

BAROQUE ASSUMPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This essay works within a transatlantic framework to excavate an early modern sensitivity to form and formal arrangement from practices of compositionally reconfiguring printed compositions. Tracing such operations generates a reappraisal of foundational conceptions of Baroque aesthetics and of the very notion of the Baroque as a style. The essay begins in colonial Latin America, where artists were frequently tasked with using European prints to produce works of art, but it then tacks in the opposite direction to argue that exploring Latin American compositional modes allows better seeing them in Europe as well – both in commonplace visual culture and in the highest echelons of artistic production. The Baroque comes to be defined as a compositional mode of artistic practice centered on form and its potential for syntactical recombination – a mode conditioned by the medium of print. This essay thus advocates for the ways that working across once-interconnected geographies can (and should) shift key historiographic concepts and aesthetic frameworks: here of Baroque compositional practice, the Baroque as a historiographic construct, and print's unmined place within both.

KEYWORDS

Baroque; Print; Colonial Latin America; Antwerp; Peter Paul Rubens; Historiography.

Around 1700 in New Spain, Juan and/or Miguel González crafted a scene of the Virgin's Assumption into heaven using *enconchado*, a distinctive New Spanish technique that these artists had themselves made famous [Fig. 1]. The composition was sketched onto a panel; pieces of mother-of-pearl were inset to define bodies and drapery; hands and faces were painted with opaque pigment. Then semi-transparent oil glazes and thick black contour lines were applied to finalize the forms. The object is quintessentially colonial. Its materials and technique – mother-of-pearl, inlaid and oil-slicked – originated in China and Japan, shipped on the Manila Galleon to New Spain from the Philippines.¹ But the contours of the scene itself resulted from flows across a second ocean. For, in building up this picture, the artist worked from a print that had been published in Antwerp and shipped, via Seville, across the Atlantic [Fig. 2]. From this print, designed by the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens and engraved by Schelte à Bolswert, the González brothers copied the two foreground figures – one on the left with outstretched arm and the other, on the right, recoiling in awe. And we know well that the González brothers were indeed intimately familiar with that engraved composition: around the same time one of the brothers created another *enconchado* scene that cleaves almost entirely to – or, as one might say, is faithfully copied from – the printed model.²

An object like this *enconchado* Assumption, then, could *only* have been produced in Latin America, situated as it was at the literal crossroads between East and West. The object represents a condensation of colonial visual systems and global commodity circuits. That use of a printed model also places it squarely within broader colonial frameworks – regimes of power, transmission, and “influence”. Copying European prints was a defining feature of artistic production in Latin America, from the very moment of conquest and missionary endeavors through the uprisings that would lead to wars for independence.³ Every year tens of thousands of European

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The bibliography on *enconchado* is large. For treatment of the technique and specific information on the González family, see Julieta Avila Hernández, *El influjo de la pintura china en los enconchados de Nueva España*, Mexico City 1997; Sonia I. Ocaña Ruiz, *Nuevas reflexiones sobre las pinturas incrustadas de concha y el trabajo de Juan y Miguel González*, in: *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 35, 2013, 125–176.

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Sold at auction at [Morton Subastas](#), 06.09.2018, Lot 99 (03.04.2020).

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The literature on such production is extensive. For important treatments across colonial geographies, see Santiago Sebastián, *La importancia de los grabados en la cultura neogranadina*, in: *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 3, 1965, 119–133; Agustina Rodríguez Romero, *Imágenes que crean imágenes. Pinturas y estampas francesas en América colonial*, in: Fernando Guzmán Schiappacasse, Gloria Cortés Aliaga, and Juan Manuel Martínez Silva (eds.), *Arte y crisis en Iberoamérica. Segundas Jornadas de Historia del Arte*, Santiago 2004, 77–84; Alex Bohrer, *De Missalen van Plantin en Andere Zuid-Nederlandse Reminiscencies in de Baroke van Minas Gerais*, in: Werner Thomas and Eddy Stols (eds.), *Een wereld op papier. Zuid-nederlandse boeken, prenten en kaarten in het Spaanse en Portugese wereldrijk (16de–18de eeuw)*, Leuven 2009, 275–295; Marta Fajardo de Rueda, *Grabados europeos y pintura en el Nuevo Reino de Granada*, in: *HiSTOReLo. Revista de Historia Regional y Local* 6, 2014, 70–124; Ananda Cohen Suarez, *Pintura colonial cuzqueña. El esplendor del arte en los Andes*, Lima 2015, 16–19; Susan V. Webster, *Materiales, modelos y mercado de la pintura en Quito, 1550–1650*, in: *Procesos. Revista ecuatoriana de historia* 43, 2016, 37–64.



[Fig. 1]
Juan and/or Miguel González, attributed, Assumption of the Virgin, ca. 1700, oil on panel
with inlaid mother-of-pearl, 39.1 × 29.4 cm, Mexico City, Museo Soumaya.



[Fig. 2]

Schelte à Bolswert, after Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin, ca. 1650, engraving, 625 × 442 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

printed sheets crossed the Atlantic, landing in the Spanish Americas where artists put them to use. European prints became a constitutive factor in colonial artistic production and were often referenced in the specifications of artistic contracts. Patrons would supply an artist with a print as a form of agreement, asking for a work that was to conform to the model.⁴

Yet the *enconchado* Assumption is no simple copy, for several of its figures do not correlate with those found in the Bolswert engraving from Antwerp. The divergences between the two compositions might be attributed to a change in dimensions and format or to the fact that these artists surely became increasingly comfortable in adapting the printed source that they had come to know well. But something else was at play here: in crafting this composition, the artists drew from not one, but two, Rubens Assumptions. When the makers of this *enconchado* looked to Bolswert's print for the apostles registering shock and awe, they left behind the distinctive Virgin, marked by a twisting pose and pinwheeling arms, along with her angelic retinue. She has been substituted with another Virgin – one hand set upon her chest, the other trailing behind – taken from a second, different Rubens print engraved by Paulus Pontius [Fig. 3]. That is to say, the composition's bottom register derives in large part from one print by Rubens, while the upper register corresponds to another.

It would be hard to know what to make of this example in isolation, but it fits within a pervasive, if until now unnoticed, practice of compositional assemblage. This essay excavates that phenomenon by focusing upon artistic practices of dicing up and splicing together multiple printed Assumptions by Rubens. Compositions of the Virgin's transit to heaven offer themselves up as an unusually tidy iconography for thinking through that sort of compositional syntax. After all, the Assumption's theological message hinges on pictorial division – an earthly sphere and a heavenly realm must be demarcated in a picture so as to underscore the Virgin's liminal status between the two. But the syntactical recombination revealed by investigating compositional practice around the Virgin's Assumption was far more involved than just swapping out the registers of prints. The single iconography of the Virgin's Assumption here acts as a key site at which to expose a much broader, period sensitivity to form and its potential for reproduction and recombination. Fundamental to note at the outset: these processes were *not* specific to colonial Latin America. This essay begins by parsing artists' reconfigurations of and recombinatory practices around northern European prints in the Spanish Americas. But that endeavor will allow us to look back across the Atlantic. Specifically, we will return to northern Europe, to Antwerp, where the highest echelons of seventeenth-century artistic production (here of Rubens himself) and

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On contractual obligation, see Almerindo Ojeda di Ninno, *El grabado como fuente del arte colonial. Estado de la cuestión*, in: Cécile Michaud and José Torres della Pina (eds.), *De Amberes al Cuzco*, Lima 2009, 15–22.



[Fig. 3]

Paulus Pontius, after Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin, 1624, engraving, 646 × 442 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

a commonplace visual culture, both printed and painted, will be shown to have responded to similar compositional concerns.

In stitching together Latin America and the Southern Netherlands, both domains in Spain's empire, this essay participates in efforts toward a globalized early modern art history. That historiographic turn has largely worked to track the movement of people and things – a critical, but provisional, step to pull extra-European spaces, social contexts, and objects into a more expansive accounting. Much less consideration, however, has been given to how working across once-interconnected geographies could, or even necessarily should, shift key concepts undergirding art historical thinking about this period to begin with. I argue that the mode of artistic production explored here has the potential to produce an alternative definition and explication of “the Baroque”, one of art history's foundational, but also fundamentally troubled, terms.

Seeing the Baroque as it was split and spliced in Latin America – that is, in bits and pieces – allows us to diagnose a pictorial mode of production that, in the end, helps make better sense of the transatlantic aesthetic developments of early modern art. From this emerges a new definition of “the Baroque” that more accurately reflects early modern visual practice. As a term, “Baroque” has been repeatedly contested to the point that it has increasingly lost utility for Europe-focused scholars, even as it continues to loom large in thinking specifically about the art of Latin America.⁵ Indeed, the Baroque, conceived of as a style, might be understood to have been shipped, via printed imagery of the kind we have already seen, from the metropole to the colonies. This seemingly historical phenomenon is tied to a historiographic thrust in that the Baroque was adopted in histories of colonial art as a readymade rubric, one borrowed from European art histories, and used to categorize and appraise art produced in Latin America. This essay tacks in the opposite direction, grasping the manipulation of form in Latin American practices of composition so as to come to see them in Europe as well, thereby reshaping the Baroque and art historical conceptualizations of its aesthetic manifestations on both sides of the Atlantic.

Here, the story of the Baroque is centered on form, or even on motif; and this account is thus meant to both challenge and actively reframe bedrock conceptualizations of the Baroque that hinge on notions of style and stylistic evolution, of periodized opposition to Renaissance classicism – one of the earliest and most enduring formulations within the discipline of art history. That set of claims, which will emerge from taking account of recombined motifs in both Latin America and Europe, proposes a mode of seeing that is flexible about the distinction between form and style, a method that grasps these as aesthetic phenomena that art historical analysis can

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A widespread unease with the term is noted in Evonne Levy and Jens Baumgarten, *Our Baroque Confection and the Baroque Survey*, in: *Revista Canadense de Estudios Hispánicos* 33, 2008, 39–64; Helen Hills, Introduction, in: ead. (ed.), *Rethinking the Baroque*, London 2011, 3–9.

cleave apart. Tracking form across both space and time demands that we begin to see these aesthetic principles as uneasy companions, for failing to do so risks hermeneutic miscategorization at the level of works, artists, and indeed entire periods. This essay exposes an early modern attention to forms as distinct from style, but moreover proposes a mechanism for its development: a sensibility to form was conditioned by print – the very medium of early modern transmission that connected the spaces in question to begin with and had empire as its engine.

I. Mixing and Matching

These larger concerns emerge from a rather fiddly reading of several colonial pictures of the single subject of the Assumption of the Virgin. The Latin American objects discussed here represent a subset of a yet broader phenomenon, and through them this section thus serves to sketch the contours of a widespread period practice – one of mixing and matching pieces of printed compositions as the basis for artistic creation. To do so, I focus specifically on prints created after designs by Peter Paul Rubens, an artist often considered a consummate progenitor of the Baroque who was based in Antwerp, a city that acted as a crucial center of printing and distribution for Spain's European and, particularly, extra-European holdings.⁶ Because of its unique position within imperial networks of trade, Antwerp yearly sent vast numbers of prints across the Atlantic to Latin America, where colonial artists took them up. And while scholars both recognize the outlines of this historical phenomenon, and even the importance of northern European artists – particularly Rubens – within it, the systematic splicing of compositions outlined below has gone unnoticed.⁷

Nearly a century after the creation of the González *enconchado*, the nun María Dolores Patiño y Orona commissioned the painter Andrés López to produce two large paintings to flank the high altar of La Enseñanza, a church in the heart of Mexico City.⁸ One of these

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On Antwerp as printing center and exporter, see Alfons K. L. Thijs, *Antwerpen internationaal uitgeverscentrum van devotieprenten 17de–18de eeuw*, Leuven 1993; Thomas and Stols, *Een wereld op papier*.

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For relatively recent treatments with particular focus on Flemish examples, see Clara Bargellini, *Difusión de modelos. Grabados y pinturas flamencos e italianos en territorios americanos*, in: Jonathan Brown and Juana Gutiérrez Haces (eds.), *La pintura de los reinos. Identidades compartidas. Territorios del mundo hispánico, siglos XVI–XVIII*, 4 vols., Mexico City 2008, 3:965–1005; Alex Bohrer, *De Missalen van Plantin en andere Zuid-Nederlandse reminiscenties in de Baroke van Minas Gerais*, in: Thomas and Stols, *Een wereld op papier*, 275–298; Fajardo de Rueda, *Grabados europeos y pintura en el Nuevo Reino de Granada*, 68–125; Cohen Suarez, *Pintura colonial cuzqueña*, 16–19; Aaron M. Hyman, *Inventing Painting. Cristóbal de Villalpando, Juan Correa, and New Spain's Transatlantic Canon*, in: *Art Bulletin* 99:2, 2017, 102–135.

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We know this from a small gold inscription on the Assumption: “A devocion de la M.^{ca} Maria Dolores de Patiño, con permiso de la R.^a M.^{ca} Priora.”



[Fig. 4]
Andrés López, Assumption of the Virgin, late-eighteenth century (after 1778), oil on canvas,
Mexico City, Iglesia de la Enseñanza. Photograph by author.

was to be an Assumption of the Virgin, which now towers over the modestly scaled nave [Fig. 4]. In composing the scene, López used a method similar to that of the González brothers, but he inverted the pieces of the prints from which he borrowed. From the Pontius engraving after Rubens [Fig. 3], he pulled the lower register – easiest to spot via the foreground figure who lunges and twists skyward, drawing the viewer's eye up and into the scene. López was more literal in his deployment of this lower register, taking not just the single figure, nor even just a few, but the entire group of apostles at left who crane their necks and raise their arms in disbelief, as well as the gathering of women and yet more apostles who hold a shroud over the tomb, adjacent to the cave or sepulcher.

At the right edge of the painting, however, we find an interloper who, registering shock, extends his arm outward such that his silvery-white drapery folds down into a slightly crumpled, highly distinctive “U”. We have seen this figure before: he stands in precisely the same position, at far right, in the other Rubens Assumption engraved by Bolswert [Fig. 2]. The apostle was copied from this other print; but, more to the point, so was the entire upper register of the Virgin and her angelic attendants. The Virgin herself is a rather loose transfer. She is still marked by her distinctive pinwheeling arms and by her steadfast heavenward gaze, but López lessened the degree to which this Virgin twists, letting her stretch up from what in Rubens's picture amounts to a tucking crouch in order to fill the composition's now quite airy upper half. He hewed more closely to the model in handling the angels below her feet, maintaining the different positions of their pudgy splayed legs, arched backs, and outstretched arms. That is, we again encounter a New Spanish Assumption for which the upper register was taken from one Rubens print of this iconography and the lower register from another. The single standing figure at lower right serves as a kind of suture for these horizontal bands – pulled from two different printed models – a fissure between them widened by the unusual height of this canvas.

The procedure of sourcing top and bottom from distinct Assumptions extended to at least five versions of Rubens's designs of the scene that made their way into print. Around the same time that López was at work for La Enseñanza, the Mexico City-based artist Francisco Antonio Vallejo created a large oil-on-canvas Assumption that was to be shipped far north to San Luis Potosí, where it is still installed in the cathedral [Fig. 5].⁹ Vallejo too performed the operation: he took the bottom register from the same Pontius-engraved Assumption that we have seen [Fig. 3], but dispersed its figures across a comparatively wide-scaled canvas. For the upper register, though, he pulled from yet a third Assumption designed by Rubens, this one also engraved by Schelte à Bolswert



[Fig. 5]

Francisco Antonio Vallejo, Assumption of the Virgin, 1759, oil on canvas, San Luis Potosí, Catedral de San Luis Potosí. Photograph by author.

[Fig. 6]. The painting's relationship to that source might be harder to spot, as Vallejo added a heavenly cast above the Virgin – her parents, St. Joseph, and the figures of the Trinity. Additionally, the Virgin has been flipped to now soar diagonally from right to left, the trail of drapery above her head traded for a halo of stars. Yet Vallejo was clearly looking to the Rubens source, and this is “the same” Virgin. If the distinctive drapery were not enough – cinched at the waist, a large extra pleat draped over her lower belly and tucked legs – Vallejo carefully nestled Rubens's angels next to the Virgin; one flies in from the side and the other kicks foreshortened legs, his right directly out at the viewer.

The list of paintings produced by Mexico City's artists could be extended and so too the enumeration of different Rubens Assumptions with which these artists worked.¹⁰ Yet reconfigured Assumptions are not particular to Mexico City, nor even to New Spain. A small Assumption that now hangs in what was the Indigenous parish church of San Blas in Cuzco, Peru makes this clear [Fig. 7]. The Virgin owes to Pontius's engraving, though she is flipped in the opposite direction [Fig. 3]. Despite this reversal, the particular position of her hands and gaze, the curl of her tunic hugging her thigh and trailing off below her feet, the triangular flutter of her robe, and her long and wispy hair are all maintained. One might assume that the now unknown artist was working with a subsequent and thereby reversed edition of the print. But not necessarily. For this was an artist thinking about the reorientations that could occur around the central axis. He plucked from the Pontius composition the distinctive foreground figure who lunges into the scene, but rotated the figure 180 degrees and displaced him to the middle ground, just to the right of the tomb. All of his features have been maintained despite the dramatic change of position and orientation – left hand raised, right hand open, gesturing forward; two types of drapery, an extra fold over the right arm; legs lunging, right forward and left back.

Yet again, however, this artist performed those reorientations with more than one Assumption designed by Rubens. In so doing, he also demonstrates how composites could be looser still, less copies of full registers than recombinations and borrowings of individual figures and forms. From a second print – published in a 1614 Plantin-Moretus Breviary – the artist culled elements in the lower register [Fig. 8]: the tomb lid jutting into the scene from below, the shovel rested upon it, the tomb itself with its distinctive beveled angles and heavy lip. Even the woman just left of the tomb seems an adaptation of the man in the same position in the print, if her right arm now rotates so that she might grab the ledge with both hands rather than gesture to the onlookers. Those details, inci-

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One could take, for example, Juan Rodríguez Juárez's Assumption for the high altar lateral in Mexico City's cathedral, which combines the lower register of a Rubens-designed Assumption engraved by Hans Witdoeck and the Virgin – with her attendant angels – in heaven from the Pontius engraving [Fig. 3]. See Almerindo Ojeda, “Correspondence 4229A/4229B”, *Project on the Engraved Sources of Spanish Colonial Art* (12.04.2020).



[Fig. 6]

Schelte à Bolswert, after Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin, ca. 1650, engraving, 636 × 436 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.



[Fig. 7]

Unknown Artist, Assumption of the Virgin, ca. 1700, oil on canvas, Cuzco, Iglesia de San Blas © Raúl Montero Quispe.



[Fig. 8]

Theodoor Galle, after Peter Paul Rubens, *Assumption of the Virgin*, ca. 1614, engraving, 304 × 194 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

dental and not quite visually commensurate as they are, may make this seem a not particularly convincing match, even if we know that the Plantin Breviary circulated widely and in vast numbers through the Americas owing to the monopoly the press received to print liturgical materials for the Spanish Empire.¹¹ But amidst such adaptation, a precise moment of quotation or copying pulls the relationship between the Peruvian canvas and the Flemish printed source into sharp focus: a single angel, positioned at the Virgin's hip in both compositions, distinctively arches back into space, albeit in reversed orientation. This angel scissors his legs as one of his windmilling arms crosses in front of his face and his body twists to allow him to look up at the Virgin, whose transit he accompanies. Of course, it is no longer the same Virgin, the upper register having been adopted from Pontius's engraving rather than the Breviary. Here, then, just like with the large canvas in *La Enseñanza* with which we began, a figure sutures two registers taken from different Rubens-designed Assumptions.

This section has begun to describe a phenomenon wherein artists of different generations, with different backgrounds, working on different continents, took the top register of one Assumption designed by Rubens and combined it with the lower half of another. That operation, as will become clear, forms part of a broader, syntactical approach to compositions, which period actors clearly saw in terms of registers to be reformed, and also as bits and pieces to be excised and redeployed. I contend that such an approach to these compositions is particular to and constitutive of "the Baroque", but not via any standard definition and, just as importantly, not only in Latin America – even if, to this point, it has been described via colonial examples. It is thus to the question of Latin America and its particular place within theories and conceptualizations of the Baroque that we now turn before panning back out to trace these modes of composition as a broader, indeed transatlantic, visual phenomenon.

II. Latin America's Baroque

The objects discussed to this point might be stressed as "Baroque" within any number of rubrics. One might, for instance, underscore the role of prints as a type of typically Baroque propaganda;¹² or that these prints were designed by Rubens, the Baroque brush par excellence. Repeated Assumptions might be understood as emblem-

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J. Richard Judson and Carl van de Velde, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard Part XXI. Book Illustrations and Title-Pages*, 2 vols., London 1978, 1:84–89, 1:143–146; Leon Voet, Christoffel Plantijn en het Iberische schiereiland, in: *Christoffel Plantijn en de Iberische wereld*, Antwerp 1992, 77; Jan Materné, Ex Officina Plantiniana. Antwerpse katholieke kerkdrukken op de Iberisch-Amerikaanse boekenmarkt, in: Eddy Stols and Rudi Bleys (eds.), *Vlaanderen en Latijns-Amerika. 500 jaar confrontatie en métissage*, Antwerp 1993, 139–153.

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See, on propaganda, Evonne Levy, *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque*, Berkeley 2004.

atic of a resurgent Marian devotion of the Counter-Reformation and a rebuttal to Protestant iconoclasm.¹³ And then there is the fact that these paintings were all produced in Latin America, placing these images within a strategy of imperial visual dissemination from metropolises to colonial, missionized spaces. Yet that range should begin to indicate a fundamental issue, which is that there is, in fact, no standard definition of, no single framework for thinking about, the Baroque. And that is a genuine analytic problem.

After all, what single word can possibly refer to a style of art, and literature, and music, and speech; an ideological structure of governance; a cultural framework engineered by the Catholic Church; alternatively, a form of artistic naturalism with epicenters in both Protestant Amsterdam and papal Rome? This is to say nothing of confounding uses of “Baroque” to define either a period (usually the seventeenth century – though the eighteenth and even nineteenth in Latin America or the Ottoman Empire);¹⁴ or a *recurrent* cultural phenomenon – that is, the Baroques of Hellenistic antiquity and Counter-Reformation Italy. As Evonne Levy and Jens Baumgarten have evocatively written, the Baroque “seems to be like a really delicious cake (or confection)”, one that when returned to after an hour of rest and a tour around the kitchen appears to be of an entirely different variety – an angel food cake suddenly a *Pflaumenkuchen*. “And then how quickly it is consumed and forgotten, just to be remade in exactly the same form and marveled at as a new invention all over again.”¹⁵

The most enduring definition, however, and one undergirding many subsequent formulations, stems from its earliest and most classical conception by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art historians of the German tradition: the idea of “the Baroque” as a style. *This* notion of “the Baroque” emerged from the foundations of the discipline of art history as a critical tool for attending to the very idea of stylistic evolution.¹⁶ In that effort, the Baroque was framed as a perversion of Renaissance ideals: excessive, vertiginous, deformed. It was this definition that was shipped, much like the prints we have seen, from Europe to Latin America. And, in this

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The literature here is vast, but perhaps nicely bookended by Thomas L. Glen, *Rubens and the Counter Reformation. Studies in His Religious Paintings between 1609 and 1620*, New York 1977; and Willibald Sauerländer, *The Catholic Rubens. Saints and Martyrs*, trans. David Dollenmayer, Los Angeles 2014.

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On the Ottoman context, see Ünver Rüstem, *The Ottoman Baroque. The Architectural Refashioning of Eighteenth-Century Istanbul*, Princeton 2019.

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Levy and Baumgarten, *Our Baroque Confection*, 39–40 specifically.

¹⁶

One would traditionally put the origin of such an appraisal of the so-called “Barockstyl” in Jacob Burckhardt, *Der Cicerone. Eine Anleitung zum Genuss der Kunstwerke Italiens*, Basel 1855. On the emergence of this discourse, see Alina Payne, *On Sculptural Relief. Malerisch, the Autonomy of Artistic Media and the Beginnings of Baroque Studies*, in: Hills, *Rethinking the Baroque*, 39–64. On the polemical, political relationship to the so-called *Jesuitenstil*, see Evonne Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language of Formalism (1845–1945)*, Basel 2015.

sense, a goal of rethinking the Baroque of northern Europe from Latin America will require tacking between historical and historiographic concerns.

A single example serves to unpack something of the stakes of “Baroque” style within a Latin American framework. In 2017, the Metropolitan Museum of Art inaugurated “Cristóbal de Villalpando: Mexican Painter of the Baroque”, a small exhibition meant to make an oversized statement about the arrival of colonial Latin American art into the halls of an encyclopedic collection that had, until then, largely ignored the topic. There was seemingly nothing more fitting for such an endeavor than a 28-foot-tall canvas representing the Transfiguration with Moses and the Brazen Serpent by Villalpando, both the 1683 painting and its painter epitomizing descriptors of the Baroque as a style, as much in Europe as in Latin America [Fig. 9].

In the show’s catalog, Rogelio Ruiz Gomar thus writes of Villalpando being put “on the path to the splendor and freedom of the Baroque tradition in the vibrant use of color and theatricality”. He continues, “Villalpando was trained in the discipline of drawing”, but “it did not take long for him to loosen his brushstroke, freeing it from harsh outlines”.¹⁷ In this account, Villalpando’s art is heralded as “sumptuous”, defined by a reliance on “color” that amounts to an “unbridled exuberant style, brimming with light and brilliance” with forms that are marked out with “elusive brushwork”.¹⁸ Such a description represents an almost wholesale adoption of traditional Baroque stylistic categorizations, with a lineage reaching back to Jacob Burckhardt and Heinrich Wölfflin, and particularly the notion of “das Malerische” (the painterly – open and loose), a concept to which we will return. But it is critical to note here that this concept of Baroque stylization was generated in opposition to the rigidity of a Renaissance preference for stability and fixity, line and balance.¹⁹

It is unsurprising that the Met’s catalog celebrated Villalpando’s Baroque, but Baroque style is, of course, not always judged positively. Indeed, the very same terms had previously been marshaled against the painter. Manuel Toussaint, the grandfather of art history in Mexico, wrote of Villalpando as part of decline and decay – yet another trope of Baroque style – positioning the artist squarely within what he called “La decadencia”, an era of colonial artistic production “whose only eagerness was to continue on in

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Rogelio Ruiz Gomar, Cristóbal de Villalpando. Grandeur of Baroque Painting in New Spain, in: *Cristóbal de Villalpando. Mexican Painter of the Baroque* (exh. cat. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), Mexico City 2017, 21–23, see specifically 21.

¹⁸

Ibid., 23.

¹⁹

Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Barock. Eine Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien*, Munich 1888; Alois Riegl, *Die Entstehung der Barockkunst in Rom*, ed. by Arthur Burda and Max M. Dvořák, Vienna 1908.



[Fig. 9]

Cristóbal de Villalpando, Moses and the Brazen Serpent and the Transfiguration, 1683, oil on canvas, 865 × 550.1 cm, Puebla, Mexico, Acervo de la Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Inmaculada Concepción.

exuberance, until collapsing in weakness and impotence”.²⁰ Despite their divergent estimations, what Toussaint and Ruiz Gomar agree upon is that the Baroque is a definable artistic style and that Villalpando’s art is Baroque. In both accounts, the seeming suitability of such language and concepts to the New Spanish artist implies a frictionless positioning of Villalpando within art history’s frameworks via its most traditional terms. Exuberant, unwieldy, painterly, theatrical: those features of the Baroque could be judged triumphant or monstrous, monumental or deformed.

The Villalpando painting, rolled and shipped from Puebla’s cathedral first to Mexico City and then to the Met in New York, epitomizes such adjectives.²¹ It is literally oversized, larger than life, too much; via a diaphanous stretch of rocky cliff (a pictorial oxymoron, so to speak) two scenes – one from the Old Testament, the other from the New – are strangely conjoined; sketched with light, the figures find little solid ground; the masses of forms writhe and emote; there is no clear horizon line, only diagonals, and interruptions, and dematerializations. One can decide to celebrate such a “style” or not.

Yet does Villalpando’s art – and that of his peers in Latin America, more generally – need to be “Baroque” at all? What has the Baroque offered to historians of colonial Latin American art that thick description alone could not? In fact, quite a lot. The profound agreement that “the Baroque” names a supposedly recognizable style has material implications for the status of colonial art and its position within the discipline. For a New Spanish painter like Villalpando, traditionally marginalized by both art history and the institutions through which it has been narrated, to be labeled “Baroque” granted the prestige necessary for transatlantic comparisons and the potential to expand what often feels like an airtight canon. Villalpando (as much historiographic construct as historical actor) now relies upon the Baroque, a term that smoothed his inauguration into the Met, the Louvre, and the Prado – museums in which his work has only recently been exhibited.

Such a move is nearly always explicitly articulated. The Met titled its show to afford Villalpando Baroque status; the Louvre, in its description of a much longer *durée* of New Spanish art, similarly chimed that one could there appreciate the “Baroque dynamism of Cristóbal Villalpando [sic] and the softness and delicacy [read Rococo] of Rodríguez Juárez”.²² The seeming ease with which colo-

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Manuel Toussaint, *Pintura colonial en México*, Mexico City 1965, 136.

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For a reproduction of the painting and details about its transport and installation, see “Exhibition Overview” on the Website of the *Met Museum* (14.04.2020).

²²

See “Mexican Art at the Louvre. Masterpieces from the 17th and 18th Centuries” on the Website of the *Louvre* (06.09.2022; Internet Archive). Matching Latin America’s art to European stylistic trajectories stretches from early historiographic moments to more recent formulations: see Pál Kelemen, *Baroque and Rococo in Latin America*, New York 1951;

nial art is thus translated into European categories is a boon not just for Villalpando, but rather for an entire field of study – colonial Latin American art – legitimated via a canonical art historical descriptor. In a recent survey of scholars working across “Baroque” traditions, historians of Latin American art expressed clear misgivings about the term; yet in the words of Clara Bargellini, “[The Baroque] has certainly been important, and all the signs are that it is not going away.”²³

To define Villalpando as Baroque, however, is to resort to a particular idea of style developed in the nineteenth century for the study of seventeenth-century European art. Despite their divergent assessments of the style’s merit, Toussaint and Ruiz Gomar both drew upon this tradition. Even their bifurcated valuation mirrors early European debates about the Baroque, in which Burckhardt could see this style as a degradation of the principles of the Renaissance and Wölfflin could instead find that style’s redemption. And Ruiz Gomar and Toussaint both seemed to find a historical justification for drawing on these terms: after all, Villalpando copied prints by Rubens and other European artists of the seventeenth century [Fig. 2 and Fig. 10].²⁴ The fact that Rubens, as the quintessentially Baroque artist, had been mobilized to this effect seems to have reified a belief in the efficacy of such stylistic frameworks for studying New Spanish art.

But this is to suggest that Europe’s art historical categories were somehow so natural and so right – and this even though they emerged from a historiographic frame that had cordoned Europe off from places with which it had once been connected – that we can now simply move from shore to shore and apply them. Rather, reconnecting those geographies once left out of art history’s narration should prompt a reconsideration of the discipline’s historiographic, formalist bedrocks. For as we have already seen, plenty of colonial artists worked from Rubens’s designs, but we would hardly class their styles in the same terms as Villalpando’s. López may have been using Rubens’s prints, and the González brothers too, yet it would be tough to argue for stylistic affinity. Indeed, many of those artists and their works were entirely overlooked by early historians of colonial art; for they, unlike Villalpando, failed to fall nicely into categories that were – like engraved sources themselves – imported from Europe.

At issue here is not just a desire to remediate art history’s exclusions but to see in those works that were sidelined – and this despite their engagement with the kind of compositions cen-

Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *The Andean Hybrid Baroque. Convergent Cultures in the Churches of Colonial Peru*, Notre Dame, IN 2010.

²³

See Baumgarten and Levy, *Our Baroque Confection*, 55. To this effect, see Evonne Levy and Kenneth Mills (eds.), *Lexikon of the Hispanic Baroque. Transatlantic Exchange and Transformation*, Austin 2014.

²⁴

On Villalpando’s copying from and familiarity with northern European prints, see Aaron M. Hyman, *Inventing Painting*, 102–135.



[Fig. 10]

Cristóbal de Villalpando, Assumption of the Virgin, 1680s, oil on canvas, 225 × 178 cm, Guadalajara, Museo Regional de Guadalajara © Rafael Doniz.

tral to the discipline – a much greater potential: to reread the Baroque itself and some of its foundational formulations, now turned assumptions. Rather than style, these artists shared forms. And these were forms that had been transmitted not in the painterly bravura of Rubens's canvases, but in the black-and-white cross-hatches and *moirées* of prints made after his designs. López, the González brothers, and the other artists we have seen additionally shared a sensibility about how those forms could be manipulated, how they could be cleaved apart or cut up and moved around the picture plane. It is that operation, I argue, that opens up an alternative conception of the Baroque.

III. Transatlantic Frames

An entry point for making good on such promises comes via understanding how the procedures of artists in Latin America working with European source materials were described and appreciated during the colonial period. For while one might view Villalpando's adoption of Rubensian motifs through the lens of Baroque style (and still in essentially nineteenth-century art historical terms), this was not often how early modern actors framed the relationships between source and copy, Europe and Latin America. Getting at such a sensibility is complicated, however, by the near complete absence of period commentary about the production of colonial art. There are no musings by connoisseurs in Latin America, no letters between artists and their patrons, and no artistic treatises penned in the Americas that we might mine for terms to help reconstruct contemporary response.²⁵ There are, however, contracts between patrons and artists. And when patrons commissioned an artist in Latin America to create a work of art by following a printed composition, they most often used a specific term: the Spanish verb *conformar*. Admittedly, the legalese of colonial notarial formulae is hardly as enticing as the high-flying prose of Europe's early modern artistic treatises or art history's founding fathers. Yet a certain radicality, I suggest, lies within the workmanly language of notarial contracts. For while seemingly banal and formulaic, these documents offer terminology that, once parsed, suggests a framework of analysis capable of prying form from style.

Not infrequently, a patron would supply an artist with a print, stipulating in their contractual commission that the final product should *conform* to that graphic source (*conforme a la estampa que recibe*).²⁶ Conformity thus became a guiding principle of colonial

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On the material and documentary difficulties of working with colonial art in traditional historiographic frameworks, see Aaron M. Hyman and Barbara E. Mundy, 'Out of the Shadow of Vasari: Towards a New Model of the "Artist" in Colonial Latin America', in: *Colonial Latin American Review* 24:3, 2015, 283–317.

²⁶

See Aaron M. Hyman, *Rubens in Repeat. Authorship and the Logic of Conformity in Colonial Latin America*, Los Angeles 2021, 1–27.

artistic production. The Latin root *conformis* – to share forms – indicates what was at stake. Conformity was a widely used word in the period and could be a loosely abstract notion – like the sharing of behaviors or affectations. Yet where the visual arts were concerned, this was more literal: a sharing of visual forms between multiple artistic instantiations of a composition. In asking painters to produce a work that conformed, patrons implicitly acknowledged a difference between model and resulting work of art. This was to be a copy, but one that might differ dramatically in terms of scale, material, and style. After all, the painting or the sculpture could never be the print and patrons did not, of course, long for another printed object. Rather, they needed something – whether painted or sculpted – that did similar visual work, but in a different scale and medium. We might call these works “conforming copies” rather than just “copies” in order to capture and underscore period concerns about exactly what it was that artists worked to transfer from one support to the next.

Period sources quite notably do not speak of reproduction, of replication, but yet more importantly they generally speak of neither “style” nor “manner”. Instead, conformity stressed formal repetition – a sharing of forms – between two or more objects. It is the question of forms that returns us to the cut-up, recombined Rubens Assumptions. But here a wrinkle emerges. We need not stay in Latin America to explore this phenomenon. Take, for instance, an Assumption painted in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century by the little-studied, Ghent-based painter Gillis le Plat [Fig. 11]. The altarpiece now hangs in the former *bedehuis* of the Bijloke abbey in Ghent, though it most likely once served as the devotional focal point for the chapel of the weavers’ guild in the city’s Hôtel de Ville.²⁷ Having seen so many Rubens Assumptions, the reader may indeed already recognize that le Plat, in planning his composition, had borrowed many figures: the man recoiling in the foreground, for instance; or the women hunched around the tomb, a swath of fabric stretched between their hands; or the group of men who strain to lift the heavy stone lid. These figures, defining the central area of the lower register as they do, came directly from the Rubens/Bolswert Assumption with which we began in Mexico City [Fig. 2]. But we have also seen this Virgin – in the second composition of the Assumption engraved by Bolswert [Fig. 6]. We spot her flowing hair, the strands of light that create a dynamic streaming halo, and the trail of drapery that flutters up and arcs artfully over her head, at once animating and containing her transit.

Yet she is not the only indication that le Plat turned to a second Rubens Assumption in composing the scene. As in the large canvas in *La Enseñanza* in Mexico City [Fig. 4], the apostle in the lower

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This painting is little known and has received scant attention; the most relevant information about its initial installation and transfer is found in Erik Duverger, Filip Spruyt en zijn inventaris van kunstwerken in openbaar en privaat bezit te Gent (ca. 1789–1791), in: *Gentse Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis en de Oudheidkunde* XIX, 1961–1966, 151–240, specifically 206; Jos Walters, *Geschiedenis der Zusters der Bijloke te Gent*, 3 vols., Ghent 1929, 1:300–310.



[Fig. 11]
Gilles le Plat, *Assumption of the Virgin*, ca. 1694–1701, oil on canvas, width ca. 290 cm,
Ghent, Abbey Church of the Bijloke, now Het STAM (Stadsmuseum). Photograph by
author.

right, arms outstretched to heaven, was taken from the print used for the *top* portion of the composition. Placed on the ground line, but reaching skywards, he unites the two halves. In fact, a cave cum sepulcher taken from this second Assumption is similarly positioned at the other edge of the canvas. In the Bijloke painting, then, the grave scene below is bookended, or embraced, by pieces of the source composition for the Virgin in heaven above, such that top and bottom registers sourced from different Rubens Assumptions are fully bound together. The formal and figural units in the lower register thus became, through this process of splitting and stitching, an expanded cast, one compressed to accommodate a now crowded scene.

Le Plat's compositional procedure in Ghent was far from an isolated occurrence. The top and bottom halves of different Rubens Assumptions could be, and indeed were, recombined in Europe to produce all manner of objects. The painter of an oil-on-copper produced in Flanders in horizontal rather than vertical format stretched the cast of characters across a newly spacious ground line [Fig. 12].²⁸ The picture, now in Madrid, combines the top half from Rubens's Assumption engraved by Pontius [Fig. 3] with the bottom register of yet another version of the subject designed by Rubens and etched and engraved by Hans Witdoeck [Fig. 13]. The fairly small size of such Flemish copper paintings made them easy to export;²⁹ but large paintings were also made in far-flung European locations where top and bottom registers, just as in Latin America, were taken from prints that had been sent on the move.³⁰ That is, in considering such reconfigured Assumptions, we are not looking at a colonial phenomenon, but rather one that spans the transatlantic world.

This represents a rather remarkable occurrence: that artists working across three continents and nearly 150 years – from ca. 1650–1784 – all came to these (multiple) Assumptions designed by Rubens in the same way. Across wildly varying social and artistic circumstances, artists shared a particular sensibility, seeing within these compositions two registers of forms and formal units that could be split and then reconfigured in part or whole. But it must

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The painting now in Madrid was likely completed ca. 1655 by Abraham Willemsen; Jesús Ángel Sánchez Rivera, *Sobre una serie de cobres flamencos de pintores en la estela de Rubens*, in: *Anales de Historia del Arte*, 2011, 483–505, particularly 503–505, fig. 8. A recent account identifies the Pontius source for the top half but not the second source; Uwe Cordes, *Das Monogramm A.W.IN.F. und die Antwerpener Malerfamilie Willemsens*, Oppenheim am Rhein 2021, 70–71.

29

See the painting once in the Musée Fabre de Montpellier, which declined to confirm it still houses the object; Quentin Buvelot, Michel Hilaire, and Olivier Zeder, *Tableaux flamands et hollandaise du Musée Fabre de Montpellier*, Paris 1998, 292–293. Such paintings not infrequently appear on the market; see Kunsthau am Museum. Carola van Ham, *Auktion 49* (October 20–23, 1971), 106.

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An anonymously painted Assumption now in the chapel of San Sebastián in the Cathedral of Málaga combines the upper register of Pontius's engraving [Fig. 3] with the lower register based on the Plantin Breviary Assumption [Fig. 8].



[\[Fig. 12\]](#)
Abraham Willemsen, *Assumption of the Virgin*, ca. 1655, oil on copper, 121 × 146 cm,
Madrid, Convento de las Comendadoras de Santiago el Mayor © Jesús Ángel Sánchez
Rivera.



[Fig. 13]

Hans Witdoeck, after Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin, 1639, engraving with etching, 645 × 480 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

be stressed that it is approaching these objects, both Latin American and European, through the priorities laid bare in *colonial* artistic documentation that pushes us to appreciate their creation as a formal operation. In so often conforming to prints they were given, retooling motifs over and over for different commissions, colonial artists were primed to focus on discrete formal units – defined implicitly in colonial contracts as the figures and primary objects of a composition. The constant manipulation and recombination of forms, which was necessary to transpose compositions from one substrate, scale, and format to another, produced a sense of how source materials could be redistributed across a pictorial field, reorganized on any given substrate.

Tracking the dissemination and use of Rubens's Assumptions in Latin America demonstrates that – in the minds of contemporary viewers and makers – these prints were understood as being made up of sets of formal units. But as we have seen, this was not only true in Latin America. Artists working on both sides of the Atlantic, with notably divergent training, materials, and stylistic impulses, manipulated these pictures along the same lines. These artists quite apparently saw in Rubens's various permutations of the Assumption a potential for their re-formation across registers, resulting in objects that, while not strict copies, do indeed conform. This was to operate with a syntactical relationship to composition, which I would argue defines “the Baroque”: a Baroque that must be seen as a transatlantic phenomenon far escaping the temporal bounds of the seventeenth century, but related to, above all, form and a mode of production rather than style. Recovering that sensibility allows us to understand certain stylistic features deemed constitutive of the Baroque as second-level, even incidental after-effects related to its primary feature: a working mode centered on formal units – figural groupings and motifs – that could slide across or between pictorial surfaces. In looking at “the Baroque” from across the Atlantic – that is, from its colonial manifestation – what emerges is a process by which forms were continually isolated, recombined, and, critically, *stabilized* within a highly schematic system, rather than loosed and unmoored as part of a stylistic inclination toward the unwieldy and the irrational.

IV. Process, Print, Form

The Baroque as style, then, is the ultimate assumption this essay calls into question. It is not, of course, the first to do so. But most often when the use of “Baroque” to define a stylistic categorization has been challenged, this has been in the service of moving the term “beyond” the formalist language and aesthetic concerns of art history – that is, away from the very origins of the idea of the Baroque. In these cases, the term and associated “style” are instead pushed to act as a diagnostic of some deeper, ostensibly more important,

structural concern of social control and/or of thought.³¹ Yet doing so presupposes that style itself is a stable concept and that Baroque style has been adequately described and deciphered – that, in effect, we know it when we see it.

The objects presented here and the period notion of conformity, however, might return us to the formalist language of the discipline's inception to account for the pictorial operations of the early modern period (broadly conceived) both differently and more effectively. Conformity offers a way into parsing form – as motif and figural unit – apart from style, and of thereby coming to grasp the operations of a widespread syntactical procedure of early modern composition. To be clear, this is not meant as a prompt to disciplinary retreat, asking for a return to the past or walling art history off from other fields that have taken up the term and framework. Indeed, I would suggest that a more precise understanding of the formalist operations of what we might call Baroque composition could, as had been the case for traditional conceptions of Baroque style, create interdisciplinary discussion. But in this, the hope would be for the production of a far less shape-shifting confection.

In Latin America, conformity conditioned artistic practice, contractually demanding and thereby conceptually instilling a mode of reproducing and redispersing forms from source models. Yet, as we have begun to see, artists in Europe were performing operations at the level of compositional transmission and execution that were not so dissimilar. Though we can – and will – locate this shared, transatlantic mode of production in the highest echelons of European art, it is actually most appreciable if one is willing to sit with what could all too easily seem like early modern debris: unoriginal paintings of decidedly weak execution and, in particular, prints at once obscure and derivative. Consider, for example, an engraving of the Virgin in heaven produced in the mid-seventeenth century by Coenraad Waumans [Fig. 14]. To create the scene, he simply excised the Virgin from the upper register of another print: the large engraving produced by Bolswert after the design by Rubens that was closest to the composition he would paint for Antwerp's cathedral [Fig. 6].

The excerpted Virgin's reversal here was, of course, part of the operation of print itself. Copied onto a copper plate, the figure was flipped through the pressure of the press. And Waumans was not alone in this practice. In fact, nearly all of Rubens's Assumptions were subjected to this type of excision and reversal. The engraver and publisher Cornelis Galle pulled the Virgin from the other Bolswert engraved Assumption [Fig. 3]; while he once gave credit to Rubens as the painter with the inscription "pinxit" in the lower

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These calls often come from outside the discipline and are mobilized within political or representational frameworks; see José Antonio Maravall, *La cultura del barroco. Análisis de una estructura histórica*, Esppluges de Llobregat 1975; William Egginton, *The Theater of Truth. The Ideology of (Neo)Baroque Aesthetics*, Stanford 2009; Howard Caygill, *Ottoman Baroque. The Limits of Style*, in: Hills, *Rethinking the Baroque*, 65–79. The approach is so common that it has been met with calls to reject issues of deeper structure entirely, though still via the idea that Baroque style is legible and diagnosable; see Anthony Cascardi, *Philosophy of Culture and Theory of the Baroque*, in: *Filozofski vestnik* 2, 2001, 87–110.



[Fig. 14]

Coenraad Waumans, after Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin, ca. 1650–1684, engraving, 255 × 136 mm, London, British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum.

left [Fig. 15a], he later released a similar engraving without such an attribution [Fig. 15b]. So too did Gaspar Huberti, publisher also of the Waumans engraving, though he seems to have copied the Galle image to do so and thus to have flipped the Virgin back to the orientation of the original [Fig. 15c].

The operation was not singular to print. In the second half of the seventeenth century, a now unknown artist produced a painting featuring the Assumption for a side altar in the church of the Beguinage in Lier, Belgium [Fig. 16].³² By this point, the reader may already spot that the painter took Bolswert's engraving [Fig. 6] (or one of the several *printed* copies that followed in its wake) as his source. But he made an important adjustment – reversing the orientation of the Virgin, who now soars away from and not toward the cave in the background, while reducing her retinue to a few angels.³³ Here too, then, our artist approached his printed source with an eye to re-registering it. He did so, however, not by matching and mixing it with the forms of an additional print, but rather via the logic of print itself: figures or forms isolated and subjected to pictorial reversal via their reproduction. This Virgin, excised from the composition and reversed, was then reinserted into the scene from which she had come.

It is easy to look past such pictures, at face value driven only by a mass market for devotional objects large and small. Indeed, not a single one of these works has ever been the focus of serious study. But derivative prints and second-, third-, or fourth-tier paintings, when placed side by side, give us access to a broader period artistic conception of larger compositions as agglomerations of formal units to be pulled apart and manipulated. Those units were themselves made up of yet smaller parts. At first glance, the engraver Adriaen Millaert seems to have proceeded in much the same way we have seen, isolating and excising the figural grouping centered on the Virgin from the Rubens Assumption engraved by Pontius [Fig. 17 and Fig. 3]. Upon closer inspection, however, the soaring angels clustered below her do not conform to the original. Nevertheless, they were still taken from Rubens. In producing this print, Millaert pulled the Virgin from one Assumption, engraved by Pontius [Fig. 3], and her angelic retinue from another, engraved by Bolswert [Fig. 2]. That is, even the smaller formal groupings with which artists began to work could be further broken down and reconstituted. In this case, the heavenly register itself was subjected to the same swap/flip, top/bottom divisions that defined the larger system of copying and recombining the entire compositions.

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For basic information, see Marc Mees and Stefaan Grieten, *De begijnhofkerk van Lier. Bouwgeschiedenis en inventaris van het kunstpatrimonium van de Sint-Margaretakerk*, Lier 1999, 215–216.

³³

As with most of these cases, one can add examples; for a scene that treats the composition in the same way, see the oil-on-copper painting in Sotheby's New York, *Old Master Paintings*, #11 (October 17, 1997).



[Fig. 15]
From top to bottom, left to right: [Fig. 15a] Cornelis Galle I, after Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin, 1630–1650, engraving, 237 × 143 mm; [Fig. 15b] Cornelis Galle I, after Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin, 1630–1650, engraving, 298 × 219 mm; [Fig. 15c] Gaspar Huberti, after Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin, 1650–1724, engraving, 245 × 145 mm. For all: London, British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum.



[Fig. 16]

Unknown Artist, Assumption of the Virgin, ca. 1650–1700, oil on canvas, 190 × 122 cm, Lier, Church of the Beguinage © Sarah Joan Moran.



[Fig. 17]
From top to bottom, left to right: Adriaen Millaert, after Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin, 1650–1667, engraving, 435 × 312 mm, London, British Museum. And [Fig. 2] and [Fig. 3]. Composite created by Lael Ensor-Bennett.

Though they have played the role of mere footnote to Rubens's production, small devotional prints with figures and forms excised from his larger compositions in fact unleashed incredible skeins of copies in their own right.³⁴ Millaert's is a fitting example, acting as the source for a tremendous number of other printed objects. Devotional print makers, anonymous engravers, and even major publishers reduced Millaert's composition to be printed as truly miniscule objects, all measuring roughly a mere 90 × 60 mm [Fig. 18]. Indeed, this Virgin was taken up, her form flipped, in engraved and hand-colored impressions time and time again. These objects became a ubiquitous feature of period visual culture and, because geared at mass dissemination, resulted in a spread that was both geographic and temporal.³⁵

Stacks of such devotional prints were produced for all manner of purposes: to be sold at religious fairs, given out on particular feast days, offered as prizes for exemplary studentship in Sunday schools.³⁶ As an inscription on its verso indicates, the impression of the print illustrated as [Fig. 18a] and [Fig. 18b], for instance, was distributed in Haarlem – that is, in the predominantly Protestant Northern Netherlands – at the funeral of one P. Heynemans, chaplain of the church of the Vier Heemskinderen.³⁷ Other verso texts point to further uses of these objects, while also underscoring the exceptionally longue durée in which these forms were reproduced and circulated. [Fig. 18g] (the verso of [Fig. 18f]), for instance, has a hand-written inscription that commemorates the first communion of Isabel Kerkhoff presided over by a certain friar Crens in 1779; it also notes in a chatty aside that Crens had performed the ceremony because the usual parish priest, Simon van Hees, was indisposed due to a bad case of gout (!).³⁸ The recto and verso of another print [Fig. 18h and Fig. 18i] pull us even further into time, to 1827 in

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None of the *devotieprenten* discussed here, for instance, feature in the *Corpus Rubenianum*, which in theory treats all known copies after Rubens. The tracking stops much further up the “replica chain”. See David Freedberg, *Life of Christ after the Passion. Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, Part VII*, London 1984. One of the only discussions of “high” art and these types of Flemish devotional prints is Carl Depauw, *Devotiegrafiek in Vlaanderen (circa 1550–1750). Een globale kunsthistorische benadering*, in: *Vlaanderen* 41, 1992, 175–184, particularly 176–177.

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On devotional prints as part of Antwerp's export industry, see Thijs, *Antwerpen internationaal uitgeverscentrum*.

36

The most comprehensive studies on use are Adolf Spamer, *Das kleine Andachtsbild vom XIV. bis zum XX. Jahrhundert*, Munich 1930; Emile-H. Van Heurck, *Les images de devotion anversoises du XVIe au XIXe siècle*, in: *De Gulden Passer* 8, 1930, 67–106; Alfons K. L. Thijs, *Notities voor een studie van de antwerpse 17de-eeuwse suffragia*, in: *De Gulden Passer* 61–63, 1983–1985, 561–94; Evelyn M. F. Verheggen, *Beelden voor passie & hartstocht. Bid- en devotieprenten in de Noordelijke Nederlanden, 17de en 18de eeuw*, Zutphen 2006.

37

The text reads: “Ter Gedachtenis van de zeer eerwaarde Pater P. Heynemans geweest Capelaan in de Kerk van de vier heemskinderen te Haarlem.”

38

The inscription reads: “Ter gedagtenisse van myn Eerste H Communie geleert by den Zeer Eerwaarde Pater Simon Van Hees en gedaen by den Zeer Eerwaarde Pater Crens ter

Mespelare, Belgium and the funeral of one Augustinus Stephanus de Looze. Here, nineteenth-century printing has replaced script, indicative of the sheer quantities that could be distributed at a single gathering – proliferating Assumptions.

One must be careful not to simply view these as degraded products of artists and publishers working at scale, churning out copies in a recursive loop ignorant of original models. For nearly all of these prints were produced in Antwerp, mere steps from Rubens's home and the grand Assumption that graced the high altar of the city's cathedral (after which one of Bolswert's engravings was completed). Even more definitively, the very same publishers producing devotional prints of excised Virgins in heaven were simultaneously releasing engravings of the Rubens-designed compositions from which they had been taken in their entirety. Gaspar Huberti, for instance, published his own version of Bolswert's Assumption [Fig. 2], while similarly printing small, excised Virgins from that very composition [Fig. 15c]. In this, he was no exception. Both "high-end" engravers and publishers who worked directly with Rubens and makers of cheap devotional prints repeatedly excerpted and reworked Virgins from complete compositions, while simultaneously setting them back into the scenes from which they had been taken. And these practices persisted for generations. Huberti is again exemplary, his son Frans having taken over operations from his father and continuing to publish many of these same or related compositions [Fig. 18c].

This expanded visual field of small devotional objects also fits into a transatlantic history of transmission. Writing to his Jesuit superiors from Bogotá (present-day Colombia) in the 1690s, Father Ignatius Toebast requested two or three thousand such *beeldekens*, preferably hand-colored, he added, as those were preferred by his Indigenous parishioners.³⁹ Yet such printed objects were mobilized within a transatlantic artistic, and not just devotional, transfer as well. Waumans's excerpted Virgin, with which this section began [Fig. 14], would be conformingly copied, for instance, by the Mexico City-based painter José de Ibarra in the mid-eighteenth century;⁴⁰ around the same time, a now-anonymous painter in the Andes took up a small *devotieprent* at many generational removes from Pontius's engraving [Fig. 3] and made from it a sumptuous, gilded painting.⁴¹ Even the smallest of prints traversed oceans and participated

oorzake dat Pater van Hees de jicht had. Gedaan van myn Is. Kerkhoff oud zynde 12 Jaeren & 2 dagen 1779."

39

J. F. Kieckens, *Een Gentsche martelaar. Igantius Toebast van het gezelschap van Jesus. Zijn leven, zijn brieven en zijn marteldood (1648–1684)*, Leuven 1888, 71. He requested "twee of drie duizend franchine beeldekens; enige zulke geschilderde en emblemata, want de andere worden hier niet geacht".

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See Paula Mues Orts, *El pintor novohispano José de Ibarra. Imágenes retóricas y discursos pintados*, PhD Universidad Autónoma de México, 2009, cat. 91.

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See *The Project for Engraved Sources in Spanish Colonial Art*, 5089A/5880B (16.11.2021).



[Fig. 18]

From left to right, top to bottom: [Fig. 18a and Fig. 18b] Unknown Artist, Assumption of the Virgin, ca. 1650–1700, hand-colored engraving on parchment, 118 × 93 mm, Utrecht, Museum Cathrijneconvent; [Fig. 18c] Franciscus Huberti, Assumption of the Virgin, ca. 1650–1687, hand-colored engraving, 92 × 66 mm, Antwerp, Ruusbroecgenootschap; [Fig. 18d] Franciscus Huberti, Assumption of the Virgin, 1834, engraving, 106 × 64 mm (at plate-mark), Antwerp, Ruusbroecgenootschap; [Fig. 18e] Michiel Cabbay, Assumption of the Virgin, ca. 1672–1722, hand-colored engraving, 115 × 88 mm, Antwerp, Ruusbroecgenootschap; [Fig. 18f and Fig. 18g] Susanna Verbruggen, Assumption of the Virgin, 1705–1772, hand-colored engraving on parchment, 94 × 68 mm, Uden, Museum voor Religieuze Kunst; [Fig. 18h and Fig. 18i] Unknown Artist, Assumption of the Virgin, 1827, engraving, 92 × 67 mm, Antwerp, Ruusbroecgenootschap. Photographs by author; composite created by Lael Ensor-Bennett.

in an imperial economy of shared forms. But that phenomenon also played out closer to home. Artists in Europe too would take up prints of Virgins excised from Rubens's larger compositions and put them to use in the studio, conformingly copying these reduced and reconfigured scenes.⁴²

These are not the sort of works upon which art historians have tended to lavish visual attention. Indeed, their pictorial content has never been taken seriously, if their sentimental appeal and the inscriptions on their versos have attracted the attention of historians of "folk" religion and of religious anthropologists.⁴³ This should not come as a great surprise given that the marginalization of these kinds of printed compositions had already begun in the very period in question. Early modern art theorists, when they mentioned *devotieprenten* and their making at all, were dismissive at best. For instance, in his 1604 *Schilder-Boeck*, Karel van Mander relates the tale of how the Antwerp painter Quentin Metsys came to enter the profession. While working as a blacksmith, Metsys was injured, became bedridden, and was thus unable to support his widowed mother. But he was presented with a fortuitous opportunity. As van Mander explains, "Shrove Tuesday approached and in Antwerp it was the practice [that ...] the attendants of the sick or Lazarists went round [...] distributing [...] little woodcut paper saints that were hand colored [...] and they required a great many."⁴⁴ When the Lazarists visited Metsys, they advised him that from his bed "he could color in these woodcut [saint prints]. From this very modest beginning, his innate [artistic] inclination or desire was inflamed [and] he dedicated himself entirely to the art of painting."⁴⁵ In van Mander's account, the small, printed devotional image provides an important starting point (but only a starting point) for Metsys's artistic journey in becoming one of Flanders's most important and lastingly influential painters. Indeed, one could go so far as to say that the printed

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Take, for instance, the anonymously painted oil-on-panel painting in Wilton House, UK, based on one of the excised Virgins produced after Bolswert's engraving [Fig. 12]. Intriguingly, as early as the eighteenth century, this copy of a copy (perhaps of another copy) had been recast as an original from which Rubens had conceived the final, full Assumption – pointing to just how ingrained assumptions were about the part-to-whole teleology of artists' working methods at the outset of connoisseurial interest in the topic; see James Kennedy, *A New Description of the Pictures, Statues, Bustos, Basso-Relievos, and Other Curiosities at the Earl of Pembroke's House at Wilton*, Salisbury 1771, 106–107.

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See footnote 35.

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Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem 1604, 215v. "Binnen desen middelen tyt begon te naken den Vasten-avont en het was t'Antwerpen een ghebruyck [...] Lasarussche in de Stadt omginghen omginghen [...] en deelden over al [...] papiere Sanctkens oft Veylighkens die van Hout-print." This translation differs from but was guided by Karel van Mander, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters, from the first edition of the Schilder-boeck (1603–04)*, 6 vols., ed. by Hessel van Miedema, Doornspijk 1994, 1:121.

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Van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, 215v.: "van dese Sanctkens af te setten soo dat hy sulcx aenghevanghen heeft. Door dit soo heel cleen begin is zijn aangeboren ghengentheyt oft lust ontsteken worden soo dat hy gantschlijck met groote liefde en vlijt hem van doe voort heeft tot de Schilder-const."

devotional image provides an origin point for the Antwerp school – but it is an origin disavowed, left as it were in Metsys's sickbed. The artist and van Mander move on, and so too should we.

In 1993, David Freedberg made a call to reconsider that stance, pointing specifically to the methodological potential of folding such materials back into a history of art. He wrote:

No one has yet made a careful study of the implications of the downward transformation of canonical prototypes, either in terms of the history of art or the history of art's audiences. And no period would more fruitfully repay examination than this one, where prints were used on a more massive scale than ever before in the service of religious propaganda and the purposes of approved edification. The reverse has not been attempted either. Little research has been done on the upward influence of popular devotional and religious prints – the influence, therefore, from low to high.⁴⁶

It has been nearly thirty years, but this proposal still has urgency, and the fruits of such an endeavor have never been reaped. The present essay is obviously invested in the methodological potential of thinking on that vertical axis – tacking between high and low. But in the early 1990s, the field sat at a turning point that would critically shift the geographies across which we think. Thus against that vertical axis, I have here coordinated a horizontal one – transits across the Spanish Empire – giving us not only a broader array of artworks with which to think, but so too different period discourses and terminological vantage points.

Examining such copied devotional works reveals essential compositional operations – of the manipulation, excision, and reconfiguration of formal units on a two-dimensional plane – that are intrinsic to the very medium of print and the practices of making and seeing that it inculcates, something much more easily appreciable when a broad array of printed and painted devotional products are considered. Such objects serve to amply reveal a period sensibility to form well beyond the bounds of the seventeenth century. That sensibility was specifically syntactical: thinking about a given composition in terms of reproducible formal units to be isolated and broken apart, and then subsequently reassembled according to a grammar-like logic of subjects, objects, verbs, subordination, hypotaxis, and conjunction. In Latin America, demands for conformity gave language to that system in pointing to the manipulation of forms and formal units within agreements to produce “copies” from printed sources. Of course, one might compare these reconfigurations to other types of artistic practices and transfer processes – the repetitions prompted by model books in medieval Europe, for

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David Freedberg, *Painting and the Counter Reformation in the Age of Rubens*, in: Peter C. Sutton (ed.), *The Age of Rubens*, Boston 1993, 131–145, particularly 138.

instance, or what must have been a robust workshop tradition of handing down patterns for Maya carving. Every time and place has a way of manipulating forms.

However, the system of formal syntax, repetition, excision, and reversal described here was a way of working conditioned by the medium of print, the very medium that connected the two sides of the Atlantic to begin with. More specifically, it derives from a particular subset within the medium, that of the reproductive print. And therein lies an important distinction or inflection for characterizing both the mechanism and the periodization of the phenomena that I here argue define the Baroque. Print as a technology was invented well over a century before these particular modes of thinking about pictures and composition came to dominate artistic practice. The reproductive print was a mode of picture making not widely taken up until deep into the sixteenth century, perhaps around 1580.⁴⁷ It was the reproductive print's particular logic of repetition across media and the sheer scale of its production, rather than the development of print writ large, that drove a shift in thinking about picture making. This shift is most easily – though not exclusively – found on full display in objects that themselves were produced from a similar drive toward conformity and representation, constitutive components of Baroque artistic practice and period visibility.

V. Rereading Rubens

With such devotional prints, we might seem a world away from the concerns of the Baroque and perhaps so too from Rubens – both the designer of the many Assumptions we have seen split and spliced, and the historiographic specter standing in for the very notion of Baroque style. But if we consider such workaday objects to have been constitutive of period practices of composition, as I have suggested, Rubens should not in theory be allowed to remain separate and untouched, so seemingly originary as to evade reconsideration. It is thus directly to Rubens that we turn. To redress Rubens is to reconsider an artist whose works and practice were central to foundational conceptualizations of the Baroque in art history, particularly with respect to his signature painterly style, the bravura flurry of the brush for which he has so often been celebrated.⁴⁸ His art emerges here not as a seemingly *sui generis* stylistic

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On reproductive prints, see Michael Bury, 'On Some Engravings by Giorgio Ghisi Commonly Called "Reproductive"', in: *Print Quarterly* 10:1, 1993, 4–19; David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print, 1470–1550*, New Haven 1994, 103–168, 360–363; Elizabeth Rodini and Rebecca Zorach (eds.), *Paper Museums. The Reproductive Print in Europe, 1500–1800*, Chicago 2005; Norberto Gramaccini and Hans Jakob Meier, *Die Kunst der Interpretation. Italienische Reproduktionsgrafik 1485–1600*, Berlin 2009.

⁴⁸

Riegl's seminal text on the Baroque is peppered with references to Rubens, who acts as something of a stand-in for the Northern Baroque tradition; see Riegl, *Die Entstehung der Barockkunst in Rom*, but particularly 1–7. Rubens figures in nearly every section of

response to the previous artistic generation (i.e. the Renaissance), nor via the particular conditions of social and religious change in which he worked as an artist who spent his formative period in Italy before returning to populate Counter-Reformation Antwerp with focal points of worship. Rather, having witnessed the expansive geographic, temporal, and cross-media engagements with his compositions, we come to appreciate Rubens's own Assumptions as Baroque in their resonance with a broader, longer artistic sensibility to form. In the process, it becomes possible to revisit certain historical questions that Rubens scholars have tended to gloss over as incidental to understanding his artistic practice, but that in fact have greater stakes for thinking about this period more generally.

Rubens's nearly thirty-year engagement with the Virgin's Assumption began in 1611 when the cathedral of Antwerp commissioned the young artist to produce a painting for its high altar.⁴⁹ Owing to the cathedral's shifting priorities and financial concerns, it would be fifteen years before he delivered the painting; but Rubens quickly produced not one, but two highly finished *modelli* representing different possibilities [Fig. 19 and Fig. 20]. Whether the two *modelli* that now exist are his two preliminary designs is not completely clear – there may have been yet a third – only that both represent quite early efforts at composing the religious scene, and that neither ever served as the model for a finished painting. Or rather, neither served as the model for a painting in its entirety. Tasked just a few years later with producing a painting for the chapel of the Houtappel family in Antwerp's Jesuit church, Rubens pulled from each of the known early compositions [Fig. 21].⁵⁰ He repurposed the Virgin from one model intended for the city's cathedral [Fig. 19], adding a few more angels to quite literally round out the upper half of the picture. For the rest of the composition, Rubens turned to his other version [Fig. 20], utilizing the craggy cave, the laboring, hulking men who move the stone slab from its entryway, and a cast of characters that displays a full range of emotions to the miraculous event, from fright, to awe, to bewilderment. Rubens, in other words, went about performing what is by now a familiar operation: he took the top register from one Assumption and the bottom register from another.

This is not an isolated example. The procedure was constitutive as much of Rubens's own production of Assumptions as it was of those of the many other artists we have seen. Before Rubens had even finished his Assumption for the Jesuit church, the Discalced

Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neuen Kunst*, Munich 1917.

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The most comprehensive treatment of the subject is still Freedberg, *Life of Christ*, 138–195.

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The work was removed after the Jesuit expulsion from Antwerp and sent to Vienna at the behest of Maria Theresia; it was replaced with a painting of the Presentation in the Temple by Jean Joseph Delin, and a copy of Rubens's original composition was installed in 1925. See Ferd. Peeters, S. J., *Une visite à l'Église Saint-Charles d'Anvers*, Antwerp 1924, 44–45; Rudi Mannaerts, *Sint-Carolus Borromeus. De Antwerpse jesuïetenkerk, een openbaring*, Antwerp 2011, 93.



[Fig. 19]

Peter Paul Rubens, *Assumption of the Virgin*, ca. 1612, oil on panel, 102.1 × 66.3 cm, London, Buckingham Palace, Collection of H.M. the Queen. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021.



[Fig. 20]

Peter Paul Rubens, *Assumption of the Virgin*, ca. 1611, oil on panel transferred to canvas, 106 × 78 cm, St. Petersburg, The Hermitage © Album / Alamy Stock Photo.



[Fig. 21]

Peter Paul Rubens, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1619–1620, oil on panel, 458 × 297 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum © KHM-Museumsverband.

Carmelites in Brussels called upon the painter to produce a large canvas for their high altar [Fig. 22]. Again, he pulled from his earlier painted model [Fig. 19], stretching the cast and forms across a slightly wider canvas and introducing an uneven ground line along which they are distributed. The Virgin, thrusting forcefully along a diagonal, comes from yet another composition that Rubens had devised in the interim [Fig. 23].⁵¹ Its delicate, even schematic, rendering in ink on paper is unlike his lush oil sketches, as this Assumption was destined for a different type of venue. He produced the drawing at the urging of Balthasar Moretus, heir to the Plantin-Moretus printing house, for the production of their 1614 *Breviarum Romanum*, a book shipped across the Spanish world for priestly consultation in liturgical rites. The alternative trajectory of this Assumption and its divergent materials rendered it no less useful for Rubens's work on future compositions. In his early encounters with this iconography, then, Rubens created a system for himself, one of forms and registers that could be manipulated via substitution, reversals, and reconfiguration.

These working modes stand in stark contrast to foundational characterizations of the Baroque that saw, and particularly in Rubens's own pictures, unified compositions held resolutely together by dramatic seventeenth-century pictorial mechanics and bravura brushwork. Wölfflin, in fact, would write specifically of Rubens's Assumptions to demonstrate this kind of inviolate unity that he compared to the separable, geometric qualities of Renaissance painting. To explain the distinction, he turned to Titian, noting that:

The circle of light and angels that fills the center of Titian's Assumption is still discernible in Rubens's, but it only finds aesthetic meaning in conjunction with the whole [...] copyists bring Titian's central figure [of the Virgin] to market entirely alone [i.e. excerpted], and that particular possibility is always available; in the case of Rubens, such an idea would not occur to anyone.⁵²

In Rubens, Wölfflin found a paragon of an artist who had achieved a type of overarching coordination of the Baroque picture (a "Zusammenhang des Ganzen") that made its parts indissociable, resolutely bound together.

Earlier commentary, however, sensed the divisions that were critical to Rubens's picture-making and to that of the many, many

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Judson and van de Velde, Book Illustrations and Title-Pages, 1:118–119 and 1:143–146.

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Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 173. The passage reads in full, "Der Licht- und Engelkreis, der die Tiziansche Assunta zentral füllt, klingt bei Rubens noch nach, allein erst im Zusammenhang des Ganzen bekommt er einen ästhetischen Sinn. So wenig es zu loben ist, wenn die Kopisten die Mittelfigur Tizians für sich allein auf den Markt bringen, eine gewisse Möglichkeit dazu ist immerhin vorhanden; bei Rubens verfiel kein Mensch auf einen derartigen Gedanken."



[Fig. 22]

Peter Paul Rubens, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1612–1614, oil on canvas, 500 × 338.5 cm, Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts © Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels / photo: J. Geleyns – Art Photography.



[Fig. 23]

Peter Paul Rubens, *Assumption of the Virgin*, ca. 1613–1614, pen and brown ink, brown wash over black chalk, incised for transfer, 300 × 189 cm, Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

copyists who took up his work precisely to disaggregate its formal units. Writing in the eighteenth century, none other than Sir Joshua Reynolds alighted upon the sometimes disjunctive effects in Rubens's work, even if he attributed them to matters of quality rather than working mode. Speaking of the Assumption in Brussels [Fig. 22], he noted:

The principal figure, the Virgin, is the worst in the composition, both in regard to the character of the countenance, the drawing of the figure [...]. The Apostles and the two women are in Rubens's best manner [...] the masses of light and shade are conducted with the greatest judgment, and excepting the upper part where the Virgin is, it is one of Rubens's rich pictures.⁵³

For Reynolds, then, something about this Virgin did not quite fit. The great Rubens scholar of the nineteenth century Max Rooses agreed. Indeed, he found the differential so great that he assigned the bottom half of the composition to Rubens himself and the top register to an assistant, namely Cornelis Schut.⁵⁴ Though early critics were not always conscious of the origins of these divergent registers, they nevertheless sensed the fault lines of the syntactical elements resulting from a cut-and-paste operation.

Modern scholars, better equipped to note the repeated and overlapping registers that result from the redeployment of divisible pictorial elements, have explained them away with traditional narrations of *ingenium* and artistic development. Insisting upon Rubens's fertile genius, Julius Held writes in his detailed account of the artist's oil sketches, for instance:

We are, of course, immediately confronted by the question of what a master so loath to waste any of his inventions did with the lower part of the London modello [Fig. 19], the part not used for the Vienna altar [Fig. 21]. The answer is simple: he transferred it, again with some adjustments reflecting a somewhat changed concept of the entire action, to the large canvas for the Brussels Carmelite church [Fig. 22].⁵⁵

Rationalized rather than engaged, the chiastic intersections and thus the syntactical pictorial system undergirding Rubens's different Assumptions have remained underappreciated. Indeed, these over-

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Joshua Reynolds, *The Literary Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. by Henry William Beechey, 2 vols., London 1835, 1:146–147.

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As reported in Simone Bergmans, Edith Griendl, and Marie-Louise Hairs, *De eeuw van Rubens*, Brussels 1965, 181–182.

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Julius S. Held, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens. A Critical Catalogue*, 2 vols., Princeton 1980, 1:510–511.

laps have increasingly been pulled apart rather than seen as mutually constitutive: the strands of Rubens's production untangled and sorted for the purpose of creating an accurate *Entstehungsgeschichte*, and thus of charting the artist's personal, stylistic evolution.⁵⁶

While that type of sifting and sorting is a useful art historical step, it has become naturalized as an endpoint in and of itself. In this case, however, it obscures the need to reckon with the integral role that such formal overlaps actually played in Rubens's process of producing these different, though ultimately related compositions. Art historians have tended to put a premium on moments of origin, and thus principally focused on the dynamics of commission, coherent monographic chronology, and style (the parsing of workshop hands). But from that perspective it becomes quite hard, if not impossible, to see that Rubens was *himself* a participant in a broader period understanding of compositional syntax as created from distinct formal units, at once repeatable and manipulable.

We see Rubens dramatically differently when his compositions are placed within a wider visual field of the sort we have traced through print culture and conforming copies across the Spanish world. At stake here, then, is not a rehashing of Rubens's intertextual borrowings from other artists – the fact that a figure here or there was taken from Titian in Venice or from Pordenone in Treviso – and of Rubens besting his predecessors with his inimitable style through competitive emulation.⁵⁷ For such an accounting fails to capture something essential about Rubens, something that makes him average rather than exceptional. An art history of the masterpiece has left little room for the copy, deprioritized the print as a mere mode of transmission (a drained, colorless substitute for an original), and, until recently, left fairly uninspected the relationship between European art and works produced beyond the continent. Those blind spots have led us to see Rubens only partially. While also characterized by sumptuous appeals through brushwork, material, light, and color – a traditional description of Baroque “style” – Rubens's art emerges here as, principally, one of form and syntax. Looking back to his compositions after tracking their reception reveals the production of a pictorial mode of formal assemblage that could and *would* be reperformed across the globe in distinctive media and styles.

One point, however, should be clarified: attention to this larger discursive field must not be taken as amounting to a story of influence, of colonial artists and derivative print makers “getting it right”

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The most expert instance is Bettina Baumgärtel, *Die Düsseldorf "Himmelfahrt Mariae" von Peter Paul Rubens und die verschiedenen Fassungen der "Himmelfahrt Mariae" von Rubens – Eine Übersicht*, in: ead. (ed.), *Himmlisch, Herrlich, Höfisch. Peter Paul Rubens, Johann Wilhelm von der Pfalz, Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici*, Leipzig 2008, 74–135.

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For these borrowings in the Assumptions, see Freedberg, *Life of Christ*, 139 and 192. On Rubens and *aemulatio*, see Jeffrey M. Muller, *Rubens's Theory and Practice of the Imitation of Art*, in: *Art Bulletin* 64:2, 1982, 229–247. This is also the thrust of the more recent *Rubens. The Power of Transformation* (exh. cat. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), ed. by Gerlinde Gruber, Jochen Sander, Sabine Haag, and Stefan Weppelmann, Munich 2017.

and obediently participating in a visual system cleverly crafted by the master in Antwerp. That would perpetuate the biases instantiated both by colonialism and by the hierarchies established around material culture. And it would additionally falsely imagine a period viewer who could clearly see the relationships between all of these parts. As ongoing scholarly efforts to make sense of Rubens's production inadvertently demonstrate, these were not operations that the layperson or even artists quite proximate to Rubens could have concretely understood. Time lags and missing pieces defined the field of production. The finished models stayed in Rubens's workshop; and these, rather than the altarpieces themselves, served as models for engraving, though often only much later (even after his death). The completed altarpieces were quickly shipped off, not just to Brussels but yet further afield; and then preparatory materials (the connective tissue between these commissions) entered into the private albums and cabinets of collectors.⁵⁸ All to say: it would not have historically been possible to fully understand Rubens's process so as to, in turn, knowingly or subserviently re-perform it.

Rather, all of these artists – including Rubens – participated in the manipulation of compositions via a particular sense (one could, should one wish, say a Baroque sense) of forms. This sensibility was conditioned, on both sides of the Atlantic, by print – the ephemeral and fluid medium that reproduced forms at varying scales and allowed them to be sent between artists who reconstituted them in all manner of materials and styles and who subjected them to flips, folds, erasures, and manipulations. Rubens's style might thus differ wildly from a nineteenth-century publisher of *devotieprenten* or an eighteenth-century painter in Latin America, and his materials might not resemble those of the González brothers inlaying mother-of-pearl in Mexico City; but these artists held in common a sense of how compositions could be put together, taken apart, re-formed. That is, these artists conformed – both in their mutual participation in a visual system and in their literal sharing of forms.

VI. Surface Effects

But where does that leave style, at least as it was construed in early art historical accounts? When Wölfflin formulated a sense of Baroque aesthetics in the foundational *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, he took painterliness (*das Malerische*) as his critical term. That term was animated against a sense of stable Renaissance form, and those oppositions generated a series of polar binarizations that have continued to structure how early modern art is described. A central problem with this formulation, however, was that the Baroque was conceived without a motivating engine; instead, it was framed as a type of negation – the Baroque was the Baroque because it was

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These questions of provenance for the Assumptions are charted in Freedberg, *Life of Christ*, 138–195.

not the Renaissance.⁵⁹ Such early art historical formulations tended to see stylistic shift as something that would simply happen. Thus while the Renaissance was animated by the force of humanism and the development of one-point perspective, all the Baroque needed was to have had the Renaissance from which to evolve.

Painterliness and its corresponding terms thereby emerged in binary opposition to the linear and draftsmanly (encapsulated as *das Lineare* and *das Zeichnerische*), defining features of the Renaissance. As this story was told, the Renaissance was an era of closed forms, contours, and planarity. The Baroque would consequently be characterized by open forms, blurred boundaries, and a destabilizing painterliness.⁶⁰ We have already seen this set of contrasts in Wölfflin's discussion of Assumptions by Titian and Rubens. For the Renaissance picture, forms were multiple yet distinguishable in their clarity of geometry and contour. But the Baroque's indistinct scumble of brushwork made the composition sink in upon itself, blending it into a unity from which nothing could easily be cleaved apart. The attention of artists, and of the viewers who looked upon the resulting works, was oriented by a material facture that dominated formal groupings or individual figures.

Print, in this story, was at best an afterthought. When Wölfflin and subsequent theorists of the Baroque incorporated print in their accounts to any extent it was to illustrate that the painterly sensibility pervaded all media. Thus from the sea of printed ink on paper were cherry-picked prints like Rembrandt's *Three Crosses*, executed entirely in the medium of drypoint [Fig. 24]. Such prints index a tortured copper plate, a matrix worked up into rough burs and left wet with plate tone to produce something that nearly foregoes linear expression for the sake of washy, inky – indeed painterly – effect. In fact, art historians still give preference to the so-called *peintre-graveur* – the notion of the painter literally built into the epithet – as opposed to the reproductive printmakers of this period, who engraved and etched already existing works of art so that they could be transmitted to broader publics in printed form.

Yet the pictorial effects of the painterly print and its accompanying mode of artistic vision could not be further from the account offered here. This account has instead emerged from charting a much more complete history of the print and its intersections with various echelons of the practices of painters across a (very) long seventeenth century. In closing, I would thus like to suggest that fully engaging that history would necessarily lead to a reconceptual-

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This point owes to the brilliant formulation in Alina Payne, Keynote Address, talk delivered at “Baroque to Neo-Baroque. Curves of an Art Historical Concept”, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence, 03.06.2019.

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These are the central principles of the first two sections of Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichte Grundbegriffe*, 20–132. On Rubens, depth, and form, see 99–107.



[Fig. 24]
Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Three Crosses*, 1653, detail, drypoint printed on Japanese paper,
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

ization of the picture plane or pictorial field.⁶¹ Early art historical theorists stressed that the Renaissance dealt in planes that systematically receded along a perspectival grid parallel to the picture plane; in contrast, the Baroque was seen to have forced composition to cascade into vertiginous spatiality. But if Wölfflin's Baroque abandoned the Renaissance plane for chaotic depth, the Baroque sense of composition I have described here is emphatically more planar than both. For this syntactical mode of composition took the picture plane *itself* as the organizing principle: a two-dimensional screen for formal arrangements that, though they might become volumetric or animated through modeling or facture, could be sliced up and slid from the surface of one picture to the next, even as they were often flattened in the process.

There is perhaps no better place to witness that mode of vision than in the working methods of printmakers themselves.⁶² When such artists of this period went to reproduce a design, they cleaved it apart along the lines of major figural and formal groupings. Consider two proof prints – one of a Rubens Assumption, another of Rembrandt's Ecce Homo [Fig. 25 and Fig. 26].⁶³ Artists pulled such prints from a plate in the process of working it up, so as to judge the effects achieved to that point.⁶⁴ Provisional though they may be, this type of object allows us to gauge just how contour-oriented the production of compositions really was, and how segmented thinking would be, no matter how seemingly painterly the ultimate result. Figures and figural groupings are left in white. Dense networks of engraved or etched lines edge up to their contours – whether those contours are faintly marked in dry point or left as invisible boundaries. Within the blank spaces, the positive values of forms are absent, their print-painterly animation left to only later be completed.

The proof print put particular emphasis on the primary figures of compositions – for instance Rubens's Virgin and her angelic retinue – which we have seen isolated and excerpted time and again. There were technical reasons to work in this mode to be sure.

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For a very different (twentieth-century) context, Jennifer Roberts has recently suggested print might allow such a reconsideration; Jennifer Roberts, *Contact. Art and the Pull of Print; Part V: Interference, The 70th A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 23.5.2021.

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Of course, a history of vision itself was one of the main aims of early formalist accounts; see Whitney Davis, *What Is Post-Formalism?* (Or, *Das Sehen an sich hat seine Kunstgeschichte*), in: *nonsite.org* 7, 2012 (05.04.2022).

⁶³

On the Rembrandt print, see Ger Luijten (ed.), *Rembrandt. The New Hollstein Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts 1450–1700*, Ouderkerk aan den IJssel 2013, 251, cat. no. 155.

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There is not as much literature on proof prints as one might hope. See Antony Griffiths, *The Print before Photography. An Introduction to European Printmaking, 1550–1820*, London 2016, 40–42; see also Jan Piet Filedt Kok, Erik Hinterding, and Jan van der Waals, Jan Harmensz. Muller as Printmaker – II, in: *Print Quarterly* 11:4, 1994, 351–378.



[Fig. 25]

Paulus Pontius, after Peter Paul Rubens, Assumption of the Virgin, 1624, engraving with drypoint, 578 × 435 mm, London, British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum.



[Fig. 26]
Rembrandt van Rijn, Christ before Pilate: Large Plate, 1635, etching, 533 × 445 mm,
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Leaving the main figures to be engraved or etched last kept those lines the freshest, protecting them from the pressure of the press as the plate was tested and from the errant scratches that would, in the process, accumulate from wiping and cleaning. Yet it made for a mode of thinking about compositions that constantly cut fissures and oriented attention to the part over the whole. Pictures were parsed in the minds of makers as de-constructible via units held together at seams. Artists thus inculcated a mode of thinking about composition in which figures, figural groupings, or other motifs could be cut from, stitched back onto, or slid around the picture plane.

Connoisseurs and collectors were in on the game. Writing in 1688, Roger North noted just how desirable proof prints were among elite viewers:

Above all a proof print is most esteemed, which is an impression before the plate is finished, done for the satisfaction of the graver, who perhaps while he is at work will often roll off a sheet to see how the draught proves, that he may mend or alter it if he sees cause. And these proof prints are known by *some unfinished part that appears*.⁶⁵

North's comments are just as important for describing the fervor with which proof prints were acquired as for giving a sense of how these were seen. It was the "unfinished part" – most obvious, of course, as an entirely missing section or figure – that defined the proof in the eyes of period viewers. In fact, a plate of the Adoration of the Shepherds engraved but never completed by Hendrick Goltzius had prints pulled from it nevertheless. These were appreciated and widely circulated precisely, as North helps us grasp, for the void at their center [Fig. 27].⁶⁶ Here, the blank reserve perpetually holds itself in waiting as a surface for the viewer's imaginative projection, an empty space left anticipating forms – perhaps ones from another picture entirely.

In a history of art that endeavored to put print at the fore, as indeed I have suggested it was during this period, painterliness would be reframed. A world of print – both as mode of reproduction and as mechanism of transmission – occasioned a deconstructive, formal thinking about pictures. And, critically, this reoriented attention to the picture plane as the prime space of figural manipulation. Painterliness might be seen to emerge not out of opposition

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As cited in William W. Robinson, *The Passion for Prints. Collecting and Connoisseurship in Northern Europe during the Seventeenth Century*, in: Clifford S. Ackley (ed.), *Printmaking in the Age of Rembrandt*, Boston 1981, xxvii–xlvi, specifically xlii, emphasis added. I thank Stephanie Porras for drawing my attention to this source.

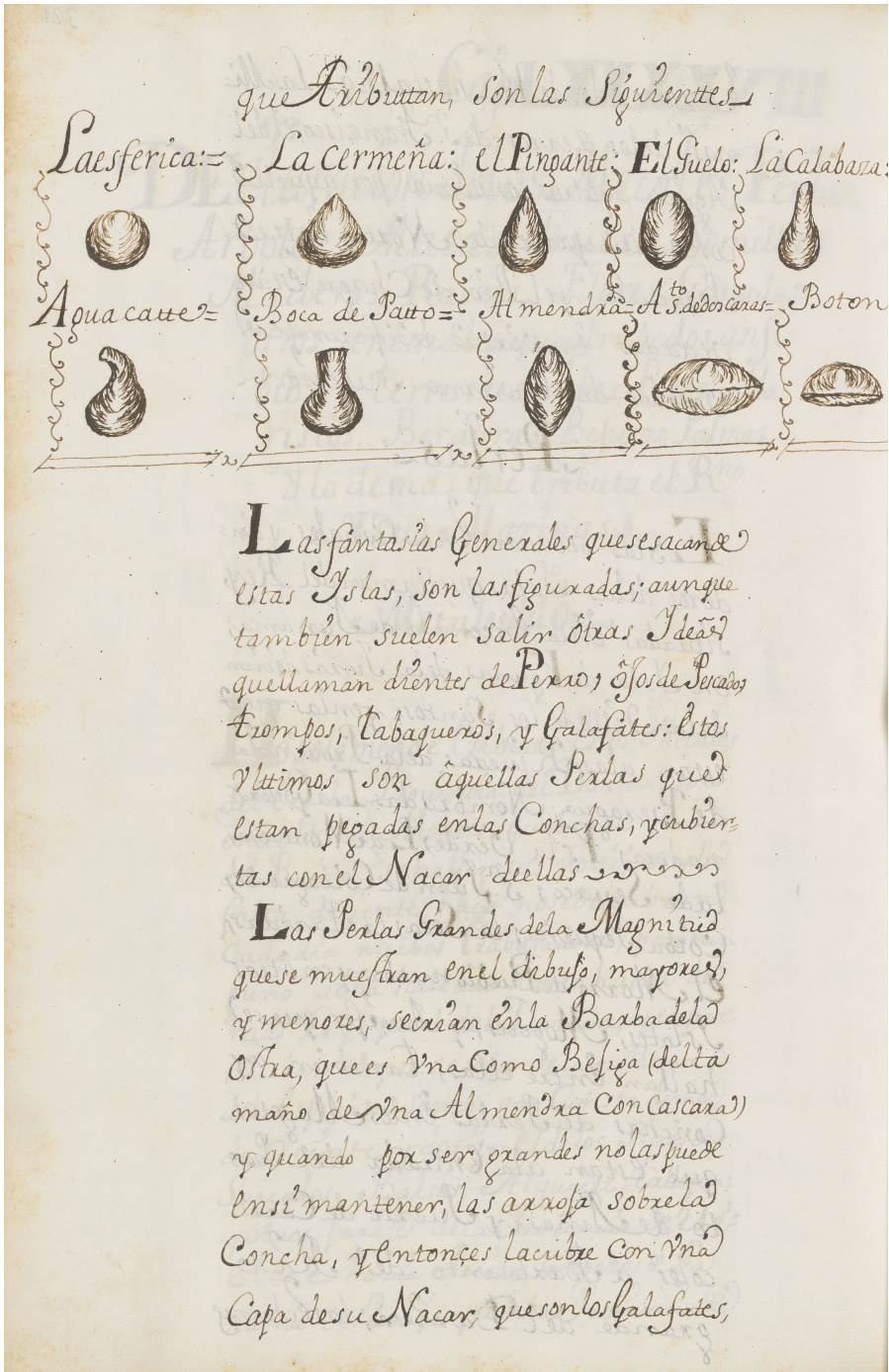
⁶⁶

On unfinished prints, including proofs and this particular composition, see Peter Parshall, *Unfinished Business. The Problem of Resolution in Printmaking*, in: *The Unfinished Print* (exh. cat. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art), Washington, D.C. 2001, 11–54, specifically 14–17.



[Fig. 27]

Hendrick Goltzius, Adoration of the Shepherds, ca. 1598–1600, engraving, 214 × 153 mm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.



[Fig. 28]

Diego de la Haya, Description and illustration of Baroque pearls found in the coastal waters of present-day Panama, in "Chronologia geographica historial, y resumen particular, y general de los crecidos gastos, que de la Real Hacienda se executan cada año para mantenerlo ...", fol. 321v, 1716, ink on paper, 305 × 203 mm, Baltimore, George Peabody Library, MS. 918.6 H413 © The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University.

to optical qualities of contour and planarity – not as mere foils of Renaissance ideals – but instead as the byproduct of an active reorientation to the pictorial surface occasioned by a world of dramatically quicker reproduction. If anything, painterliness was a balm or a salve – a mode of working up the surface so as to smooth the joins between bits and pieces, figures and parts, that always threatened to undo themselves and, in turn, the picture entirely.

With this, we might return to where we began, to the González brothers' *enconchado* Assumption made in Mexico City [Fig. 1]. From one point of view, its inset mother-of-pearl might open easily onto a traditional reading of Baroque aesthetics. Indeed, the word Baroque etymologically and conceptually derives from precisely this kind of material, from the dramatic swells and curves of the irregular pearl [Fig. 28].⁶⁷ But the *enconchado*'s fragmented pearlescent inlays serve to create a quite different aesthetic effect, drawing our attention resolutely toward the surface. Just like the pictorial mechanisms of printed transmission and recombination that led to the work's composition, the material holds us at the level of the pictorial plane. Bulging, excessively irregular, even monstrous pearls pulled from the (often colonial) seas give way to the iridescent but sharply outlined contours of flat mother-of-pearl. The Baroque itself might be similarly reoriented as a pictorial mode that takes place on the surface – the prime site at which its aesthetic effects were produced.

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On this etymology, see Helen Hills, *The Baroque. The Grit in the Oyster of Art History*, in: *Rethinking the Baroque*, 11–36, particularly 11–15.

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