

Naturalism in Religious Paintings: A critical reanalysis of Lavinia Fontana

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Abstract:

Women painters are often underestimated when it comes to challenging and intellectual paintings. This article focuses on sixteenth century Bolognese painter Lavinia Fontana and her didactic approach to representing divinity through naturalism in her religious work. While she is generally best remembered as a portraitist, the caliber of her religious works prove she was an integral participant in the intellectual artistic discussion of the Counter-Reformation. While Fontana has not received full recognition for her skill as a religious painter, by discussing her paintings in comparison with similar work by well-known male painters, it is clear that her work deserves more critical attention and recognition.

Keywords: naturalism, religion, Renaissance, divine art, didacticism, Counter-Reformation

Introduction

The shift towards increasing naturalism in the Renaissance represented a significant change in religious paintings and signalled a move away from the icon-based imagery of the Middle Ages. Naturalism, in the context of this paper, is understood as the mimetic representation of religious subjects through an imitation of nature. In the Renaissance, naturalism was an intrinsic tool used by artists for the communication and expression of religious doctrine in art. This paper will consider the changes to naturalism in religious painting from the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries,

with a focus on the work of Lavinia Fontana, a sixteenth century Bolognese painter who was heavily influenced by the writings of Bishop Gabriele Paleotti.

The expectations laid out by figures like Paleotti will be explored in order to better understand Fontana's work as well as the resulting changes to the representation of the divine through naturalism. The writings of Cennino Cennini and Leon Battista Alberti provide insight into the medieval and early Renaissance expectations for painting, while Paleotti's *Discorso* reflects the direct effect of the Counter Reformation on paintings, all of which contextualize the work of Fontana.

Although Fontana is generally known as a portraitist, her religious work deserves more critical analysis and scholarly attention. As a Counter-Reformation artist, her paintings engaged with the contemporary artistic religious dialogue on two levels, through both didactic clarity and spiritual depth. Here, two of her religious paintings, *The Stigmatization of Saint Francis* and *The Annunciation*, will be analyzed in comparison with several fifteenth century paintings of the same subjects by Giovanni Bellini, Leonardo da Vinci, Albrecht Altdorfer, and Fra Angelico. These comparisons will demonstrate how Fontana's work deserves the same scholarly critical analyses as that of her male counterparts due to the intellectual quality of her work and thought-provoking contemplative content.

Fontana's work was recently featured in an exhibition at the Museo del Prado in Spain titled *Two Women Painters: Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana* (2019-2020) in which her religious work was emphasized. The exhibition catalogue states that Fontana "was among the most significant representatives of the new religious sensibility, one of whose main doctrinal centres was Bologna," (due to Paleotti's presence there.)¹ Her substantial contribution to the breadth of religious paintings in the Renaissance proves her worth as an intellectual painter whose work is on par with that of her male contemporaries.

Influences and Connections

Born in Bologna in 1552, Lavinia Fontana is recognized as Europe's first professional female painter outside the structure of any court or convent. As a working professional, she interacted in the artistic sphere in a serious and sophisticated manner, which put her in dialogue with contemporary male artists. She has the largest known surviving body of work for any artist who was a woman before the eighteenth century and she became a civic celebrity in her lifetime, due to her artistic achievements.² The daughter of painter Prospero Fontana, she grew up within the Bolognese artistic community and was well connected. However, after her death her work was not widely recognized until recently, with notable recognition coming with Caroline Murphy's 2003 monograph on the artist, *Lavinia Fontana: A Painter and Her Patrons*. Fontana was appointed as an artist in the papal court in Rome and was the first woman accepted into the Accademia di San Luca. While Lavinia Fontana has predominantly been characterized as a portraitist, this is a reductive categorization considering that her impressive oeuvre also includes religious work like public altarpieces and private devotional works. This paper will argue against this reductive view, instead arguing for Fontana's deserved recognition as a painter who fully participated in contemporary religious artistic dialogue. Fontana's work was heavily influenced by the historic moment in which she painted. Several key texts have clear connections to her work. Cennini's *Libro Dell'Arte*, published circa 1400, delineates the religious foundations of the artistic profession at the end of the medieval period.³ As a trained painter himself, Cennini wrote

¹ Leticia Ruiz Gómez, *A Tale of Two Women Painters: Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana* (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2019), 189.

² Caroline P. Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: A Painter and her Patrons in Sixteenth-century Bologna*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1.

³ Thea Burns, "Cennino Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte*: A Historical Review," *Studies in Conservation* 56, no.1 (2011): 2. It is generally accepted that Cennini's compiled *Il Libro Dell'Arte* between 1390 and 1437, but usually pinpointed to the year 1400 specifically

an instruction manual for himself and other painters. He began with a humble prayer, a dedication to God. He states his purpose for writing the *Libro* to teach what he was taught and what he has learned and then invokes the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost along with the Virgin Mary, Saint Luke, Saint Eustace and “all the Saints of Paradise.”⁴ This introduction makes it clear how foundational religion was for artists in the period and its importance for creating art in the “right way.”⁵ Other approaches to art writing emerged in the Renaissance, as exemplified in another work, Alberti’s *Della Pittura*. Although published in 1435, not long after Cennini’s *Libro*, Alberti looked forward to the new era with a growing scientific attitude on religion and art. While Cennini believed paintings should represent aspects of the invisible world, “to fix them with the hand, presenting to plain sight what does not actually exist,” Alberti asserts that the “painter is concerned solely with representing what can be seen.” Alberti introduces ideas of perspectival naturalism, for its efficacy in illustrating illusionistic space. Conversely, many Renaissance artists used one-point perspective as a mark of divinity in the natural world, here referred to as divine naturalism. In the Renaissance, naturalism was used not simply to depict the literal surface of the world, but as a method for representing the physical world’s interactions with the realm of the divine. In other words, divine naturalism references the painted interactions between the material and immaterial.

As the Renaissance progressed, so too did naturalism, bringing the painted world closer to reality, with scenes more relatable to viewers’

experiences. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation created rifts throughout Europe which deeply transformed the artistic sphere. Changes that occurred from 1545-63 with the Council of Trent’s decrees included directions on how images should be used as devotional objects, as aids for prayer and teaching doctrine. Gabriele Paleotti’s *Discorso*, published in 1582, provides an analysis of sacred and profane images and articulates the didactic perspective on religious art that developed as a result of the Council of Trent’s decrees to make religion more widely accessible. Naturalism was a method of painterly representation for the divine which adapted to these theoretical positions and expectations. Lavinia Fontana’s religious paintings, in the context of Bishop Paleotti’s post-tridentine Bologna, are both didactic and divine, representing religious scenes with a clear naturalism.

The *Catholicon*, a thirteenth century Latin dictionary by John of Genoa, clearly delineates the continuities in the concerns and expectations of religious paintings. This publication was considered a standard dictionary in the following centuries and represents some of the unchanging core values of religious paintings. According to the *Catholicon* there were three uses for religious images by the Church: to teach the illiterate as visual books, as a daily reminder of the mystery of the divine, and to inspire and excite devotion in viewers.⁶ If these uses for religious paintings are interpreted as instructions 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

⁴ Cennino Andrea Cennini, *The Craftman’s Handbook: The Italian “Il Libro Dell’Arte,”* trans. Daniel V. Thompson, Jr. (Dover Publications Inc: New York, 1960), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 41.

emotional resources of the sense of sight, the most powerful as well as the most precise of the senses.”⁷ These core values pertaining to religious images, visual education, regular reminders of divinity and inspiring devotion, persisted through the Renaissance. Lavinia Fontana’s religious paintings exhibit these values not only because they are affecting and didactically clear as visual illustrations of religious events, but because they have a depth and complexity, which allow viewers to discover new aspects of the work and thus endlessly contemplate the divine through her paintings.

Surrounded by Bologna’s Counter-Reformation culture, Lavinia Fontana was exposed to the sermons of Bologna’s bishop, Gabriele Paleotti. As in his *Discorso*, Paleotti’s sermons spoke about the important role painting played in forming the Christian mind. Consequently, Fontana’s “development as a painter coincided with the didactic belief that the mission of religious painting was to teach and move the viewer to a closer proximity to God.”⁸ In the sixteenth century, Bologna had a flourishing academic and artistic community. Paleotti’s symbiotic relationship with both is addressed by Paolo Prodi:

the central ideas...are rooted not just in the Tridentine decree on sacred images but also in the city of Bologna, with its rich cultural and intellectual humus. The purpose of the

work is not to impose norms from above but to allow the bishop to engage in colloquy with local artistic and intellectual circles. The... *Discorso* does not flow one way, imposing rules and prohibitions from the top for those beneath, but in a manner of speaking flows both ways, becoming an exchange of views about the art of painting - an art cherished for itself and as a source of both inspirational nourishment and helpful guidance for pastoral activity.⁹

As a bishop practicing after the Council of Trent, Paleotti was directly responsible for Bologna’s religious art. His *Discorso* not only fostered a culture of directness and open conversation concerning religious teachings, but also provided instructions for the city’s artists as a guide for how best to follow the Council’s decrees on the uses and representations of the sacred in art. Informed by Italy’s broader spiritual traditions at the time, his writing is a useful “lens through which to explore earlier spiritual traditions and their bearing on late-Renaissance images.”¹⁰ According to Paleotti, painted representations of scripture should primarily be didactic. For Paleotti, the important element is the truth conveyed through the painting’s clarity that does not stop at the literal, instead the image is meant to prompt the viewer to turn inwards

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁹ Gabriele Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, trans. William McCuaig (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2012), 19. Paolo Prodi wrote the introduction to William McCuiag’s 2012 translation of Paleotti’s *Discorso*.

¹⁰ Steven F.H. Stowell, “Invention and Amplification: Imagining Sacred History,” in *The Spiritual Language of Art: Medieval Christian Themes in Writings on Art of the Italian Renaissance*. (Boston: BRILL, 2014. Accessed October 29, 2019), 254, ProQuest Ebook Central.

and consider an interior truth, one "that lies within the mind... before the viewer has seen the image, and which is impossible to consider outside the grace of God."¹¹ As Steven Stowell observes in his article, "Invention and Amplification: Imagining Sacred History," Paleotti did not believe clarity limited the spiritual efficacy of painted images but instead it helped make contemplation of the divine easier for the viewers.¹²

While Paleotti believed clarity was important for illiterate classes, this did not mean paintings should be oversimplified to all strata of society. For the illiterate, paintings should illustrate scriptural events. Meanwhile, the same image should enable the literate and spiritually sophisticated viewer to realize the chasm between corporeal beings and divine transcendence. Therefore, Paleotti did not recommend that "paintings depict plain, unornamented historical material simply so that they can appeal to the lowest common denominator, but rather because he views it as the only proper path toward the interior, mysterious marrow of Scripture."¹³

Visual Analysis

Lavinia Fontana's representations of scripture show affinities with Paleotti's sermons on the expectations and uses of religious paintings. Her painting, *Noli me tangere*, 1580, exemplifies how directly and explicitly she represented biblical content following Paleotti's guidelines. The biblical narrative shown is the meeting of the resurrected Christ with Mary Magdalene. Because Christ appears as a gardener, initially, she does not recognize him. The painting depicts the moment that He reveals himself to her and Fontana has painted

the Magdalene kneeling before Him. This scene had already been portrayed countless times in painting, but Fontana presents an unusual version. Christ is generally shown with token symbols of His projected profession as a gardener; however, Fontana shows Him in a full ensemble, including hat and spade. This allows the viewer to relate directly to Magdalene's perspective and understand her initial confusion. As Caroline Murphy points out, this provides "the viewer with a more complete empathetic identification... Such a rendering permits the painting to function even more effectively as a tool for prayer, given that its viewer is likely, as the Magdalen once did, to ask Christ for forgiveness for his or her sins."¹⁴ The clarity and accessibility of this composition is in accordance with Paleotti and the Council of Trent's didactic concerns. Furthermore, Fontana's unusual interpretation of the scene presents her resourcefulness and creativity in painting common subjects.

Noli me tangere attests to Fontana's talent for painting larger, detailed narrative scenes. Her *Stigmatization of Saint Francis*, from 1579, is another example within this genre. A frequently depicted religious scene, Saint Francis' stigmatization is often shown in an expansive landscape, with the saint in a moment of divine ecstasy and revelation as he receives the wounds of the stigmata. Fontana shows Saint Francis in this wilderness, on top of Mount La Verna, a city in the distance and a cave directly behind him. There are many similarities between Fontana's *Saint Francis* and representations by other contemporary artists. Notably, Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Francis*, from the

¹¹ Ibid. 254 – 55.

¹² Ibid., 309. In the fifteenth century, it might be said that thoughtful artists were practical theologians, meaning their paintings created meaningful interpretations of scripture which the artist imbued with their own thoughtful perspectives of the divine.

¹³ Ibid., 309 - 10

¹⁴ Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, 34.

1470s, is strikingly similar in its composition and colour palette of greens, greys and browns.

Unlike Fontana's painting, which has received little critical analysis from scholars, Bellini's has been the subject of many academic studies generating a multitude of different interpretations of the moment being shown. Scholars have argued that Bellini shows a conflation of several scenes into the single moment of the narrative, leading viewers to have to absorb all of these competing elements in order to fully comprehend the painting.¹⁵ Bellini references the stigmatization, the wounds just barely visible on the saint's hands and feet, but other elements of the saint's narrative are unclear, such as the absence of the seraph angel which, according to hagiography, appeared to Saint Francis. In comparison to the complexity and open-endedness in Bellini's painting, Fontana opted for clarity. She shows divine presence in the top corner, surrounded by a holy light shining down, while Saint Francis faces it, kneeling in awe. His hands are open in awe before him, the stigmata evident. As mentioned earlier, Bellini's painting does not show the seraph angel and intriguingly, neither does Fontana. However, she did paint a dove in the top left corner, as the source of the holy light, flying towards Saint Francis. As the sign of the Holy Spirit, the origin of grace in the painting, the dove acts as an entrance for the viewer into the notion of God's earthly presence. For Bellini, the lack of a single symbol of the divine could refer to a more ubiquitous presence of divinity throughout this painted landscape, which spills over to affect the viewer as well. Fontana's direct

representation of the divine, with the dove, shows the didacticism of her approach.

Paintings of religious scenes were generally made for devotional use, an element of which would be teaching the viewer about an event. As a tool for prayer, the painting is then also method for representing religious stories. The representation of this scene is a type of painting that Alberti called *istoria*, meaning the representation of events through a scene with interacting figures, which he considered "the most valuable genre of painting."¹⁶ Emanuele Lugli's article, "Between Form and Representation: The Frick St Francis" discusses modes of representing *istoria* and nature in the painting, stating that it "is the representation of an event that it claims actually happened."¹⁷ This use of *istoria*, as a depiction and confirmation of the divine made historical, encompasses the paintings of Saint Francis by Bellini and Fontana. Both depictions show the saint dwarfed by the surrounding landscape, a singular element in a much larger composition which recalls a more relatable landscape where human experience acts as a piece of the larger picture. In both paintings, the viewer is encouraged to have their gaze wander over the entire composition, with the figure of Saint Francis as a vector, creating diagonal tension to direct the viewer's focus instead towards the divine.¹⁸ While *istoria* is not only used in the representation of religious scenes, it is an important tool in artistic religious representations. The use of *istoria* here confirms the religious event shown, the stigmatization of Saint Francis, as genuine. In these paintings history and the divine collide to elevate

¹⁵ Emanuele Lugli, "Between Form and Representation: The Frick *St Francis*," *Art History* 32, no. 1 (2009): 27-28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* This is in contrast to paintings which represent beings, or *colossus*, defined by Alberti as single figures which fill the entire frame and are the main focus of the painting. Lugli introduces this quote in the context of a discussion on the difference between representations of events and of being, similar to Alberti's differentiation between *istoria* and *colossus*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

representation, confirm the truth of the event and create an image as a focal point for prayer. This confirmation of the literality of the Saint Francis' stigmatization incites emotion in the viewer, prompting them to consider the earthly divinity witnessed in the painting.

In contrast to Bellini's sunlit elements, Lavinia Fontana makes use of *sfumato* in her paintings. This technique for painting the natural landscape was developed by Leonardo da Vinci and is clearly observable in his *Madonna of the Rocks*, painted between 1483 and 1486. *Sfumato* allowed for increased gradations in shadows, which resulted in more realistic naturalism. Da Vinci was obsessed with the infinite possibilities within nature's shadows and saw *sfumato* as a way to represent that infinity, characterizing God's divine creation of nature. He was trying to get as close as possible to recreating nature. The "seamlessness attained through *sfumato* was [his] answer to the infinitely subtle continuities...only imperfectly rendered in earlier painting."¹⁹ This is a crucial quote in understanding how *sfumato*, as developed by da Vinci. It is through *sfumato*'s capacity for infinite subtleties that da Vinci was able to articulate God's divine immanence in nature. Fontana was working several decades after da Vinci and with her exposure to the artistic community through her father, would have been familiar with the work of da Vinci, whose techniques had been widely disseminated by that point. Her use of *sfumato* shows the sixteenth century's continued concern with nature and divinity that goes beyond naturalism's story-telling facility, although the clarity Fontana brings to the represented narrative shows her occupation with painting for didactic purposes. Da Vinci's aim with *sfumato* was, in part, to erase traces of the artist's hand to allow painting to reflect scripture without interference of individual perspectives, by perfecting

"traditional modes of pictorial modelling."²⁰ In this way, *sfumato* serves Paleotti's vision of painting, through erasing the hand of the artist and focusing instead on the content, enveloping the religious message in the very mode of naturalistic depiction as divine and untainted by human perceptions. Without viewers being reminded of the artist creating the work they can instead focus entirely on the image before them. By adopting da Vinci's techniques, Fontana's use of *sfumato* elevates the presence of divinity in the landscape, as it conveys God as the infinite, and indefinable as well as the uncircumscribable nature of nature.

While *sfumato* is a connecting technique between the landscapes in Fontana's *Stigmatization of Saint Francis* and da Vinci's *Madonna of the Rocks*, the way each artist emphasizes the divine presence is quite different. The space in *Madonna of the Rocks* is novel and ambiguous, reflecting the ephemeral subject of the Immaculate Conception, while the landscape surrounding *Saint Francis* has several elements recognizable from the saint's biography. This familiarity would have allowed the viewer to relate to the landscape and feel closer to the event depicted. The city in the background, while lacking detail through the haze of *sfumato*, is likely Assisi. Furthermore, Saint Francis is clearly on a mountain top, likely Mount La Verna, near Assisi. There is a shadowed figure behind Saint Francis, possibly Brother Leo, who was said to have accompanied Saint Francis into the wilderness. Each of these elements contribute directly to the viewer's ability to understand the divine event. Fontana's ability to so clearly reference, and thus render the saintly narrative, can be said to have come out of the influence of Paleotti's *Discorso*. This familiarity speaks to Fontana's goal of trying to bring the divine into a relatable setting. In contrast, da Vinci was not concerned with creating relatable settings for divine

¹⁹ Ibid., 16.

²⁰ Alexander Nagel, "Leonardo and Sfumato," *Res*, 24 (Autumn 1993): 8.

figures, even if he was trying to paint naturalistically. For da Vinci, representing reality was a materialization of God's nature, a way of showing that earth was divine. Fontana's clarity in the represented narrative lends this work to teaching, and then further encourages deeper contemplation of the represented divinity.

In both the *Madonna of the Rocks* and Fontana's *Saint Francis*, the landscape has a primal quality, which may reference the Garden of Eden at the beginning of earthly time, although it is generally not presented in such a rugged manner as a land largely untouched. Although in Fontana's painting there is a city in the background, the space around Saint Francis is wild and unruly, far removed from that note of civilization. The figures in both paintings emerge organically from the landscape, simultaneously advancing and disappearing into the shadows. The body of both Saint Francis and the Madonna are echoed in the shape of the landscape. This is clear in the shape of Mary's arms embracing John and Christ, echoing the cave formation above, while Fontana painted the top of the mountain echoing the bent shape of the kneeling saint. The sense of God is worked strongly into the landscape through *sfumato*, symbolism and naturalism, the earth itself echoing the divine figures. God is present in everything, the creator of nature, immanent in the landscape, a constant and underlying presence.²¹

There are some notable parallels between the landscape of Fontana's *Saint Francis* and the divine landscapes of northern artists, like Albrecht Altdorfer (1480-1535), despite the significant geographic distance and different artistic traditions. Larry Silver's article, "Nature and Nature's God", looks at the use and meaning of landscape in Altdorfer's religious paintings. His description of

how Albrecht used these landscapes may be applied to Fontana as well:

On the most basic level, those landscapes are isolated wilderness settings... These offer what anthropologists call *liminal spaces*, that is, areas that lie outside the normal flow of life's events and suitable for withdrawal at important life-cycle milestones or moments of transition, rites of passage. For this reason, I have called them "landscapes of retreat," appropriate for meditation or mystic revelation in the case of saints. These liminal spaces... become sacred spaces, positively charged or magically altered by the presence of spiritual forces and powerful holy figures.²²

The liminality and sacred activation of the landscape that Silver references is clearly present in Fontana's *Saint Francis*. The Holy Spirit flying into the frame lights the space while *sfumato* blends the landscape together, enveloping and isolating Saint Francis in his moment of ecstasy. While Brother Leo may be shown on the sidelines as a witness to this divinity, he is blocked by the tree, physically barred from participating by the composition of the landscape. Saint Francis is clearly isolated by Fontana, the city in the background is far removed from his current setting and blended into the other-worldly landscape through a smoky atmosphere. In fact, the distance of this cityscape acts to emphasize the isolated location that Saint Francis has come to. He retreated from the corporeal world to surround himself with divine nature and thus be closer to God. *Sfumato* aids in seeing Saint Francis' space as a liminal, sacred retreat and it is in this sacred landscape that he is magically altered by the stigmata, through the Holy Spirit, visible in the form of the radiantly lit dove.

²¹ Randi Klebanoff, "Leonardo and Michelangelo: Making Visible the Invisible," class lecture, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, November 6, 2019.

²² Larry Silver, "Nature and Nature's God: Landscape and Cosmos of Albrecht Altdorfer," *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 2 (1999): 198-99.

The Annunciation is one of the most frequently painted biblical events in this period, with certain conventional elements present in almost all depictions, several of which are used by Fontana. The Virgin Mary and Angel Gabriel are usually shown interacting, often with Gabriel announcing the divine event while Mary prays, reacts or retreats into a trance, experiencing one of five stages she goes through, as outlined in a sermon by Fra Roberto in 1489.²³ The dove, as the Holy Spirit, is sometimes painted approaching Mary's womb, or in earlier depictions often her ear, as the conduit for God's grace and the incarnation of the divine word. In the fifteenth century, as art moved farther away from medieval icons, artists devised a plethora of symbolic elements and techniques to communicate the implications of the scene for religious contemplation. The scene of the Annunciation was particularly complex due to the immateriality of the event of Christ's immaculate conception, an event beyond visible reality, that, as a result had to be shown through symbols, references and signs representing this mystery as *figura*. As explained by Georges Didi-Huberman, the *figura* is "a configuration of the visible world; it is the aspect of an object or a creature in general," that stands for the immaterial and unfigurable.²⁴ Didi-Huberman explained that the *Catholicon* defined *figura* as associated with the notion of "natural form."²⁵ Distinct from natural signs, *figura* pointed to immaterial divine events or Christian mysteries, like

the Annunciation. Because divine presence in the corporeal world was not visible to the human eye, the *figura* often involved disruptions of reality in the image. The use of *figura*, like the allegorical meaning of scripture, however, was not always clear to all viewers and may have been opaque to all but sophisticated religious viewers who could understand the mysteries beyond the literal teachings of scripture. For those viewers, *figura* could communicate higher meanings of divinity, beyond the literal narrative story. This does not mean *figura* is accessible only to the educated, but simply that it was an element of painting that required time and analysis to understand. *Figura* was used pervasively in the fifteenth and sixteenth century paintings, as will be shown in the comparison of Lavinia Fontana's 1576 *Annunciation*, with an *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico, from 1440-45.

As Didi-Huberman has observed, for Fra Angelico *figura* was a way to reference complex divine mysteries within the painting and he would often do this with areas of what could be considered abstraction, "zones that are 'nonfigurative' (in the art historian's sense), zones of *relative disfiguration*, situated *between* two or even several iconic categories, which would correctly respond to... [the] signifying practice," of *figura*.²⁶ San Marco's *Annunciation*, in cell three, exemplifies this disfiguration. Mary and Gabriel stand opposite each other in a sparse room. The plain vaulted wall behind them, uncomfortably blank, both approaches

²³ Roberto Caracciolo, *Sermones de laudibus sanctorum* (Venice: Giorgio Arrivabene, 1489), 65-67, cited in Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 51. Baxandall refers Fra Roberto's five Laudable Conditions of the Blessed Virgin as disquiet, reflection, inquiry, submission and merit. Paintings of the Annunciation generally portray Mary in one or more of these stages. The original is *Sermones de laudibus sanctorum*, given by Fra Roberto

²⁴ Georges Didi-Huberman, "Part Two: Prophetic Places: The Annunciation Beyond its Story. Story and Mystery," in *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995): 119.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁶ Georges Didi Huberman, "Introduction," in *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995): 27.

the viewer and recedes in space. The architectural references in the top of this blank wall are ambiguous, to create this illusion of the wall simultaneously receding and advancing. Seen from the floor, occupied by Mary and Gabriel, the wall is clearly behind them, a spatial creation that tends to collapse when contemplative attention is directed to the central space between the two figures. This tension, along with the immeasurability of the empty space, demands the viewers' attention, pulling focus from the interaction between the two figures to instead encourage the viewer to question the wall as a figural representation of the divine presence. This figural, perspectival disruption references the presence of the divine. Furthermore, other confusing aspects of the space include Mary's oddly foreshortened legs, which seem to float and disappear into her skirt, and the awkward closed doorway behind her (symbolizing her virginal womb). Saint Peter Martyr is included in the scene, positioned behind Gabriel, but is significantly not able to see what is happening. He is blocked by both the column and the angel's body. The viewer has a clearer sightline than the saint as a method of showing the veiled qualities of the divine in the corporeal world.²⁷

Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* is deceptively simple and a much-studied painting, used for religious contemplation. Its complexity is revealed when, upon further contemplation, the simple surface level interpretation opens onto deeper levels of understanding. Lavinia Fontana's *Annunciation* speaks more directly to the viewer, with a simple composition and didactic elements, as is consistent with her oeuvre and the writings of Paleotti. Despite these differences, similarities can still be drawn between the two paintings. Compositionally the two are quite similar, although the space behind the figures in Fontana's is not perspectival as with Fra Angelico's painting. Fontana's background is instead

a disruptive, black void, a darkness only lit in the top corner by the dove flying towards Mary, symbolizing God's divinity. Gabriel's left-hand points up to the dove while his right hand holds a cluster of lilies, signifying Mary's virginal purity. It seems that Mary was just sitting on the wooden bench behind her, praying and reading the bible which she dropped as she stood up. Behind Gabriel in Fontana's painting there is an open door, leading out to an undefined natural setting. All that is visible beyond the door is a blue sky, an ambiguous element which could be a tactic to allow viewers to place the location of the Annunciation in an ambiguous heavenly setting. This door is the only clear architectural element in the otherwise shadowed room. The darkness of the background and the confusion of the door's placement could reference the divine, as it disrupts the earthly setting and natural reality. Consequently, the ill-fitting nature of this door becomes a jarring signal to the viewer of the divine disruption of Mary's reality by the entrance of Gabriel. Perhaps the door did not exist before he walked through it but was cut into the void to allow for him to enter her corporeal setting. The brightness of the ambiguous landscape beyond the door alludes to its heavenly quality, a disruptive element of divine intervention in contrast with the sombre sparse interior. While many of the anecdotal elements are clear symbols of the Annunciation story and/or are mentioned directly in the bible which contemporary viewers of Fontana would have easily understood, even if illiterate, the manipulation of the space enacts disruptions that point beyond the narrative. This means that Fontana's painting creates a space that viewers could relate to while also contemplating the clear divine interventions. While the dark background might be *figura*, similarly to Fra Angelico's, it also functions to flatten space and accentuate the interaction between Mary, Gabriel and the dove. In comparison to Fra Angelico's

²⁷ Randi Klebanoff, "The Annunciation: Figuring the Unfigurable," class lecture, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, October 9, 2019.

painting, Fontana's is a more straightforward representation of the *Annunciation*.

Conclusion

Fontana's engagement in the use of naturalism to convey doctrinal messages, coupled with her adherence to didacticism, proves her worth as an active participant in the professional art world who deserves increased attention. Her paintings are not straightforward private devotional pieces but deserve to be recognized as part of the Renaissance's discourse around religious paintings due to her sophisticated compositions and intelligent references which placed her in the predominantly male artistic field.

Lavinia Fontana is ground-breaking as the first recognized professional female painter, outside of a court or convent. The influences in her work, and the narratives and networks she worked within, were the same as those of her male contemporaries. Through this comparison of Lavinia Fontana's *Saint Francis* and *Annunciation* to fifteenth century paintings of the same subjects, her participation in and contribution to the artistic discourse of divine naturalism is evident. Techniques like *sfumato* and *figura* for representing the divine were developed in the fifteenth century for representing earthly reality and are used by Fontana for this purpose. The approaches to religious art brought forward by writers like Cennini, who believed that painting should represent the unseen, Alberti, who argued for the representation of the literal surface, and Paleotti, who advocated for the didactic use of art and its potential for deeper divine meaning, each conform to the expectations for religious painting outlined in the *Catholicon*, as daily reminders of God that inspired devotion. While Lavinia Fontana's work can be compared to earlier painters like Bellini, da Vinci and Fra Angelico, her work is also a manifestation of the period in which she was working, partial to the approach dictated by Paleotti through her painting's didacticism and clarity. As Paolo Prodi noted in his introduction to the *Discorso*, this is not a one way cultural exchange but

a network of influences developed between religion and art. Paleotti advocated for artistic didacticism in order to lead worshippers to deeper contemplation of the divine, to a point where they can see how *istoria* is pierced by the mystery of the divine. Fontana's paintings aid in increasing the community's religious introspection, with layered meanings, while maintaining the tradition of divine naturalism, to present divinity interacting with earthly settings. The sophisticated engagement with her religious paintings prove her substantial contribution to the artistic discourse, demonstrating that her work deserves to be studied with the same academic scrutiny as the work of her male contemporaries. Far from an artist relegated to the appropriate private sphere of portraits, as was expected of her gender, Fontana was instead not working in such isolation but was a full participant in the professional artistic discourse, influenced by art critics, writers and theologians working through the political and cultural shifts in Renaissance Europe and contributing to the progressive intellectual development of religious painting.

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