period – although elements might have been re-cast after a sixteenth/seventeenth-century original. Susan L. Braunstein addresses the problem of dating Renaissance-style Hanukkah lamps, many of which are nineteenth-century imitations. The imitations can often be recognised by their concave reverses, loss of design elements and poor finishing, which result from sand-casting (repeatedly) after lost-wax cast originals. Braunstein, Susan L: \textit{Luminous Art: Hanukkah Menorahs of the Jewish Museum}, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 103.
\textsuperscript{477} One of the two lamps (with the additional figure) is in the Wolfson Museum, Hechal Shlomo, Jerusalem; the other is in Temple Emanu-El, New York.
\textsuperscript{478} The back of the additional figure is hollow, while the identical elements of the two lamps are cast solid. Grossman, Cissy (ed.): \textit{A Temple Treasury: The Judaica Collection of Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York}, New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1989.
discussed below. In general, though, the existence of Hanukkah lamps with figural ornament raises the question of whether such objects might have been approved by contemporary rabbis, and by extension, what kinds of secular object might or might not have been tolerated.

Leon Modena on “protruding human figures”

Of the many pre-modern rabbinic responsa (written rulings) referred to by scholars of Jewish culture, there is none to my knowledge that deals with monumental statuary, an absence that testifies to the strength of the taboo in Judaism. There are, however, rulings concerning small-scale figuration, an example of which was written by Leon Modena. The specific question it deals with is the permissibility of using silver spice boxes decorated with human figures for Havdalah, the ritual by which Jewish households mark the end of the Sabbath and other holidays. A seventeenth-century Italian spice box in the collection of the V & A may be representative of the kind of object in question: it comprises a two-part cast-silver container, embellished with pierced foliage and putti (i.e. human figures), and applied figures of doves (fig. 59).

In his ruling, Leon Modena declined to address the general question of whether objects for non-ceremonial use that incorporate “protruding human figures” are allowed, “even though it is not permitted to make them.” In the immediate case he decided that spice boxes with such figures should be forbidden, as the vessels are used “for a Mitzvah blessing, and when smelling [the spices] they are brought close to the face,” giving the appearance that one is kissing the

479 Avery, Charles: Joseph de Levis and Company: Renaissance Bronze-Founders in Verona, London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2016, catalogue numbers 111-114 (pp. 172-174). Avery’s attribution to the de Levis workshop is made on the basis of comparing the lamps’ decorative elements with a number of works signed by Joseph and other members of the family, including a mortar, door knockers and a church bell (p. 173). Avery also attributes two other Hanukkah lamps to the de Levis workshop, one of them in the Jewish Museum, New York, which is ornamented with a cherub and basket of fruit (cat. 115), the other, from the Israel Museum (Stieglitz cat. 122), whose relief openwork comprises winged figures, dragons’ heads, a grotesque mask, and two small satyrs (cat. 116).


481 Keen, Jewish Ritual Art, p. 69

482 Sabar, op. cit, p. 266
figure, while “mentioning G-d’s name.” These concerns were apparently not allayed by the diminutive size of the figures (any spice box had to be small enough to handle), or the fact that blessings would take place in the privacy of the home. While the responsum might have settled the matter at hand, it prompts some general questions concerning the interpretation and application of Jewish laws on images.

In his ruling, Leon Modena seems unconcerned that anyone might kiss a figure on a spice box, only that he or she might appear to be doing so. What conditioned this sensitivity to idolatrous appearances, and how prevalent was it (historically) in Jewish culture? Also, in making his ruling, he defers the question of whether “non-ceremonial” objects that incorporate “protruding human figures” are permitted, which seems to imply that some might be. What sort of objects might these be, and what would make them permissible or otherwise? While deferring the general question of protruding human figures, the rabbi is unequivocal in his statement that Jews are forbidden to make them. Why might such a distinction be made in Jewish law, and how might it have affected the production of images by and for religious Jews? These questions will be examined here, with reference to the particular social and cultural environment of early modern Italy.

**Idolatrous appearances**

In Leon Modena’s ruling, he compares silver spice boxes with human figures to “faces carved on fountains for idol worship, from which one should not [drink] water as this would look like kissing the idol.” The comparison, which might seem oddly impertinent to seventeenth-century Venice, is a reference to a commentary in *Avodah Zarah* (the Talmud tractate on “foreign worship”), which also warns against bending down before an idol – whether to drink, pick up money or take a splinter from one’s foot, any of which might be mistaken for genuflection. These precepts, originally referring to pagan cult images, are

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483 Ibid, p. 267
484 The putti in the V & A example are about two centimetres high.
485 Sabar, op. cit.
486 “If there is a spring flowing in front of an idol [one] should not bend down and drink, because he may appear to be bowing to the idol; but if not apparent it is permitted.” Avodah Zarah 12a, *Babylonian Talmud*, London: The Soncino Press, 1935-1952
included in Maimonides’s code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, which further prohibits making images of silver or gold, even for decoration, lest they be mistaken for idols.\(^{487}\)

Although the original precepts were recorded in late antiquity, the particular example used by Leon Modena in his responsum might have had renewed currency in early modern Italy, where fountains and wellheads incorporating pagan mythological figures were common in civic spaces. For example, the fountain built in 1591-93 in the Piazza Giudea, at the entrance to the Roman Ghetto – which, until then, had no local supply of clean water – spews water from the mouths of four carved Gorgon heads.\(^{488}\) These images might not have been carved “for idol worship,” but their symbolism was nonetheless rooted in pagan superstition, and rabbis from the Ghetto were doubtless reminded of the example in the Talmud.

As I will show, Jews in early modern Europe were conscious of how their avoidance of “image-worship” in a broad sense – an avoidance that once characterised a unique monotheism – continued to set them apart from their non-Jewish neighbours. In the case of Leon Modena, those neighbours were Italian Catholics, whose veneration of sacred images, as well as the conspicuous practice of kissing them, had been lately endorsed by the Council of Trent.\(^{489}\) It was at its last session, in 1563, that the Council was forced to address the controversy surrounding the veneration of images, which had been exacerbated by Protestant iconoclasm.

Leon Modena’s summary of Jewish attitudes to images (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) was, as I have hinted, written for Christian readers, and those readers were specifically Protestant ones. The *Historia de’ Riti*

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489 “… by the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover the head, and prostrate ourselves, we adore Christ.” The canon and decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent, celebrated under the sovereign pontiffs Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV, London: Burnes & Oates, 1888, p. 235. Incidentally, Modena appears to have been acquainted with Paolo Sarpi, author of the controversial *History of the Council of Trent* (1619), from which the rabbi copied passages. Adelman, “Leon Modena: The Autobiography and the Man,” p. 26
Hebraici was commissioned for King James I of England, probably by the Ambassador to Venice, Sir Henry Wotton (1568-1639).490 Remembering the Ambassador in his memoirs, the English traveller and humourist Thomas Coryat (c. 1577-1617), commended him for “his true [Protestant] worship of God in the midst of Popery, superstition, and idolatry,” which Coryat railed against throughout his travels in Italy.491 Perhaps encouraged by the Ambassador to spend time in the Ghetto, observing the customs of the Jews (absent from England since 1290), Coryat fell into a heated theological argument, in Latin, with a local rabbi.492 Although Coryat criticised the Jews’ “superstitious ceremonies,” he conceded that they “are very religious in two things” – namely, that they dedicate their Sabbath entirely to God (“I would to God our Christians would imitate the Jewes herein”), and that “they worship no images [i.e. statues493]” – in which respect, he implied, they were better than the “Popists.”494

The English Protestant, Coryat, could denigrate Roman Catholicism with impunity, but an Italian Jew could hardly have been so unguarded. In his own memoirs, Leon Modena describes the anxiety he suffered over the first publication of his Riti Hebraici in Paris (1637), since when he had written it two decades earlier, he had not been “careful about [omitting] things contrary to the [Roman] Inquisition, because it was only in manuscript and was meant to be read by people who were not of the pope’s sect.”495 Understandably, explicit Jewish references to Roman Catholic image-(ab)use are, in general, scarce, but

490 Ibid, p. 29.
491 Coryat, Thomas: Coryat's Crudities..., Vol. I, Glasgow: James MacLehose & Sons, 1905, p. 380. For a taste of Coryat’s views on Roman Catholic worship (and of his inimitable style), see his Observations of Mantua (p. 264): “I said unto my selfe, this is the Citie which of all other places in the world, I would wish to make my habitation in, and spend the remainder of my dayes in some divine Meditations amongst the sacred Muses, were it not for their grosse idolatry and superstitious ceremonises which I detest, and the love of Odcombe in Somersetshire.”
492 Coryat’s adversary was hypothetically identified as Leon Modena by Cecil Roth: “Leone da Modena and England,” Transactions (Jewish Historical Society of England), Vol. 11, (1924-1927), pp. 206-227 (pp. 216-222)
493 By “images,” Coryat evidently meant statues (as had the recent translators of King James’s Bible). Cf. Coryat’s description of the Greek church in Venice (p. 368): “…the Greeks will by no meanes endure any images in their Churches; notwithstanding in stead of them they have many pictures made after the Greekish manner; as of Christ and the Virgin Mary […] of Moyses, &c.” Samuel Johnson’s English Dictionary (1785) defines “image” as “1. Any corporeal representation, generally used of statues […] 2. An idol; a false god.”
494 Coryat, p. 373.
495 M. Cohen, Life of Judah, pp. 11-12 & 146-149
there is enough evidence to speculate how Christian attachment to images might have looked from an ordinary Jewish perspective. One seventeenth-century Jewish convert to Protestantism, Shalome ben Shalomoh, a native of Roman Catholic Poland, describes how he was approached by a Calvinist soldier, who first suggested he “turn a Christian”: “A Christian, said I, why think you I will worship images? [For] such was my ignorance that I thought all Christians were Papists, there being none but Papists [...] and Jews, in the country where I was born.”

Although Shalome was evidently playing to a Protestant audience, it is reasonable to suppose that an ordinary Jewish view of Christian worship in Italy would have been similarly conditioned by the manifestly privileged status of sacred images in the Church, and in civic life.

Leon Modena’s spice box responsum is typical of rabbinic attitudes in that it does not suggest any real danger of Jews worshipping images, but cautions against behaviours that could bring the individual, and his coreligionists, into disrepute. If it could be alleged, by Christians, that the Jewish ritual smelling of spices was a pretext for kissing human figures, it would support allegations that behind their apparent iconophobia, Jews were in fact inveterate idolaters. By a similar contradiction it had been alleged, with notorious frequency, that behind their strict dietary laws, Jews concealed a ritual thirst for Christian blood. A history of libels, such as the one concerning the infant Simon of Trent (died 1475, canonised 1588), as well as the accusations of image-abuse considered in the previous chapter, made Jews cautious of doing anything that might be used to disparage their rites, and ultimately jeopardise their religious freedom or their lives. Leon Modena is a case in point. While he had avowedly composed his description of Jewish rites as a corrective to earlier Christian publications – in particular Johannes Buxtorf’s Synagoga Judaica (Basel, 1603), which portrayed Judaism as a religion of superstitious ceremonies – Leon worried

\footnote{ben Shalomoh, Shalome: A True Narrative of God’s gracious dealings with the Soul of Shalome ben Shalomoh, of the Circumcision after the flesh; as delivered to the Church of Christ assembled at their meeting-house, in Rosemary Lane, September the 29th, 1699, London, 1699}

\footnote{Buxtorf (1564-1629) was the foremost Protestant rabbinic scholar of his time, who resisted the Protestant tendency to idealise Judaism’s strict adherence to the Bible. In a letter, written by Leon Modena to a Christian friend (Vincenzo Noghera), he admits that he “had indeed the intention of refuting entirely that work of Buxtorf.” Cohen, Mark R: “Leone da Modena’s Riti: A Seventeenth-Century Plea for Social Toleration of Jews,” Jewish Social Studies, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Oct., 1972), pp. 287-321 (p. 293)
that “[when] this book is seen in Rome, it will become a stumbling block for all the Jews, and for me in particular.”

The particular concern about idolatrous appearances that Leon Modena expressed in his responsum is something he would have learnt from his childhood teacher, the grammarian and poet Samuel Archivolti (1515-1611), who was also head of the rabbinical court at Padua. In a judgement he made around 1560 against the decoration of synagogues with “pictures of grass, trees, and calyxes,” Archivolti cut through centuries of rabbinic ambivalence on the subject, with the argument that such paintings might give non-Jews cause to say “that we worship the grass of the field and the fruits of the earth and the other images.” Indeed, “who knows if it were not some synagogue decoration that led Appion the Greek [second century CE] to malign us, saying that Jews worship the image of an ass?” As for the fact, evidently pointed out to him by his petitioners, “that the sages of twenty-five or thirty years ago did not object to [non-figurative] paintings in Venetian synagogues,” Archivolti responded tersely that “the artisans probably did not consult with them.”

It was on similar grounds – and with more obvious reason – that a number of eminent rabbis supported a general outcry in the 1540s against a wealthy congregant who wanted to place his family emblem, the crowned image of a lion, over the Torah ark in the synagogue of Candia (Crete, then a Venetian colony). The local rabbi appealed to leading authorities, including David ibn Abi Zimra (“Radbaz,” 1479-1573), Meir Katzenellenbogen of Padua (1473-1565), and Joseph Caro (author of the Shulchan Aruch), who declared that his “stomach shuddered” on hearing that this man “who is the image of a demon, has erected a stone lion on the ark, a place to which the whole congregation

498 M. Cohen, Life of Judah, p. 147
499 The Hebrew text of Archivolti’s responsum was published by David Kaufmann in his article “Art in the Synagogue,” The Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Jan., 1897), pp. 254-269. The English translation, by E. Diamond, is reproduced by Mann, Jewish Texts, pp. 84-86.
500 Ibid.
501 If, as Vivian Mann suggests (Jewish Texts, p. 193, n. 55), Archivolti had the Ashkenazic Canton synagogue specifically in mind, the biblical scenes she alludes to were only added during the refurbishments of the late-seventeenth or early-eighteenth century. The scenes are on painted wooden panels with relief carving, but figuration is resisted to the extent that the image of Moses striking the rock is framed so as to exclude all but the arm and rod of Moses. See Ottolenghi, Adolfo: Notizie storiche... Per il IV centenario della Scuola Canton, Venice: Gazzettino Illustrato, 1932
502 Mann, Jewish Texts, pp. 116-120
bows [in prayer].” Radbaz, whose responsum involves an oblique reference to the lion as a symbol of Saint Mark, and of Venice, invoked the Mosaic injunction against behaving in the manner of Gentiles (Leviticus, 18:3), saying that “in those lands [i.e. Venetian territories] an image like that is surely worshipped, [so] it is forbidden to make it and let it stand in any place because of the suspicion of [idolatry].”

Although it was vehemently condemned by the rabbis, the move to place a leonine family emblem in the synagogue at Candia might have been made under the pretext of Jewish tradition. As David Kaufmann observes, “the ancient heraldic animal of Judah” has often been admitted into synagogues, “even in full plastic representation” (as it was in the Temple of Solomon). Indeed, there is no evidence that objections were raised to the relief carvings of lions’ heads on the pedestal, or heraldic lions on the doors of the aedicula-style Torah ark from the Scuola Catalana in Rome (1522/23. fig. 60). Neither were there objections to the carved wooden lions that supported a Torah ark rescued from the Sephardi synagogue at Ascoli in 1569 (the year that Jews were expelled from papal territories), and transported to the Sephardi synagogue at Pesaro, where it remained into the following century.

The Ascoli ark is lost, but is known from a description left by Abraham Graziano (d. 1684), whose grandfather had brought the ark to Pesaro. Prompted by the publication of two volumes of sixteenth-century legal responsa in Italy (Moses Trani’s in 1639, and Radbaz’s in 1652), both of which contained rulings against sculpted lions in synagogues, Graziano felt moved “for the sake of his own tranquility of mind,” to justify his ancestors’ toleration of the ark. According to

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503 Translated by Mann (ibid, p. 117) from Joseph Caro, Sh’ut Avkat Rokhel (Jerusalem, 1960), no. 65. In Meir Katzenellenbogen’s responsum, he recalls a similar episode in Padua (before 1509), where a wealthy congregant commissioned a parokhet (curtain for the Torah ark) with a protruding image of his family emblem, the figure of a deer. This led to a dispute between the congregant and the venerable rabbi, Judah Minz (c 1405-1508), but the parokhet evidently remained in use. Sabar, pp. 58-59
505 Kaufmann, “Art in the Synagogue,” p. 255
506 The ark remained in place until the old synagogue complex in Rome was demolished 1908-10. For extensive discussion of the ark, see: Rodov, The Torah Ark in Renaissance Poland.
507 Ibid, pp. 67-68. Kaufmann, “Art in the Synagogue” (pp. 254-262). Abraham Graziano’s argument appears in English translation in Mann, Jewish Texts, pp. 121-123
508 Kaufmann, “Art in the Synagogue,” p. 258
Graziano – who made his case in the margins of the *Shulchan Aruch* – the crowned lion of Candia was objectionable because it was placed above the Torah scrolls, and because local Gentiles appeared to worship such images, but this was not the case in Ascoli or Pesaro, where the lions appeared at the base of the ark, as supports. Notably, on the Scuola Catalana ark in Rome, the lion’s head on the pedestal (once one of a symmetrical pair) has its face and gaze deferentially downcast.

Significantly, these Italian Torah arks with leonine symbols predated the influential rulings against images in the synagogue recorded around the mid-sixteenth century. It was around 1560 that Samuel Archivolti condemned paintings in synagogues that were apparently tolerated two or three decades earlier. Now he appealed for support – which he duly received – from the Sages at Safed, to uphold the status of the synagogue as a place of worship in which there could be no hint of idolatry, by virtue of there being no images at all. Meanwhile, as we shall see, Jews in Italy were becoming increasingly open to forms of visual experience in the private sphere – a development that we will see exemplified by Archivolti himself.

**Church censorship and “foreign worship”**

It is remarkable that the responsa of Archivolti, Joseph Caro, Radbaz and Leon Modena display an attitude to images that seems defined as much by an imaginary external perception of Jewish worship as by actual religious concerns. Jewish self-awareness in this and other respects could only have been heightened by Counter-Reformation attitudes towards Judaism, and in particular the Church’s control and censorship of Hebrew texts. In 1553, Pope Julius III issued a ban on the Talmud, which was alleged to contain blasphemies against Christianity. Copies were seized and burned in Rome on Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), and other Italian cities soon followed

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509 Mann, *Jewish Texts*, p. 84

510 Robert Bonfil (*Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, pp. 226-227) remarks on the increased separation – in spatial, conceptual and visual terms – between the synagogue as a place of worship that excluded profane activities, and the private sphere; a separation that became increasingly evident from the sixteenth century onwards.
suit. The effort was such that in Leon Modena’s time, copies of the Talmud were scarce, so that rabbis relied on quotations from legal codes like the *Mishneh Torah*. The Talmud appeared on the first *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1559, as well as the revised *Index* authorised by the Council of Trent in 1564. Following a Jewish petition to the Council, the Tridentine *Index* included a provision that “if [the composition] appears without its title ‘Talmud,’ and without the attacks and injuries directed against Christianity, it will be tolerated.”

The Talmud’s perceived blasphemies against Christianity largely related to *Avodah Zarah*, which regulates Jews living in Gentile environments, including interactions with idols and idolaters. When, in 1578, the Froben printing house in Basel began a project of reprinting the Talmud with a view to Church-approved sale in Italy, the offending tractate was omitted altogether. Even so, permission to distribute in Italy was denied and, in 1596, the Talmud was again unconditionally banned. In that year, the ecclesiastical censor and former rabbi Domenico Gerosolimita formulated an index of rules for expurgating Hebrew texts. Gerosolimitano’s *Book of Expurgation* (Hebrew: *Sefer Hazikkuk*), set out twenty basic tenets, the first of which forbade any use of the term *avodah zarah* – “foreign worship” – unless “it is understood as referring to idolatry that existed prior to the coming of our Lord.” Likewise, the second tenet demanded that “[any] mention of the word *tzelamim* [idols] should be followed by the words *shel aku”m* [of worshippers of celestial bodies]” (i.e. pagans), and the third prohibited any use of the word *goy* (gentile) in relation to idols or idolatry.

Clearly, the Church’s sensitivity to the halakhic concept of idolatry betrays a suspicion that it denigrated Christian worship. Such sensitivity was no doubt

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513 Ibid., p. 61
514 Ibid., p. 70.
515 Ibid., p. 120.
516 Ibid.
517 Ibid., pp. 120-1.
increased, as Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin has suggested, by contemporary Protestant polemics against Roman Catholic “idolatry,” so that censors were “entrusted with the task of effacing these connotations while defending Catholic forms of worship and faith.”518 Into this, I would factor Rome’s own complex relationship with its pagan past. Over the preceding two centuries, Italian Christian society had consciously emulated aspects of Greek and Roman culture – including cultic statuary – while the Church in particular had styled itself as inheritor of Roman Imperial tradition. While I accept Kenneth Stow’s argument that the Church’s suppression of the Talmud was sustained by a primary objective of promoting Jewish conversion to Christianity (to which the Talmud was seen as a major impediment),519 the particular aversion to the halakhic concept of idolatry stems from an idea that it conflated Roman Catholicism with (Roman) polytheism – in the same way that Jewish tradition conflated pagan Rome with Edom, the eternal enemy of Israel. Although Italian Christians had built an analogy between their own culture and that of pagan Rome, there were some points of the analogy that had to be denied. Hence the stipulation in Sefer Hazikkuk that any mention of the names “Edom, Rome, or Italy in a disgraceful way should be completely erased.”520

The Church’s approach to censorship of Hebrew texts highlights the tensions within Christianity that were increasingly manifest in religious art, and its destruction, from the fifteenth through the sixteenth centuries. Evidence that Jewish scholars internalised this censorship,521 and the fact that Christian disputes over sacred images often implicated Judaism, might have conditioned the ruling Archivolti gave on synagogue decoration in Padua, around 1560, in which he called for the removal of images painted in Venetian synagogues several decades earlier.522

Published in the same decade in which Archivolti made his ruling, the authoritative legal code (Shulchan Aruch) of Joseph Caro, includes a summary

518 Ibid., p. 129.
519 See: Stow, "The Burning of the Talmud"
520 Raz-Krakotzkin: The Censor, the Editor, and the Text, p. 122.
521 Ibid, p. 160. Understandably, the external censorship to which Jews were subjected became “internalised into the process of writing” Hebrew texts. In 1553, the Jewish community of Rome appointed five rabbis who would be responsible for expurgation (Ibid, p. 90.).
522 Mann: Jewish Texts, p. 86
caution that one “should avoid giving the appearance of bowing to an idol or showing it respect.”\textsuperscript{523} It was around this time (in 1550, and again in 1568) that Giorgio Vasari published his biography of Michelangelo, including the allegation that Roman Jews would go, every Sabbath, to adore the artist’s statue of Moses, as though it were something “not human, but divine.”\textsuperscript{524} Bearing in mind that contemporary rabbis, as much as those in antiquity, warned explicitly and repeatedly against giving cause for this kind of misrepresentation, it is scarcely credible that devout Jews would allow themselves openly to admire a statue of the iconoclastic lawgiver, let alone behave as though they were adoring it.

The general avoidance of figural representation – and especially anthropomorphic sculpture – remained, as Leon Modena attests, an important aspect of Jewish tradition. While he acknowledges that some contemporary Italian Jews kept figurative images, especially two-dimensional ones at home, he is clear that these Jews “license[d] themselves” (“si fanno lecito”), rather than being licensed by their rabbis.\textsuperscript{525} By disclaiming these contemporary habits as secular, Leon could uphold his claim of religious aniconism in spite of them: Jews “keep no figures, nor images, nor statues in their houses, and much less in the synagogues and Holy places.” What this suggests is a marked separation between religious and secular spheres that can be defined, to a large extent in spatial terms.

Leon’s childhood mentor, Archivolti, who would not tolerate the depiction of plants and fruits in the synagogue (lest non-Jews say “that we worship […] images”), showed remarkable enthusiasm for figurative art in his secular life as a poet. One of Archivolti’s poems, written in Hebrew, but in the Italian ottava rima form, is a homage to the Christian portrait painter Francesco Apollodoro of Padua (1531-1612), whose images would endure when earthly lords were dead and buried.\textsuperscript{526} “Long live Francesco Apollodoro!,” the rabbi-poet enthused. If

\textsuperscript{523} Joseph Caro, Shulkhan Arukh (Venice, 1565), Yoreh De’ah, Chapter 11 (150:1-3).
\textsuperscript{524} Vasari, op. cit, p. 891
\textsuperscript{525} Modena, Riti, p. 16
\textsuperscript{526} Archivolti’s poem was first published by Simon Bernstein: “New Poems by Rabbi Samuel Archivolti” (Hebrew), Tarbiz, Volume VIII (1937), pp. 55-68. My thanks to Wojtek Tworek (UCL Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies) for translating the sense of the Hebrew poem into English.
Archivolti sat for his own portrait, it is not known to survive, but his protégé Leon Modena – who inherited his interest in art, as well as his fear of idolatrous appearances – would own, commission, and even dream about portraits, as we shall see.\(^{527}\) Evidently, the restrictions on figurative art in a religious context did not preclude or discourage Jews of the period from taking an active interest in figurative art outside it – provided there was no semblance of idolatry.

**Idols and ornaments**

As may be inferred from the discussion so far, the question of whether an image is forbidden by Jewish law depends to a large extent on the likelihood of its being seen (by anyone) as an object of worship. The chapter in the Talmud that deals with image-worship begins with the opinion of Rabbi Meir that “All images are forbidden” – but this was not the consensus among the other Sages, according to whom, “only [an image] which bears in its hand a staff or a bird or a sphere is forbidden.”\(^{528}\) It is obvious from the references to hands, and hand-held attributes that the “images” censured by the rabbis belonged to a certain class of anthropomorphic statue. Bearing in mind that the Mishnah was redacted at the time of the Roman occupation of Judea, we may surmise that the statues in question were Imperial cult images, like the one Caligula threatened to impose in the Jewish Temple. This is confirmed by the rabbinic commentary (gemara), which interprets the prohibition as referring to rulers and their attributes of power, and extends it to any statue with a sword in its hand, a crown or wreath on its head, or a seal-ring on its finger.

The gemara introduces a further distinction between cultic statues (idols) and those that may be considered purely ornamental, a critical distinction that would be important to Jews living in environments where encounters with statues could not reasonably be avoided.\(^{529}\) There is an anecdote in the Mishnah concerning Rabban Gamaliel (son of the redactor of the Mishnah, Yehudah

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\(^{527}\) According to an inventory of Leon Modena’s possessions made after his death in 1648, he owned three paintings (“quadri”), although the inventory provides no details. Ancona, Clemente: “L’Inventario dei beni appartenenti a Leon da Modena,” *Bollettino dell’istituto di storia della società e dello stato veneziano* 4 (1962), pp. 249–267 (p. 260)


\(^{529}\) Hayes, *The Emergence of Judaism*, p. 117
HaNasi), who frequented a public bath in which there was a statue of the goddess Aphrodite. The rabbi was challenged on his religious principles by a Gentile philosopher, Proclus, to whom he responded that it was not he (Rabban Gamaliel) but the statue that trespassed the other’s space: “People do not say, ‘Let us make a bath to adorn Aphrodite,’ but [rather] ‘let us make an Aphrodite to adorn the bath.’” As the rabbi explained, “what is treated as a god is forbidden, but what is not treated as a god is permitted.”

In the same way, Joseph Caro’s *Shulchan Aruch* distinguishes between objects that are honoured, and those that are mundane (that is, for everyday use). If a Jew acquires a vessel with an image associated with idolatry, the permissibility of keeping it depends on whether the vessel was made to be honoured, in which case it is prohibited, or for mundane purposes, in which case it is permitted “because [the images] were made only for beauty.”

These halakhic discussions, and in particular the critical distinction between decorative and cultic images, would be relevant to Jews living in Christian environments, especially ones where images were abundant. A ruling by Radbaz, who was a member of Caro’s rabbinical court at Safed, responds to the question of whether Jews may use coins bearing Christian images, specifically those issued from the Italian trade centres of Lucca and Venice, whose ducat bore images of Christ and Saint Mark. Radbaz responded, pragmatically, that although the images were associated with Christian worship, they would never be worshipped on “mundane utensils” that Christians used freely in commerce with Muslims. Coins, moreover, were objects of necessity for Jews, especially since their livelihood in Venice, as elsewhere in Italy, was largely reliant on loan banking. We will return to the subject of coins, and in particular their symbolic connection with portrait medals, in chapter six.

These legal complexities explain the equivocation in Leon Modena’s spice box responsum over “non-ceremonial” objects with protruding human figures, since objects unconnected to Jewish rites might include images honoured by non-Jews. The rabbi must have been aware of the fashion in affluent Italian

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533 Ibid, p. 57
households for figurative ornaments, including those without any mundane use (statuettes, for example), but is impossible to tell how commonplace such objects were in Jewish homes, given the obvious problem in tracing inherently non-Jewish objects to Jewish ownership. Still, it seems likely that the evident fashion for vernacular-ornamented Hanukkah lamps (some of which incorporate human figures) related to a fashion in Jewish households for similar styles of secular ornament. There will be more to say about these fashions and their implications in the chapters that follow.

The prohibition of sculpting human figures

While Leon Modena declined to discuss the general permissibility of objects with sculpted human figures (the question being too complex to be settled by any simple pronouncement), he was unequivocal that “it is not permitted to make them.”534 To understand this seemingly arbitrary distinction, it is necessary to consider the halakhic significance of making. Remarkably, it is a question that has received little attention in scholarship on “Jewish art” – a term that is often used in a way that need not imply art made by Jews.535 Questions of Jewish authorship, when they arise in the art-historical literature, tend to focus on social or economic opportunities, while understating or over-simplifying the halakhic problem.536 Of course it is significant that Jews in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, were often denied the basic social and economic stability needed to establish workshops, but religious restrictions on image-making have a theoretical importance to Jewish ceremonial objects, whether or not those objects were made by Jews. As a case in point, Hanukkah lamps with sculpted human figures might only have been acceptable to Jews because they were made by Christians – which must complicate their status as Jewish artefacts.

The halakhic distinction between making images and acquiring them by other means is evident in the original prohibition in Exodus: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image […] Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor

534 Sabar, op. cit, p. 266
535 For example, the category “Jewish art” might include Hebrew manuscripts illuminations or ritual objects produced by Christians. See the discussion of the term “Jewish art” in the introduction of Samantha Baskind & Larry Silver, Jewish Art: A Modern History, London: Reaktion, 2011
536 For example: Mann, Gardens & Ghettos, pp. 53-55
serve them.” Here, there is an apparent legislative gap between making and adoring, which is immediately exposed in the biblical narrative. While Moses receives the Law on Mount Sinai, his followers immediately fall foul of its proscriptions against false gods and graven images, by asking his brother Aaron to make them an idol. Having collected the people’s gold earrings, Aaron uses the metal to make “a molten calf,” which he fashions “with a graving tool.” When Moses returns, he destroys the calf, and confronts Aaron: “What did this people unto thee, that thou hast brought so great a sin upon them?” Aaron’s response is to claim that all he did was to “fling” the gold into the fire, “and out came this calf.” Feeble as it seems, Aaron’s excuse exploits the literal sense of the prohibition in the Decalogue; according to his account, he neither made nor bowed down to the golden calf, so he escapes punishment, while three thousand of the calf-worshippers are killed. As the biblical narrative wryly concludes, “the Lord plagued the people, because they made the calf, which Aaron made.”

The theme of image-making as an incentive to idol-worship is continued by the Hebrew Prophets, and is an enduring concern in rabbinic Judaism. A ruling in Maimonides’s *Mishneh Torah* says that a person who “fashions a false god by hand for others,” even if he is not an idolater himself, is liable for punishment (if he makes an idol and worships it, he should be doubly punished). While it may be permitted to sculpt images of animals “and other living beings” for decoration, it is never permitted to sculpt images of humans, regardless of whether such images represent false deities. This summary ruling is supported by a reference to *Exodus* 20:23 (“you shall not make with Me gods of silver and gods of gold”), but the prohibition is extended to include human figures made

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537 *Exodus*, 20:4-5
538 *Exodus*, 32:1
539 *Exodus*, 32:4
540 *Exodus*, 32:24
541 *Exodus*, 32:35
542 For example, *Isaiah*, 44:10-11: “Who hath formed a god, and made a graven thing that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all the partakers thereof shall be confounded: for the makers are men […] they shall stand and fear, and shall be confounded together.” (Douay-Rheims)
for decoration, and in other media (wood, plaster, or stone), for the avowed reason that “others [might] err, and view them as deities.” In short, the law forbids Jews to make idols (which could be in the form of animals), or to sculpt human figures for any reason, in case they be misused as idols.

Jewish image-makers

The religious prohibition is clear enough, but can we discount altogether that Hanukkah lamps, or other objects with “protruding human figures,” were made by Jewish craftsmen? Admittedly, there is little evidence for any figural representation by Jews in pre-modern Italy, besides the illumination of manuscripts. There were Jewish metalworkers, including goldsmiths, but with one notable exception (to be discussed below) there is no evidence that they produced human figures. It is often supposed that the de Levis family, who established a bronze foundry at Verona in the sixteenth century, were Jewish, on account of their name, the form of the maestro Giuseppe’s signature – “Joseph de Levis” – and the existence of two bronze mortars with Hebrew characters and stylised menorot, signed individually by Giuseppe’s son, Paolo, and nephew, Servo (fig. 61). The de Levis workshop produced many ornamental objects (from firedogs to doorknockers) that incorporate the

545 Mishneh Torah (op. cit), Halakha 10, p. 482.

546 Perhaps the best known being the prolific artist/scribe Joel ben Simeon, who was active during the later fifteenth century in Germany as well as in Italy. For an example of his work, see the four full-page grisaille drawings (c. 1460s), showing the Sacrifice of Isaac and the sacred vessels of the Temple, which were added to a Southern French copy (1429) of Gershonides’s Commentary on the Pentateuch. London: BL, MS Add. 14759, ff. 1-3. Also, MS Add. 14762 & 26597. There is documentary evidence that two Jewish painters, Angelo di Elia and Giacobbe di Vitale, paid dues (the latter, ten soldi) to the painters’ guild in Perugia in 1507 and 1508, but besides that, nothing is known of their careers. Gnoli, Umberto: Pittori e Miniatori nell’Umbria, Spoleto: Claudio Argentieri, 1923 (pp. 29 & 130).


548 The sword-maker Salomone da Sesso, some of whose work is adorned with human figures, was known for most of his career as Ercole de’ Fedeli, following his conversion to Christianity in his mid-twenties. Wischnitzer, op. cit, p. 144

549 Avery, Joseph de Levis and Company, p. 14. According to Jewish tradition, those with the name Levi are patrilineal descendants of the biblical Levites.

550 One of the two mortars is in the Steiglitz Collection (cat. 279, p. 416), the other in a private collection.
complete human figure, as well as bells and statuettes for churches. They might also have produced some of the Hanukkah lamps discussed above. In a recently-published catalogue raisonné, Charles Avery attributes to Giuseppe’s workshop the two lamps, described earlier, that incorporate complete figures of prophets or sages and a relief image of Judith, as well as three other lamps with cherubs, and one with grotesques, dragons, and a sphinx.\footnote{Avery, *Joseph de Levis and Company*, catalogue numbers 111-114 (pp. 172-174). Avery’s catalogue is largely based on a series of four articles published in *The Connoisseur* between 1972 and 1977, and reprinted in Charles Avery, *Studies in European Sculpture*, London: Christie’s, 1981}

Avery, however, remains equivocal over the Jewish identity of the de Levis family, acknowledging evidence presented by Luciano Rognini, in 1979, suggesting that the family and their name originated not with the biblical Levites, but in the village of Levo in Lombardy.\footnote{Rognini, Luciano: *I Levi*, in *Fonditori di campane a Verona dall’XI al XX secolo* (catal.), a cura di L. Franzoni, Verona, 1979, pp. 71-75. See the discussion of the family’s origins in: Avery, *Joseph de Levis*, pp. 116-18} Rognini had also shown that the younger generation of the family, including Giuseppe’s sons and nephews, were baptised as infants in Verona. Notwithstanding this particular proof, a number of objects attributed to Giuseppe de Levis and his workshop were included in the exhibition “Gardens and Ghettos: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy,” at the Jewish Museum, New York, in 1989. Besides two of the Hanukkah lamps attributed by Avery, and one of the mortars with Jewish symbols, the exhibition included an inkstand with the Three Graces (all nude, and modelled in the round; fig. 62), a bell with a sun motif, another bell decorated with human figures, harpies and the stemma of a noble Veronese family, and a firedog with a freestanding figure of the Roman goddess Juno, posed as Venus pudica.\footnote{Gardens & Ghettos, cat. nos. 170-177. The firedog has a pair with a figure of Jupiter; both are in the V & A.}

In the exhibition catalogue, the curator Vivian Mann presents the de Levis family as Jewish; she implies that the baptism of the younger generation was the “price of [Giuseppe’s] success,” insisting that “Joseph was probably born a Jew and appears to have remained one, which did not prevent his receiving numerous church commissions.”\footnote{Mann, Gardens & Ghettos, pp. 53-55 (see also p. 63). Charles Avery provide the catalogue entries for the de Levis objets.}

The idea that Giuseppe de Levis was a professing Jew who raised Christian sons, both of whom kept his ostensibly Jewish name is one that is difficult to
support. Even had he lived in the Jewish tradition, it seems unlikely that the Jewish community of Verona would have condoned his casting human figures in bronze – least of all a pair of statuettes representing John the Baptist and Saint George that crown the holy water stoups in the church of San Giorgio in Braida, and are signed around their respective bases, *IOSEPH DE LEVIS F[ECIT] and ANGELVS DE RVBEIS IN[VENIT].* It does not seem credible either that a professing Jew would have been granted such a commission by the church, let alone the freedom to sign his (Jewish) name so conspicuously. So, although it is quite possible that these Hanukkah lamps (and others) were made by the de Levis workshop, the evidence weighs heavily against the family’s Jewishness.

Given the scarcity of evidence for Jewish figural image-makers in Italy or elsewhere, the Venetian Mosè da Castellazzo (1466–1526) is a remarkable exception. Mosè, identifying himself as “Moyse hebreo da Castellazo,” claimed to have worked in “many places in Italy,” making portraits of “gentlemen and famous men.” The son of an Ashkenazi rabbi and banker (Abraham Sachs), Mosè was probably born at Castellazzo, Piemonte. In his mid-thirties, by which time he lived at Mestre, mainland Venice, he was a friend of the Venetian poet, humanist (and later cardinal) Pietro Bembo and of his then-lover, Maria Savorgnan. Their friendship is recorded in an exchange of letters in 1501, while Mosè was in Ferrara, producing portrait medals for Bembo and Ercole I d’Este (1431–1505). Mosè had connections with other powerful Christians, including the Marquis of Mantua and the Duke of Milan. In 1515, the latter, Massimiliano Sforza (1493–1530), granted him an extraordinary set of privileges, including

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555 When Jews converted to Christianity, they ordinarily took new, Christian names, and their nuclear families were converted with them. To have a Jewish name, and a Jewish father, while professing Christianity might have raised suspicions of Crypto-Judaism.

556 Avery (*Joseph de Levis*, p. 84) reads the inscriptions on the two statues as “a connected statement that one man [Angelo de Rossi] was responsible for the design of the pair and the other for casting them.”


558 Ibid, p. 68.

559 Savorgnan, Maria & Pietro Bembo, *Carteggio d'amore, 1500-1501*, edited by C. Dionisotti, Firenze: F. LeMonnier, 1950, letters 65-67 (pp. 36-7) and 71 (pp. 40-41). Mosè was also asked, by Savorgnan, to make her a burning glass (“uno spechio da foco”). Ibid, letter no. 66 (pp. 36-37).
exemption from taxes levied on “portraits, drawings, paintings or instruments,”
exemption from any restrictions placed on Jews, as well as the right to carry
arms.\textsuperscript{560}

It seems Mosè was equally well connected among his Jewish contemporaries.
In his memoirs, the quixotic Jewish diplomat David Reubeni recalls “the painter
Moshe Qastliz,” from whom he received hospitality (and funds) in 1524.\textsuperscript{561} By
this time, Mosè was living in the Venetian Ghetto and, with his children, had
begun work on a woodcut illustration of the entire Hebrew Bible, for which he
obtained ten-year copyrights in Venice and Mantua (1521).\textsuperscript{562} It is not known if
this project was completed, since there are no extant printed copies of his bible,
but a manuscript containing crude copies of a large part of the Pentateuch in
pen and watercolour gives a sense of how the publication might have looked,
and there is abundant use of figuration.\textsuperscript{563} Unfortunately, none of Mosè’s work
in paint or metal is known to survive – although Roberto Weiss proposed that an
unattributed medal of the elderly Ercole I d’Este is the one mentioned in the
Bembo correspondence.\textsuperscript{564}

In the context of the present discussion, the immediate question is whether
Mosè da Castellazzo’s image-making could be reconciled with his life as a
religious Jew. According to Joseph Caro’s code of Jewish law, while it is
forbidden to make a complete human image, “There are those who say that […]
an image of the head or the body without the head is not prohibited, whether
found or made.”\textsuperscript{565} This lack of clear proscription might leave the door open for
a Jewish maker of portrait medals (although such objects entail their own
problems, to be explored in the next chapter). Apparently, Mosè’s creative

\textsuperscript{560} Simonsohn, Shlomo: \textit{The Jews in the Duchy of Milan}, Jerusalem: Israel Academy of
di Stato di Milano, Registri Ducali 67, 124-125)

\textsuperscript{561} Sestieri, Lea: \textit{David Reubeni: Un ebreo d’Arabia in missione segreta nell’Europa del ‘500},

\textsuperscript{562} Kaplan, pp. 71-72

\textsuperscript{563} See: Schubert, Kurt & Ursula Schubert (eds.): \textit{Bilder-Pentateuch von Moses dal
Castellazzo: Venedig 1521: vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat des Codex 1164
aus dem Besitz des Jüdischen Historischen Instituts Warschau, Wien: Bernhalter &
Windischgraetz, 1983-1986 (2 volumes: facsimile and commentary). Also: Kogman-Appel,
Katrin: “Picture Bibles and Re-Written Bibles: The Place of Moses dal Castellazzo in Early
Modern Book History,” \textit{Ars Judaica} 2 (2006)

\textsuperscript{564} Weiss, Roberto: “La medaglia veneziana del Rinascimento e l’umanesimo.” in \textit{Umanesimo
Europeo e umanesimo Veneziano} (Vittore Branca, ed.), Firenze: Sansoni, 1964

activities did not limit his family’s prospects in the world of Jewish learning. His son, known as Yehiel Ashkenazi, is recorded as a sage in Jerusalem, where he co-headed one of the Ashkenazi yeshivot and engaged in halakhic exchanges with Joseph Caro.⁵⁶⁶

While Mosè da Castellazzo evidently enjoyed the patronage of high-ranking Christians, it is uncertain whether his social privileges were attained on the strength of his artistry, or whether the portraits he made generated any income at all. Mosè, it seems, had continued his father’s business in loan banking; in 1519, he and his own sons received permission to trade in Goito, in the Duchy of Mantua.⁵⁶⁷ In his 1521 copyright request to the Council of Ten, Mosè introduced himself by recalling how he had worked for many years in Venice and elsewhere in Italy, “making portraits of gentlemen and famous men, so that they might be remembered for all time […] and because I have never cared to make money, but only desired to please everyone, I have contented myself with giving them [that] pleasure.”⁵⁶⁸

Claiming a disdain for monetary reward – and thereby distancing his art from manual labour⁵⁶⁹ – was not something that Mosè’s later circumstances allowed. By 1521, he was living in the Ghetto of Venice, where he conceived of his picture bible for avowed financial reasons: “finding myself burdened by family, and approaching old age, I used my ingenuity to find some means by which I […] might live without troubling anyone.”⁵⁷⁰ He aimed to guarantee a market for his bible by making it accessible to Christians, as well as to Jews, stating in his copyright request that the captions to his “testamento vechio” (using the


⁵⁶⁸ The letter begins: “Serenissimo Principe travendo Jo Moyse hebreo da Castellazo affitcitatomi gia molti anni in questa vostra inclyta Cita in retrazer Zentihomeni et homeni famosi azio che de quilli per ogni tempo se haby memoria et simelmente per molti loci de Italia come e manifesto, et perche mai hi ho curato de far denari, ma sempre desideroso de contentar ciascuno mi ho contentato di quello che ha piacesto a loro…[sic.]” As transcribed by Kaufmann, “Le peintre vénitien Mosé dal Castellazzo,” Revue des études juives, XXII (1891), pp. 290-293


⁵⁷⁰ “…al presente ritrovandomi cargo de fameglia et venuto in vechiosa ho cercato cum el mio inzegno de trovar cosa per la qual mi insieme cum la fameglia mia possiamo viver senza danno de nisuno [sic.]” Kaufmann, op. cit.
Christian designation for the Hebrew Bible) would be written so as to be understood by, and thereby “instructive and beneficial,” to all.\(^{571}\)

While Mosè da Castellazzo evidently relied on Christian patronage, there is no suggestion that he produced images or other objects specifically for Jews. Meanwhile, Christian artists or craftsmen did work for Jews, as suggested by the mortars with \textit{menorot} from the de Levis workshop. Benvenuto Cellini (1500-71), in his autobiography, tells how as a teenaged goldsmith in Bologna he worked for a Jew named Graziadio,\(^{572}\) while his famous contemporary Pastorino de’ Pastorini (c.1508-1592) made two of the portrait medals for Jews that are the subject of the penultimate chapter. If it is true, as Vasari says, that the Florentine ironsmith Niccolò Grosso (known as \textit{il Caparra}, “earnest penny”) refused to work for Jews because he said “their money was putrid and stank,” it was worth mentioning only because Niccolò’s principles (such as they were) were unusually strict.\(^{573}\)

While Hanukkah lamps such as those described earlier offer material evidence that some Jews in early modern Italy either countenanced or encouraged the production of objects with protruding human figures, there is no evidence that any such objects were produced by Jews. Even had social and economic circumstances permitted, it appears likely that respect for Jewish tradition would have limited the repertoire of Jewish craftsmen. We may then suppose that Hanukkah lamps with human figures were made by Christians, who offered representational possibilities that Jewish craftsmen could not. In the next chapter, I will examine how and why this potential came to be exploited by Jews in Italy at such an inauspicious moment in their history.

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\(^{571}\) On the evidence of the surviving manuscript copy, the pictures were captioned in Italian as well as Hebrew.


\(^{573}\) “Non volse mai lavorare a’ Giudei, dicendo loro che i danari loro erano fracidi e putivano.” Vasari, Giorgio: \textit{Vita del Cronaco, architetto fiorentino} (1550), in \textit{Le Vite...}, Torino: Einaudi, 1991, vol. II, p. 653. Vasari’s anecdote uses the Jews, associated as they were with usury, as a foil to the financial ethics of Grosso, which Vasari describes at length, and whom he praises in the next sentence as “[una] persona buona e religiosa.”
Chapter 5
Towards Acculturation – Against Assimilation: Hanukkah lamps all’antica

A pervasive taste for all’antica ornament in Renaissance Italy is reflected in a profusion, from the late sixteenth century, of bronze lamps for the observance of Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of lights.\textsuperscript{574} When one considers the essential religious purpose of these objects, their ornamental appearance might be regarded as extraneous, or even incompatible with it.\textsuperscript{575} In this chapter, I argue that to some extent this type of ornamentation enhances the symbolic aspect of Hanukkah lamps – even when the particular motifs employed might seem to be at odds with the traditional observance of Judaism.

Hanukkah (literally “dedication”) is an eight-day festival that commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple of Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucids (167-160 BCE). It was the Seleucid Emperor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes who, in attempting to assimilate the Jews to Hellenic culture, violently suppressed Judaism, looted the Temple’s sacred vessels, and imposed “the abominable idol of desolation upon the altar of God” (I Maccabees, 1:57). An army of orthodox Jews, led by the Hasmonean Judas Maccabeus, overcame Antiochus’s forces and re-purified the Temple. During Hanukkah, the eight flames that are lit in Jewish households symbolise the relit Temple Menorah – the iconic, seven-branched lampstand, which according to rabbinic tradition was miraculously sustained for eight days by a single day’s supply of oil.\textsuperscript{576}

Although lights have been a feature of Hanukkah since antiquity, the earliest known purpose-made oil lamps, incorporating eight distinct lights, are medieval.\textsuperscript{577} Early examples of these are commonly decorated with geometric designs or inscriptions in Hebrew, while some lamps from the fourteenth and

\textsuperscript{574} Modena, \textit{Riti} ("Della Festa di Hanucha, o delle Candele"), pp. 78-79
\textsuperscript{575} For further discussion, see: Kanof, Abram: \textit{Jewish Ceremonial Art and Religious Observance}, New York: Abrams, 1970 (pp. 158-174)
\textsuperscript{576} Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat, 21:3. Hanukkah lamps often incorporate an extra, ninth lamp. One flame is lit for each of the eight nights of Hanukkah, while the ninth acts as a “servant” to the other eight. The servant light is used to light the other, symbolic lights, from which it is forbidden to derive mundane benefit. (Kanof, op. cit, pp. 159-160)
\textsuperscript{577} Braunstein, \textit{Luminous Art}, p. 15
fifteenth centuries have backplates incorporating low relief or cut-out images of lions and dragons. From the sixteenth century, Hanukkah lamps in Europe became increasingly ornate, with often high relief, highly figurative decoration. Some of the more voluptuous examples were produced in Central and Eastern Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but the use of human figuration seems to have emerged in sixteenth-century Italy, where human figures, including putti, appear alongside mythological creatures and other all’antica motifs. In some cases, as in the lamps attributed by Avery to the de Levis workshop (figs. 57 & 58), the human figures are modelled fully in the round. The decoration of these lamps appears startlingly at odds with rabbinic rulings on Jewish ceremonial art, and even with the description of Jewish attitudes to images in Leon Modena’s *History of Jewish Rites*, which was written (c.1615) perhaps a little later than the lamps were cast.

Admittedly, there is little halachic prescription on the form of Hanukkah lamps, and since they would have been commissioned or bought by individuals for use in their homes, rabbis need not have been consulted; but to understand why Hanukkah lamps were produced, and consumed, in these elaborate forms, with their ostensibly non-Jewish ornament, we must question not only whether their figurative and all’antica elements were permissible, but more importantly, why they were desirable. There is a common assumption that the use of Renaissance motifs in Jewish ceremonial art was the result of simple aesthetic attraction, or the passive acceptance of non-Jewish fashions. The catalogue for the Stieglitz Collection of Jewish art, for example, suggests that in Renaissance Italy, “mythical motifs bore little religious or symbolic significance,”

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578 See, for example, Stieglitz catalogue number 115, which is a fourteenth or fifteenth-century lamp from Germany with a backplate formed by two dragons.

579 The evolution of the Hanukkah lamp in Italy and Europe can be traced clearly through the illustrations in museum catalogues. See, for example: Keen, *Jewish Ritual Art*, catalogue numbers 16-26 (pp. 36-41). Also, the objects arranged geographically and chronologically in: Benjamin, *The Stieglitz Collection*, 1987

580 The catalogue of the Stieglitz Collection (op. cit, no. 116, pp. 150-51) dates a German lamp with a freestanding armoured figure (Judas Maccabeus?) holding the servant light to the fourteenth or fifteenth century, but the lamp looks much later, and is similar in design to a seventeenth-century lamp illustrated in the same catalogue as a comparison (116.II). On the Collection website, the date of the first lamp is revised to the late-sixteenth or early-seventeenth century.

581 Mann (*Gardens & Ghettos*, p. 52) remarks, without qualification, that the lamps testify to “the prestige accorded bronzes as an art form in Renaissance Italy.”
as demonstrated by their use in “household objects […], such as vases, chairs [etc.],” so “it is not surprising to find what are generally acknowledged to be Christian motifs in Italian Jewish books, marriage contracts, Hanukkah lamps and other artifacts.”\(^5\) But such a generalised explanation (let alone the conflation of Christian and mythical motifs) is unsatisfactory, especially when the household object in question is as inherently symbolic as a Hanukkah lamp.

Of the figures and creatures adorning the lamps discussed here, none except Judith has any obvious relation to the Hanukkah story, and that connection relies only on her supposed Maccabean descent.\(^6\) Although of Jewish origin, Judith was effectively reappropriated from Christian tradition, since her story survived in a deuterocanonical book of the Old Testament.\(^7\) Her particular heroism, in killing the invading general Holofernes, made her popular in medieval Christian art as a figure of virtue, and specifically of fortitude.\(^8\) Famously, Donatello’s bronze figure group *Judith and Holofernes* (1460) was regarded by the Florentines as an embodiment of civic virtue and liberty, particularly after the expulsion of the Medici (and the Jews) under Savonarola. The looseness of Judith’s association with Hanukkah is acknowledged by Leon Modena in the *Riti Hebraici*.\(^9\)

More perplexing, in any case, is the abundance of symbolism that seems not only extraneous to Hanukkah, but even at odds with Jewish tradition. There are plenty of examples from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of lamps incorporating sirens and centaurs, winged figures and nude torsos.\(^10\) One freestanding lamp, in light-coloured bronze, has a backplate decorated in relief with two centaurs, carrying nude nymphs on their backs; between them,

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5\(^3\) Modena, *Riti*, p. 79.

5\(^4\) The Book of Judith is excluded from the canon of the Hebrew Bible, and was seemingly absent from Jewish tradition for the first millennium of the Common era, surviving only in Greek and Latin as part of the Christian Old Testament. Levine Gera, Deborah: “The Jewish Textual Traditions,” in *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines* (edited by Kevin R. Brine, Elena Ciletti and Henrike Lähnemann), Cambridge: OpenBook, 2010

5\(^5\) Ciletti, Elena & Henrike Lähnemann: “Judith in the Christian Tradition,” in *The Sword of Judith* (op. cit.)

5\(^6\) Modena, *Riti*, p. 79.

5\(^7\) For example: Keen, *Jewish Ritual Art*, cat. nos. 19, 21, 22, 23 and Benjamin, *The Stieglitz Collection*, cat. nos. 124 & 125.
enclosed by a wreath, is the frontal image of a Gorgon head (fig. 63). This lamp is a prime example of how art in Judaism tended to absorb and accumulate images and motifs from its non-Jewish environments. The crenellations that run along the top of the lamp’s backplate and side panels also characterise a lamp illustrated in a Hebrew manuscript made, probably in Rimini, in 1374 (fig. 64); in both examples, the crenellations are formed by merlons in the “swallow-tail” form particular to the Ghibelline castles of central and northern Italy. The simple, medieval type illustrated in the manuscript was effectively expanded two centuries later to incorporate a reflective backplate, complete with figurative ornament.

In this case, it has been noticed that the particular imagery on the backplate was not originally designed for a Hanukkah lamp, since it replicates the front panel of a widely-copied bronze box for writing utensils, attributed to Severo Calzetta da Ravenna (active c. 1496-1543; fig. 65). The proportions of the writing box panel and lamp backplate, as well as most of the relief work, are identical, except that Gorgon heads appear on the side panels of the writing box, not on the front, while the lack of definition in the lamp’s relief work is a sign of repeated remoulding (i.e. replication).

It is one thing to identify the origin of reused imagery such as this, and another to explain its reuse. Generally speaking, the display of all’antica ornaments, such as the original writing box, offered evidence of an owner’s wealth and discrimination. Possession of such objects “demonstrated possession of

588 Hanukkah lamp, cast bronze, sixteenth century (11.0 x 20.5 x 5.5 cm). Stieglitz Collection, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (Benjamin, op. cit, no. 126, p. 166). The unusually light colour is due to a high concentration of tin in the alloy (ibid, p. 440, n. 26.1).
589 Decisions of Isaiah of Trani the Younger. British Library MS Oriental 5024, f. 19. For an example of Ghibelline crenellations, see Gradara Castle, south of Rimini. Another lamp, in the Jewish Museum, New York, has similar swallow-tail crenellations, and a Hebrew inscription: “For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching is light” (Proverbs, 6:23). Braunstein, Luminous Art, p. 104
590 Benjamin, op. cit, p. 166. Palimpsests or replications of this kind are rare. While the style and imagery of Renaissance-style Hanukkah lamps relate to other decorative objects of the period, peculiarities of size and shape suggest that most Hanukkah lamp backplates were designed as such. Braunstein, Luminous Art, p. 102
virtues – at least to those sections of society deemed capable of appreciating their messages,” including their classical allusions. This aspect of ownership becomes more complex when the owners are Jews; particularly when the owned objects are connected to Jewish rites. Such is the case with illuminated Jewish marriage contracts (ketubot) produced in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Italy, which were frequently ornamented with human figures and images from mythological and Christian sources (fig. 66), despite the general disapproval of rabbis, notably the chief rabbi of Ferrara, Isaac Lampronti (1679-1756). Ilia Rodov explains the persistence of the fashion for vernacular-ornamented ketubot as part of an effort by affluent Jews to display a commonality of manners and aesthetic tastes to Christians of similar income outside the ghetto. Admittedly, all’antica-style Hanukkah lamps appear much earlier than this style of ketubah, and the sculpted medium is inherently more problematic, but Rodov’s argument is a compelling one, and demands further attention.

Get, and anti-get

Inherently paradoxical, Jewish marriage contracts with manifestly non-Jewish symbols may be seen to epitomise the complexity of Jewish cultural change in the age of the ghettos; a complexity that begins with the ghetto itself. The Jews of Rome, the first outside Venice to be ghettoised (in 1555), appear by the late-sixteenth century to have acknowledged the finality of their separation from Christian society – contemporary references to the Ghetto as “our Ghet” pun on the Hebrew get, meaning a bill of divorce but David Ruderman observes that ghettoisation paradoxically resolved the precariousness of the Jews’ social

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593 Ibid.


595 Ibid, p. 63

596 Stow, Kenneth: “The Consciousness of Closure: Roman Jewry and its Ghet,” in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, edited by David B. Ruderman, New York: New York University Press, 1992, p. 387. The term “ghetto” originates with the segregation of Jews in Venice (1516), and is generally thought to derive “from the Italian word gettare (to pour or to cast), because of the previous presence of foundries in the area.” It appears as a discrete term for a Jewish enclave in the papal bull *Dudum a Felicitis* (1562), and became widely used in this sense as the ghettos themselves proliferated. Ravid, Benjamin C. I: “From Geographical Realia to Historiographical Symbol: The Odyssey of the Word Ghetto” in *Essential Papers...* (op. cit.), pp. 373-85
position; it provided a defined space where not only could they live, but where they were compelled to live, and from which they need not fear expulsion.\textsuperscript{597}

For Robert Bonfil, an appreciation of paradox as “a mediating element between opposites,” is crucial to understanding the cultural development within the ghetto that accelerated Jewish contributions to cultural life outside it, notably in the fields of theatre, music and literature.\textsuperscript{598} Bonfil, writing in the 1980s, challenged the received idea that the increased Jewish engagement with non-Jewish culture that began in the mid-sixteenth century was merely a “delayed outburst of Renaissance vitality”; rather, he argues, this cultural activity was conditioned by the ghetto itself. Considering evidence that knowledge and use of the Hebrew language dwindled in the Italian ghettos, Bonfil observes that a Jewish preference for the vernacular “at a time of increased isolation from the outside world was the diametric opposite of the attitude [Jews] had adopted at a time of relative openness.”\textsuperscript{599} In other words, the enforced isolation of the ghetto reduced the imperative to assert cultural difference, and increased the inclination to find a commonality with the surrounding, Gentile culture.

Although a re-evaluation of Jewish cultural development in the early modern period was well under way by the mid-1980s, there has so far been little attempt to re-evaluate visual material in terms of the cultural paradoxes that have been exposed. A rare exception is Rodov’s work on Italian ketubot, which bring Jewish tradition together with Gentile aesthetics, thereby evincing common ground between (affluent) Christians and Jews. Lending to Rodov’s thesis the incisive pun on “ghetto” as a bill of divorce (Hebrew: get), these illuminated marriage contracts might be described, in literal and symbolic terms, as anti-get.

The use of non-Jewish images

We may be tempted to regard all’antica Hanukkah lamps, like the one styled after the writing box, in similar terms – but there is still the pressing question of whether the mythical motifs as they reappear on the lamp (beneath the added

\textsuperscript{597} Ruderman, David B: “Introduction” to Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy, p. 25

\textsuperscript{598} Bonfil, Robert: “Change in the Cultural Patterns of a Jewish Society in Crisis: Italian Jewry at the Close of the Sixteenth Century,” first published in Jewish History, Vol. 3 (1988), reprinted in Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy, pp. 405 & 410

\textsuperscript{599} Ibid, pp. 410-11
crenellations) attract any new symbolic value. When the Gorgon heads, centaurs and nude nymphs appeared on the writing box, they could be appreciated as images made to beautify (and antiquate) a mundane vessel; but how might the imagery be recharged by the particular symbolism of Hanukkah? As noticed, the essential purpose of a Hanukkah lamp is to commemorate Jewish resistance to forces of assimilation, especially to the Hellenic culture that conceived of Gorgons and centaurs, and that celebrated nakedness as much as orthodox Judaism condemned it.\footnote{I Maccabees (1:14-15) describes how Jews who assimilated to the Hellenic culture under the Seleucids built at Jerusalem a gymnasium (where the custom was to exercise naked; \textit{gymnos} = naked), and “made themselves uncircumcised, and forsook the holy covenant, and joined themselves to the heathen.”}

In at least two examples of lamps from the later-sixteenth or early-seventeenth century, the sense of incongruity is heightened by the inclusion of coats of arms belonging to high-ranking members of the Roman Catholic Church. The backplate of one gilt bronze lamp in the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 67) displays the arms of Iñigo d’Avalos (c. 1535-1600), a former Chancellor of the Kingdom of Naples, who was created Cardinal in 1561 and later appointed to a series of bishoprics in central Italy.\footnote{Including those of Sabina (from 1586) and Frascati (from 1589).} The escutcheon with the d’Avalos arms is supported by a half-length human figure, symmetrically framed by sea creatures, cornucopias and lions passant, and crowned by a wide-brimmed ecclesiastical hat (galero), its tassels held by a pair of wingless putti. The galero and tassels appear as they would in the heraldic achievement of a cardinal – so the coat of arms, which dominates the composition of the backplate, must also be seen as integral to its design.\footnote{In a related lamp (sold at auction at Sotheby’s New York, in 2013) the galero has been removed, but the tassels, incongruously, remain. http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2013/a-treasured-legacy-steinhardt-n08961/lot.61.html (accessed November 2016)}

In another gilt bronze lamp (also in the V & A), an impalement of the Sannesio and Aldobrandini coats of arms appears in a central cartouche that rests on a grotesque mask, and is framed by scrolling foliage with human heads; two reclining putti hold a galero between them (fig. 68). The heraldry on this lamp belongs to Giacomo Sannesio, who was created cardinal by Pope Clement VIII...
(Ippolito Aldobrandini) in 1604, and was Bishop of Orvieto from 1605. The Cardinal’s arms are joined to those of the Pope who appointed him.\textsuperscript{603}

The surprising appearance of ecclesiastical coats of arms on Hanukkah lamps is generally explained with reference to the protection supposedly offered to Jews by the represented cardinals, but little attempt has been made to specify circumstances, or to assess the broader cultural implications of the objects. The historian Cecil Roth (1899-1970), who was an avid collector of Italian Judaica, cites the two lamps discussed here, and another he knew of with the coat of arms of Cardinal Cesare Baronio (1538-1607) as “only three of perhaps a dozen which are traceable” (I have been able to trace only two).\textsuperscript{604} Roth is probably right to reject the possibility that the lamps were presented as gifts to the Cardinals, suggesting instead that they were made for individual Jews to whom the Cardinals had extended their patronage and protection, and who, “proud of the association,” had their patrons’ arms incorporated in their personal lamps, so as to “blazon the connection abroad.”\textsuperscript{605} Roth’s explanation is so far reasonable, but gives way to the poignant optimism and nostalgia that so often colours his view of pre-modern Italian history, when he uses the lamps to illustrate, “once again, the cordial relations and the close integration between the Italian Jew of the age of the Renaissance and the world around him.”\textsuperscript{606} In reality, Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605), whose arms feature on the “Sannesio” lamp, was no less determined than Paul IV in his oppressive treatment of the Jews. In the second year of his papacy, Clement issued the bull \textit{Caeca et Obdurata Hebraeorum perfidia} (“the blind and obdurate perfidy of the Hebrews”), which renewed the edict of expulsion from all papal territories, with the exception of the ghettos of Rome, Ancona and Avignon.\textsuperscript{607} The ghettos’ inhabitants were obliged to attend weekly sermons aimed at their conversion. In the same month as the decree of expulsion, Clement renewed Paul IV’s ban on the Talmud, ordering that it, and the Kabbalah, should be

\textsuperscript{603} “The Cardinals of the Roman Church very frequently join to their personal arms those which were borne by the Pope to whom they owe their elevation.” Woodward, John: \textit{A Treatise on Ecclesiastical Heraldry}, Edinburgh; London: Johnston, 1894, p. 144

\textsuperscript{604} Roth, \textit{The Jews in the Renaissance}, p. 206. Roth incorrectly identified the impaled arms of Giacomo Sannesio as those of Ippolito Aldobrandini, before he was elected Clement VIII.

\textsuperscript{605} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{606} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{607} Stow, \textit{Catholic Thought}, p. 25
seized and burned. Jews who had gradually returned to Bologna following the expulsion of 1569 were forced to leave the city again for the (relatively) tolerant duchies of Mantua and Ferrara. For those who went to the latter, respite was brief; when Duke Alfonso II d'Este died heirless in 1597, the Pope sent his nephew, Pietro Aldobrandini, to oversee the devolution of Ferrara to the Holy See. The Jews, whose “usury” Clement particularly abhorred, were to be expelled immediately, until his nephew intervened on the grounds that they were integral to the city’s economy, and gained an initial stay of five years.

So much, alas, for “cordial relations” and “close integration.” If the cardinals whose arms appear on the lamps did offer protection to individual Jews, it was probably much needed. Comparable is the appearance of Cardinal Cristofano Madruzzi’s coat of arms on the title pages of Hebrew books printed at Riva di Trento between 1559 and 1562. Madruzzi had allowed these books to be printed in his area of jurisdiction after the Hebrew press at Cremona was halted, and Talmudic texts were burned there in 1559. The Cardinal’s motivation was evidently financial but, as Yerushalmi remarks, “at a time when Hebrew books were being hounded all over Italy, Jews were too grateful for any printing opportunities to inquire into the motives of their sponsors.”

A representative title page, from a Haggadah printed at Riva di Trento in 1561, declares (in Hebrew) that it was printed “and corrected with great care under the rule of the lord Cardinal [Madruzzi], may his glory be exalted.”

If Cardinals Iñigo d’Avalos and Giacomo Sannesio made comparable concessions to Jewish individuals or communities, the evidence is so far lacking, but their biographies do suggest leads to be followed. Before his elevation to the cardinalate in 1604, Sannesio was in the service of the pope’s nephew, Pietro Aldobrandini, and while the Pope was making his triumphal

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608 Parente, Fausto: “The Index, the Holy Office, the Condemnation of the Talmud and Publication of Clement VIII’s Index,” in Gigliola Fragnito (ed.), Church, Censorship and Culture in Early Modern Italy (translated by Adrian Belton), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001 (p. 183)


610 Hacohen, The Vale of Tears, p. 31

611 Yerushalmi, Haggadah and History, plate 27 and accompanying text.

612 Ibid.

613 Ibid, notes to plate 27.

614 http://www2.fiu.edu/~mirandas/bios1604.htm#Sannesio (accessed December 2016)
entry into Ferrara in 1598, the cardinal appointed to govern Rome in his absence was Iñigo d’Avalos. Both cardinals were, therefore, in positions of (perceived) influence with Clement VIII and his nephew. It may be supposed that the coats of arms were incorporated in the Hanukkah lamps in deference to the Cardinals as past, present or potential intercessors.

This need not mean, however, that lamps with ecclesiastical coats of arms should be regarded as mere expressions of servility. In a case that is possibly analogous, Ilia Rodov suggests that while the heraldic lions on the doors of the Catalan Torah ark in Rome (1522/23) might have appeared to Christians as a homage to the late pope, Leo X, who had permitted the building of the synagogue, they would have been recognisable to the Jewish congregants as symbols of messianic redemption. In a similar vein, Marc Epstein has read some of the bestial images in medieval Jewish manuscripts as covert expressions of nationalist aspirations and animosity towards Christian oppressors. In the particular case of leviathans or dragons (often interchangeable with serpents), Epstein argues that their demonic energy was iconographically "harnessed" in manuscript illuminations, after the example of Moses’s brazen serpent. The lions, serpents and dragons that appear on Hanukkah lamps (even alongside ecclesiastical heraldry), might, I suggest, have had a range of connotations for Jews that would not all have been apparent to Christians. For example, the two lions that paw at the d’Avalos coat of arms may be seen as ferocious protectors of Judaism, as well as heraldic supports.

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615 http://www2.fiu.edu/~mirandas/bios1561.htm#Avalos (accessed December 2016)

616 The claims made by Mordechai Narkiss (Menorat ha-Hanukah, Jerusalem, 1939, p. f) and quoted by Keen (Jewish Ritual Art, pp. 40 & 42), that these lamps expressed the gratitude of the “Jews of Naples” to Iñigo d’Avalos “for his attitude towards them,” and of the Jews of Ferrara to Pietro Aldobrandini for permitting them to remain in Ferrara are erroneous, since the Jews were expelled from Naples in 1541, while the arms on the other lamp are not those of Pietro Aldobrandini, but of Giacomo Sannesi.


618 Epstein, Dreams of Subversion, Chapter 4: “Harnessing the Dragon” (p. 74)

619 Epstein (Ibid, pp. 55-58) suggests that the use of pairs of lions on Torah arks may have begun as “a sort of visual homonymic pun,” since the Aramaic word for Law, or Torah, can be changed by a switch of letters to “a pair of lions.” Ultimately, the “violent biblical image of the lion [was transformed] into the postbiblical image of a lion whose violent qualities are put to good (i.e., defensive) purpose.”
The two or three Hanukkah lamps with ecclesiastical coats of arms may be exceptional (Roth’s estimation of “a dozen” different ones cannot be taken for granted), but the appearance of even two is enough to prompt reconsideration of the many Hanukkah lamps from the period that incorporate ostensibly non-Jewish imagery. As we have seen, it is probable that lamps of this type were made by Christian hands; I suggest that they were also made, in an important sense, for Christian eyes. Of all Jewish ritual objects, Hanukkah lamps would tend to be most visible to non-Jews, since tradition demands that lamps be lit in windows or doorways of dwellings where they might be seen from the street – except when this might attract hostility from non-Jews. In some northern-Italian cities such as Ferrara and Mantua and Verona, where Jews were not confined to ghettos until the early 1600s (in Ferrara, not until 1627), and were accustomed to a climate of relative tolerance and religious freedom, it is likely that during Hanukkah, lamps were displayed to the street, and would have been visible to passing Christians, as well as to Christian associates. The likelihood that these objects would be viewed by Christians should certainly help to explain the appearance of lamps with ecclesiastical heraldry. Might it also go some way to explaining the general popularity of lamps incorporating non-Jewish symbols?

A Jewish-Italian aesthetic

We have seen how, from the middle of the sixteenth century, Judaism in Italy was subject to increased hostility and suspicion, largely emanating from the papacy, and how Jews developed a heightened consciousness of the image they presented to non-Jews. Christian scrutiny of Jewish rites, and official censorship of Hebrew texts was effectively internalised, so that rabbis edited their own writings according to Church prescriptions, and worried about the external perception of Jewish rites. Symptomatic of this is Leon Modena’s

620 “It is incumbent to place the Hanukkah lamp by the door of one's house on the outside; if one dwells in an upper chamber, [one] places it at the window nearest the street. But in times of danger it is sufficient to place it on the table.” Shabbath 21b, Babylonian Talmud, London: The Soncino Press, 1935-1952  https://archive.org/stream/TheBabylonianTalmudcompleteSoncinoEnglishTranslation/The-Babylonian-Talmud-Complete-Soncino-English-Translation#page/n499/mode/2up (accessed December 2016)

621 Raz-Krakotzkin: The Censor, the Editor, and the Text, p. 160
Historia de Riti Hebraici, which he composed (around 1615) with the intention, acknowledged in a letter to a Christian friend, of refuting Johannes Buxtorf’s caricature of Jewish ceremonies (1603).\textsuperscript{622} Speaking of Hanukkah lamps, Buxtorf had mocked the detailed halachic prescription for their lighting and display, deriding the Jews as being “very particular about the outer light,” while not caring that “such great darkness abides in their hearts.”\textsuperscript{623} In response to this kind of derision, Leon Modena set out to give only “a true account of the fundamentals” of Judaism.\textsuperscript{624}

As Mark Cohen has argued, the ultimate goal of Leon Modena’s vernacular apologia for Judaism was “to advance the social integration of Jews into Christian society,”\textsuperscript{625} an aim that is reflected in the way the author presented himself to his readers. When the History of Jewish Rites was printed in his native Venice in 1638 (with the subtitle “life and observances of the Jews of these times”), the title page included a portrait of the author with his head uncovered – a condition that would preclude participation in Jewish rites, but is in keeping with Christian social norms.\textsuperscript{626} Thus the title page, as much as the content of the book, works to counter the assumption that Jewish religious observance and Christian society are necessarily opposed.

The evident popularity of Hanukkah lamps decorated with manifestly non-Jewish figures might be explained in similar terms. Hanukkah celebrates the endurance of Jewish tradition – and thereby a distinct Jewish identity – in spite of external threats and pressures to assimilate. In Italy, since the mid-sixteenth century, such pressures were deliberately increased by papal edicts, while the suffering of the Jews under Antiochus IV (who desecrated the Temple, and burned Hebrew texts) was reprised in the burning of the Talmud and defiling of synagogues under Paul IV and his successors. In the face of this hostility, a Hanukkah lamp ornamented in a vernacular, all’antica style tempered the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{622} M. Cohen, “Leone da Modena’s Riti,” p. 293

\textsuperscript{623} Johannes Buxtorf, Synagoga Judaica (1603), chapter 23: “The lamp should be hanging on the right side of the door, not less than ten spans from the ground, and not higher than twenty. They have subtle discussions on how long they should burn, who should light them, if you can light one with the other and similar things. They are very particular about the outer light, but they do not care that such great darkness abides in their hearts.” Translation by Alan D. Corré https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/corre/www/buxdorf/chp23.html (accessed November 2016)

\textsuperscript{624} M. Cohen, “Leone da Modena’s Riti,” p. 293

\textsuperscript{625} Ibid, p. 288

\textsuperscript{626} R. Cohen, Jewish Icons, p. 28
\end{footnotesize}
fundamental statement of religious difference by evincing an aesthetic common
ground. In other words, in response to the systematic alienation of Jews and
Judaism, the appropriation of non-Jewish, vernacular symbols in Hanukkah
lamps contributed to presenting a familiar, *Italian* image of Judaism to the non-
Jewish observer. Thus we should not be surprised to find a Hanukkah lamp
that is not only vernacular in style, but adapted from a recognisable secular
object, such as a writing box (fig. 63). Similarly, the distinctive crenellations that
had appeared on Northern-Italian lamps since the fourteenth century, while
representing the indomitability of Jewish tradition, might have appealed to the
patiotic sensibilities of neighbouring Christians.

This formula would help to explain in particular why the apocryphal figure of
Judith appears on sixteenth-century Hanukkah lamps, while the actual hero of
Hanukkah, Judas Maccabeus, is absent. Judith has no direct relationship to
Hanukkah, but as a figure re-appropriated from Christian tradition, she could be
recognised by Christians – including those who might have produced the lamps
– for whom and what she was: an embodiment of virtue that was not conditional
on Jewish identity. Judas Maccabeus, on the other hand, might have been seen as evidence of Jewish temerity, or even misconstrued as a Jewish idol.

There is something comparable in the production of sixteenth-century Hebrew
books, which were usually printed at Christian presses, reusing woodcut
borders and title pages from non-Jewish publications. Traditionally the most
abundantly illustrated Jewish text, in print as in manuscript, is the Haggadah,
which sets out the order of the Passover Seder. The much-emulated edition
printed at Mantua in 1560 is typographically identical to a Bohemian archetype
(Prague, 1526), but the latter’s “stern Teutonic borders” are replaced with lively
Italian ones, busily populated with putti. The woodcut illustrations are
likewise replaced and increased in number, in keeping with an Italian aesthetic.

It is in the Mantua Haggadah that a figure mirroring Michelangelo’s Sistine
*Jeremiah* appears as the Wise Son who features in the text of the Haggadah
(fig. 52). The figure is almost identical to Michelangelo’s, except that its
orientation is reversed, while the addition of a hat of the round, knobbed variety
that Jews were forced to wear in parts of pre-modern Europe demonstrates that

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627 Yerushalmi, *Haggadah and History*, p. 37
the figure was adapted for a Jewish context. The figure appears again in the Mantua Haggadah of 1568 (as well as a Venice edition of 1599), but is this time identified as Rabbi Akiva, who is referred to in the Talmud as “chief of the sages,” and was executed by the Romans for teaching the Torah in spite of Imperial prohibition. In the seemingly arbitrary adaption of Michelangelo’s prophet – a figure from the Pope’s own chapel in Rome – there is a hint of the covert defiance detected by Epstein in medieval manuscript illuminations. For Yerushalmi (and others), the Michelangelesque figure in the Mantua Haggadah does no more than reveal “the traditional openness of Italian Jewry to the surrounding culture.” Yerushalmi’s assessment is representative of the prevailing view of Jewish visual culture in early modern Italy that I set out to challenge. In doing so, I do not mean to suggest that Jews in Italy were impervious to popular tastes, or that they took no pleasure in the decoration of books and ritual objects in contemporary Italian style; to do so would be absurd. My contention is that the ornamentation of printed books and Hanukkah lamps evinces far more than common aesthetic tastes. The argument is well illustrated by comparing the title page of the 1560 Mantua Haggadah with that of the 1568 edition. The earlier title page has an architectural frame with twisted columns – a motif recognised by Christians and Jews as an allusion to the Solomonic Temple (it appears again in the title page of the Riva di Trento edition of 1561, fig. 69); this is replaced in the later Mantuan edition by an arch covered in fruit and foliage, and flanked by the full-length figures of the Roman deities Mars and Minerva (fig. 70). The same framing device, first used in non-

628 The reorientation of the figure may be an incidental result of the reversal that occurs during printing, or otherwise it anticipates the right-to-left reading of the image in relation to the Hebrew text it accompanies. For a discussion of the semantics of left and right in printed illustrations for Jews and Christians, see: Avigdor Posèq, “Left and Right in Rembrandt's 'Defeat of Goliath',' Studia Rosenthaliana, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1989), pp. 8-27
630 Epstein, Dreams of Subversion.
631 Yerushalmi, Haggadah and History, p. 38. The woodcut of Rabbi Akiva from the Mantua Haggadah (1568) is reproduced on the cover of a recent volume of essays, whose preface incorrectly identifies the archetype as Michelangelo’s Moses, while stating that it “perfectly illustrates” the theme of the volume, revealing “the influence of the Italian Renaissance on the traditional Jewish world.” Veltri, Giuseppe & Gianfranco Miletto (eds.): Rabbi Judah Moscato and the Jewish Intellectual World of Mantua in the 16th-17th Centuries, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012 (p. vii)
Jewish books, had earlier appeared on the title page of Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*, printed at Sabionetta in 1553 (fig. 54), and was used again in Venice in the early 1600s. Why should these images of “false gods” be acceptable – even desirable – on the title pages of standard Jewish texts?

Yerushalmi suggested that “[such] ‘pagan’ motifs seem hardly to have troubled Jews and were regarded merely as decoration.” But this assumption is based on the mere existence of the motifs, and does not explain why they should be preferred in so many cases to other, more pertinent kinds of decoration – twisted columns, for example. I suggest that these images were chosen not in spite of their manifest non-Jewishness, but precisely because of it. The appearance of recognisable pagan deities in juxtaposition to the (abstruse) Hebrew title would help to dissolve suspicions that Jews were both superstitious and necessarily critical of the pagan images used by their Christian neighbours. As is shown by the Inquisitorial censorship of *Avodah Zarah*, the idea that Jews conflated contemporary Christians with pagan Roman idolatry was a major pretext for the censorship – and wholesale destruction – of Hebrew books.

This formula might be applied also to the pagan mythological figures on bronze Hanukkah lamps, which are arguably more problematic than printed images because the figures are protruding. We have seen that the abundance of figuration on Hanukkah lamps was unusual compared to other household ritual objects, and would have been unthinkable in the synagogue. It is remarkable then that some of the imagery on sixteenth-century Italian lamps partakes of the Hellenic culture that was so vehemently rejected by the Maccabees. As a synthesis of Jewish tradition and Gentile aesthetics, the lamps, in a sense, embody – or even symbolically resolve – the conflict inherent in the Hanukkah story, and more generally, in the Jewish Diaspora story. In the next chapter, I will examine the symbolic negotiation of religious and secular identities through another type of *all’antica* bronze object whose ancient archetype was historically anathema to Judaism.

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632 As Yerushalmi notes, in Hebrew publications of the Conti press in Cremona and Sabionetta, such figures as Neptune and Hercules appear, while the 1574 Venice edition of Maimonides’s *Mishneh Torah* includes a printer’s emblem of a nude Venus standing over a seven-headed dragon. Yerushalmi, op. cit, notes to plate 28

633 Ibid.
Chapter 6
In Their Own Image: Portrait Medals and Jewish Identity, in Rome, Venice and Ferrara

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the itinerant portraitist and loan banker Mosè da Castellazzo was in Ferrara, making portrait medals for the aristocratic scholar Pietro Bembo, and for the Duke of Ferrara, Ercole I d’Este. In a letter to Bembo, Mosè expressed his desire, “God willing,” to make portraits of many other gentlemen in the city. This record of a Jew making portrait medals for high ranking Christians is not only unprecedented, but more remarkably, it predates the earliest known medals representing Jewish individuals by half a century. The earliest of these, which is dated 1552, and represents two members of a Roman Jewish family is, moreover, the earliest known portrait, in any medium, commissioned by or for a Jewish person since antiquity (fig. 71). Two others portrait medals of Jews survive from the same decade. In this chapter, I examine these medals in their historical context, relating them to changes in socio-political conditions and using them to exemplify the development of Jewish cultural and individual identities in early modern Italy.

Medallion portraits had been popular in Italy since the mid-1400s, but the earliest surviving examples with Jewish subjects were produced a hundred years later than that. The medal dated 1552 is a two-sided representation of a young man, Elia de Lattes, and his mother, Rica, members of a family well established in Rome. Two other medals appear a few years later, in 1557 and 1557/8; they represent a middle-aged man and a teenage woman, both then residents of Ferrara (figs. 72 & 73). With the belated appearance of Jewish portrait medals, ideas inherent in the medium, involving spirituality, secularity and self-image, assume a new and peculiar complexity.

634 “Piacendo a m. d. Dio, mi bisonia retrari molti sinior qua [sic.].” Savorgnan, Maria & Pietro Bembo, Carteggio d’amore, p. 41.
635 See the discussion of Herodian coinage, below.
Antique coins to *all’antica* medals

The Italian invention of the portrait medal, which is usually attributed to the Tuscan Pisanello (c. 1395-1455), channelled the Renaissance currents of humanism and individualism, and in particular, the Petrarchan idea that personal fame would be assured by the expression of *virtus*.\(^{636}\) Portraits in general were seen as a means to perpetuating fame and ensuring the “immortality” of the subject, and to this distant end, medallistic portraits offered the advantage of a medium that was not only transportable and reproducible, but also durable – as proven by the survival of the ancient coins that inspired them. It was in the spirit of his age that Mosè da Castellazzo avowedly made his portraits of “gentlemen and famous men, so that they might be remembered for all time.”\(^{637}\) Indeed, at least two of those whose lives are revisited in this chapter would be virtually unknown today, were it not for the survival of their medallistic portraits in museum collections.

The main archetype of the portrait medal was Imperial Roman coinage, which the Emperors used to disseminate an ideal image of their physical appearance and personal triumphs (fig. 74). Renaissance medals were not used for commercial exchange, lacking the intrinsic value of coinage, but they adapted the form and propagandist value of Roman coins. Medals appealed especially to powerful figures, who used them to align themselves implicitly, and often explicitly, with the Emperors. From the mid-fifteenth century, it was customary for popes to commission medallistic portraits with the inscription “*pontifex maximus*” (fig. 75), a title inherited from the high priest of pagan Rome, and first appropriated by Augustus, “son of the divine” Julius Caesar.

From a traditional Jewish perspective, there are serious problems inherent in such images and their allusions. Fundamentally, Roman Imperial coins contradict the basic tenets of Judaism; they exemplify the correlation between false gods and graven images that pertains in the Decalogue. Until now, Jewish portrait medals (and the Renaissance medal in general) have received only cursory treatment with regard to this element of Mosaic Law, its religious

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\(^{637}\) Kaufmann, “Le peintre vénitien Mosè dal Castellazzo,” pp. 290-293
interpretation and cultural legacy. Daniel Friedenberg, in his monograph *Jewish Medals* (1970), only mentions “the obvious fact” that Jewish tradition “discouraged the making of graven images,” in accounting for the relatively small number – if not the late appearance – of such objects.\(^{638}\) Raymond Waddington (1994) touches all too briefly on the problem in his short and otherwise insightful essay on sixteenth-century portrait medals of Jews.\(^{639}\) Despite his provocative title, “Graven Images....,” and his recognition of the “cross-cultural paradox” inherent in such objects, Waddington does not engage with the deeper religious and historical complexities of the image prohibition, or for that matter, of the portrait medal.\(^{640}\)

As we saw in the previous chapters, rabbinic attitudes to the production and use of images, especially images of humans, are complex and variable. Jewish legal codes, as well as individual rabbinic responsa, discriminate between images that are flat or raised, concave or convex, between representations of the complete human body (with or without certain attributes), the body without the head, or the head without the body.\(^{641}\) Special limitations apply to the representation of the face. Further distinctions are made between objects that are honoured or mundane, those that are intended to be kept, and those that are used for commerce.\(^{642}\) Without any clearly prescribed, universal formula for deciding the permissibility of an image or object, portrait medals present a complex case in terms of Jewish law.

Beyond the statutes on images, portrait medals of Jews raise questions about the social status of the individuals portrayed, the relationship between religious and secular interests, and more broadly, the idea of what constitutes Jewish identity. How might Jewish subscription to a secular cult of fame have been viewed by other Jews, and no less importantly, by Christian contemporaries?

The medals – like the imagery in printed books and on Hanukkah lamps – might

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\(^{638}\) Friedenberg, Daniel M: *Jewish Medals: From the Renaissance to the Fall of Napoleon (1503-1815)*, New York: Jewish Museum, 1970, p. 1


\(^{641}\) See, for example, Joseph Caro’s *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah*, 141:1 (translated in Mann, *Jewish Texts*, pp. 29-30)

\(^{642}\) See, for example, the responsum of Radbaz (c.1480-1573), with regard to the handling of Venetian and Luccan florins (Mann, *Jewish Texts*, pp. 56-58)
be seen to evince a strong tendency to acculturation among Jews in early modern Italy, and yet, they assert their subjects’ Jewish identities with unprecedented boldness. My approach here is to draw out the ambiguities and contradictions that these portrait medals seem to embody, as part of the process of resolving them.

The numismatic image in Jewish tradition

There is a metaphor in the Mishnah, the oral law of Judaism, according to which, “if a man mints many coins from one mould, they are all alike, but [God] fashioned all [humans] in the mould of the first man, and not one resembles the other.” The duality of this idea is illustrated by an array of medallic portraits. Taken individually, each medal, like a coin, conforms to its type (being cast from the same mould or struck from the same matrix), but viewed collectively, they are as diverse as the subjects they represent. The complexity of Jewish portrait medals in particular is anticipated by this ancient coin metaphor, which I use as a key to examining the cultural and historical context of the medals, and eventually to reflect on the identities of the individuals they represent.

Our metaphor is found in the context of laws of capital punishment, and specifically a passage that warns against giving false witness in capital cases. According to the Mishnah, the fact that God created only a single human (adam), from whom all others are descended, establishes the unity of humankind. It follows from this idea that anyone who destroys a human life commits a crime against humanity (to use modern parlance), while anyone who saves a life preserves humanity itself. Nowadays, the passage is often cited as authority for Judaism’s support of human rights. This notion of what Charlotte Fonrobert calls “synecdochal individuality” is elaborated metaphorically: “if a man mints many coins from one mould, they are all alike,” but God, who “fashioned all [humans] in the mould of the first man,”


644 Elsheva Fonrobert, Charlotte: “‘Humanity was Created as an Individual’: Synecdochal Individuality in the Mishnah as a Jewish Response to Romanization,” in The Individual in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean, Jörg Rüpke (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 493

645 Ibid, p. 497
one distinct. At face value, the metaphor is neat enough, but it has a deeper significance that makes it especially pertinent to our medals.

As I have suggested, the man-made coins that supplied the ancient metaphor ran against the grain of Jewish orthodoxy, which did not tolerate coins with portrait heads, let alone ones that claimed the divinity of the person portrayed. Indeed, the Talmud exemplifies the holiness of one sage by his refusal so much as to look at the images on coins. Although Jewish rulers – or more precisely, Roman client kings of the Herodian Dynasty, including Herod Phillip II (4 BCE – 34 CE), issued coins bearing the effigy of the Roman Emperor, or in the case of Agrippa I (37-44 AD), his own effigy as “Friend of Caesar,” these coins were for use in areas largely populated by non-Jews, and their purpose was to advertise the protection of Imperial Rome. Under direct Jewish government, however, human or animal figuration on coins was avoided. During the first Jewish revolt against Roman rule (66-70 AD), the Tyrian shekel – which was used to pay the Temple tax, although it bore a profile head of the Phoenician god Melqart – was replaced with coins bearing inanimate Jewish symbols, while the revolt of 132-136 CE saw Roman coins literally de-faced by striking Jewish symbols over the Imperial effigy.

Bearing in mind that Judea was dominated by Rome at the time that the Mishnah was composed, the coin metaphor must have evoked the unwelcome image of a Roman ruler. This means that the coins referred to in the Talmud share their archetype with the Renaissance portrait medal, a coincidence that might affect our understanding of all’antica medals representing Jews.

For the Jews of antiquity, images of Roman Emperors represented a threat to a way of life that was inseparable from religious observance. The first-century historian Flavius Josephus describes how Pontius Pilate marched an army into

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646 Reifenberg, Adolf: *Israel's History in Coins from the Maccabees to the Roman Conquest*, London: Horovitz, 1953, pp. 10-11


648 Reifenberg, *Israel's History in Coins*, pp. 10-11

649 Ibid, pp. 13 & 16. See also: Dario Calomino, *Defacing the Past: Damnation and Desecration in Imperial Rome*, London: British Museum; Spink, 2016 (pp. 195-197)
Jerusalem under ensigns with the effigy of Tiberius, and how, since “our [Jewish] law forbids us the very making of images,” the people pleaded with Pilate either to remove the ensigns or carry out his threat to kill them. Tiberius’s successor, Caligula (who “so grossly abuse[d] the fortune he had arrived at, as to take himself to be a god”), was enraged by the Jews’ refusal to venerate him or his effigies, so he ordered a colossal gilded statue of himself to be erected in the Temple of Jerusalem. The Jews again insisted – as Leon Modena would sixteen centuries later – that their law did not permit them “to make either an image of God, or indeed of a man, [not even] to put it in any despicable part of their country, [and] much less in the temple itself.” When the Jews first revolted against the Romans in 66-70 CE, the future Emperor Titus destroyed the Temple, and looted its sacred vessels – an event commemorated by his triumphal arch (fig. 76) and his father Vespasian’s coinage.

God or Caesar (the numismatic image in Christian tradition)

The potency of Roman Imperial coins as symbols of cultural and religious oppression is well illustrated by the Gospel story in which Jesus is asked whether Jews should pay the taxes demanded by the Romans. Considering an Imperial coin, he asks rhetorically whose image and inscription it bears, before imparting his wisdom: “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.” (fig. 77). Jesus deftly avoided the deadly horns of a political dilemma, but underlying his answer are the opposing ideas of the coin as the temporal image of an earthly ruler, and the self as the spiritual image of God; the same idea that is used metaphorically in the Mishnah. The meaning would have been clear enough to Jesus’s Jewish

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650 “... they would take their deaths very willingly, rather than the wisdom of their laws should be transgressed.” Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, XVIII, iii. (Whiston, 1865, p. 379)


652 Josephus, Wars, II, x. (p. 480). Cf. Modena, Riti, Parte Prima, Capitulo II

653 Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22, verses 17-21.

654 Sanhedrin 38a, Babylonian Talmud
audience (as it was to the early Church Fathers), but in Christian tradition it has been obscured by the idea of Jesus as the incarnate image of God. It is telling that the subject of the Tribute Money is absent from Christian art until the early sixteenth century, when the political aspect of its message became newly apposite, as we shall see.

For early Christian exegetes, the point of the Gospel story was certainly more theological than political. In his treatise On Idolatry, Tertullian (second-to-third century) explained that while a person might owe money to Caesar, one owes one’s self to God: “the image of the emperor, which is on the coin, should be rendered to the emperor, and the image of God, which is man, to God.”

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) likewise imagined God as a numismatic archetype, whose replicated image had been eroded since the fall of man: “as a coin, rubbed against the ground loses the image of the emperor, so the mind of man, worn by earthly passions, loses the image of God.” Augustine went on to cast Christ as a “minter” (“monetarius”), who came to restore the damaged coins through grace and the forgiveness of sins.

An important component in Jesus’s answer to his inquisitor – and likewise the Mishnaic metaphor – is the idea that God’s image cannot be reduced, as Caesar’s could, to the ubiquitous image on a coin. The gradual obscuration of this meaning in Christian tradition is manifest in the numismatic image of Jesus, which appeared first on coins minted for the Byzantine Emperor Justinian II,

\[655\] *Colossians*, 1:15.

\[656\] This long absence has been noted before, but never explained. Fehl (*Decorum and Wit…*, p. 49) cites Schiller (*Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 1966, I, p. 166) and Kirschbaum (*Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, 1972, IV, cols. 571-2) on this point. NB. The subject referred to here is not to be confused with the story of the Temple tax from *Matthew*, 17:24-27, painted by Masaccio in the 1420s.

\[657\] “[…] id est imaginem Caesaris Caesari, quae in nummo est, et imaginem deo, quae in homine est.” Tertullianus, *De Idololatria*, 15:3.

\[658\] “Quomodo enim nummus, si confricetur a terra, perdet imaginem imperatoris, sic mens hominis, si confricetur libidinibus terrenis, amittit imaginem Dei.” Augustine of Hippo, *Sermonibus Octavarum Paschae*, 229/IV, 2.

http://www.augustinus.it/latino/discorsi/discorso_324_testo.htm (accessed December 2016)

\[659\] “Venit autem monetarius Christus, qui repercutiet nummos.” *Ibid*. For Augustine, the meaning of Christ’s verdict on the tribute money was “If Caesar seeks his own image on the coin, does not God seek His own image in man?” (“[Si] Caesar quærít imaginem in nummo, Deus non quærít imaginem in homine?”) *Ibid*.
It is notable that the first rash of Byzantine iconoclasm occurred soon after this important development in Christian symbolism. After the Byzantine example, and long after the abatement of iconoclasm, the image of Christ appeared on the reverse of thirteenth-century Venetian gold ducats. In the mid-fifteenth century, the appearance of ruler-portraits on European currency, introduced for the first time in nearly a millennium, also coincided in Italy with the invention of the portrait medal.

The first medallic “portrait” of Christ was cast in the late 1450s, by Matteo de’ Pasti of Verona (fig. 78). The image on this medal is not presented as an “authentic” likeness, but beginning around the year 1500, a large number of medals were produced in Italy that were purported to replicate an ancient portrait of Christ. Some of these were accompanied by the name “Jesus” (יְשׁוֹהוּ) in Hebrew. The claim attaching to these medals (sometimes by a literal inscription) relied on the reproduction of a set of facial features apparently established by a single archetype. As G. F. Hill observed, through a process of casting and re-casting, “all specimens [of this type] are the lineal descendants of one original” – that is, the notionally authentic image of Christ. This idea is elaborated by Alexander Nagel, who remarks that, while the format and material of the numismatic portrait “carried resonant associations with antiquity,” the technique of bronze casting “held out the promise that […] these were impressions of an ancient likeness, the last iterations of a reliable chain of

661 Ibid.
662 The basic design of the Venetian ducat – with Christ on the obverse, and the Doge and Saint Mark on the reverse – remained unchanged for over five hundred years. The reverse inscription read: *Sit tibi, Christe, datus || quem tū regis, iste ducātus*, “Christ, let this duchy that you rule be given to you.”
663 Stahl, Alan: “Mint and Medal in the Renaissance,” in *Perspectives on the Renaissance Medal* (p. 137)
664 There are examples in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Münzkabinett, Berlin.
666 For a discussion and examples of these, see Hill, ibid. Until the late fifteenth century, Hebrew inscriptions on medals in general were extremely rare. The earliest known medal with a Hebrew inscription is a self-portrait of the Venetian Giovanni Boldù (active c. 1454-1475); it was produced in 1458 and the inscription in Greek and Hebrew identifies him as a painter.
667 Ibid, pp. 16-17, n. 1.
replications going back to antiquity. By appropriating the form and reputation of Imperial coins in this way, these medals paradoxically elide the difference between God and Caesar as exemplified by Jesus himself in the Gospels. In doing so, they expose the theological concept underlying the divergence in Jewish and Christian attitudes to the biblical prohibition of images.

It is significant, I suggest, that the proliferation of bronze medals of Christ around the turn of the sixteenth century coincided with widespread eschatological speculation, and, more particularly, Jewish predictions for the coming of the Messiah. The medals offered a material reassurance to Christians (including, perhaps, recent converts from Judaism), while implicitly refuting claims that the Messianic prophesies of Hebrew scripture remained unfulfilled. As a case in point, the Pavian scholar of Oriental languages Teseo Ambrogio (1469–c.1540) describes a bronze “coin” of Christ that he saw at Ferrara, with “Samaritan letters” that read “Messiah the King came in peace, God became man, or incarnate.”

Although its original, theological value had been debased, the Christian maxim “Render unto Caesar” gained renewed currency in sixteenth-century Europe, being used to exemplify a balance between religious and secular interests. Its earliest representation as the subject of an important artistic commission is the first of two versions painted by Titian at an interval of fifty years. The

669 See: Ruderman, David B, “Hope against Hope: Jewish and Christian Messianic Expectations in the Late Middle Ages,” in Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy, pp. 299-323
671 For example, during the Peasants’ War (1524-25), Martin Luther sought to remind the peasants of their civic duty by invoking the example of the Tribute Money. See: David M. Whitford, “Luther’s Political Encounters,” in The Cambridge companion to Martin Luther, edited by Donald K. McKim, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003 (pp. 179-191)
672 Titian, The Tribute Money, 1516, oil on poplar, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden The later version (c. 1560-8, National Gallery, London) was painted for Philip II of Spain. Phillip’s father, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, appears in a 1540s design for a stained glass window featuring the Tribute Money at St John’s Church, Gouda. See: Xander van Eck,
earlier version, a small panel now in Dresden, was likely commissioned by the Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso I d’Este, around 1516 (fig. 77). According to Vasari, the picture adorned the door of a cabinet, for which “Titian painted, in half length, a head of Christ […] to whom a base Jew shows the coin of Caesar.” Philipp Fehl made the highly plausible suggestion that the cabinet was where the Duke kept his large collection of coins and medals. Alfonso made another direct reference to the Tribute Money in his own coinage: the Ferrarese doppio ducato minted in 1515 has the Duke’s own all’antica image on the obverse, and Jesus with a Pharisee, accompanied by the Vulgate paraphrase “qu[a]e sunt Dei Deo” (to God what is God’s) on the reverse (fig. 79). As Fehl construed it, the coin was “a gesture defying the continuing papal claim to the dominion of Ferrara” (a claim that was ultimately realised in 1598).

Ferrara and the economics of tolerance (Abramo Norsa)

The political or theological example of the Tribute Money is of special importance to the present discussion, both in general terms, and in the particular case of Ferrara. As long as the city was ruled by the Este, not only did it maintain independence from the papacy, but it afforded an unusual degree of protection to its burgeoning Jewish population. It was Ercole I d’Este who had controversially exempted his Jewish subjects from paying taxes demanded by the papacy, and who encouraged the immigration of Sephardic Jews following the expulsions from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1497). During the sixteenth century, the Duchy continued to welcome Jewish immigrants, including those who professed Christianity to avoid persecution, but whose secret observance of Jewish rites made them liable to be prosecuted as heretics by the Inquisition. In Ferrara, they were permitted to practice


673 “[…] nella porta d’un armario dipinse Tiziano dal mezzo in su una testa di Cristo, maravigliosa e stupenda, a cui un villano ebreo mostra la moneta di Cesare.” Vasari, Vite (1568), Firenze: Sansoni, 1881, Vol. VII, p. 434


675 Ibid, p. 49.

Judaism openly and without fear of reprisal. Two of the portrait medals we will examine were made for Jewish residents of Ferrara – one of them belonging to the most famous family of Iberian refugees.

As described in part one, Ferrara’s policy of toleration was driven more by economic than humanitarian concerns. The Estense Dukes, beginning with Ercole I (the patron of Mosè da Castellazzo), relied heavily on Jewish loans and levies. The role of Jewish loan bankers in Ferrara is exemplified by Abramo Emanuele Norsa (1505-79), the subject of one of our portrait medals, who was the head of the Ferrarese branch of an important banking family. The single known specimen of his uniface bronze medal, made by the fashionable Sienese medallist Pastorino de’ Pastorini, is lost (having been stolen from the Museum in Parma during the Second World War), but we know its appearance from an old photograph. It shows a handsome man of middle age, amply bearded yet neatly coiffured; the profile is truncated below the shoulder, to show an expensive-looking brocaded collar and lace ruff. This is the image of a man of considerable wealth and social status, which reflects well what we know of Abramo Norsa. In December 1543, Ercole II granted Abramo and his descendants the status of nobility, with all the “honours, advantages, privileges, benefits, exemptions and graces that are enjoyed by other gentlemen of our household.”

In 1558, the year after the date on his medal, Abramo received a request from the Duke to borrow the largest available sum for the longest period, to which he agreed a loan of five thousand scudi for four years, at fifteen percent interest. In this case, the transaction was mutually beneficial, but this was not always so. In 1547, Ercole had ordered Abramo to release to the Commissary Apostolic a sum of 333 ½ scudi that the late Emanuel da Rubiera had bequeathed to the Poor of Jerusalem; if Abramo did not pay in the allotted

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678 Friedenberg, Jewish Medals, p. 43


time, he and his wife would be personally liable for double the amount. Such arbitrary rulings were the price of toleration for even the most privileged Jewish residents of Ferrara. The economic and social politics of religious toleration are attested not only by notarial documents, but also, as Dana Katz has shown, by the production of images in which popular urges to violence against Jews were deflected to a symbolic status. A case in point — happening to involve ancestors of Abramo Norsa — is the Madonna and Child altarpiece (c.1499) at Sant’Andrea in Mantua, discussed in chapter three, which includes defamatory portraits of the loan banker Daniele Norsa and his family (fig. 44). The altarpiece was commissioned in the wake of a scandal that began when Daniele whitewashed a mural of the Madonna and Child on his own house. By the time the Sant’Andrea altarpiece was painted, the house had been razed, a chapel built in its place, and Andrea Mantegna commissioned to paint a first altarpiece at Daniele’s expense. It is worth noticing that, unlike the financial losses, which could be recouped eventually through the activity of loan banking, the artistic commissions were a kind of humiliation that the Jews had no obvious means to redress. This case in particular prompts the question of how portrait medals might have functioned in an economy of religious and social toleration in Ferrara, where at least two Jewish residents, including Abramo Norsa, commissioned medals during the 1550s. It was in the same city, half a century earlier, that the loan banker Mosè da Castellazzo is reported to have made medals for Pietro Bembo and Ercole I d’Este. According to Mosè, his sole motivation for making such portraits was a desire to perpetuate the fame of his portrait subjects, “and because I have never cared to make money, but only desired to please everyone, I have contented myself with giving them [that] pleasure.” Could it be that Mosè’s production of portrait medals, avowedly for no financial gain,

681 ASMo, Arch. Materie, Banchi e Banchieri, b. 1. Ibid, Doc. 390, p. 770.
682 Katz, The Jew in the Art of the Italian Renaissance (op. cit.)
683 Ibid, Chapter Two (“The Politics of Persecution in Quattrocento Mantua”). Chapter Three (“Slaying Synagoga in Estense Ferrara”) concerns Garofalo’s Allegory of the Old and New Testaments (1523), which shows the personification of the Synagogue assassinated by a “Living Cross.” Despite its manifest anti-Jewish violence, Katz relates the image to Ferrarese and Augustinian policies on tolerance.
684 The quotation is from Mosè’s copyright request to the Venetian Council of Ten (1521), discussed in the previous chapter.
helped to secure the privileges he enjoyed at the courts of Ferrara, Mantua and Milan? And was the unpaid work of Mosè the portrait medallist seen by his Christian patrons to offset the “usurious” gains of Mosè the moneylender? Medals, which had no monetary use, could be valuable tokens of *amicizia*, as exemplified by Pisanello’s gift (in 1435) of an “effigy” of Julius Caesar to his patron, Leonello d’Este.685

According to Mosè da Castellazzo’s testimony, he worked for many years producing portraits of “gentlemen and famous men,”686 but there is no suggestion that he produced a medal for any of his coreligionists. Producing portrait medals gratis for other Jews does not, in any case, seem congruent with Mosè’s social or economic aims and activities. Moreover, as I will argue, the appearance of the first portrait medals of Jews in the 1550s is consistent with broader developments in Jewish culture in Italy, which would not have been the case in the earlier 1500s.

Abramo Norsa, was, like Mosè da Castellazzo, a Jewish loan banker who enjoyed social privileges conferred by the Duke of Ferrara. His portrait medal is an assertion of those privileges, and of a social position that would be unattainable by Jews in the Papal States or other Italian principalities. That status was, however, contingent on Ferrara’s defiance of the papacy and resistance to papal rule, to which the biblical paraphrase on Alfonso I d’Este’s coinage seems to allude. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider how the balance of religious and secular interests, exemplified by the story of the Tribute Money, has special relevance to the cultural experience of Jews in Italy during the sixteenth century. I interpret portrait medals and other objects commissioned by Jews as part of a symbolic negotiation of religious difference and secular integration.


686 Literally, “zentilhomeni et homeni famosi.”
Portraits of Rabbis

The appearance of medallic portraits of Jews in mid-sixteenth century Italy should be considered amidst evidence of a nascent Jewish interest in painted portraiture. In the previous chapter, we saw that the eminent Paduan rabbi Samuel Archivolti (1515-1611) – an advocate for aniconism in synagogues – wrote an ode to the contemporary portrait painter Francesco Apollodoro, who made images of men that were fit “for eternity.” By the time that Leon Modena wrote his *Historia de Riti Hebraici*, around 1615, many Jews in Italy would apparently “licence themselves” to keep portraits at home, “especially if they are not in relief or full body.” Modena himself exhibited a liberal attitude to portraiture, describing in his memoirs how a French courtier, Louis Iselin (to whom he taught Italian “and other things”), left his own portrait “as a token of his affection,” and commissioned Tiberio Tinelli (1586-1638) to paint one of the rabbi. The painter died before the portrait was finished, but Modena would follow Iselin’s example in sending “a small, square portrait” of himself to David Finzi, a Jewish patron in Egypt. When the *Riti Hebraici* was eventually printed in Venice (1638), a portrait of its author was included in the title page (fig. 80).

In spite of Leon Modena’s testimony in the *Riti Hebraici*, no painted portraits of Jews from that time or earlier are known to survive. As noticed earlier, the medal of Elia de Lattes and his mother (1552) is the earliest example in any medium, commissioned by or for a Jewish individual. The survival of this and two other medals, in contrast to the dearth of painted portraits, must be attributed in part to the durability of the medium, and to some extent the quantity in which they were likely to have been produced. Still, the absence of any earlier examples, whether in paint or metal, testifies to the general novelty of portraiture in Jewish circles. It is worth noticing that the only earlier portrayals of Jewish individuals are in Christian art, most infamously the portraits of Daniele Norsa and his family in a Mantuan altarpiece. The inclusion

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687 Bernstein, “New Poems by Rabbi Samuel Archivolti” (op. cit.)
688 Modena, *Riti*, p. 16
690 Ibid.
691 At least seven specimens of the Nasi medal, and three of the Lattes medal are extant (see Friedenberg, *Jewish Medals*, pp. 128-129).
of donor portraits in Christian devotional art was, by the 1490s, common practice in Italy, but in the particular Mantuan case, the portraits were designed not to perpetuate fame, but rather the infamy of the involuntary Jewish donor.

While a positive interest in portraiture developed much later in Jewish than in Christian society, it developed earlier among the Jews of Italy than among those in other parts of Europe. Describing the emergence of the rabbinic portrait as a genre in eighteenth-century Amsterdam and London, Richard Cohen asserts that until the previous century “a widespread reservation to portraits prevailed […], as they were deemed idol worship and emulation of a Christian tradition.” Cohen’s statement is rather generalised, but his discernment of a generational change in Jewish attitudes to portraiture is well illustrated by a specific case. Around 1715, the Sephardic community of London commissioned a painted portrait of Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch ben Yaakov Ashkenazi, known as the Hakham Zevi (1656-1718), in spite of the rabbi’s objection to portraiture as a maaseh zar, “foreign act.” His son, Rabbi Jacob Emden, approved of his father’s portrait (and the reproductions that were made of it), while respecting his father’s demurral as a sign of his great piety.

Cohen observes that the practice of commissioning painted portraits of rabbis emerged among Jews of Sephardic, and especially Portuguese backgrounds, a fact that he attributes to “an extension of the rabbis’ personal experience as former crypto-Jews, and an absence of the normative abstention from portraits based on the strict interpretation of the Second Commandment.” Jewish interest in portraiture in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy cannot be characterised as a Sephardic phenomenon, but still the immigration to Italy of large numbers of Jews who had formerly lived as Christians may be a factor in promoting a more liberal Jewish attitude to visual representation.

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692 R. Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, p. 117 (see chapter three, “The Rabbi as icon”).


694 Ibid, p. 120

The particular case of the Hakham Zevi illustrates an important point that, although portraits and other images might not be strictly forbidden by laws on visual representation, they might still attract censure as “foreign acts” incompatible with Jewish tradition. This proves a more general point that the notion of secularity, whereby a religious life accommodates a degree of profanity, did not necessarily pertain in the same way for Jews as it did for Christians, or indeed, for some Jews as for others in different times or places. In this regard, the Italian rabbis Samuel Archivolti and Leon Modena both demonstrate a wider concept of secularity than the Moravian-born Hakham Zevi did a century or more later. None, though, would have contemplated portraits in a synagogue.

Two other examples of portraiture elicited different responses from the Hakham Zevi’s son, Jacob Emden. In one, he criticized the followers of Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz (whom he had denounced as a heretic) for allegedly kissing their rabbi’s portrait, and treating his image as a substitute for the Decalogue. In the other, Emden condemned a small (50 mm) medal commissioned in 1735 by the Jewish community in Amsterdam, on the appointment of Elazar Rokeach as Chief Rabbi. The medal shows the rabbi’s head and upper body in half profile, while an inscription on the reverse, “By the hand of Joel [ben] Lippman Levi,” makes it the oldest surviving object unequivocally produced by a Jewish medallist. In a written responsum, Emden acknowledged Elazar Rokeach’s piety, but condemned those who were instrumental in making and reproducing the medal; more particularly, he implied that if the portrait had been made by a gentile there might have been “no danger” of its being seen as an idol.

As described in chapter four, Jewish legal restrictions on images were conditioned by the likelihood of their being perceived or treated as god-like, and this pertains especially to the human form. More particularly, though, it is “the imaging of the [human] face that stands in the greatest need of limitation,

696 Ibid, p. 124
698 Friedenberg, Jewish Medals, p. 64
especially if the image is raised in relief or otherwise embossed."\(^{700}\) In the Gemara, the specific restriction on representing faces is explained with reference to God’s instruction in Exodus 20:23: “you shall not make with Me gods of silver and gods of gold,” which is understood by rabbinic commentators to acknowledge the human likeness to God, from which the latter’s image may be (falsely) inferred.\(^{701}\)

The deeply rooted idea that the human face manifests an intellectual or spiritual resemblance to God is evident in Leon Modena’s use of the same biblical phrase “image and likeness” to describe his intellectual relationship to his mentor, Archivolti, and the relationship between a portrait and its subject, in this case his Christian patron Louis Iselin.\(^{702}\) The idea is evident elsewhere in Modena’s memoirs, when he describes a youthful experiment with dream divination, “using prayer without conjuration,” by which he evoked an image of Esther, the cousin he was intended to marry, but had never seen. In his dream, an old man drew aside a veil to expose a portrait of Esther, but while he was gazing at the image, “it changed, and another one, which I could not clearly make out, replaced it.”\(^{703}\) Modena probably knew how portraits were used by the Christian nobility to view prospective brides,\(^{704}\) but with further, pre-Freudian insight, he recognised in his dream an allusion to Exodus 34, in which Moses veils and unveils his countenance following his glimpse of God.\(^{705}\)

As the academic theologian Melissa Raphael argues, “since Jewish theology traditionally arrives in different ways at the notion of the human face as reflecting the glory and pathos of the divine ‘face’ (or presence) in whose image it is made,” it is reasonable to suppose that “permissible images [in Judaism] are those that defer to the trace of the divine in the face.”\(^{706}\) To exemplify this point, Raphael notices that the authoritative legal code (Shulchan Aruch),

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\(^{701}\) Ibid, pp. 57-58. Cf. Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim, 3:10


\(^{703}\) Ibid, p. 90.


\(^{705}\) Leon Modena’s play on a phrase found in Exodus 34:34 is noticed by Mark Cohen (Life of Judah, p. 90).

\(^{706}\) Raphael, Judaism and the Visual Image, p. 17
compiled by Joseph Caro in the mid-sixteenth century, says that it is forbidden to keep an image of a human face – even by itself – unless one has disfigured it slightly. This, however, only applies to images of a full face, “with two eyes and a nose,” and not to the face in profile. As Raphael reasons, profile portraits are less problematic than frontal ones, wherein “the bond between the human face and the divine countenance is most directly manifest.” 707 The profile portrait that characterises an all’antica medal might thus be regarded as a permissible form of representation in strictly halachic terms – in spite of the potential association with “foreign worship.” Still, the question remains what made such medals suddenly desirable to Jews in Italy in the 1550s, among whom Elia de Lattes might not have been the first, and was evidently not the last to commission one.

Ghettoisation (Elia de Lattes)

The de Lattes medal, a relatively small (40 mm diameter) cast bronze, presents a bust-length profile portrait of a young, bearded man in a doublet, identified by the inscription ELIA DELATAS Ebreo (Elia de Lattes, Jew). This inscription is followed by a date in a combination of Roman and Hindu-Arabic numerals, MD52 (1552). The reverse shows a similarly posed portrait of a woman in a gown and hair net, with the identifying inscription RICA SUA GINETRICE [sic.] – “Rica, his mother.” The relationship between the inscriptions – with Rica’s being dependent on Elia’s, and not vice versa – suggests that the medal was intended primarily to commemorate the latter.

Elia de Lattes was the grandson of Bonet de Lattes, a Sephardi polymath who emigrated to Rome from Provence in the late-fifteenth century (the family name was adopted in Lattes, near Montpellier). The family was soon well established in Rome; Bonet and his son Immanuel (Elia’s father) served as personal physicians to a succession of popes, including Alexander VI (1492-1503) and Leo X (1513-1521). 708 Bonet de Lattes was also a distinguished rabbi and astrologer, noted for his invention of an astronomical ring-dial, which he

707 Ibid, p. 28
Such was his standing at the Papal court, that the Christian Cabbalist Johann Reuchlin appealed to him for help when one of his own books was threatened with censure (1513). Little is known about Bonet’s grandson, Elia, except that he was a respected member of the Jewish community in Rome in 1553, the year after the date on his medal.

The style of his medal, however, suggests a Venetian provenance. G. F. Hill included it in a group of Venetian portrait medals, made in the 1540s and 1550s, that comprises several reverse portraits of relatives (including wives and brothers), with similar styles of identification. The closest analogy is one commissioned around 1554 by Pietro Aretino for his daughter, Adria (b. 1537), and lately attributed to Danese Cattaneo (fig. 81). Adria is identified by the inscription HADRIA DIVI PETRI ARETINI FILIA (“Adria, daughter of the divine Pietro Aretino”) – a hubristic parody of the inscriptions on Roman Imperial coins – while her mother, Caterina Sandella, appears on the reverse as CATERINA MATER.

The year in which Elia de Lattes’s medal was produced was one of the last in which he and his fellow Jews could have enjoyed the relative freedoms to which they were accustomed as citizens of Rome. Three years later, in 1555, the bull Cum nimis absurdum, issued by the newly-elected Pope Paul IV, “brought to an end the policies of generally mild treatment which the Jews living under direct

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709 See: Mann, Gardens and Ghettos, cat. no. 66, p. 241.
714 Aretino’s hubristic wit is equally well represented by his own portrait medal, by Alessandro Vittoria (c. 1550), the obverse of which shows Aretino seated, in an attitude and attire reminiscent of Michelangelo’s Moses, receiving gifts from several figures in antique dress; the inscription states that “The princes, having received tribute from the people, pay tribute to their servant [i.e. Aretino].” The medal is discussed at length by Waddington (Aretino’s Satyr, pp. 80-82)
papal dominion had almost invariably enjoyed." As we saw in part one, the bull ordered that in Rome and all other territories of the Church, Jews were to live confined to a single area, “separated completely from the dwellings of Christians.” They were permitted just one synagogue, and forbidden to own any kind of real estate. In order that “they be identified everywhere as Jews,” they were to wear a visible sign: for men, a yellow hat, for women a yellow shawl. Among other social and economic restrictions, Jews were forbidden to employ Christians in any capacity, or to “be so presumptuous as to entertain or dine with Christians or to develop close relations or friendships with them.” Commercial activities outside the Ghetto were restricted to trade in second-hand clothing.

We do not know Elia de Lattes’s occupation, or the extent to which the new restrictions affected him personally, but the sharp downturn in Roman Jewish fortunes may be traced through better-documented members of his family. His father and grandfather had enjoyed professional intimacy with successive popes, among whom there was a strong tendency, since the mid-fifteenth century, to employ Jewish physicians. This trend, which continued even into the reign of Julius III (1550-1555), was broken by *Cum nimis absurdum*, which explicitly prohibited Jewish physicians from treating Christians of any rank. It was perhaps as a direct result of this that in 1557, Elia de Lattes’s brother Isaac, a trained physician, left Rome for Pesaro, where he would remain as head of the Yeshiva.

If Elia’s medal was the product of a sojourn in Venice, he would have had a foretaste of life in a segregated Jewish community, where residents could leave only when the gates were opened by Christian guards, and only then if they wore a sign of their alterity. Although Jews in Rome still enjoyed relative

715 Stow, *Catholic Thought*, pp. 3-4
716 For a full transcript and English translation of *Cum nimis absurdum*, see Stow, *Catholic Thought*, Appendix I, pp. 291-298
717 Ibid, p. 295
718 Ibid, p. 296
719 At the beginning of his papacy, Julius III employed three Jewish physicians. Milano, *Il ghetto di Roma*, pp. 66-69
720 See the several references in Robert Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy*, Oxford; New York: Published for the Littman Library by Oxford University Press, 1990
freedom, they were not oblivious to changes in the social and religious climate that would lead eventually to their own segregation. Already, in 1552, manifestations of popular anti-Jewish feeling anticipated the restrictive measures of the papal bull; in that year, the Christian cloth-workers of Rome petitioned that Jews be excluded from selling new goods, a prohibition that was realised three years later by Cum nimis absurdum.\footnote{Stow, \textit{Theater of Acculturation}, p. 61}

As Kenneth Stow in particular has made evident, the mid-century shift in papal policy towards the Jews was predicated on a growing desire for their conversion. This desire was evident already in 1543, when the House of Catechumens was founded, and we saw it reflected in the account of Michelangelo’s Moses published by Vasari in 1550, which has the Jews of Rome abandoning their religious observances to “visit and adore” the image on the papal tomb. The underlying motive for Julius III’s 1553 ban on the Talmud was clear to the Jewish chronicler Joseph ha-Kohen (1496-1575), who described the pope as the one “who wished to lead us to apostasy, who ordered our glorious books to be burned.”\footnote{Ha-Kohen, \textit{Emek Habacha}, quoted in translation by Stow, “The Burning of the Talmud,” pp. 439-440} Stow has pointed out that the language of Cum nimis absurdum itself betrays an ultimate aim “not to segregate Jews from Catholics […but] rather, to convert the Jews en masse.”\footnote{Stow, \textit{Catholic Thought}, p. 5}

Although the gates of the ghettos were opened each morning, the only real prospect of escape from this social prison was exile, or the abandonment of Jewish tradition; in other words, total assimilation.

It was not only in Rome that the Jews suffered from the growing religious intolerance of the 1550s. Joseph ha-Kohen, who was expelled with his fellow Jews from Genoa in 1550, describes repeated attacks on synagogues at Pesaro in 1553. In the worst of them, a Christian mob desecrated thirteen Torah scrolls, wrapped a pig in their covers and put it in the Holy Ark.\footnote{Hacohen, Joseph & The Anonymous Corrector: \textit{The Vale of Tears (Emek Habacha)}, translated by Harry S. May, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, p. 86} This style of outrage would be repeated in 1559, at Recanati (near the papal port of Ancona), where a missionary priest sent by Paul IV forced his way into the
synagogue and planted a crucifix on the ark. The public burning of the Talmud, which began by papal decree in the Campo de’ Fiori in Rome (1553), was continued throughout Italy. And in a pattern that would be rendered proverbial by Heinrich Heine, the burning of books was a prelude to human immolation. At Ancona, in 1556, the Roman Inquisition convicted twenty-four “Marranos” (Iberian Jews who had been forced to adopt Christianity) of a heretical lapse into Judaism and burned them alive at the stake.

The 1550s are a truly dark episode in Italian Jewish history, and it is curious that the dates of our three Jewish portrait medals are clustered around these calamitous events. The de Lattes medal (1552) is followed by medals of Abramo Emanuele Norsa (1557), and Gracia Nasi (1557/8), both by the famous (Christian) medallist Pastorino de’ Pastorini (c.1508-1592). The existence of these three medals would be remarkable even had they not been commissioned in a climate that was becoming increasingly oppressive for Jews in Italy. Although it could be argued that the style of representation is permissible in halachic terms, all’antica medals seem to be inherently at odds with Jewish identity (behind the “graven image” is a melding of pagan and Christian ideals), and from this we might infer a reason for their early absence.

Our difficulty now is to reconcile these medals with Jewish tradition, and to explain why they should appear first at such an inauspicious moment. In view of their immediate historical context, the medals are all the more remarkable for the semblance they give of measured acculturation. How might these medals reflect contemporary Jewish self-image, and more specifically, the identities of the individuals they represent?

Returning to the medal of Elia de Lattes, the first thing to notice is that his name is suffixed by the word “ebreo,” but judging by the image alone – which shows him fashionably dressed and bareheaded – there is no obvious indication of his Jewishness, or of his mother, Rica’s. The same is true of the Norsa and Nasi medals. The inscription on the former (ABR.EMA.NVR) identifies the subject as Abramo Emanuele Norsia (a form of Norsa), but while the name is evidently

725 Ibid, p. 94
Jewish, his appearance – bareheaded, in doublet and silk ruff – is not. By the mid-sixteenth century, even impressive beards like his were no longer exotic, being cultivated by members of the Christian elite, including Pietro Aretino (fig. 82), and every pope after Clement VII. The mid-sixteenth century, even impressive beards like his were no longer exotic, being cultivated by members of the Christian elite, including Pietro Aretino (fig. 82), and every pope after Clement VII. Gracia Nasi is likewise dressed as any affluent young Italian woman, her style of dress – with a beaded hairpiece, pendant earring, stiff-collared partlet and choker – being remarkably similar to that of Girolama Sacra in a medal of similar size and appearance made by Pastorino in 1555 (fig. 83). The only suggestion of cultural difference between Girolama Sacra and Gracia Nasi is that the latter’s name, combining Latin and Hebrew origins, is inscribed in Hebrew characters. Thus the medals’ Jewish subjects are only differentiated from Christians by their names. In two cases, this is deliberately accented by the use of Hebrew, or “ebreo,” but in Abramo Norsa’s case, the difference is incidental.

The fact that these Jewish individuals dressed like their non-Jewish contemporaries should not itself be surprising. Jews in medieval and early modern Italy did tend to align themselves with the prevailing sartorial codes, and although rabbinic law maintains that Jews should dress in a particular manner, in practice this was often discretionary. According to Leon Modena’s Historia de Riti Hebraici, Jewish men “do not willingly imitate the other nations in their dress,” but they do in the case that their own dress would make them seem “deformed,” and women “also dress according to the country in which they find themselves.” It was this tendency of Jews in Italy and elsewhere in Western Europe to dress in the same manner as their Christian neighbours that prompted the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) that Jews should be distinguished by their dress, in accordance with Mosaic Law (Numbers, 15:37-51). The requirement for a visible sign – usually a badge or hat – was sporadically reinforced, often at the insistence of mendicant friars, and when

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729 Friedenberg, Jewish Medals, p. 46. The Nasi medal is 6.6cm in diameter, the Sacra medal 6.97cm. There are examples of the latter in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, The British Museum and the V & A.

730 Modena, Riti, p. 19. Chapter V: “4. Non imitano volontieri le altre nationi nel vestire, se non in quanto non paiano molto difformi… 5. Le donne vestano anch’ esse secondo il paese ove si trovano….” Similarly, Modena explains that Jews do not always wear the tephilin, so that they do not attract the scorn of Christians.

731 Canon 68.
this happened, Jews with economic advantages, primarily bankers and physicians, sought exemptions from wearing it.\textsuperscript{732}

Robert Bonfil has argued against a prevailing idea that these sartorial habits betray an assimilative tendency among Jews in Renaissance Italy. For him, Jews preserved their distinct identity, paradoxically in a sense, by merging as unobtrusively as possible into the social fabric.\textsuperscript{733} In particular, Bonfil argues that Jewish sumptuary laws against sartorial luxury were aimed not at redressing an assimilative tendency, but at ensuring that Jews did not attract the envious gaze of Christians: “Unable to think for the moment in terms of aspiring to equality, the Jews thought in terms of fitting in as inferiors, while continuing at the same time to cultivate a sense of their repressed superiority.”\textsuperscript{734} What is remarkable in the case of our medals – particularly those of Abramo Norsa and Gracia Nasi – is the extent to which they exceed the terms of this prescription, this being a testament to the relatively privileged status of Jews in Ferrara.

Elsewhere, the expedience of a degree of conformity, as well as humility, is evident in Leon Modena’s note (in the \textit{Riti}) on the necessity for head-coverings, in which he says that Jewish men do not uncover their heads for any reason, but “being amongst Christians, where the custom is used to show reverence to superiors, they do it also.”\textsuperscript{735} (Here, the old Yiddish proverb, “better a Jew without a beard, than a beard without a Jew,” would work as well for hats.) In the Venice edition of the \textit{Riti}, the author proved the point by appearing bareheaded on the title page.

Returning to Elia de Lattes’s portrait medal, the Latin inscription, and the term “ebreo,” suggests that it might have been intended, like Leon Modena’s book, for circulation among Christians. The designation “ebreo” would certainly have seemed redundant if the medal had been confined to Jewish circles; in any

\textsuperscript{732} The examples are numerous. For a study of the application of the sign in Italy, see: Flora Cassen: “From Iconic O to Yellow Hat: Anti-Jewish Distinctive Signs in Renaissance Italy,” in \textit{Fashioning Jews: Clothing, Culture, and Commerce}, edited by Leonard Greenspoon, West Lafayette IN: Purdue University Press, 2013

\textsuperscript{733} Bonfil, \textit{Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy}, p. 110. See especially chapter III, “The Problem of Sociocultural Identity.”

\textsuperscript{734} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{735} Gl’ homini ancora non hanno per ben fatto l’ andar con il capo scoperto […] ma essendo tra Christiani, dove si costuma per riveriri I maggiori, io fanno anch’ essi. Modena, \textit{Riti}, p. 19
event, it made explicit what Elia’s name only implied. If the medal was made in Venice, as seems likely, then his bareheadedness, while conforming to Gentile custom, also absented the one article of clothing that would have signalled his religious difference, since Jews in Venice were required to wear red or yellow hats to distinguish them from Christians. The medal, then, seems to exemplify Jewish acculturation, in spite of official efforts to enforce segregation.

In the case of Elia’s native Rome, during the 1550s, Kenneth Stow describes the enduring Jewish tendency to acculturation, which he defines as “adding to one’s cultural identity through adoption, adaption, and modification,” as opposed to assimilation, which implies “blemishing one’s cultural essence through negation and abandonment […] leading, often, to outright denial.”

The portrait medal of Elia de Lattes, which uses a typically Christian means of self-advertisement, but is at the same time manifestly contrary to a denial of Jewishness, seems to exemplify Stow’s useful definition of acculturation. The same may be said of the Hanukkah lamps and marriage contracts discussed in the previous chapter, which, like Leon Modena’s bareheaded portrait, show that the observance of Jewish rites did not preclude integration into Christian society. In other words, these objects and images propose acculturation, without assimilation.

The three Jewish individuals represented by our portrait medals were resident in cities where Jews were not yet separated from Christian society, although they must have been acutely aware of developments elsewhere. Still, as we have noticed, the style of self-image presented by the medals is at odds with the self-effacing tendency among Jews that Bonfil describes in the age before the ghettos. The medals far exceed the basic demands of social conformity, and they certainly convey no sense of inferiority.

The image on Abramo Norsa’s medal is in bold contrast to that painted sixty years earlier of Daniele Norsa in Mantua. Abramo’s late relative is shown in three-quarter profile, looking out despondently from under his hat; on his chest is a yellow “O”, the sign of alterity that was reintroduced in the wake of the image-libels. Although these portraits visually identify Daniele Norsa and his

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737 Stow, Theater of Acculturation…, p. 68
family, the Latin inscription – *Debellata Hebraeorum Temeritate* ("the temerity of the Jews subdued") – does not record their individual names, only their collective infamy as Jews. By contrast, Abramo Norsa signals his individual (Jewish) identity on his own terms, and asserts his social equality to the Christians with whom he might have shared his medal.

Jewishness and legitimacy (Elia de Lattes and Gracia Nasi)

There is something particular to the way in which Elia de Lattes asserts his Jewishness that needs to be examined further. As Raymond Waddington has pointed out, further to the inscription "Ebreo," the appearance of Elia’s mother on the reverse of the medal is significant, as it “seems to acknowledge the halakhic determination of Jewish identity.”

According to rabbinic law, a person’s identity as a Jew or Gentile is determined matrilineally, and the use of the impersonal *genetrice* ("progenitor") instead of *mater* ("mother") underlines the importance of this relationship. Elia de Lattes, it seems, included in the medal a declaration of his legitimacy as a Jew.

As Waddington has argued elsewhere, Pietro Aretino used a similar type of medal – perhaps made by the same medallist (who might have been Danese Cattaneo) – to redress the social stigma suffered by Adria, his illegitimate daughter. As we have seen, Adria’s medal shows a portrait of her mother, Maria Sandella ("mater") on the reverse, but the important message about her identity is the statement of paternity on the obverse. In the case of the Lattes medal, the obverse states that Elia is a Jew ("ebreo"), while the reverse emphasises the special importance of his mother as progenitor ("sua genetrice"). This is underlined by the fact that Elia’s and Rica’s portraits are both right-facing, so that the physical likeness between son and mother becomes evident as the medal is turned in the hand. At the same time, the

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738 Waddington, “Graven Images,” p. 94
739 Aretino may be the only man ever to use the medal in lieu of a legal document, a birth certificate.” Waddington, *Aretino’s Satyr*, p. 89
740 The medallist Danese Cattaneo, possible author of the de Lattes medal, was fond of wordplay: his two-sided medal of Eugenio Sincritico and his wife, Celeste, identifies the latter with the inscription "CELESTIS IMAGO" – which may be read either as "an image of Celeste, or as "a heavenly image." British Museum, London 1923,0611.33
741 Adria and Maria Sandella face in opposite directions.
transformation of the image between the generations seems to visualise the Talmudic metaphor for human unity and individuality.

To explain why Elia de Lattes should have felt compelled to use a portrait medal to assert his legitimacy as a Jew, Waddington remarks that this was “an issue of no small importance when the Iberian expulsions had produced a confusion of New Christians, Marranos, crypto-Jews.” 742 Waddington does not, however, suggest why this should have been a pressing concern for Elia de Lattes in particular, nor to whom the message of his medal might have been addressed.

As noticed, the medal is likely to have been made in Venice, which had, since the expulsions of Jews from Spain and Portugal, become an “uneasy refuge” for so-called Marranos, 743 a term derived from the Arab word for swine, and referring to individuals who were ostensibly Christian, but were suspected of adhering to Judaism in secret. These included the descendants of Jews forcibly converted to Christianity, whose religious identity sometimes remained indeterminate. As Brian Pullan notes, “it was often in Venice that Europeans of Jewish blood made their final choice between Christianity and Judaism.” 744 In any case, those who hesitated between the two religions were regarded with suspicion from both sides. In 1550, Venice renewed a 1497 decree expelling the Marranos, declaring them “a people of infidels, without religion, and enemies of the Lord God.” 745 (In reality, such an edict was difficult to enforce, since Marranos were, by definition, hard to define. 746) Meanwhile, according to the Spanish polemicist Diego de Simancas, Jews in Rome used the term “Marrano” to disparage former Christian converts who had returned to Judaism. 747

Elia de Lattes was a third-generation Roman from a well-known Jewish family, so it is unlikely that any aspersions would have been cast on his Jewishness, either by Jews or by Christians. Waddington is probably right that “Rica sua gienetrice” alludes to the halakhic determination, but this could hardly have

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742 Waddington, “Graven Images,” p. 94
743 Pullan, The Jews of Europe, p. 4
744 Ibid, p. xiv
745 Ibid, p. 174
746 Ibid.
747 Ibid, p. 170
been at issue for Elia de Lattes personally. Instead, I suggest that the inclusion
of his mother in his medal was meant to communicate a larger idea, that to be a
Jew is something more fundamental than a religious persuasion. A person may
adopt or abandon Christianity (whether by choice or by coercion), but according
to Jewish tradition, one is born a Jew and remains one – regardless even of
apostasy – since Jewishness is not an individual choice, but a result of God’s
choosing. The medal of Elia de Lattes was perhaps prompted by encounters
with New Christians in Venice, but amid increasing conversionary pressures in
Rome. In this context, the conjunctive titles “genetrice” and “ebreo” imply that
Jewish blood is thicker than baptismal water; a message that Elia de Lattes
articulated in a language, and through a medium, that any proselytising
Christian might understand.

A defiant assertion of Jewishness is also inherent in the medal representing
Gracia Nasi, then in her eighteenth year, and living in Estense Ferrara. Her age
is inscribed in Latin (A[NNO] Ε[TAS] XVIII); her name in Hebrew (נשא גרציאה). Gracia Nasi had not always been known by the name on her medal, for when
she was born, in 1540, she was christened Beatriz Mendes. Her family were
evertheless wealthy spice-traders from Lisbon who had, like many other
families, renounced Judaism to avoid expulsion in 1497. Beatriz’s aunt and
dual namesake, Beatriz de Luna, would become famous as the powerful Jewish
philanthropist, Gracia Nasi (1510-1569), who used her wealth and influence to
arrange safe passage for Iberian Jewish refugees. Although outwardly
Christian, the family practiced Judaism in secret, which put them at risk of the
Portuguese Inquisition, established in 1536. On the way to safety and security
in the Ottoman Empire, they settled for periods in Antwerp, Venice, and Ferrara.
In Venice, they still lived ostensibly as Christians, but in Ferrara, they were
openly invited to practice the religion of their forebears. In 1550, the same
year that Venice renewed its ban on Marranos, Ercole II d’Este had issued a

748 “Even though the people have sinned, they are still called Israel.” Sanhedrin 44a, Babylonian Talmud
749 The spelling of the given name with the Hebrew letter צ (which sounds as “ts”) reflects an
Italian pronunciation, “Grazia,”
750 Birnbaum, Marianna D: The Long Journey of Gracia Mendes, Budapest: Central European
University Press 2003
751 Ibid, chapter 5. Gracia Nasi the younger came to Venice in 1555 with her mother, Brianda,
who was banned from Venice after applying to the Council of Ten for the right to live with her
decree guaranteeing safe conduct for Iberian Jews, even those who had, for some reason, denied that they were Jews and taken Christian names.752

Thus, the medal of Gracia Nasi the younger, which was commissioned around the time of her Jewish wedding, is an expression of her newly re-affirmed identity as a religious Jew.753 For Waddington, Gracia Nasi’s medal epitomises the “cross-cultural paradoxes of the Marrano exile” – an object simultaneously “proclaiming her faith and violating its injunction against graven images (Exodus 20:4).”754 Waddington’s assessment of the medal’s inherent paradox implies a confusion of cultural identities, but bearing in mind Bonfil’s useful understanding of paradox as “a mediating element between opposites,” I would argue that the medal mediates effectively between aspects of the subject’s self-image that only seem to be in conflict.755 In my view, Gracia Nasi’s portrait medal was a means by which to display the highly acculturated, but resolutely Jewish identity that seemed eminently viable in Ferrara in the 1550s, if not in later decades, or elsewhere. While the vernacular-ornamented Hanukkah lamps and Jewish marriage contracts of the later-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were produced in spite of social exclusion, the three portrait medals that survive from the 1550s refuse to countenance the exclusion of their subjects, or the denial of their subjects’ Jewishness. It should not be surprising that they were a manifestly short-lived phenomenon; no portrait medal of a Jewish individual survives from the subsequent decades, during which time the ghettos multiplied, and social equality for Jews in Italy became increasingly a thing of the past, and of the distant future.

The deeper significance of Gracia Nasi’s medal can, I suggest, be measured against the fate of the crypto-Jews burned at the stake in Ancona in 1556. The

752 Ioly Zorattini, op. cit, p. 6
753 The Nasi medal contrasts with a medal from the same period commemorating another eighteen-year-old “marrano,” Ursula López, whose wealthy merchant family remained in Antwerp. The uniface medal, dated 1555, and attributed to Pastorino or Jan Symons, was issued at the time of Ursula’s marriage to Marcus Pérez, a New Christian merchant. It is similar in size (6.4cm) and general appearance to the Nasi medal, but there is no allusion to the subject’s Jewish origins. Ursula’s husband (a prominent Calvinist) and her brother-in-law, Luis (a suspected Anabaptist), were persecuted as heretics under Spanish occupation. A medal commemorating Luis Pérez (dated 1597) has on its reverse the inscription “IN XPO VITA [in Christ is life].” Waddington, “Graven Images,” pp. 98-99
754 Ibid, p. 97
755 Bonfil suggests that “rather than eliminating paradox by means of distinctions, we should accept it as a distinctive characteristic of transitional situations.” Bonfil, “Change in the Cultural Patterns of a Jewish Society in Crisis,” pp. 405 & 421, n. 13
medal, whose declaration of Jewishness defies the papacy and the Inquisition, implies solidarity with the victims of what may be defined – according to the Talmud, and the International Criminal Court (1998) – as a crime against humanity.\textsuperscript{756} In protest at the atrocity, the older Gracia, already in Constantinople, led a Levantine merchant boycott of the papal port. Although her plan was frustrated by conflicting economic interests and fear of reprisals,\textsuperscript{757} the statement was clear, and the sentiment is reflected in her niece’s portrait medal. While generations of Jews, including their own family, had been forced to hide or renounce their Jewishness, or to wear it as a badge of infamy, these women, like Elia de Lattes, asserted their Jewishness as a matter of personal honour and collective pride.


\textsuperscript{757} See: Birnbaum, op. cit, Chapter 7
PART III. (Conclusion)
Chapter 7)  
Totem, or Taboo?  A Statue of Moses in the Ghetto of Siena

In a hall reserved for civic functions in the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena, there is a weathered marble statue, about three-quarters life-size, of a heavily robed and bearded man (fig. 84). According to several accounts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this statue once stood in the niche of a wall fountain in the city’s former Ghetto. The connection with the fountain (which survives), and with the Jewish enclave, supports the identification of the marble figure with Moses, striking water from the desert rock (Exodus 17:1-6, or Numbers 20:1-12), while a cylindrical hole in the fist of the statue’s lowered right hand bears witness to the rod that it would once have held (fig. 88).

When it stood over the fountain, a few steps from the entrance to the synagogue, this statue no doubt recalled the miracle in the desert – but equally, for a Jewish audience, the Mosaic prohibition of “graven images.” As such, the statue invites a number of questions. Primarily, how might such an image be reconciled either with the biblical figure it represents – yet seems to defy – or with traditional Jewish attitudes to sculpted images? More particularly, who made this statue of Moses, when was it installed in the Ghetto, and by whom? When and why was it removed from the fountain, and why, for that matter, was it never replaced? A lack of documentary evidence leaves these questions open to conjecture, but a body of circumstantial evidence, viewed in light of the preceding chapters of this study, shapes the hypothesis set out here. In what follows, I bring together the two parts of this thesis, regarding the perceived opposition of Christian and Jewish attitudes to the Mosaic prohibition of images.

The statue, and the fountain

I will begin by reviewing what little is known of the Moses, its connection with the Ghetto fountain (from which it has long been physically separated), and to the Jewish community of Siena. The provenance of the statue remains obscure, and it has, for the past hundred years, been sadly neglected as a work of art. This fate is remarkable, considering that by the 1780s, when it still adorned the Ghetto fountain, the figure was thought to be a masterpiece of the
great Sienese sculptor Jacopo della Quercia (c. 1374-1438). After a first period of neglect in the 1800s, which followed its removal from the fountain, the Moses was reattributed to Jacopo’s follower, Antonio Federighi (c. 1420-1483). Since then, doubt has been cast over the attribution to Federighi, although a dating to the mid-to-late fifteenth century is generally accepted. It should be noticed here that if the statue is indeed the work of a quattrocento sculptor, then it must predate by a century the establishment of the Ghetto in which it once stood (1573), and by two centuries the first documented reference to its location there (1679).

Today, the brickwork and shallow niche that contained the Moses remain in what was the narrow piazza of the Ghetto (fig. 85), while the water that flows from near the base of the niche is nowadays controlled by a tap. Although the extant fountain structure dates to the late seventeenth century (1674 or 1679), there was a source of water on the site even before the Ghetto was established. This is indicated in plans drawn up, through espionage, by the Florentine engineer Giovanni Battista Belluzzi, a year before Siena was subjugated by the Spanish and ceded to the Duchy of Florence (1555). Two decades later, the Governor of Siena wrote to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, regarding plans for “il serraglio [enclosure] di questi ebrei,” recommending the site in the Terzo di San Martino, to the southeast of the Piazza del Campo, behind the Palazzo Pubblico, since it contained a piazza and a supply of water. According to the Governor, the area’s rents were cheap and its

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758 della Valle, Guglielmo: "Notizie di Jacopo della Quercia Scultore a sua eccellenza D. Giuseppe Lascaris Conte di Castellaro" (1782), in Lettere senesi di un socio dell'Accademia di Fossano sopra le belle arti, Rome: Presso Giovambatista Pasquali, 1785, p. 167

759 Most recently, Enzo Carli (Gli scultori senesi, Milano: Electa, 1980, p. 40) accepted the figure as a late work by Federighi (i.e. 1470s), while Elinor Richter rejected the attribution, and dated the figure 1460-70. Richter, Elinor: The Sculpture of Antonio Federighi, PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1984, pp. 379-381


761 The extant fountain bears the following date inscriptions, but the contemporary chronicler Girolamo Macchi (1648-1734) dates the building of the fountain to 1679 (Macchi, op. cit.): M.DC.LXXIV [1674] / RESTAURATO MDCCCLXXIII [1873]


763 Letter dated Siena, 15th March 1571 (i.e. 1572, the old Florentine calendar year beginning on 25th March), from Federigo delli Conti di Monte Acuto to the Grand Duke of Tuscany (Cosimo I
householders were used to letting to prostitutes or crooks (“meretrici o persone di bassa mano”).\textsuperscript{764} Indeed, it seems likely that the source of water now associated with the Synagogue is one that Belluzzi, the spy, related to a brothel (“postrìbolo”).

We have no description of the fountain at the time the Ghetto was established, but we may assume that there was no statue of Moses, since there is no mention of one until immediately after the building of the present fountain structure in the 1670s, as part of a series of works carried out in the Ghetto.\textsuperscript{765} The local chronicler Girolamo Macchi (c.1649-1734), archivist of the Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala, recalls that the fountain was built “at the expense of the Jews and for their benefit,” and claims that it was they who “installed the figure of Moses, when he struck the rock with his staff and caused the water to flow.”\textsuperscript{766} Macchi’s small drawing shows the fountain, complete with a crudely sketched figure of Moses with exaggerated horns or rays of light (fig. 86). The fountain is shown in a more complete form than that which survives: there is a projecting base protected by a low rail, a plinth upon which the statue is positioned, and above the niche, the coats of arms of the Popolo and Comune di Siena.

Macchi says nothing of the statue’s provenance, but by 1782, when the Franciscan priest, and editor of Vasari’s Lives, Guglielmo della Valle described it in one of his published letters on Sienese art, it was regarded as the work of Jacopo della Quercia.\textsuperscript{767} Della Valle describes the Moses as “a little squat, but in the movement of the hand one sees the spirit of the prophet who commands the elements.”\textsuperscript{768} Despite the prestigious association with Jacopo, the figure

\textsuperscript{764} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{765} Turrini, Patrizia: La comunità ebraica di Siena: I documenti dell’Archivio di Stato dal Medioevo alla Restaurazione, Siena: Pascal Editrice, 2008, p. 61  
\textsuperscript{766} “Questa fonte […] fu fatta l’Anno 1679, a spese proprie di detti ebrei per loro comodità; e ci fecero la figura di Mosè, quando batté la verga del masso e scaturì l’acqua.” Macchi, op. cit.  
\textsuperscript{767} della Valle, ”Notizie di Jacopo della Guercia,” p. 167  
\textsuperscript{768} Ibid. “La figura è un pò tozza; ma nella mossa della mano si vede lo spirito del profeta, che comanda agli elementi. Nella voltata del viso mostra fierezza, e risoluzione, nel panneggiamiento, e nelle parti del corpo ben ricercate spicca l’amore, e la diligenza di Jacopo: rappresenta Mosè.”
was not long afterwards removed from the fountain, and deposited in the basement of the synagogue, where it remained in obscurity until 1867.\footnote{769 The circumstances of its rediscovery are described below.}

In the century that passed between Macchi and della Valle’s accounts, there is only one other documented reference to the statue, and that, significantly, concerns an objection to its presence in the Ghetto. In 1740, the Jewish community of Poznań (Greater Poland), which was suffering the financial costs of a blood libel, sent two representatives on a fundraising mission to Jewish communities in Italy.\footnote{770 Perles, Josef: Geschichte der Juden in Posen, Breslau, 1865, pp. 102-103} In Siena, they encountered the statue of Moses on the Ghetto fountain, and condemned it as a violation of Jewish law – in response to which they were told that no Italian rabbi had ever made such an objection.\footnote{771 Ibid, pp. 102-103, n. 90}


In any event, the visit of the pious foreigners had no immediate effect, since the Moses was described by Guglielmo della Valle four decades later, this being the last mention of the statue in situ.

The circumstances surrounding the statue’s separation from the fountain are now as mysterious as its origins, but in the decades following della Valle’s description, there are several events that might have precipitated the removal of the figure from its niche. First, between 1784 and 1786, the present synagogue was built on an existing site of Jewish worship.\footnote{773 Pavoncello, op. cit, p. 306} Since the fountain is set into the near end of the building that stands adjacent to the synagogue’s entrance, the proximity of fountain and synagogue might have prompted a reevaluation of the statue’s position there.\footnote{774 Faluschi makes no mention of a Moses fountain in his admittedly brief description of the Ghetto, published in 1784: “Ghetto degli Ebrei, il quale è stato ampliato con abitazioni assai commode, e si va presentemente perfezionando una ben grande, e Nobile Sinagoga.” Faluschi, Giovacchino: Breve relazione delle cose notabili della città di Siena, 1784, p. 123.} A decade after the synagogue’s inauguration,
Siena was shaken by a major earthquake (May 1798), which was reported to have left the Ghetto in “a deplorable state,” although we have no details of what was damaged.\textsuperscript{775} In March of the following year (1799), the city was occupied by the French Revolutionary Army, which liberated the Ghetto, burning its wooden gates in the Piazza del Campo, where a Tree of Liberty was raised. The freedom of the Jews lasted only three months, until a vicious reprisal by the Viva Maria, an anti-Republican movement from Arezzo, who looted Jewish homes and shops, desecrated the synagogue, murdered thirteen Jews, and burned their bodies in the Campo, using the Tree of Liberty as a pyre.\textsuperscript{776} A priest affiliated with the Viva Maria publicly advocated the murders, citing God’s punishment of the rebellion led by Korah against Moses (Numbers, 16): “such is the law given to [the Jews] by God […] that those who rebel against their sovereign are consumed by fire.”\textsuperscript{777} He went on to implicate the citizens of Siena, cynically commending their scrupulousness in bringing the Law of Moses to bear upon the Jews – so as “not to delay their journey to the Promised Land” – for “who was it that led the troops to the Ghetto, if not the Sienese?”\textsuperscript{778}

Nowadays it is conjectured locally that the statue of Moses was vandalised by the Aretine fanatics before being removed to the storeroom of the synagogue.\textsuperscript{779} It is true that the statue is damaged in several places – the nose is badly chipped, the index finger of the proper left hand and the right thumb are missing, and the hem of the drapery is broken in places – which is at least consistent with its having been mishandled. The fact that there is no mention of

\textsuperscript{775} Soldani, D Ambrogio: \textit{Relazione del terremoto accaduto in Siena il di 26 maggio 1798}, Siena, 1798, p. 29

\textsuperscript{776} A commemorative plaque was attached to the left of the synagogue entrance in 1999. The freedom of the Jews was restored under French hegemony (from 1800), then Imperial rule (from 1810-1814), after which the process of emancipation was again interrupted. See: Symcox, Geoffrey: “The Jews of Italy in the \textit{Triennio Giacobino}, 1796-1799,” in \textit{Acculturation and its Discontents: The Italian Jewish Experience Between Exclusion and Inclusion} (David N. Myers, ed.), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008

\textsuperscript{777} “… ma questa è legge data loro da Dio nell’ \textit{Esodo} e nei \textit{Numeri}, che chi […] è ribelle al suo sovrano sia abbruciato.” Lumini, Apollo: \textit{La reazione in Toscana nel 1799: documenti storici}, Cosenza, 1891, p. 227

\textsuperscript{778} “Ora dunque i Sanesi che scrupolosamente vollero farli osservare la loro legge, per non ritardarli il passaggio alla terra promessa, gli fecero osservare con ogni esattezza la legge per non ritardarli un si lungo tragitto: ed in fatti chi guidò le truppe ai Ghetto se non i Sanesi?” Ibid, pp. 227-8

\textsuperscript{779} This local legend is embroidered macabrely in a publication whose author cannot substantiate any of it (email correspondence, 2016). Carla Bardelli, \textit{Siena Magica}, Bologna: OGB, 1998
the Moses in detailed contemporary accounts of the attack on the Ghetto, however, supports the possibility that the statue had been removed at some earlier time.\footnote{As well as descriptions of the fate of individual Jews and their possessions, it is recorded how the fanatics entered the synagogue, where they killed four congregants, broke open the ark with a blade (the damage to the doors remains visible), then dragged out the Torah scrolls, which they proceeded to tear and trample. Gallorini, Santino: “Viva Maria” e nazione ebraa: i fatti di Monte San Savino e Siena, Cortona: Calosci, 2009, p. 179. Also: E A Brigidi, Giacobini e realisti; o, Il Viva Maria: Storia del 1799 in Toscana, Siena: Enrico Torrini, 1882 (chapter 17).}

In any case, following its dislocation, the statue was apparently taken no further than the few yards to the new synagogue, and was all but forgotten (except, perhaps, by the custodians of the synagogue), until it was “rediscovered” by a non-Jewish engineer named Marchetti in 1867.\footnote{Archivio di Stato di Siena, Commissione consultiva conservatrice di belle arti per le Province di Siena e Grosseto, deliberazioni dal 1 gennaio 1867 al 1 agosto 1906, pp. 7 (adunanza del di 24 aprile 1867) & 9 (adunanza del 13 giugno 1867)} The advisory commission for fine arts of the Prefecture of Siena ordered an expert report, which concluded that the Moses was the work of “someone other than the celebrated Jacopo della Quercia, but still no mean chisel.”\footnote{“...non essere quella statua opera del celebre Giacomo della Querce, ma di altro non spregevole scalpello.” ASS, Prefettura di Siena, Commissione consultiva di belle arti 14, anno 1867, fasc. 7 “Statua di Mosè attribuita a Giacomo della Querce. Parer.” Cited by Ceppari Ridolfi, M. Assunta & Patrizia Turrini: “La memoria delle fonti” in Siena e l’acqua. Storia e immagini della città e delle sue fonti, Vinicio Serino (ed.), Siena, Nuova Immagine Editrice, 1998, pp. 76-77} The experts proposed that the statue be restored, and replaced on the “public fountain which [still] exists beside the [synagogue].”\footnote{Ibid.}

Although the fountain itself was restored in 1873, the relocation of the figure was never carried out, and it was instead moved to the Museo dell’ Opera del Duomo (by 1875), and after that, to the Palazzo Pubblico, by 1897.\footnote{The statue is attributed to Jacopo della Quercia in a German travel guide published in 1875. Gesell-Fels, T: Rom und Mittel-Italien, Volume 1, Leipzig; Bibliographisches Institut, 1875, p. 186} By then, the work was attributed to Antonio Federighi, sculptor, architect and long-serving capomaestro of the Opera del Duomo.\footnote{It is unclear who first made the attribution, but the 1897 Baedeker guide to Rome and Central Italy (Part II, p. 26) mentions the statue as a work by Federighi, and it was exhibited as such in the great exhibition of Sienese art in 1904 (Ricci, Corrado: Il Palazzo Pubblico di Siena e la Mostra d’antica Arte Senese, Bergamo, 1904, p. 75).} When it was last formally exhibited, in 1938, the Moses had been moved to its present position in the “Sala delle lupe” on the ground floor of the Palazzo Pubblico, where it is no longer generally accessible to public view. Today, there is no manifest
connection between the statue and the fountain, only an absence framed by an empty niche.

In the decades following its rediscovery, the Moses achieved some recognition, and its photograph was used to illustrate Adolf Gelber’s essay “Moses the Liberator” in a popular anthology, Moses, published by the new Jewish Press in Berlin in 1905 (the cover illustration is a bust-length photograph of the more famous statue by Michelangelo). Since the early twentieth century, however, the Sienese Moses, which can now be seen only by appointment, or by those attending civic functions in the Sala delle lupe, has attracted almost no interest from art historians, although Paul Schubring (1907) had rated it among Antonio Federighi’s most important works, and one that foreshadowed Michelangelo. Since then, doubts have been raised over the attribution, and the Moses is not mentioned in any literature on Federighi published since 1980. The problem of attribution is compounded by a lack of any documentary evidence for the statue earlier than Girolamo Macchi’s mention of it, relating to the 1670s. This uncertainty surrounding the provenance of the Moses has surely eased its slide from mainstream art history. During the twentieth century, the figure is scarcely mentioned, except as a curiosity by Jewish cultural historians, including Franz Landsberger, Cecil Roth, Helen Rosenau and Moses Shulvass – all of whom assumed that the work was commissioned by Siena’s Jewish community from a local Christian sculptor (Federighi). There is, however, no concrete evidence that the Jews of Siena actually did commission the Moses. Moreover, there is the problem of an apparent chronological gap between the production of the statue, which is supposed to date to the fifteenth century, and

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787 Schubring, Paul: Die Plastik Sienas im Quattrocento, Berlin: Grote'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1907, p. 63.

788 Richter, The Sculpture of Antonio Federighi, pp. 379-381


the seventeenth-century fountain on which it was installed. The present essay constitutes the first attempt to explain this anachronism, and to consider the significance of a statue of Moses in the particular social and cultural context of an Italian Ghetto.

Identifying Moses

The Sala delle lupe, where the statue of Moses stands today, is named after its resident pair of medieval stone wolves, whose human sucklings are the legendary founders of Siena, Senius and Aschius (sons of Remus). The Moses, which stands between the wolves, is made of local white marble, veined, stained and damaged in several places. The back of the figure, which is unfinished and slightly flattened (the hair and ear on the hidden left side are crudely carved), is consistent with its being designed for a shallow niche – otherwise a wall, or pier – while rusted metal inserts would once have secured it to the niche of the Ghetto fountain (fig. 87).

The figure stands in dynamic contrapposto, weight on the proper right foot, left heel raised and head turned emphatically to the left. The left hand reaches across the chest to the opposite shoulder, countering the turn of the head, while the movement of the arm is rhymed with a heavy fold of drapery that wraps the left flank. The right fist, poised at waist height (and connected to the waist by two struts of marble) contains a cylindrical hole (fig. 88), suggesting a rod that would have extended away from the figure, some thirty degrees below the horizontal. When it stood in its niche, in the north-east angle of the Ghetto’s narrow piazza (since expanded by the fascist town planning of the 1930s), the Moses would have appeared to look out, away from the synagogue, which forms the adjacent north-west wall (figs. 89 & 90). A person entering the Ghetto through the narrow passage off Via di Salicotto (formerly Malcucinato) that runs parallel to the front of the synagogue would have encountered the Moses fountain immediately (fig. 91).

791 The old infrastructure of the Ghetto is recorded in a large (1:100) model of the area around Via di Salicotto, made in 1929. The model is preserved in the Archive of the Contrada della Torre. I am grateful to the archivist, Francesco Fusi, for showing me the model and for answering my questions.
Before considering the iconological implications of the statue and its presence on the fountain, we need to address the uncertainties entailed by its dating to a time before the establishment of the Ghetto – which implies that the figure was appropriated from elsewhere, and that the Ghetto fountain was designed to reaccommodate it. This means, furthermore, that we cannot take for granted that the statue was always intended to represent Moses, since besides the (missing) rod, the figure lacks Moses’s more conspicuous attributes, having neither horns nor the prosthetic “rays” that identify Giovanni Pisano’s statue (c.1290) for the façade of Siena Cathedral. There may be a suggestion of horns in the arrangement of the hair above the brow, but this is only evident when viewed from a single angle (fig. 92).

We should bear in mind, however, that horns are uncommon in Italian representations of Moses – until Michelangelo\textsuperscript{792} – and they are lacking in other Sienese representations of Moses, notably in the narratives designed by Domenico Beccafumi for the marble intarsia pavement of the Cathedral. These narratives include Moses striking water from the rock (1529, fig. 93), and breaking the tablets of Law (1531, fig. 94) – a subject revisited by Beccafumi in a painting for the Duomo in Pisa (1537-38). In each case, Moses’s head is unadorned, and since the episodes in Exodus precede the second ascent of Mount Sinai, the lack of horns or radiance may be seen as consistent with the narrative.

Leaving the horns aside, a comparison between the figure from the Ghetto fountain and Pisano’s statue for the Duomo reveals strong formal similarities in the treatment and styling of hair and beards, and more importantly, the pose (fig. 95). The heads of both figures are turned emphatically to the left, while they gesture in the opposite direction from the waist. While the head of Pisano’s Moses is thrust forward to enhance visibility from below, the other’s head is tilted back, suggesting that it was made for installation much nearer to the ground. Originally part of a complex sculptural programme, Pisano’s Moses was designed to interact with figures to either side,\textsuperscript{793} but it might have stood out as an individual model for the later sculptor, who put a rod in place of the pointing finger, removed the scroll from the left hand (leaving a visual echo in

\textsuperscript{792} See the discussion in chapter two.

\textsuperscript{793} See: Lorenzoni, Mario (ed.): \textit{La facciata del Duomo di Siena: iconografia, stile, indagini storiche e scientifiche}, Cinisello Balsamo, Milano: Silvana, 2007
the swathe of drapery at the hip), and closed the composition of the figure by drawing the free left arm across the chest.

As noticed, our statue – which I think can be firmly identified as a Moses – would originally have held a rod, probably a metal insert, whose weight was supported by the marble struts that join the hand to the waist. It may not be quite accurate, though, to say that the statue represents the act of striking water from the rock, since the rod was held at waist height, and Moses’s attention appears to be directed elsewhere. When the miracle is depicted in its narrative context, as in many images from antiquity through early modernity, Moses is usually shown holding his rod up to the rock, to illustrate that it is his agency that causes the water to flow. The pictorial convention is followed by Beccafumi in his pavement design, and was so commonplace that Girolamo Macchi represented Moses in a similar attitude when he made his crude sketch of the Ghetto fountain.

The pictorial convention, however, does not apply to sculptural representations of Moses that accompany an actual source of water. In such cases, the figure is usually positioned above the source, with rod lowered, as in the bronze statuette by Andrea Riccio for a holy water font in Padua (1513; fig. 34), the high-relief figure in Cardinal Cristoforo Madruzzo’s nymphaeum at Soriano nel Cimino (c. 1561), Prospero Bresciano’s colossal figure for the Acqua Felice terminus in Rome (c. 1589), and the porphyry statue in the Grotta di Mosè at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence (c. 1635). The pose of the Ghetto Moses is therefore consistent with its having been designed to accompany a source of water. Still, if the figure predates the Ghetto, and the fountain, this entails the possibility that it was transferred from another, unknown setting. In addressing the question of where this might have been, we should begin by reexamining the statue’s date and attribution.


Attributions

As I have mentioned, the statue is commonly associated with Antonio Federighi, whose most important sculpted figures are those of saints Ansano (1458), Vittore (1459) and Savino (1460-61) that stand alongside Vecchietta’s figures of Peter and Paul (1460-62) on the Loggia della Mercanzia (fig. 96). The handling of Moses’s drapery is, however, more static and less elaborate than is typical of Federighi, while the expressive facial features are more reminiscent of Vecchietta (1410-1480) than of Federighi’s classicising facial types. In the Moses, there is a naturalism and emotional intensity that is characteristic of Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439-1501) and his student Giacomo Cozzarelli (1453-1515), in whose polychrome wooden statues of John the Baptist (1464; fig. 97) and Vincent Ferrer (c.1509) the raised hands and parted lips evoke fervent speech. The emphatic, closed gesture of the Moses suggests an almost defensive attitude. The drama and realism of these several figures, including the Moses, recalls the bronze figure of the Baptist (1457; fig. 98) by Donatello, a sculptor who had a profound and lasting influence in Siena, his adopted city.

The attribution of the Moses to Federighi seems to persist largely for want of a more obvious candidate, and because the dating to the 1460s or 1470s has never been challenged. Before we accept this early dating – which so precedes the construction of the Ghetto fountain – it is important to acknowledge the peculiar anachronism that characterises later Sienese sculpture and painting. Well into the sixteenth century, Sienese art remained deeply rooted in the local medieval tradition, even while absorbing stylistic developments from elsewhere. This tendency, which has led Sienese art to be regarded, and often marginalised, as “backward-looking and retardataire,” has lately been re-evaluated as, to some extent, a deliberate cultural reaction to Siena’s political decline.

In terms of the strong curatorial thesis of the exhibition

796 Angelini, Pio II e le arti, p. 71
797 Bellosi, Luciano (ed.): Francesco di Giorgio e il Rinascimento a Siena 1450-1500, Milano: Electa, 1993 (cat. 24, pp. 192-24; cat. 89, pp. 418-19)
799 See Luke Syson’s introduction to Renaissance Siena (pp. 14-15) and his essay in the same volume on “Stylistic Choices.”
800 Ibid, p. 14
“Renaissance Siena: Art for a City” at the National Gallery in London (2007-8), artists of the cinquecento, like Domenico Beccafumi (1486-1551), “can be found reiterating traditional artistic models as a self-conscious means of reinforcing Sienese identity.”

The general resistance of Sienese art to a wider stylistic chronology persists in the work of Fulvio Signorini (1563-1609 or later), who was the most important Sienese sculptor of the late sixteenth century – a period in which the city produced few other sculptors of note. Signorini’s modest oeuvre includes two bronze statues of the local saints Catherine and Bernardino (the Franciscan preacher), both of which stood in the chapel of the Immaculate Conception in the basilica of San Francesco (c.1600), and are blackened by the fire that gutted the church in 1655 (fig. 99). The figure of San Bernardino is so faithful to the traditional style and iconography established in the decades following the preacher’s death in 1444, that when it and its companion piece were acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in New York (1933), they were assigned to the late quattrocento, and only later identified as the statues Signorini was known to have made for the basilica of San Francesco. More remarkably, Signorini’s bronze Risen Christ (1592), which stood in the Piccolomini library in the Duomo, was ascribed, barely thirty years after it was made, to Vecchietta (1410-1480), being noted as such in the inventory of art in Sienese churches and public buildings compiled by Fabio Chigi (the future Pope Alexander VII) in 1625-26. In the anachronic misattribution of the figure, the strength of Sienese tradition is emphasised by the elision of more than a century.

Signorini’s figures of San Bernardino and Saint Catherine are of a similar size (147.3cm, 148.6cm) to our Moses (137cm), and have a comparable quiet

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801 Fattorini, Gabriele and Jennifer Sliwka, “Domenico Beccafumi and the Sienese Tradition,” in Renaissance Siena (op. cit.), p. 299
804 Cf. Vecchietta’s polychrome wooden figure of San Bernardino, carved before 1474 (Bellosi, Francesco di Giorgio, cat. 30, pp. 206-08).
805 Bruschettini, “Fulvio Signorini,” op. cit, p. 269
806 Ibid. Bruschettini cites Bacci, op. cit. p. 300. Vecchietta’s own bronze Risen Christ (1476) is also listed by Chigi, in its present position over the altar of the church of the Santissima Annunziata in the Ospedale (Bacci, p. 302).
emotional intensity, while there are more particular similarities in the pleat-like folds of drapery that envelop the proper right arm of Saint Catherine, and in the stance of San Bernardino. Although Signorini is reputed to have made figures in marble for various Sienese churches,\textsuperscript{807} the only firm attributions to him are the allegorical figures of Faith and Charity on the pediment of the high altar of Sant’Agostino (1608), and a rather unambitious seated figure of the Borghese pope Paul V (1609), sculpted for the Duomo.\textsuperscript{808} More pertinent to the present discussion is a tradition, going back at least as far as the mid-seventeenth century, according to which Fulvio Signorini assisted Prospero Bresciano on the gigantic marble figure of Moses striking the rock that marks the terminus of the Acqua Felice aqueduct in Rome (c.1589, fig. 100).\textsuperscript{809}

It is immediately clear that a comparison between Bresciano’s Moses and the figure from the Ghetto fountain only exposes their manifest differences. The obvious disparity in scale (one being three times the size of the other) may be incidental, but Bresciano’s gigantic figure – identified as Moses by its flamboyant horns, its rod (now lost) and tablets of Law (superfluous in this context) – lacks all the subtlety of the Sienese figure. With its forthright gesture and exaggerated horns, Bresciano’s Moses compares better to the figure in Macchi’s sketch of the Ghetto fountain (which he evidently made at his desk, without troubling to recall the actual appearance of the figure).

For its inelegant proportions, and a perception that the sculptor had tried, and failed miserably, to rival Michelangelo, Prospero Bresciano’s colossus attracted immediate criticism and ridicule, and would be characterised by Adolfo Venturi (among others) as an “abject parody of michelangelism.”\textsuperscript{810} It is worth recalling

\textsuperscript{807} Gigli, Girolamo: \textit{Diario senese} (vol. II), Lucca, 1723, p. 379

\textsuperscript{808} The figure was later moved to the Palazzo Chigi-Saracini and inscribed with the name of an earlier pope, Julius III (1550-55). Bruschettini, “Fulvio Signorini,” op. cit, p. 269. The statue of Paul V is listed among the works of art in the Duomo by Fabio Chigi. Bacci, Pèleo: “L’elenco delle pitture, sculture e architetture di Siena, compilato nel 1625-26 da Mons. Fabio Chigi, poi Alessandro VII secondo il ms. Chigiano I. i. II,” in \textit{Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria}, X, 1939, IV, pp. 197-213 & 297-237 (p. 299)

\textsuperscript{809} Ugurgieri Azzolini, Isidoro: \textit{Le pompe sanesi, o’ vero Relazione delli huomini, e donne illustri di Siena}, Pistoia, 1649 (Vol. II, p. 382). Signorini is known to have worked in Rome (and Bresciano in Siena), but Steven Ostrow casts doubt on his connection to the giant Moses, which to him “rings of Tuscan campanilismo,” attempting to “associate the Sienese sculptor with a major artist and monument in Rome.” Ostrow, Steven F: “The Discourse of Failure in Seventeenth-Century Rome: Prospero Bresciano’s Moses,” \textit{The Art Bulletin}, Vol. 88, No. 2 (June, 2006), pp. 267-291 (p. 272)

\textsuperscript{810} “Il Mosè di Prospero Bresciano, sgangherato, teatrale, buffonesco, è la più turpe parodia del michelangelismo in Roma, verso la fine del Cinquecento.” Venturi, Adolfo, \textit{Storia del arte}
here that Michelangelo’s Moses, ever since its installation on the tomb of Julius II, around 1545, was widely regarded as the definitive representation of the biblical hero, with statues of Moses by Montorsoli (Bologna, 1558-61), Girolamo Lombardo (Loreto, 1568), Bresciano (Rome, 1589), and Pietro Francavilla (Florence, 1592), all being heavily influenced by Michelangelo’s. The now-familiar sternness and muscularity – as well as the horns – of Michelangelo’s paradigmatic image are altogether absent from the Moses in Siena, which accords with the scholarly consensus that the figure predates Michelangelo. Indeed, there seems no obvious or compelling reason to revise the commonly accepted dating of the statue to the third quarter of the quattrocento.

A Jewish commission?

We may now return to the question of the Moses’s origins, and whether the statue could have been commissioned or appropriated by the Jewish community of Siena. A generation of Jewish cultural historians seemed content to ignore the apparent anachronism between the statue and the establishment of the Ghetto – even if they were unaware that the fountain was built as late as the 1670s. As I will argue, the idea that the Jewish community of Siena commissioned the statue from a local Christian sculptor (either in the fifteenth century or later), or that they appropriated the figure from a Christian environment, assumes various circumstances that are too unlikely to be credible.

For the art historian Helen Rosenau, the supposed commission of the Moses was “a symptom of the uninhibited attitude of Italian Jewry” to the visual arts, while Landsberger remarked that “[such] an event would have been almost inconceivable in earlier times and in other countries – a statue, and what is more, in a public place.” Rosenau and Landsberger did not, however, cite any comparable cases in Italy or elsewhere, and neither has any other scholar to date. Earlier, Josef Perles (1865), describing the Poznań Jews’ reaction to


the Moses fountain, stated that similar fountains existed at the synagogues of Palermo, Messina and Jerusalem, during the time of Obadiah di Bertinoro (1455-1516) – but while Obadiah called the fountain at Palermo “splendidly beautiful,” there is no suggestion that it, or any others, contained any figurative ornament at all.\textsuperscript{813} The evidence of a single statue is certainly no basis on which to generalise about attitudes to visual representation among Jews in Italy. Considering that there are no comparable cases of human statuary in Jewish communities anywhere from late antiquity to early modernity, the case in Siena is not just unprecedented, but seemingly unique.

Having assumed that the Moses was made at the behest of a Jewish community that was apparently open to any kind of figurative art, Roth and Shulvass each make an obvious imaginative connection to Vasari’s tale of Jewish visits to Michelangelo’s Moses, the truth of which they likewise accept without reservation.\textsuperscript{814} As we have seen, there is good reason to be sceptical of Vasari (both in general, and here in particular). In subscribing to the idea of a Jewish community adopting, or even commissioning a statue of Moses from a Christian sculptor, these modern Jewish historians were idealising an age of supposed cultural integration and exchange, while implicitly challenging the medieval stigma of Jewish “blindness” which persisted as a modern racist stereotype.\textsuperscript{815} Given the (then) widespread view of Judaism as rabidly opposed to images, in sharp contrast to the Christian culture that flowered in Renaissance Italy, a “Jewish” statue of Moses offered a considerable counterweight.\textsuperscript{816} But what would be the implications of such a display in an early modern environment, when Jews still defined themselves to a great extent by their religious observances, maintained within (and in contradistinction to) a larger, Christian society? How might such a display be perceived or construed by Christians or other Jews?

\textsuperscript{813} Obadiah journeyed from Northern Italy to Jerusalem in 1487, from where he wrote a letter to his father describing the Synagogues at Palermo and Messina, which he had visited en route. Schwab, Moïse: Voyages: Lettres d’Obadia de Bertinoro, 1487-89, Paris, 1866, pp. 7 & 10.


\textsuperscript{816} This is consistent with Cecil Roth’s project in The Jewish Contribution to Civilization, New York; London: Harper & Brothers, 1940.
According to Leon Modena’s *History of Jewish Rites* (Venice, 1638), while many Jews in Italy “license[d] themselves to keep portraits and paintings at home,” they continued to avoid images in “relief or full body.”

As we saw in chapter four, the rabbi, who endorsed secular portrait painting, ruled firmly against the use of ritual spice boxes decorated with human figures, in case it appeared to non-Jews that the smelling of spices was a pretext for idolatry. In making this ruling, he invoked the commentary in *Avodah Zarah* (the Talmud tractate on “foreign worship”) that warns against drinking from a fountain with a carved face, or bending down for any reason in front of a statue, since this might be mistaken for genuflection. The Jews from Poznań who opposed the statue on the Ghetto fountain in 1740 might well have reminded their Sienese coreligionists of these injunctions, as well as the consensus of the rabbinic sages that any statue bearing in its hand a staff, or any other attribute of power, is expressly forbidden.

It may be true, as the Poznań Jews were told, that no Italian rabbi had ever objected to the statue, but this amounts more to an excuse than a defence. It brings to mind the anecdote in the Mishnah, according to which Rabban Gamaliel justified his use of a public bath containing a statue of the goddess Aphrodite, by observing that the statue was made to adorn the bath, and not the contrary; that is to say it was not there to be venerated by the bathers. Rabban Gamaliel did not mean to defend the statue, only to excuse his own regular proximity to it. Such an excuse, however, would only hold because it was not he, or any other Jew, who had put the statue of Aphrodite in the public bath. The question is, to what extent were the Jews of Siena actually involved in the design of the Ghetto fountain?

According to Girolamo Macchi, the fountain in the Ghetto was built “at the expense of the Jews and for their commodity,” but this need not imply that it was built to their specifications. In fact, the reference to expense – which might be taken for granted when describing something built at anyone’s behest –

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817 Modena, *Riti*, p. 16
818 Sabar, “The Right Path for an Artist,” p. 12
819 *Avodah Zarah* 12a
820 *Avodah Zarah* 41a
821 *Avodah Zarah* 44b
822 Macchi, op. cit.
seems here to imply the contrary. As we shall see, there is more concrete evidence to suggest that the commission was beyond the control of the Jewish community, and that the fountain was built in the interests of the civic authorities as much as their own.

Although most Sienese Jews rented their homes or shops from Christian landlords – including several religious institutions with properties in the Ghetto – they were still obliged to make direct contributions for infrastructure, as was the case elsewhere in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. In October 1612, the Grand Duke, Cosimo II de’ Medici, issued an order to the Jewish community of Pitigliano, on pain of expulsion and confiscation of goods, to finance the construction of an aqueduct and fountain to provide drinking water to the town. The expense was so great that the Jews in nearby Sorano offered to contribute – a plan that was opposed by representatives of the “Terra di Sorano,” who objected that the Jews were beholden to the town in which they lived.

According to Macchi, the engineering for the new Sienese fountain so improved the supply of water to the Ghetto, that the overflow was channelled to the prison on via Salicotto, whose inmates had long suffered from a shortage of water. Two decades after the Ghetto fountain was built, in 1699, representatives of the Biccherna noticed that the Jewish dyers who occupied a shop next to the prison had been using water from the overflow without paying the applicable rates, and the charges were levied retrospectively. This is a clear illustration that although the fountain was built at the expense of the Jewish community, the water that issued from it was officially provided by the civic authorities. In this connection it is significant that Macchi’s drawing of the fountain shows the stemme of the Comune and Popolo of Siena above the niche containing the Moses.

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823 Turrini, *La comunità ebraica di Siena*, p. 61
826 Ibid.
827 Turrini (*La comunità ebraica di Siena*, p. 61) cites ASS, *Biccherna*, 1068, cc. 7-12
A miracle of civil engineering

The provision of water was always a particular challenge in the city of Siena, on account of its hilltop position, and the challenge had been met with an ingenious medieval system of subterranean aqueducts (*bottini*), supposedly fed by a mythical underground river, the Diana.\(^\text{828}\) When the aim of bringing a supply of water to the central piazza was achieved in 1342, the celebrations are said to have inspired the name *Fonte Gaia*, now associated with the decorative marble panels and statues by Jacopo della Quercia, completed in 1419. The achievement of Sienese engineers remained a matter of great civic pride, manifest in the city’s numerous fountains.\(^\text{829}\) These monumental structures, which combined architectural detailing with sculptural ornament and civic symbols, were “designed to be both functional and a symbol of the city government’s role in the provision of water.”\(^\text{830}\)

The topical association of water with the mystical and quasi-miraculous would have made Moses an especially apt adornment for a Sienese fountain. As Paul Schubring observed, anyone who has known Italy in the hot summer months will have experienced something like the impatient muttering that preceded the miracles in the desert, and in Siena, the “old leader who […] brought to the Jews water from the rock, appears as the classic *aqua dux* among the grandchildren of his late, itinerant people.”\(^\text{831}\) This was, however, a fountain officially provided by the civic authorities, and it is important to understand how the figure of Moses related to that reality. To this end, it will be instructive to consider the circumstances in which other Moses fountains of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were conceived.

I have mentioned some examples already, the most famous being at the terminus of the Acqua Felice (the ancient aqueduct leading to the Quirinal Hill), which was restored and renamed by Pope Sixtus V, Felice Peretti (1521-1590). Here, it is the pope who is identified with Moses by the presence of Prospero


\(^{829}\) See the illustrations and descriptions in Ridolfi & Turrini, *Siena e l’acqua* (op. cit.)

\(^{830}\) Nevola, *Siena*, pp. 22-23

\(^{831}\) Schubring, op cit, p. 65: “Der alte Volksführer, der einst den Juden in der Wüste aus dem Stein Wasser verschaffte, erscheint hier als der klassische Aquadux unter den späten Enkeln seines wandernden Volkes.”
Bresciano’s monumental statue. There is a similar, albeit less conspicuous, identification with Moses in the Grotta di Mosé (c. 1635) at the Palazzo Pitti, which marked the completion of a new aqueduct by the Grand Duke Ferdinand II. An inscription beneath the porphyry statue of Moses reads, “Behold the leader of the Israelites drawing out the Ferdinandian water.” In this case, as in the papal commission, the Grand Duke as aqua dux is identified with Moses; or more precisely, Moses, the servant of God, is positioned as an agent of the Grand Duke’s munificence and power.

This brings us to an example of a seventeenth-century Italian fountain in which the identification with Moses does not rely on a statue, but is in other respects especially pertinent to the case in the Ghetto of Siena. Following the restoration of the ancient Acqua Traiana in Rome by Paul V, a supply of water was made available for the first time within the Jewish Ghetto, when a wall fountain was installed in the Piazza delle Cinque Scole. The fountain, which was built in 1614 but no longer exists, can be seen in a nineteenth-century watercolour (fig. 101). We know from written accounts that the fountain was surmounted by a legend, recording that “Paul V Pontifex Optimus Maximus,” in his munificence, brought water to the Ghetto to alleviate the want of the Jews. The fountain was ornamented with two relief images of menorot (seven-branched candelabra), while the water flowed from the mouths of two dragons, emblems of the Sienese Borghese family, to which the pope belonged. The words and images on the fountain served not only to aggrandise the pope, but by usurping the role of the leader and liberator of the Jews, it reminded the Ghetto inhabitants of their own status in Christendom, and of the supposed Christian supersession of their religion.

The presence of the statue on the new Sienese Ghetto fountain might be understood in similar terms, as a reminder to the inhabitants of the Ghetto of

832 Campbell, “Hard Times in Baroque Florence,” pp. 188-189
833 EN ISRAELIS DUX E CAVTE / FERDINANDAM AOVAM EDVCENS
836 Piga, op. cit, p. 95
their reliance on the toleration of the Christian state. Ostensibly, it was Moses who had struck the water from the rock, but between the fiction of the stone image, and the civic emblems that appear above it in Macchi’s drawing, there would have been no room for doubting whose power and munificence was embodied in the fountain.

**Refinding Moses**

Although it now seems clear that the new Ghetto fountain was a civic commission, we are no closer to identifying the original location of the old marble statue that completed it. The figure is somewhat large for a holy water font, and there is no mention of a Moses statue (other than Pisano’s), let alone a Moses fountain, anywhere in Fabio Chigi’s inventory of 1625-26. The statue could anyway just as easily have come from a private villa or palazzo, since Moses was a popular theme for fountains that had no particular religious use or context, such as the *Grotta di Mosè* at the Palazzo Pitti.

According to Giorgio Vasari, when Julius III (1550-55) decided to install a fountain in a corridor adjacent to the Cortile del Belvedere – which held an array of ancient, pagan statuary – Michelangelo designed one with a marble figure of Moses striking the rock. The Pope, however, was not inclined to wait for a new work in marble (being mindful, perhaps, that Michelangelo’s other Moses was thirty years in the making), and the fountain was instead adorned with the antique *Sleeping Ariadne*, a figure then identified as Cleopatra. There is no other evidence for Michelangelo’s design, but Vasari’s anecdote shows that for Christians, at least, the theme of Moses striking the rock was as fitting for a profane setting as for a sacred one. After all, Moses belonged as much to the pre-Christian (pagan) world as to the Christian one. This conflicted identity had prompted Riccio to fuse Moses and Zeus-Ammon in the bronze figure for the

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837 Bacci, op. cit.
839 Michelangelo delegated the work to Daniele da Volterra (ibid.)
holy water font in Padua (1513), while the figure of Moses in the Florentine grotto was made using a fragmentary ancient statue of a Roman emperor.\footnote{The sculptors were Raffaello Curradi and Cosimo Salvestrini. M Campbell, “Hard Times in Baroque Florence,” p. 188}

Julius III’s fountain of “Cleopatra,” and the figure in the Grotta di Mosè are examples of figures (or fragments of figures) being reappropriated for use on fountains. Much earlier, in mid-\textit{trecento} Siena, an excavated antique statue of a goddess had been installed on the Fonte Gaia, before it was superstitiously implicated in the city’s misfortunes, broken and its pieces reburied.\footnote{Ghiberti, \textit{Commentari}, p. 63} This is not the only recorded incident of iconoclasm relating to a Sienese fountain; another, which occurred a century later, may be of particular interest to our discussion.

In 1458, the Sienese humanist Aeneus Silvius Piccolomini was elected Pope Pius II. During the six years of his pontificate, he returned to his native city for extended periods, canonised the local saint, Catherine, and contributed greatly to the city’s art and architecture through direct and indirect patronage.\footnote{Nevola, \textit{Siena} (Chapter 4: “Pius II Piccolomini and Architectural Patronage in Siena”). See also the discussions of Pius’s patronage in Syson (ed.), \textit{Renaissance Siena}.} The pope showed particular favour to the sculptor and architect Antonio Federighi, who oversaw the building of the huge Logge del Papa (1462), and constructed an \textit{all’antica} tomb monument for the pope’s parents in the basilica of San Francesco (1459), adjacent to the convent where the pope often stayed (some fragments of the tomb, including two bust-length effigies, survived the fire of 1655, and are preserved in the convent’s cloister).\footnote{Angelini, Alessandro: “Patrons, Artists and Workshops,” in \textit{Renaissance Siena} (Syson, ed.), pp. 31-33. Also idem, “Antonio Federighi e il mito di Ercole,” in \textit{Pio II e le arti} (op. cit.)} In the same year, 1459, the pope had built in the grounds of the convent a fountain, which was fed by a subterranean aqueduct.\footnote{Ridolfi & Turrini, \textit{Siena e l’acqua}, “Fontana di San Francesco, l’acqua di Pio II,” p. 8. Liberati, Alfredo: “La fonte di San Francesco,” in \textit{Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria}, XIV-XV, 1955-56, pp. 161-163} According to his contemporary, and posthumous biographer, Giovanni Antonio Campano, the pope, who spent several months in
Siena after the Congress of Mantua (1459), would spend whole days beside the fountain, considering affairs of state.\(^{845}\)

The fountain, which the pope recalls wistfully in his *Commentarii*, existed for only a few months, until it was vandalised one night by some “pernicious youths […] for no other reason than to aggravate the pope.”\(^{846}\) The perpetrators, who were not caught, were likely opponents of Pius’s campaign to allow noble Sienese families, primarily his own, to participate in the city’s republican government.\(^{847}\) There is no record of the fountain’s appearance, although it has been suggested that a small marble panel attributed to Federighi, and featuring a high relief figure of Neptune, formed part of its ornamentation; the panel, however, is in remarkably good condition, which is not consistent with the story of the fountain’s demise.\(^{848}\)

Alternatively, it is tempting to imagine that the fountain was adorned with a statue of Moses, a figure with whom the pope, at the Congress of Mantua, expressly identified himself.\(^{849}\) Supposing that it did, the pope’s identification with Moses, and his personal attachment to the fountain, would have made it a good target for an expression of dissent. The brief existence of Pius II’s fountain would fit with the widely accepted dating (c. 1460-70) for the statue of *Moses* later installed in the Jewish enclave,\(^{850}\) while the fire that ravaged San Francesco two decades before the construction of the Ghetto fountain might have occasioned the retrieval of the figure from a repository in the church or convent. Could it be that the ill-fated statue from the Ghetto fountain had been at the centre of this earlier controversy, and condemned to an earlier period of obscurity?


\(^{847}\) Nevola, *Siena*, pp. 61-62

\(^{848}\) Angelini, *Pio II e le arti*, p. 126. The panel, which is in the Musée du Louvre, measures 59 x 30 cm.


\(^{850}\) The sculptor might not have been the classicising Federighi (who was anyway engaged with parental tomb), but perhaps someone working under his direction.
Conclusions

It may be impossible to establish with certainty the provenance of the Moses that adorned the Ghetto fountain in Siena, but we have established the likelihood that it was reappropriated for this use by Siena's civic authorities. The political aspect of its placement on the fountain, as an embodiment of the city government's authority and munificence, is clear, but we have not yet considered fully the religious implications of a statue of Moses – the iconoclastic lawgiver and liberator of the Jews – in an urban enclosure where Jews were compelled to live, and from which they might only be liberated by the Christian rite of baptism. The statue, which may formerly have stood on a Christian fountain (perhaps even a papal one), gained special religious significance when it was installed alongside the synagogue in the Ghetto. Drawing on the arguments made in the preceding chapters of this thesis, I will conclude by exploring the symbolic implications of the statue’s placement on the Ghetto fountain, and reimagining the circumstances that might have led to its removal. In the process, I will summarise the more general arguments and conclusions of this thesis.

A Moses fountain, as built for Pope Sixtus V in Rome, or the Grand Duke Ferdinand II de' Medici in Florence, symbolised the vital provision of water by those rulers, who were thereby implicitly identified with Moses when he enacted the miracle in the desert. When this model is transferred to an environment that is socially and spatially defined by a religious opposition between Christianity and Judaism, we should be alert also to the significance, and in particular the controversy, of the desert miracle in Christian and Jewish traditions.

As noticed earlier, there are two, similar episodes in Hebrew scripture: the first, in Exodus, comes before the events at Mount Sinai, the second, in Numbers, much later, when the people are nearing the Promised Land after forty years of wandering. In both episodes, there is no water to drink and the people murmur against Moses, complaining that he led them out of Egypt only to die in the desert. On each occasion, Moses appeals to God, who in the first account tells him to take “the staff with which you struck the Nile” and strike the rock, which causes the water to flow (Exodus, 17:5-7).\footnote{Alter, The Five Books of Moses, p. 412} Forty years later, God again
instructs Moses to take his staff, but this time he should only “speak to the rock before [the people’s] eyes, and it will yield its water” (*Numbers*, 20:8).  

Rather than do as instructed, Moses and Aaron challenge their recalcitrant followers – “Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?” – then Moses strikes the rock twice with his staff, and the water flows. As a consequence of their disobedience, God tells Moses and Aaron that they will not reach the Promised Land (“Inasmuch as you did not trust Me to sanctify Me before the eyes of the Israelites, even so you shall not bring this assembly to the land that I have given to them”), and Aaron and Moses both die soon afterwards.  

The account in *Numbers* does not identify precisely what it was that Moses did wrong, but a time-honoured interpretation (supported by the great medieval Jewish commentators Rashi and Maimonides), holds that his sin was in striking the rock, rather than speaking to it as God instructed. An alternative, and more compelling interpretation, is that in his address to the people, Moses claims the miracle for himself and Aaron, without acknowledging God at all. Using his rod to dramatise the act of divination, Moses wields God’s power as though it were his own. As we saw in chapter two, the idea of Moses playing God to his superstitious followers was satirised by the sculptor Andrea Riccio, in his fusing of Moses with Zeus-Ammon in a bronze figure for a monastery font in Padua (1513). Here, an inscription on the font, referring to “the double blow of the rod,” deliberately identifies Riccio’s figure with the episode in *Numbers*, not with the less conflicted event in *Exodus*, where the number of blows is unspecified. While the statue from the Ghetto fountain is not explicitly related to either of the two biblical episodes of divination, it would have remained open to association with Moses’s fateful act of disobedience to God, which prevented

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852 Ibid, p. 783  
853 *Numbers*, 20:12 (Ibid, p. 784)  
854 Ibid, p. 783. This was construed by Augustine of Hippo (*Contra Faustum*, 16-17) as a lapse in faith that prefigured the denial of Christ by Saint Peter.  
855 Ibid. See also: Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The JPS Torah Commentary*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989  
856 QUOD DEDIT HIC GEMINO SCEPTRI […] ICTU... Transcribed in Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art*, p. 155
his leading the Jews to the Promised Land – a limitation that gains typological significance through Christian exegesis.\textsuperscript{857}

In the episode as described in \textit{Numbers}, Moses threatens inadvertently to undermine the strict monotheism that he himself imposed on his followers. The insistence on God’s invisibility, and the attendant prohibition of images, was meant to safeguard the Mosaic ideal of monotheism against the seductions of polytheism; but the forbidden gods threatened constantly to re-emerge, even, or especially, through the agency of Moses himself. This pattern is exemplified by the fate of the brazen serpent, created by Moses in the subsequent chapter of \textit{Numbers} (21:8-9). Although God himself legitimised the image of the serpent, it was eventually misused as an idol, and destroyed as such (2 \textit{Kings}, 18:4).

As I argued in part one, it was in recognition of the insidious mechanism by which idolatry persists (epitomising Freud’s psycho-cultural rule of repression and recurrence) that at least three sixteenth-century Italian sculptors – Riccio, Michelangelo and Francesco da Sangallo – adorned their statues of Moses, uncannily, with the horns of idols. Their awareness of idolatry was heightened by the way in which their own work emulated antique, pagan statuary. A statue of Moses, \textit{all’antica} like Michelangelo’s, or a freestanding bronze, like Riccio’s, embodied the controversy surrounding the veneration of images. By deliberately exposing the latent threat of idolatry, they sought iconographically to harness the idol and to neutralise its threat.

The particular risk of Moses becoming god-like to his followers had been acknowledged in the account of his death and burial in \textit{Deuteronomy} (34:5-7), according to which “no man has known [Moses’s] burial place to this day.” According to a long exegetical tradition, neatly summarised by Robert Alter, the idea that Moses was buried serves to “underline [his] irreducible humanity,” while the occultation of his grave prevents “any possibility of a cult of Moses, with pilgrimages to his gravesite.”\textsuperscript{858} The significance of Moses’s obscure burial had renewed currency in the Reformation era, when both Protestants and Roman Catholics were wont to justify their own religious practices, as well as to denigrate the others’, with reference to the idolatry of the (biblical) Jews.


\textsuperscript{858} Alter, \textit{The Five Books of Moses}, p. 1,058
Calvin, for example, returned to the theme of Moses’s burial several times, notably in his scathing attack on the Roman Catholic cult of relics (1543).\textsuperscript{859} Vasari might have been mindful of such criticisms when he wrote his (1550) account of Jewish pilgrimages to Michelangelo’s Moses on the tomb of Julius II; according to him, God had prepared Moses for bodily resurrection by the “divine” hand of the sculptor.

In chapter one, we saw how the graven image of Moses in Christian art is used to embody Christianity’s supersession of Judaism, an iconographic tradition that can be traced back to Siena, and Ambrogio Lorenzetti. In Italian art, especially of the Reformation era, Moses often stands for the legitimacy and efficacy of Christian images in general. Since Moses, or Judaism more generally, is inevitably implicated in Christian image controversies, anxieties relating to the use of images in Reformation-era Italy were naturally projected onto contemporary Jews. This is manifest in the revival of an early-medieval topos according to which Jews – traditionally regarded as repressed idolaters, whose hostility to images betrayed their hostility to the Christian image of God – are seduced, and sometimes converted, through the power of Christian images. The particular allegation of Jewish Moses-worship levelled by Vasari, while evincing the power of the Christian image, entailed an idea of Jews being unable to suppress their idolatrous urges when confronted by the image of their lawgiver, even while failing to recognise what that image signifies in Christian terms.

A century after Vasari (1661), the Sienese priest and theologian Giovanni Andrea Borboni stated boldly what Vasari had insinuated: that the Jews – being inveterate idolaters – would, on seeing the statue on the papal tomb, bow down to it as though Moses himself were resurrected, “and they would readily worship him as their God.”\textsuperscript{860} The appearance, in Borboni’s native Siena, of a statue of Moses on the fountain outside the synagogue might have encouraged further insinuations that Jewish idolatry persisted in the form of Moses-worship. There is a hint of this in the description of the Ghetto Moses by Guglielmo della Valle (1782), who suggested that the Jews of Siena held “more than veneration” for


\textsuperscript{860} Borboni, delle Statue, p. 140. Quoted in chapter 2.
their statue. This kind of remark would support critical Jewish reactions to the statue of Moses, like that of the visitors from Poznań, discussed above.

Of course, we must bear in mind the evidence presented in chapters five and six, that in the age of the Italian Ghettos, Jews, including some eminent rabbis, freely engaged with aspects of non-Jewish visual culture in their secular lives, while making conscious efforts to present an acculturated image of Judaism to the (internalised) non-Jewish observer. The vernacular decoration of Hanukkah lamps and Jewish texts in print sometimes appeared to test the limits of a Jewish religious aesthetic, involving images and motifs that might seem anathema to Judaism. I set out to challenge the received idea that non-Jewish motifs in a Jewish context were effectively meaningless, arguing that they were often used deliberately to dispel Christian notions of Jews as superstitious and hostile to non-Jewish culture at large. Still, within these visual displays of acculturation, there remained an essential concern with the preservation and reassertion of Jewish identity (of which portrait medals identifying Jewish individuals are the epitome). A statue of Moses, however, since it flouts the original "Mosaic" distinction between Jews and idolaters, would appear from Jewish and Christian perspectives to undermine the religious and cultural integrity of Judaism.

As described in chapter four, rabbinic responses to the biblical statutes on images, beginning with those compiled in the Talmud, do not regard Jews as being susceptible to idolatry, as Christians would often allege, but they are preoccupied by the danger of idolatrous appearances. A number of distinguished rabbis of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made judgements that illustrate the consistency of this development in rabbinic Judaism. In their rulings against figuration in synagogue decoration and ritual objects, the rabbis warned that non-Jews might frame such images and their use as idolatrous. More particularly, contemporary rabbis repeatedly invoked

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861 “Gli Ebrei portarono più di venerazione all’opera di Jacomo [sic], che essi posseggono [… ] rappresenta Mosè.” Della Valle, “Notizie di Jacopo della Guercia,” p. 167. Della Valle commented elsewhere on the allegation of Jewish Moses-worship in Vasari’s Life of Michelangelo, saying “It is not true that the Jews flock to venerate [Michelangelo’s] statue, because it is in [a] Church near the high altar, where neither would the Jews enter […] nor would they be permitted to enter without serious punishment.” While discrediting Vasari, the author fails to credit the Jews with their traditional refusal to venerate images. Vasari, Giorgio & Guglielmo della Valle (ed.): Vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti, vol. X, Siena: Pazzini Carli e Compagno, 1793 (pp. 65-66, n. 1).
passages in the Talmud that caution against bending down before statues, including the specific example of bending down to drink from “a spring [that flows] in front of an idol,” since one “may appear to be bowing to the idol.”

The statue of Moses on the Sienese Ghetto fountain – where it was posed as enacting a miracle – must have aroused these concerns, especially given the physical obligation to stoop or genuflect while collecting water.

Moses as baptiser of the Jews

Beyond the inherent contradiction of a statue of Moses, and the controversy surrounding the use of his rod, the Christian typology of the miracle in the desert must be an important consideration, especially in a Sienese context. In his first letter to the Corinthians (chapter 10), Paul advanced the idea that the biblical Hebrews were “baptised” in Moses when he led them through the Red Sea, and that in the desert, they “drank of the spiritual rock that followed them […] that] was Christ” (I Corinthians, 10:4). From this passage, a tradition of eucharistic readings of the desert miracle would follow.

I suggested in chapter one that the typological connection between Christ and the desert rock is evoked in Michelangelo’s statue of Moses, whose beard cascades like water from the rock, or from the wound in Christ’s side. The typology is likewise evoked in the marble intarsia pavement of Siena Cathedral, where Beccafumi’s Moses Striking Water from the Rock (1529) paves the way towards the high altar, where the Eucharist is celebrated.

As Alexander Nagel has argued, the scheme of the sixteenth-century pavement, which includes a composite scene of Moses breaking the tablets of Law and punishing the worshippers of the Golden Calf (1531), may be understood in terms of the renewed controversy over images and emphasis on eucharistic devotion that developed through the first half of the sixteenth century. As Nagel sees it, “[the] scene of the fabrication of the Golden Calf […] sets up a strong contrast between the cast idol worshipped by the

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862 Avodah Zarah 12a, Babylonian Talmud (op. cit.)
863 E.g. Augustine of Hippo, Contra Faustum, 16
864 Nagel, The Controversy of Renaissance Art, chapter 8, “Architecture as Image.”
865 In Siena, this was manifest in the replacement of Duccio’s Maestà (1308-11) with Vechietta’s bronze tabernacle (1467-72) in 1506. Ibid, pp. 216-218
Israelites” and Vecchietta’s cast tabernacle on the high altar, “which emerges out of this prehistory as a kind of anti-idol.” Consistent with the “anti-idolatry polemic” identified by Nagel is the injunction that directly follows Paul’s identification of the desert rock with Christ: “Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them” – a reference to the worship of the Golden Calf.

The typological connection between the miraculous provision of water in the desert and the spiritual sustenance offered by Christ is an idea that is embedded physically at the centre of Christian worship in Siena, and this, I suggest, is what underpinned the placement of an old statue of Moses in the city’s Jewish enclave. The styling of Moses as “baptiser” of the Jews, which derives from I Corinthians 10, was elaborated in a sermon preached at the cathedral by a Jesuit, Giovanni Contri, in 1639, on the feast of Siena’s patron saint, Ansanus. The sermon, a panegyric on the third-century Roman saint, known as “the baptizer of the Sienese” for his role in their conversion, emphasised the analogy to Moses, and was published the following year as Il Mosè di Siena.

This idea of Moses as baptiser might have had conversionary connotations in seventeenth-century Siena, where Jews were often subjected to aggressive Christian proselytising, including compulsory attendance of sermons. Such was the pervasiveness of anti-Jewish zeal that the Grand Duke of Tuscany was compelled to pass a law, in 1668, to curb the violent mistreatment of Jews in Siena; the law specifically forbade the abduction of Jewish children, “even under the pretext” of raising them in the Christian faith. In this context, the installation of a statue of Moses, “baptiser of the Jews,” over the Ghetto’s only source of water – where it stood in literal and symbolic juxtaposition to the

866 Ibid, p. 218
867 Ibid.
869 Turrini, La comunità ebraica di Siena, p. 34
Synagogue – might be compared to cases in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in which violent anti-Jewish sentiment was deflected to the symbolic status of an image.871

It may be true that no local rabbi had ever condemned the statue of Moses (as the Jewish visitors from Poznań had), but to do so would have been futile if, as seems likely, the ostensibly totemic figure was in reality an oppressive taboo, imposed upon the Jews by the civic authorities. Its removal might thus be reimagined as the wilful act of a newly empowered Jewish community; not at the time that the new synagogue was built (1784-86) – when Jewish places of worship were still necessarily effaced by secular façades – but rather, when the Ghetto was liberated, and its gates destroyed, by the French Revolutionary Army, in March 1799.

The statue on the fountain, so I have argued, was not intended to recall the liberation of the Jews by Moses (as naively implied by the publication of its photograph to illustrate “Moses the Liberator”).872 On the contrary, it appeared paradoxically to embody the cynical, quasi-Mosaic authority invoked by the anti-Republican priest, who used an example from Numbers to support the 1799 massacre of those Jews who had “[rebelled] against their sovereign” – if only by embracing the liberty and equality offered by a (secular) foreign power.873 In short, as long as the statue stood in the Sienese Ghetto, it co-opted the sovereignty of Moses and stood in figurative opposition to Jewish emancipation. The decision to remove it might have been encouraged by the spirit of political and religious iconoclasm that pervaded the French Revolution as much as the Protestant Reformation.874

It is perhaps telling that when, in 1867, the statue of Moses was “rediscovered” in the basement of the Synagogue, where it had remained effectively buried for decades, there was apparently no effort to reclaim it for the Jewish community. The report commissioned by the Prefecture of Siena had recommended that the

871 See: Katz, The Jew in the Art of the Italian Renaissance (op. cit.) and cases discussed in chapter three of this thesis.
872 Gelber, Moses, p. 48. The statue is identified as “Moses vom alten Ghetto-brunnen in Siena.”
873 Lumini, La reazione in Toscana nel 1799, pp. 227-8
statue be reinstated on the “public fountain” where it had stood\textsuperscript{875} – but when
the fountain was restored six years later (1873), the niche remained empty. In a
publication on Siena’s fountains (1997), the archivists Patrizia Turrini and Maria
Assunta Ceppari Ridolfi echo the art experts’ call for the reinstatement of the
statue on the Ghetto fountain, “which remains deprived of that adornment that
the Sienese Jews had had made at their expense.”\textsuperscript{876} The authors suggest the
placement of “at least a copy” in the niche, which today is “desolately bare.”\textsuperscript{877}
The former inhabitants of the Ghetto might not have seen it that way. Indeed, in
light of the arguments set out in this thesis, the figurative absence over the
fountain seems more apt to honour Moses than any kind of statue.

\textsuperscript{875} The archival records relating to the statue’s discovery and the report are cited above. There
is no mention in the documents of any representation from the Jewish community, and my
enquiries with the present custodians of the synagogue have shed no further light on the matter.

\textsuperscript{876} Ceppari Ridolfi, M. Assunta & Patrizia Turrini, op cit, pp. 76-77

\textsuperscript{877} Ibid.
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