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1 Pordenone, *God the Father, prophets and sibyls*.
Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, cupola

NEGOTIATING THE NUMINOUS
PORDENONE AND THE MIRACULOUS *MADONNA DI CAMPAGNA* OF PIACENZA

Jason Di Resta

Floating somewhere beyond the confines of earth's embrace, the prophets and sibyls that Giovanni Antonio da Pordenone (ca. 1484–1539) painted in the central cupola at Santa Maria di Campagna in Piacenza appear passionately motivated by divine insight (Fig. 1). Their fervent gestures and torsions portray the soul's access to divine mysteries as an ecstatic transgression of composure.[1] Possessed of prophetic furor, this tumultuous cast of figures has long been recognized among the artist's greatest achievements. Even the Tusco-centric Giorgio Vasari admitted that Pordenone's oracles "son belli a maraviglia".[2] And yet these revealers of divine will have never been duly considered in relation to the object they were designed to surround: a miracle-working statue known as the *Madonna di Campagna* (Fig. 2).[3] Like other Italian cult images, the *Madonna di Campagna* was venerated as a special category of image, a divinely sanctioned figure credited with the capacity to actuate change in the world. Much recent scholarship has focused on questions of material agency and of the ontological status of miraculous images, but regardless of how one wishes to balance the circuit of agency between people, images, and deity, analyzing the understanding of divine intervention in local instances remains problematic.[4] As Megan

[1] The effects of divine insight were similarly characterized and widely disseminated by Marsilio Ficino in his commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus* and introduction to the *Ion*. See Marsilio Ficino, *Commentaries on Plato*, I: *Phaedrus and Ion*, ed. and trans. by Michael J. B. Allen, Cambridge, Mass./London 2008, pp. 38–47, 50–55, 112–119, 194–207.

[2] Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. by Rosanna Bettarini/Paola Barocchi, Florence 1966–1997, V, p. 425.

[3] The only scholar to mention a formal connection between the painted prophets and the cult statue is Paola Ceschi Lavagetto, "Le opere: l'opera pittorica in Santa Maria di Campagna", in: *Santa Maria di Campagna: una chiesa bramantesca a Piacenza*, ed. by Maurizio Giuffredi, Reggio Emilia 1995, pp. 41–71: 46.

[4] A few of the more relevant studies on miracle-working images include Richard C. Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image", in: *Studies in the Renaissance*, XIX (1972), pp. 7–41; Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult:*

2 *Madonna di Campagna*. Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, high altar

Holmes observed, the miraculous image was "an open-ended, subjective, and controversial category".[5] Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the subjective nature of miraculous experience was increasingly scrutinized and, in regard to cult images, there was a recurring preoccupation with the image's material nature and its claim to materialize divine presence.[6]

Holmes further noted how during the sixteenth century a growing awareness of the disparity between the rhetoric of divine perfection and the visual language of miraculous images led to new artistic solutions intended to uphold and renew their authority.[7] Begun in 1530, Pordenone's cupola frescoes constitute an interesting and heretofore understudied example. They were designed to maintain and enhance devotion to the cult object by way of a spectacular restaging of the humble *Madonna*, visualizing the object's charisma in a way that the modest statue could not on its own.[8] In doing so, the frescoes helped to structure cultic experience at the sanctuary and propagate belief in the ineffable potency of the *Madonna di Campagna*.[9] Leaving aside the issue of miraculous agency in itself, this essay explores how the rhetorical reinforcement of such agency shaped the virtuosic performance of a paint-

Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst, Munich 2000 ([1]1990); David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago 1989; the various essays in *The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*, conference proceedings Rome 2003, ed. by Erik Thunø/Gerhard Wolf, Rome 2004; Megan Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, New Haven, Conn./London 2013; Jane Garnett/Gervase Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy, from the Renaissance to the Present*, London 2013; Fredrika H. Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy*, New York 2013; Christopher J. Nygren, "Titian's Miracles: Artistry and Efficacy between the San Rocco *Christ* and Accademia *Pietà*", in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, LVII (2015), pp. 321–349; *Saints, Miracles and the Image: Healing Saints and Miraculous Images in the Renaissance*, ed. by Sandra Cardarelli/Laura Fenelli, Turnhout 2017; Robert Maniura, *Art and Miracle in Renaissance Tuscany*, Cambridge *et al.* 2018.

[5] Holmes (note 4), p. 8.

[6] See *ibidem*, pp. 174–177; Belting (note 4), pp. 510–545; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, New York 2011, pp. 44–52, 154–167; Marcia B. Hall, *The Sacred Image in the Age of Art: Titian, Tintoretto, Barocci, El Greco, Caravaggio*, New Haven, Conn./London 2011, pp. 41–63.

[7] Holmes (note 4), pp. 204f.

[8] To a first approximation, the visual rhetoric appears analogous to a category of images known as *Bildtabernakel* (picture-tabernacle), in which archaic cult images were incorporated into larger pictures of a more up-to-date style. While this analogy is a useful starting point, Pordenone's frescoes did not function like reliquaries: they did not restrict access to the cult statue nor attempt to contain the radical inherency that was believed to act through it. See Martin Warnke, "Italienische Bildtabernakel bis zum Frühbarock", in: *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, XIX (1968), pp. 61–102; Victor Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, 2nd rev. ed., London/Turnhout 2015 ([1]1997), pp. 103–113.

[9] In northwest Italy, a significant precedent for the use of spectacular illusionism to enhance the magnetism of a cult Madonna is Bramante's

er who, as I have shown elsewhere, was particularly concerned with motivating the spiritual self-examination of beholders.[10] Pordenone's frescoes reveal that the difficulty attending the interpretation of divine truth and its material manifestation in Scripture and miracles was itself an issue relevant to the artist. After describing how the painter's virtuosic artifice is made to work on behalf of the cult object, I will demonstrate how his decorations in the central cupola and vestibule of Santa Maria di Campagna operate collectively to structure the spiritual insight of a devout beholder.

Cultic Rivalry in Northern Italy

The decision to commission Pordenone in February 1530 and, antecedently, to build a new edifice (begun 1522) to honor the miraculous statue were fraught with a more than local political tension. As Bruno Adorni has emphasized, the civic character of the cult of the *Madonna di Campagna* took the form of a rivalry with the neighboring cult of the *Madonna della Steccata* in Parma (Fig. 3).[11] Located along the Via Francigena, Parma and Piacenza vied for the custom of pilgrims traveling to Rome, and the relative popularity of their cult images could directly impact local economic prosperity. These objects also operated as the primary intermediaries in communal solicitations for divine aid against French occupation, to which both communities were repeatedly subjected throughout the first two decades of the sixteenth century. During this time the frequency of miracles attributed to the *Madonna della Steccata* outpaced that of the *Madonna di Campagna*, prompting the Piacentines

3 *Madonna della Steccata*. Parma, Santa Maria della Steccata, high altar

to renewed efforts in appealing to the Virgin and in seeking papal endorsement for the cult.[12] Thus, within a week of learning that on 21 December 1521 the *Madonna della Steccata* had interceded in Parma's conflict with the French for a second time since September, the Piacentines pledged to construct a gran-

coro finto at Santa Maria presso San Satiro, Milan. See Timothy McCall, "Bramante's *coro finto*, Ex-Votos, and Cult Practice in Sforza Milan", in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, LXXII (2019), pp. 1–53.

[10] Jason Di Resta, "Violent Spaces and Spatial Violence: Pordenone's Passion Frescoes at Cremona Cathedral", in: *Räume der Passion: Raumvisionen, Erinnerungsorte und Topographien des Leidens Christi in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, conference proceedings Frankfurt 2011, ed. by Hans Aurenhammer/Daniela Bohde, Bern *et al.* 2015, pp. 445–477.

[11] Bruno Adorni, "Santa Maria di Campagna a Piacenza come tempio 'civico'", in: *Il Pordenone*, conference proceedings Pordenone 1984, ed. by Caterina Furlan, Pordenone 1985, pp. 45–49.

[12] See Francesco Carpesano, *Commentaria suorum temporum: 1476–1527*, ed. by Giacomo Zarotti, Parma 1975, pp. 169f.; Umberto Benassi, *Storia di Parma*, Parma 1899–1906, II, pp. 165f. According to Andrea Corna, *Storia ed arte in S. Maria di Campagna (Piacenza)*, Bergamo 1908, pp. 65f., once Piacenza had been returned to the Papal States at the end of 1521, the com-

diose new church for their cult image.[13] The rivalry intensified throughout the 1520s and 1530s as both miraculous images became enshrined within new centrally-planned churches and both churches became the centers of major decorative campaigns that drew some of the most distinguished artists practicing in Italy.[14] A year after Pordenone began working in Piacenza, members of the confraternity of Santa Maria della Steccata contracted Parmigianino to decorate the vault and apse directly above their thaumaturgical image of the *Virgo lactans*. These projects contributed to a network of centrally-planned Marian sanctuaries that stretched across early modern Italy, testifying to the miraculous agency of their *Madonnas*.[15] The cult images provided the material loci for ritual exercises and material production that helped shape communal identity, informed local beliefs about the supernatural, and, in the case of the Piacentine *Madonna*, the perception of political adherence to the Holy See.[16] Within this context of rivalry, a connection the Piacentines hoped would redound to the advantage of their cult image was the long-standing relationship between their shrine and the papacy.

A sanctuary dedicated to the Madonna 'in Campagnola', so-called because it was situated in the countryside to the west of the city's medieval walls, had existed since at least the eleventh century, but the exact origins of the wooden cult statue are unclear.[17] Seventeenth-century sources refer to a "sacratissima Imagine" and "miracolosa figura" of the Virgin Mary at the sanctuary during Pope Urban II's visit in 1095.[18] And in a 1757 appraisal of the statue, the sculptor Jan Geernaert supported the authenticity of documents dating the object to before the end of the first millennium because he believed the Virgin's drapery was like that made by the ancient Greeks.[19] Of course, the venerable antiquity of the cult object was of express concern to local historians preoccupied with the prestige of Piacenza's religious sites, and Geernaert's evaluation was reiterated throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[20]

munity immediately petitioned Pope Adrian VI to approve the statutes of the new congregation and the indulgences previously granted to visitors of the old sanctuary by his predecessors. Confirmation was granted only in the form of a private rescript.

[13] Bruno Adorni, "Introduzione", in: *Santa Maria della Steccata a Parma: da chiesa 'civica' a basilica magistrale dell'Ordine costantiniano*, ed. by *idem*, Milan 2008, pp. 13–25: 14; Corna (note 12), pp. 58–60.

[14] Laudedeo Testi, *Santa Maria della Steccata in Parma*, Florence 1922, p. 11, records that construction of the sanctuary of the Steccata began on 4 April 1521. Corna (note 12), pp. 71f., reproduces an excerpt from the unpublished *Cronaca* of Niccolò Banduchi da Fontana, a rector of the new church, that notes the first stone of Santa Maria di Campagna was laid on 13 April 1522 (an event at which "l'Imagine nella [*sic*] Madonna" was present). In both cases the churches and the decorations were financed in large part by the community.

[15] See the various publications by Paul Davies, especially *Studies in the Quattrocento Centrally Planned Church*, London 1992, and "La chiesa a pianta centrale e il suo successo nell'Italia del Rinascimento", in: *L'arte rinascimentale nel contesto*, ed. by Edoardo Villata, Milan 2015, pp. 237–249.

[16] Regarding local cultic rituals, an important Piacentine custom was practiced on the feast of the Annunciation and known as the *ballo dei bambini*. During this ceremony, new-born children were passed between clergymen assembled in the nave until they reached the high altar where they were held up, one by one, to the *Madonna di Campagna* with the implicit understanding that the Virgin, through the mediation of the cult object, would 'see' the child. This ritual not only affirmed belief in the statue's status as an efficacious conduit of grace, but generated a charged atmosphere during which latent animation was projected onto the *Madonna*. This practice of attributive agency or momentarily imputing dynamic presence to an object weakens, however temporarily, the ontological distinction between animate agents and inert matter. For the *ballo*, see Aldo Ambrogio, *Santuario della Madonna di Campagna in Piacenza*, Piacenza 1958, p. 5. For attributive agency, see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford *et al.* 1998, pp. 16–27, 96–99, 150.

[17] For the origins of the sanctuary, see Cristoforo Poggiali, *Memorie storiche della città di Piacenza*, Piacenza 1757–1766, VIII, pp. 342–344; Corna (note 12), pp. 21–27, 32–36; Pierre Racine, "Il luogo: Santa Maria di Campagna alle origini delle Crociate", in: *Santa Maria di Campagna* (note 3), pp. 15–25, with further references.

[18] Pietro Maria Campi, *Dell'historia ecclesiastica di Piacenza [...]*, Piacenza 1651–1662, I, pp. 368, 373. An official *libellus* that lists all the miracles attributed to the *Madonna di Campagna* has not been found.

[19] A transcription of Geernaert's appraisal was published in Corna (note 12), pp. 26f.

[20] See, for example, Gaetano Buttafuoco, *Nuovissima guida della città di Piacenza: con alquanti cenni topografici, statistici e storici*, Piacenza 1842, p. 133; Leopoldo Cerri, *Piacenza ne' suoi monumenti*, Piacenza 1908, p. 114; Corna (note 12), p. 27.

Modern technical analysis, however, suggests that the free-standing, polychromed sculpture currently enshrined on the church's high altar originated in the mid-fourteenth century.[21] If or when this statue replaced an earlier one is unknown, but it is certain that the presence of this sculpture helped to designate a much earlier *locus sanctus*: the primitive sanctuary marked the site of an "antichissimo pozzo" that contained the remains of early Christian martyrs.[22] The *pozzo* originally drew pilgrims on account of a thaumaturgic oil it was alleged to emit and this phenomenon was attributed to the Virgin's intercession.[23] Access to the miraculous oil may have contributed to Pope Urban II's decision to host a council in the fields adjoining the sanctuary during the first week of March 1095.[24] For the Piacentines, the consequences of this council were immense, for Urban granted an extraordinary benefice to visitors of the old shrine of Santa Maria di Campagna. Following the conclusion of the council, the pope carried a bag of sand to the sanctuary exclaiming that he would concede as many years of indulgences as there were grains of sand contained in the sack to those who visited the sanctuary between 19 February and the octave of Pentecost.[25] It was the confirmation of these indulgences that the sixteenth-century advocates of the *Madonna di Campagna* desired for their new church, indulgences that would presumably curb the rising celebrity of the *Madonna della Steccata*. However, it would take another miracle for the indulgences to receive public ratification.

Of the few recorded miracles ascribed to the *Madonna di Campagna*, the most consequential concerns the Medici pope Clement VII. Following the Sack of Rome in May 1527, Clement attributed his escape from the mutinous troops of Charles V to the grace of the Piacentine *Madonna*.[26] To record the fact, the city's governor had a life-sized ex-voto of the pope erected in the new sanctuary just as Pordenone began painting the central cupola.[27] For the Piacentines who had been seeking papal advocacy since 1522, the pope's miraculous delivery was a boon, since he thereafter publicly confirmed the indulgences granted to visitors of Santa Maria di Campagna by Urban II.[28] The privileges conceded by Clement not only endorsed the efficacy of Piacenza's most celebrated cult object but also signaled the city's political alignment with Rome.

The most explicit visual demonstration of Piacentine solidarity with the Holy See was the paintings commissioned from Pordenone for the miraculous statue's new church.[29] The central cupola of Santa Maria di Campagna is divided into octants articulated by raised ribs that climb to an oculus where they

[21] Ceschi Lavagetto (note 3), pp. 41, 43f., 68 note 3.

[22] Campi (note 18), I, p. 48. The well is a catacomb believed to have originated during the Diocletian persecution of 303 CE. See also Poggiali (note 17), I, pp. 266–268; Corna (note 12), pp. 43–56. Similar wells can be found in Brescia at Sant'Afra and in Padua at Santa Giustina.

[23] Campi (note 18), I, pp. 48, 365, is explicit in noting that it was due to the intercession of the Virgin that the salubrious oil was squeezed (*spremuto*) from the bones of the holy martyrs for the benefit of the sick and afflicted.

[24] The pope's elderly and infirm mother, Eudosia, apparently accompanied him to Piacenza to visit the sanctuary in hope of a cure, but passed away during the council and was buried in the ancient sanctuary. See *ibidem*, I, p. 368.

[25] *Ibidem*, I, pp. 368–370, II, p. 269. Campi also records that additional indulgences were granted by Gregory X in 1273.

[26] Poggiali (note 17), VIII, p. 376.

[27] Ferdinando Arisi/Raffaella Arisi, *Santa Maria di Campagna a Piacenza*, Piacenza 1984, p. 158.

[28] In addition to indulgences, Clement awarded the Piacentines the right to elect their own custodians and officiators of the mass. These rights are recorded in Giovan Francesco Malazappi's *Croniche della Provincia di Bologna de' Frati Minori osservanti di San Francesco* (1580). For the relevant passages, see Sante Celli, "Nel quarto centenario della consacrazione della basilica di Santa Maria di Campagna", in: *Bollettino Storico Piacentino*, LVI (1961), pp. 17–21: 20.

[29] Pordenone is documented in Piacenza between 15 February 1530 and 11 March 1532, the former date being that of the original, no longer extant contract between the artist and the rectors of the church. The latter date corresponds to a contractual agreement whereby Pordenone is given permission to depart for four months. For the documents, see Juergen Schulz, "Pordenone's Cupolas", in: *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Art Presented to Anthony Blunt on His 60th Birthday*, London 1967, pp. 44–50; Arisi/Arisi (note 27), pp. 351–354.

4 Luigi da Pace after Raphael, *God the Father, personifications of the planets and Olympian deities.* Rome, Santa Maria del Popolo, Chigi Chapel, cupola

form a ring around the base of the lantern. Pordenone decorated these ribs and the spaces between them to create a thick, heavily ornamented framework through which is seen a radially-conceived illusion of heaven's infinite expanse. Along with a host of angels, the globe of the firmament is populated by what appear to be Old Testament prophets and pagan sibyls, along with the image of God the Father in the vault of the lantern. Due to a paucity of attributes and legible inscriptions, the majority of these figures lack specific identities, but the pairing of prophets and sibyls and the attendant theme of religious syncretism have their most direct precedent in papal commissions such as Michelangelo's frescoes for the Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508–1512) or Bramante's design for the *rivestimento* of the Santa Casa at Loreto (ca. 1509).[30] Moreover, the use of an architectonic framework to synthesize a radial system of illusion with a directed center at the apex of the dome suggests an awareness of Raphael's cupola for the Chigi Chapel at Santa Maria del Popolo (Fig. 4).[31] Past scholarship has repeatedly stressed Pordenone's debt to these works as well as the Roman formal vocabulary of heroically muscular and foreshortened bodies, but without considering that such similarities might be part of a calculated move among the Piacentine citizenry to appropriate figural language and iconography promoted by the papacy.[32] Such tactics had already been employed by the local Benedictines at San Sisto when they obtained the services of Michelangelo's *garzone* Bernardino Zacchetti, commissioning him to decorate the eastern cupola of their church with subjects poached from the Sistine Chapel ceiling.[33] Pordenone's arrangement of the cupola's decorations around God the Father rather than Christ and the Virgin foregrounds a visual affiliation with the aforementioned Roman examples and marks an emphatic distinction between his cupola and the

[30] Partial identifications of Pordenone's figures can be found in Charles E. Cohen, *The Art of Giovanni Antonio da Pordenone: Between Dialect and Language*, Cambridge/New York 1996, II, pp. 646f. Caterina Furlan, "A proposito di alcune sibille friulane del Cinquecento", in: *Sotto la superficie visibile: scritti in onore di Franco Bernabei*, ed. by Marta Nezzo/Giuliana Tomasella, Treviso 2013, pp. 171–177.

[31] John Shearman, "The Chigi Chapel in S. Maria del Popolo", in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXIV (1961), pp. 129–160.

[32] Cf. Lili Fröhlich-Bume, "Beiträge zum Werke des Giovanni Antonio Pordenone", in: *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, n.s., II (1925), pp. 68–90; Arisi/Arisi (note 27), pp. 188, 194; Paola Ceschi Lavagetto, "Il restauro degli affreschi della cupola di Santa Maria di Campagna", in: *Il Pordenone* (note 11), pp. 51–59: 53; Cohen (note 30), I, pp. 298, 324, note 100, II, p. 651; Caterina Furlan, "Il Pordenone, Raffaello e Roma: un rapporto rivisitato (1515–1522)", in: *La Madonna per San Sisto di Raffaello e la cultura piacentina della prima metà del Cinquecento*, ed. by Paola Ceschi Lavagetto, Parma 1985, pp. 85–112: 104–106; Claudia Bertling Biaggini, *Il Pordenone: Pictor Modernus. Zum Umgang mit Bildrhetorik und Perspektive im Werk des Giovanni Antonio de Sacchis*, Hildesheim *et al.* 1999, pp. 61–64, 68–70.

[33] For Zacchetti's cupola see Sonia Cavicchioli, "The Fresco Decoration of the Church of the Cassinese Monastery of San Sisto in Piacenza, Italy: Meaning and Function", in: *Equipamientos monásticos e práctica espiritual*, ed. by Maria de Lurdes Craveiro/Carla Alexandra Gonçalves/Joana Antunes, Moscavide 2017, pp. 9–23.

5 Pordenone, *God the Father*. Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, lantern

dome of Santa Maria della Steccata, as well as the domes executed by Correggio at San Giovanni Evangelista and Parma cathedral. Pordenone's allusions to the art of Rome clearly aligned with his patrons' political agenda, and in doing so made a significant bid for the Piacentine *Madonna*'s pre-eminence among local competitors.

The Visual Rhetoric of Theophany

The practice of projecting a vision of heaven on ceilings and domes bespeaks an unbroken tradition from antiquity and one accompanied by a perennial problem: the difficulty of conveying a persuasive synthesis between center and margin.[34] At Santa Maria di Campagna, Pordenone's efforts to negotiate the synthesis of a directed center with the radial illusion governing the dome's lower portions resulted in an image of God so severely foreshortened that bodily proportions are almost unreadable (Fig. 5). Far more space is devoted to the celestial ring of gesturing oracles who orbit around the truncated image of the Godhead (Fig. 6). The emotional fervor with which

[34] See John Shearman, *Only Connect…: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, Princeton 1992, pp. 149–191; *idem*, "Correggio's Illusionism", in: *La prospettiva rinascimentale: codificazioni e trasgressioni*, conference proceedings Milan 1977, ed. by Marisa Dalai Emiliani, Florence 1980, pp. 281–294: 284–291.

6–8 Pordenone, *God the Father, prophets and sibyls*, overall view and details of northeast and southeast octants. Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, cupola

these figures reach out into the world of the spectator suggests a suspension of the distinction between fiction and reality. But the actions of the prophets and sibyls not only implicate the presence of a beholder. Many of them engage in heated interactions conveyed by dramatically foreshortened, counterpoised gestures that direct the viewer's attention upward to the image of God in the lantern and downward to the miraculous effigy that was installed at the high altar on 24 December 1531 (Figs. 6–8).[35] Before 1555, the high altar was positioned beneath the cupola's western perimeter.[36] And with the exception of the upper frieze, the drum of the dome remained undecorated until 1543.[37] Thus anyone entering the cupola precinct in the decade following Pordenone's undertaking would become immediately aware of a formal relationship constructed by the two prophetic figures in the foreground of the westernmost octant who expressly point down across the as yet unpainted space of the drum to the *Madonna di Campagna* (Fig. 9). Such cross-spatial illusionism abounds in the artist's earlier projects at Treviso, Cremona, and Cortemaggiore, where the emphatic relief of dramatically foreshortened figures viscerally engages the viewer.[38] At Piacenza, however, the gestures of the prophets articulated an axis between Pordenone's animated illusions and an object of divine animation. The importance of the west octant is indicated by the care with which it was executed: technical analysis reveals it comprises twelve *giornate*, a number which far exceeds the other octants in the dome.[39] As a compositional device, the actions of these figures help direct devotion to the cult focus, but as many of the prophets and sibyls point upward to the foreshortened image of God the Father in the lantern, they also function reciprocally to express, in Paul Davies words, "the radiation of holiness" from the cult statue outward.[40]

9 Pordenone, *Prophets and sibyls*, detail from Fig. 6

[35] Corna (note 12), pp. 96f.

[36] The high altar was moved during a major restructuring that began in 1555 and extended the west end of the church. The *Madonna* is still installed on the high altar, but in a shrine built in 1791 and accompanied by sculptures of Saint John the Baptist and Saint Catherine of Alexandria. For the structural modifications, see Arisi/Arisi (note 27), p. 358.

[37] These later frescoes were executed by Bernardino Gatti. Arguing for the impact of Raphael on Pordenone's development of cross-spatial relationships, Shearman (note 31), p. 145, note 75, observed that the image of God the Father in the lantern was oriented to be read in conjunction with Gatti's fresco of the *Assumption* in the drum. However, Shearman makes no mention of the role played by the prophets and sibyls, the cult statue, or the fact that Gatti's paintings post-date Pordenone's by over a decade. Although it is possible that Pordenone conceived a decorative scheme for the drum before departing Piacenza in 1532, no record survives.

[38] See *ibidem*, p. 145; Schulz (note 29), pp. 45f.; Charles Cohen, "Observations on the Malchiostro Chapel", in: *Il Pordenone* (note 11), pp. 27–33: 28–30; *idem* (note 30), I, pp. 280–285.

[39] Ceschi Lavagetto (note 32), p. 53.

[40] Paul Davies, "Framing the Miraculous: The Devotional Functions of Perspective in Italian Renaissance Tabernacle Design", in: *Art History*, XXXVI (2013), pp. 898–921: 911.

The interspatial relationship also extends to the vertical alignment of image, relic, and Eucharist at the high altar.[41] Below the *Madonna di Campagna*, at the foot of the altar, lay another site of miracle: the entrance to the famed *pozzo* of martyrs that exuded panacean oil. Aligning the well and the *Madonna* with the high altar orchestrated a physical concentration of the miraculous environment that stretched from the crypt to the altar to the enshrined cult statue along a single axis.[42] When read upward from floor to cupola, the interspatial visual relationship that Pordenone's beckoning prophets construct with the cult object could be said to extend the material and ritual apparatus surrounding the miraculous image. This is to say that the oracles ask the *Madonna*'s devotees to go beyond their perception of the object itself and extend the process of interaction to include the cupola decorations. Such an assertion is not exceptional. By illusionistically extending the cult object's network of relations, Pordenone's commanding prophets underscore the orthodox position that the Queen of Heaven's power, to use Robert Maniura's phrase, "is not strictly localized just as the saint is not strictly localized".[43] Indeed, Pope Clement VII's assertion that he escaped the troops of Charles V thanks to the intercession of a statue located hundreds of miles away reinforces contemporary belief in the non-localized power of the Virgin.[44] By conscripting sensational artifice to create an illusion of participation with the cult object, Pordenone's oracles suggest that the realm of divine agency is not restricted to the material effigy. As the numerous figures who draw the devotee's attention to the Godhead in the lantern indicate, the cult object's sanctity is due to the grace of God above.

In brief, Pordenone's prophetic mediators of divine will facilitate a cross-spatial illusion between the cult statue and a supratemporal vision of the celestial kingdom in an attempt to augment the desired function of the *Madonna di Campagna* and legitimize that desire by acknowledging the absent source of the object's sanctity. Notwithstanding, the beholder's experience of the dome decorations does not end with the prophets and sibyls; they populate only a portion of the cupola. A considerable amount of space is devoted to the decorative framework that intercepts the cross-spatial illusion to present an additional claim on the viewer's attention. This framework is crowded with an abundance of arcane ornamentation that hinders an unambiguous reading of the cupola's imagery. As we shall see, the interpretive difficulty it presents alongside the undisguised directives of the prophets and sibyls encourages a more speculative form of religious engagement.

Productive Ambiguity

The painted framework is organized into a network of contained spaces possessing different levels of pictorial realism. The ring that surrounds the oculus is crowded with a frieze-like parade of putti who drive a variety of terrestrial and aquatic animals around in an endless circle. These putti, as well as their counterparts inhabiting the ribs, are painted

[41] Due to the absence of material and textual evidence recording the *Madonna di Campagna*'s early votive environment and the architectural modifications that transformed the high altar and choir of the church in 1555 and 1791, this essay will not address the question of how votive objects resonated with the imagery in the cupola.

[42] Cf. Mitchell B. Merback, "Channels of Grace: Pilgrimage Architecture, Eucharistic Imagery, and Visions of Purgatory at the Host-Miracle Churches of Late Medieval Germany", in: *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, ed. by Sarah Blick/Rita Tekippe, Leiden/Boston 2005, pp. 587–646, who has drawn attention to the spatial logic of a number of German host-miracle shrines where cult imagery, altars, and miracle sites were coordinated along a vertical axis.

[43] Robert Maniura, "Agency and Miraculous Images", in: *The Agency of Things in Medieval and Early Modern Art: Materials, Power and Manipulation*, ed. by Grażyna Jurkowlaniec/Ika Matyjaszkiewicz/Zuzanna Sarnecka, New York/London 2018, pp. 62–72: 68.

[44] For more on the non-localized power of miracle-working images, see Christopher J. Nygren, "Metonymic Agency: Some Data on Presence and Absence in Italian Miracle Cults", in: *I Tatti*, XXII (2019), pp. 209–237.

in flesh tones against a fictive gold background that is circumscribed by painted moldings of grey stone. The unusually broad ribs are luxuriantly ornate and teeming with a surprising array of creatures, both grotesque and natural, along with weaponry, astrological and musical instruments, vegetation, masks, zoomorphic escutcheons, and banners. In the center of each painted rib is the illusion of a recessed oval within which Old Testament scenes appear in monochrome to give them the appearance of gilded relief sculpture. As the writings of Carlo Ridolfi attest, these vignettes were legible to early modern viewers and follow the biblical chronology when read counter-clockwise, starting with the *Creation of the universe* and ending with *Judith with the head of Holofernes*.[45] Below the ribs, Pordenone painted a frieze containing mythological characters executed in color alternating with scenes of ancient history painted, like the Old Testament scenes, in monochrome *tondi*.[46] Collectively, the diversity of subjects might be said to espouse a syncretic story of salvation, but the variety and interplay of motifs that enliven the framework also affirm an interest in imitating all of nature's materials, whether they be sculpted stone, clay, cast metal, cloth, flora, or flesh. When viewed in its entirety, the cupola presents a celebration of the exuberant abundance of imitable matter (animate and inanimate), such that the principle of plenitude may be said to underwrite the glorification of the Piacentine *Madonna*.[47]

At first glance, the visual sequences and symmetries of the framework evince a sense of cohesion, but no text or group of texts has been shown to reveal a consistent pattern of relationship that can account for all of the depicted phenomena. Indeed, the dome imagery is loaded with curious juxtapositions and iconographic ambiguities; many of the figures are unidentifiable and the typologies drawn by modern scholars are inconsistent.[48] One of the difficulties facing interpreters is the lack of consistent sequential and paradigmatic relations. As noted, the Old Testament scenes follow the biblical chronology, but the scenes from ancient history defy chronological sequence. The vertical alignment of these biblical and historical vignettes along the ribs of the dome implies some kind of correspondence and, in certain cases, typological relationships can be discerned. The vignettes of David defeating Goliath and Cynegeirus clenching the bowsprit of a Persian ship, for example, present *exempla* of determination: underdogs who overcame extraordinary odds to defeat stronger opponents (Fig. 10). However, no such relationship can be found between the vertically-aligned scenes of Noah's ark and Queen Tomyris taking revenge on Cyrus (Fig. 11). Also unclear is the relationship between some of the abutting scenes of historical action and poetical fiction within the same rib, such the putto donning wings and stringing a bow like Cupid beneath the scene of Joseph sold into

[45] In between, the Old Testament scenes include the *Creation of Adam*, the *Dove returning to Noah with an olive branch*, the *Sacrifice of Isaac*, *Joseph sold into bondage*, *Moses receiving the Tablets of the Law* and *David slaying Goliath*. Cf. Carlo Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell'arte ovvero Le vite degli illustri pittori veneti e dello Stato*, ed. by Detlev von Hadeln, Rome 1965 (first ed. Venice 1648), I, p. 125; Cohen (note 30), II, p. 646.

[46] The mythological episodes have been identified as the *Rape of Europa*, *Neptune and Amphitrite*, *Venus and Adonis*, *Diana and nymphs fighting satyrs*, the *Battle of the gods and giants*, the *Labors of Hercules*, and *Processions with Bacchus and Silenus*. The scenes from ancient history were inspired predominantly by Valerius Maximus' *De factis dictisque memorabilibus libri IX* (an Italian translation was available by 1509), although several subjects are also mentioned in Augustine's *De civitate Dei* and a few in Livy's *Ab urbe condita*. The scenes have been identified as *Castor and Pollux at the battle of lake Regillus*, *Virginius kills his daughter*, *Supplication of the Sabine women*, *Naval battle of Cynegeirus*, *Proof of the innocence of the vestal Tuccia*, *Battle of Marcus Valerius Corvus*, *Justice of Trajan*, and *Tomyris with the head of Cyrus*. See Jacqueline Biscontin, "Il fregio del Pordenone in Santa Maria di Campagna a Piacenza", in: *Prospettiva*, XX (1980), pp. 58–69; Roberto Guerrini, "Temi profani e fonti letterarie classiche tra Pordenone e Amalteo", in: *Il Pordenone* (note 11), pp. 67–73.

[47] Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, New York 1936, pp. 50f.

[48] Cf. Biscontin (note 46); Ferdinando Arisi, "Bibbia, mito e storia nella

10 Pordenone, detail of rib with *David and Goliath* (above) and *Naval battle of Cynegeirus* (below). Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, cupola

11 Pordenone, detail of rib with *Noah's ark* (above) and *Tomyris with the head of Cyrus* (below). Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, cupola

12 Pordenone, detail of rib with *Joseph sold into bondage*. Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, cupola

13 Bernardino Gatti, *Life of the Virgin*. Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, drum

bondage (Fig. 12).[49] As Charles Cohen has noted, the sheer abundance and combination of Christian, mythological, and ancient historical imagery that fills the cupola grant the ensemble an "encyclopedic character" that cannot be reduced to a single message.[50] As with many artistic experiments of the 1530s, referential ambiguities appear to be built-in to the design as a way of altering the conditions by which meaning is communicated.[51]

Notwithstanding, most scholars agree that the imagery bears on the providential diffusion of sacred truth signaled by the prophets and sibyls of the cupola and fulfilled by the scenes from the life of the Virgin which were later painted in the drum of the dome by Bernardino Gatti in 1543 (Fig. 13).[52] To be sure, such readings are credible, but they ignore the frescoes' relationship to the cult statue and dismiss much of the 'extravagant' imagery adorning the framework as mere ornament, reflecting a modernist bias that ignores the poetical role of ornament in upholding meaning through its affective capacity and polysemous character.

The sheer size of the framework grants it an assertive material presence. Encrusted with a dense swarm of lively forms, it does not function simply as a device to direct the viewer's attention elsewhere, but as a series of paintings to be appreciated in their own right. The Renaissance frame can connote a

cupola grande di S. Maria di Campagna, a Piacenza, affrescata dal Pordenone", in: *Il Noncello*, LVI (1983), pp. 7–24.

[49] In other cases, evident relationships emerge, such as between the vignette of David defeating Goliath and the surmounting image of a putto riding an eagle in the manner of Ganymede – another young shepherd, beloved of the divine, and elevated to a position of power in heavenly service. I am grateful to Samuel Vitali for this observation. The point is that such relationships are not consistent.

[50] Cohen (note 30), I, p. 294. In this regard, Pordenone's cupola contrasts with the ensemble he had just completed in the Pallavicino Chapel at the church of the Santissima Annunziata, Cortemaggiore, which was designed with a tight iconographic and psychological unity to celebrate the theme of the Immaculate Conception. See Alessandra Galizzi Kroegel, *Flying Babies in Emilian Painting: Iconographies of the Immaculate Conception circa 1500*, PhD diss. Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md., 1992, pp. 212f.

[51] See the essays in *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art*, conference proceedings Miami, Fla., 2007, ed. by Alexander Nagel/Lorenzo Pericolo, Farnham/Burlington 2010; and the interpretive red herrings contained in the decorations of the Galerie François I discussed by Rebecca Zorach, *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold: Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance*, Chicago/London 2005, pp. 43–77.

[52] Cf. John Shearman, "La Cappella Chigi in S. Maria del Popolo", in: *idem*, *Funzione e illusione: Raffaello, Pontormo, Correggio*, ed. by Alessandro Nova, Milan 1983, pp. 115–147: 129, 244, note 75; Ceschi Lavagetto (note 3), pp. 45–48; Cohen (note 30), I, pp. 290–299.

circumscribed notion of space, one that posits its existence as a boundary that separates the viewer from the viewed or the work of art from its environment.[53] Pordenone problematizes this conception of the frame by loading it with figures that presumably inhabit a space in front of it. The stacking of illusion on top of illusion puts pressure on art's mimetic limitations by drawing attention to the simultaneous perception of surface and illusionistic depth. In doing so, the amalgams of motifs adorning the ribs weaken the logic of the frame and compete with the contiguous illusion of heavenly space. This is to say that the ornamented framework raises questions about the status and distinction between what is central and marginal within the dome as a whole. One way to address this problem would be to invoke Jacques Derrida's treatment of the *parergon* as a way of conceiving the paradoxical logic of the frame.[54] As that which is "subordinate or accessory to the main subject",[55] the *parergon* is typically associated with the activity of the threshold that enables the *ergon*, the main work or intrinsic form, by defining what it augments.[56] But for Derrida, the *parergon* is neither part of the *ergon* nor easily detached from it.[57] It has what he calls "une épaisseur" (a thickness) separating it from the constitutive and external simultaneously, while exerting "pressure at the boundary" and potentially threatening the *ergon* by calling attention to what it lacks.[58] As such, the parergonal frame can destabilize the structure it both supplements and makes possible.[59] The ornamented framework of the cupola could be said to operate along similar lines in the way it both supports and calls into question the distinction between what is essential and what is accessory. However, at stake here is not the identification of problems that assail the task of distinguishing between 'inside' and 'outside' (or 'necessary' and 'extraneous' or 'central' and 'peripheral'), but how such problems impact the role of ornament within the larger pictorial exposition of divine will staged by the prophets and actualized through the cult statue. A more period-appropriate means that offers greater purchase on assessing the way Pordenone's paintings call hierarchical distinctions into question can be found by considering the rhetorical effects of early modern *ornamentum*.

The terms *ornato* (Latin: *ornatus*) and *ornamentum* had varied connotations and applications. For Cristoforo Landino, *ornato* was understood as an added or attached embellishment.[60] Alternatively, Leon Battista Alberti's application of the principle *ornamentum* was more relative and could refer to that which brings pleasure and dignity, as something auxiliary, but also as constitutive of the unity of the design.[61] This latter sense of the term has also been shown to inform the thinking of Leonardo Bruni, for whom

[53] Paul Duro, "Introduction", in: *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, conference proceedings Canberra 1994, ed. by *idem*, Cambridge, Mass., 1996, pp. 1–10; Louis Marin, "The Frame of Representation and Some of Its Figures", *ibidem*, pp. 79–95, 285–288; and the discussion in Holmes (note 4), pp. 213–215.

[54] Jacques Derrida, *La vérité en peinture*, Paris 1978, pp. 44–94.

[55] Oxford English Dictionary, URL: https://oed.com/view/Entry/137856?redirectedFrom=Parergon& (accessed 20 July 2020). See also the important historical discussions of the *parergon* [*para*: beside, *ergon*: work] in Anna Degler, *Parergon: Attribut, Material und Fragment in der Bildästhetik des Quattrocento*, Paderborn 2015; Paul Duro, "What Is a Parergon?", in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, LXXVII (2019), pp. 23–33.

[56] About the subject, see Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon", in: *October*, IX (1979), pp. 3–41: 20.

[57] *Ibidem*, p. 24.

[58] Derrida (note 54), p. 71; *idem* (note 56), p. 20.

[59] See the discussions in Mark Wigley, "Theoretical Slippage: The Architecture of the Fetish", in: *The Princeton Architectural Journal*, IV (1992), pp. 88–129; and Rafael Schacter, *Ornament and Order: Graffiti, Street Art and the Parergon*, Farnham *et al.* 2014, pp. 35–39.

[60] In the preface to his 1481 edition of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Landino praised Masaccio's skill as an imitator of nature and composer whose pictures were "puro senza ornato" (Cristoforo Landino, *Scritti critici e teorici*, ed. by Roberto Cardini, Rome 1974, I, p. 124). See also Hellmut Wohl, *The Aesthetics of Italian Renaissance Art: A Reconsideration of Style*, Cambridge/New York 1999, pp. 56–59.

[61] According to Hans-Karl Lücke, "*Ornamentum* Reconsidered: Observations on Alberti's *De re ædificatoria libri decem*", in: *Albertiana*, VII (2004), pp. 99–113: 111, Alberti's "*ornamentum* does not supersede a form which in itself is sufficient and establishes the norm, but rather serves to bring

ornamentation of speech was not superficial but vital for mediating "between the knowledge of things and the sciences of the word", making it essential to the process of cognition and the illumination of reality.[62] Pordenone's use of ornament in Piacenza reflects a similar understanding of it as simultaneously constitutive and supplementary. For example, several of the actions performed by the putti within the ribs make no specific literary allusion, but the considerable space devoted to them suggests that they are more than merely accessory. Their significance is neither narrative nor narrowly symbolic, but rhetorical and affective. As Charles Dempsey has shown, such "spirited pictorial animation[s]" could participate as demonstrations of artistic variation or as expressive essences that transmit sensations and bring forth inner passions.[63] In this regard, the ideas and sensations they embody cannot be limited to the dynamic of prophecy and fulfillment attributed to the oracles in the cupola and the narrative scenes in the drum. This observation is not intended to discredit prior interpretations but to emphasize the ambiguity that inheres within the apparent visual order of the dome paintings and the impropriety of approaching them as if they constituted a straightforward program or offered a clear hierarchy of content.[64] Numerous components, such as the putto frightened by a ghoulish head or another confronted by a monkey (Figs. 14, 15), defy systematic relation or maintain something of their own autonomy within the larger exposition of God's self-disclosure. Like medieval marginalia, such components do not reduce the status of the framework's imagery to inchoate visual noise, but signal their own prerogatives, a "flux of becoming" captured within the decorative system.[65] Pordenone's *ornamentum* may thus supplement the impression of order while also constituting a space for its conversion into play and the generation of variable emotive and referential cues.

Encompassing naturalism and artistic fantasy, the ornamented framework appeals to the aesthetic ideals that shaped Renaissance perceptions of *pitture grottesche*.[66] And like such decorations, the peculiar aggregations of forms do not communicate a single proposition, but function allusively and flexibly. In early sixteenth-century Italy, grotesques were understood as calculated infringements against reason. And yet such bizarre congeries of pictorial imagination were not regarded as mere caprice, but prized as forms of modern *all'antica* painting characterized by endless variety, visual wit, and the potential to transmit veiled truths.[67] Pordenone, of course, was working well before the first appearance of the term *grottesca* in sixteenth-century Italian art theoretical literature and its subsequent interpolation by Giovan Paolo Lomazzo, Pirro Ligorio, Gabriele Paleotti, and other post-Tridentine

something unfinished and insufficient to completion and at the same time to perfection". See also Paul Davies, "The Double Life of Alberti's Column", in: *Art History*, XIII (1990), pp. 126–128.

[62] Hanna-Barbara Gerl/John Michael Krois, "On the Philosophical Dimension of Rhetoric: The Theory of *Ornatus* in Leonardo Bruni", in: *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, XI (1978), pp. 178–190: 180.

[63] Charles Dempsey, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto*, Chapel Hill *et al.* 2001, p. 28; see also pp. xii–xv, 29–34, 43–54, 94f.

[64] The assumption that pre-modern visual ensembles harbor an inherent singularity of meaning or hidden, unifying program has been rightly criticized by Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*, London 1992; Zorach (note 51); Kirk Ambrose, *The Nave Sculpture of Vézelay: The Art of Monastic Viewing*, Toronto 2006; and many others.

[65] Camille (note 64), p. 9.

[66] A few of the more pertinent studies on Renaissance grotesques include Nicole Dacos, *La découverte de la Domus Aurea et la formation des grotesques à la Renaissance*, London *et al.* 1969; Rudolf Wittkower, "Hieroglyphs in the Early Renaissance", in: *idem*, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, London 1977, pp. 113–128; Philippe Morel, *Les grotesques: les figures de l'imaginaire dans la peinture italienne de la fin de la Renaissance*, Paris 1997; Dorothea Scholl, *Von den "Grottesken" zum Grotesken: Die Konstituierung einer Poetik des Grotesken in der italienischen Renaissance*, Münster 2004.

[67] Susanne Margarit McColeman, "Grotesque in Sacred Spaces: The Cappella dei Priori and the Cappella del Quartiere di Leone X in Palazzo Vecchio", in: *Holy Monsters, Sacred Grotesques: Monstrosity and Religion in Europe and the United States*, conference proceedings Houston 2013, ed. by Michael E. Heyes, Lanham *et al.* 2018, pp. 109–131, has argued that the hybrid appearance of the creatures adorning Roman grottos could evoke the early modern discourse of monstrous portents. Stemming from the Latin word *monstrare*, such monsters were meant 'to show' something to viewers.

commentators.[68] But the belief that one could gain some access to secret knowledge through the interpretation of cryptic pictographs was well-documented in northern Italy at the turn of the century, and examples abound in Francesco Colonna's antiquarian romance *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499). For instance, while the lovesick hero, Poliphilo, contemplates the enigmatic decorations of an obelisk in the gardens of Queen Eleuterylida, Lady Logistica explains that "these figures, with their perpetual affinity and conjunction, are noble antique monuments and Egyptian hieroglyphs, whose hidden message tells you this: to the divine and infinite trinity, one in essence".[69] The attempt to reconcile mythological and hieroglyphic concepts with Christian doctrine is typical of such interpretations, as is Logistica's subsequent admonition: "Do not think my explanation prolix, Poliphilo, but rather brief [...]. Although it seems somewhat transparent to humans, it is not totally clear to us [...]."[70]

Logistica's warning makes plain the elusive nature of such imagery and the idea that the hidden truths to which they allude are only partially accessible.[71] In Parma, pictograms from the *Hypnerotomachia* substituted the epitaph in a design for Canon Vincenzo Carissimi's sepulcher (ca. 1520), suggesting that for the canon and his circle of friends, hieroglyphic signs could express concepts in discursive form.[72] Giancarla Periti has shown that the same kind of discursive reasoning underlies the decorations *alla grottesca* that Alessandro Araldi and Correggio executed for the Benedictine convent of San Paolo in Parma, and a similar argument may be made for the ornamented frames of the Chiostro Maggiore at Santa Giustina in Padua.[73] Though not so easily decoded as Colonna's sequences of glyphs, the motifs and vignettes that crowd the framework of Pordenone's cupola encourage a similar hermeneutics that presupposes the possibility of gaining insight into divine wisdom through their contemplation. This mode of interpretation has nothing to do with actual Egyptian hieroglyphs, but was developed in the writings of classical authors and granted new currency in early modern Italy through the efforts of Poggio Bracciolini, Niccolò de' Niccoli, and others.[74]

[68] According to Wohl (note 60), p. 216, the earliest known references to *grottesche* in sixteenth-century Italian art literature are found in Anton Francesco Doni's *Disegno*, Venice 1549, and *La Zucca*, Venice 1551. Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane [...]*, Bologna 1582, chap. 37–43, condemned the creation of *grottesche*. Giovan Paolo Lomazzo likened grotesques to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs in his *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura [...]*, Milan 1584, excerpted in *Scritti d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. by Paola Barocchi, Milan 1971–1977, III, pp. 2693–2695. Sometime after 1568, Pirro Ligorio described *grottesche* as a kind of *Ursprache* that by means of sensibly perceived and poetically contrived symbols disclosed the hidden workings of nature; see his unpublished *Libro dell'antichità*, transcribed in Dacos (note 66), pp. 162, 165. Although Dacos does not discuss Pordenone, the artist's use of ornament supports her argument that the status of Renaissance grotesques developed from subservient ornamentation to autonomous painting in the early sixteenth century. However, while Pordenone's congeries of arcane imagery defer the stable identification of a unified program, the ornamentation is not "sans sujet", nor simply an expression of creative liberty. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 117; see also pp. 129–135.

[69] Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: The Strife of Love in a Dream*, trans. by Joscelyn Godwin, London 1999, p. 129.

[70] *Ibidem*, p. 130. As Rosemary Trippe, "The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, Image, Text, and Vernacular Poetics", in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, LV (2002), pp. 1222–1258: 1248, noted, Colonna's writing similarly "conceals meaning within rhetorical ornament, specifically metaphor, simile (*imago*), comparison (*similitudo*), and periphrasis (*circumitio*)".

[71] Poliphilo's journey to encyclopedic knowledge is likewise evanescent. For more on Colonna's use of hieroglyphs, see Giovanni Pozzi, "Les hiéroglyphes de l'*Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*", in: *L'emblème à la Renaissance*, conference proceedings Paris 1980, ed. by Yves Giraud *et al.*, Paris 1982, pp. 15–27; Clare Lapraik Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance*, Leiden/Boston 2016, pp. 342–367.

[72] See Alessandra Talignani, "*Quis Evadet*: una traccia della *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* a Parma nel sepolcro di Vincenzo Carissimi", in: *Artes*, V (1997), pp. 111–137. The funerary monument was built without the inscription.

[73] Giancarla Periti, *In the Courts of Religious Ladies: Art, Vision, and Pleasure in Italian Renaissance Convents*, New Haven, Conn./London 2016, pp. 131–203; Cristina Bragaglia, "Girolamo del Santo e gli affreschi del chiostro maggiore di Santa Giustina a Padova: fonti iconografiche", in: *Bollettino del Museo Civico di Padova*, LXXXII (1993), pp. 171–194.

[74] See Wittkower (note 66); Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, London 1958, pp. 169f. It should be noted that for Marsilio Ficino, Egyptian hieroglyphs were not discursive. Instead, each glyph was "a type of science and wisdom, a subject and a whole", as argued by Denis J.-J. Robichaud, "Ficino on Force, Magic, and Prayers: Neoplatonic and Her-

14 Pordenone, detail of rib with frightened putto. Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, cupola

15 Pordenone, detail of rib with putto and monkey. Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, cupola

That said, Pordenone's ornamental repertory encompasses much more than ancient *grottesche*. The plenitude of Christian and non-Christian subjects, natural and fantastic motifs, and diversity of imitated materials suggests a desire to represent all of nature's *materia*: subject, substance, and form. The belief that nature itself could be read like a discursive language of symbols that points back to its divine author was pervasive in the Christian West and found one of its most sustained articulations in the all-enveloping metaphor of the Book of Nature.[75] This metaphor relied on a metaphysical understanding of nature rooted in Scripture: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made."[76] As Raymond of Sabunde expressed it in his *Theologia naturalis* (1480): "each creature is like a letter traced by the hand of God".[77] The implication

metic Influences in Ficino's *Three Books on Life*", in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, LXX (2017), pp. 44–87: 77.

[75] See Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, Frankfurt 1981, pp. 47–67; Kellie Robertson, *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy*, Philadelphia 2017, pp. 31–90; and the essays in *The Book of Nature in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, conference proceedings Groningen 2002, ed. by Arjo Vanderjagt/Klaas van Berkel, Leuven *et al.* 2005.

[76] Romans 1:20: "invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi, per ea quæ facta sunt, intellecta, conspiciuntur: sempiterna quoque ejus virtus, et divinitas."

[77] "[…] quam quelibet creatura non est nisi quædam littera digito dei scripta" (Raymond of Sabunde, *Theologia naturalis sive liber creaturarum […]*, Venice 1581 [first ed. Deventer 1480], "Prologus", n.p.).

here is that by reading the Book of Nature – that is, by interpreting the sensorially-perceived world as a meaningful ordering of signs or metaphysical index – one could discover something of God's hidden wisdom. However, the Book of Nature is not filled with logical statements, but with enigmas and obscure portents, the elucidation of which can never grant precise knowledge of what is God. Thus, in the context of natural theology, discursive reasoning functions as a means to an unattainable end, but not without return. For as Nicholas of Cusa explains, it is in the process of asking "in what manner they [visible signs] exist or for what purpose they exist" that one begins to recognize God's infinity and transcendence.[78] As an encyclopedic collection of nature's *materia*, Pordenone's cupola decorations might be interpreted like the Book of Nature, their referential ambiguities and syntactic detours likewise encouraging speculation on the manner in and purpose for which they allude to divine wisdom.

Augustine's Example

Appearing chaotic and structured at once, the vitality of Pordenone's decorations depends on their flexibility as symbolic vehicles and the wide range of emotions they could stimulate, both independently and in conversation with the miracle-working statue to which the prophetic figures direct the viewer's attention. Given the preceding observations, how might one attempt to unravel some of their complexity? One potential avenue lies in the action performed by the figure Pordenone painted to greet visitors to the sanctuary: the fresco of *Saint Augustine enthroned* from 1533–1535 (Fig. 16).[79] Located on the left wall when entering the church, this large fresco presents an image of the saint placed amongst the emblems of his episcopal office and surrounded by a group of attendant putti who hold aloft immense manuscripts for his perusal. As the only monumental figure adorning the vestibule until 1543, Augustine was the visitor's first interlocutor. With arms flung wide, the saint gestures toward two separate codices. Pressing his fingertips against precise areas of the pages, Augustine appears to have pinpointed a correspondence within the texts of the two books. This is to say that Augustine physically enacts a textual concordance for the beholder, toward whom he directs his gaze. Aided by angelic attendants and divorced from any recognizable historical context, the moment depicted does not correspond in any specific way to the recorded events of the saint's vita. Rather than providing insight into his life then, the fresco can be said to function demonstratively: presenting a comparison of texts, the saint demonstrates a process of extrapolating the true and fuller *sensus* from different verbal surfaces. The manuscript on the right displays a passage from the saint's *De civitate Dei* (discussed below), but the text of the other manuscript is hidden from view. Occluding this text suggests that what is important here is not the result of Augustine's concordance, but the process of interpretation that gave rise to it. The action that Augustine performs, in other words, furnishes an indication of the particular interpretive disposition that Pordenone's dome paintings presuppose. This is not to say that the painting of Saint Augustine provides the hermeneutic key to an iconographical program conceived in advance, but that it advocates a particular process of engagement. Such an exemplary figure, moreover, is not unique in Pordenone's oeuvre: at Cremona cathedral, for instance, the counterposed gesture and gaze of the centurion Pordenone painted in his *Crucifixion* directs viewers to turn from Christ's corpse on the cross to the celestial vision of the Redeemer located across the space of the nave in the church's apse, demonstrating by way of example the

[78] Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia*, trans. by Jasper Hopkins, Minneapolis [2]1985, book 2, chap. 13, p. 101.

[79] First recorded by Vasari (note 2), IV, p. 431. See also Cohen (note 30), I, p. 371, II, pp. 687–690, no. 70; Caterina Furlan, *Il Pordenone*, Milan 1988, pp. 225f., 263–266.

ascendant process of Christian vision.[80] At Piacenza, Augustine illustrates another kind of example: the pursuit of divine truth through associative means of discernment.

Confronted with the astounding diversity and abundance of pictures adorning the central cupola, visitors to the church of Santa Maria di Campagna found themselves faced with some of the same problems that attend the cross-referencing and typological thinking characteristic of scriptural exegesis. Even though the range of subjects within the dome extends beyond the purview of Scripture, the interpretive difficulties that Pordenone's paintings engender are not unlike those articulated in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*. In this fundamental work, Augustine provided basic exegetical principles for the interpretation and exposition of Scripture, employing an allegorical method to demonstrate how one could discern an intellectual recognition of the "invisible things" of God through "the things that are made".[81] In the sixteenth century, the theory of signs that Augustine developed in the treatise's second book was particularly important for theologians seeking to defend the spiritual sense of Scripture and offers a rationale for the ambiguity of some of Pordenone's decorations. While acknowledging that Augustine identified the signs of words, not pictures, as the means of discovering and disseminating divine will, early modern iconophiles did not hesitate to extend his theory of signs to include pictorial representations.[82] Much like the exegete, Christian beholders believed that the will of God acted through the various authors and objects that contributed to and disseminated the story of salvation. The purpose of reading these authors (or meditating on their pictorial translation) was, as Augustine relates, "to find in it nothing more than the thoughts and desires of those who wrote it and through these the will of God".[83] However, such an ambition was impeded in several ways. For one, there was the necessity of sifting through various human intentions, which generated no small amount of obscurity. Due to differences in language (verbal or pictorial), culture, historical awareness, and structures of thought, uncertainties about the intention behind a text (or image) abound. The opacity of Scripture, moreover, is explained as the product of human sin, particularly that of pride, and tied to the plurality of languages that followed from the Tower of Babel.[84] The resultant obscurity is further exacerbated by those ensnared by their own heedless presumption: "But many and varied obscurities and ambiguities deceive those who read casually, understanding one thing instead of another; indeed, in certain places they do not find anything to interpret even erroneously, so obscurely are certain sayings covered with a most dense mist."[85] Augustine is plainly aware of the pitfalls into which unwary exegetes may be led, but he also recognizes that the conditions under which dissonant voices and inordinate self-esteem guide one another into obscurity may also operate as a necessary curative: "I do not doubt that this situation was provided by God to conquer pride by work and to combat disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless."[86]

The non-transparency of Holy Writ chides those who presume to make evident a hidden sense without

[80] Di Resta (note 10), pp. 459–461.

[81] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. by D. W. Robertson, New York 1958, p. 10.

[82] For the saint's attitude toward images, see *ibidem*, pp. 61f., and the discussion in Anne Dunlop, "Black Humour: The Cappellone at Tolentino", in: *Art and the Augustinian Order in Early Renaissance Italy*, ed. by Louise Bourdua/Anne Dunlop, Aldershot/Burlington 2007, pp. 79–98: 93–97. For sixteenth-century applications of Augustinian concepts to pictorial images, see Esther Gordon Dotson, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling: Part I", in: *The Art Bulletin*, LXI (1979), pp. 223–256; Meredith J. Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance: Art and Philosophy from Petrarch to Michelangelo*, Cambridge/New York 2005, pp. 177–183.

[83] Augustine (note 81), pp. 36f.

[84] *Ibidem*, p. 36.

[85] *Ibidem*, p. 37.

[86] *Ibidem*.

16, 17 Pordenone, *Saint Augustine enthroned*, overall view and detail. Piacenza, Santa Maria di Campagna, vestibule

the discretion that comes from hard work. Considering the copious polysemy of Pordenone's dome frescoes and the impasse to decipherment they present, I believe this dynamic operates within the painted decorations: opacity offers a remedy to the presumption of approaching sacred truth and its miraculous manifestations (like those attributed to the *Madonna di Campagna*) without mediation. At a time when reformers sought to usurp the pre-eminence of allegory with a literalist view of Scripture, Pordenone's decorations conversely uphold the shroud of mystery that "veils truth in a fair and fitting garment".[87] In addition, the process of discernment that these decorations encourage similarly operates along alternating currents of access and deferment. As Augustine continues: "Thus the Holy Spirit has magnificently and wholesomely modulated the Holy Scriptures so that the more open places present themselves to hunger and the more obscure places may deter a disdainful attitude. Hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not found plainly said elsewhere."[88] In describing the process of elucidating obscure places by deferring

[87] *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's* Genealogia deorum gentilium, ed. by Charles G. Osgood, New York 1956, p. 39.

[88] Augustine (note 81), p. 38.

to clearer ones, Augustine suggests the potentially infinite semantic richness of the biblical text. This idea is elaborated in book three, where he defends the multivalent character of Scripture:

> When, however, from a single passage in the scripture not one but two or more meanings are elicited, even if what he who wrote the passage intended remains hidden, there is no danger if any of the meanings may be seen to be congruous with the truth taught in other passages of the Holy Scriptures. [...] For what could God have more generously and abundantly provided in the divine writings than that the same words might be understood in various ways which other no less divine witnesses approve?[89]

The capacity of a single passage to indicate a whole range of semantic possibilities (even meanings the author did not intend) presents no danger to Augustine so long as these possibilities can be collated to other passages and contribute to the "love of God and of one's neighbor".[90] The versatility of the biblical text offers no end to the pleasure enjoyed in pursuing the truth of divine intention. In this way, the topos of scriptural non-transparency enjoins deferment as a propagator of discourse. When read as an attempt to amplify the *Madonna di Campagna*'s web of interaction with the plenitude of salvation history, Pordenone's framework decorations similarly underscore the value of obscurity for deferring resolution and inspiring discourse on sacred truth and its miraculous revelation. Indeed, the inclusion of the cult statue in this process is made explicit by the emphatic gestures of the cupola's oracles that refer the beholder to the high altar below.

It seems to me, therefore, that the cupola decorations manifest two preoccupations: first, to exploit the affective power of spectacular artifice to amplify the *Madonna di Campagna*'s charisma and enliven a di-

[89] *Ibidem*, pp. 101f.

[90] *Ibidem*, p. 88. Here Augustine refers the reader back to a similar passage on the use of interpretation to generate the "double love" of God and of neighbor in book I, pp. 19, 22–27, 30f.

vinely-charged sphere of interaction. And second, to affirm a positive role for *ornamentum*; that rather than simply embellish, the framework's referentially flexible motifs foster the shroud of mystery, suggesting that the truth they allude to cannot be detached from the veil of fiction. Like the theatrically foreshortened prophets and sibyls that animate the *Madonna*'s ritual environment, the ornamented framework also creates a sense of wonder, but one that is predicated upon the non-transparency of sacred truth. Taken together, I believe these concerns point to an experiment in which the affective and discursive dimensions of painting are placed alongside one another in an attempt to sound out the revelatory potential of human artifice in the service of cultic devotion. Joined in dialogic relation to a miracle-working statue, Pordenone's frescoes encourage the devotee's scrutiny of an astonishing mystery that they simultaneously augment.

The votive culture in which the cupola decorations participated was not bound by class or education, and while the extent to which visitors recognized the thematic, metaphoric, and structural correlations and incongruities would have varied from person to person, such recognition was not contingent upon the beholder's direct knowledge of Augustine's exegetical principles. Nor was the capacity of the cupola to instill a sense of wonder and admiration solely dependent on theological speculation. The forceful, plastic presence and grand theatricality of the prophets and sibyls, as Vasari acknowledged, were wondrous to behold. And basic correlations, such as those between God the Father and the inspired states of the prophets or the sequence of Old Testaments subjects, were noted by Ridolfi. However, the range of allusions to specific texts (such as Valerius Maximus' *De factis dictisque memorabilibus libri IX* or Livy's *Ab urbe condita* for the scenes of ancient history) and paintings by nearby competitors (such as the crowds of gambling putti and monochrome vignettes by Correggio and Parmigianino at San Giovanni Evangelista in Parma) suggests that Pordenone's cupola was addressed not only to pilgrims but to an informed local audience.[91] There are marked indications that Pordenone sought to engage the intellectual culture of the upper class. For example, within the fresco of *Saint Augustine enthroned* lies a subtle allusion to the underlying mechanics of miraculous causation. Located just above eye-level, the codex beneath the saint's left hand bears an inscription from *De civitate Dei* (Fig. 17).[92] Past scholarship has pointed to this inscription to help explain the dome's extraordinary imagery, but what has been repeatedly ignored is that this inscription is part of an exposition that deals directly with the process and purpose of miraculous phenomena. Exhibited within the context of a Marian shrine built to uphold belief in a local miracle-working image, and one through whose alleged agency the pope had been saved, the reference to *De civitate Dei* is not insignificant. The passage inscribed in Pordenone's fresco records part of the first line of book ten, chapter fifteen: "Liber Decimus. Sic itaque divinae providentiae placuit ordinare" ("Here, then is the way in which divine providence saw fit to arrange").[93] By itself, the fragment could have functioned as a simple dictum granting textual authority to the content and configuration of

[91] In addition to the church's rectors, Pordenone's patrons at Santa Maria di Campagna included some of the city's leading patricians, such as Francesco Paveri Fontana and Pietro Antonio Rollieri. The church's administration was overseen by a committee whose members were drawn from the principal ecclesiastical and civic institutions. For the original members of the *fabbriceria* see Arisi/Arisi (note 27), pp. 345f.

[92] The most extensive treatment of the inscription is by Biscontin (note 46), pp. 64–69.

[93] Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. by Eva Matthews Sanford/William McAllen Green, Cambridge 1957–1972, III, pp. 316f.

[94] *Ibidem*.

the 'arrangements' the beholder encountered within the church. However, its implications become much more interesting when the phrase is completed:

> Here, then is the way in which divine providence saw fit to arrange the succession of temporal periods. It was arranged, as I have said and as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, that the law should be laid down in the form of angelic pronouncements concerning the worship of the one true God.[94]

As the passage indicates, this chapter describes how angels serve divine providence: as agents in the transmission of God's immutable truth to the sensible world of men.[95] Hearing by inexpressible means "the language of eternity, which he [God] never starts to speak, nor ever ceases to speak", the angels deliver his law in a temporal succession.[96] The temporal components of the law, manifested in acts of sacrifice, incense burning, vows, and dedications are defined as signs of eternal things, metaphors for spiritual devotion that enjoin the faithful, in tandem with the angels, to worship.[97] For Augustine, God's law and the promises it supports are delivered and guaranteed through miraculous interventions, which are mediated by the angels, recorded in Scripture, and performed according to divine providence.[98] In addition, chapter fifteen concludes with an important distinction: none of God's creations can be identical to him.[99] This is because "they need him by whom they were created in order to exist and be in good condition".[100] For erudite beholders familiar with the content of the painted inscription, Pordenone's fresco of *Saint Augustine enthroned* could operate as an important reminder that nothing in the sensible world (including cult objects) can claim equivalency with God and that true miracles underpin the worship of God alone. For the bishop of Hippo, miracles and the words, objects, and rituals that bear testimony to them (and I would include Pordenone's decorations here) all have the same aim: they are proponents of the soul's liberation. As the saint concludes, it is through "visible miracles in heaven or on earth, whereby he [God] may quicken the soul, hitherto given up to visible things, to worship him, the invisible".[101] When considered collectively, the implications that resonate from the passage inscribed on the surface of Pordenone's painting become an affirmation of the intangible cause and means by which miracles occur.

Sacred and profane, familiar and foreign, recognizable and ambiguous: the cupola's dizzying array of painted figures, motifs, and materials glorify the *Madonna di Campagna* with a celebration of divine creation's plenitude. But the ambiguity of form and inconsistency of relation that inheres within the visual order of the decorations emphasizes the importance of a mutable disposition for the discernment of sacred truth, which is proclaimed to be neither transparent nor univocal but contingent and prolific. The awareness that these images register the inherent duplicities of art is characteristic of broader artistic investigations that were conducted in Italy during the 1520s and 1530s, investigations in which the epistemological status of image-making was being reappraised. Scholarship published in the wake of Hans Belting's *Bild und Kult* (1990) has explored the traditional functions of the religious image in times when artists lay claim

[95] The idea that angels convey divine intention to the terrestrial realm was commonplace and occurs in treatises as diverse as Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Celestial Hierarchy* and Giovanni Andrea Gilio's *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'istorie* (1564). See Andrew R. Casper, *Art and the Religious Image in El Greco's Italy*, University Park 2014, pp. 21f., with further references.

[96] Augustine (note 93), III, pp. 316f.

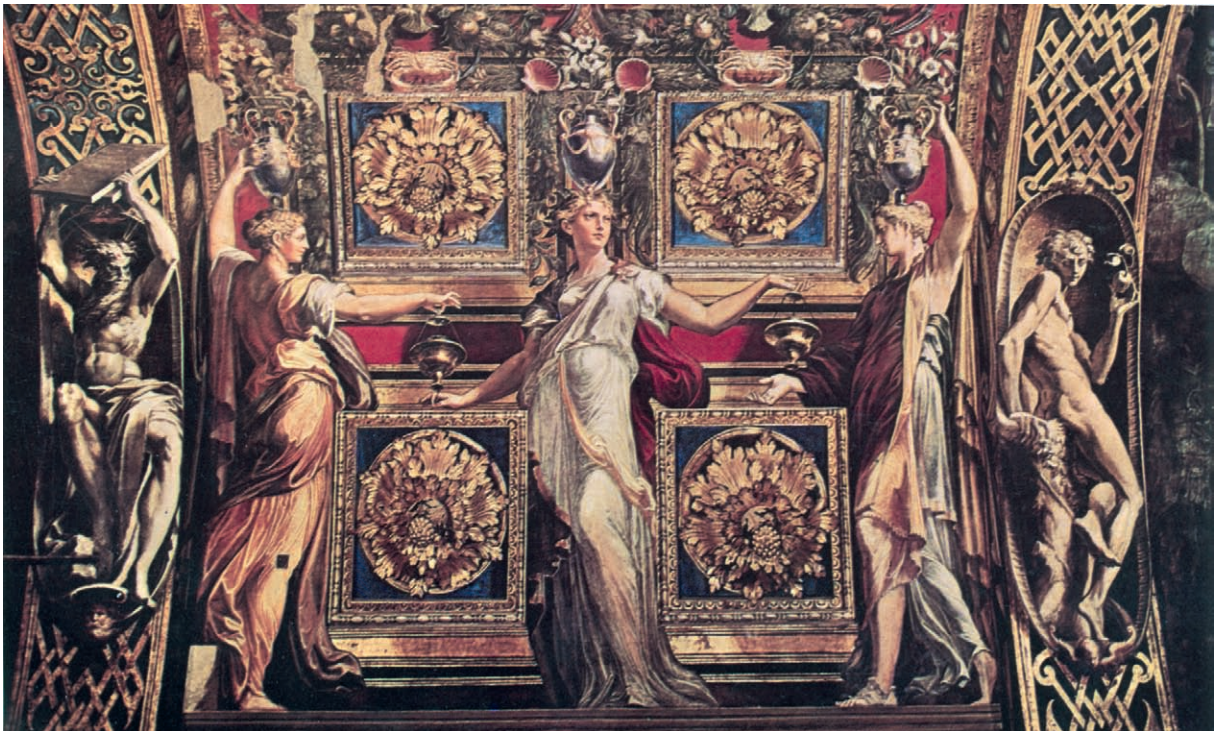
[97] *Ibidem*, pp. 318f.

[98] Cf. Augustine, "De Trinitate", in: *Patrologiae Latinae cursus completus*, ed. by Jacques-Paul Migne, Paris 1841–1855, XLII, cols. 815–1154: 881–886.

[99] Augustine (note 93), III, pp. 318f.: "[…] qui non est quod ipse".

[100] *Ibidem*.

[101] *Ibidem*, III, pp. 308f.

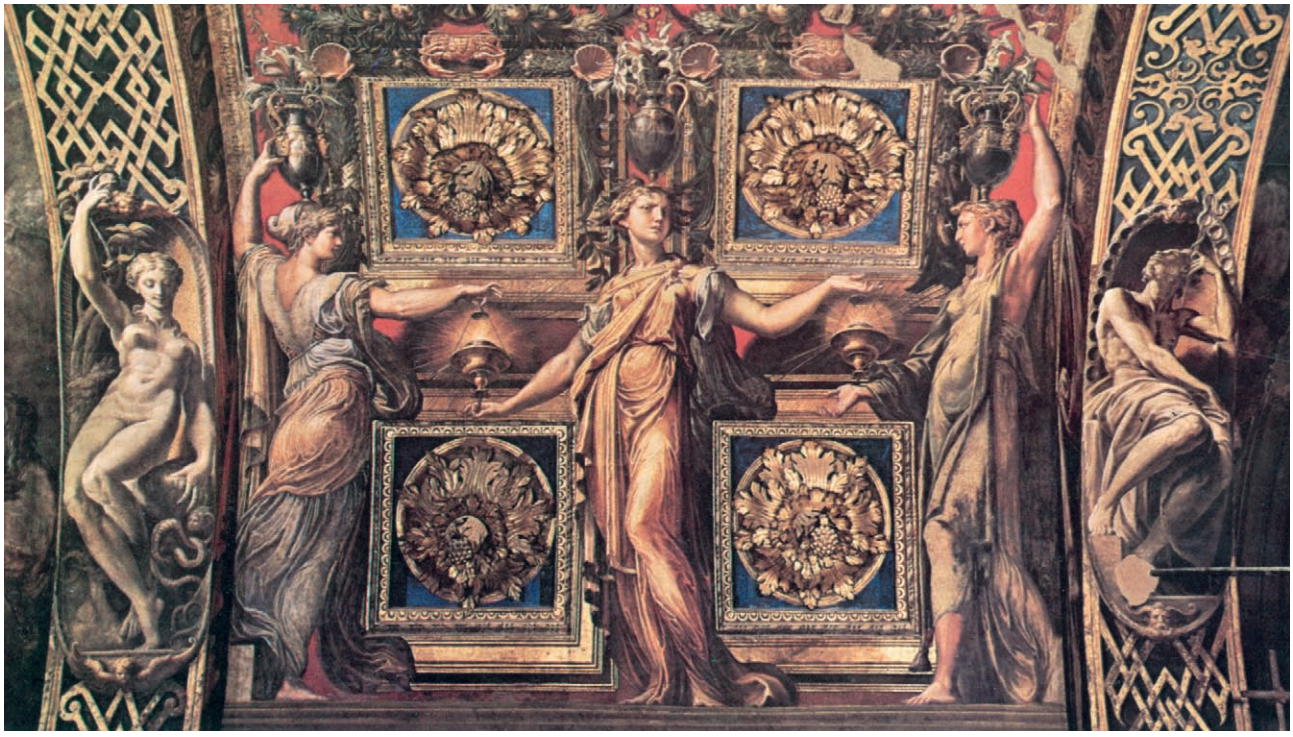


18 Parmigianino, *Foolish virgins* flanked by *Moses* and *Adam*. Parma, Santa Maria della Steccata

to an 'author' function and art is conceived increasingly in terms of invention, rather than similitude or resemblance.[102] Recent studies have shown that during the course of Pordenone's career, artists throughout northern Italy were adapting in novel and still unregulated ways to the representation of divinity while simultaneously asserting the value of artistic interest. Painters like Gaudenzio Ferrari, Girolamo Savoldo, Alessandro Bonvicino, Girolamo Romanino, and Lorenzo Lotto often treated works of art as testing grounds on which the conditions of different styles, iconographic traditions, visual tropes, etc. could be worked out and compared.[103] Like many of his peers, Pordenone's frescoes combine spectacular illusionism with self-reflexive gestures that undermine the mimetic transparency of the illusion and point to the artist's craft: for example, the stacking of illusion on top of illusion in the ornamented framework or the extreme foreshortening of God the Father. The claim is *not* that the artist is trying to free himself from 'iconography'

[102] A vast number of scholars have contributed to the revision of Belting's argument concerning the interaction between categories of art and image. In particular, I am thinking of Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Chicago 1993; Klaus Krüger, *Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren: Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien*, Munich 2001; Stuart Lingo, *Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting*, New Haven, Conn., *et al.* 2008; Hall (note 6); Alexander Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art*, Chicago *et al.* 2011; Stephen J. Campbell, "On Renaissance Nonmodernity", in: *I Tatti*, XX (2017), pp. 261–294.

[103] See the studies by Mary Pardo, "The Subject of Savoldo's *Magdalene*", in: *The Art Bulletin*, LXXI (1989), pp. 67–91; Alessandro Nova, "Folengo and Romanino: The *Questione della Lingua* and Its Eccentric Trends", in: *The Art Bulletin*, LXXVI (1994), pp. 664–679; Andrea Bayer, "Brescia and Bergamo: Humble Reality in Sixteenth-Century Devotional Art and Portraiture",



19 Parmigianino, *Wise virgins* flanked by *Eve* and *Aaron*. Parma, Santa Maria della Steccata

or cultic function in order to privilege 'art' and its process of becoming as the subject of representation.[104] As demonstrated above, the multivalent character and targeted ambiguity of the decorations adorning the central cupola of Santa Maria di Campagna are not an impasse for devotion, but an opportunity for religious engagement of an exegetical sort. In fact, it is unlikely that Pordenone and his north Italian contemporaries would have noticed a dilemma between serving the theological imperatives of Christian image-making and the self-promotional aims of the artist.[105] At the site of the Piacentine cult's rival, for example, the decorations Parmigianino created in the vault above the *Madonna della Steccata* (1531–1539) straddle the interstices between the expectations of religious images and the assertion of artistic self-awareness (Figs. 18, 19). As Morten Steen Hansen has demonstrated, the biblical figures in the vault stage a defense of the miraculous *Virgo lactans* by means of typological references and a Petrarchan poetics of bodily beauty.[106]

in: *Painters of Reality: The Legacy of Leonardo and Caravaggio in Lombardy*, exh. cat. Cremona/New York 2004, ed. by *eadem*, New Haven, Conn., *et al.* 2004, pp. 105–112; David Young Kim, *The Traveling Artist in the Italian Renaissance: Geography, Mobility, and Style*, New Haven, Conn., *et al.* 2014; and Stephen J. Campbell, *The Endless Periphery: Towards a Geopolitics of Art in Lorenzo Lotto's Italy*, Chicago/London 2019.

[104] Cf. Belting (note 4), pp. 24–27, 510–545, and Joost Keizer, "Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Subject of Art", in: *The Art Bulletin*, XCIII (2011), pp. 304–324.

[105] A similar argument has been made for El Greco by Casper (note 95), pp. 8–13, 43–71.

[106] Morten Steen Hansen, "Parmigianino and the Defense of a Miraculous Image", in: *The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance* (note 4), pp. 185–203: 186, 188–193.

Standing between the vault's coffers, the gracefully elongated *Wise and foolish virgins* enact an ideal of natural beauty perfected by the hand of the artist. Installed as part of a background for the miraculous icon, the conspicuously artificial maidens stimulate reflection on the relationship between artistic and divine animation. At the same time, Hansen has shown how the monochromatic frescoes of Moses and Aaron that help bookend the exquisite ornamental bodies contest the aniconism of Judaism as a foil for the cult icon. By pointing to the figurative blindness of Old Testament 'others', Parmigianino's paintings defend the *Madonna della Steccata* as a discrete image type justified by biblical prototypes and the advent of Christ.[107] In this way, the skillfully contrived figures ornamenting the vault did not mitigate access to the invisible divine or render the Steccata impotent; rather, it was just the opposite.

At Piacenza, the disruptions of apparent order and iconic resemblance to produce a cloud of associations connected to exegetical thought can be read as a response to a particular predicament, one in which the mystery of the *Madonna di Campagna*'s agency was at stake. The cross-spatial dynamic constructed between painted oracles and cult object, together with the accumulation of diverse motifs and referentially ambiguous elements work collectively with the fresco of Saint Augustine to enrich the nexus of cultic devotion and encourage devotees to practice a form of spiritual engagement that variably attracts and defers resolution.[108] The resultant opacity is a calculated effect, and one intended to assert both the dissimulative nature of sacred truth and the enduring vitality of painting to mediate it. When read as a kind of technology that captivates viewers, the demonstrative actions of Saint Augustine and the obscure imagery of the dome cast into relief the shortcomings of modern interpreters who have reduced them to vehicles of textual transmission.[109] Pordenone's frescoes are not programmatic illustrations whose source is currently unknown. Rather, they provide pictorially-rendered enactments of how to pursue the truth of divine intention. As such, the enterprise amounts to more than an attempt to exalt a miracle-working statue or publicly confirm its sanctity as a local expression of political adherence to the Holy See. Beneath Pordenone's cupola, divinity and artifice were made to intersect, but along lines of wonder that withhold rather than disclose their mysteries. The miraculous potency of the *Madonna di Campagna* was thereby justified by reminding viewers that its source lay beyond the scope of human understanding.

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[107] *Ibidem*, pp. 200–202.

[108] In this way, Pordenone's decorations in Santa Maria di Campagna operate like theological *figurae*, a mode of invoking meaningful relations between dissimilar things and events. See Erich Auerbach, "Figura", in: *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, Minneapolis [2]1984 ([1]1959), pp. 11–76; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, Chicago/London 1995.

[109] See Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology", in: *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, ed. by Jeremy Coote/Anthony Shelton, Oxford 1992, pp. 40–63.

Abstract

The decorations that Giovanni Antonio da Pordenone frescoed in the central cupola of Santa Maria di Campagna in Piacenza, Italy (1530–1532) have never been considered in relation to the venerable cult statue they surround. As a pictorial extension of the statue's charisma, Pordenone's paintings glorify the statue, but they also provide a complicated response to the object's claim to divine authenticity. This essay explores how an artist working in an age of religious controversy combined powerfully affective illusionism with the expressive flexibility of arcane ornament to sound out the revelatory potential of human artifice in dialogue with an object of a higher, miraculous order. In doing so, Pordenone's decorations not only bolstered and legitimized the desired function of the cult statue, but encouraged a speculative form of religious engagement in pursuit of divine truth and its miraculous manifestation.

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