

fig. 2. Andrea Mantegna, *Samson and Delilah*, c.1495–c.1505, The National Gallery, London

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SCULPTURE IN PAINTING/ PAINTING IN SCULPTURE (ITALY, c. 1485–c. 1660)

When Leonardo chose to open his treatise on painting, written in the 1490s, by defending its merits at the cost of sculpture he instigated a debate over their relative merits that would linger into the eighteenth century under the name of the ‘paragone’ (‘comparison’).¹ Leonardo had set out to defend painting from any charge that it was merely a ‘mechanical art’, in order to elevate the artist from mere artisan to an intellectual status paralleling that of men of letters.

During the course of the sixteenth century a thick stream of artistic and literary theorists, but also actual practitioners, took up the gauntlet for the opposing teams. They included Michelangelo, Giorgio Vasari, Pomponio Gaurico, Paolo Pino, Benedetto Varchi, Vincenzo and Raffaello Borghini, Agnolo Bronzino, Benevenuto Cellini, Giancristoforo Romano, Baldassare Castiglione, and, in the following century, Giovanni Battista Armenini, Federico Zuccari, Giulio Mancini, Giovan Battista Marino, Vincenzo Giustiniani, Galileo Galilei, and Orfeo Boselli.

The ongoing debate tended to reshuffle the same deck of ideas, sometimes in a disturbingly simplistic manner, not always free of pedantry, and as a rule organised into binary oppositions. Even before Leonardo, from at least Petrarch in the 1350s, sculptors had extolled the durability of sculpture over paint, to which Leonardo rejoined (and would still be echoed by Galileo) that this owed nothing to art and everything to the material; sculptors countered that the physical challenge of carving the block was a measure of the ‘difficulty’ of the art; painters replied that such difficulty was more labour than art, contrasting the courtly ‘facility’ of the painter’s endeavour with the strivings of the brutish sculptor; sculptors rejoined that while the painter could improvise and always retouch his painting (it was therefore the ‘art of addition’) there was no room for error in sculpture (which was the ‘art of subtraction’). Sculptors were virtually claiming infallibility. They also disparaged the shallow illusionism of painting in contrast to the multiple viewpoints of freestanding sculpture. Giorgione (1478–1510) famously responded by painting a ‘St George’, reflected in a pool as well as in two mirrors, to demonstrate that painting alone could present an entire figure in a single glance. And so on, and so on. A consistent motif was that while painting could conjure up the appearance of reality—not only the handling of light, shade, and colour but also the ability to portray distance and thereby collapse several scales into one plane—sculpture was at best a transcription of reality because it could merely reproduce figures at 1:1. Indeed, the ultimate accomplishment of painting, it was

1. In formulating my ideas about the paragone, I have often profited from discussion with Maarten Delbeke and Steven Ostrow. Some aspects of this essay were presented at a roundtable at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in 2008, others at the 2009 international conference *Bernini's Paragoni* held at the National Gallery of Scotland, co-organised by the author and Genevieve Warwick.

ESSENTIAL READING ON THE PARAGONE INCLUDES:

- L. Fallay d'Este, *Le Paragone: Le parallèle des Arts*, Paris, 1992.
M. Pepe, 'Il "Paragone" tra pittura e scultura nella letteratura artistica rinascimentale', *Cultura e scuola*, 1969, vol. 8, pp. 120–31, M. Collareta.
'Le "Arti Sorelle". Teoria e pratica del "Paragone"', in *La Pittura in Italia: Il Cinquecento*, ed. G. Briganti, Milan, 1988, pp. 569–80, S. La Barbera Bellia, *Il Paragone delle arti nella teoria artistica del cinquecento*, Rome, 1997.
P. Barocchi, 'Die Wettstreit zwischen Malerei und Skulptur: Benedetto Varchi und Vincenzo Borghini', in *Ars et Scriptura: Festschrift für Rudolf Preimesberger zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. H. Baader, U. Müller Hofstede, K. Patz and N. Suthor, Berlin, 2001, pp. 93–106, C. Farago ed., *Re-reading Leonardo: The Treatise on Painting across Europe 1550–1900*, Farnham/Burlington VT, 2009.

argued, lay in its mimetic superiority: the further the means of imitation were from the object in question, the greater the degree of illusion required, and thereby the mental skill that elevated art above craft. Painting by its very nature was the two-dimensional representation of volume, and therefore took the palm.

One of the few places, however, where minds met was in the realm of relief, especially the most flattened sort (*rilievo schiacciato*) that had been pioneered by sculptors of the calibre of Donatello (1386–1466), Desiderio da Settignano (c.1430–64) and Agostino di Duccio (c.1418–c.1481). Relief was already akin to painting by virtue of its planarity, in fact by even having a background at all, but *rilievo schiacciato*, in which the planes of carving might be as subtle as a millimetre, required a command of illusion that vied with painting in its ability to compress the representation of space into so shallow a field. Even Leonardo had conceded that this sort of relief was ‘a mixture of painting and sculpture’.

Furthermore, while the paragone was often couched in adversarial terms, pitting the brush against the chisel, and although each side may have been wary of being supplanted by the other in the battle for commissions, experience also taught the teams of artists involved in large-scale public works that the arts were just as collaborative as they were competitive. Moreover, because the pursuit of the paragone offered an arena for the interaction of the arts in theoretical terms, it became a stimulus to invention not only thanks to the commonalities that made any comparison possible, but also to the distinctions that provided a creative differential. In short, it encouraged the artist to think across any party lines.

A well known example of the paragone in practice is Titian’s ‘La Schiavona’ (c.1510–12) in this exhibition (see p. 80). Some comparison between the arts must have been intended in this yin-yang composition, otherwise Titian would not have devised the implausible profile of a parapet that morphs into a relief. In the conventional terms of the paragone the smiling and buxom lady would contrast favourably with the bloodless, almost sepulchral, relief, while the limitations of sculpture would be further evidenced by the fact that she is shown only in profile; and painting would anyway triumph through its ability to demonstrate two viewpoints in one frame. However, the relationship may be less antagonistic than reciprocal: the sitter is unembarrassed by the alter image which she fingers, perhaps beckoning the sense of touch. Even the most partisan champions of painting allowed that it exploits only one sense, sight, while sculpture offers two; conversely, painting has ‘captured’ the appearance of sculpture and sealed it below its surface. All in all, we cannot be sure that the young Titian’s intention was a challenge so much as a claim to fraternity in an artistic élite. For it has been argued that, in choosing to portray this sort of relief, Titian was consciously matching himself against Tullio Lombardo (1455–1532), the pre-eminent Venetian sculptor of his day and a virtuoso carver, in the round, in relief high or low, and classicising portraiture of all kinds.²

2. L. Freedman, ‘“The Schiavona”: Titian’s Response to the Paragone between Painting and Sculpture’, *Arte Veneta*, 1987, vol. 41, pp. 31–40.

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Lombardo himself was *au fait* with the commonplaces of the paragone, as revealed in a letter of 1526 where he commends to a patron the durability of sculpture over painting, citing as proof the abundant survival of ancient sculpture over the relative paucity of ancient painting. And it can hardly be coincidence that he also began carving, only to abandon, a low relief that copied Leonardo's renowned 'Last Supper' in Milan.³ Tullio's own engagement with the paragone, and that of his brother Antonio (1458–1516), involved not only the virtuoso execution of bas-reliefs, but the bold injection of colour in the shape of porphyry or even agate inlays—quite probably influenced by wood marquetry. Bolder still were the large reliefs that the brothers executed on the façade of the Scuola Grande di S. Marco (1489–95) (fig. 1.a) and within the Cappella di Sant'Antonio (1500–1) in the Basilica del Santo in Padua. These combined all degrees of relief, from the virtually freestanding, through shallow bas-relief (Leonardo's 'mixture of painting and sculpture'), to the virtually engraved, the last purposefully more like drawing than carving (fig. 1.b). Finally, streaky marble panels were used as background inlays to suggest skies riven with cloud, and the whole ensemble is contained by illusionist passageways in false perspective that not only reconcile sculpture to architecture but provide another link with painting. As Leonardo had said, 'low relief is a form of painting...as far as drawing is concerned, because it participates in perspective'.

The material tactics of the Lombardo brothers were illusionistically shared by a painter never far from their imaginations, Andrea Mantegna (c.1431–1506). At the close of the fifteenth century, in just the same years, Mantegna devised a completely new genre of painting in which fictive low-reliefs of gilt bronze or marble are silhouetted against richly veined, but again feigned, marble backgrounds.⁴ Mantegna

3. A. Sarchi, *Antonio Lombardo*, Venice, 2008, pp. 120–124.

4. R. W. Lightbown, *Mantegna: With a Complete Catalogue of the Paintings, Drawings and Prints*, Oxford, 1986, pp. 210–218. K. Christiansen, 'Paintings in Grisaille', in *Andrea Mantegna*, ed. J. Martineau, London, 1992, pp. 394–417.



fig. 1.a. Pietro, Tullio and Antonio Lombardo, detail of the façade of the Scuola Grande di S. Marco, Venice, 1489–95



fig. 1.b. Tullio and Antonio Lombardo, *The Healing of Anianus*, Scuola Grande di S. Marco

had been criticised from the outset of his career for painting figures that were more statuesque than vital, but here he devised an art form of ‘substitute reliefs’ that married the depth of painting with the illusion of a two-layer relief. This marriage is a complete fiction, and in some cases the carving would have tested the skill of any sculptor (fig. 2). More notable still, however, is that in these fictive confections Mantegna chose to simulate coloured marble in the backing slab, a medium that had long been hailed as a natural form of painting because of its brushy veining, its venue for images made by chance and its variegated palette, sometimes all within the same slab. Just like cameos, the marble medium—a sort of frozen painting by Nature (or God) the Artist—posited a loop-hole in the rules of the paragone.

By 1550, even an avid interlocutor of artistic theory like Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) regarded the paragone debate as sterile, and Michelangelo simply said ‘*basta!*’. Yet Mantegna’s fictions would become fact in that genre of sixteenth-century reliefs where gilded bronze reliefs are mounted on marble supports (fig. 3), especially the black variety coincidentally known as *pietra di paragone* (in English, ‘touchstone’).⁵

Other ingredients, now supplied by practice rather than debate, also entered the mix. From Sebastiano del Piombo onwards (1530), painters had countered the charge that painting was not ‘eternal’ by painting directly onto marble slabs. The added attraction, as more than one observer remarked, was that when the painter attempted to adapt his composition to the veining of the slab then ‘the skill of the artist played with the art of nature’. By the late sixteenth century, this painting *on* stone had turned to painting *in* stone, in the shape of the elaborate table-tops and easel-pieces produced by workshops from Prague to Naples, assembled from

5. It was common for any black stone to be called *pietra di paragone* from at least the sixteenth century. The term was borrowed from the dark basalts used to assay precious alloys, especially coins. By rubbing the metal to be assayed across the stone, adjacent to a streak of a metal of known purity, and then treating both with nitric acid to dissolve impurities, the contrast between pure and impure metal, between true and debased coins, became obvious. This assaying by ‘touch’ is why *pietra di paragone* is called ‘touchstone’ in English and because of the ‘proving’ *Prüfstein* in German. In all languages the figurative use of the term also carries the same meaning, i.e. the standard by which something may be judged.



fig. 3. Pompeo Targone, to the designs of Giacomo della Porta and Gaspare Guerra, relief of St Cecilia between Sts Valerianus and Tyburtius, 1599–1603, gilt bronze on black marble, S. Cecilia, Rome

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tesserae of judiciously selected hardstones jig-sawed into ensembles copied directly from painted cartoons (fig. 4).

These various innovations in technique, and the continuing interest in the role of painting versus sculpture as the locus of the *metatechne*, the art of art, would reach sophisticated fruition during the seventeenth century, particularly in the work of Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). Bernini had inherited not only his extraordinary facility in carving from his father, Pietro, but also his personal engagement with the paragone. Pietro used paintings as models for his sculpture, indeed virtually ‘translated’ them into relief, and he overtly sought to rival painting in a *tour de force* such as the massive ‘Assumption’, carved in 1606–10 (fig. 5). In works of such ambition, Pietro meant the multiplicity of planes, degrees of polish and variety of texture, chiaroscuro, anamorphic illusionism, exploitation of the oblique, and impression of movement to capture both visible and tangible nature, in other words to fuse sculpture’s capacity for materialisation (to manifest things ‘as they are’) with painting’s capacity for illusionism (to represent things ‘as they seem’).⁶

Eventually Gianlorenzo too would combat the proscriptions of the paragone by creating his own brand of ‘sculpted painting’ in youthful works like the ‘St Lawrence on the Grille’ (1617) or the famous ‘Apollo and Daphne’ (1622–5), works that defy the unrelenting stone by producing effects that were supposedly the prerogative of painting: supple flesh, the sheen of hair, the delicate tracery of a sapling, even smoke, transparency, shifting light, movement, but also transformation.⁷ And the paragone continued to weigh on Gianlorenzo’s mind sufficiently

6. S. F. Ostrow, ‘Playing with the Paragone: The Reliefs of Pietro Bernini’, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 2004, vol. 67, pp. 329–64.

7. R. Preimesberger, ‘Themes from Art Theory in the Early Works of Bernini’, in *Gianlorenzo Bernini. New Aspects of His Art and Thought: A Commemorative Volume*, ed. I. Lavin, University Park, 1985, pp. 1–24.



fig. 4. Cosimo Castrucci, *Landscape with bridge and chapel*, 1596, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Kunstkammer

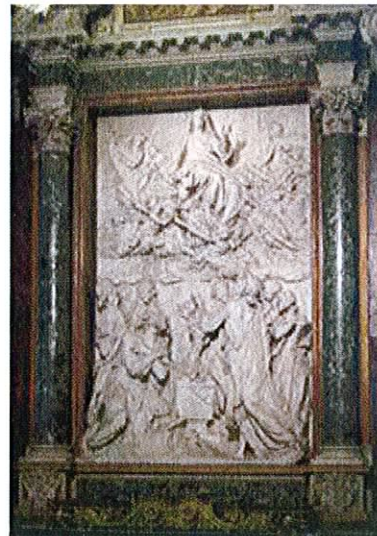


fig. 5. Pietro Bernini, *Assumption*, 1606–10 Baptistery, S. Maria Maggiore, Rome

8. T. Montanari, "'Theatralia', di Giovan Battista Doni: una nuova fonte per il teatro di Bernini", in *Estetica Barocca*, ed. S. Schütze, Rome, 2004, pp. 305-8. See also S. F. Ostrow, 'Bernini e il Paragone', in *Bernini Pittore*, ed. T. Montanari, Cinisello Balsamo, 2007, pp. 223-33.

for him to write a comedy (1635) in which a painter's studio and a sculptor's appeared on stage side-by-side, with the actors his own studio-hands.⁸

The Cornaro Chapel that Bernini designed in mid-career (1647-53) was a step towards a definitive solution (fig. 6). His preoccupation with the paragone is immediately betrayed by his calculated use of relief. On the side walls the Cornaro cardinals, actually their souls, are carved in white silhouette against a tinted stucco background to demonstrate, as a contemporary poet commented, Bernini's ability 'to carve colour,' and they are also enclosed in fugitive false-perspectives surprisingly reminiscent of the Lombardos' earlier formulations (fig. 7). The altar frontal (another 'Last Supper') also rehearses the genre of bronze relief on a marble ground, this time Lapis Lazuli. But these are merely supplements to the main event, the central effigy of 'St Theresa in Ecstasy', in which all the effects are extorted from a colour-less block that is unnecessarily, almost perversely, one piece of stone (the 'art of subtraction'). This effigy is indefinable within the criteria of the time and the strictures of the paragone. Theresa and her accompanying angel are in a sense a relief, indeed only what is necessary for appearances is carved. Theresa has, for example, no right arm and the figure group is hollowed out to lighten its load. More significant still—and most obviously in debt to the painterly imagination—this floating statue is the first baseless statue ever made. It is as though Bernini had taken Michelangelo's 'Pietà' and made it fly. Moreover, the Theresa occupies her own mini-building and is lit by her own sun. Effectively, Bernini has taken the back off the relief and folded it into a volume, and the idea of the 'sculpted painting' has now ballooned into that of the *built painting*. His pupil, the brilliant but short-lived Melchiorre Cafà (1636-67) seems to have acknowledged this achievement in his 'St

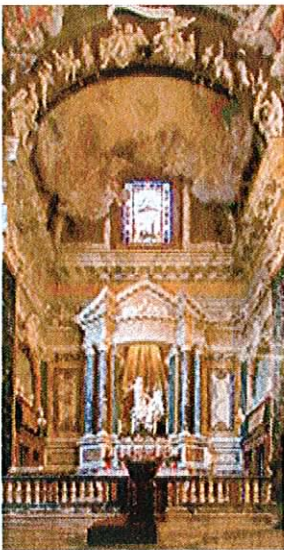


fig. 6. Gianlorenzo Bernini, Cornaro Chapel, 1647-53, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome

fig. 7. Cornaro cardinals, lateral relief, Cornaro Chapel

fig. 8. Melchiorre Cafà, St Catherine in Glory, c.1662-4, High Altar, S. Caterina da Siena a Largo Magnanapoli, Rome

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Catherine in Glory' (c. 1662–4), where he re-embedded the effigy into an intarsia background that obviously re-evoked the 'eternal painting' (fig. 8).

Bernini also subsumed the dialectic between painting and sculpture into the colourful world of polychrome marble architecture that frames and fields all the figurative sculpture.⁹ Until now, architecture had generally stood on the sidelines of the paragone debate, disqualified by its inability—with the exception of the Renaissance grotto—to imitate from nature or life, with observers wavering between regarding it as the mother of the arts or a poor sister.¹⁰ However, already in the 1540s the latest protagonists of the paragone had broached the question by arguing that because architecture is 'necessary' (unlike painting and sculpture), 'sculptures and paintings are made to decorate buildings rather than the reverse' (Benedetto Varchi) and, conversely, that the fine arts were necessary to architecture because they 'mix in a little delicacy to its essence, which is in truth mechanical' (Vincenzo Borghini). By the 1580s, the issue was short-circuited by the painter turned treatise writer Gian Paolo Lomazzo, who discussed architecture in equal terms and identical categories to painting, and in whose *Idea of a Temple of Painting*, as the title suggests, the criteria of painting become the metaphorical building blocks of a conceptual building, the Temple of Painting.

Bernini, for his part, was predisposed to see architecture as sculptural, not only because it was carved and plastic, with façades particularly akin to reliefs, but also because body metaphors had long underpinned architectural design. Yet he was able to assimilate architecture to painting via sculpture, and make peace between the arts so to speak, by using coloured marble as a medium rather than an ornament. This material lay half-way between the pictorial and the plastic arts, and overcame any distinction between the art of addition and the art of subtraction, because colour was part of its very substance. In this sense the marble became as much a medium as any other binder used for pigment, and seemingly as mobile too. What was a dormant background in Mantegna's fictions is now an active environment, with a palette spanning from the shadow of the tomb at the chapel's base (the Cornaro Chapel is a mortuary chapel) to the glaring light of the resurrection painted in its vault. Bernini effectively paints with the stones, exploiting their veining as though they were brush trails. The ultimate unity of the ensemble is not a conjunction of the arts but an elision, because the ability of one art to perform as another deregulated and even confounded the boundaries between sculpture and painting, ultimately subsuming them into mother architecture. We can no longer decide whether sculpture is engulfed by painting or emerges from it. In fact, distinction itself has become an idle question, giving way to that 'intervisuality' that guarantees the autonomy of the representation, and nullifies any issue of truth or deception.

9. An early approach to this question is in F. Barry, "'I Marmi Loquaci': Painting in Stone", *Daidalos*, 1995, vol. 56, pp. 106–21.

10. A. Payne, 'Alberti and the Origins of the Paragone between Architecture and the Figurative Arts', in *Leon Battista Alberti: teorico delle arti e gli impegni civili del 'De Re Aedificatoria'*, ed. A. Calzona, F. P. Fiore, A. Tenenti and C. Vasoli, Florence, 2007, pp. 347–68.