Sensory reality as perceived through the religious iconography of the Renaissance

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In *Della pittura*, Leon Battista Alberti wrote: “No one would deny that the painter has nothing to do with things that are not visible. The painter is concerned solely with representing what can be seen.”¹ What Alberti does not mention is that during the Trecento, as well as in his own time, painted surfaces were populated with things that are not visible, with saints and angels, seraphims and cherubims, even the Madonna, Jesus and the Almighty God. The reality of all religious paintings of the Renaissance is virtually inhabited by heavenly and otherworldly creatures, taking the viewer onto a metaphysical level of experience and mystical union with the celestial cosmos. Physical space is intertwined with the supernatural environment that holy figures occupy, and religious paintings systematically form another actuality, a virtual reality for the viewer to experience and sense.

In most cases this dynamic new world is the result of the combined efforts of the artist and the client (or patron), as specific details regarding the execution, content, materials, cost and time of delivery were stipulated in contracts. Hence, the scenographic virtuality of sacred images was produced by real people who wished to construct an alternative sensory reality in which they are portrayed alongside holy men and women.

During the period ranging from the later Middle Ages to the end of the seventeenth century, Europeans believed that their heads contained three ventricles. In these, they were told, their faculties were processed, circulated and stored the sensory

¹ Alberti 1967, 43.
data by means of which they could apprehend and understand the outside world. Aristotelian philosophy served as the operating system of this hybrid construction, Galenic anatomy as the hardware and the Hippocratic theory of blood spirits and humours as the data transmitter. This system attributed a central place to images in thought processes and consequently had a considerable impact on the visual arts.²

Aristotle stated that there is nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses. His ideas about the senses and the intellect are given in *De Anima*³. The bottom line is that all living beings, even plants, have a nutritive soul, animals and humans share a sensitive soul, and humans alone possess a rational soul (the intellect proper). In the Aristotelian tradition, many faculties which nowadays are considered to be cognitive, like memory and imagination, were understood to be sensitive, so that memory and imagination remained forms of sensing rather than thinking. This is quite an interesting notion since Renaissance thought was most influenced by Aristotelian ideas as well as philosophers who spoke about the same issues. Humanists, also, translated his works and, at least in Italy, Averroes’s works were the main source of diffusion of the Aristotelian philosophy. Aquinas also played an important role in injecting Aristotle’s thought into the Western Christian mind and molding the Renaissance understanding of it.⁴

The senses are the first to know, the first to detect whatever a person is exposed to. We first feel and then think. We first enter a reality through our senses and then do we furnish a rational structure or meaning for it. Images create rather than merely represent reality. This insight is the cornerstone of how people shape experience and sense the world around them through images. The act of looking at shapes, thinking, and art enables us to identify emotions. However, Arnheim said that the instinctive ability of man to understand through vision has been in a lethargic state and needs awakening⁵.

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² Quiviger 2010, 15.
³ Aristotle 1931.
⁵ Ibid.
In the religious iconography of the Renaissance, not only is the heavenly sphere depicted but also a specific sensory impact is produced by the objects represented as well as by the scenography of the pictures. The painted surface thus becomes a kind of a theatrical ‘representation’ manipulating objects or the very expression of emotion to establish a specific atmosphere or mood and induce sensory impact in the viewer. It creates an all immersive environment through the depiction of lighting, set, clothing, as well as the suggestion of the senses of smell or hearing, touch, taste, even through the implication of temperature and texture.

A work of art is a microcosm of multiple meanings and psychological nuances channeled through perception. As Arnheim puts it: “I consider art to be a means of perception, a means of cognition. Perception makes it possible to structure reality and thus to attain knowledge. Art reveals to us the essence of things, the essence of our existence; that is its function.” Focusing on several case studies, this paper will examine how the sensory impact is communicated and emerges through the microclimate of each piece.

Painting the senses is, of course, dissimilar to sensing the painting. A number of works from the Renaissance and Baroque periods exist which depict the senses as allegories, to name only The Allegories of the (Five) Senses, a collaborative series of paintings (1617–1618) by Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens (fig. 1). This series comprises five allegorical paintings, one devoted to each of the senses.

Upon visiting the great religious works of the past, one needs to start from the very beginning to discover whom religious paintings addressed, in what context, where they could be found, how accessible they might be, and whom they were made for. It is important to learn about the original location of the religious paintings, who might have seen them and what sort of behaviour or demonstration of piety was expected in order to step into their viewers’ shoes and try to understand, let alone feel, how they would.

The definition of their function is elusive. Given the lack of references and original material, as well as the time distance, reconstructing a possible or plausible role or even utility for the religious works presents us with great difficulty. We can only guess though that the relationship of the religious images and their viewers has undergone a significant change over time. Renaissance people had a more physical and emotionally involved relationship with religious objects, paintings included. Religious paintings were first and foremost objects that conveyed spirituality providing an emotionally safe ground, a kind of safety net for life’s upheaval, worries, dangers and various adversities. To us they are revered works of art because we have eradicated them from their original context and settings. We feel amazement before a Madonna by Botticelli or some more sensitive souls among us could even be moved to tears before it but not because any religious feelings are awake. It is art and artistry, the abundance of talent, the mere beauty of the work that moves us. Nothing is for granted or written in stone when it comes to art and emotions, but by taking a wild guess, modern people, museum and gallery goers visit them with a view to seeing art, not as to experience any sort of spiritual uplifting.
Unlike our reactions and motivation, religious painting in its original context was aiming to inflame an intense experience. Paintings, statues and goldwork were rarely seen in static, unchanging circumstances. While some pictures did hang openly on the walls of churches, homes and town halls, others were hidden away in chests and cupboards and only shown on very special occasions. Objects such as the metal plates known as paxes (meaning ‘peace’ in Latin), which are now kept in untouchable glass-covered museum cases, were once held, kissed and wept over. Paintings and sculptures might be carried in procession, worn in hats, burnt in bonfires of luxury goods, and in some cases, like the last architectural model of the church of San Francesco in Rimini which was made of sugar, eaten.\footnote{Welch 1997, 133–135.}

A great number of religious (some secular paintings too) were for most of the time in storage or covered with heavy draping or shutters, sometimes even with painted curtains, and were revealed during mass or some special celebrations. Curtains were necessary to protect the paintings from dust and fading, but could also fulfill liturgical and symbolic functions: during prescribed periods such as the Holy Week, the picture would be revealed, for example, while singing the celebratory ‘Gloria’ during Mass on Holy Saturday.\footnote{Netherstole 2011, 22.} This inaccessibility or lack of direct appreciation might possibly enhance the visual experience of the religious work. When something is hard to get, it might create feelings ranging from anxiety to eagerness or desire. Perhaps this availability depending on the religious calendar played an important role in the appreciation of the concealed work, thus amplifying the enjoyment and religious experience.

At an early date, before altarpieces were made popular, altars were occasionally adorned with polychrome wooden statues of the Virgin and Child as seen at Benozzo Gozzoli’s trompe-l’œil fresco of an altarpiece in Montefalco (fig. 2).
Fig. 2: Benozzo Gozzoli, Madonna and Child Surrounded by Saints, 1452, San Francesco, Cappella di San Gerolamo, Montefalco.

It also known that curtains were hung before a number of works, such as the San Benedetto Altarpiece, the San Pier Maggiore Altarpiece or the Pistoia Santa Trinità Altarpiece. Curtains were even

\[9\] Ibid.
Fig. 3: Fra Angelico and Lorenzo Ghiberti, Tabernacle of the Linaioli, 1432–1435, National Museum of San Marco, Florence.
agreed upon in contracts drawn between the painter and the commissioner\textsuperscript{10}. Many altarpieces, commissioned by guilds, now exhibited as works of art in museums and therefore always open for public viewing, were originally opened only when their guild were assembled in the hall they were situated.

This is the case, for instance, for Fra Angelico’s Linaiuoli altarpiece (1433), now seen in the Museo di San Marco in Florence. It was only opened when the guild of linen-drappers, the Linaiuoli, congregated in their hall (fig. 3). Commissioned by the Arte dei Linaiuoli, the ‘Guild of Linen Merchants’, for their meeting courters, their Residenza in the Piazza Sant’ Andrea in Florence, this triptych is the artist’s first dated work and major commission. The enormous marble frame which resembles an aedicula, was designed by Lorenzo Ghiberti and executed by three craftsmen in his workshop. It is classical, with a round arch, dental cornice and pediment. The tabernacle is composed of a rectangular marble frame, with a triangular top depicting the ‘Blessing Christ and Cherubims’ in a sculpted mandorla. In the centre, within an arched opening, are Fra Angelico’s panel of the Maestà with twelve musician angels.

Internally, St. John the Baptist (left) and St. John the Evangelist (right) are depicted; and externally St. Mark the Evangelist (left) and St. Peter (right). The panels are completed by a predella, placed below, with three scenes of St. Peter Dictating the Gospel to St. Mark, Adoration of the Magi and the Martyrdom of St. Mark. The figure of Mark is recurrent due to his status as the patron of the corporation, the \textit{The Arte de’ Linaiuoli} which commissioned the work.

When the shutters were closed, the saints Peter and Paul were seen standing on rock-strewn ground in the night background (fig. 4). Their radiant haloes formed two suns behind their heads, so great

\textsuperscript{10} This excerpt concerns the case of a contract drawn between the member of the noble Lazzara family and the Paduan painter Pietro Calzetta regarding the decoration of an entire chapel in the basilica of St Anthony of Padua which was destroyed in the sixteenth century: ‘… He [Master Pietro] must also make a curtain of blue cloth that is of good quality along with the iron needed to cover the said altarpiece’. See Welch 1997, 104.
Fig. 4: Fra Angelico and Lorenzo Ghiberti, Tabernacle of the Linaioli, 1432–1435, National Museum of San Marco, Florence (the closed tabernacle).
a contrast it is that of the golden light against the night-time sky. The contrast of the night of spiritual stalemate and the glow of belief, of the fervent faith that illuminates even the darkest night, must have had a profound impact on the guild members. The two evangelists are barefooted so as to imply the holy ground they stand on as well as respect, reverence and submission. They are shown with their attributes standing on the rock, the barren ground in the dark background, perfect, serene and in no need of anything other than their strong faith in Christ. The draping is designed and painted with great care, their expressions are emotionless, with just a trace of their spiritual status. When looking at this image, the members of the guild would sense the distance among them and the saints and their current state of human imperfection. The deep inky blue background must have been a constant reminder of the celestial cosmos, the dark and infinite universe, lit up only by the faith and sanctity of the two disciples. Feelings of humility and reverence must have been evoked in the guild members.

When the guild convened, the shutters were opened, revealing the Madonna and Child imbued in a supernatural light reflected upon the gold leaf that enfolds them. When the finished tabernacle was installed into the wall of their meeting room, the guild had stars painted on the wall around it, as well as having a window constructed in order to have natural light in the room.

Lighting is another important issue that should be taken into consideration when studying the impact of religious paintings on the senses of the viewer. Unfortunately, we can hardly reconstruct the actual experience or the circumstances of their appreciation, which one can only try to imagine in the lack of documentation. The experience of being exposed to a work by candlelight is completely different, in any case, even for modern viewers, compared to seeing it in natural light. “The experience of being in church at a sunny midday mass was surely very different from being there in the darkening light of a winter’s afternoon.”[11] The sensory experience of looking at a

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religious painting or sculpture directly lit by the rays of the sun, artificial light before them or through coloured stained glass, again, varies a lot. Even an oil lamp gives out different light from a single candle and the light that comes from a candle is different in strength from two or three burning before a painting during the hours of the day or night. The play of light against the gold leaf background of a painting and the supernatural echoes of it are different from its contrast against a dark painted surface, for instance the effect of light (natural or artificial) on the night sky of the shut Linaiuoli tabernacle which creates a rather more mystical sense. Again, stained glass light has another use and feel, since it is not primarily destined to admit light but rather to control it.

The sense of smell is also very important: the scent of flowers in vases or pots, even whether they were fresh or withered, take sensory reality to yet more extreme levels. Some more important factors that should be addressed are the psychological disposition of the viewer, whether they prayed to an icon for a specific reason, for example so that they could have a child, their personality and inclination to believe or not. Personality, the set of characteristics possessed by a person, can uniquely influence their cognitions, motivations and behaviours in various situations.

In other words, trying to identify accurately and objectively the impact of Renaissance religious paintings on their contemporary viewers is a task that cannot actually be achieved. ‘Everyone must at least have similar perceptions when they look at the same thing, because otherwise no communication could take place’\(^1\). Contextualizing religious paintings of the Renaissance, especially those destined for private worship, becomes even more difficult given the fact that we do not know the ritual followed by their owners, for example, if the appreciation of the icons involved chanting, incense burning, the lighting conditions – were they viewed in natural or artificial light –

the very setting of the image – was it surrounded by other religious paintings in a kind of devotional shrine, candles burning before them, were there flowers as offerings or any other, etc. Museum settings are dramatically different to the original place of the paintings. We are used to considering museum exhibits detached from their original function – this sterile environment deprives us of the chance to put them into context. We can only resort to imagination and hypotheses.

Pope Gregory I (reigned as Pope 590–604) in a letter to an iconoclast bishop laid the foundations for the function of images:

You brother should have both preserved the images and prohibited the people from adoring them so that those who are ignorant of letters might have the means of gathering a knowledge of history and that people might in no way sin by adoring a picture.

Images as teaching aids were a common idea during the Renaissance period, as well:

“By the Grace of God, the expositions of sacred writ to the ignorant who know not how to read” was according to the opening of the Sienese painters’ guild statutes of 1355 the mission of the members. The Summa grammaticalis quae vocatur Catholicon, or Catholicon of Johannes Balbus (d. 1298), the 13th-century Latin dictionary which found wide use throughout Christendom, served in the late Middle Ages to interpret the Bible ‘correctly’, following earlier writers as Thomas Aquinas. Educated people could gather from it the substantial knowledge of their time and among other important things they would learn that images had three functions: to instruct the ignorant and unlettered, to keep the memory alive of the mysteries of faith and the examples of the saints and to act as means of exciting devotion. This last function was meant to prompt an emotional response, which could only be achieved through the senses.

The Imitation of Christ (Latin: De Imitatione Christi) attributed to Thomas à Kempis is perhaps the most broadly read devotional

13 Freedberg 1989, 267
14 Milanesi 1854–6, i. l.
15 Scaramella 1991, 149.
work next to the Bible. Its purpose is to educate the soul in Christian perfection with Christ as the Divine Model. It is prompting the devoted Christians to amalgamate, by means of imagination, their world and the heavenly one. They were encouraged to use images as aids for praying and contemplation. One scarce instance of written recorded use of images in order to reconstruct specific feelings, we have in Giovanni Morelli, who lost his 9 year old son, Alberto, and on the anniversary of his death he wrote in his zibaldone, his diary, how he used the image of the crucifixion as an aid to remembrance:

Many, many times I had commended the salvation of the soul of my son to the merciful son of God and to his pious mother, Virgin Mary. But [now] disposing my body and all my senses with greater fervor and love, [and] forgetting my own soul and every other personal interest, I knelt with bare knees before the figure of the crucified son of God to which [Alberto] had commended his bodily health during his illness. I was in my nightgown, with nothing on my head, and wore a halter around the neck. Gazing upon Him, I began my prayer by first picturing and looking at my sins [...] And when I considered with what harsh, acerbic and dark torment Jesus Christ [was] crucified, whose figure I gazed upon, had brought [us] back from eternal pain, I could not bear to look upon him with indifferent eyes. Rather, my heart and all my senses heightened to the greatest tenderness through, I believe, a pious gift He gave me, [and] my face was bathed in tears from my eyes.

Going to even greater lengths, Morelli wrote about the psalms and prayers he said to finish with a Hail Mary while ‘gazing continually at the image and figure of the devout Crucified [and] fixing my eyes on his precious wounds’. He contemplated the pain of Mary at the loss of her son and, while standing up,

took hold of the painting with devotion and kissed it in the same places where, during his illness, my son had sweetly kissed it after he had repeatedly asked that he regain his health. Then after I had put it back in the usual place, and then again knelt down, I said the Credo and then the Gospel of St. John. While saying it my eyes were fixed on [John’s] figure [...] Holding the tavola in my arms, I repeatedly kissed the Crucified Christ and the figure of his mother and the Evangelist.

The image of the Crucifix helped Morelli to recreate the feeling of pain and relive the agony of losing his son, the misery of watching Alberto pray but without the Lord answering his pleas for surviving

18 Ibid.
Fig. 5: Andrea Mantegna, St. Sebastian, 1456–1459, Kunsthistorisches Museum.
the illness. Touching the same painting his son had been weeping over and meditating upon before his death was a way to communicate with both Alberto and Christ. In this context the Crucifix was the medium for the distressed father to sense or even make sense of his son’s departure.

Fig. 6: Quirizio da Murano, Christ Showing His Wounds and the Host to a Clarissan Nun, 1460–1478, Galleria dell’Accademia, Venice.

19 Welch 1997, 309.
Pain and death are important and all so often depicted themes in religious painting. In scenes of martyrdoms of saints, such as Mantegna’s paintings of St Sebastian (fig. 5), Luca Cranach’s *St Catherine* or Dürer’s *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand*, the main focus is on physical pain through torture and eventually dying as a means of great psychological impact, that of fear and agony. Macabre details serve exactly this purpose, to create the sense of fear in the beholder, even recreate the uneasy and inconvenient sense of stress, of which faith seems to be the only way out.

In Quirizio da Murano’s painting of Christ Showing his wounds and the Host to a Clarissan nun, the main focus is again on the mental and sensory recreation of pain, just as it was in the case of Morelli’s Crucifix (fig. 6). In Murano’s picture, though, the viewer is prompted to recreate the sense of taste as well, since the wafer is visually connected with the wounds of Christ and also implies the mystery of transubstantiation. The donor, in all her humility, emphasized not only by her praying gesture but by her smaller scale, has a chance to taste the very body of Christ, while the viewer can recall the taste of the wafer and contemplate the transubstantiation of the host, as well as the pain and suffering of Christ in view of his wounds. Feelings of awe, humility, empathy and piety are prompted by this image.

Not only in Murano’s picture but in all the paintings that donors or witnesses of the holy events are depicted, the viewer, especially the donors/ witnesses themselves, can experience telepresence, the sense of being present inside a virtual environment, including the liminal experiences of entering and coming out. The painted surface becomes a theatre of setting the senses and feelings in motion. ‘The beholder feels himself witnessing the holy events and conversing with the holy persons. He is not cut off from them; he is surrounded by the congregation of the saints and takes part in the events he sees.’

See for example Masaccio’s *Holy Trinity*, Robert Campin’s *Annunciation Triptych* (Merode Triptych), Dieric Bouts’ *Last Supper* (fig. 7), to name but few.

The iconographic theme of the ‘Hortus Conclusus’, is another subject in Renaissance religious painting that speaks directly to the
senses. The ‘Hortus Conclusus’ is both an emblematic attribute and a title of the Virgin Mary in Medieval and Renaissance poetry and art, appearing in paintings and manuscript illuminations from about 1400.

In Fra Angelico’s *Annunciation*, to the left of the loggia the enclosed Garden of Eden is depicted alluding to the purity of the Virgin Mary (fig. 8). Besides the theological and didactic meaning of the image, it remains a picture of a fresh garden with beautiful flowers, green grass and trees which in itself has a certain impact on the beholder. A sense of peace and serenity encloses the viewer while the sense of smell is activated. So it goes with all the Hortus Conclusus paintings.

See for example Stefan Lochner’s *Virgin of the Rose Bower* where the sense of hearing is triggered as well as of touch since the Madonna is holding the wrist of the infant and he is holding the apple.
which alludes to the sense of taste (fig. 9). The same senses or recollection of sensory impact is activated in *The Little Garden of Paradise* by the Upper Rhenish Master.

Fig. 9: Stefan Lochner, Virgin of the Rose Bower, 1440-42, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne.
Either clearly visible or implied, as in Lorenzo Lotto’s *Annunciation*, the enclosed garden is always a peaceful place, a place of beauty, where the divine history of salvation was revealed through Nature.

The *Sacra Conversazione* creates a virtual space where the Madonna and Child in the company of saints who had lived in different periods of time are shown. Sacred Conversations are usually good departure points for depicting perspective and for recreating the world in three dimensions. Architecture, spatial depth techniques, lighting and the use of specific colours can create a sense of inclusion in the beholder.
In the *Santa Lucia Altarpiece* by Domenico Veneziano, the setting with its three ogival arches, the columns and the shell-shaped niches, the whole architecture, recreates a sense of space and depth (fig. 10). This is underlined by the polychrome floor including the base of the Madonna's throne, which is depicted with the use of geometrical perspective.

In Bellini’s *Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saints* architecture, again, plays a very important role as in Piero della Francesca’s *Brera Madonna* and all the works of this type especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Of course, this paper could not but, scratching the surface, touch upon the subject of sensory reality as created through the religious paintings of the Renaissance. This is a great field of research, one that would benefit from interdisciplinary approaches that could shed more light on the subject. So far, research on these not in the traditional sense strict art historical matters in the art of the Renaissance, with few exceptions, has not extensively looked into the ways in which religious iconography created alternative sensory realities. Through the study of portable paintings for personal devotional purposes and altarpieces of the Trecento and Quattrocento, sensory reality was discussed and put in context from a recently developed socio-political point of view, as well as from a historical, psychological, artistic, symbolic and theological standpoint. Among other motifs, the iconography of the *Sacra Conversazione*, the *Maestà*, the *Hortus Conclusus* and martyrdoms of saints as well as the presence of donors in the company of saints and their impact on the viewer’s senses was explored.

The religious paintings of the Renaissance mostly prompt us to feel, as they create recollections of the senses. They are a means of creating a sensory reality other than the physical, a kind of virtual environment in which the beholder can enter and absorb its spiritual essence through all his senses.
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