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## On Small Differences. Ekphrasis and Connoisseurship

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to Enrico Castelnovo  
«parole non possono dire»  
(Pietro Toesca, oral tradition)

READING images: the metaphor embedded in this expression implies, if taken literally, that images are texts, or comparable to texts. This approach has been repeatedly pursued, with questionable results. An alternative, less simplistic road will be suggested here, arguing that our relationship with images always implies a verbal mediation of some kind. Even the connoisseur – a laconic art historian, as Erwin Panofsky defined him – tacitly relies upon words: the words of *ekphrasis*, of description.<sup>1</sup> Reading images means, first of all, to translate images into words, to describe them. Let us look at this process, and at its implications, more closely.

1.

My case study will begin with Philip Pouncey, the British connoisseur – a recognized authority in the field of Italian drawings. A volume published in Italy collects his (usually dense and short) contributions in three languages.<sup>2</sup> Four catalogues, based on exhibits which took place, respectively, at the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Uffizi, the British Museum, the Louvre, celebrated Pouncey's triumphs as a connoisseur.<sup>3</sup> The introductions to those catalogues invariably mentioned an attribution which

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<sup>1</sup> E. PANOFSKY, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, N.Y., Garden City, 1955, p. 20: «The connoisseur might be defined as a laconic art historian, and the art historian as a loquacious connoisseur».

<sup>2</sup> PH. POUNCEY, *Raccolta di scritti (1937-1985)*, a cura di M. Di Giampaolo, Rimini 1994.

<sup>3</sup> J. STOCK, D. SCRASE, *The Achievement of a Connoisseur: Philip Pouncey, Italian Old Masters Drawings*, introduction by J. A. Gere,



achieved a quasi-exemplary status, becoming an epitome of Pouncey's uncanny gifts as well as a model for the connoisseur's practice. Here is a telling comment by John A. Gere, who co-authored with Pouncey the two volume catalogue of the drawings by Raphael and his circle preserved at the British Museum:<sup>1</sup>

It may be asked, how does an artistic personality reveal itself? In addition to the Morellian criteria presented by such secondary physical features as the form of hands or ears, there are individual patterns of composition and grouping into which the draughtsman falls unconsciously and which are as unmistakable as a writer's choice of words and the cadence of sentences; and above all there is the psychology of the artist as expressed in nuances of facial expression.

"A classic example of the last type of attribution" Gere went on "is that of the study of a crouching nude man by Bastianino (FIG. 1), which had laid unnoticed for more than two hundred years among the anonymous sheets at Christ Church. No drawings from the hand of this obscure Ferrarese imitator of Michelangelo were known when Mr. Pouncey remarked that 'if Bastianino had made drawings, this is exactly the kind of drawing that one would have expected from him'. The suggestion was triumphantly confirmed by the discovery in a painting by Bastianino of the figure for which the drawing undoubtedly served as a study."<sup>2</sup>

A footnote concerning the last remark. The drawing is covered by a square grid (*quadrettatura*): a device used by painters to transfer their drawings into larger surfaces, either on walls or on panels or on canvases. According to a Ferrarese erudite, Bastianino was nicknamed "Gratella" (i. e. grid) since he had rediscovered this forgotten device.<sup>3</sup>

Philip Pouncey's attribution has been described several times – by John Gere himself, by Nicholas Turner, by Evelyne Bacou, by James Byam Shaw – more or less in the same words. But as soon as we read Pouncey's article devoted to Bastianino's drawings, we are confronted with a somewhat different version.<sup>4</sup>

Cambridge 1985; *Hommage à Philip Pouncey. L'oeil du connaisseur. Les dessins italiens au Louvre*, Paris 1992; *Philip Pouncey per gli Uffizi. Disegni italiani di tre secoli*, Firenze 1993; N. TURNER, *The Study of Italian Drawings. The Contribution of Philip Pouncey*, with an introduction by J. A. Gere, London 1994. N. PENNY, *The Sixteenth Century Italian paintings*, vol. 1, *Paintings from Bergamo, Brescia and Cremona*, London 2004, pp. 384-385.

<sup>1</sup> PH. POUNCEY, J. A. GERE, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, Raphael and His Circle*, London, 1962, 2 vols.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. GERE, introd. to *The Achievement of a Connoisseur. Philip Pouncey*, Cambridge 1985 (republished in *Philip Pouncey per gli Uffizi, Disegni italiani di tre secoli*, catalogo della mostra a cura di M. Chiarini, G. Dillon, A. Petrioli Tofani, Firenze 1993, pp. ix-xi-ii, see especially p. xii), and ill. n. 7. See also J. BYAM SHAW, *Drawings by Old Masters at Christ Church*, Oxford 1976, no. 908, pl. 549; ID., *Philip Pouncey – a celebration*, «Burlington Magazine», vol. cxxvii, n. 992, November 1985, p. 761 (and illustrations on p. 763).

<sup>3</sup> C. CITADELLA, *Catalogo storico de' pittori e scultori ferraresi, e delle opere loro, con in fine una nota esatta delle più celebri pitture delle chiese di Ferrara*, 4 voll., in FERRARA 1782-1783, II, pp. 124-125.

<sup>4</sup> PH. POUNCEY, *Disegni del Bastianino*, in ID., *Raccolta di scritti*, pp. 139-146 (originally published in *Arte illustrata*, v [1972]).



We became aware of Bastianino's stylistic originality" Pouncey remarked "to a large extent thanks to the way in which Roberto Longhi [in his *Officina ferrarese*, 1934] brilliantly presented his concept concerning Bastianino's quality (a concept later developed by Francesco Arcangeli): this allowed us to share his poetic vision inhabited by 'titani cinerei e nebbiosi', ash-gray and foggy titans.<sup>1</sup>

The same words – "titani cinerei e nebbiosi" – which Longhi had used to evoke Bastianino's paintings surface again in the description of Pouncey's encounter with the Christ Church drawing:

"In this case my attention was attracted by the bizarre physical appearance, as well as by the subtlety in which the body had been shaped, conveying not only its massive character but also, to a certain extent, the atmosphere which it inhabits. He is not only a 'titan' but a 'foggy titan'".<sup>2</sup>

The next step, i. e. the identification of the painting based on the drawing (a detail from an altarpiece by Bastianino representing the *Last Judgement*, originally at Rovello Porro, now in Ferrara's Certosa: FIG. 2 [whole]; FIG. 3 [detail]) was not made by Pouncey himself but by Myril, his wife.<sup>3</sup> The disappearance of her name from the later accounts of Pouncey's attribution may be ascribed to a gender bias, shared, apparently, by some distinguished art historians, both male and female.<sup>4</sup> More puzzling is the disappearance, in the aforementioned remarks, of Pouncey's crucial reference to Longhi's "titani cinerei e nebbiosi" – ash-gray and foggy titans. Compared with the detailed, vivid account I just read, Gere's comment looks disappointingly vague:

Such feats of divination [like Pouncey's] seem miraculous, but they are achieved only by a prolonged and single-minded absorption in the subject.<sup>5</sup>

When he came across the Christ Church drawing Pouncey was apparently unaware of the *Saint Sebastian* at Brera, which had been identified as "Bastianino" by its previous owner, Filippo Acqua: see L. CIAMMITTI, *Un collezionista marchigiano del Settecento: Filippo Acqua*, in *Disegni emiliani dei secoli XVII-XVIII della Pinacoteca di Brera*, ed. by D. Pescarmona, Milano 1995, pp. 31-48, especially pp. 46-48.

<sup>1</sup> PH. POUNCEY, *DISEGNI DEL BASTIANINO*, p. 140: «È in gran parte merito della brillante esposizione del concetto espresso da Roberto Longhi circa il valore dell'artista e dello sviluppo di tale concetto fatto da Francesco Arcangeli, se siamo resi consapevoli della originalità stilistica del Bastianino e se siamo capaci di dividerne la visione poetica popolata di "titani cinerei e nebbiosi"».

<sup>2</sup> PH. POUNCEY, *Disegni del Bastianino*, p. 141: «Ma nel caso particolare la mia attenzione fu arrestata dallo strano fisico del personaggio e dalla sottigliezza della modellatura che non solo rende l'aspetto del corpo massiccio ma, in qualche modo, suggerisce pure l'atmosfera nel quale esiste. Esso è infatti non solo un "titano", ma un "titano nebbioso"».

<sup>3</sup> See M. POUNCEY, *Philip Pouncey: témoignage d'une vie*, in *Hommage à Philip Pouncey. L'oeil du connaisseur*, pp. 17-22.

<sup>4</sup> J. BYAM SHAW, *Philip Pouncey – a celebration is an exception*.

<sup>5</sup> J. A. GERE, *Lectures and Memoirs*, «Proceedings of the British Academy», 76 [1991], p. 537.



What we came across is indeed something more specific: a mental process in which, incidentally, the artist's psychology – which Gere mentioned as a crucial element of the attribution practice, regarded as a kind of empathy – played no role whatsoever. Pouncey's act of recognition had different roots, which reveal (I will argue) some of the theoretical implications of connoisseurship. Let us look at the case more closely.

## 2.

Sebastiano Filippi, nicknamed Bastianino was born in Ferrara around 1532, and died in 1602; his father, Camillo, was also a painter. Bastianino shows up at the very end of Roberto Longhi's *Officina ferrarese*, a book conceived as a detailed comment to the great exhibit held in Ferrara in 1933: it has been republished several times with substantial additions.

In one paragraph, amounting to 16 lines in the first edition of *Officina ferrarese*, Longhi identified Bastianino, virtually unknown outside Ferrara, as "the greatest poet of Italian mannerism after El Greco", and concluded: his "ash-gray and foggy titans" (*titani cinerei e nebbiosi*) will hopefully make him, in a near future, the favourite artist of some "young critic".<sup>1</sup> Pouncey must have read those lines in his mid-20s (he was born in 1910, being 20 years younger than Longhi). Although his note on Bastianino's drawings was published much later, Pouncey had engaged himself in a dialogue with Longhi's *Officina ferrarese* a long time before – in fact, since his very first essay, "Ercole Grandi's Masterpiece", which came out in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1937. With the help of x rays – a technology rarely used by art historians at that time – Pouncey developed Longhi's argument on the dual authorship of the Pala Strozzi (National Gallery, London) (FIG. 4), suggesting that the unnamed artist involved in the altarpiece, along with the more famous Lorenzo Costa, was Gianfrancesco Maineri.<sup>2</sup> In his *Ampliamenti nell'Officina ferrarese* (issued in 1940) Longhi answered at length, rejecting Pouncey's identification – which is still widely regarded as the most likely. (But the debate is still open).<sup>3</sup>

Thirty-five years later, Longhi's four words used to depict the work of Bastianino – "ash-gray and foggy titans" – paved the way to Pouncey's attribution of the Christ Church drawing. How was this

<sup>1</sup> R. LONGHI, *Officina ferrarese* [1934], *Opere v*, Firenze 1968, p. 89: «B. quasi un William Blake del michelangiolo italiano. I suoi titani cinerei e nebbiosi... diventeranno una volta, e speriamo sia presto, i beniamini di qualche giovine critico... In verità, dopo il Greco, il Bastianino è il maggior poeta del manierismo italiano». F. Arcangeli, born in 1915, also identified himself, initially, with the "giovine critico": see *Il Bastianino*, Ferrara 1963 (dedicated "al mio Maestro Roberto Longhi"), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> PH. POUNCEY, *Raccolta di scritti*, pp. 3-16.

<sup>3</sup> R. LONGHI, *Ampliamenti nell'Officina ferrarese*, in *Officina ferrarese*, Firenze 1968, pp. 152-54. See C. GOULD, *National Gallery Catalogues. The Italian Sixteenth Century Schools*, London 1975, pp. 77-80.



sequence possible? To answer this question one has to address a crucial element of Longhi's work: his dense, vivid literary style, which contributed (along with his extraordinary gifts as a connoisseur) to his almost legendary fame among 20<sup>th</sup> century art historians. But in the English-speaking world the name of Longhi has remained, beyond the specialists's circle, virtually unknown (two recent translations notwithstanding). In a recent, and in many ways symptomatic book, entitled *The Books that Shaped Art History from Gombrich and Greenberg to Alpers and Krauss*, Longhi's name is never mentioned.<sup>1</sup> Too much of a connoisseur, perhaps, for the editors of a book whose introduction dismissively refers to "the minutiae of connoisseurship" – an allusion to Berenson's *Drawings of the Florentine Painters* to which an essay is devoted.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, and more importantly, Longhi's highly idiosyncratic language created an obstacle which prevented a more widespread impact of his work: a price to be paid by his use of literary style as a cognitive tool.

## 3.

This last point, which is crucial from a theoretical point of view, was made by the great Romance philologist Gianfranco Contini in a series of essays devoted to Roberto Longhi, considered as the most prominent master of Italian 20th century prose.<sup>3</sup> I will try to unfold the implications of Contini's dense, often cryptic remarks, following a path opened up by André Chastel, in an essay devoted to Longhi as a genius of *ekphrasis*.<sup>4</sup>

A large amount of research has been devoted to *ekphrasis*: a rhetorical genre based on the description of works of art, either real or imagined.<sup>5</sup> In ancient Greece, where the genre emerged, *ekphrasis*

<sup>1</sup> Ed. by R. Shone and J.-P. Stonard, London 2013. On p. 218 note 20 the reader will find a reference to Longhi's correspondence with Berenson (hence the absence of an entry in the index). On the absence of an adequate reception of Longhi's work in the English-speaking world see D. TABBAT, *The eloquent eye. Roberto Longhi and the historical criticism of art*, «Paragone Arte», luglio-novembre 1996, pp. 3-27 (also as an introduction to R. LONGHI, *Three Studies: Masolino and Masaccio. Caravaggio and His Forerunners. Carlo Braccesco*, Riversale-on-Hudson, New York, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> *The Books that Shaped Art History from Gombrich and Greenberg to Alpers and Krauss*, introduction by R. Shone, p. 5. The essay (by C. C. Bambach) on Berenson's *Drawings of the Florentine Painters* is on pp. 31-41. The choice is heavily unbalanced towards the English-speaking world. If we include art historians forced to emigrate to it, we have only 3 chapters (on a total of 16) devoted to art historians belonging to non-English linguistic traditions (E. Mâle, H. Wölfflin, H. Belting).

<sup>3</sup> G. CONTINI, *Altri esercizi (1942-1971)*, Torino 1972, *Sul metodo di Roberto Longhi [1949]* pp. 101-110; *Longhi prosatore [1955]* pp. 111-122; *Per la ristampa del Piero [1964]* pp. 123-126; *Per Roberto Longhi*, «Paragone Letteratura», 21, 244, June 1970, pp. 3-5; *Ultimi esercizi ed elzeviri (1968-1987)*, Torino 1988, *Memoria di Roberto Longhi [1973]*, pp. 347-368; *Rinnovamento del linguaggio letterario [1976]*, pp. 107-122, especially pp. 112-114.

<sup>4</sup> A. CHASTEL, *Roberto Longhi: il genio dell'ekphrasis*, in *L'arte di scrivere sull'arte. Roberto Longhi nella cultura del nostro tempo*, ed. by G. Previtali, Roma 1982, pp. 56-65.

<sup>5</sup> The literature on this topic is very large (and rapidly expanding). See M. KRIEGER, *Ekphrasis. The Illusion of the Natural Sign*,



focused on *schema* – a broad notion which included what we usually label “iconography”.<sup>1</sup> Longhi’s reinterpreted the genre, as Chastel pointed out, creating “verbal equivalences” of works of art (a quote from Longhi, as we will see): descriptions which – we might say, relying upon the ancient Greek terminology – aimed to convey not only their *schema*, but their *ergasia*, their stylistic features as well.<sup>2</sup> For Longhi, attribution often came at the end of *ekphrasis*, as a conclusion of it.<sup>3</sup>

## 4.

The expression “verbal equivalences” (*equivalenze verbali*) had been used by Longhi himself to define his own method in an early, polemical review, published in 1920. The passage is well known, but it deserves a further analysis.

But first of all, some informations about its intellectual context. In his *Aesthetics* (1902), a book which had a deep impact on philosophical debates, in Italy and elsewhere, Benedetto Croce had insisted on the deep unity of art: its media (verbal, pictorial, musical and so on) were irrelevant, insofar as the critic’s aim was to identify the lyrical core of specific art works.

In 1912 Longhi objected that the “new aesthetics” (that is, Croce’s) diluted the concreteness of pictorial style into vague, psychological categories.<sup>4</sup> Some years later, in 1919, in an essay entitled “The history and criticism of visual arts and its present conditions”, Croce mentioned Longhi as a *temperamentvoll* (as the German say) writer – influential, competent and highly intelligent – but rejected his argument (without naming him) along with the “bizarre idea of an art criticism competing with art and expressing it through a new medium”.<sup>5</sup> Longhi answered, in 1920, in a review of Enzo Pe-

Baltimore and London 1992; the article *Ekphrasis* (by W. D. Lohr), in *Metzler Lexikon. Kunstwissenschaft. Ideen, Methoden, Begriffe*, hrsg. U. Pfisterer, 2. Aufl., Stuttgart 2011, pp. 99-104. On the relationship between *ekphrasis* and *enargeia*, see M. KRIEGER, *Ekphrasis*; C. GINZBURG, *Description and citation*, in *Threads and Traces. True False Fictive*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2012, pp. 7-24.

<sup>1</sup> M. L. CATONI, *La comunicazione non verbale nella Grecia antica. Gli schemata nella danza, nell’arte, nella vita*, intr. di S. Settis, 2a ed. Torino 2008.

<sup>2</sup> M. L. CATONI, *La comunicazione non verbale*, pp. 196-197, quoting a text by Arrianus (95-175).

<sup>3</sup> A. CHASTEL, *Roberto Longhi*, p. 58: (on Ercole de’ Roberti presence in the Schifanoia frescoes): «l’attribuzione viene in certo modo da sola al termine di questa *ekphrasis* concentrata, che è stata non tanto un’analisi quanto una distillazione verbale dell’invenzione visiva e della qualità pittorica direttamente affrontate».

<sup>4</sup> R. LONGHI, *Rinascimento fantastico* (originally published in *La Voce*, 1912), in *Id.*, *Scritti giovanili, 1912-1922*, 1, Firenze 1980, pp. 3-13, especially p. 3: «il melanconico risultato dell’estetica nuova, il cui solo grande merito fu di campire liricamente tutta l’arte, e il cui demerito non minore fu di indistinguere fra i campi intuitivi specifici a ogni arte, abbruttendo la tecnica più di qualsiasi naturalismo, e di mandare eternamente a braccio storicismo ed estetismo, senza intendere che la soluzione era buona per la sola letteratura. Nel concepire infine la liricità come essenzialmente umanistica, psicologica» (also quoted by GARBOLI, *Scritti servili*, p. 180).

<sup>5</sup> B. CROCE, *La critica e la storia delle arti figurative e le sue condizioni presenti* (1919), republished in *Nuovi saggi di estetica*, Bari

traccone's posthumous book on Luca Giordano, the Neapolitan 17<sup>th</sup> century painter. Petraccone had addressed some criticism to Longhi's essay on Mattia Preti; but the real target of Longhi's oblique rejoinder was Croce, who had introduced Petraccone's book.<sup>1</sup> Here is Longhi:

we believe that it is possible to create specific verbal equivalences of specific visual experiences; equivalences which may have a quasi genetic dimension, in so far as they replicate the way in which a work of art has been created and expressed.

We don't know whether this is a translation – and since it has been demonstrated that translations are impossible, we hope that this would not be the case – but since a personal involvement is inevitably associated to historical knowledge, we believe that our approach may have a role in a methodically sound historical criticism of visual arts.<sup>2</sup>

In a brilliant essay Cesare Garboli emphasized the ironical overtone of Longhi's remark on the impossibility of translation, unfolding some of its implications.<sup>3</sup> But to fully appreciate the irony we must identify its target: Benedetto Croce's rejection of the very possibility of translation, put forward in his *Aesthetic* – a book whose full title read: *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* (*Aesthetic as science of expression and general linguistic*).<sup>4</sup> For Croce, the identity of aesthetic and

1926, pp. 261-280, with an appendix, "Per una migliore critica delle arti figurative", pp. 281-285. See particularly pp. 270-71: "Un'altra cosa veramente si dice (...) dai nuovi critici e storici, la quale sembra ad essi di gran peso e trova molti consenzienti o a molti riesce prontamente persuasiva: cioè, che a questo modo la critica sostituisce concetti di categorie spirituali alle ben determinate linee e colori della pittura, e uccide la pittura, illudendosi di spiegarla (...) La stravagante idea, di una critica d'arte che gareggi con l'arte e la riesprima con un nuovo mezzo, è stata da me altrove più volte confutata".

<sup>1</sup> E. PETRACCONI, *Luca Giordano*, opera postuma a cura di B. Croce, Napoli 1919; see especially pp. 4-9.

<sup>2</sup> R. LONGHI, review of E. PETRACCONI, *Luca Giordano*, intr. B. Croce, Bari 1919 [*L'Arte* 1920] (*Scritti giovanili*, 1, p. 456): «Ci pare che sia possibile creare certe equivalenze verbali di certe visioni; equivalenze che procedano quasi geneticamente, a seconda cioè del modo con che l'opera venne gradualmente creata ed espressa.

Non sappiamo se ciò sia tradurre – e, poiché tradurre è stato dimostrato impossibile, speriamo che non lo sia – ma da quando un fatto personale è inevitabile per chiunque imprenda fare storia, crediamo che questo nostro modo possa ancora aver luogo in un buon metodo di critica storica delle arti figurative...».

<sup>3</sup> C. GARBOLI, *Longhi scrittore* [1980], in *Pianura proibita*, Milano 2002, pp. 11-25, p. 16: «È divertente vedere con quanta ironia Longhi lasci cadere nel discorso la parola forse più gravida di significati letterari di tutto il Novecento: che cosa è e che cosa significa 'tradurre'?». Longhi's essay was not written in 1919 (see *ibid.*, p. 15) but in 1920: one year difference which is, I argue, not irrelevant.

<sup>4</sup> B. CROCE, *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale*, Bari 1922 (1902: transl. D. Ainslie, London 1909, reprinted many times), p. 160: «La linguistica ha scoperto anch'essa il principio dell'individualità irriducibile del fatto estetico, allorché ha affermato che la parola è il realmente parlato, e che non vi sono due parole veramente identiche; distruggendo così i sinonimi e gli omonimi, e mostrando l'impossibilità di tradurre davvero una parola in un'altra, dal cosiddetto dialetto alla cosiddetta lingua o dalla cosiddetta lingua materna alla cosiddetta lingua straniera».

linguistics implied that both deal with unique phenomena. Since (as the linguists say) there are no identical words, no synonyms, no omonyms, translations are (Croce argued) rigorously impossible. Those who, like myself, believe in the possibility of translation, would describe this radically idealistic position in Saussurian terms, as follows: for Croce (and especially for the early Croce) language coincides with *parole*; *langue* should not be taken into account, being a mere fiction, not a reality.

Longhi, as we have seen, insisted that his 'verbal equivalences' of visual works of art were indeed translations: a remark which had positive, not only polemical, implications. Here I am, once again, following in the footsteps of Cesare Garboli. In another fundamental essay on Longhi's early intellectual development, Garboli wrote: «In the morphology of Italian idealism, the very peculiar variation introduced by Longhi, i.e. a contamination of materialism and idealism» is remote from Croce's philosophy: in fact, it can be regarded as a version of Giovanni Gentile's philosophy ('idealismo attuale'). «I don't know» Garboli commented «if, and to what extent, and up to which date, Longhi read Gentile. But this is not so important».<sup>1</sup>

Something more will be said on this issue in a moment; but first, a general remark. For more than fifty years the Italian philosophical scene was dominated by Croce and Gentile – first as friends, later as enemies. Their theoretical divergences became also political (and more bitter) with the emergence of Fascism – a movement, then a regime, strongly supported by Gentile (who became its official philosophical representative) and opposed (after an initially benevolent attitude) by Croce. The divergence between Croce and Gentile, which had emerged in 1913, was in 1920 still restricted to the theoretical domain. One of the issues on which they debated was translation. In my view Longhi must have read Gentile's essay *Il diritto e il torto delle traduzioni* (*The right and wrong of translations*) first published in the opening issue of «Rivista di cultura», printed on April 15, 1920.<sup>2</sup> Gentile initially agreed with Croce's argument on the impossibility of translations but then, with a typical dialectical move, turned it upside down: we always translate, insofar as every act of reading (or of thinking somebody else's thought) is a translation. Originals do not exist: a conclusion which Gentile developed in other texts, arguing that the past, as an objective entity, distinct from the act of thinking, does not exist.

<sup>1</sup> C. GARBOLI, *Scritti servili*, Torino 1989, *Breve storia del giovane Longhi*, pp. 165-207 (1988), especially pp. 204-205: «Nella sua formulazione storicista, l'estetismo di Longhi è una forma di idealismo attuale. Ignoro se, e fino a che punto, o fino a quando, Longhi abbia letto Gentile. Ma la cosa non ha grande importanza. Si può essere in sintonia con una corrente di pensiero, anche senza conoscerne la codificazione. È molto probabile che Longhi abbia letto e frequentato il Gentile degli anni futuristi e vociani, mentre è dubbio che abbia conosciuto le sistemazioni più tarde, per esempio quella piccola summa antistoricista che è il saggio dedicato al 'superamento del tempo nella storia' (1936)...».

<sup>2</sup> G. GENTILE, *Il torto e il diritto delle traduzioni* republished in ID., *Frammenti di estetica e letteratura*, Lanciano 1920, pp. 369-375. The issue of *L'Arte* in which Longhi published his review of Petraccone's book, was dated 'January-April 1920'.



The echoes of this debate are still with us. In an essay entitled *Reading is like translating*, Hans-Georg Gadamer mentioned the old Italian motto 'traduttore-traditore', translator-traitor (which he ascribed to Croce) and then argued (following Gentile, although without mentioning him) that reading a text, including texts written in our mother-tongue, always implies a translation.<sup>1</sup> A comment on contemporary hermeneutics and translation would take me into a different direction. Let me go back to Longhi; more specifically, to the «contamination of materialism and idealism» Garboli detected in Longhi's thought.

## 5.

I will try to clarify this issue relying upon some (so far, strangely unexploited) evidence: Longhi's library, which is preserved, along with his splendid collection of paintings, in Florence, at the Fondazione bearing his name. Longhi used to underline passages and to scribble comments (occasionally, in shorthand) on the margins of the books he owned. A copy of the third edition of Croce's *Aesthetics*, published in 1908, allows us to follow at a close distance the response of the young reader (Longhi, born in 1890, must have read it first in his twenties; then again several times, for certain in 1941).<sup>2</sup> Some of the passages most heavily underlined deal with Croce's aforementioned argument, rejecting the distinction among arts (poetry, painting, music and so forth) as theoretically irrelevant. In a typical passage Croce remarked that Aristotle was right in saying that the difference between poetry and prose cannot be identified in an external feature like verse. "Poetry and prose yes but poetry and painting no" Longhi noted.<sup>3</sup> These laconic words pointed at a profound theoretical di-

<sup>1</sup> See N. MÁTYUS, *Il dibattito di Croce e Gentile sul problema della traduzione* <sedest.esteri.it/budapest/cepdf/Matyus\_it.PDF>, referring to H.-G. GADAMER, *Lesen ist wie Uebersetzen*, in *Aesthetik und Poetik*, 1: *Kunst als Aussage*, Tübingen 1993, pp. 280-285 (first published as *Leggere è come tradurre*, «MondOperaio», 19 [1988], n. 2, pp. 119-121); I have been unable to find any trace of a direct knowledge of Gentile in Gadamer's writings. Cesare Garboli, who detected the Gentilian flavour of Longhi's early writings, also paid homage to Gentile (without naming him) in commenting upon his own translation: see Molière, *Tartufo*, trad. e intr. di C. Garboli, Torino 1974, pp. xv-xvi: «Ma una traduzione, si sa, non è mai solo una traduzione. È quasi sempre, consapevole o no, e anche se immediato e naturale, un esercizio critico, una lettura (...). Tradurre è forse il solo modo di esercitare la critica, o, per essere più precisi, il solo modo di avvicinarsi criticamente a un testo: operazione che non cessa di essere la medesima, cioè una 'traduzione', anche quando si tratti di testi scritti nella propria lingua. Quando abbiamo sotto gli occhi una canzone di Dante Alighieri, o leggiamo l'*Orlando furioso*, produciamo issosofatto altrettanti equivalenti più o meno prossimi agli originali. Insomma, 'traduciamo'». See ID., *Croce e Gentile* [1988], in *Pianura proibita*, pp. 26-34.

<sup>2</sup> B. CROCE, *Estetica*, Bari 1908 (Fondazione Longhi, Florence), p. 485: 1941 [minus] 75 [=] 1866 (year of Croce's birth). On the right margin Longhi noted that Croce wrote his first theoretical essay, *La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte*, when he was 27.

<sup>3</sup> B. CROCE, *Estetica*, p. 532. Longhi's comment: «poesia e prosa sì ma poesia e pittura no».

vergence. For Croce art was an all-encompassing category of the spirit, defined as identity between lyrical intuition and expression; but expression should not be confused with the intuition's physical embodiment, or extrinsecation (*estrinsecazione*). Longhi's impatience with this argument suddenly erupts in his marginal notes. When Croce (implicitly echoing, once again, Aristotle): wrote: "Aesthetic judgement on a work of art is totally unrelated to a judgment on the artist's morality", Longhi sarcastically commented: «Therefore when the painter materially paints and 'extrinsecates' ("*estrinseca*") he is merely a practical man!»<sup>1</sup> *Materialmente dipinge*, 'materially paints': what Croce regarded as a mere empirical phenomenon – the materiality of the object – was at the center of Longhi's approach, both as a connoisseur and an art historian. In fact, without this commitment to the object – that object, located in a definite space and time, having specific physical features – connoisseurship would be unthinkable.

But Longhi's peculiar mixture of idealism and materialism must be looked at in a much larger historical framework. Many years ago, in an essay which dealt (among many other things) with Giovanni Morelli and connoisseurship, I pointed out that we usually take for granted a dichotomy between texts and (certain) images, which is on the contrary the outcome of silent, long-term cultural trajectory. On the one hand, we assume that a text (or a number) will remain the same in whatever medium, in whatever handwriting, in whatever font is reproduced; on the other, we assume that a reproduction of a painting by Raphael or Rembrandt cannot, by definition, replicate the original. On the one hand, we have invisible texts; on the other, visible objects.<sup>2</sup> I advanced this argument long time before coming across the impatient remarks Longhi scribbled on the margins of his own copy of Croce's *Aesthetic*. Longhi's stress on the materiality of the painterly object implicitly pointed out at the different status of poetry, on which Croce's definition of art was based.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> B. CROCE, *Estetica*, p. 129: «Il giudizio estetico sull'opera d'arte non ha a che vedere con quello sulla moralità dell'artista in quanto uomo pratico». Longhi's comment: «dunque il pittore mentre materialmente dipinge ed 'estrinseca' è soltanto un uomo pratico!»

<sup>2</sup> C. GINZBURG, *Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*, in ID., *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, Baltimore 1989, pp. 96-125, especially p. 107; ID., *Invisible Texts, Visible Images*, in *Coping with the Past. Creative Perspectives on Conservation and Restoration*, ed. by P. Gagliardi, B. Latour, P. Memelsdorff, Firenze 2010, pp. 133-144, 157-160.

<sup>3</sup> In 1942, in a letter to Croce, Longhi wrote that he was working on an essay «Unità teoretica e storica delle [tre] arti figurative» (the title of a series of lectures delivered in 1922-'23 and never published). Longhi asked for Croce's help, arguing that there was «una perenne diversità di 'condizione storica' tra poesia 'figurata' e poesia 'per verba'» an element which supported «l'autonomia della storia dell'arte in confronto a quella della poesia». In his answer Croce reaffirmed his own thesis on the unity of art: «non credo possibile distinguere e giustapporre o contrapporre le due serie, come poesia e pittura o in altrettali modi. Come definire l'una e l'altra mercé di caratteri propri ed originali? A desumere questo carattere dal così detto mezzo fisico non bisogna pensare, perché non è concepibile passaggio alle nostre classificazione estrinseche o fisiche» (R. LONGHI, *Omaggio a Benedetto Croce* (1952), now in *Critica d'arte e buongoverno, 1938-1969, Opere complete, XIII*, Firenze 1985, pp. 251-55, especially pp. 254-55).



In his youth Longhi was briefly tempted by a version of extreme formalism which ostensibly ignored names and chronology. After a few years (as I argued elsewhere) he chose a very different approach, focusing on names and chronology.<sup>1</sup> But his passionate commitment to the materiality of the object, as well as to the possibility of using 'verbal equivalences' as an indispensable interpretive tool, never failed.

## 6.

My comments about *ekphrasis* may have recalled Michael Baxandall's reflections on the same issue. In this case, convergence does not imply independence: Baxandall was well aware of Longhi's work, which he repeatedly praised in strong terms – especially notable in a writer known for his laconic restraint. In his essay on "Jacopo Sadoletto's *Laocoon*" Baxandall wrote:

all criticism lives with co-presences, whether something like the Bible or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or just other criticism – as, for example, anyone intending to discourse on Piero della Francesca will have to do with the co-presence of Roberto Longhi.<sup>2</sup>

Here texts (the Bible, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) are compared to pictures (Piero's frescoes). But in the same essay, as elsewhere, Baxandall pointed out that a) *ekphrasis*, a verbal description (should we say 'verbal equivalent'?) is a necessary tool of art criticism; b) that «language is not very well equipped to offer a notation of a particular picture.» Baxandall mentioned two reasons for this inadequacy: a) language is «a generalizing tool»; b) it is «temporally linear»: true, «if a picture is simultaneously available in its entirety, *looking* at a picture is as temporally linear as language», but at a completely different – indeed, incompatible – pace.<sup>3</sup> (I would add a third reason: language is discrete, a picture is a *continuum*).<sup>4</sup> «What one offers in a description» Baxandall concluded, commenting upon *ekphrasis* provided by writers as distant as Libanius and Kenneth Clark, «is a representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture.»<sup>5</sup> Might we also add: a translation?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C. GINZBURG, *Datazione assoluta e datazione relativa: sul metodo di Longhi [1982]*, in ID., *Indagini su Piero. Il Battesimo, il ciclo di Arezzo, la Flagellazione, nuova edizione con l'aggiunta di quattro appendici*, Torino 1994, pp. 149-161.

<sup>2</sup> M. BAXANDALL, *Jacopo Sadoletto's Laocoon*, in *Words for Pictures. Seven Papers on Renaissance Art and Criticism*, New Haven and London 2003, pp. 98-116, especially p. 114. See also idem, *The Language of Art History*, «New Literary History», x (1979), pp. 453-65.

<sup>3</sup> M. BAXANDALL, *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven and London 1985, pp. 1-11, especially p. 3. See also my introduction to M. BAXANDALL, *Episodes. A Memorybook*, London 2010.

<sup>4</sup> C. GARBOLI, *Longhi scrittore*, p. 19: «È dunque necessario, per tradurre delle immagini, che le immagini cambino di segno, passando dalla fisicità del linguaggio figurativo a una rappresentazione mentale espressa in segni discreti».

<sup>5</sup> M. BAXANDALL, *Patterns of Intention*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> G. CONTINI, *Longhi prosatore*, p. 115: «il reale sarà addotto per metafora dei valori formali, e le apparenti 'trascrizioni' o 'tra-



I am trying to create a bridge between Baxandall and Longhi (Baxandall as a reader, and to a certain extent a translator, of Longhi). Retrospectively, I am tempted to read Longhi's *ekphraseis* as an experiment aiming to overcome the inadequacies of language emphasized by Baxandall. Let me recall a famous example – Longhi's description of one of Piero's frescoes in Arezzo: *The Battle between Constantinus and Maxentius* (FIG. 5), first published in his 1914 essay "Piero dei Franceschi e le origini della pittura veneziana" (Longhi was 24). Longhi was so fond of this page that he quoted it again twice: 1) in a series of notes, published only posthumously, delivered in the same year 1914 in Rome, to a class of secondary school students (later one of them became his wife: Lucia Lopresti, better known as Anna Banti, her pen name); 2) in his book on Piero della Francesca, 1927. In the latter instance, the self-quotation (put in quotation marks) was followed by a short, half-ironical, half-distantiating comment, which I will quote as well. Here is Longhi:

Slow, sure irrigation of the meadows of the painting. A huge expanse of horses and men, in the nearly flat low relief of color. Reiterated foreshortenings, flattened breasts, fragmented knees, rounded hooves, perfectly semicircular rear profiles. Round wells of form stagnate, blotchy barren hills compose a patchwork, shafts and lances leave their marks, in liquid ivory amber ebony, upon one side of a blue field of sky roofed with light-edged clouds; while, on the other is hung out to dry, softly, with no linear borders, the victory banner of the defeated general: a banner without which, I think, the Pesaro family would have had no banner, at least in art; lances, without which the lancers at Breda would still remain, I believe, unarmed – in painting!

And, O you incorruptible spheres of pale felt! stay poised upon the pewter of those helmets, until, light-dazzled, you become, upon the blue breast of heaven, medals – awarded for coloristic valor!

In such words did I once attempt to express, even if in an overly romantic style, the effect made by this great painting.<sup>1</sup>

An exercise in purely formal description? Yes and no. The subtext and allusions of Longhi's dense page reveal the perspective from which he approached Piero della Francesca's fresco – taking the word "perspective" in a metaphorical but also literal sense, since the description obviously echoes Cézanne's famous remark in his letter to Emile Bernard, dated April 15, 1904: "To treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything in proper perspective so that each side of an object

duzioni', che rapiranno il fedele di Longhi, saranno un adempimento storico dell'esperienza figurativa pura, una sorta, si dirà più tardi in critica letteraria, e ad altro effetto, di correlativo oggettivo» (an allusion to T. S. Eliot).

<sup>1</sup> R. LONGHI, *Piero della Francesca*, translation and preface by D. Tabbat, with an introduction by K. Christiansen, New York 2012, p. 40. See also ID., *Breve ma veridica storia della pittura italiana*, Firenze 1980, introd. A. Banti, p. 128: «se voi stessi ormai sapete riposare su queste praterie di tinte varie come le stagioni potrete comprendere la Sconfitta di Massenzio seguendone la equivalenza verbale ch'io ho tentato altrove e che ripeto qui per voi». (Frontespizio ms.: Sulla trama delle lezioni impartite nei licei Tasso e Visconti di Roma, 1913-14. Scritta dai 15 di giugno ai 4 di luglio nel 1914, a Roma); *Piero della Francesca*, p. 38.



or a plane is directed towards a central point".<sup>1</sup> The allusions to Titian's altarpiece for the Pesaro family (FIG. 6) and Velázquez's *The Surrender of Breda* (FIG. 7) point at a historical trajectory which from Piero della Francesca to Giovanni Bellini (only indirectly evoked) ends with Cézanne. Equally important is the very opening of the description, marked by a series of nominal phrases: a linguistic device whose main feature, as Emile Benveniste argued in a famous essay, is the absence of temporal connotations inevitably associated to verbs.<sup>2</sup> Nominal phrases could work (I would argue) as a compromise between the linearity of verbal language and the non-linearity of pictures.

## 7.

The sentence I started from – «titani cinerei e nebbiosi», «ash-grey and foggy titans» – can be also reworked as a nominal phrase. Moreover, it is – like Longhi's *ekphrasis* of Piero della Francesca's *Battle* – densely metaphorical: 'ash-grey', 'foggy'. But this metaphor had a long history, which went back to another remarkable Ferrarese painter: Carlo Bononi (born in 1569, he died in 1632). In commenting upon the work of Bastianino, a master from the previous generation, Bononi wrote: «[egli] annebbiò con suo gusto particolare quanto mai dipinse, e pretese così di unire i colori» – a passage I would translate as follows: «he obfuscated [*literally, he covered with fog*] all his paintings, following his particular taste, and aiming to blend the colours» – i. e. to avoid sharp transitions between colours.<sup>3</sup>

Here we have a painter talking about another painter, using a painterly jargon – the idiom of the workshop, a linguistic domain which we know only partially, sometimes indirectly. Later erudites from Ferrara developed Bononi's words, using similar metaphors to describe Bastianino's work:

[he] covered his paintings with a light veil, to obfuscate it»; «[he] used to cover his works with a foggy veil that obfuscates them, making them easily recognizable (*un velo nebbioso che lo adombra e lo fa facilmente riconoscere*).<sup>4</sup>

We are back to the metaphor Longhi used to define Bastianino's peculiar art: «titani cinerei e nebbiosi», «ash-gray and foggy titans». As we have seen, Longhi's *ekphrastic* language, sometimes dismissed

<sup>1</sup> P. CÉZANNE, «Traitez la nature par le cylindre, la sphère, le cône, le tout mis en perspective, que chaque côté d'un objet, d'un plan, se dirige vers un point central» (letter to Emile Bernard, April 15, 1904).

<sup>2</sup> E. BENVENISTE, *La phrase nominale* [1950], in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 1, pp. 151-167, especially p. 159: «Dans la phrase nominale, l'élément assertif, étant nominal, n'est pas susceptible des déterminations que la forme verbale porte: modalités temporelles, personnelles, etc. L'assertion aura ce caractère propre d'être intemporelle, impersonnelle, non modale, bref de porter sur un terme réduit à son seul contenu sémantique.»

<sup>3</sup> C. CITADELLA, *Catalogo*, II, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> See G. BARUFFALDI, *Vite de' pittori e scultori ferraresi*, a cura di G. Boschini, Ferrara 1844-46, I, p. 446; C. LADERCHI, *La pittura ferrarese. Memorie*, Ferrara 1856, p. 119. Since Laderchi (who acknowledged his debt towards Baruffaldi: see vol. III, pp. 139-140) quoted a slightly more extended text, he must have had access to some evidence left by Bononi – possibly mediated by another erudite, Scalabrini, who was Bononi's relative.



as a personal aesthetic response to paintings, was in fact rooted, more often than not, in a long tradition which went back to local erudites and ultimately to the artists themselves.<sup>1</sup>

## 8.

It is helpful to remind in this context the Greek etymology of the word "metaphor" (*meta-phorein*), which is literally replicated, in Latin, by the word *translatio* – hence, translation. In order to translate a pictorial style into words – into verbal equivalents – one has to rely upon metaphors (mostly synaesthetic).<sup>2</sup> But can metaphors have a referential dimension? This looks like a paradoxical question, in the light of the well known attack launched, especially in xviii century France, against metaphor: a rhetorical trope which the Classicist taste rejected as irrational. But as Francesco Orlando, the Italian critic, pointed out, metaphors can also be the starting point of a mental experiment ('as if').<sup>3</sup> This is why, I would argue, Longhi relied upon literature (as Cesare Garboli remarked) "as if it were a science".<sup>4</sup> Two 'as ifs' reinforcing each other: metaphors (as well as, in a more general sense, literature) have a cognitive power, in so far as they build up a model of reality – including realities still to be experienced. (A model – *not* a mirror image). Pouncey's brilliant attribution of the Christ Church drawing to Bastianino shows the experimental, predictive quality of Longhi's ekphrastic metaphor.<sup>5</sup>

This is, in many ways, an extreme case: but it throws some light on a widespread (and still insufficiently explored) phenomenon, i. e. the manifold role played by words in connoisseurship – as well

<sup>1</sup> E. PETRACONE, *Luca Giordano*, p. 8: «Di un bel grigio in un quadro di Mattia Preti, il Longhi, ch'è un fine intenditore d'arte ed è appunto uno dei duci della scuola nuovissima [della critica figurativa pura], di questo grigio egli dice ch'è una massa di 'cenere fusa'. È bellissimo ed efficace, ma è appunto un tradurre un puro valore pittorico, una intuizione puramente di colore, in una immagine di fondo letterario; è un presentare e rappresentare quella data forma in una forma che non è sua, è un chiarificamento, una intuizione di una intuizione; in fondo non altro che l'espressione di una emozione personale, che sta a noi accettare o rifiutare o modificare, secondo che essa trovi o no rispondenza nella nostra sensibilità». But see C. MONTAGNANI, *Glossario longhiano. Saggio sulla lingua e lo stile di Roberto Longhi*, Pisa 1989 (there is no entry for 'nebbiosi').

<sup>2</sup> M. L. Catoni has pointed to me the relevance of a passage in an *Oxyrynchus papyrus* opposing soft and hard performance of the same dance in a Greek comedy: see her comment in *La comunicazione non verbale*, pp. 180-181.

<sup>3</sup> F. ORLANDO, *Illuminismo, barocco, e retorica freudiana*, Torino 1997 (1st ed. 1982), ch. III: «Che la metafora può non essere la regina delle figure», pp. 65-127, especially pp. 78-79.

<sup>4</sup> C. GARBOLI, *Longhi lettore*, in *Pianura proibita*, p. 13. «[Longhi] fa appello alla letteratura come se la letteratura fosse una scienza».

<sup>5</sup> The predictive potential of metaphors in scientific models is stressed by M. B. HESSE, *The Explanatory Function of Metaphor*, in EAD., *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science*, Brighton 1980, pp. 111-124, especially pp. 122-23. An earlier version of this paper was delivered in 1964: see EAD., *Models and Analogies in Science*, Notre Dame, Indiana 1970, pp. 157-177.



as, on a more general level, in visual appreciation. As Michael Baxandall remarked in his book on Quattrocento Italian painting, "the only practical way of publicly making discriminations is verbally".<sup>1</sup> Words mediate between painting and experience: visual experiences, social experiences of all kind. We speak about paintings; they resist to words; we insist, we speak again. *Parler peinture*, as the French say, is a never ending activity.

#### ABSTRACT

The paper deals with a case study in connoisseurship: Philip Pouncey's attribution to Bastianino, the 16th century Ferrarese painter, of a drawing preserved at Christ Church, Oxford. What made this attribution possible? The reconstruction of a trajectory involving (in reverse chronological order) Philip and Myril Pouncey, Roberto Longhi, and Carlo Bononi, the Ferrarese painter (1569-1632) paves the way to a reflection on the role played by ekphrasis (verbal description) in connoisseurship. A special attention is devoted to Roberto Longhi's "verbal equivalences" (*equivalenze verbali*) and their theoretical implications.

KEYWORDS: Bastianino, Carlo Bononi, Philip Pouncey, Roberto Longhi, Benedetto Croce, Giovanni Gentile, Cesare Garboli, Michael Baxandall, ekphrasis, connoisseurship, metaphors, nominal sentences.

<sup>1</sup> M. BAXANDALL, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy. A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford 1972, p. 36.

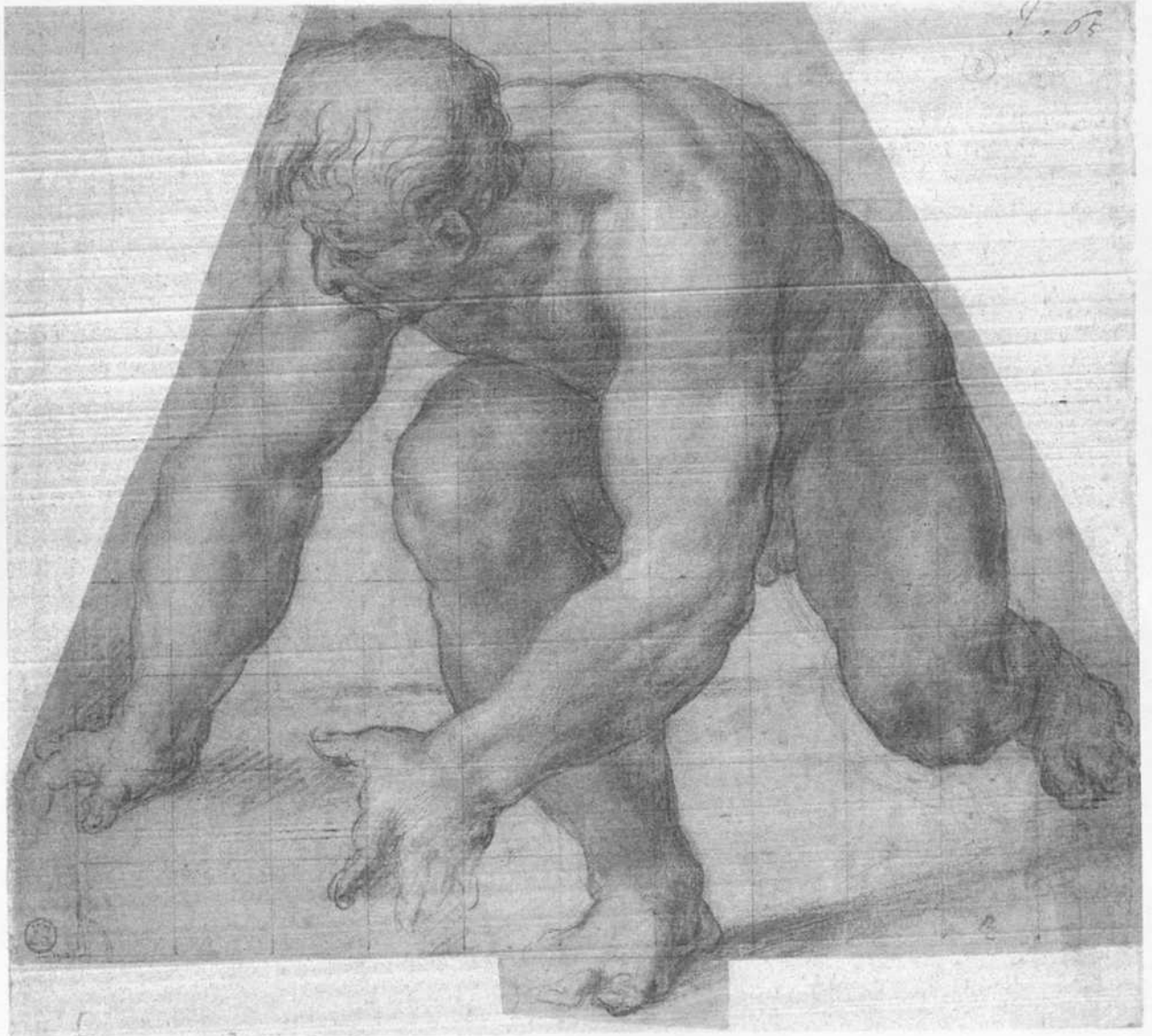


FIG. 1 Bastianino, *Study of a Nude Man*, Oxford, Christ Church Gallery.





FIG. 2. Bastianino, *Last Judgement*, Ferrara, San Cristoforo alla Certosa.



FIG. 3. Bastianino, *Last Judgement*, detail.

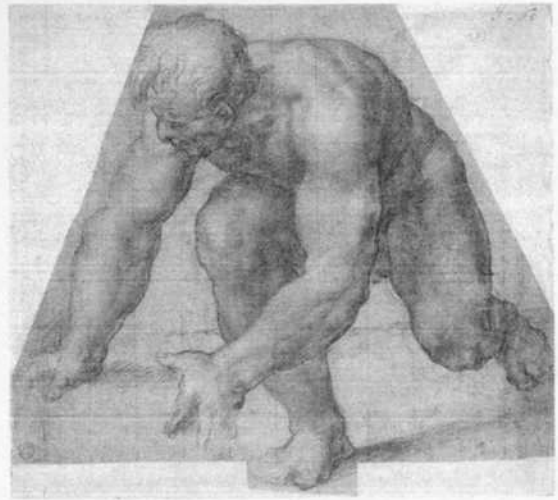




FIG. 4. Lorenzo Costa and Gianfrancesco Maineri, *Virgin and Child with Saints*, London, National Gallery.



FIG. 5 Piero della Francesca, *The Battle between Constantinus and Maxentius*, Arezzo, Basilica di san Francesco.



FIG. 6. Titian, *Pesaro Altarpiece*, Venezia, Santa Maria dei Frari.



FIG. 7. Diego Velázquez, *The Surrender of Breda*, Madrid, Museo del Prado.