The Artful Hermit. Cardinal Odoardo Farnese's religious patronage and the spiritual meaning of landscape around 1600
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CONCLUSION

The recently discovered original lease-contract of the Camerino degli Eremiti, signed and dated 9 January 1611, furnished new and important information on the rooms’ exact location and function. From this point a new discussion of the iconography and function of Giovanni Lanfranco’s paintings could start. Investigating artistic, spatial, religious and cultural contexts of this object has enabled a better understanding of the role that landscape painting played in this particular case. Also more general insights touching upon patronage, iconography and the allocation of meaning by different beholders can be drawn from this case-study. The conclusion should now be drawn that the art of landscape around 1600 does not fit into modern iconographic categories based on unambiguous and singular meaning, but was an expression of the encyclopaedic world-view of the early modern period which around 1600 became dominated by the new religious orientation of the Catholic Reformation. Baroque painting, including landscapes, transmitted several meanings at the same time to a variety of beholders. The significance of these artworks was not primarily grounded in aesthetic beauty, but in functional, socio-political and religious contexts.

Apart from clarifying the legal situation of the Camerino—owned by the confraternity of the Orazione e Morte, and rented by cardinal Odoardo Farnese—the contract documented the relations between the two parties concerned. Farnese was protector of the brotherhood, involved in its government and acting as their representative with the pope. He was also expected to participate in their devotional gatherings and liturgical celebrations. In this context, the Camerino degli Eremiti with its two windows opening onto the church and oratory of the sodality served as a place from which the duties of the cardinal protector could be exerted: from this room Odoardo was supposed to attend at the celebration of the Quarant’Ore, the forty hours prayer, the main obligation of the brothers; at the same time he was expected to ‘supervise’ the confraternities’ actions as papal representative. Thus, the Camerino degli Eremiti architecturally expressed for both Farnese and the brotherhood the particulars of ecclesiastical patronage.

The paintings and frescoes inside the Camerino served to point out the obligations and duties of religious patronage on two different levels. In this case, Farnese was the intended viewer and thus the ‘public’ assigning meaning to these works of art. The first level of meaning was constituted by the Eucharistic symbolism conjured up by Lanfranco’s Christ served by angels in the centre of the ceiling, and by the various scenes of saints either receiving bread or the Host from heavenly messengers. This level painted out Farnese’s spiritual obligation of
participating in the Quarrant’Ore, the forty hours Adoration of the Host that was staged monthly by the brotherhood. On a second level, each of these solitary saints also stood for a religious order, church or brotherhood, or a country represented by Farnese at the papal court: the Camaldolese and Carthusian Orders, the abbey of Grottaferrata, the church of Saint Eustace and the country of Portugal. Farnese was involved with all of these institutions, and archival sources corroborate the suggestion of the Camerino’s decoration that Farnese took his ecclesiastical obligations utterly serious. In other words, the subjects of these paintings utilised several layers of iconographic meaning to reflect his ample network as cardinal protector and the loyalty that Farnese observed towards his clients. The intended public that understood these allusions consisted of the members of the higher ecclesiastic circles, who might have been invited by Farnese into the semi-private context of the Palazzetto.

That Lanfranco’s canvases and frescoes in the Camerino were devised to form a detailed reflection of the various networks of ecclesiastical patronage was the result of recent changes in the Catholic church, especially those touching upon the cardinal protector. Clement VIII Aldobrandini decided in 1592 to do away with this position, but in 1605 Paul V Borghese initiated the reversal of that process, resulting in a political strengthening of the protectorate. Odoardo Farnese’s activities as protector were the direct result of these changes. His increasing involvement with the brotherhood of the Orazione e Morte and other institutions was the outcome of a growing awareness of the duties these obligations brought with them. Odoardo’s artistic patronage resulted from this development as well. Donations of works of art commissioned from Carracci, Lanfranco, Domenichino, and Girolamo Rainaldi, among others – to these respective institutions in all cases served to cement and maintain the relations between patron and client.

This functional attitude towards art also applied to the choice of iconography for the works exchanged in the context of patronage; in each case, the meaning of these artistic products stressed the mutual interests of both parties. Again, this was not done by singling out one particular iconographic significance, but by employing several meanings at the same time. On one level, the works of art visualised the political and organisational bonds by the choice of particular saints; on another level, they invariably stressed the religious aims of both parties. Around 1600, the latter aspect was determined by the confessionalisation as part of the Catholic Reformation. From this can be concluded that the Council of Trent and the Catholic Reformation not only influenced the choice and depiction of iconographic themes, as has been suggested in numerous studies on the influence of the decrees and the manuals written in the latter half of the sixteenth
century, but Tridentine recommendations also altered the sociological and historical context in which these works of art functioned. In other words, artistic patronage of early modern cardinals resulted in works of art in which each and every detail can be explained in the light of the patron-client relationship within larger social and ecclesiastical networks. Iconographic readings can for this reason not stop on one level, that of conspicuous consumption and the prestige of the patron, but should investigate the social, religious and historical contexts as well.

Also the spatial context controlled and determined significances, and this applies in particular to the genre of landscape painting. The Palazzetto Farnese was not, as has been supposed in earlier studies, a more or less coincidental addition to the Palazzo Farnese, but constituted a carefully planned new wing allowing access from the palace proper to the garden on the bank of the Tiber. It was a suburban villa inspired by classical examples. Up to the smallest architectural details, Pliny the Younger's description of his villa in Laurentum, especially his account of the *diaeta* or extended study, were followed in the design of the Palazzetto. This building offered cardinal Odoardo a place to study the arts, literature and learning, and enjoy the garden and its encyclopaedic natural beauties. The secret garden behind the Palazzetto thus extended the *studiolo*-function of the interior: it constituted an outdoor *museum* of exotic plants and flowers, to be studied along the lines of contemporary learning. This meant that each plant, just as each painting in the Palazzetto itself, harboured multiple meanings, ranging from literal and mythological significances to botanical, medical and cosmological knowledge.

The collection of landscape paintings in the Palazzetto generated particular meanings to constitute a coherent iconographic programme on this encyclopaedic level. It is into this broader context, which should be considered common knowledge to the early-Seicento beholder, that the religious thematic of the Camerino degli Eremiti fitted. Each of the four *camerini* was dedicated to a cosmological theme, either of the times of the day, or the seasons, by means of its pictorial decoration. Lanfranco's Camerino degli Eremiti prolonged the concept of this flight of rooms in stylistic sense - the use of canvases in a wooden coffered ceiling - and in an iconographic sense as well, constituting the third, religious, level of meaning. Within the Palazzetto representing cosmological learning in a visual form, the Camerino degli Eremiti presented the visible world as a reflection of its Creator. The landscapes were images of the presence of God on earth, and functioned as ladder to Heaven.

Within this context, the saints acquired yet a third level of meaning apart from their reference to Farnese's ecclesiastical patronage and the devotion of the *Quaresim'Or*.
figures were not mere additions to Lanfranco's compositions or excuses for the depiction of landscape; they were an integral part of the composition and bearers of a particular meaning in relation to it. In this case, they functioned as 'indices' pointing out the direction in which the meaning of the landscapes should be sought. In the early seventeenth century, hermits and anchorites were no mere remnants from a distant past, but living examples of spiritual perfection. In the public opinion, these saints were able to be in this world in a bodily sense, while at the same time dwelling in Heaven with their souls. On this level of meaning, recognisable for the general seventeenth-century beholder, the saints in Lanfranco's paintings were chosen with regard to their devotional exemplarity.

The third and last level of meaning of the Camerino's decoration related the 'secular' purpose of the Palazzetto with the 'devotional' function of the room as intended by the brotherhood of the Orazione e Morte. Pagan and religious iconography did not dialectically exclude each other, but were perceived by the seventeenth-century public as complementary. One could transcend from the classical and worldly knowledge to divine revelation by studying Creation in all its variety. Instead of selecting one, the early modern beholder would add up these various messages to form an encyclopaedic iconographic compendium that enclosed the knowledge of this world on various levels.

The multiplicity of meanings in Lanfranco's paintings necessitates a redefinition of the relation between background and staffage in the context of anchorite landscapes. The traditional interpretation that in seventeenth century landscape painting the staffage was additional to the natural setting needs to be reversed. It is not the landscape that determined the significance; any painted view of landscape could support a number of different meanings – from an allusion to villeggiatura, botanical interests, or the place of religious narrative. These possibilities were channelled by the staffage. The range of meanings was moreover dependent upon the spatial context and historical circumstances. In a villa, the secular and antique meaning would come to the fore, whereas in a liturgical or religious setting, the connotation of Creation would be more obvious to the beholder. By adding a hermit or anchorite to the landscape, the painter would provide the beholder with the clue to its meaning.

Moreover, during the first decades of the Catholic Reformation, the religious interpretation of the visible world became dominant over all other possible meanings as a result of the pedagogic actions of various orders; and this was especially the case when landscape paintings were applied to churches or in palaces of ecclesiastical princes. And it was precisely in
these two contexts that the art of landscape began to flourish from the 1570s onwards. For the early modern period in Italy, it should thus be concluded that depictions of nature in art carried multiple significances, but the religious connotations constituted the dominant way of reading and interpreting the visible world.

When over the course of time the figures diminished in size or disappeared altogether from the composition, this does not mean that the religious meaning of landscape was annulled. To the contrary: the devotional significance of painted and real landscapes had become so all-pervading that the help of staffage to point this out to the beholder was no longer necessary. Without the help of indices in the form of anchorite staffage, the seventeenth-century beholder was able to interpret the world around him as the second Book of Revelation, the expression of God's creation. Seen in this light, the absence of religious figures in northern landscape-paintings is not a sign that a secular gaze on the world had evolved: it was merely the exemplary nature of saints that had lost its importance in the Protestant religion. The religious message of the painted landscape was no different north and south of the Alps: it both was part of an encyclopaedic gaze, in which plural meanings existed alongside each other.

The first and second premises of Goethe's theory of landscape-painting, and thus the modernist view on the genre - the painter's influence on the development of the genre and its meaninglessness - can be dismissed as a result of this study. Goethe's third premise that hermits and background constituted remnants of traditional signifiers and setting respectively for a given story, has also been proven incorrect in two ways. First, figures of solitary saints did not provide a narrative element, but handed the observer the key to understand the meaning of the natural setting. Second, this relation of signifier and setting was never reversed, but remained the same even when the figure had been reduced to, in modern eyes, compositional insignificance. Reduction in size had no effect on meaning but signalled the domination of the religious over other significances. Thus, interpretations of painted landscape around 1600 as an exclusive sign of the nascent modern gaze can thus be dismissed, and the continuing superiority of the religious world-view over the pagan significance, without annulling these levels, should be accepted. The case-study of the Palazzetto Farnese and Camerino degli Eremiti has enabled a view beyond the epistemology of Goethe's time onto the ideas of the seventeenth century, and provided a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of meanings, all part of the Christian concept of Creation, that nature carried for the early modern beholder.