

VISUAL CULTURE IN EARLY MODERNITY



Hybridity in Early Modern Art



Edited by Ashley Elston and Madeline Rislow

Hybridity in Early Modern Art

This collection of essays explores hybridity in early modern art through two primary lenses: hybrid media and hybrid time.

The varied approaches in the volume to theories of hybridity reflect the increased presence in art historical scholarship of interdisciplinary frameworks that extend art historical inquiry beyond the single time or material. The essays engage with what happens when an object is considered beyond the point of origin or as a legend of information, the implications of the juxtaposition of disparate media, how the meaning of an object alters over time, and what the conspicuous use of out-of-date styles means for the patron, artist, and/or viewer. Essays examine both canonical and lesser-known works produced by European artists in Italy, northern Europe, and colonial Peru, ca. 1400–1600.

This book will be of interest to art historians, visual culture historians, and early modern historians.

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Cover Image: Carlo Crivelli, *St. Lucy* (detail), ca. 1479–80, tempera on panel with imitation gems and pastiglia, The National Gallery, London (Photo: © The National Gallery, London).

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Ashley Elston and
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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xi

Introduction: Hybridity in Early Modern Art	1
ASHLEY ELSTON AND MADELINE RISLOW	

PART I	
Hybrid Media	9

1 Connecting Human and Divine: Carlo Crivelli's Hybrid Media	11
AMANDA HILLIAM	
2 Collaboration and Dissonance in Siena's Bichi Altarpiece	28
ASHLEY ELSTON	
3 Emblems and Hybridity in a Southern German Epitaph Sculpture	45
CATHARINE INGERSOLL	
4 Hybridity, Media, and Source Material in Visual Representations of the Wild Woman: Transitions from Hand-Copied Manuscripts to Hand-Press Prints	64
MICHELLE MOSELEY-CHRISTIAN	

5 A Material Legacy: Hybridity and French Manuscript Illumination from the late Fifteenth through Sixteenth Centuries	80
LARISA GROLLEMOND	

PART II	
Hybrid Time	99

6 Visual Hybridity in the Sancta Sanctorum (Rome): Reframing the Middle Ages	101
KIRSTIN NOREEN	

vi *Contents*

7	(Re-)Encasing the Ashes of St. John the Baptist in Genoa Across Time	119
	MADELINE RISLOW	
8	Recycling, Renaissance Style: Hybridity and Giorgio Vasari's Pieve Altarpieces	137
	SALLY J. CORNELISON	
9	Style and Meaning beyond Europe: Bernardo Bitti and Mannerism	152
	CHRISTA IRWIN	
	<i>Index</i>	171

Figures

1.1	Carlo Crivelli, <i>The Annunciation with St. Emidius</i> , 1486, tempera transferred from panel onto canvas, The National Gallery, London.	13
1.2	Carlo Crivelli, <i>St. Peter</i> , 1476, tempera on panel with imitation gems, pastiglia, and sculptural additions, The National Gallery, London.	15
1.3	Carlo Crivelli, <i>The Virgin and Child</i> , 1476, tempera on panel with imitation gems, pastiglia, and sculptural additions, The National Gallery, London.	16
1.4	Carlo Crivelli, <i>St. Lucy</i> (detail), ca. 1479–80, tempera on panel with imitation gems and pastiglia, The National Gallery, London.	17
1.5	Carlo Crivelli, <i>St. Michael</i> , ca. 1479–80, tempera on panel with imitation gems and pastiglia, The National Gallery, London.	18
1.6	Carlo Crivelli, <i>Altarpiece with Sts. Peter, Dominic, Peter Martyr, Venantius and the Virgin and Child</i> , 1482, tempera on panel with gems, pastiglia, and sculptural additions, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.	22
2.1	Bichi Chapel, Sant’Agostino, Siena.	30
2.2	Francesco di Giorgio Martini, <i>St. Christopher</i> , ca. 1490, polychrome wood, Musée du Louvre, Paris.	32
2.3	Luca Signorelli, <i>Figures in a Landscape: Two Nude Figures</i> , ca. 1490, oil on panel, Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio.	32
2.4	Luca Signorelli, <i>Figures in a Landscape: Man, Woman, Child</i> , ca. 1490, oil on panel, Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio.	32
2.5	Luca Signorelli, <i>Sts. Eustochia, Mary Magdalene, and Jerome</i> , ca. 1490, oil on panel, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.	33
2.6	Luca Signorelli, <i>Sts. Anthony of Padua, Augustine, and Catherine of Alexandria</i> , ca. 1490, oil on panel, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.	33
3.1	<i>Epitaph of Anna Lucretia von Leonsberg</i> , 1556, sandstone, Regensburg Cathedral Cloister, Regensburg, condition after 2019 restoration.	45
3.2	<i>Wise head, close mouth</i> (Prudens, magis quàm loquax), 1550, woodcut, from Andrea Alciato, <i>Emblemata</i> (Lyon: Macé Bonhomme for Guillaume Rouille, 1550), p. 25, University of Glasgow Library, SMAdd265.	48
3.3	<i>Epitaph of Anna Lucretia von Leonsberg</i> (detail), 1556, sandstone, Regensburg Cathedral Cloister, Regensburg, condition before 2019 restoration.	51
3.4	Giulio Bonasone, <i>Moderation completes wisdom, progress completes eloquence, the figure here completes happiness</i> (Sapientiam modestia,	

- Progressio eloquentiam, Felicitatem haec perficit), 1555, engraving, from Achille Bocchi, *Symbolicae quaestiones* (Bologna: Academia Bocchiana, 1555), p. 210, Staatliche Bibliothek Passau, S nv/Yge 113, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11347818-2. 52
- 3.5 *Immortality won through literary pursuits* (Ex literarum studiis immortalitatem acquiri), 1550, woodcut, from Andrea Alciato, *Emblemata* (Lyon: Macé Bonhomme for Guillaume Rouille, 1550), p. 144, University of Glasgow Library, SMAdd265. 54
- 3.6 Giulio Bonasone, *No attack can weaken a valorous soul* (Quateferi nullo impetumentem bonam), 1555, engraving, from Achille Bocchi, *Symbolicae quaestiones* (Bologna: Academia Bocchiana, 1555), p. 200, Staatliche Bibliothek Passau, S nv/Yge 113, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11347818-2. 56
- 4.1 “Death of a Centaur,” from the *Hours of Charles d’Angoulême* (BNF Latin 1173 f41v), ca. 1475–1500, painted paper and painted engraved printed paper, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. 65
- 4.2 Wirnt van Gravenberg, *Wigalois* (LTK 537 f68v), 1372, Leiden University Special Collections, Leiden. 66
- 4.3 Master ES, *Playing Card Wild Woman with a Unicorn*, fifteenth century, engraving, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 67
- 4.4 “Jealousy Misdirects the Two Knights, Heart and Desire,” from *The Book of the Love-Smitten Heart* (Ms. Français 1509 f7v), ca. 1400, illuminated parchment, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. 70
- 4.5 Master IAM of Zwolle, *Battle of Two Men and a Centaur*, ca. 1470–90, engraving, Boston Museum of Fine Arts. 74
- 4.6 Master of the Playing Cards, *Nine of Wild Men*, ca. 1450, engraving, The Albertina Museum, Vienna. 75
- 5.1 Attributed to Jean Perréal, “Portraits of King Charles VIII and Queen Anne of Brittany” with fragments of a book of hours attached to sliding boards (Ms. lat. 1190), ca. 1492–5, tempera on wood panel and parchment, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. 84
- 5.2 Attributed to the Master of Martainville 183, “The Annunciation” from a book of hours (The British Library, Harley Ms. 2936, fols. 14v–15), ca. 1500–10, tempera on parchment, The British Library, London. 85
- 5.3 Master of the Rosenwald Hours, “The Annunciation” from *The Rosenwald Hours* (Library of Congress Ms. 52/Rosenwald Collection Ms. 10), 1524, tempera on parchment, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. 87
- 5.4 Jean Bourdichon, “Portrait of Julius Caesar” from the *Vies des Douze Césars* (Ms. nouv. acq. fr. 28800, fol. 1v), ca. 1515–20, tempera on parchment, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. 88
- 5.5 Master of the Getty Epistles, “King Henri II Touching for Scrofula” from a book of hours, called the *Hours of Dinteville/Henri II* (Ms. lat. 1429, fol. 107v), ca. 1543–7, tempera on parchment, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. 90
- 5.6 “Louis XI surrounded by the Knights of the Order of St. Michael” from the *Statuts de l’ordre de Saint-Michel* (Ms. fr. 14361, fol. 7v), ca. 1520, tempera on parchment, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. 92

5.7	Attributed to Nicholas Hilliard, “Anne, Duc de Joyeuse” (pasted-in locket portrait) in the <i>Hours of Catherine de Médicis</i> (Ms. nouv. acq. lat. 82, fol. 56), 1576–9, tempera on parchment, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.	93
6.1	<i>Pope Nicholas III flanked by St. Peter and St. Paul; Christ Enthroned</i> , 1277–80, fresco, east wall, Sancta Sanctorum, Rome.	101
6.2	<i>Martyrdom of St. Peter; Martyrdom of St. Paul</i> , 1278–80, fresco, south wall, Sancta Sanctorum, Rome.	102
6.3	<i>Stoning of St. Stephen; Martyrdom of St. Lawrence</i> , 1278–80, fresco, west wall, Sancta Sanctorum, Rome.	102
6.4	<i>Decapitation of St. Agnes; Miracle of St. Nicholas</i> , 1278–80, fresco, north wall, Sancta Sanctorum, Rome.	103
6.5	West wall, Sancta Sanctorum, Rome.	104
6.6	<i>Stoning of St. Stephen</i> , 1278–80, fresco, west wall, Sancta Sanctorum, Rome.	105
7.1	Attributed to French and German metalsmiths, Reliquary for the ashes of St. John the Baptist (<i>Arca Barbarossa</i>), donated 1178, quartz, silver, niello, wood, and damask, Museo del Tesoro, San Lorenzo, Genoa.	120
7.2	Unknown, Reliquary for the ashes of St. John the Baptist, early fourteenth century, marble, Museo del Tesoro, San Lorenzo, Genoa.	120
7.3	Teramo Danieli and Simone Caldera, Processional reliquary for the ashes of St. John the Baptist, 1438–45, embossed silver, gilt, enamels, copper, and wood, Museo del Tesoro, San Lorenzo, Genoa.	121
7.4	Teramo Danieli and Simone Caldera, Processional reliquary for the ashes of St. John the Baptist (detail), 1438–45, embossed silver, gilt, enamels, copper, and wood, Museo del Tesoro, San Lorenzo, Genoa.	125
7.5	Domenico Gagini with Elia Gagini, Chapel of St. John the Baptist, 1448–65, marble, San Lorenzo, Genoa.	126
7.6	Print showing the processional reliquary of St. John the Baptist, frontispiece in Agostino Calcagnino’s <i>Historia del glorioso precursore di N.S.S. Giovanni Battista</i> (Genoa: Gio. Maria Farroni, 1648) (Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (92-B27448)).	128
7.7	Unknown, St. John the Baptist in the desert <i>soprapporta</i> , second half of fifteenth century, marble, Vico delle Mele 6, Genoa.	130
8.1	Giorgio Vasari, <i>The Calling of Peter and Andrew</i> , 1551–3, oil on panel, Badia of Sts. Flora and Lucilla, Arezzo.	137
8.2	Giorgio Vasari, high altar, 1560–4, Badia of Sts. Flora and Lucilla, Arezzo.	138
8.3	Giorgio Vasari, <i>The Coronation of the Virgin</i> (Albergotti Altarpiece), 1566–70, oil on panel, Badia of Sts. Flora and Lucilla, Arezzo.	139
8.4	Giorgio Vasari, <i>Portrait of Vasari as a Saint and St. Mary Magdalen</i> , 1560–4, oil on panel, Badia of Sts. Flora and Lucilla, Arezzo.	141
8.5	Pietro Lorenzetti, <i>Pieve Polyptych</i> , 1320–4, tempera on panel, Pieve, Arezzo.	142
9.1	Bernardo Bitti, <i>Madonna of the Candles</i> , 1575–80, oil on canvas, Church of San Pedro, Lima, Peru.	152
9.2	Bernardo Bitti, <i>Coronation of the Virgin</i> , 1575, oil on canvas, Church of San Pedro, Lima, Peru.	154

x *Figures*

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 9.3 | Bernardo Bitti, <i>Virgin of the Immaculate Conception</i> , 1592–8, oil on canvas, Monastery of the Mercedarians, Cuzco, Peru. | 157 |
| 9.4 | Bernardo Bitti, <i>Baptism of Christ</i> , 1590s, oil on canvas, Church of San Juan Bautista, Juli, Peru. | 159 |
| 9.5 | Jacopino del Conte, <i>Baptism of Christ</i> , 1541, oil on canvas, Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato, Rome. | 160 |
| 9.6 | <i>Quero</i> , Peru, fifteenth century to sixteenth century, wood, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. | 162 |

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Introduction

Hybridity in Early Modern Art

Ashley Elston and Madeline Rislow

Art historians operate at intersections, the meeting of form and context, artist and patron, viewer and object. Particularly with the emphasis on social history pursued by so many scholars in the last 50 years, the weaving together of various aspects of the conditions that impact visual art (and vice versa) has become part and parcel of the field. And yet, for all of the productive attention paid to the complex ways in which art and society interact, this framework for the study of early modern art tends to isolate works of art through categorization, placing them within a fairly limited number of subsets based primarily on medium and chronology.¹ A cursory examination of the textbooks widely used to present Italian and Northern Renaissance art to undergraduate university courses reveals that such categorization is also the guiding organizational principle to teach this period with a focus on development over time (Trecento, Quattrocento, Cinquecento for Italy; International, Fifteenth century, Sixteenth century for Northern Europe), overlaid then with consideration of media (divided into painting, sculpture, architecture) and place (Florence, Siena, Venice, Rome in Italy; the Rhineland, Flanders, Ghent, France in Northern Europe, etc.).²

Without doubt, such structure can work well in teaching and provides a digestible format for students who benefit from the clarity of approaching a massive amount of information through the prism of well-defined groups of objects.³ However, the tendency continues beyond the classroom, with the specialization of the field often reinforcing a hyper-focus on *a* medium, *an* artist, *a* city, *a* decade.⁴ This volume is intended to extend the challenge to this ingrained taxonomic framework and complicate the traditional canonical narrative by posing new questions of well-known works of art and artists, and by bringing forward examples of visual culture that often fall into the interstices between established categories for early modern art.

As an opportunity for rethinking the organizational inclinations of the field, we turn to the notion of the hybrid (a mixture, something that exhibits heterogeneous sources, a composition of diverse elements) as it entwines with the study of visual art, both as iconography and as a more abstract concept. Indeed, the most basic idea of the term “Renaissance” (subjected, reasonably, to extended serious debate), as a period in which Western European cultures sought to revive that of ancient Greece and Rome, relies on cultural hybridity.⁵ The body of scholarship surrounding the fraught “hybrid” term fittingly crosses disciplinary lines, and while it is not within the scope or aim of this volume to compile its substantial bibliography, its place in modern critical theory must be acknowledged.⁶ The flexibility and ubiquity of hybrid structures as well as the spread of interest in the concept through multiple academic fields contributes to a situation that in many ways aligns with Robert Young’s 1995 assertion that “there is no single, or correct, concept of hybridity: it changes as it repeats, but it also repeats as it changes.”⁷ With roots in biology and linguistics, the term is perhaps now most closely associated

with postcolonial and subaltern studies of the 1990s, in particular with Homi Bhabha's critical work challenging the definition of cultural identity—not static but constantly evolving as past and present interact—and hybridity has since become a frequent point of discussion and contention throughout the humanist academy.⁸ Cogent critiques of hybridity, including those that interrogate an underlying schema of an essentialist cultural “purity” and expose the potential inadequacy of the term to encompass nuanced complexity, address problematic aspects of the theoretical discourse.⁹

Since Bhabha's situation of the term within postcolonial studies, the term “hybrid” has been both implicitly and explicitly associated with sites and structures of power. In Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn's words, hybridity “is produced and enacted when particular kinds of things and practices are brought together that in some way challenge presumptive norms.”¹⁰ The essays gathered here reveal instances of hybridity that we hope lead to a reevaluation of some of the underlying inclinations of the field, especially the privileging of the moment of production, the intended original placement, and a desire to categorize by clearly delineated media. The case studies in this volume draw from multiple theories of hybridity to investigate the admixtures of various media, of various times, and of various cultures as they relate to early modern art. European works of art created from ca. 1400 to 1600 that combine media (both in actuality and through representative means) and that reference multiple chronologies abound. Exploring individual artists, sites, objects, and motifs, the essays reflect the challenges noted above in universal definitions of the hybrid, yet simultaneously display the broad, beneficial applicability of the framework.

Some of the principles employed in examining liminality, another concept invested in boundaries, may be useful in considering hybridity as it relates to early modern European visual culture.¹¹ With its roots in anthropology, the liminal offers art historians a lens through which to articulate how objects (and the people that interacted with them) could operate at junctures.¹² The phenomenological slippage that can occur in objects, images, and structures located at literal or figurative thresholds is also involved in works of art that exhibit hybridized forms of media and time. Ambiguity and ambivalence often enter conversations on visual art and the liminal, and also surround hybridity related to both the objects themselves and the way in which scholars have tended to approach them.¹³ And, as with the liminal, hybridity's ambiguity can be productive, allowing for complexity that constructively enhances the object/image's devotional or social efficacy.

The essays gathered here explore the guiding foci of medium and time as they relate to hybridity. Both materiality and temporality have prompted impressive and extensive independent literatures that have accelerated in the past 10–15 years, as discussed below; bringing them together in this volume reflects their interconnected natures. Indeed, as encountered again and again in these essays, changes in the physical qualities of works of art over time provoked new lives, meanings, and audiences. Spurred by the recent wave of interest in both material and time and built on the foundations of their respective bodies of scholarship, these essays offer studies engaged with the hybridization of these concepts in early modern European visual culture.

The collection initially developed in sessions convened at the meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in New Orleans in 2018 with a focus on Italian art, and since that point has expanded its consideration of Northern European art and sharpened its chronological focus on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, providing a degree of shared context and scholarship across the geographical and material sweep represented in the essays. The intention of this volume is not to seek comprehensive coverage; rather, the case studies gathered here reflect the myriad of approaches historians of early modern European art take when interrogating the role of hybridity, a methodological heterogeneity

of particular value given the discourse surrounding this theme and its mutable interpretations. While the majority of the contributions consider Italian works of art, within that group we have included essays on relatively understudied artists and regions alongside those of well-known names and places to demonstrate the utility of the hybrid in early modern studies. Hybridity provides a means to examine well-studied artists and sites with fresh eyes; using it as a focus to explore lesser studied works and artists suggests, perhaps, one way to resist the marginalization of an artwork that challenges clean categorization of media, style, and/or periodization. In excavating the possibilities rather than the limitations of that which is hybrid, these case studies participate in broader, ongoing reevaluations of traditional art historical structures in early modern visual culture.

Material

Materiality as an avenue of inquiry into early modern visual culture engages with object qualities ranging from the physical and technical to the linguistic and metaphysical. This framework manages simultaneously to bring us back to the fundamental unit of art history—the work of art as thing—and broaden the field’s ability to intersect with other disciplines, often anthropology with its shared interest in the way in which humans have interacted with and understood objects.¹⁴ Increasingly, the work of critical theorists such as Alfred Gell, Bruno Latour, and W.J.T. Mitchell crops up in art historians’ work alongside the social historical analyses of Hans Belting and Michael Baxandall.¹⁵ The growth of interdisciplinary degree programs in material culture and visual studies would indicate that such trends will continue into the foreseeable future.¹⁶

In the introduction to *The Matter of Art*, Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith attribute the rise of interest in materiality in part to the “increasingly disembodied nature of information and images in a digital age.”¹⁷ Whether or not the “material turn” in art history functions as a reaction to contemporary cultural modes predicated on intangibility, the volume of recent publications on media/material topics constitutes a significant trend in scholarship. A search for scholarship on the materials of early modern European art now generates a number of results, everything from studies of wax to wood, from pigments to supports, that consider media as physical phenomena and as bearers of theoretically-driven meaning.¹⁸ Art historians’ work on materiality has contributed substantively to how we think about the ways in which visual culture informed, and was in turn informed by, its contexts, in addition to opening up valuable new avenues for intellectual collaboration with related fields of study.

In this recent body of scholarship on materials that has considered afresh the implications of media types both traditionally lauded (e.g., marble) and habitually minimized (e.g., wax), a tendency to treat media largely independently has developed. For example, the constituent essays in *The Matter of Art* each explore a particular medium (e.g., Spike Bucklow’s study of lead white) or treat multiple media but separately (e.g., Eckart Marchand’s consideration of workshop training methods in the respective media of plaster, wax, and terracotta).¹⁹ While in no way meant to diminish the value of the single medium study, this collection seeks to consider how hybridization of media (encompassing all manner of literal and figurative mixtures) might be understood.

Models for reflecting on the qualities of different media in relation to each other are entrenched in the history of art, and were especially prominent during much of the period covered by these essays. The *paragone*, a template for the comparison of materials that has proved impressively durable since its rise to prominence in the sixteenth century, most readily springs to mind.²⁰ Understood generally as a theoretical competition between arts (painting vs. sculpture, image vs. poetry), in seeking to establish the particular abilities

of different media in opposition to each other, the *paragone* framework supports mono-medium categorization. However, while at first seeming resistant to the hybrid, the *paragone* may prove productive to understanding it. As Christopher Nygren recently reminded us, the *paragone* “is a fundamentally dialogic mode of reasoning, and one that authors found generative.”²¹ Recent publications have pushed back against the traditional characterization of the *paragone*, arguing for a constructive model of comparison rather than a competition requiring a superior and an inferior.²² By identifying productive moments of material comparison and integration, the examination of media hybridity here continues in this vein of scholarship to reconsider the solely antagonistic *paragone* framework.

In addition to shifting discussions of the *paragone* as a way to investigate media, scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum have emphasized the fluidity and dynamism of late medieval and early modern materials.²³ Saints’ relics—material understood as alive and dead, of the earth and yet somehow linked to heaven—demonstrate how objects could function as hybrid entities in this period and how their status was irrevocably linked to their state as matter. Yet those conditions were often literally or figuratively blurred, and distinctive, singular, stable categories difficult to pin down.²⁴

It is with this foundation in mind—that early modern materials were often conceived of as inherently variable in state and concept, and as mixtures of forms rather than pure examples of an easily codified type—that several of the essays in this collection enter the conversation. The first two essays in this section explore works of art that, as argued here, were highly effective devotional objects *because* of their very employment of hybrid media. Amanda Hilliam’s work centers on fifteenth-century Italian altarpieces by Carlo Crivelli as hybrid examples of the genre. Building three-dimensional elements off the surface of the painted panel, Crivelli, as Hilliam sees him, created “artisanal microcosms” with each altarpiece consisting of a blend of media that resulted in “a transitional space where material transformations take place.” These physical conversions, made possible by Crivelli’s manipulation of media, allowed for greater spiritual connection for the viewer. Ashley Elston focuses on the late fifteenth-century altarpiece of the Bichi family chapel in Siena, an ensemble of polychrome sculpture and painted panels jointly completed by Luca Signorelli and Francesco di Giorgio Martini. She presents this case study as an example of collaboration between painting/painter and sculpture/sculptor that utilized the integrated, but distinct, presence of both media in support of the liturgical atmosphere of the chapel.

The next three essays draw our attention to hybrid materials in Northern Europe and explore the relationship of text (in manuscript, print, and inscription) and image. These studies excavate the visual as well as linguistic roles of text as a conceptual material deployed in conversation with figural imagery. Catharine Ingersoll analyzes the unusually long Latin inscription and emblem on the sixteenth-century sculpted tomb marker of Anna Lucretia von Leonsberg in Regensburg. Ingersoll asserts that the monument, composed by Anna’s humanist husband, employed text with image as a unified rhetorical statement designed to communicate both of their characters. Turning to methods of production for both text and image, Michelle Moseley-Christian approaches hybridity as a conversation between prints and manuscript illuminations in the fifteenth century, a time of great transition for the book realm with the introduction of the printing press. Taking up the example of the “wild woman” typos, largely derived from Germanic sources, she argues that the medial and technological shift affected intriguing changes in iconography. Larissa Grollemond looks at the continued popularity of illuminated manuscripts in late fifteenth-century and sixteenth-century France, long after the introduction of the printing press. As she contends, the French aristocracy’s continued use of handmade objects allowed noble patrons a means to preserve their identity and history in a manner

that also experimented with hybrid media, incorporating styles associated with panel painting and *trompe l'oeil* objects. This connotative intersection of media, style, and time reveals multifaceted possibilities that inhere in the production and reception of such hybrid objects.

Time

As noted above, textbooks of the history of early modern art often depend on a chronological arrangement. An effective strategy for tracing the development of styles, influences among artists, and shifts in iconography, the date in which a work of art was made has been one of the cornerstones of basic art historical inquiry.²⁵ The concern with time supported art historians' interest in social context as the cultural, political, and religious environments in which artists, patrons, audience, and objects operated at a given moment could be brought to bear on a topic. Baxandall's classic 1972 monograph, in which he developed the term "Period Eye," has proved to be an enduring study that links appreciation of certain stylistic characteristics with temporally situated cultural atmospheres.²⁶ One of the corollary effects of using the "Period Eye" is that it privileges the moment of production of a work of art, and the ways in which the object is a product of the intersection of styles, iconographies, and functions from multiple times may be unduly minimized if we do not consciously search for them.

Hybridity of time, like hybridity of materials, manifests in many modes. We might begin by remembering works of art that incorporate earlier styles, either those associated with past periods of the same culture or those that speak to the past glories of others.²⁷ More than simple anachronism, the conspicuous integration of past styles has the potential to exploit the past for the present audience. Klaus Krüger, examining the aesthetics of the past, asserts that historicizing "retrospective" stylistic choices made by fourteenth-century Italian panel painters are tied to increased reflection at that time about the nature of representation and, as he puts it, the "image as medium."²⁸ Although not always characterized in these terms, the classicism so closely associated with Italian culture in the early modern era reflects a type of temporal hybridity. Furthermore, spolia, those reused objects and architectural fragments often (but not exclusively) of ancient origin, and thus a related facet of hybrid time in visual culture, bring the past into the present through tangible means.²⁹

Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood's interrogation of time and its connections to visual culture have spurred considerable discussion. In *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010) they state that "no device more effectively generates the effect of a doubling or bending of time than the work of art, a strange kind of event whose relation to time is plural."³⁰ Their model of "substitution" positions art as "belonging to more than one historical moment simultaneously."³¹ Objects and artifacts become points of disruption and collapse a linear progression of time, in effect producing a temporal hybrid for the viewer. Nagel and Wood's extended consideration of multilayered time as integral to early modern works of art has renewed attention on theories of temporality.

The next several essays consider hybrid time through change in a space or object. Kirstin Noreen explores the idea of temporal hybridity in the paintings adorning the Sancta Sanctorum, one of the holiest sites in Rome during the medieval and Renaissance periods and a visual environment that has undergone a series of changes over the centuries. She considers the stylistic and iconographical conversations created, covered, preserved, and destroyed over time as the fresco program was selectively altered through repainting, moving from the original medieval images and frames to the later Renaissance overpainting and finally to the decision in the modern era to remove much of the

overpainting to privilege the original. Madeline Rislow traces the history of the relics of St. John the Baptist as they were enshrined in the city of Genoa. Following their translation in the eleventh century, the relics of the city's patron saint were encased within three reliquaries between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, made in a variety of media, but linked by shared narrative iconography. Rislow places this series of reliquaries within the growth of St. John's cult, the changing history of the city, and also within their physical movement during urban processions, showing how the reception of a continued stored artifact (the relics) was affected by change in display over centuries.

Turning from object to artist, Sally Cornelison considers the impact of time on a single artist by examining how Giorgio Vasari recycled designs, especially his own. Cornelison excavates Vasari's ability to reuse his professional past through an examination of two panels for the Pieve in Arezzo. Here, Vasari cleverly repurposed paintings originally intended for other locations into new sites. In so doing, she highlights how circumstances complicate an understanding of a linear chronological progression of an artist's career.

In their work on colonial Spanish America, Dean and Leibsohn observed that art history tends to locate hybridity in the final product rather than in the process, privileging finished visual characteristics to the exclusion of other points or types of hybridity.³² As the study of early modern European art becomes more inclusive of the impact of other cultures, the utility of broad terms—such as Renaissance, Baroque—bound mostly by accepted chronological parameters becomes increasingly problematic and worthy of close scrutiny, as seen in Christa Irwin's essay, which brings to light the work of Bernardo Bitti, an Italian painter who spent much of his career in Peru with Indigenous and European audiences.³³ Irwin addresses the varied issues at stake in continuing to describe Bitti's work using traditional period terms. She argues that despite stylistic similarities with Mannerism, Bitti's work takes on different meanings in the context of the Peruvian vice-royalty, thus showing how terminology based on time periods can elide issues of cultural context.

Hybridity writ large precipitated the ideas gathered in this volume about early modern European objects and artists, and pushes back against the efficient, well-defined categories of art history that can unintentionally minimize, marginalize, or overlook altogether those works of art that do not easily fit into established types, or obscure what might be gleaned about an image or object if we questioned how it mixed media or complicated its relationship with time. Hybridity, by its very nature, operates in concert with focused explorations of the constituent parts. This collection is thus intended to represent a next step in synthesizing the scholarship on media and time that has shaped significant paths in the study of early modern European art.

Notes

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- 1 The challenge hybridity presents to the structure of art history came up in the provocative conversation recorded in James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim, eds. *Art and Globalization* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 59.
- 2 Frederick Hartt and David Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011); John Paoletti and Gary Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2012); James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350–1575*, revised by Larry Silver and Henry Luttikhuisen (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005).

- 3 It should also be acknowledged that in the field overall, art historians have started to question the value of this traditional teaching approach in recent years. See, for example, Art History Teaching Resources, <https://arthistoryteachingresources.org>, founded in 2011.
- 4 Robert S. Nelson, "The Map of Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 79, no. 1 (1997): 28–40.
- 5 Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2012), 5. Burke applies the term hybrid to this definition of Renaissance. Margaret de Grazia, "Anachronism," in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, eds. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13–32. De Grazia marks the Renaissance as the origins of purposefully thinking about a time period as distinct and in relation to others.
- 6 On the historiography of the term "hybrid," see Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture, Theory and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 1–28; Peter Burke, *Hybrid Renaissance: Culture, Language, Architecture* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), 11–37.
- 7 Young, *Colonial Desire*, 27.
- 8 See Young, *Colonial Desire*, 1–28, and the essays gathered in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 9 Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, "Hybridity and Its Discontents: Considering Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America," *Colonial Latin American Review* 12, no. 1 (2003): 3–35; Gauvin Alexander Bailey, "Spain and Spanish America in the Early Modern Atlantic World: Current Trends in Scholarship," *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2009): 9–14.
- 10 Dean and Leibsohn, "Hybridity and Its Discontents," 6.
- 11 Pnina Werbner, "The Limits of Cultural Hybridity: On Ritual Monsters, Poetic Licence and Contested Postcolonial Purifications," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7, no. 1 (2001): 133–7.
- 12 Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1969); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Lynn F. Jacobs, *Thresholds and Boundaries: Liminality in Netherlandish Art (1385–1530)* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
- 13 Pnina Werbner, "Introduction: The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity," in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, eds. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed, 1997), 16.
- 14 For example, Aden Kumer and Christopher Lakey, "Res et signification: The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages," *Gesta* 51, no. 1 (2012): 1–17; Christina Normore, "Navigating the World of Meaning," *Gesta* 51, no. 1 (2012): 19–34; Paula Findlen, ed. *Early Modern Things: Objects and their Histories, 1500–1800* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
- 15 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- 16 For example, this non-exhaustive list indicates institutions now offering graduate degrees or certificates in material culture and/or visual studies: University of Wisconsin-Madison, University of Rochester, Washington University, University of Delaware, Virginia Tech, University of California-Santa Cruz.
- 17 Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop and Pamela H. Smith, "Introduction," *The Matter of Art*, eds. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 6.
- 18 For example, Hanneke Grootenboer, "Theorizing Wax: On the Meaning of a Disappearing Medium," *Oxford Art Journal* 36, no. 1 (2013): 1–12; Christina Nielsen, "Carving Life: The Meaning of Wood in Early Modern European Sculpture," in *The Matter of Art*, eds. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 223–39; Emma Jones, "The Sculptural Stones of Venice: The Selection, Supply, and Cost of Marble and Stone in the Sixteenth Century," in *Making and Moving Sculpture in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Kelley Helmstutler Di Dio (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 111–36; Christopher J. Nygren, "Titian's *Ecce Homo* on Slate: Stone, Oil, and the Transubstantiation of Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 99 (2017): 36–66; Piers Baker-Bates and Elena M. Calvillo, eds. *Almost Eternal: Painting on Stone and Material Innovation in Early Modern Europe* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2018).
- 19 Spike Bucklow, "Lead White's Mysteries," in *The Matter of Art*, eds. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 141–59;