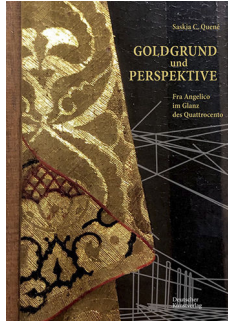



# SASKIA C. QUENÉ, *GOLDGRUND UND PERSPEKTIVE. FRA ANGELICO IM GLANZ DES QUATTROCENTO*

Berlin/München: Deutscher Kunstverlag 2023, 332 pages with 111 color ill., ISBN 978-3-422-98938-2 (Hardback).



Reviewed by  
Henrike C. Lange 

Saskia Quené’s dissertation *Goldgrund und Perspektive. Fra Angelico im Glanz des Quattrocento* is a smart and beautifully produced book. Stating that it fills a gap would not be quite accurate, as it rather expands its main concepts in all kinds of ways. The author opens up a new discussion of Fra Angelico and his work in gold ground, gold, and gilding, and the perspectival structure of his paintings: spatially, materially, perspectively, historiographically, and theoretically. Her study is advertised as examining something elusive that can be described as a “blind spot”, namely, the meaning(s), condition(s), and fate(s) of the gold ground. It addresses one of the unpublished eternal set of questions of the auditorium, something students and audiences in museums endlessly ask about, but for which there is not one easy answer – and hence very few publications that provide an overview of the subject. The how, when, where, what for, and why of the gold ground – questions that have as many variables and combinations as any artist could play on and all must be re-examined for each individual artwork.

This is what Quené does with a strong focus on her very few select case studies. The author states that she was searching for something more elusive than the original question of gold ground,

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for its origin and iconography, covering categories of objects as diverse as manuscripts and altarpieces, Egyptian mummy portraits and Byzantine mosaics, Trecento cult images, and tarot cards (p. 13). What she eventually found was best pinned down in the work of Fra Angelico, and so the present study instead presents “Prolegomena” (historiography, iconography, material, technique, form, and function) and is structured around (1), the *Madonne dell’Umiltà*, (2) the manifestation of the devotional image from point, line, and plane towards a form of “Incarnation” (especially in the Annunciation iconography) and (3), a short study of Fra Angelico’s *Paradiso* in relation to colour/gold and gold/light.

As a historical and material phenomenon, the gold ground is omnipresent, often seen as singularly epoch-making (medieval) and -breaking (Renaissance/early modern). The enduring *Goldgrund* of the Italian Quattrocento in its finer forms and formulations has thus been recognized, as Martin Warnke once remarked, as substituting a “thinly veiled persistence of the cult of material sacred objects” which seems to insist on the presence of an irrepresentable Heaven in the context of the increasingly scientific blue-skied early modern image.<sup>1</sup> For decades, the field depended mostly on a handful of important, but somewhat insular, interventions such as Wolfgang Braunfels’s *Nimbus und Goldgrund* and Wolfgang Schöne’s *Licht in der Malerei*, often missing Bodonyi’s fine dissertation on the gold ground in late antiquity that lay dormant in Vienna (despite Gombrich’s more prominent review of the study).<sup>2</sup> One should not forget a small number of theses and dissertations such as those by Lois Heidmann Shelton and Beate Leitner, both 1987, respectively on gold and gold ground.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Michael V. Schwarz productively revived the complex questions by asking about the agency of the gold ground, proposing to move the discussion away from an elusive “meaning” to a more illuminating understanding of “function”.<sup>4</sup> And exhibitions reliably enjoy the promotional draw of gold

1

Martin Warnke, oral communication in office hours, Hamburg (Germany), Warburg-Haus, Wintersemester 2002.

2

See Wolfgang Braunfels, *Nimbus und Goldgrund*, in: *Das Münster* 4, 1950, 321–334, and Wolfgang Schöne, *Über das Licht in der Malerei*, Berlin 1954. See also József Bodonyi, *Entstehung und Bedeutung des Goldgrundes in der spätantiken Bildkomposition. Ein Beitrag zur Sinndeutung der spätantiken Kunstsprache*, PhD Dissertation, University of Vienna, 1932, and Ernst H. Gombrich, review of József Bodonyi, *Entstehung und Bedeutung des Goldgrundes in der spätantiken Bildkomposition. Ein Beitrag zur Sinndeutung der spätantiken Kunstsprache*, Wien 1932, in: *Kritische Berichte zur kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur* 6, 1937, 65–76.

3

See Lois Heidmann Shelton, *Gold in Altarpieces of the Early Italian Renaissance. A Theological and Art Historical Analysis of Its Meaning and of the Reasons for Its Disappearance*, PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1987. See also Beate Leitner, *Der Goldgrund – ein Bildelement in der spätmittelalterlichen, westlich-abendländischen Tafel- und Buchmalerei*, M.A. Thesis, University of Vienna, 1987.

4

See Michael V. Schwarz, *Goldgrund im Mittelalter – ‘Don’t ask for the meaning, ask for the use!’*, in: *Gold. Gold in der Kunst von der Antike bis zur Moderne* (exh. cat. Vienna, Belvedere Museum), ed. by Agnes Husslein-Arco and Thomas Zaunschirm, Vienna 2012, 28–37.

(e.g., Hamburg 1999 “Goldgrund und Himmelslicht”; Berlin 2005 “Geschichten auf Gold”; Vienna 2012 “Gold. Gold in der Kunst von der Antike bis zur Moderne”).<sup>5</sup> Medievalists have thoroughly discussed the issue wherever applicable to their painters, mosaicists, illuminators, and architects, most prominently in publications around gold-ground-bound and gold-ground-exceeding artists such as Cimabue, Giotto, Giusto, the Vivarini, Simone Martini, Gentile da Fabriano, and Pisanello, among others.

Even limiting the question to early modern painting in Italy, the contemporaneity of gold ground, gilding, and gold paint on the one hand, and naturalistic skies, objects, and figures in space on the other, cannot be pressed into one simple formula between light and shadow or between material and immaterial means of representation – especially not on any linear, teleological line from the “dark” ages towards an early enlightenment of humanism. And therein lies a triple brilliance: that of the artworks and their maker’s intellectual genius and the skill of their hands, that of the materials themselves (gold, gold ground, gold leaf, punchwork, applications, gold paint, tempera, oil), and that of the means of interpretation between representational and symbolic dimensions. Quené combines close-up studies of Fra Angelico with a side-glance to Gentile (without much looking around, which will hopefully be picked up by future generations, for instance, to Starnina, Veneziano, or Lorenzo Monaco). She helps to re-complicate the oversimplified narrative of perspective and naturalism being automatically opposed to the gold ground, which stemmed from Alberti’s partial rejection of the ready-made gold as cheapening the artist’s more worthy skill of creating its shine and opacity by means of colourful *chiaroscuro*.

The scope of Quené’s study frames the gold ground in a manner welcome in the context of perspective and other spatial phenomena, moving deeper into the working of gold ground. We are confronted with the finer calibration of the spectator-image relationship, modulated by the tension between light and shadow, spatiality and flatness, opacity and the idea of transparency and depth into illusionistic distance. The gaze bounces off the image surface – in this book, off the page – but never without unique complications of the matter on the panel through incisions, punchwork, interruptions. To make this evident, the publisher (Deutsche Kunstverlag) produced an attractive publication of the German text with images in excellent quality, interspersed and structured with an endpaper made of exquisite red and, within the book, almost-full monochrome pages combined with details from the paintings in focus: (1) red for the Newark (Alana Collection) *Madonna with Child*, (2) gold for the Prado *Annunciation*, and (3) blue for a detail from the altarpiece predella from S. Domenico, Fiesole (now National Gallery, London).

5

See *Goldgrund und Himmelslicht. Die Kunst des Mittelalters in Hamburg* (exh. cat. Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle), ed. by Uwe M. Schneede, Hamburg 1999. See also *Geschichten auf Gold. Bilderzählungen in der frühen italienischen Malerei* (exh. cat. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie), ed. by Stefan Wepplmann, Berlin 2005.

*Glanz, Nachglanz, Abglanz...* evocative in her prose, Quené addresses gold ground as its own materialization of the content, for the first part, as “Grund der Demut” (echoing the ambivalent meaning of *sfondo* and *campo*, both translatable to *Grund* as “reason” in German, as also addressed in a classic study by Jeroen Stumpel, and more recently by David Young Kim).<sup>6</sup> With his unique visual theology, Fra Angelico is an ideal case study for the persistence of gold ground with the integration of various gold, gold paint, and gold ground techniques, weaving his figures into complex spatial contexts between materiality and light, between scientific innovations and theological themes.

More specifically, research in the visual arts as well as in the literature and vernacular mysticism of Trecento/Quattrocento Italy has long addressed the importance of “humilitas”. As a religious-cultural theme, humility constantly stands in productive tension with notions of spiritual riches. One example for this dynamic is the actual use, or painterly / sculpturally representation, of luxury materials such as gold, ivory, or silk in Marian devotion. Between gold decorating and perspective, *humilitas* iconographies clash with the challenge of representational “reality”. And in the early Quattrocento, it is this clash that brings about the ever-new encasing of figures within subtle variations of gold ground in visual spaces, all skilfully engaging with major optical categories such as transparency, perspective, relief, volume, and spatiality. Humility iconographies have been addressed traditionally – in art history, by Millard Meiss, in Dante studies, by Marilyn Migiel, and recently in Dante studies as well as in studies on Giotto.<sup>7</sup> For instance, in Teubner’s 2023 *Dante and the Practice of Humility*, the author examines Dante’s concern with humility also as a compositional exercise to train the author to write with humility. The tension that Teubner detects between the self-giving and self-possessed forces intertwined and active in the author-artist – created but creating for the creator – seems to run parallel to what Quené describes as Fra Angelico’s painterly practice for the *Madonna of Humility*. These parallels suggest informative echoes bouncing back and forth between word and image, activating the dynamics of religious thought in the practice

## 6

See Jeroen Stumpel, On Grounds and Backgrounds. Some Remarks about Composition in Renaissance Painting, in: *Stimolus* 18, 1988, 219–243, and David Young Kim, *Groundwork. A History of the Renaissance Picture*, Turnhout 2022.

## 7

See, for painting, Millard Meiss, The Madonna of Humility, in: *Art Bulletin* 18, 1936, 435–465; for literature, Marilyn Migiel, Between Art and Theology. Dante’s Representation of Humility, in: *Stanford Italian Review* 5, 1985, 141–159. More recently and with further bibliography, for Giotto, see Henrike Christiane Lange, Giotto’s Triumph. The Arena Chapel and the Metaphysics of Ancient Roman Triumphal Arches, in: *I Tatti Studies* 25/1, 2022, 5–38, as well as Anne L. Williams, Imago humilis. Humor, Irony, and the Rhetorical Wit of the Sacred in the Arena Chapel, Padua, in: *Gesta* 61, 2022, 57–80, and Henrike Christiane Lange, *Giotto’s Arena Chapel and the Triumph of Humility*, Cambridge 2023; for Dante, see Rachel Teubner, *Dante and the Practice of Humility. A Theological Commentary on the Divine Comedy*, Cambridge 2023, and Henrike Christiane Lange, Ephemerality and Perspective in Dante’s Marble Reliefs and Botticelli’s Drawing for *Purgatorio* 10, in: Matthew Collins and Luca Marcozzi (eds.), *Reading Dante with Images. A Visual Lectura Dantis*, vol. II, forthcoming.

of artmaking and craftsmanship (be it for the highly visual text in Dante's case, or on the material surface of his paintings in the case of Fra Angelico).

Furthermore, Quené's study fits nicely into other coordinate systems defined by recent monographs that promote new approaches to both the visual structure of late medieval painting as well as its inherent modernity.<sup>8</sup> Quené includes a broad range of theoretical and analytical perspectives, engaging approaches as diverse as Louis Marin's *Opacité de la peinture* on the one hand, and Schild Bunim's thorough illustrations of background ornaments on the other.<sup>9</sup> She swiftly sorts through what seems, in her line of questioning, relevant (e.g., Dante, Part III on *Paradiso*, pp. 229–290) and irrelevant (e.g., Bachtin, p. 223, n. 131), worthy of attention, or worthy of criticism. Given the many quoted sources and influences, some findings could be mixed in various ways, and possibly with at times varying results and interpretations, but they convince overall as a set of choices within the framework set by the introduction. Between the work in theory and the focus on craftsmanship, it is particularly commendable that the author took opportunities to try out some of the techniques.

One lamentable fact is the absence of an index, which would not merely facilitate searches within the hard copy, but, most importantly, provide the skeletal blueprint of the brain of the book. This is especially regrettable as the book is so rich and tightly knit (the author alludes to this quality in explaining why the bibliography does not distinguish between primary and secondary sources); the copious footnotes are so extensive and well-considered, they are the real goldmines in this book. The hard copy, with its unique touch of monochromatic pages distinguishing the different parts of the book in pure red, gold, and blue, will best be consulted by specialists in tandem with the digital version's search function.

I am submitting this review to the editors while viewing a few archival boxes relating to the founders of the Department of History of Art at the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>10</sup> Among Leopold

8

See, for instance, Robert Brennan, *Painting as a Modern Art in Early Renaissance Italy*, Turnhout 2020, and Karl Whittington, *Trecento Pictoriality. Diagrammatic Painting in Late Medieval Italy*, Turnhout 2023.

9

See Louis Marin, *Opacité de la peinture. Essais sur la représentation au Quattrocento*, Florence 1989. See also Miriam Schild Bunim, *Space in Medieval Painting and the Forerunners of Perspective*, New York 1940.

10

The present boxes include donations by Walter Horn (who founded the department, its Phototeca, and its Slide Library between 1938 and 1939, when he became the first art historian on the faculty of the University of California system), Jean Bony, Leopold Ettlinger, and Michael Baxandall. Beyond serving, as one of the "Monuments Men", as a fine arts intelligence officer from 1945 to 1946, locating the Imperial Crown Jewels and Coronation Regalia of the Holy Roman Empire, Horn was a specialist in medieval architecture. Horn later published the St. Gall plan in the University of California Press's most extensive project, see August Frugé, *A Skeptic Among Scholars. August Frugé on University Publishing*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1993, especially ch. 17, Mega Biblion. Exposing the Press to Art History, 229–244 and James H. Clark, Addendum II, Publishing The Plan of St. Gall, 339–353.

Ettlenger's donations, I found a phonebook-thick manila envelope, filled with Alinari photos and images with stamps from "Universität Hamburg, Kunstgeschichtliches Seminar", from Warburg London, and from Photo Marburg: the Sistine Chapel frescoes, comparisons to Perugino, Botticelli's *Punishment of Korah* and *Stories of Moses*, comparisons to Byzantine manuscripts and mosaics, and so on. Any Sistine Chapel scholar would recognize the book that was printed from these exact original photos before coming to Ettlenger's handwritten pencil-signature in old German calligraphy on the page that itemized a "Provisional List of Plates": this is the image programme for Ettlenger's 1965 *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo: Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy*.<sup>11</sup> The book has endless merits; however, certain materially and optically unique features in gold (such as the golden clouds in Cosimo Rosselli's *Mount Sinai* fresco from the Moses cycle) can simply not be seen in the valuable tome's pages – the gold long disappeared through the lenses of photography and printing, swallowed by white highlights and black ink.

It is only at those times, when we try to understand the writing of the history of art by looking at the means and limitations of mechanical capture and reproduction across decades, that the difference hits us like a punch to the retina. The small golden clouds in the sky of Rosselli's *Mount Sinai* was never apparent to readers. They depended on a visit to the site to reconnect to what was read in the text, and even then needed a steel-trap visual memory. *Goldgrund und Perspektive* delivers both the text and the complex visual documentation of its topic. Quené's book therefore also represents an excellent example of new possibilities for the field. It is probably not by chance that the author consolidated her argument over a specific time in the more recent history of technology – a period during which research could oscillate between advanced means of photographic and print reproduction of gold on the one hand, and, on the other, the stratospheric technological progress of personal photography in front of the objects over the past two decades. The researcher can immediately check and correct the light and reflection of gold on the camera screen, taking unlimited shots from subtly varying angles. The text, in this fortuitous case, matches this searching, gradual visual analysis.

Yet the book as an object, reinforced and reinvented with the present-day genius of printing and technology, is now also capable of rendering certain effects and experiences that are much closer to visual contact with the artwork in real space. Given these technological possibilities, we should feel not simply like children on the shoulders of giants – but rather like children with certain generational superpowers in digital technology. And among those, an adequate reproduction of the visual effects of gold on paper is certainly not the least formidable.

11

See Leopold D. Ettlenger, *The Sistine Chapel before Michelangelo. Religious Imagery and Papal Primacy*, Oxford 1965.