

Baxandall, Michael

The Period Eye

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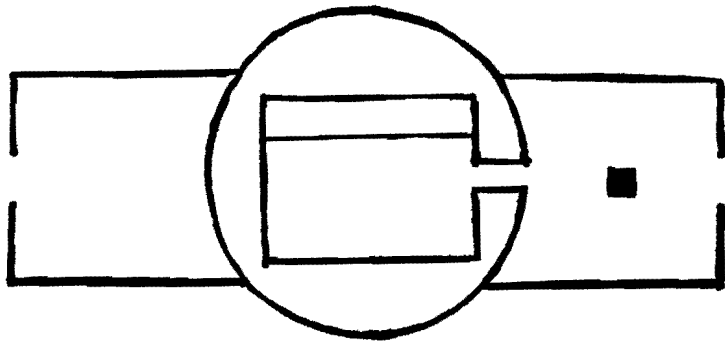
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II. The period eye

I. AN OBJECT reflects a pattern of light on to the eye. The light enters the eye through the pupil, is gathered by the lens, and thrown on the screen at the back of the eye, the retina. On the retina is a network of nerve fibres which pass the light through a system of cells to several millions of receptors, the cones. The cones are sensitive both to light and to colour, and they respond by carrying information about light and colour to the brain.

It is at this point that human equipment for visual perception ceases to be uniform, from one man to the next. The brain must interpret the raw data about light and colour that it receives from the cones and it does this with innate skills and those developed out of experience. It tries out relevant items from its stock of patterns, categories, habits of inference and analogy—'round', 'grey', 'smooth', 'pebble' would be verbalized examples—and these lend the fantastically complex ocular data a structure and therefore a meaning. This is done at the cost of a certain simplification and distortion: the relative aptness of the category 'round' overlays a more complex reality. But each of us has had different experience, and so each of us has slightly different knowledge and skills of interpretation. Everyone, in fact, processes the data from the eye with different equipment. In practice these differences are quite small, since most experience is common to us all: we all recognize our own species and its limbs, judge distance and elevation, infer and assess movement, and many other things. Yet in some circumstances the otherwise marginal differences between one man and another can take on a curious prominence.

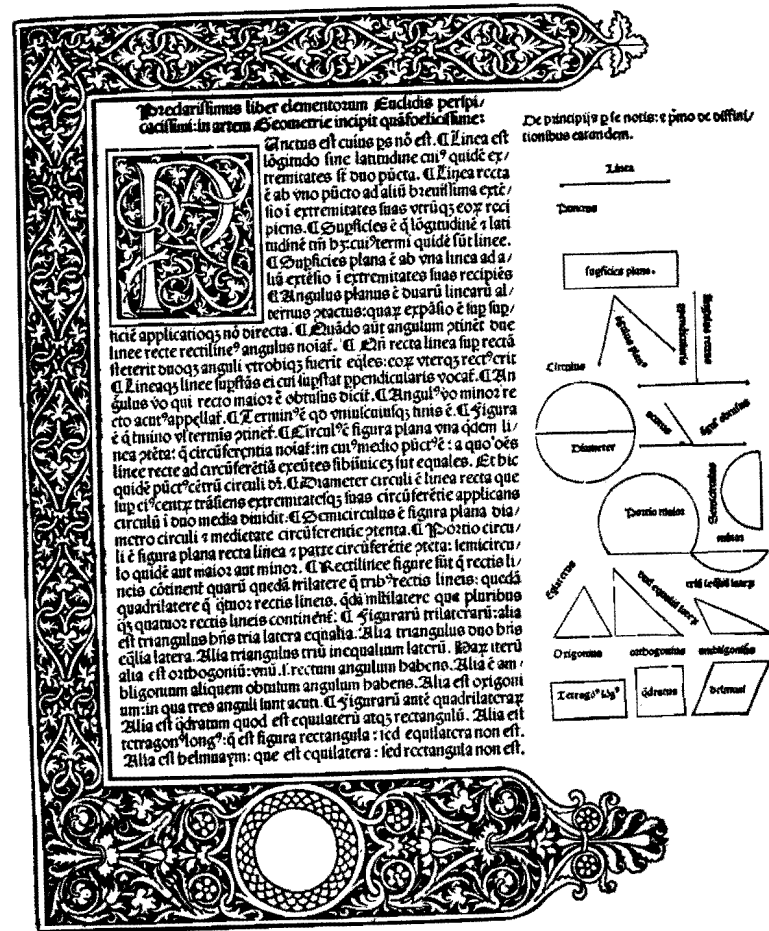
Suppose a man is shown the configuration in plate 13, a configuration that can be apprehended in various ways. One way would be primarily as a round thing with a pair of elongated L-shaped projections on each side. Another way would be primarily as a circular form superimposed on a broken rectangular form. There are many other ways of perceiving it as well. That which we tend toward will depend on many things—particularly on the context of the configuration, which is suppressed here for the moment—but not least on the interpreting



13. Santo Brasca. *Itinerario . . . di Gerusalemme* (Milan, 1481). p. 58 v. Woodcut.

skills one happens to possess, the categories, the model patterns and the habits of inference and analogy: in short, what we may call one's *cognitive style*. Suppose the man looking at plate 13 is well equipped with patterns and concepts of shape like those in plate 14 and is practised in using them. (In fact, most of the people plate 13 was originally made for were proud of being so equipped.) This man will be disposed to the second of the ways of perceiving the configuration. He will be less likely to see it just as a round thing with projections, and more likely to see it primarily as a circle superimposed on a rectangle: he possesses these categories and is practised at distinguishing such patterns in complicated shapes. To this extent he will see plate 13 differently from a man without resources of this kind.

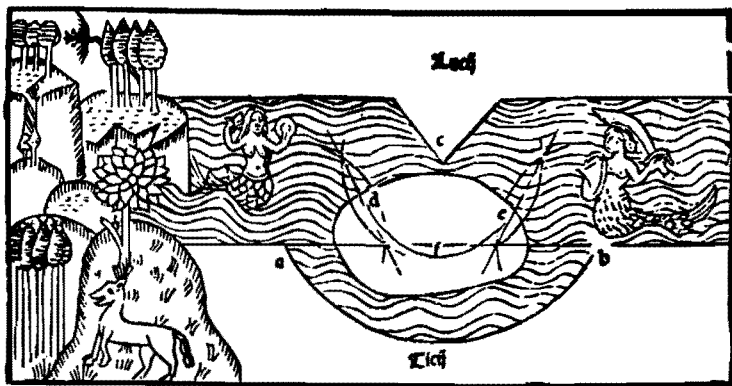
Let us now add a context to plate 13. It occurs in a description of the Holy Land printed in Milan in 1481 and it has the caption: 'Questo e la forma del sancto sepulchro de meser iesu christo.' (This is the shape of the Holy Sepulchre of Our Lord Jesus Christ). The context adds two particularly important factors to the perception of the configuration. First, one now knows that it has been made with the purpose of representing something: the man looking at it refers to his experience of representational conventions and is likely to decide that it belongs to the ground-plan convention—lines representing the course walls would follow on the ground if one were looking vertically down at a structure. The groundplan is a relatively abstract and analytical convention for representing things, and unless it is within his culture—as it is within ours—the man may be puzzled as to how to interpret the figure. Second, one has been cued to the fact that prior



14. Euclid. *Elementa geometriae* (Venice, 1482). p. 2 r. Woodcut.

experience of buildings is relevant here, and one will make inferences accordingly. A man used to fifteenth-century Italian architecture might well infer that the circle is a circular building, with a cupola perhaps, and that the rectangular wings are halls. But a fifteenth-century Chinese, once he had learned the ground-plan convention, might infer a circular central court on the lines of the new Temple of Heaven at Peking.

So here are three variable and indeed culturally relative kinds of thing the mind brings to interpreting the pattern of light



15. Bartolo da Sassoferrato. *De fluminibus* (Rome, 1483). p. 18 r. Woodcut.

plate 13 casts on the retina: a stock of patterns, categories and methods of inference; training in a range of representational conventions; and experience, drawn from the environment, in what are plausible ways of visualizing what we have incomplete information about. In practice they do not work serially, as they are described here, but together; the process is indescribably complex and still obscure in its physiological detail.

2. All this may seem very distant from the way we look at a picture, but it is not. Plate 15 is the representation of a river and at least two distinct representational conventions are being used in it. The mermaids and the miniature landscape on the left are represented by lines indicating the contours of forms, and the point of view is from a slightly upward angle. The course of the river and the dynamics of its flow are registered diagrammatically and geometrically, and the point of view is from vertically above. A linear ripple convention on the water surface mediates between one style of representation and the other. The first convention is more immediately related to what we see, where the second is more abstract and conceptualized—and to us now rather unfamiliar—but they both involve a skill and a willingness to interpret marks on paper as representations simplifying an aspect of reality within accepted rules: we do not *see* a tree as a white plane surface circumscribed by black lines. Yet the tree is only a crude version of what one has in a picture, and the variable pressures on perception, the cognitive style, also operate on anyone's perception of a painting.

We will take Piero della Francesca's *Annunciation* fresco at

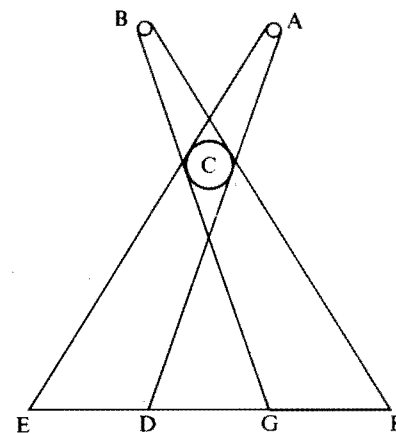
Arezzo (Colour Plate I) as an example. In the first place, understanding the picture depends on acknowledging a representational convention, of which the central part is that a man is disposing pigments on a two-dimensional ground in order to refer to something that is three-dimensional: one must enter into the spirit of the game, which is not the groundplan game but something Boccaccio described very well:

The painter exerts himself to make any figure he paints—actually just a little colour applied with skill to a panel—similar in its action to a figure which is the product of Nature and naturally has that action: so that it can deceive the eyes of the beholder, either partly or completely, making itself be taken for what it really is not.

In fact, since our vision is stereoscopic, one is not normally long deceived by such a picture to the point of completely supposing it real. Leonardo da Vinci pointed this out:

It is not possible for a painting, even if it is done with the greatest perfection of outline, shadow, light and colour, to appear in the same relief as the natural model, unless that natural model were looked at from a great distance and with only one eye.

He adds a drawing (plate 16) to demonstrate why this is so: A and B are our eyes, C the object seen, E-F space behind it, D-G the area screened by a painted object, but in real life seen. But the convention was that the painter made his flat surface very suggestive of a three-dimensional world and was given credit for doing so. Looking at such representations was a fifteenth-century Italian institution, and involved in the institution were certain expectations; these varied according to the



16. After Leonardo da Vinci. Stereoscopic vision. From *Libro di pittura*, Vatican Library, MS. Urb. lat. 1270, fol. 155 v.

placing of the picture—church or *salone*—but one expectation was constant: the beholder expected *skill*, as we have seen. Quite what sort of skill he expected will occupy us presently, but the point to be noticed now is that a fifteenth-century man looking at a picture was curiously on his mettle. He was aware that the good picture embodied skill and he was frequently assured that it was the part of the cultivated beholder to make discriminations about that skill, and sometimes even to do so verbally. The most popular fifteenth-century treatise on education, for example, Pier Paolo Vergerio's *On noble behaviour* of 1404, reminded him: 'The beauty and grace of objects, both natural ones and those made by man's art, are things it is proper for men of distinction to be able to discuss with each other and appreciate.' Looking at Piero's painting, a man with intellectual self-respect was in no position to remain quite passive; he was obliged to discriminate.

This brings us to the second point, which is that the picture is sensitive to the kinds of interpretative skill—patterns, categories, inferences, analogies—the mind brings to it. A man's capacity to distinguish a certain kind of form or relationship of forms will have consequences for the attention with which he addresses a picture. For instance, if he is skilled in noting proportional relationships, or if he is practiced in reducing complex forms to compounds of simple forms, or if he has a rich set of categories for different kinds of red and brown, these skills may well lead him to order his experience of Piero della Francesca's *Annunciation* differently from people without these skills, and much more sharply than people whose experience has not given them many skills relevant to the picture. For it is clear that some perceptual skills are more relevant to any one picture than others: a virtuosity in classifying the ductus of flexing lines—a skill many Germans, for instance, possessed in this period—or a functional knowledge of the surface musculature of the human body would not find much scope on the *Annunciation*. Much of what we call 'taste' lies in this, the conformity between discriminations demanded by a painting and skills of discrimination possessed by the beholder. We enjoy our own exercise of skill, and we particularly enjoy the playful exercise of skills which we use in normal life very earnestly. If a painting gives us opportunity for exercising a valued skill and rewards our virtuosity with a sense of worthwhile insights about that painting's organization, we tend to enjoy it: it is to our taste. The negative of this is the man without the sorts of skill in terms of which the painting is ordered: a German calligrapher confronted by a Piero della Francesca, perhaps.

Thirdly again, one brings to the picture a mass of information and assumptions drawn from general experience. Our own culture is close enough to the Quattrocento for us to take a lot of the same things for granted and not to have a strong sense of misunderstanding the picture: we are closer to the Quattrocento mind than to the Byzantine, for instance. This can make it difficult to realize how much of our comprehension depends on what we bring to the picture. To take two contrasting kinds of such knowledge, if one could remove from one's perception of Piero della Francesca's *Annunciation* both (a) the assumption that the building units are likely to be rectangular and regular, and (b) knowledge of the Annunciation story, one would have difficulty in making it out. For the first, in spite of Piero's rigorous perspective construction—itsself a mode of representation the fifteenth-century Chinese could have had problems with—the logic of the picture depends heavily on our assumption that the loggia projects at a right angle from the back wall: suppress this assumption and one is thrown into uncertainty about the whole spatial layout of the scene. Perhaps the loggia is shallower than one thought, its ceiling sloping down backwards and its corner thrusting out towards the left in an acute angle, then the tiles of the pavement will be lozenges, not oblongs . . . and so on. A clearer case: remove the assumption of regularity and rectangularity from the loggia architecture of Domenico Veneziano's *Annunciation* (plate 17)—rise to take for granted either that the

17. Domenico Veneziano. *The Annunciation* (about 1445). Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum. Panel.



walls of the courtyard meet at right angles or that the foreshortened rows of columns are spaced at the same intervals as the row seen face on—and the picture space abruptly telescopes into a shallow little area.

Regarding knowledge of the story, if one did not know about the Annunciation it would be difficult to know quite what was happening in Piero's painting; as a critic once pointed out, if all Christian knowledge were lost, a person could well suppose that both figures, the Angel Gabriel and Mary, were directing some sort of devout attention to the column. This does not mean that Piero was telling his story badly; it means he could depend on the beholder to recognize the Annunciation subject promptly enough for him to accent, vary and adjust it in rather advanced ways. In this case, Mary's stance frontal to us serves various purposes: first, it is a device Piero uses to induce participation by the beholder; second, it counters on this occasion the fact that its position in the chapel at Arezzo causes the beholder to see the fresco rather from the right; third, it helps to register a particular moment in Mary's story, a moment of reserve towards the Angel previous to her final submission to her destiny. For fifteenth-century people differentiated more sharply than us between successive stages of the Annunciation, and the sort of nuance we now miss in Quattrocento representations of the Annunciation is one of the things that will have to engage us later.

3. Renaissance people were, as has been said, on their mettle before a picture, because of an expectation that cultivated people should be able to make discriminations about the interest of pictures. These very often took the form of a preoccupation with the painter's skill, and we have seen too that this preoccupation was something firmly anchored in certain economic and intellectual conventions and assumptions. But the only practical way of publicly making discriminations is verbally: the Renaissance beholder was a man under some pressure to have words that fitted the interest of the object. The occasion might be one when actual enunciation of words was appropriate, or it might be one when internal possession of suitable categories assured him of his own competence in relation to the picture. In any event, at some fairly high level of consciousness the Renaissance man was one who matched concepts with pictorial style.

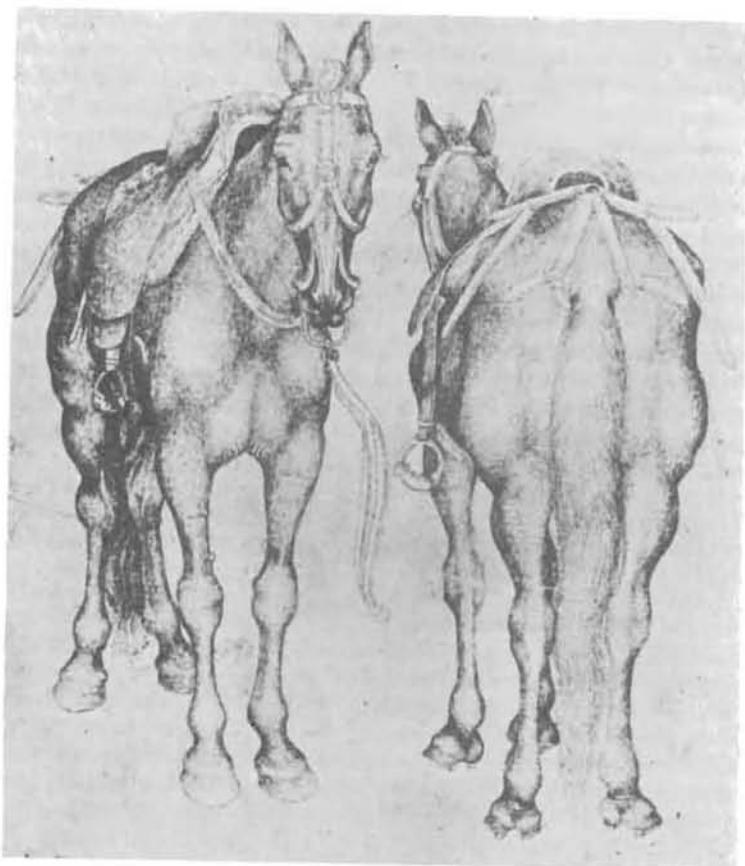
This is one of the things that makes the kind of culturally relative pressures on perception we have been discussing so very important for Renaissance perception of pictures. In our own

culture there is a class of over-cultivated person who, though he is not a painter himself, has learned quite an extensive range of specialized categories of pictorial interest, a set of words and concepts specific to the quality of paintings: he can talk of 'tactile values', or of 'diversified images'. In the fifteenth century there were some such people, but they had relatively few special concepts, if only because there was then such a small literature of art. Most of the people the painter catered for had half-a-dozen or so such categories for the quality of pictures—'foreshortening', 'ultramarine at two florins an ounce', 'drapery' perhaps, and a few others we shall be meeting—and then were thrown back on their more general resources.

Like most of us now, his real training in consciously precise and complex visual assessment of objects, 'both natural ones and those made by man's art', was not on paintings but on things more immediate to his well-being and social survival:

The beauty of the horse is to be recognized above all in its having a body so broad and long that its members correspond in a regular fashion with its breadth and length (plates 18–19). The head of the horse should be proportionately slender, thin and long. The mouth wide and sharply cut; the nostrils broad and distended. The eyes should not be hollowed nor deeply recessed; the ears should be small and carried like spears; the neck long and rather slender towards the head, the jaw quite slender and thin, the mane sparse and straight. The chest should be broad and fairly round, the thighs not tapering but rather straight and even, the croup short and quite flat, the loins round and rather thick, the ribs and other like parts also thick, the haunches long and even, the crupper long and wide. . . . The horse should be taller before than behind, to the same degree a deer is, and should carry its head high, and the thickness of its neck should be proportionable with its chest. Anyone who wants to be a judge of horses' beauty must consider all the parts of the horse discussed above as parts related in proportion to the height and breadth of the horse. . . .

But there is a distinction to be made between the general run of visual skills and a preferred class of skills specially relevant to the perception of works of art. The skills we are most aware of are not the ones we have absorbed like everyone else in infancy, but those we have learned formally, with conscious effort: those which we have been taught. And here in turn there is a correlation with skills that can be talked about. Taught skills commonly have rules and categories, a terminology and stated standards, which are the medium through which they are teachable. These two things—the confidence in a relatively advanced



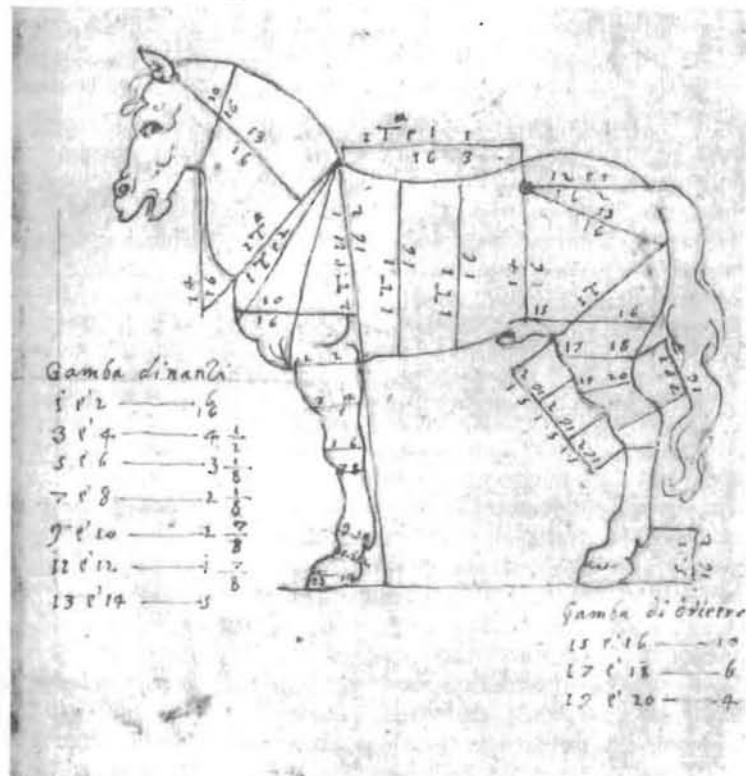
18. Pisanello. *Studies of a Horse* (Cod. Vallardi 2468). Paris, Louvre. Pen and chalk.

and valued skill, and the availability of verbal resources associated with them—make such skills particularly susceptible to transfer in situations such as that of a man in front of a picture.

This raises a problem. We have been moving towards a notion of a Quattrocento cognitive style. By this one would mean the equipment that the fifteenth-century painter's public brought to complex visual stimulations like pictures. One is talking not about all fifteenth-century people, but about those whose response to works of art was important to the artist—the patronizing classes, one might say. In effect this means rather a small proportion of the population: mercantile and professional men, acting as

members of confraternities or as individuals, princes and their courtiers, the senior members of religious houses. The peasants and the urban poor play a very small part in the Renaissance culture that most interests us now, which may be deplorable but is a fact that must be accepted. Yet among the patronizing classes there were variations, not just the inevitable variation from man to man, but variation by groups. So a certain profession, for instance, leads a man to discriminate particularly efficiently in identifiable areas. Fifteenth-century medicine trained a physician to observe the relations of member to member of the human body as a means to diagnosis, and a doctor was alert and equipped to notice matters of proportion in painting too. But while it is clear that among the painter's public there were many

19. After Leonardo da Vinci. *Dimensions of a horse*. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS. M.A., 1139, fol. 82 r. Pen and chalk.



subgroups with special visual skills and habits—the painters themselves were one such subgroup—this book will be concerned with more generally accessible styles of discrimination. A Quattrocento man handled affairs, went to church, led a social life; from all of these activities he acquired skills relevant to his observation of painting. It is true that one man would be stronger on business skills, another on pious skills, another on polite skills; but every man had something of each of these, whatever the individual balance, and it is the highest common factor of skill in his public that the painter consistently catered for.

To sum up: some of the mental equipment a man orders his visual experience with is variable, and much of this variable equipment is culturally relative, in the sense of being determined by the society which has influenced his experience. Among these variables are categories with which he classifies his visual stimuli, the knowledge he will use to supplement what his immediate vision gives him, and the attitude he will adopt to the kind of artificial object seen. The beholder must use on the painting such visual skills as he has, very few of which are normally special to painting, and he is likely to use those skills his society esteems highly. The painter responds to this; his public's visual capacity must be his medium. Whatever his own specialized professional skills, he is himself a member of the society he works for and shares its visual experience and habit.

We are concerned here with Quattrocento cognitive style as it relates to Quattrocento pictorial style. This chapter must now exemplify the kinds of visual skill a Quattrocento person was distinctively equipped with, and try to show how these were relevant to painting.

4. Most fifteenth-century pictures are religious pictures. This is self-evident, in one sense, but 'religious pictures' refers to more than just a certain range of subject matter; it means that the pictures existed to meet institutional ends, to help with specific intellectual and spiritual activities. It also means that the pictures came within the jurisdiction of a mature body of ecclesiastical theory about images. There is no sign of the more academic elaborations of this theory being active in many people's minds during the fifteenth century, though they were quite often rehearsed by the theologians, but a few of the basic principles still set standards for the pictures much more real for the public mind than some of the artistic theory we make so much of now.

What was the religious function of religious pictures? In the

Church's view the purpose of images was threefold. John of Genoa's late thirteenth-century *Catholicon*, still a standard dictionary of the period, summarized them in this way:

Know that there were three reasons for the institution of images in churches. *First*, for the instruction of simple people, because they are instructed by them as if by books. *Second*, so that the mystery of the incarnation and the examples of the Saints may be the more active in our memory through being presented daily to our eyes. *Third*, to excite feelings of devotion, these being aroused more effectively by things seen than by things heard.

In a sermon published in 1492 the Dominican Fra Michele da Carcano gives an orthodox Quattrocento expansion of this:

... images of the Virgin and the Saints were introduced for three reasons. *First*, on account of the ignorance of simple people, so that those who are not able to read the scriptures can yet learn by seeing the sacraments of our salvation and faith in pictures. It is written: 'I have learned that, inflamed by unconsidered zeal, you have been destroying the images of the saints on the grounds that they should not be adored. And we praise you wholeheartedly for not allowing them to be adored, but we blame you for breaking them ... For it is one thing to adore a painting, but it is quite another to learn from a painted narrative what to adore. What a book is to those who can read, a picture is to the ignorant people who look at it. Because in a picture even the unlearned may see what example they should follow; in a picture they who know no letters may yet read.' St. Gregory the Great wrote these words to Serenus, Bishop of Marseilles. *Second*, images were introduced on account of our emotional sluggishness; so that men who are not aroused to devotion when they hear about the histories of the Saints may at least be moved when they see them, as if actually present, in pictures. For our feelings are aroused by things seen more than by things heard. *Third*, they were introduced on account of our unreliable memories ... Images were introduced because many people cannot retain in their memories what they hear, but they do remember if they see images.

If you commute these three reasons for images into instructions for the beholder, it amounts to using pictures as respectively lucid, vivid and readily accessible stimuli to meditation on the Bible and the lives of Saints. If you convert them into a brief for the painter, they carry an expectation that the picture should tell its story in a clear way for the simple and in an eye-catching and memorable way for the forgetful, and with full use of all the emotional resources of the sense of sight, the most powerful as well as the most precise of the senses.

Of course, the matter could not always be as simple and as

rational as this; there were abuses both in people's responses to pictures and in the way the pictures themselves were made. Idolatry was a standing preoccupation of theology: it was fully realized that simple people could easily confuse the image of divinity or sanctity with divinity or sanctity itself, and worship it. There were widely reported phenomena that tended to go with irrational responses to the images; a story in Sicco Polentone's *Life of St. Anthony of Padua* printed in 1476:

Pope Boniface VIII . . . had the old and ruinous Basilica of St. John Lateran at Rome rebuilt and redeccorated with much care and expense, and he listed by name which saints were to be depicted in it. The painters of the Order of Minor Friars were preeminent in this art and there were two particularly good masters from this Order. When these two had painted up all the saints the Pope had ordered, on their own initiative they added in a blank space pictures of Sts. Francis and Anthony. When the Pope heard about this he was angered by their disrespect of his orders. 'I can tolerate the St. Francis,' he said, 'as it is now done. But I insist on the St. Anthony being removed completely.' However all the people sent by the Pope to carry out this command were thrown down to the ground, fiercely knocked about and driven away by a terrible, resounding, gigantic spirit. When the Pope heard of this, he said: 'Let the St. Anthony alone, then, since we can see he wants to stay; in conflict with him, we can only lose more than we gain.'

But idolatry never became as publicly scandalous and pressing a problem as it did in Germany; it was an abuse on which theologians regularly discoursed, but in a stereotyped and rather unhelpful way. Lay opinion usually felt able to dismiss it as an abuse of pictures that did not constitute a condemnation of the institution of images itself; as the humanist Chancellor of Florence Coluccio Salutati had described it:

I think [an ancient Roman's] feelings about their religious images were no different from what we in the full rectitude of our faith feel now about the painted or carved memorials of our Saints and Martyrs. For we perceive these not as Saints and as Gods but rather as images of God and the Saints. It may indeed be that the ignorant vulgar think more and otherwise of them than they should. But one enters into understanding and knowledge of spiritual things through the medium of sensible things, and so if pagan people made images of Fortune with a cornucopia and a rudder—as distributing wealth and controlling human affairs—they did not deviate very much from the truth. So too, when our own artists represent Fortune as a queen turning with her hands a revolving wheel, so long as we apprehend that picture as something made by a man's hand, not something itself divine but a similitude of divine providence, direction and order—and representing indeed not

its essential character but rather the winding and turning of mundane affairs—who can reasonably complain?

The abuse was agreed to exist in some measure but did not stimulate churchmen to new thoughts or action on the problem.

As for the pictures themselves, the Church realized there were sometimes faults against theology and good taste in their conception. S. Antonino, Archbishop of Florence, sums up the three main errors:

Painters are to be blamed when they paint things contrary to our Faith—when they represent the Trinity as one person with three heads, a monster; or, in the Annunciation, an already formed infant, Jesus, being sent into the Virgin's womb, as if the body he took on were not of her substance; or when they paint the infant Jesus with a hornbook, even though he never learned from man. But they are not to be praised either when they paint apocryphal matter, like midwives at the Nativity, or the Virgin Mary in her Assumption handing down her girdle to St. Thomas on account of his doubt (plate 20), and so on. Also, to paint curiosities into the stories of Saints and in churches, things that do not serve to arouse devotion but laughter and vain thoughts—monkeys, and dogs chasing hares and so on, or gratuitously elaborate costumes—this I think unnecessary and vain.

Subjects with heretical implications, apocryphal subjects, subjects obscured by a frivolous and indecorous treatment. Again, all three of these faults did exist. Christ was erroneously shown learning to read in many paintings. The apocryphal story of St. Thomas and the Virgin's girdle was the largest sculptured decoration on S. Antonino's own cathedral church at Florence, the Porta della Mandorla, and appears in numerous paintings. Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (plate 21), painted for the Florentine merchant and humanist Palla Strozzi in 1423, has the monkeys, dogs and elaborate costumes S. Antonino considered unnecessary and vain. But, also again, the complaint is not new or particularly of its time; it is just a Quattrocento version of a stock theologian's complaint, voiced continually from St. Bernard to the Council of Trent. When S. Antonino looked at the painting of his time he might well have felt that, on the whole, the Church's three functions for painting were fulfilled: that most pictures were (1) clear, (2) attractive and memorable, (3) stirring registrations of the holy stories. If he had not, he was certainly the man to say so.

So the first question—What was the religious function of religious paintings?—can be reformulated, or at least replaced by a new question: What sort of painting would the religious



20. Matteo di Giovanni. *The Assumption of the Virgin* (1474). London, National Gallery. Panel.



21. Gentile da Fabriano. *The Adoration of the Magi* (1423). Florence, Uffizi. Panel.

public for pictures have found lucid, vividly memorable, and emotionally moving?

5. The painter was a professional visualizer of the holy stories. What we now easily forget is that each of his pious public was liable to be an amateur in the same line, practised in spiritual exercises that demanded a high level of visualization of, at least, the central episodes of the lives of Christ and Mary. To adapt a theological distinction, the painter's were exterior visualizations, the public's interior visualizations. The public mind was not a blank tablet on which the painters' representations of a story or person could impress themselves; it was an active institution of interior visualization with which every painter had to get along. In this respect the fifteenth-century experience of a painting was not the painting we see now so much as a marriage between the painting and the beholder's previous visualizing activity on the same matter.

So it is important before all else to know roughly what sort of activity this was. One handbook that is usefully explicit is the *Zardino de Oration*, the *Garden of Prayer*, written for young girls in 1454 and later printed in Venice. The book explains the need for internal representations and their place in the process of prayer:

The better to impress the story of the Passion on your mind, and to memorise each action of it more easily, it is helpful and necessary to fix the places and people in your mind: a city, for example, which will be the city of Jerusalem—taking for this purpose a city that is well known to you. In this city find the principal places in which all the episodes of the Passion would have taken place—for instance, a palace with the supper-room where Christ had the Last Supper with the Disciples, and the house of Anne, and that of Caiaphas, with the place where Jesus was taken in the night, and the room where He was brought before Caiaphas and mocked and beaten. Also the residence of Pilate where he spoke with the Jews, and in it the room where Jesus was bound to the Column. Also the site of Mount Calvary, where he was put on the Cross; and other like places. . . .

And then too you must shape in your mind some people, people well-known to you, to represent for you the people involved in the Passion—the person of Jesus Himself, of the Virgin, Saint Peter, Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Mary Magdalen, Anne, Caiaphas, Pilate, Judas and the others, every one of whom you will fashion in your mind.

When you have done all this, putting all your imagination into it, then go into your chamber. Alone and solitary, excluding every external thought from your mind, start thinking of the beginning of the Passion, starting with how Jesus entered Jerusalem on the ass. Moving slowly from episode to episode, meditate on each one, dwelling on each single stage and step of the story. And if at any point you feel a sensation of piety, stop: do not pass on as long as that sweet and devout sentiment lasts. . . .

This sort of experience, a visualizing meditation on the stories particularized to the point of perhaps setting them in one's own city and casting them from one's own acquaintance, is something most of us now lack. It gave the painter's exterior visualizations a curious function.

The painter could not compete with the particularity of the private representation. When beholders might approach his painting with preconceived interior pictures of such detail, each person's different, the painter did not as a rule try to give detailed characterizations of people and places: it would have been an interference with the individual's private visualization if he had. Painters specially popular in pious circles, like Perugino (plate 22), painted people who are general, unparticularized, inter-



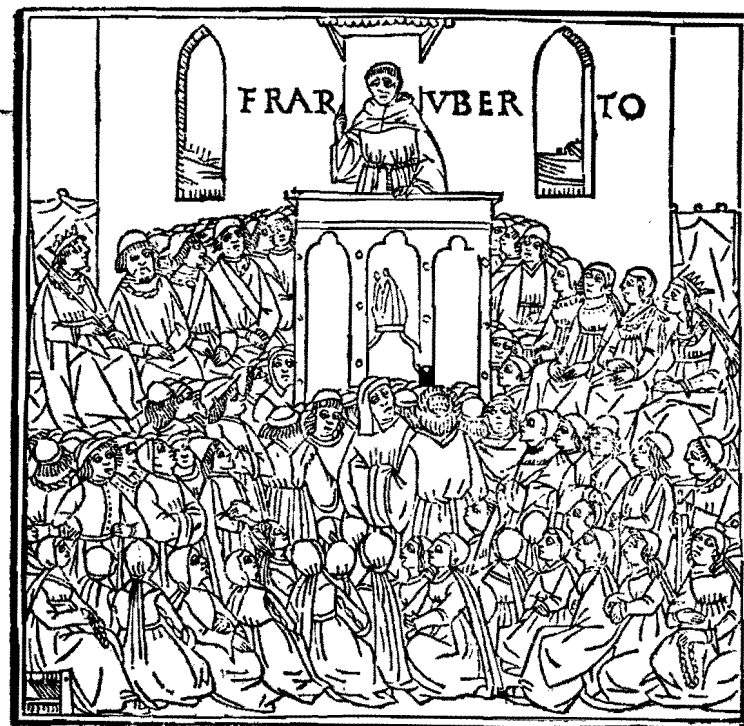
22. Perugino. *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1495). Florence, Palazzo Pitti. Panel.

changeable types. They provided a base—firmly concrete and very evocative in its patterns of people—on which the pious beholder could impose his personal detail, more particular but less structured than what the painter offered.

It was not only a painter like Perugino that worked within conditions of this kind, though his response to them was much appreciated. A great deal of the quality of the most central experiences of Quattrocento painting—let us say, of Masaccio's *Tribute Money* (plate 65) or Bellini's *Transfiguration* (Colour Plate II)—derives from the same situation. Bellini does not offer the detail of persons and places the public provided for itself. He complements the beholder's interior vision. His persons and places

are generalized and yet massively concrete, and they are marshalled in patterns of strong narrative suggestion. Neither of these qualities, the concrete and the patterned, are what the beholder provided for himself since you cannot provide these qualities in mental images, as a little introspection shows; neither could come fully into play before the physical sense of sight was actually resorted to. The painting is the relic of a cooperation between Bellini and his public: the fifteenth-century experience of the *Transfiguration* was an interaction between the painting, the configuration on the wall, and the visualizing activity of the public mind—a public mind with different furniture and dispositions from ours. We enjoy the *Transfiguration*, the painter's part in all this, because we are stimulated by its imbalance, its hypertrophy of the weightily concrete and eloquently patterned at the permissible expense of the particular, which Bellini could count on being contributed by the other side. We should only deceive ourselves if we thought we can have the experience of the *Transfiguration* Bellini designed, or that it expresses in any simple way a spirit or a state of mind. The best paintings often express their culture not just directly but complementarily, because it is by complementing it that they are best designed to serve public needs: the public does not need what it has already got.

What the *Zardino de Oration* describes are private exercises in imaginative intensity and sharpness. The painter was addressing people who were publicly exercised in the same matter too, and in more formal and analytical ways. The best guide we now have to the public exercises is the sermon. Sermons were a very important part of the painter's circumstances: preacher and picture were both part of the apparatus of a church, and each took notice of the other. The fifteenth century was the last fling of the medieval type of popular preacher: the fifth Lateran Council of 1512–17 took measures to suppress them. It is one of the underlying cultural differences between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy. The popular preachers were no doubt tasteless and inflammatory sometimes, but they filled their teaching function irreplaceably; certainly they drilled their congregations in a set of interpretative skills right at the centre of the fifteenth-century response to paintings. Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce (plate 23) is a convenient example: Cosimo de' Medici thought he dressed too sharply for a priest, and his sense of the dramatic was strong—during a sermon on the Crusade he stripped off his habit to reveal, Erasmus noted with distaste, the crusader's



23. Fra Roberto Caracciolo. *Prediche vulghare* (Florence, 1491). Woodcut.

livery and armour underneath—but his sermons as we have them are decorous enough. In the course of the church year, as festival followed festival, a preacher like Fra Roberto moved over much of the painters' subject matter, explaining the meaning of events and rehearsing his hearers in the sensations of piety proper to each. *The Nativity* (Colour Plate IV) embodies mysteries of (1) humility, (2) poverty, (3) joy, each being subdivided and referred to the material details of the event. *The Visitation* (plate 38) embodies (1) benignity, (2) maternity, (3) laudability; benignity declares itself in (a) invention, Mary's act of seeking the distant Elizabeth out, (b) salutation, (c) conversation—and so on. Such sermons were a very thorough emotional categorization of the stories, closely tied to the physical, and thus also visual, embodiment of the mysteries. The preacher and painter were *repetiteur* to each other.

To look a little more closely at one sermon, Fra Roberto preaching on the Annunciation distinguishes three principal mysteries: (1) the Angelic Mission, (2) the Angelic Salutation



24a. *The Annunciation in Florence*, 1440–60. *Disquiet*: Filippo Lippi. Florence, S. Lorenzo. Panel.

and (3) the Angelic Colloquy. Each of these is discussed under five main heads. For the Angelic Mission, Fra Roberto expounds (a) Congruity—the Angel as the proper medium between God and mortal; (b) Dignity—Gabriel being of the highest order of angels ('the painters' licence to give angels wings to signify their swift progress in all things' is here noted); (c) Clarity—the Angel manifesting itself to the corporeal vision of Mary; (d) Time—Friday 25 March, perhaps at sunrise or perhaps at midday (there are arguments for either), but certainly at the season when the earth is covering itself with grasses and flowers after the winter; (e) Place—Nazareth, meaning 'Flower', pointing to the symbolic relation of flowers to Mary. For the Angelic Salutation Fra Roberto is much briefer: the Salutation implies (a) honour, the Angel kneeling to Mary, (b) exemption from the pains of childbirth, (c) the giving of grace, (d) union with God, and (e) the unique beatitude of Mary, both Virgin and Mother.

So far what Fra Roberto has said is mainly preliminary or marginal to the painter's visual drama of Mary. It is the third mystery, the Angelic Colloquy, that throws clear light on the fifteenth-century feeling for what, on the level of human emotion, happened to her in the crisis the painter had to represent. Fra Roberto analyses the account of St. Luke (1: 26–38) and lays out a series of five successive spiritual and mental conditions or states attributable to Mary:

The third mystery of the Annunciation is called Angelic Colloquy; it comprises five Laudable Conditions of the Blessed Virgin:

1. *Conturbatio* — Disquiet
2. *Cogitatio* — Reflection
3. *Interrogatio* — Inquiry
4. *Humiliatio* — Submission
5. *Meritatio* — Merit

The first laudable condition is called *Conturbatio*; as St. Luke writes, when the Virgin heard the Angel's salutation—'Hail, thou art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women'—she was troubled. This disquiet, as Nicholas of Lyra writes, came not from incredulity but from wonder, since she was used to seeing angels and marvelled not at the fact of the Angel's apparition so much as at the lofty and grand salutation, in which the Angel made plain for her such great and marvellous things, and at which she in her humility was astonished and amazed (plate 24(a)).

Her second laudable condition is called *Cogitatio*: she cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. This shows the prudence of the most Holy Virgin. So then the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS . . . (plate 24(b)).

The third laudable condition is called *Interrogatio*. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? that is to say, . . . 'seeing I have the firm resolve, inspired by God and confirmed by my own will, never to know a man?' Francis Mayron says of this: 'One could say the glorious Virgin desired to be a virgin more than to conceive the Son of God without virginity, since virginity is laudable, while to conceive a son is only honourable, being not a virtue but the reward for virtue; and the virtue is more desirable than its reward, since virtue subsumes merit whereas reward does not.' For that reason this modest, pure, chaste, maidenly lover of virginity inquired how a virgin could conceive . . . (plate 24(c)).

The fourth laudable condition is called *Humiliatio*. What tongue could ever describe, indeed, what mind could contemplate the movement and style with which she set on the ground her holy knees? Lowering her head she spoke: Behold the handmaid of the Lord. She did not say 'Lady'; she did not say 'Queen'. Oh profound humility! oh extraordinary gentleness! 'Behold', she said, 'the slave and servant of my Lord.' And then,



The Annunciation in Florence. 1440-60.

24b. (left) *Reflection*: Master of the Barberini Panels. Washington, National Gallery of Art, Kress Collection. Panel.

24c. *Inquiry*: Alesso Baldovinetti. Florence, Uffizi. Panel.





24d. *The Annunciation in Florence*, 1440-60. *Submission*: Fra Angelico, Florence, Museo di S. Marco, Fresco.

lifting her eyes to heaven, and bringing up her hands with her arms in the form of a cross, she ended as God, the Angels, and the Holy Fathers desired: *Be it unto me according to thy word* (plate 24(d)).

The fifth laudable condition is called *Meritatio* . . . When she had said these words, the Angel departed from her. And the bounteous Virgin at once had Christ, God incarnate, in her womb, according with that wonderful condition I spoke of in my ninth sermon. So we can justly suppose that in the moment when the Virgin Mary conceived Christ her soul rose to such lofty and sublime contemplation of the action and sweetness of divine things that, in the presence of the beatific vision, she passed beyond the experience of every other created being. And the bodily sensations of the Child being present in her womb rose again with indescribable sweetness. Probably, in her profound humility, she raised her eyes to heaven and then lowered them towards her womb with many tears, saying something like: 'Who am I, that have conceived God incarnate etc. . . .'

The imaginary monologue continues and brings Fra Roberto's sermon to its climax.

The last of the five Laudable Conditions, *Meritatio*, followed after the departure of Gabriel and belongs with representations of the Virgin on her own, the type now called *Annunziata* (plate 50); the other four—successively *Disquiet*, *Reflection*, *Inquiry* and *Submission*—were divisions within the sublime narrative of Mary's response to the Annunciation that very exactly fit the painted representations. Most fifteenth-century Annunciations are identifiably Annunciations of *Disquiet*, or of *Submission*, or—these being less clearly distinguished from each other—of *Reflection* and/or *Inquiry*. The preachers coached the public in the painters' repertory, and the painters responded within the current emotional categorization of the event. And though we, unprompted by Fra Roberto, respond to a general sense of excitement or thoughtfulness or humility in a picture of the scene, the more explicit categories of the fifteenth century can sharpen our perception of differences. They remind us, for instance, that Fra Angelico in his many Annunciations never really breaks away from the type of *Humiliatio*, while Botticelli (plate 25) has a dangerous affinity with *Conturbatio*; that a number of marvellous fourteenth-century ways of registering *Cogitatio* and *Interrogatio* become blurred and decay in the fifteenth century, in spite of occasional revival by a painter like Piero della Francesca; or that around 1500 painters were experimenting particularly with more complex and restrained types of *Conturbatio* than that of the tradition used by Botticelli; they shared Leonardo's distaste for the violent mode:



25. Botticelli. *The Annunciation* (about 1490). Florence, Uffizi. Panel.

... some days ago I saw the picture of an angel who, in making the Annunciation, seemed to be trying to chase Mary out of her room, with movements showing the sort of attack one might make on some hated enemy; and Mary, as if desperate, seemed to be trying to throw herself out of the window. Do not fall into errors like these.

Fifteenth-century pictorial development happened within fifteenth-century classes of emotional experience.

6. The effective unit of the stories was the human figure. The figure's individual character depended less on its physiognomy—a private matter largely left for the beholder to supply, as we have seen—than on the way it moved. But there were exceptions to this, and particularly the figure of Christ.

The figure of Christ was less open to the personal imagination than others because the fifteenth century was still lucky enough

to think it had an eye-witness account of his appearance. It was in a forged report from a fictitious Lentulus, Governor of Judea, to the Roman Senate:

A man of average or moderate height, and very distinguished. He has an impressive appearance, so that those who look on him love and fear him. His hair is the colour of a ripe hazel-nut. It falls straight almost to the level of his ears; from there down it curls thickly and is rather more luxuriant, and this hangs down to his shoulders. In front his hair is parted into two, with the parting in the centre in the Nazarene manner. His forehead is wide, smooth and serene, and his face is without wrinkles or any marks. It is graced by a slightly reddish tinge, a faint colour. His nose and mouth are faultless. His beard is thick and like a young man's first beard, of the same colour as his hair; it is not particularly long and is parted in the middle. His aspect is simple and mature. His eyes are brilliant, mobile, clear, splendid. He is terrible when he reprehends, quiet and kindly when he admonishes. He is quick in his movements but always keeps his dignity. No one ever saw him laugh, but he has been seen to weep. He is broad in the chest and upstanding; his hands and arms are fine. In speech he is serious, sparing and modest. He is the most beautiful among the children of men.

Not many paintings contradict this pattern.

The Virgin was less consistent, in spite of the putative portraits by St. Luke, and there was an established tradition of discussion about her appearance. There was, for example, the problem of her complexion: dark or fair. The Dominican Gabriel Barletta gives the traditional view in a sermon on the Virgin's beauty—quite a common theme of sermons, though rather symbolically approached:

You ask: Was the Virgin dark or fair? Albertus Magnus says that she was not simply dark, nor simply red-haired, nor just fair-haired. For any one of these colours by itself brings a certain imperfection to a person. This is why one says: 'God save me from a red-haired Lombard', or 'God save me from a black-haired German', or 'from a fair-haired Spaniard', or 'from a Belgian of whatever colour'. Mary was a blend of complexions, partaking of all of them, because a face partaking of all of them is a beautiful one. It is for this reason medical authorities declare that a complexion compounded of red and fair is best when a third colour is added: black. And yet this, says Albertus, we must admit: she was a little on the dark side. There are three reasons for thinking this—firstly by reason of complexion, since Jews tend to be dark and she was a Jewess; secondly by reason of witness, since St. Luke made the three pictures of her now at Rome, Loreto and Bologna, and these are brown-complexioned; thirdly, by reason of affinity. A son commonly takes after his mother, and vice versa; Christ was dark, therefore. . . .