



# FINISHING TOUCHES: AN AFTERWORD

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## Abstract

*This conclusion reflects on the major findings of the essays in the issue.*

**Keywords:** Antoniazio Romano, Titian, senses, devotion, renaissance, baroque, early modernity

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## Biographical notes

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## FINISHING TOUCHES: AN AFTERWORD

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The sense of touch in cooperation or in competition with sight is explored in countless works of renaissance art, as we have seen. Antoniazzo Romano's *The Virgin*

*Invoking God to Heal the Hand of Pope Leo I* (c.1475, National Gallery of Ireland) (Figure 9.1) offers an especially poignant depiction of the tactile revelation of faith. As an exposition of a miracle in which eyes, hands and desire play vital roles, it distils in one image a range of tensions produced in the relationship between faith and sensuality in early modernity.

Reminiscent of a Byzantine icon, this painting is dominated by the three-quarter-length figure of the Virgin, dressed in brilliant blue and set against a gold background. She is, it seems, an apparition or image, which, as an inscription along the parapet in front of



Figure 9.1: Antoniazzo Romano, *The Virgin Invoking God to Heal the Hand of Pope Leo I*, c.1475. Tempera and gold leaf on wood panel, 110.8 x 77cm. (© National Gallery of Ireland)

her explains, pope Leo encountered during prayer.<sup>1</sup> The Virgin's motioning hands seek God's intervention but her eyes are unfocused. God is portrayed in the upper left corner, a tiny, half-length figure, poised on a cloud, who transmits his divine will via his gesture. He is looking past the Virgin to the two diminutive figures depicted in the painting's lower zone. Here Antoniazzo interprets the outcome of the miracle – Leo is having his severed hand reinstated by an angel. The pope's mutilation was self-inflicted. As the Golden Legend relates, Leo had cut off his hand to punish himself after it was kissed by a female worshipper during Mass, an act which 'aroused in him a violent temptation of the flesh' (de Voragine, 1969, p.231). The episode offers a reminder, should we need it, that touch – the traditional signifier of which is, of course, the hand – is the sense most intimately identified with sexual desire. While Leo had found it necessary to cut off the offending body part,<sup>2</sup> the actions of divine hands are shown in this image to perform its restoration.<sup>3</sup>

Antoniazzo's painting is suggestive of the many ambiguities that surround haptic encounters, and the contested place of touch in the realm of the devotional, but also, more generally, of the potential power of the image to make the sacred present. It is well known that St Bonaventure and St Thomas Aquinas, and others, praised the didactic benefit of art as an aid to memory and discerned its power to stir religious passion and encourage faith, but believed that the process of beholding an image moved from an initial level of sensory engagement to a richer *spiritual* understanding. Nevertheless, 'religious seeing' is about powerful forms of embodiment, deeply anchored in the incarnation of Christ and the miraculous motherhood of the Virgin (Morgan, 2012, p.54). The stories of their lives, their hopes and torments, epitomised in devotional art and pious practices, embraced an iconography that celebrated the epistemological merits of the senses of sight and hearing, but importantly also that of touch;

1 IMAGO CORAM QUA ORANDO LEO PAPA SENSIT SIBI MANUM RESTITUTAM; on this painting see, Howe (1984) pp.417–9; Couzin (2007) pp.129–54; National Gallery of Ireland, online, <http://onlinecollection.nationalgallery.ie/view/objects/asitem/id/11495>

2 'And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell ...' (Mark 9:43).

3 Antoniazzo's interpretation of the Virgin's miraculous intervention develops the account supplied in the Golden Legend, which nevertheless emphasises the roles of divine hands: '... Leo had recourse to the Blessed Virgin, entrusting himself wholly to her care. And she appeared to him at once, and with her holy hands restored his hand to him' (de Voragine, 1969, p.231).

the latter, according to our modern appreciation, including a variety of bodily sensations, mediated by receptors in the skin, the joints and in underlying soft tissues, such as movement and warmth (Quiviger, 2010, p.105).

Thus, the tensions and delights engendered by the yearning for tactile encounters in early modern devotional acts or sacred art, signalled in this issue's title, have been shown to be key to its investigations. The contributors, all activists in art history's 'sensory turn', have examined artifacts, prints, paintings, sculpture, spiritual guidebooks and what we today qualify as installation art. Their enterprise has been prompted by the ambition to problematise the neo-platonic imperialism of sight and sense hierarchies that traditionally considered touch along with smell and taste as base bodily senses. Rather, they show that it was touch, as well as sight and hearing, and sometimes even taste and smell, that provided access to the divine.

In the essays by Theresa Flanigan and Catherine Lawless, proscriptions on female devotion, as elicited from spiritual guidebooks – including Florentine examples composed by St Antoninus and Dominici – are particularly highlighted and explored. Such texts, composed for women of high social rank (Antoninus's was dedicated to Dianora Tornabuoni), played active roles in shaping ideals of piety, locating deep religious feeling as an essential component of femininity.

A prominent early modern view that women were easily influenced and particularly sensitive was rooted in Galenic theory, which held that females were constitutionally cooler and moister than males.<sup>4</sup> But this greater sensitivity might, as St Bonaventura (1221–74) supposed, make women especially able to bond emotionally with Christ's suffering.<sup>5</sup> Devotional texts and sermons stressed the need to feel the Holy Family's pains and torments in one's own flesh and bones, yet their purpose was not simply to indulge the senses but also to delimit and contain them. Such manuals poetically likened a woman's life to a sensuous garden abundant with fragrant flowers and fertile fruit easily identifiable with the *hortus conclusus* of Mary. The garden protected by walls and free from sin was a powerful metaphor for virginity, an ideal to emulate by womankind. Similarly, Christian teaching often imagined the senses as garden gates or apertures to be secured so temptations of the flesh and evil thoughts could not enter to hijack the soul, so it was recommended to

4 Galen of Pergamon: Greek physician and philosopher in the Roman empire (129–c.200/c.216 AD). For a summary of this theory, see Battersby ([1989] 1994), pp.40–1.

5 See Lawless in this volume, p.62.

women to stay at home behind the closed doors of the senses. Archbishop Antoninus exhorted that women should neither look nor be looked at; they should attune their ears to the word of God and practise silence. Speech - to Antoninus a sixth sense - has the tongue as its operative organ (the latter being, of course, equally instrumental to the perception of touch and taste). His interest in controlling women's behaviour through their speech served patriarchal authority, limiting or preventing their ability to communicate within the wider world. While the men of the Tornabuoni family take centre stage in Ghirlandaio's scenes with a public or political tenor, its female figures appear 'in the wings', passive and with lips sealed (Figures 3.2 and 3.6). But, in contrast, Flanigan argues, women are allocated more space and seem to be more physically involved and conversational in scenes in which the Virgin is the protagonist (Figures 3.1 and 3.9).

Painted images of the Virgin and Child, alone or in scenes with St Elizabeth, John the Baptist and other holy figures, depictions of Christ's Passion and of mystics in the throes of spiritual revelations, generated a visual imagery of powerfully tactile signs that inspired affection and identification. Women's responses to these representations show the extent to which their faith was expressed through the sense of touch and the performative, according to Catherine Lawless. The religious fervour ignited by pious artworks compelled female beholders to publicly and openly kiss and caress statues and pictures in churches. In the home or convent (the domestic and domestic/institutional setting),<sup>6</sup> behind the doors that shut them off from external 'sense pollution', secular women and nuns would be able to indulge their senses in devotional activities in front of small-scale religious paintings. Children and family members might be invited to participate in services that could involve the washing of hands and the ringing of bells and other manoeuvres that appealed to the full sensory spectrum.

A specific instance of devout performativity in the baroque *palazzo* is postulated in the essay by Erin Benay. Jacopo Ligozzi's stunningly beautiful portable altar (Figures 6.1a, b and c) performs as a spiritual aid by engaging the sensorium of the beholder. The refinement of its velvet-lined carrying case adorned with Florentine *pietre dure* inlay, showing exquisite botanical motifs, draws viewers nearer to the stories depicted inside it – Christ's *Agony in the Garden* and Abraham's *Sacrifice of Isaac* – to urge their imaginative

and affective involvement in traumatic biblical events. The manipulation of the altar and the revealing of these emotive scenes, is almost akin to the solemnisation of a religious rite in which the object and its images become active celebrants.

The meanings generated by sacred art are produced by its iconography but also by its contextual framework: the relationship between composition, locale and spectator. The Cornaro chapel in S. Maria della Vittoria in Rome offers a complex and highly-charged case in point. In this lavishly adorned baroque environment a collection of elements are put into play, which have at their centre Bernini's sculpted group of St Teresa and the lustful seraphim (the subject of Andrea Bolland's essay, see Figures 8.1 and 8.2). In the vicinity of the altar, several male figures rendered in high-relief provide a permanent audience to the scene, although some of them look elsewhere. The constituent parts produce a space in which engaging with the sculpture involves multi-directional viewing that enrol the visitor into becoming an active participant in a quasi-theatrical form of devotion.

At the art installations at the Sacro Monte di Varallo, discussed by Allie Terry-Fritsch, that performative potential meant total immersion. The site, created to replicate and transfer the sacred power of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, was a counter-reformatory enterprise spurred by the ambition to make the experience available to a vast number of the faithful who could not make that journey. This environment, designed to amaze and fascinate, used the virtuoso *meraviglia* style for its landscaping, architecture and tableaux, which featured life-size sculptures of saints and biblical characters with real hair and wearing period clothing. The many figures of Christ, featured at various stages of his earthly existence, were infused with lifelike qualities in order to stimulate a close and loving relationship between the pilgrims and the Saviour. Visitors to the site were encouraged to dress up and perform in a strictly stage-managed exercise akin to a passion play, which activated the sacrality of the site.

We have been shown how the devotional capacity of sacred art was promoted through direct appeal to the senses. But as Johannes de Caulibus explained, 'images were but tools to lead to a higher state of contemplation, in which it is suitable for the contemplator to be mute, deaf and blind' (*Meditationes Vitae Christi*, quoted by Lawless p.71). Bodily powers could, therefore, lead the beholder into a disembodied realm of divine recognition, an orbit in which absence, silence and blindness mediate the difficult, stoney path

6 On convents as 'domestic/institutional', see Hills (2009).

to salvation, as St Augustine (354–430) suggested in his *Confessions*.<sup>7</sup>

Religious ecstasy is a remarkable physical and mental state, which expresses a mystical union with the divine, and is often understood as brought about through intense sensual excitement. Many readings of Bernini's *St Teresa* see the saint as in the throes of orgasm. However, Andrea Bolland proposes a very different interpretation based upon seventeenth-century understanding of this kind of religious frenzy. Witnesses of the ecstasy of mystics from that time reported that the ecstatic body appeared insensate and almost dead, like a statue carved in grey stone, a gloomy reminder of a living person. Interestingly, Ignatius Loyola's hagiographers describe that he looked totally lifeless during such experiences. In the case of *St Teresa*, the animation suggested by the drapery is apparently not provoked by any sign of movement in the mystic's body. Teresa's rapture, Bolland argues, is shown as a kind of loss: she is alienated from the senses in an 'out of body' experience.

Absence and presence are interwoven themes in Shira Brisman's essay. She demonstrates how imagery of Christ's life from Dürer's *Small Passion* woodcut series mediates between the human and the divine. The prints that feature instances of touch sought or performed during Christ's experience on earth – physical contacts of bodies, hands and lips – record not only the traces of these happenings but also the moral mark that he imprinted upon mankind. These physical signs and the Saviour's virtuous teachings are likened to the medium of graphic art and its indexical nature, to the contact between block, ink and paper – the multiplication of the image and its dissemination to a large audience. A single print or a whole series (in the case of the *Small Passion*, relatively small-scale works), privately owned and viewed, might thus translate into different levels of theological understanding and multifarious nuances of devotional engagement.

In the scriptural scene (John 20:14–17) that the iconography of *Noli me Tangere* illustrates, Mary Magdalen is reported to be the first person to see the resurrected Christ. Christ, who tells her not to touch or hold on to him, is most often portrayed as swaying away from her, avoiding physical contact. However, in Dürer's print (Figure 1.1), his stance is still and he nearly caresses the Magdalen's forehead with his outstretched right index finger while she reaches her open right hands towards him. By placing their both

hands one above the other but at a distance, Brisman suggests that Dürer might have wanted to indicate their ultimate reunion, not possible at that moment, that would be realised at a later date. The opposite is the case in the engraved scene of *The Betrayal*, in which Judas's and Christ's lips meet in the deceitful kiss. Here closeness ushers in absence: Christ's martyrdom, the end to his human existence and his egress from this world.

The materiality of the work of art is also central to essays by Barbara Baert and Itay Sapir, which dwell, albeit in different ways, on embodiment and disembodiment in renaissance and baroque visual culture. John the Baptist, Christ's cousin and forerunner, is a point of connection between their essays. 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness', John the Baptist had proclaimed.<sup>8</sup> The *Johannesschüssel* – the representation of John's head on a platter (and the subject of Baert's essay) – would seem to settle on the silencing of that cry. Functioning as a kind of surrogate relic, the *Johannesschüssel*, and particularly its cruder examples, must have produced both fear and fascination, as three-dimensionality and polychromy were made to manifest in particularly graphic terms the horrific spectacle of the severed head. But, Baert's approach – that includes reflecting on the Indo-European etymology of 'throat' to uncover a wide semantic range including tube, tunnel, passage, transition, uterus, even soul – leads her to the view that 'the exhibitionism of the *Johannesschüssel* concerns the opening of all possible openings, with the tube of the throat being the most obsessive opening of all' (p.83). Beholding this object, she argues, might channel a quasi-mystic process, allowing the devotee to transgress the object's sanguinary ghastliness to address a yearning to see the invisible, the face of God.

Ribera's *John the Baptist* (Figure 2.1) offers a view of the youthful saint in the wilderness. According to Sapir, this work is emblematic of the painter's obsessive questioning, rather perplexing for a visual artist, of the limitations of sight, in order to favour the cognitive virtues of touch. The unfocused gaze, open mouth and the rubbing of hands in the *St John* picture suggest patterns that the painter repeated many times over to emphasise the shortcomings of vision to spiritual insight. This work does not show the violence for which Ribera's work is known, and, in which the appeal to the haptic is perhaps most pronounced. To Sapir,

7 'It was to the inner part of me that my bodily senses brought their messages ... with my bodily powers I had already tried to find him ...' (1961, Book X, p.212).

8 Isaiah 40:3, Matt.3:3, Mark 1:3, Luke 3:4, John 1:23, and discussed by St Augustine (Sermon 293, 1-3; L 38, 1327–28), see: [te-deum.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/st-augustin-on-st-john-baptist.html](http://te-deum.blogspot.co.uk/2012/06/st-augustin-on-st-john-baptist.html) (accessed 10 January 2015).

Ribera's robust and carnal art, his passionate brush and exacting treatment of hands and faces in works of male protagonists (saints and mystics) undergoing deep spiritual experiences, torture and martyrdom, further insist on touch as an epistemological alternative to sight. Ribera's attention to the texture of skin, the large tactile organ of the body, such as in the aged St Andrew (Figure 2.2), draws attention to the potentiality of sight as the 'embodied eye', a form of touch.

After the disturbing viewing of representations of physical suffering and its outcomes, we take refuge in the apparently tranquil landscape of Titian's *Noli me Tangere* (Figure 9.2) to close this reflection. Titian's painting of the resurrected Saviour and his most faithful female follower, Mary Magdalen, would seem to bring us back to a more conventional hierarchy of the visual and the tactile.<sup>9</sup> The impact here differs from that produced by Dürer's haptic theology. This composition exudes intense sensuality and eroticism, and stages, in a dynamic way, an exchange between vision and touch. Christ's beautiful, elegant, naked body with only hips, groin and shoulders draped in his almost transparent shroud, is presented as a tangible object of desire thanks to Titian's artifice, and, simultaneously, a phantasmic apparition, due to the lightly teetering stance, in which Christ's feet seem hardly to touch the ground. His lower body sways away from Mary as she tries to touch him with her right hand, while his torso leans slightly towards her as their eyes meet. The Magdalen's kneeling pose seems to bind her emphatically to the earth. The consuming passion she feels is accentuated by her long, loose locks and her red dress spread out on the grass, suggestive of her bleeding heart at the moment of separation from the beloved. The tall tree that divides the composition in two might be an indication of Christ's impending ascension to heaven, and the Magdalen's occupation of the realm of the sensory and the worldly, rather than that of the spiritual and the divine. In the encounter between sight and touch, sight is the favoured sense. Unlike St Thomas who was privileged to touch Christ's wounds in order to believe (see, for example, Caravaggio's *Incredulity of St Thomas*, Potsdam),<sup>10</sup> the Magdalen must see to believe when her urgent, instinctive desire to touch is forbidden.

The case studies in this issue have dwelt on a range of ways that the senses were 'evoked, engaged, embodied, constructed, and at times circumscribed, in devotional art and cultural practice of the early modern period' (Benay and Rafanelli, p.2). An outcome of these



Figure 9.2: Titian, *Noli me Tangere*. Oil on canvas, 110.5 x 91.9cm, National Gallery, London. (© The National Gallery, London. Bequeathed by Samuel Rogers, 1856)

explorations must be a fuller understanding that senses are not naturally finite and delimited, and that their meanings are historically contingent. Next steps in terms of the wider project of sensory culture studies of this period should lead us to probe still further the impact of class, gender and place on the cultural construction – the defining, redefining and delimitation – of senses. Were/are men and women subject to different senses in different ways according to these characteristics? And, if the sensorium is conditioned by gender might it also conceivably be viewed the other way round? How far are gender and spirituality staged, shaped and performed in relation to our sensibilities of the senses?<sup>11</sup>

9 On this work, see especially, Rafanelli (2007).

10 Further reading on this work includes Benay (2014).

11 The authors are most grateful to Helen Hills for her comments on the questions emanating from this issue.

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