This dissertation finds a classical source for some of the qualities of Mannerist painting usually considered wholly anti-classical. The ancient source is not the monumental sculpture which informed so many of the works of the Renaissance, but rather the ancient Roman wall paintings in Nero’s Domus Aurea. Discovered during the Renaissance, these frescoes made a marked impression on wall decoration all’antica, but their influence can also be traced in less obviously derivative works. The painting style, known by around 1500 as “the grotesque,” altered the aesthetic of sixteenth-century art, initiating a taste for the strange and decorative that is manifest in many works of cinquecento Mannerists.

INDEX WORDS: Rosso Fiorentino, Grotesque, Mannerism, Sansepolcro Deposition from the Cross, Domus Aurea
PAINTING MONSTROSITIES:
THE GROTESQUE, MANNERISM, AND ROSSO FIORENTINO

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2003
DEDICATION

To two men, one whom I lost during this process, my grandfather, Ray Miller,

and one whom I gained, my soon-to-be-husband, Paul Fox.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many people should be thanked that writing this acknowledgments page is in some ways a more daunting task than was writing the dissertation. My new fiancé, Paul, who gave me a further reason to finish so that I can start my life with him, has all of my adoration and devotion. My family - Mom and Dad, Courtney, Tripp, Stephanie, Miller, Emily and Jim – have given me the support and love (and sometimes the money) I needed to make my way through this process. My love goes out to them. My friends cannot be thanked sufficiently: my chums at my home away from home, the Roadhouse, my old friends, and my constant companions. A few I must name specifically – Megan and Kristen, who always provided an ear for me to bend, Nora, without whose invaluable “counseling sessions” I would never have made it to graduation, and Theresa, who is simply always, always there for me. To my cohorts in graduate school here at UGA, Amber and Cynthia who were walking the same difficult path with me, and Rhonda, who soon will be and provided so much support, I offer my thanks and affection (and congratulations). Many thanks to the Lamar Dodd School of Art for the school’s continued financial assistance. My professors deserve so much credit for this dissertation reaching its fruition – I am extremely grateful to Andrew Ladis, Tom Polk, Asen Kirin, and Tom Peterson, who made this work so much better through their suggestions. For treasured assistance from outside of UGA, I sincerely thank Paul Barolsky for his generous help and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation for their funding of my research in Italy. But, over all, my most heartfelt thanks go to my professor, Shelley Zuraw. For the
hundreds, even thousands, of hours she spent counseling, fussing, cheerleading, and most of all teaching me, she has my undying gratitude. No one could have a better professor, friend, mentor.
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INTRODUCTION

The ruins of Nero’s palace, the Domus Aurea, were discovered sometime in the 1480s. Paintings covered nearly every wall and ceiling space in the unearthed ruins, offering the most extensive example of Roman wall decoration available to Renaissance viewers. The Domus Aurea frescoes are web-like, architectural configurations typically composed of long strands of all manner of objects, including foliate arabesque designs, vases, candelabra, masks, *putti*, herms, animals, and hybrids beasts, all intricately woven into an overall decorative scheme (fig. 1). These lavish and complex arrangements rarely depict deep space, instead appearing more like surface design. They serve to ornament vast areas of wall space and, at the same time, to frame small narrative scenes.¹ A new term, *grottesche* (in English, grotesques) was coined for these paintings, its root word referring to the grottoes or caves in which they were discovered.² Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) described them in the technical introduction to his *Le Vite de’ piú eccelenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* as

> a kind of free and humorous picture produced by the ancients for the decoration of vacant places. For this purpose they fashioned monsters deformed by a freak of nature or by the whim and fancy of the workers, who in these grotesque pictures make things outside of any rule, attaching to the finest thread a weight that it cannot support, to a horse legs of

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² See a more extensive discussion of the word grotesque, the ambiguity of its meaning, and the permutations of the definition over time, below, Chapter Four.
leaves, to a man the legs of a crane, and similar follies and nonsense without end.³

Within a decade ancient grotesques were seized upon by Renaissance artists as a source for their own work. The Neronian model prompted a wide-ranging fashion for similar imagery that replicate the original wall decoration function of the site (fig. 2). Well into the sixteenth century, the ancient frescoes continued to inspire painters as well as artists working in other media; many artists found in the grotesque a model for other types of decorative imagery in designs for tapestries, manuscript illumination, majolica, and armor. And yet Renaissance grotesques are almost always relegated to the simple copying of classical motifs, viewed only in relationship to their classical precedents. Often treated as a mere pattern-book, one that the Renaissance artist employed to create stylish, all’antica wall surfaces, the grotesque has hardly been investigated for its influence on sixteenth-century imagery beyond such ornamental modes.⁴ As with ancient sculpture, the grotesque was


refashioned, even reborn, in just the few years after its discovery. The grotesque provided more than just a model for lavish decoration; it influenced the compositional schemes, spatial articulation, and experimentation with hybrid portrayals in even the most traditional subjects. Indeed, it left its imprint on many types of painting as a visual and as a conceptual source. The grotesque suited cinquecento tastes; it will be argued that its aesthetic choices are the same as those embodied in Mannerist paintings.

“Mannerism,” by its very etymology, is inextricably linked to style; it suffers from its own nomenclature, dismissing all but stylistic interpretations. Maniera, the Italian word translated and transformed to create the word mannerism, can mean style in its general sense of a characteristic, or can imply an idea of stylishness, a sort of finesse or polish. Yet, the term is also used to imply an artificial stylization, a single-minded adherence to a fixed formula, “a deficiency of inspiration and naturalism.” It is the last meaning that has provided modern scholars with the appellation Mannerism.

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6 As noted by nearly every text on Mannerism, and as with many eras of art history, there is no absolute style which constitutes the period; my discussions will center around works and artists most commonly included in anyone’s definition of the impulses of the period.

7 Il Grande Dizionario Garzanti della Lingua Italiana (n.p. : Garzanti Editore, 1987), s.v. "maniera." The word manierato goes on in this same vein: manierato qualifies something that is deprived of naturalism, that is affected, or that is not spontaneous. This is used to describe artists or works that lack originality and are flawed by a strong adherence to the academic canon, Dizionario Garzanti, s.v. "manierato." Dizionario Garzanti, s.v. "manierista," is the noun form of this word, and designates someone who follows this academic and unnatural style.

8 One of the major problems with the term is its lack of chronology. Mannerism is used to describe traits of works from numerous eras, unlike Renaissance works which can be positioned on a relatively secure timeline. For my purposes I will utilize the dates
Vasari employs the term *maniera* more than a thousand times in the *Vite*. When Vasari's application of the word is examined, the modern definition becomes very uncomfortable. In the Introduction to the third part of the *Lives*, he commends the artists who make up the first two parts of his narrative for their strides toward naturalism and their increased facility with coloration and composition, but then goes on to explain what they did not achieve.\(^9\) The artists of the third generation embody Vasari’s pinnacle of artistic success; he describes five artistic qualities which were completely mastered only by sixteenth-century artists: *regola* (rule), *ordine* (order), *misura* (measure or proportion), *disegno* (design), and finally, *maniera*.\(^{10}\)

Vasari employs *maniera* in several ways. He discusses the *maniera* of an artist in general terms to mean a style which is characteristic of that particular artist or of a particular period.\(^{11}\) Yet he also uses the term in a more affirmative meaning to designate a beautiful manner, *una bella maniera*, both in art and in deportment. In the "Life of Rosso Fiorentino," he attributes to the artist a quality of *maniera* in both his art, in that his work was "graceful in manner," and in his actions, in that he was a delight to the King because of

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\(^9\) Vasari: Milanesi, IV: 7.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 7-8.

\(^{11}\) In the “Life of Donatello” Vasari describes “an old man between two columns, more akin to the ancient manner than any other work that there is to be seen by the hand of Donato,” Milanesi, II: 401; Idem., *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. De Vere, Everyman’s Library (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), I: 366.

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set out by Walter Friedlaender who establishes the date of Raphael's death, 1520, for the beginning of Mannerism, and writes that it dominated the artistic theory for around sixty years, *Mannerism and Anti-Mannerism in Italian Painting* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 42-43.
his manners.12 As a qualifier of one's actions, *maniera* implies a certain poise or elegance. Adapted into the language of art, it took on the meaning of a refined, polished, and sophisticated style. In order to achieve a beautiful manner Vasari states in the Preface to the Third Part of the *Lives* that one must copy after the most beautiful things and, through proper *disegni*, combine these to create from them the most perfect figures possible.13 Such beautiful things are drawn from nature, but carefully chosen and adapted to the subject in a way that makes them appear even more correct than they do in their natural state.

Conversely, the trait of *maniera* could imply artificiality, either in a person or in a work of art. The basic difference, using modern terminology, is between "stylish," a positive trait, and "stylized," a negative one.14 Vasari himself allows the word its negative connotation. He wrote that Perugino's art was reduced to *maniera* because he fixedly followed the same formulas and theories in each of his paintings.15

Vasari's *maniera* does not indicate an era, a specific style, or an identification of the art now called Mannerist, since the term is one he uses throughout the three hundred year scope of the *Lives*. He does not even use the word to mean anything specific to the sixteenth century except, in its positive usage, the achievement of excellence he perceives within his own time. It is in the seventeenth century that the first wholly negative reactions to *maniera*


13 Vasari, Milanesi, vol. IV: 8. See below, Chapter Four, for Leonardo’s earlier description of this method.


15 Vasari, Milanesi, III, 585.
appear. Giovanni Pietro Bellori reviled the quality, which for him was an artificial and bizarre style, in the works of the years between Raphael and the Carracci.16 He writes in the preface to the Life of Annibale Carracci “The artists, abandoning the study of nature, corrupted art with the maniera, that is to say, with the fantastic idea based on practice and not on imitation. This vice, the destroyer of painting, first began to appear in masters of honored acclaim.”17 Bellori’s words show the shift in the word’s connotations, and moreover, the new perception that those works displayed a break with the Renaissance, a distinction not made in the Cinquecento. A negative view of the works was implied in Heinrich Wöfflin’s Renaissance and Baroque, where he ignores the productions of the mid-to late Cinquecento in favor of the two styles which chronologically flank them.18 The artists themselves have been viewed with skepticism. Their works, and, in consequence, their characters have been maligned.19 Despite Vasari’s praise of their works, the personal anecdotes he recounts, about Pontormo and Rosso most notably, have come to be read as caricatures of madmen – Pontormo, while exalted for the beauty and grace of his paintings, remains haunted by the stigma as a recluse and a paranoid. Rosso Fiorentino, one of the originators of the Mannerist style, is probably the most misunderstood of all. The eccentric


quality of his works, praised as beautiful inventions by Vasari, only accentuates the bizarre reputation of the personality who dueled with priests, owned and loved a mischievous ape, and died a violent death though suicide.

Only in the twentieth century was the era, the period now generally comprises the years between Raphael’s death and the beginning of the seventeenth century, defined separately from the Renaissance. By choosing it as a field of study, art historians like Walter Friedlaender in the 1920s legitimized Mannerist art, and in the 1960s and ‘70s Giuliano Briganti, Arnold Hauser, John Shearman, and Sidney Freedberg reinforced the newfound esteem for the period. And yet Mannerism still seems, more than any other artistic era, to require some sort of justification for its creations. Many theories have been suggested: Mannerism was a reaction to spiritual crisis or an attempt at visualizing a heightened metaphysical spirituality; it was spurred by the fashions of the era and the demand of eclectic patrons; it reflected a growing cynicism caused by socio-political upheaval; or even an alienation which stemmed from the rise of artistic autonomy.20 By definition, the Renaissance requires none of the speculations about artistic reasoning which so pervades the literature on Mannerism: it is art formed by its attention to classical works. Classicism, its source, provides its justification.21 Mannerist paintings champion many qualities which


21 “The great revival of art and letters, under the influence of classical models, which began in Italy in the fourteenth century and continued during the fifteenth and sixteenth; also, the period during which this movement was in progress,” Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford, England : Oxford University Press, 1989), s.v. “Renaissance.” See Edit Pogány-Balás, The Influence of Rome's Antique Monumental
seem set in opposition to Renaissance ideals of naturalism, idealism, and balance. They
depict shallow spaces which encourage figures to stack up against the picture plane. The
centers of the images are sometimes unfocused or empty, with most objects or figures
circcling the margins. Extravagant and artificial decorative aspects are promoted, even
privileged. The paintings frequently contain disturbing, sometimes even monstrous,
components. Yet these same attributes are found in one source, one identical in origin to the
Renaissance’s classical models: the paintings in Nero’s Domus Aurea. As described by
Vitruvius:

[But] these paintings, which had taken their models from
real things, now fall foul of depraved taste. For monsters
now are painted in frescoes rather than reliable images of
definite things. Reeds are set up in place of columns, as
pediments, little scrolls, striped with curly leaves and
volute, candelabra hold up the figures of aediculae, and
above the pediments of these, several tender shoots,
sprouting from coils of roots, had little statues nestled in
them for no reason, or shoots split in half, some holding
little statues, some with the heads of beasts. Now these
things do not exist nor can they exist nor have they ever
existed, and thus new fashion has brought things to such a
pass that bad judges have condemned the right practice of
the arts as lack of skill. How, pray tell, can a reed really
sustain a roof, or a candelabrum hold the decorations of a
pediment, or an acanthus shoot, so soft and slender, loft a
tiny statue perched upon it, or can flowers be produced
from the roots and shoots on the one hand and figurines on
the other? Yet when they see these deceptions, people
never criticize them, but rather take delight in them, nor do
they ever notice whether any of these things are possible or
not.22

Sculptures on the Great Masters of the Renaissance, trans. Árpád Debreczeni (Budapest:
Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980).

22 Vitruvius, Ten Books on Architecture, trans. Ingrid D. Rowland (Cambridge:
91-92.
While Vitruvius’s description of the works reveals his contempt for the style, Renaissance artists viewed the paintings quite differently. The value with which they imbued the discovered frescoes is demonstrated by their immediate adoption and sustained adaptation of the ancient decorative mode. The first chapter will begin tracing the development of Renaissance grotesques with the discovery of the Domus Aurea and its subsequent imitations. Chapter Two will address the noticeable revisions to the standard grotesque that developed within a decade of the discovery of the Domus Aurea. These adaptations display a new liveliness and liberation from the original marginal field. Chapter Three will identify how the decorative and lyrical qualities of the grotesque were adapted to imbue paintings outside of the typical grotesque context with similar ornamental notions. An exploration of the monstrous aspects of the grotesque will be undertaken in Chapter Four. The combination of beauty and ugliness, delightfulfulness and monstrousness, the very defining features of the grotesque, appear in many different forms in the works of one painter, Rosso Fiorentino. Examples of these myriad aspects will be demonstrated in Chapter Five and then, finally united in a single painting, Rosso’s heretofore perplexing Sansepolcro Deposition, in Chapter Six.

Artistic choices of Mannerism did have a source, and one, by virtue of its ancient ancestry, equally as laudable as that for the Renaissance. The grotesque model, though initially simply providing a model for ornamental wall design, came to help shape the visualization of all manner of artistic creations. The grotesque, in the years after its disinterment from its grottoes, gave birth to and reshaped the aesthetic of the Cinquecento.
CHAPTER 1
THE GROTESQUE EXHUMED

By the mid 1400s, the passion for artifacts unearthed from the ruins of ancient Rome was well established.\(^{23}\) This enthusiasm for all things antique spurred numerous excavations in Rome and its surrounds. The pursuit of such antiquities ranged from the collecting of ancient coins to the translation and transcription of classical texts, some of which had fallen into relative obscurity. The most renowned of the adoptions and adaptations from the antique is certainly in the field of artistic production. Newly unearthed sculptures and sculpture fragments provided models from which the Renaissance artist could draw. As some of the more notable antique sculptural discoveries were being unearthed and scrutinized, amid these same sites the excavators also were finding examples of a less monumental and more fantastic variety of classical art – decorative painting which adorned the walls of Imperial palaces.

In the 1480s, while digging at the site of Trajan’s baths, the explorers broke through into a yet more deeply buried set of ruins – the vestiges of Nero’s formerly

magnificent palace, the Domus Aurea, or Golden House (figs. 3 & 4). The fascination with the ruins of ancient Roman palaces, villas, baths, and fora had already taken hold in the quattrocento mind, but this site offered a view into an area of Roman art of which Renaissance artists previously had very few models – decorative painting. Because it was integral to the palace, what they found at this site could not be acquired in the customary manner – obtaining another classical object for one’s collection. But the paintings were collected in another way. They were revived to decorate modern palaces. The imagery there became one of the most powerful influences on contemporary decorative painting, and then went on to inspire images with altogether different functions.

A great deal of information exists about the Domus Aurea’s early history and patron. The sixth of the ancient Roman Caesars, the emperor Nero, reigned from 54 to 68 C.E. Nero’s perversions, as well as the antagonism he provoked in the Roman populace, are catalogued by Suetonius and Tacitus. Among his more damnable activities were his profligate building projects. According to Suetonius, “There was nothing in which he was more ruinously prodigal than in building,” and the biographer then goes on to list the extravagances Nero dictated for his new palace and to describe the devastation of the emperor’s, and thus the Roman people’s, finances which followed in

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the wake of the construction of the palace complex. The Domus Aurea was constructed to replace Nero’s former palace, the Domus Transitoria, after the conflagration of Rome in 64. The fire raged for six days before guttering out, and during this week of horrors, Nero, according to legend, watched the destruction from the tower of Maecenas singing and taking pleasure in the beauty of the flames. Accounts of Nero’s reaction to the fire by Suetonius and Tacitus imply that the emperor saw the tragic occurrence as opportune “ground-clearing” for his grander building schemes; Suetonius even goes so far as to say that the fire was set by the emperor himself.

The Domus Aurea was so named for its gilded façade, but the appellation possibly also made reference to what had been called the “golden reign” of Nero. Tacitus writes that the architects of the Domus Aurea were Severus and Celer who “undertook to conquer nature, and to perform wonders even beyond the imagination and the riches of the prince.” The dimensions of the palace structure were approximately 985 feet long and 295 feet wide. Nero’s lavish palace, as described by Suetonius and Tacitus, contained such as extravagances as a 120-foot tall statue of the emperor in its vestibule, a rotating banquet hall, perfume running through the plumbing which could be released as a spray into the rooms, ceilings of ivory, and walls adorned with gold, jewels, and mother-of-pearl. The surrounding complex, too, was immoderately grand, consisting of buildings,

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29 Tacitus, *Annals*, XV, 111.
baths, fields, lakes, woods, and pastures, and covered most of the Palatine, Celian, and Oppian Hills before construction ended. Although Nero claimed that in this palace he was “at last beginning to be housed like a human being,” the Roman people were horrified by the sprawling complex, as attested to by a ditty that according to Suetonius circulated as the building was going up:

All Rome’s become one house,
To Veii fly,

Unless it stretch to Veii,
Bye and bye.”

After Nero’s suicide in 68 CE, the construction continued for a few months under Otho, the eighth Caesar. After Otho’s murder in 69, the succeeding Flavian emperors apparently recognized the extreme discontent of the populace and attempted to appease them by destroying much of the complex. It has, however, also been suggested that some of the palace complex was utilized and even added onto by the Flavian emperors. Vespasian and Titus replaced Nero’s private lake with the Colosseum, Domitian razed the palace structures on the Palatine and built new palaces, and after a fire that broke out in 104 damaged what remained of the palace structure, Trajan had the ruins pulled down to the first floor to provide the groundwork for new thermae. Martial’s description at

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30 Suetonius, 261. See also Martial’s reference to Rome being “one house,” below.

31 Suetonius, 269.

32 Suetonius says Otho allotted fifty million sesterces for its completion, 301.


the 80 C.E. dedication of the new edifices recognized the rededication of the land to structures which benefited, or which at least were not odious to, the people:

Here where the glittering solar colossus views the stars more closely and where in the central road lofty machines grow up, the hateful hall of the beastly king used to radiate its beams, at the time when a single house used to occupy the whole city. Here where the mass of the conspicuous and revered amphitheater rises up, the pools of Nero once stood. Here where we marvel at that swiftly built donation, the baths, an arrogant field had deprived the poor of their homes.”

The Renaissance excavation across from the Colosseum on the slopes of the Oppian Hill first exposed the ruins of Trajan’s baths and then, upon further digging, the remnants of the Domus Aurea. That sumptuous setting described by Suetonius and Tacitus had almost completely vanished by the fifteenth century. What remained were a series of corridors and rooms cluttered with refuse. The debris found at the site was in fact just that: after the 104 CE fire had destroyed the main body of the palace, rubble from the building was piled into the rooms and the openings bricked up so that it could provide a foundation for Trajan’s baths. Some vestiges of the palace’s former splendid ornamentation had been preserved however; numerous frescoes on the decaying walls and ceilings were still visible. While neither Suetonius nor Tacitus makes mention of these paintings, Pliny, in his _Natural History_, written just a few years after the palace construction, states that their creator was the artist Famulus. Pliny claimed that the artist had been made a prisoner to the task of painting in the Domus Aurea, an explanation that

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is unsurprising since almost every room abounds with complex arrangements of decorative scenes, and, again according to Pliny, the overwhelming nature of this task was the reason that there were not more examples of Famulus’s work.\textsuperscript{37} He writes that Famulus painted for only a few hours a day, dressed formally in a toga.\textsuperscript{38} Pliny also provides an interesting characterization of the painter. After calling him serious and severe, which is supported by the formality of his working attire, he goes on to describe him as “floridus et vividus.”\textsuperscript{39} Perhaps this contradictory end to his statement may be linked not to the man, but to his paintings, for that incongruity strangely applies to the dualities present in the works themselves.

Revealed in the Domus Aurea excavation were elegant designs of intricate foliage, elaborate candelabra, draperies, masks, \textit{putti}, and architectural motifs. (figs. 5 & 6). These exquisite things were combined with imaginative creatures: mythological beasts and unnatural hybrids, crossbreeds of humans and various animals, sometimes charming in their invention, sometimes gruesome (figs. 7 & 8). Famulus’s work traditionally has been classified in the fourth stage of the Pompeian style.\textsuperscript{40} The Fourth

\textsuperscript{37} Pliny, \textit{Natural History}, xxxiii, 120.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., “paucis diei horis pingebat, id quoque cum gravitate, quod simper togatus quamquam in machinas.”

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., “gravis ac severus, idemque floridus et vividus.”

\textsuperscript{40} Roger Ling, \textit{Roman Painting} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 71. The appellation of the First through Fourth Styles was codified by August Mau in \textit{Pompeii: Its Life and Art}, trans. Francis W. Kelsey (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902), 41–44, following Vitruvius’s first two chronological designations, what are called the “Incrustation Style” and the “Architectural Style,” which are, respectively, representations of marble slabs or cornices and representations of architectural structures which seem to open upon landscape scenes. Mau calls Vitruvius’s ultimate style, the one which he disparages as poor art, the “Ornate Style,” and goes on to name a final style, the “Fantastic, or Intricate, Style,” for the more whimsical offspring of the “Ornate.”
Style is characterized by its drawing from elements present in the Second and Third: the Second Style’s illusory breaking of wall space through to a *trompe l’oeil* exterior landscape unite with the Third Style’s slender and ornamented fictive architecture. The delicate, marginal decoration present in the Third Style became more abundant and more dramatic in the Fourth, allowing for more novel creations in its ornamental motifs. Nero had built a fantasy world for his residence and then had it filled with painted fantasies. These “wonders even beyond the imagination” were what appeared before the eyes of their quattrocento discoverers. The interest the frescoes sparked can be witnessed in the many names of visitors, including artists and patrons, etched into the walls and ceilings of the ruins.\(^41\)

While some antique decorative cycles in stucco and fresco had been discovered before this at the Colosseum and in outlying estates such as Hadrian’s Villa, such a profuse display of this style of ornament had never been witnessed.\(^42\) The Renaissance

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\(^{41}\) While these inscriptions cannot be verified as true signatures, they have typically been identified as such. See Dacos, *Découverte de la Domus Aurea*, Appendix I, 149-160, for his discussion and list of the graffiti in the palace ruins. These are not the first graffitied names found in a revered Roman site; even more famous are the many “signatures” marked on the walls of the crypt at St. Peter’s and at Sta. Costanza.

\(^{42}\) Most of the surviving decoration at Hadrian’s Villa is in a geometric or “architectural” style, and while some of the stuccowork shows arabesques with small figures, the designs are not as flamboyant as those seen in the Domus Aurea. See William L. MacDonald and John A. Pinto, *Hadrian’s Villa and Its Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), esp. 151-170. Some portions of Pompeii may also have been available, although Mau states that no major excavation occurred there before the seventeenth century, *Pompeii: Its Life and Art*, 25.
visitor could gain access to fourteen rooms, among them “The Room of the Owls,” “The Room of Hector and Andromache,” the rooms containing the “Yellow Vault,” the “Golden Vault,” the “Black Vault,” and two corridors that run along the north end of the building, one in the center and one at the east end of the palace (fig 9). Because the rooms had been completely entombed only a few years after they were painted, many of the paintings were in remarkably good condition. Above all, the Domus Aurea site offered an abundant repertoire of antique painted imagery within the confines of the papal city.

The paintings were copied almost immediately after their discovery. Domenico Ghirlandaio is presumed to have signed his name in the Golden Vault room, and his workshop made detailed drawings of the wall paintings, which are compiled with sketches of antique architecture in the 1491-1508 Codex Escurialensis (fig. 10).

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43 See the fold-out map in Segala and Sciortino, Domus Aurea. Dacos, Découverte de la Domus Aurea, Plate 1, Fig. 1, also includes a plan which shows not only the zones open in the Renaissance, but also the walls which date to Nero’s construction and those that were put up by Trajan.

Giuliano da Sangallo included sketches of the grottoes in his Codex Barberini (begun 1465) and the Taccuino Senese dated around 1513-14 (fig. 11). These drawings provided opportunities for continued study of the images without the inconvenience of having to revisit the site to get a glimpse of them.

These paintings proffered a new artistic vocabulary to be utilized by artists of the late Quattrocento. Of the numerous painters who had a glimpse of the Domus Aurea frescoes and stucco reliefs, a few immediately applied their knowledge of these novel visions to their own works. The spell of these images almost immediately inspired Renaissance patrons to commission copies of such works, both for their own palaces and for sacred Christian spaces.

Hellmut Wohl discusses the grotesque’s affect on ornamental style in his recent Aesthetics of Italian Renaissance Art. He notes that the all’antica style quite prevalent

might have originally been responsible for sketching the Domus Aurea designs is supported by his fame for executing drawings after the antique: Vasari tells us that Ghirlandaio was amazingly skilled in his drawn reproductions of antiques; he could reproduce them perfectly without measuring the original models, Milanesi, III: 271-272.


The paintings were engraved Nicolas Ponce by and published his Descriptions des bains de Titus (Fol. Paris, 1786). Also see the recent republication of the images in Terme di Tito e loro interne pitture in Domus Aurea: La Decorazione pittorica del palazzo neroniano nell’album delle “Terme di Tito” conservato al Louvre, essay by Marie-Noëlle Pinot de Villechenon (Milan: Franco Maria Ricci, 1998).

in the Quattrocento was expanded by the introduction of the grotesque. What Wohl
terms the “ornate classical style,” the early Renaissance employment of swirling acanthus
and candelabrum supports used as structural elements for framing, was heightened by the
new grotesque imagery. The foliage and candelabra were joined, not replaced, by novel
elements from the Domus Aurea. These images also presented a new format for
decorative work; no longer following older examples in which all’antica decorative work
was relegated to the margin, these decorative bands could expand outward to cover entire
walls or ceilings just as they did in the Golden House.

Numerous examples of all’antica borderwork and fictive sculptural decoration
exist in quattrocento painting. Reproductions or imitations of the Domus Aurea frescoes
do not mark the first ancient influence on the painting of the Renaissance. Roman
decorative motifs had been observed previously in sculpture fragments and had already
made a significant impression on fifteenth-century painted ornamental embellishments
inside and outside the walls of Rome. The legacy of those ancient carved designs can be
seen in the painted “sculpture” or “stuccowork” created before the Domus Aurea
excavations, witnessed in works outside of Rome like Mantegna’s Camera degli Sposi in
the Castello di San Giorgio, Mantua (ca. 1465-1474) and Ghirlandaio’s Annunciation of
the Death of Santa Fina in the Chapel of Santa Fina, San Gimigniano (1477-1478). 48
These two cycles share little except the artist’s interesting use of fictive ornament derived
from Roman models. In both cases the artists’ work after their visits to Rome only

48 Ronald Lightbown, Mantegna with a Complete Catalogue of the Paintings,
Drawings and Prints, 2nd edition (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986), 99-
117, cat. no. 20, 415-419; Michele Cordaro, “The Most Beautiful Room in the World,”
Mantegna’s Camera degli Sposi, trans. Huw Evans (Milan: Electa, 1993), 11-12;
Cadogan, Domenico Ghirlandaio, 48-55.
expanded on this theme. Ghirlandaio’s interest in the antique had already been demonstrated through his authorship of the *Codex Escurialensis*. Mantegna, too, while he had not been to Rome before the date of this cycle, studied antique sculpture and incorporated that visual information into his works. The aforementioned Renaissance frescoes by these artists show a familiarity with antique sculpture, seen as with Mantegna’s cycle as painted stucco vaulting, and seen in both as carved pilasters (figs. 12 & 13). The sculptural model was used to represent fictive sculpture. The Camera degli Sposi’s and Santa Fina chapel’s antique-inspired designs are mostly comprised of arabesque-like tendrils of foliage which grow upwards from candelabra and vase supports. The passages which employ these adopted designs function exclusively as framing elements, for the larger narrative scenes or as frames for Mantegna’s vault portraits of the Caesars.

With the discovery of the Domus Aurea frescoes came a vast new source for painters, indeed a catalogue of painted models. The result was that no longer did the Renaissance painter feel compelled to employ antique design, heretofore mostly

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witnessed in ancient marbles, merely to create fictive sculpture. Now that they had a prototype for painted imagery, the designs could be used outside of a sculptural format. Further, the sheer profusion and effusiveness of the Domus Aurea frescoes must have been unexpected, based on previously available models. The paintings there functioned not just as borders, but covered whole walls. The designs witnessed in the grottoes demonstrated an expanded freedom of invention. While Mantegna does include a disembodied head (fig. 14), or mask, in one of his border concoctions, his Camera degli Sposi creations do not approach the extensive catalogue of oddities that would be found in the Neronian designs.\(^{51}\)

The Domus Aurea paintings clearly were recognized to be unusual at the time of their discovery – they were a “new fashion” according to Vasari. The author’s quote that Raphael and Giovanni da Udine “were struck with amazement . . . at the freshness, beauty and excellence of these works . . .” attests to the fascination the novel images triggered.\(^{52}\) Modern imitations of them began almost immediately.

Pinturicchio was among the first artists to witness these unearthed frescoes and to employ this newfound vocabulary in his commissions.\(^{53}\) By the time of his commission

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\(^{51}\) This has been identified as a self-portrait of the artist, interestingly shown trapped by, or growing from, the antique imagery by which he was so fascinated. For this identification, see Keith Christiansen, *Andrea Mantegna: Padua and Mantua* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 28, 86.

\(^{52}\) Vasari, Milanesi, VI: 551; De Vere, II: 488.

for the Piccolomini Library in Siena (fig. 15), the fashion for using this type of imagery was fully established; it was in fact in the 1502 contract for the commission of the Piccolomini Library that the term *grottesche*, invented to name this imagery, is first documented. In this document Cardinal Francesco Tedeschini-Piccolomini, who later became Pope Pius III, specified that the artist include “disegni che hoggi chiamano grottesche,” designs that they now call grotesques,” in his library decorations. Such a specification, using this new word, seems to imply that the patron was asking for something different from the typical all’antica imagery he had witnessed in other decorative cycles.

Pinturicchio’s work in Innocent VIII’s Villa Belvedere in the Vatican, dated between 1494 and 1497, marks his first commission in the antique mode. Although much of the original decoration is either unrecognizable due to its deplorable state or was eradicated during the eighteenth-century redecoration, Vasari’s description gives an idea of what originally adorned the walls: “a loggia full of landscapes depicting therein Rome, Milan, Genoa, Florence, Venice, and Naples…”. This description makes no mention of grotesques, but seems to show Pinturicchio’s knowledge of what has been


54 See below, Chapter Four, for a discussion of the term “grotesque.”

55 The entire contract is reprinted in Milanesi, III: 519-522; see esp. 519 for this quotation.

56 Vasari provides the beginning date, Milanesi III: 498. An inscription on the ceiling of the Gallerie delle Statue provides the end date of the work.

57 Ibid., III: 498.
classified as painting in the Second Pompeian style.\textsuperscript{58} His antique-inspired decorations were stimulated further with his access into the Domus Aurea, where it is believed he documented his visit to the underground ruins by graffiti-ing his name (fig. 16) in the room of the “Yellow Vault.”\textsuperscript{59} In his decoration for the Borgia Apartments, dating between about 1492 and early 1495, is one of the earliest extant quattrocento program in which the specific imagery of the \textit{grottesche} is employed, however sparingly (fig. 17). Pinturicchio’s 1495 work in the Castel Sant’Angelo apparently used antique grotesque elements as its primary motif; Vasari says he painted “infinite stanze a grottesche.”\textsuperscript{60} Although the Piccolomini Library walls show narrative scenes merely bordered by grotesques as in the Borgia Apartments decorations, the vault of the library presents a veritable explosion of grotesques whose very complexity, strangeness, and overwhelming extent elicits the delight and wonder that is the essence of the grotesque (fig. 18). Here Pinturicchio found license to freely experiment with the newfound imagery, not only in its individual figural types, but also in its composition, the breaking down of the space into various compartments, and its original function, covering a vast space with outlandishly flamboyant designs.

Some artists seem to have set themselves up as not just painters who could execute grotesques within larger decorative schemes like Pinturicchio, but as specialists in a new category, painters of the grotesque. Morto da Feltro is assigned by Vasari to the

\textsuperscript{58} See description of that style above, 15, n. 40.

\textsuperscript{59} Segala and Sciortino, \textit{Domus Aurea}, 48. For a complete list of the names scratched into the Domus Aurea walls in the centuries after its excavation, see Dacos, \textit{Découverte de la Domus Aurea}, 139-151.

\textsuperscript{60} Vasari, Milanesi, III: 499-500; De Vere, I: 574.
category of laudable painters of the grotesque. He writes that Morto came to Rome during the time that Pinturicchio was painting his grotesques in the Borgia Apartments and the Castel Sant’Angelo and implies that it was the study of these rooms that influenced Morto’s fascination with the painting of these antique images. The suggestion has been made that the name “Antoni da Feltre” inscribed on a wall in the ruins of the Domus Aurea might be his signature, and Vasari writes that he constantly studying antiquities and “never tired” of examining the excavated grottoes and their vaults. The work assigned to him by Vasari in the Palazzo della Signoria seems to have been his most successful venture, but the paintings were lost in the refurbishment of the palace for Duke Cosimo in the 1540s. Vasari heaps praise on the painter for his work in this arena: “Morto da Feltro…was as original in his life as he was in his brain and in the new fashion of grotesques that he made, which caused him to be held in great estimation...”.

Giovanni da Udine is perhaps the most famous of these painters of the grotesque, making his living, and his fame, by the reproduction and development of this imagery. Several years after its initial excavation, when the rooms of the Golden House were far more easily accessible, Raphael and his assistant Giovanni toured the site. Vasari’s “Life of Giovanni da Udine” makes it clear how impressive the antique works were to Raphael’s young apprentice:

61 For the identity of this artist see Adolfo Venturi, “Di un quadro inedito de Morto da Feltre,” L’Arte 1 (September 1930), 473-475, and a further discussion of his identity, below, in chapter 6.

62 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 202; De Vere I: 924. Again, see Dacos’s list in Découverte de la Domus Aurea, 150.

63 Milanesi, V: 201; De Vere I: 924
These grotesques – which were called grotesques from their having been discovered in the underground grottoes – executed with so much design, with fantasies so varied and so bizarre, with their delicate ornaments of stucco divided by various fields of color, and with their little scenes so pleasing and beautiful, entered so deeply into the heart and mind of Giovanni, that, having devoted himself to the study of them, he was not content to draw and copy them merely once or twice.\(^{64}\)

His master, too, must have believed them very important, not just as an archaeological find which would have been under Raphael’s supervision as Chief Prefect of Antiquities for the Vatican, but also as design elements that Raphael almost immediately put to use in three commissions at the Vatican Palace between 1516 and 1519.\(^{65}\) Raphael’s knowledge of the Vitruvian categories of Roman painting is a certainty. He owned, annotated, and wrote commentaries on Vitruvius’s books of architecture.\(^{66}\) A poem written by Girolamo Aleandro around 1519 dedicated to Raphael attests to the perception that it was he who allowed grotesques the appreciation they enjoyed by that date:

Who, I ask, has taught you to rep[roduce the forms buried beneath the earth and to put them before the light of our eyes? To measure through their long course the subterranean places and not violate the houses built above them?\(^{67}\)

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\(^{64}\) Vasari, Milanesi, VI: 551-552; De Vere, II: 488.


Under Raphael’s direction, Giovanni da Udine was placed in charge of the grotesque frescoes for the stuffetta of Cardinal Bibbiena, and then again in Bibbiena’s Loggetta. The stuffetta grotesques are painted on dark red and black grounds and consist of sea creatures, putti, decorative plant stalks, and ornate architectural constructions (fig. 19). They were designed to frame the erotic images inspired by Ovid’s Metamorphoses. The antique painting style was surely intended to complement the illustrations of the ancient Roman text. The Loggetta is similarly ornamented with decorative foliage, elegant architectural motifs, and combined forms, now on a solid white background (fig. 20). While some of the grotesques here do operate as framing elements for fictive grisaille statues and, as in the bathroom, for antique scenes, there is also a significant shift in their use. Many of the scenes are made up only of grotesques. The grotesque is no longer strictly a framing device but also had become the focal point of the decorative scheme.

The next of the Vatican commissions in which we see Giovanni continuing with his production of “antique” ornament is the private loggia for Pope Leo X. For this he created stucco grotesques to accompany his painted grotesques. The emulation of antique stucco work had been attempted before, but had not reached the delicacy of the antique models due to an inaccurate mixture of the plaster. Giovanni experimented

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68 The more sexually suggestive of these, “Venus Removing a Thorn from her Foot” and “Pan and Syrix” were obliterated by an apparently “more prudish” tenant of the bathroom, Roger Jones and Nicholas Penny, Raphael (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 193.

69 Ibid., 193-194. For further information on Giovanni’s stuccowork, see Gian Camillo Custoza, Giovanni da Udine: La tecnica della decorazione a stucco alla “Romana” nel Friuli del XVI secolo, Pasian di Prato: Campanotto Editore, 1996.
with the technique and the ingredients of the formula until successfully perfecting it.\(^{70}\) In this site, too, we see a new use of the grotesques (fig. 21). Although they have again been consigned to the border, they now frame representations from the Bible. The enframed scenes make up what has been christened “Raphael’s Bible,” a series of depictions of mostly Old Testament and some New Testament narratives which decorate each of the thirteen bays of the loggia, four in each bay.\(^{71}\)

There seems to have been no contradiction in providing these pagan fantasies a place in the margins of this very Christian cycle. In the preceding years humanism had endorsed a conflation of ancient learning, philosophy, and literature with Christian beliefs – Raphael’s Stanza della Segnatura bears witness to its acceptance by even the pope – so the use of antique imagery in a Christian context is not surprising. Another answer has been posited for this seeming incongruity: the fantastic decorations have been compared to the frequently monstrous or whimsical creations that adorn the margins of illuminated gospel books, thus making Raphael’s Bible even more like the text it mimics.\(^{72}\) But Giovanni’s choice of an antique form as the model for his decorative creations rather than a medieval book shows a marriage of the two genres: he created a new mode, easily comprehended as the same type of imagery found in illuminated manuscripts but much more enviable because of its Neronian source.

\(^{70}\) Vasari, Milanesi, VI: 552.


\(^{72}\) Davidson, 39.
The examples mentioned above are only a few of the many that began appearing in the early years after the 1480s discovery of the Domus Aurea. Even Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling has been linked to the compartmentalization of grotesque vault decoration (fig. 22). By mid-century, numerous examples of its inspiration existed: the rooms of Raphael’s Villa Madama, Giulio Romano’s Palazzo Te decorations, Ridolfo Ghirlandaio’s Palazzo della Signoria halls, Perino del Vaga’s decorations in the Castel Sant’Angelo – the list is so extensive as to demand abbreviation in a study such as this. What is clear is that the vogue for grotesques was rampant by the mid-Cinquecento and was fueled largely by the discovery of Nero’s Golden House.

The spread of the grotesque and its continued popularity can be credited not only to its escalating manifestations in secular decoration, but also to the profusion of reproductions of them which began making their way across Italy and on to other parts of Europe in the early Cinquecento. Among the first of these reproductions was the Codex

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75 For a limited study, one just of the stufe decorated with grotesques in the cinquecento, see Quando Gli Dei Si Spogliano: Il bagno di Clemente VII a Castel Sant’Angelo e le alter stufe romane del primo cinquecento (Rome: Romana Società Editrice, 1984).

Escurialensis, which, as already mentioned, was sent to Spain by 1509 and which appears to have been copied before its journey out of Italy. 77  Prints were also made of these designs – a 1505 print bearing the monogram “ZA,” believed to be Giovanni Antonio da Brescia, shows an early response to grotesque design; his later work fully incorporates this vocabulary. 78  Nicoletto Rosex da Modena, an artist who signed his name in the Domus Aurea in 1507, disseminated his knowledge of the frescoes through prints. 79  No dates were included on these engravings, but they were copied by numerous other artists: the aforementioned Giovanni Antonio in Italy, in Germany by Lambrecht Hopfer, and in France by Jacques Androuet du Cerceau in the mid sixteenth-century. 80  The Sack of Rome, which sent many artists who had settled in the papal city fleeing to other places allowed for a dispersal of the influence of the Roman cycles. 81  A few of these artists ended up in France at the court of Frances I, among them Rosso Fiorentino, the designer of the Palace at Fontainebleau and one of the initiators of the Fontainebleau School, itself responsible for much of the spread of the new grotesque-inspired fashion of ornament. One of Rosso’s printmakers, Domenico del Barbiere, engraved and published a series of


78 The French Renaissance in Prints from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Los Angeles: Grunewald Center for the Graphic Arts, University of California, Los Angeles, 1994), cats. 112-117, 362.

79 Again, see Dacos’s list, Découverte de la Domus Aurea, 148.

80 The French Renaissance in Prints, 362.

grotesque prints during the 1540s while in France. Other Italian printmakers linked to Rosso, Marcantonio Raimondi and Agostino Veneziano, also created plates of grotesque ornamental designs. Inspired by the Fontainebleau School which brought so much of this Italianate design north of the Alps, Jacques Androuet de Cerceau, admired for his albums of architectural design, also produced engravings of grotesques and grotesque designs for vases, furniture, jewelry and the like, fifty of which were in circulation in 1550 and later compiled more in his *Livre de Grotesques* of 1566 (fig. 23).\(^82\)

The effect of this wide dispersal of ornamental motifs led to the incorporation of the grotesque in many media. As at Fontainebleau, Francis I’s lavish palace, it followed the original function as wall decoration for “imperial” estates.\(^83\) The grotesque influenced the creation of numerous forms of goldsmithing and metalwork. It appeared again as decorative framework for religious paintings. Tapestries, maiolica, and manuscripts also made extensive use of the motifs.\(^84\) These designs could be employed wherever there was a desire for elegant and extravagant embellishment. By mid-century the exhumed frescoes had claimed a far-reaching influence and the grotesque had become a solid fixture in Renaissance decorative art.

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\(^83\) See my discussion of the Fontainebleau decorations below, Chapter Five.

A print by the Master of the Die after Perino del Vaga, *Grotesques* (fig. 24), depicts a grotesque design containing a herm-like woman with foliage forming her lower half and supporting a branching shifting vase on her head, but its caption makes clear the powerful influence of the antique-inspired style:

Poet and painter as companions meet⁸⁵
Because their strivings have a common passion
As you can see expressed in this sheet
Adorned with friezes in this worthy fashion.
Of this, Rome can best examples give,
Rome toward which all bright talents are heading
Whence now, from grottoes where no people live,
So much light on this fine art is spreading.

The Domus Aurea frescoes were undoubtedly considered a worthy model, yet, as I will show, it did not remain a static one, and its influence did not end with mere imitations. Almost immediately arises a shift in function. This in turn was followed by an absorption of the decorative aesthetic qualities of the grotesque into images which bear no formal or conceptual relationship to antique decorative painting.

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CHAPTER 2

THE GROTESQUE AMPLIFIED

Vasari categorized some painters as solely painters of the grotesque, those who strictly adhered to the antique model. Although within that category Vasari did recognize a certain excellence, his evaluation of these painters never approached the level of praise he reserves for painters of more serious subjects. Even in his admiration of Morto’s ability to “restor[e] the painting of grotesque in a manner more like the ancient than was achieved by any other painter . . .,” one can read between the lines that this is limited praise. Vasari goes on to say, “every man knows that it is easy to make additions to anything once it has been discovered.”

While the grotesques themselves were quite praise-worthy in their imaginative and bizarre constructs, Vasari implies that the exact copying of them or even variations on them did not really require the artist’s imagination. In the Preface to the Third Part of The Lives, Vasari explains the ways in which the art of his time had been able to reach such a level of excellence. He says artists in the earlier ages, although approaching excellence, had fallen short of attaining true perfection,

for there was wanting in their rule a certain freedom which, without being of the rule, might be directed by the rule and might be able to exist without causing confusion or spoiling the order; which order had need of invention abundant in every respect, and of a certain beauty maintained in every least detail, so as to reveal all that order with more adornment.

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86 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 205-206; De Vere, I: 926.
87 Ibid., Milanesi, IV: 9; De Vere, I: 618.
The concept of freedom within order is the salient point – the ability to understand the model but then move on to a more individual interpretation or production while still referring to the model.

It is this concept which seems to motivate Vasari’s description of the grotesques of Filippino Lippi, an artist who, although of the second age, merits respect because of his judicious license:

So abundant [was] his invention in painting, and so bizarre and new were his ornaments, that he was the first who showed to the moderns the new method of giving variety to vestments, and embellished and adorned his figures with the girt-up garments of antiquity. He was also the first to bring to light grotesques, in imitation of the antique, and he executed them on friezes in terretta or in colours, with more design and grace than the men before him had shown; wherefore it was a marvellous thing to see the strange fancies that he expressed in painting.  

Filippino was well known for his sketches of antique architecture and fragmentary sculpture. Cellini describes “losing his heart” to Filippino’s book of drawings from the antique, and Vasari claims that Filippino “never executed a single work in which he did not avail himself with great diligence of Roman antiquities…” While working in Rome he would have had access to not only the ruins scattered throughout the city, but to collections of antiquities such as the Lateran Collection which had moved into the Palazzo dei Conservatori in 1471. Filippino, like many of his contemporaries, also

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88 Ibid., Milanesi, III: 461-462; De Vere, I: 565.
89 Cellini, 31-32; Vasari, Milanesi, III: 462; De Vere, I: 565.
made the descent into the Domus Aurea to see the frescoes there. Yet he did not merely adhere to the patterns he observed in Nero’s palace, but, using those images for his base, created different types of imagery. He copied the antique, but also expanded upon the repertoire and, ultimately, the uses of the ancient painting style.

Although the sketchbook Cellini remembered so fondly from his childhood has been lost, other drawings directly from the antique by Filippino’s hand are known. His sketch of the Departure of Hippolytus for the Hunt, placed next to a harpy and a decorative border (fig. 25), on the verso of the Portrait of a Woman in the Guise of Minerva, are copies of the decorations in Nero’s palace. The use of this same harpy is clearly identifiable in the east wall frieze of his Strozzi Chapel frescoes. The model has been readjusted and reworked into twin putti who hold candles and lift the Veronica Veil between them. And, while extant copies after the antique by him are somewhat scarce, what do survive are numerous images by Filippino that, although inspired by the antique, are creations of the artist’s own imagination. While his source is the classical, he uses his model not as an authoritative pattern, but as a springboard to even more inventive constructs. Among a series of eight drawings now in the Uffizi, two designs for candelabras testify to Filippino’s ability to re-invent classical imagery (fig. 26).

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91 Dacos, Découverte de la Domus Aurea, records a signature believed by Filippino in the Golden Vault, 147.


93 The Drawings of Filippino Lippi and His Circle, cat. 61 and 62 (228-229). Alessandro Cecchi’s catalogue entry dates them in the early 1490s either during
are not direct copies from any known antique source, but have been identified as original designs based on Filippino’s familiarity with the grotesque format.

Filippino was summoned to Rome in 1488 to paint the chapel of the Neapolitan cardinal Oliviero Carafa in Santa Maria sopra Minerva.\textsuperscript{94} Classically styled decorations abound in this work, mostly fitting within the quattrocento all’antica mode.\textsuperscript{95} Antique-inspired architecture is present in both the narrative scenes and in the frameworks of the paintings. He included in the Assumption of the Virgin the depiction of painted sculpture fragments which are clearly derived from ancient sculpture, and even portrayed well-known Roman sculpture from antiquity – he painted the bronze Marcus Aurelius, thought during the Renaissance to represent Constantine, in the background of the Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas (fig. 27).\textsuperscript{96} Not only painting to suit the current taste for all’antica motifs, Filippino also employed these antique components to help set a recognizable stage, whether it be a scene of the ancient world, as in his Assumption of the Virgin where an ancient sarcophagus lies in the foreground and a triumphal arch is seen in the landscape, or a view into a more recent, but emphatically Roman, setting, as in the

\footnotesize{Filippino’s late work on the Carafa Chapel or at the beginning stages of his work at Poggio a Caiano, 228. See also Jonathan Nelson, “Filippino Lippi at the Medici Villa of Poggio a Caiano,” Florentine Drawing at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent. ed. Elizabeth Cropper. Villa Spelman Colloquia Vol. 4. (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1994), 159-174.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{94} Gail L. Geiger, Filippino Lippi's Carafa Chapel: Renaissance Art in Rome (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1986); Enrico Parlato, “La decorazione della cappella Carafa: allegoria ed emblematica negli affreschi di Filippino Lippi alla Minerva,” in Roma, centro ideale, 169-184; Neilson, Filippino Lippi, 76.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{95} See the discussion of Wohl and the all’antica mode before the Domus Aurea discovery above, Chapter One.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{96} See Geiger, 103-104, for a discussion of the implications of this sculpture’s inclusion.}
**Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas.** The employment of grotesque decoration is plentiful: the fictive pilasters framing the chapel are decorated with candelabra, foliate arabesques, masks, and hybrid creatures, the same motifs found in the Domus Aurea. The depictions of these are, however, unusual. The hybrids are more pronouncedly monstrous and lively than what was typically produced in grotesque ornament. In these examples, Filippino’s inclusion of classicizing imagery, while bolder and more lifelike than the antique models, still remains in the margins.97

And yet, his revision of the grotesque was more extensive than just making it more personally idiosyncratic. In some cases he altered the model from pagan, decorative motifs to one imbued with distinctly Christian symbolism. His painted frieze in the **Triumph of St. Thomas** has been compared to the frieze from the Temple of Vespasian on the Capitoline: Filippino inserted Christian motifs into the decorative border where the Roman artist had employed pagan images of sacrifice.98 Another adaptation of all’antica imagery can be seen in the **Triumph**, one that shows a strange confusion between decorative motifs and figures within the narrative. Two putti, components of both ancient and Christian art, stand atop the central aedicule and hold up inscribed plaques (fig. 28). It is unclear whether these represent living putti or sculpture. Filippino has by his stacked construction implied that they are members of a grotesque composition like seen in this scene’s framing pilaster (fig. 29): they are supported by column pedestals and in turn provide supports for objects above them. Filippino has

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97 Neilson, 93.

moved what are nominally decorative components of the grotesque out of the frame and into the center of his narrative.

By the time Filippino returned to work at the Strozzi Chapel in Florence’s Santa Maria Novella around 1489, commissioned before the Carafa Chapel but almost immediately interrupted by that appointment, he had been experimenting with the grotesque style for several years. The chapel frescoes employ grotesque-styled friezes, figured pilasters, and fictive architecture comparable to those at the Carafa (fig. 30), again showing the artist copying and employing grotesque imagery for ornament and to create fictive frames. But in this chapel, too, he allowed his grotesques a new freedom and liveliness.

Here it is possible to glimpse the budding metamorphosis of the grotesque style – Filippino allowed his grotesques to cross the border between fictive and real. He places them in the center of his images and imbues them with more vitality than strict decorative work should have. There is an apparent shift in that the images based on the grotesque vocabulary are not employed only for decorative purposes but also as instruments of the narrative. As with the Carafa Chapel’s putti that seemed to be in some ways both real and decorative, in the Strozzi we see instances where the grotesque figures move from the margins to act in the “center” of the frescoes. In the scene of St. Philip Banishing the Dragon (fig. 31), what appear at first glance to be purely decorative motifs carved onto antique fixtures, then seem to belie that notion: they start to take on the appearance of

real, not fictive objects. The sculpture atop the entablatures to the side of the altar of Mars, while having the characteristics of a sculpted ornamental “collection,” is seen as actual piles of antique armor and weaponry. The figure of Mars is set on a pedestal and thus clearly supposed to be read as sculpture. And yet this figure is as animate as the figure of Philip. The dog and woodpecker perched precariously on the pedestal with him, although frequently seen in similar positions in ornamental design, seem also to be alive. The pedestal on which they stand, the object that should explicitly identify all three as sculptural figures, further confuses sculpted material with the real. The pedestal is itself a recognizable feature of grotesque decoration. It is also an obvious piece of stone furniture. As actual furniture supporting the weight of the sculpture of Mars, it must be read as real, just as Phillip and the dragon in the scenes are real. Yet the elaborate carving on its surface and its repetitive stacked quality must have been intended to recall, not actual antique pedestals, but the bases of grotesque structures.

Luca Signorelli, like Filippino, fashions grotesques that are not so much reproduced, but reinvented. His work in the Chapel of the Madonna of St. Britius in the Cathedral of Orvieto began many years after the original commission was abandoned by Fra Angelico. He arrived to start the job in April 1499 and then lobbied the patrons of the chapel to allow him to take up the theme of eternal placement in Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory, based on descriptions from Dante’s Commedia. As noted by Dacos, he was

100 For a comparison with Roman sculpture, see the Tiberian Arch at Orange, discussed in Diana E. E. Kleiner, Roman Sculpture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 154-155. Other representations of such trophy collections also were available in Rome; see Bober and Rubenstein, cat. no. 175 for the Two Trophy Pillars, present in Sta. Sabina by the late fifteenth century.

101 Signorelli met with the Opera members to get permission for his plans and the contract was approved on April 27, 1500, Dugald McLellan, Signorelli’s Orvieto
among the first to liberate the grotesque from the limits of pilasters, friezes, and ceiling decoration, by allowing them wide-ranging fields in the socles of the chapel.\textsuperscript{102} Here they encircle portraits of poets, still acting as frameworks, although ones which almost overwhelm his nominal subjects (fig. 32). While the identities of several of the grotesque-framed portraits are still contested, the identification of Dante and Virgil are secure.\textsuperscript{103} Appropriately, both of these authors dealt with transformation in some sense – Dante in his visions of the metaphysical transition of humanity at the end of time and Virgil in his descriptions of journeys of the living to and from the abode of the dead. A third portrait, although still much debated, has frequently been identified as Ovid, who in his \textit{Metamorphoses} told of the passage from the world of the living to that of the dead but also of the physical metamorphosis of both gods and humans.\textsuperscript{104} Signorelli’s choice of these poets for the wainscot clearly is intended to bring to mind other visions of the end of time to join his own elaborate vision depicted above. Equally apposite thematically is his decision to surround these poets with figures that themselves are in a transitional state – from vegetation to structure to human to animal to mythical being.


\textsuperscript{102} Dacos, \textit{Découverte de la Domus Aurea}, 73.

\textsuperscript{103} See Creighton Gilbert’s discussion of the portrait identities and their meaning in \textit{How Fra Angelico and Signorelli Saw the End of the World} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 91-98

\textsuperscript{104} The portrait is usually identified as Ovid because of the scenes of Pluto and Proserpina which surround it, not exclusively, but most famously, recounted in the \textit{Metamorphoses}. See Gilbert, \textit{Fra Angelico and Signorelli}, 93-94, where Gilbert argues for the identification of this figure as Claudian.
The figures populating the decorative pilasters which frame the narrative scenes are monsters—demons, depicted as hybrid creatures, who torture human figures (fig 33). These fields retain the bilateral symmetry found in the typical antique decorative structure seen in both ancient paintings and relief sculptures, and because they are painted in grisaille, appear to be fictive stuccowork or marble relief. These depictions by Signorelli can be explained by the creatures with hybrid qualities present in Christian exegesis. It is equally true, however, that that Christian imagery, from Early Christian mosaics to Medieval manuscripts, parallels the combined human/animal forms of Signorelli’s grotesque marginalia. For Signorelli, the grotesque provided not just a model for decorative framework, but a stylistic vocabulary for the depiction of mutations, literally required by the narrative. Vasari praised the “bizzarra e capricciosa invenzione” of the images in this chapel because they elucidated the terror that certainly would be experienced at the end of the world, and these concoctions are certainly terrible in their hybrid appearance.\footnote{Vasari, Milanesi, III: 690.}

Signorelli’s transformative imagery extends into his depictions of the narrative - transitions from dead to alive and mortal to immortal in the scenes of The Resurrection of the Dead, and metamorphoses from human to beast in The Damned (fig. 34a). The narrative scene of the Damned elicits a comparison with ancient art in its strong resemblance compositionally to Roman battle sarcophagi, but in terms of the hybrid construction of its figures, the grotesque is again evoked.\footnote{See Bober and Rubenstein for numerous examples of these battle reliefs.} The demons depicted in The Damned (fig. 34b), akin to the ones present in his marginal designs, are hideous mutations of humans that exhibit the wings of birds and bats and the horns of goats and
bulls. Their inhuman, shifting coloration makes them even more monstrous. Even the angels, although traditionally represented as humans with bird appendages, can find some kinship, at least in terms of their physical makeup, with the antique harpy. This adaptation of the grotesque structure imbues what was merely decorative with a more pointed, and more disturbing, meaning. Thus creatures from the narrative seem to have invaded the marginal border, and creatures that had been meant to stay within framing devices now also appear in the center of the images – there is no longer a boundary between the grotesque as decoration and the grotesque as real. In Signorelli’s Orvieto frescoes the Domus Aurea’s graceful whimsy developed into horrendous malformations.

In the *Rule of the Antichrist*, there are two clearly hybrid creatures. The figure of Satan is represented as a horned man, thus a hybrid concoction of human and animal. A different type of hybrid is seen in the depiction of the Antichrist (fig. 35) who echoes and then deviates from the recognizable figure of Christ. The curls of the hair suggest horns; the look in the eyes is not the beneficent gaze of a saviour but the glazed stupor of a madman. This figure is not a human/animal hybrid, but a Christ/Satan hybrid. Thus the form that would normally signify the calm beauty of the Christian protagonist has here become the horror of a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Further evidence of his evil nature has been noted by Reiss, who compares the stance of the figure to one derived from a coin depicting Nero. Medieval and Renaissance tradition considered Nero an effective

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108 See Riess’s discussion of the use of Nero as model for the Anti-Christ, in *Renaissance Antichrist*, 121.
prototype for the Anti-Christ; here the emperor’s own hybrid decorations have provided a supplementary model for that figure.

Andrea del Sarto’s *Madonna of the Harpies* (fig. 36a), painted for the nuns of San Francesco dei Macci between 1515 and 1517 and now in the Pitti, presents the Virgin standing on a pedestal holding the Christ Child and flanked by Saints Francis and John the Evangelist.\(^{109}\) The base on which the Virgin stands is classically inspired. Mythological creatures are sculpted at the corners of the hexagonal pedestal (fig. 36b) like those seen in such candelabra bases as the Roman *Bacchic Dancers* base (fig. 37) in the Museo Archeologico, Venice.\(^{110}\) While this could be considered only the employment of all’antica accoutrements in keeping with Renaissance’s elevated interest in the classical world, the manner in which the antique monsters are represented, as well as their relationship to the human participants, are markedly odd.

The monsters have been identified as either harpies or sphinxes.\(^{111}\) Both types are hybrid creatures: the harpy composed of the head and breasts of a woman and the wings of a bird; the sphinx also a concoction of bird and woman but combined with a lion’s body. I read the legs of the creatures neither as those of birds or of lions, but as an even further hybridization: they appear to have human legs with cloven hooves for feet. And these beasts show another grotesque metamorphosis of form — as Shearman points

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\(^{110}\) See reproduction and catalogue entry in Bober and Rubenstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture*, fig. 89, 121-122.

\(^{111}\) Shearman, *Andrea del Sarto*, vol. I: 47, n. 6 and vol. II, cat. 46, 236-237, says that they are sphinxes.
out, the creatures’ wings convert into a cartouche between them. The harpy or sphinx motif is a common one in the grotesque vocabulary, found in the Domus Aurea and reproduced in Renaissance grotesques (fig. 38). Yet the creatures depicted on Andrea’s base are not random all’antica motifs. They operate in the manner of grotesques in that they are a support for other figures. Although painted in a sculptural grisaille, they are not merely decorative figures. The beasts seem sentient rather than inert stone. They react to the figures that they support; the two foremost harpies look up with gaping mouths and evident expressions of anguish. Interpretations have related their presence to the subjugation of the ancient world and the Old Law brought about by the birth of Christ through his virgin mother.\textsuperscript{112} Their symbolic meaning is not in question here; it is their activation that needs further examination. These beasts, which in grotesque decoration would remain clearly fictive, have been altered by Andrea to become participants in the scene. In a further shifting, the configuration of a standing figure posed on a pedestal leads one to expect a sculpted figure rather than a living one atop it. The Virgin is surely intended to be read as a real presence, and yet the sense that she is a statue, an icon for worship, is implicit.\textsuperscript{113} Painted sculpture now acts alive and the living may be mistaken for sculpture. The line between what is decorative and what is ostensibly real has become blurred.


\textsuperscript{113} Shearman, in Andrea del Sarto, vol. I, 47, and, Only Connect, 59-60, describes this pedestal attribute, its placement within a niche, and the supporting putti as all lending themselves to the idea that she is to be seen as a goddess or a cult statue.
Andrea’s student, Jacopo Pontormo, took this notion and its odd usage even further. A similar ambiguity between what is living and what is sculpted may be seen in his 1518 *Virgin and Child with Saints John the Evangelist, Joseph, John the Baptist, Francis, and James* (fig. 39) executed for the chapel of Francesco di Giovanni Pucci in Florence’s San Michele Visdomini. The *putti* present at the top corners of the painting stand on sculpted pedestals, and, while depicted with the same vital coloration as the other participants, still retain the aspect of sculptural form: their placement and, therefore, their function, imply that they are sculptures in a typical grotesque stacked construction.

Pontormo’s *Joseph in Egypt* panel (fig. 40), now in London’s National Gallery, was one of four paintings executed by the artist in 1515-1518 for the nuptial chamber of Francesco Borgherini and Margherita Acciaioli. The inclusion of two nude statues set up in the square can easily be linked to the art of the classical world. These sculptures are peculiar, however, in that they seem not wholly marble. They are too active and seem almost alive. Another figure, the *putto* atop the pedestal at the far right, is clearly not made of stone. His flesh is rosy, his hair golden, and his drape a white distinct from

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116 Paul Barolsky, *Infinite Jest: Wit and Humor in Italian Renaissance Art* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 119, also notes this incongruity. This might have, for the Florentine viewer, evoked a practice at the Feast of S. Giovanni in Florence, in which children dressed as angels were attached to revolving poles, discussed in Martin Wackernagel’s *The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist*, trans. Alison
the greyish tone of the other marbles. He mimics the gesture of the statue in the right
background, obviously attempting to parade himself in the same guise. The cloth that
swirls around his middle seems to react to his own movement or to a gust of wind
through the depicted courtyard – neither of which would be possible if this were truly
marble. Here again the boundary between two states seems broached: the grisaille statues
seem almost alive and the “living” putto pretends to be a sculpture.

Although not hybrid combinations of animal and human, these figures on bases,
too, are of a composite nature. They are both marble and flesh, sculpture and actor.
They partake of both the marginal realm as well as the central one. They have the ability
to shift from a narrative role to an inactive, merely decorative one, and back again. These
images have animated even what should be understood as inanimate objects and have
made ornamental what purports to be the materially real.

While such examples show artists utilizing the grotesque as more central
characters, many artists continued to represent them as only marginal figures, as their
original function prescribed. Even with these, however, there has been a change in the
manner of representation. Perino del Vaga’s spalliera for the Sistine Chapel (fig. 41), to
be hung under Michelangelo’s Last Judgment fresco, depicts sphinxes, further hybridized
by the fact that rather than the hind legs of lions, they have foliage or some sort of
feathery substance growing from their back ends. Yet the Renaissance obsession with
naturalism of form was applied even to these marginal and hybrid concoctions. Perino’s

describes the festival in his Life of Cecca, Milanesi III: 199-203; De Vere, I: 502-505.
The element of decorative fantasy seems to have been significant in the celebrations,
which made use of all sorts of supernatural or unnatural disguises and sets.
harpies are so anatomically well-described, so muscular and fleshy, that they seem no less real than the human figures they frame; bones and tissue seem to support the skin.

More and more the grotesque seems to push its boundaries, sometimes even to the point of occupying more space than the narrative scene they purport to decorate. Perino’s frescoed decorations for the Sala Paolina in the Castel Sant’Angelo (fig. 42) maintain the original format of the grotesque, wall painting, and contain many of the same motifs, but exhibit a new robustness, with excessively large and active figures which almost overwhelm the walls.\(^{117}\) Tapestries likewise employed antique designs, depicting borderwork of interlacing foliage, which, in the wake of the Domus Aurea discovery changed, from relatively subdued bands of graceful arabesques to an explosion of grotesque-inspired imagery (figs. 43 & 44). Manuscript illumination, too, was enhanced by the new influence. A comparison between the early Renaissance borders of Suetonius’s *Lives of the Caesars* and Amico Aspertini’s *Ghisleri Hours* marginalia shows a similar amplification. (figs. 45 and 46) Aspertini’s raucous grotesque border of the *Ghisleri Hours*’ Adoration of the Shepherds vies for attention with the narrative scene, diverting the viewer from what should be the ostensible focus of the manuscript page.\(^{118}\)

\(^{117}\) See Marcia Hall, *Color and Meaning: Practice and Theory in Renaissance Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 187-192, for discussion of Perino’s indebtedness to both ancient design and Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling.

\(^{118}\) For the manuscripts pages, see J. J. G. Alexander, *Italian Renaissance Illuminations* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), cat. no. 38, 114-116. The Domus Aurea frescoes caused not only the privileging of borderwork, not witnessed so fully since the Middle Ages, but a renewed interest in Medieval marginalia, a source fallen out of favor for centuries but re-examined in the Cinquecento. The heightened appreciation for miniaturist borderwork is evidenced by Vasari’s description of Giulio Clovio as a “new, if smaller, Michelangelo,” De Vere, II: 854. See Maria Giononi-Visani, *Giorgio Giulio Clovio: Miniaturist of the Renaissance* (London: Alpine Fine Arts Collection, Ltd., 1993) for a study of Clovio’s works and contributions to Mannerism. The influence of the Gothic style on Mannerist artists is discussed by Friedlaender, 10-12.
Even though still delimited by their acting as framework, Perino’s figures seem more real and Aspertini’s more prominent than typical in their ancient form. The grotesque has begun to exceed its traditional bounds.
CHAPTER 3

THE GROTESQUE METAMORPHOSED

The last chapter examined works in which the grotesque was adapted, either by moving its components into the center, or by allowing it to take on more lively, or more lifelike, characteristics. This chapter will examine the influence of the style, not within its own genre, but on works that cannot be categorized as grotesques. In these we will see not a failed attempt at grotesque decoration but a visual translation of grotesque qualities into something else. The appellation Renaissance itself is suggestive of the idea of rebirth, in fact, for the grotesque, it was a resurrection. The rebirth of the grotesque into these different forms occurs after its initial copying and revision identified in the Renaissance; it is in the Mannerist era where the ancient style’s change to a new type of existence can be identified. Mannerism is itself a hybrid creature: it is the offspring born from Renaissance ideals and unburied antique painting.

One must only look at the mainstream art of the turn of the Cinquecento and at that of the mid-century to see that the ideas of beauty clearly changed. There was apparently a revision of the concepts of beauty, from just an imitation of nature as held in the early fifteenth century, to a quest to incorporate something more of the divine – a “spiritual and aesthetic objective.”\textsuperscript{119} The emphasis on natural models shifted toward a fondness for heightened gracefulness through artificiality. Mannerism as a general rule sought to create form which could not be found in nature or which attempted to perfect

nature’s flaws, either by taking, as Leonardo commended, aspects of the most beautiful, or by completely revising what was natural, elongating it, twisting it, somehow mutating it, to create a more elegant and graceful form. Where the Renaissance held up antique sculpture as their model of beauty – natural and yet idealized – the Mannerists took another model for their principle. The grotesque, redolent of a wholly unnatural beauty, provided the perfect source.

A reiteration of the qualities of the grotesque, both in the ancient model and Renaissance imitations, is necessary at this point. Grotesque objects are frequently hybrids which alter their shape from one type of form to another. The grotesque is stylistically characterized by its elongation of forms which are connected at odd junctures. These linkages of graceful and artificial figures are typically shown in an extremely shallow space and thus are constructed in vertical stacks or circular links at the surface of the picture plane, a quality which lends itself to suitability for marginalia or framing devices. The lyrical extended forms branch out and then curl back in upon themselves, creating decorative and graceful passages of pattern. Many of these same qualities can be seen in works of the Mannerist era.

Pontormo’s Deposition of 1525-28 (fig. 47), made for the Capponi Chapel in Sta. Felicità, Florence, is arguably the most famous of all Mannerist works and, in some sense, is regarded as an icon of that period. Many comparisons may be made between Pontormo’s renowned image and the grotesque. Clearly here Pontormo does not seek to create a grotesque per se; he employs its qualities, its essence, its very aesthetic, to provide the underpinnings for this image. The painting is composed of a swirl of figures around a central axis. Delicate, pallid colors transform unexpectedly into brilliant acidic
hues, muddy greens and dirty linen tones are juxtaposed with vivid contrasting colors, and all are enhanced by their contrast with the dulled blue and browns of the sky and ground. These colors surface and resurface throughout the painting, linking the figures through the colorful drapery. The branching colors create graceful currents around the painting, much like the winding circular structures seen in the Domus Aurea’s Yellow Vault (fig. 48), where the rectangular frame contains winding passages around its border, connecting to support a roundel of grotesque design at its center. Pontormo’s draperies create an encircling undulation of form that, while not intended to be grotesques, are a visual equivalent. Vitruvius’s “reeds…little scrolls, striped with curly leaves and volutes” are transformed into the curling, lyrical forms of arabesques of drapery.

The ground plane seems to disappear beyond the first few feet of depicted space. The uppermost figures are lifted up off of the ground, as though they are hovering above it, or are somehow stacked on the figures below them. They seem to float, a perception underscored by the unseen support for all but the three lowest figures, the two men who hold Christ’s body and the woman in pink and yellow, whose feet rest, tip-toed, on the ground. The youth in blue at the lower left appears to support the upper body of Christ, but his legs do not seem to brace to support the body, but almost to dance, and the ballet-like position of his feet cannot provide sufficient foundation to support such weight. The

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120 Hall, *Color and Meaning*, 174-179, discusses the rare quality of Pontormo’s coloration, that it is painting in high value palette without shadows, and recognizes his debt to Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling. She also discusses a “hybrid mode” of coloring, a selection of the best selected prototypes, which occurred in the High Maniera; 158-159, 169-80.

two foreground male figures are evidently to be read as lifting the body of Christ, but it is unclear who holds up the Virgin. Visually her “base” must be the woman in pinks and oranges who turns to embrace her. The Virgin, in turn, seems to provide some mysterious support for the figure of John who bends forward above her. This unsound network of weight-bearing support, too, is a grotesque quality: thin tendrils of vegetation provide gravitationally impossible bases for human or animal figures or architectural structures (fig. 49), or, to again quote Vitruvius’s description, “reeds are set up in place of columns, as pediments…candelabra hold up the figures of aediculae.”

In Pontormo’s painting, like in sixteenth-century grotesques (fig. 50), carved pedestals are replaced by an equally implausible construction, the flesh and blood human figures who act as bases.

The grotesque melding of parts, seen in antique examples (fig. 51) and in Renaissance grotesques (fig. 52), is simulated in the Deposition’s merging figural parts. The Virgin’s knees and upper legs form parallel lines which almost connect with her son’s. The converging hands at the center of the canvas are fragmented, seemingly disjointed from the surrounding bodies; careful scrutiny is required to trace each back to its owner. The pink/blue sleeve that comes from behind Christ’s left ear seems an odd distortion; it appears to be the pink-veiled woman’s left arm, but should be associated with the turning figure partially hidden behind Christ. The arm of Christ falls to his side, but is easily confused with that of his supporting figure – Christ’s elbow is placed so that it seems, at first glance, to be protruding from this figure’s blue sleeve. The youth’s legs reach up to link with Christ’s dangling right arm, which is then echoed in the parallel arm of his supporter. This visual pathway continues upward, following the lock of hair curled

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122 Ibid.
around Christ’s neck to connect with the down-stretched arm of the bowing woman in blue. Thus Vitruvius’s notion of hybridism in the grotesque, that “shoots split in half, some holding little statues, some with the heads of beasts,” is implemented too; while Pontormo provides no beasts, his figures do seem to meld into other figures, shifting form, throughout the painting.123

This elegant interlacing and composition which presses out toward the border corresponds to the grotesque, which too is composed of arabesque-like passages and resides at the margins of the field. The composition seems to lace around the margins of the panel; the group of figures swirls around, and makes a frame, for the off-center body of Christ. Yet Pontormo’s figures do not act solely as border-work in the manner of the grotesque, but as the focus, as the main image. He makes them alive and shifts them into the center just as was done in some of the earliest Renaissance transferences discussed above in Chapter 3. Pontormo does not aim to create a grotesque; indeed, there is nothing here to suggest the ancient world or its decoration. The components that characteristically made up the grotesque have disappeared. No candelabra, pedestals, or foliate supports are represented. But they are only alluded to by the twisting vertical forms of the figures and their draperies. Here the hybrids are the lamenting figures that seem to meld together and grow from each other.

The Deposition’s human figures help to constitute the painting’s lyrical play of lines. Several of the figures, like the body of Christ or the man in blue who holds his shoulders, subtly swivel at the axes of their waists, placed into poses which echo movements of grotesque scrollwork or foliate design (fig. 53) but are also linked to a

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123 Ibid.
sixteenth-century invention, the *figura serpentinata*.\(^{124}\) The serpentine form literally embodies the Mannerist twisting of components of form into graceful arabesques, and by the late sixteenth century, the *figura serpentinata* had become codified as a standard trait in figural depiction. Michelangelo’s *Victory* (fig. 54) was a model for the fully developed idea of the *figura serpentinata* and exhibits the desire to create an emphatically distorted but elegant stylization.\(^{125}\) The abdomen strains vigorously to the left while the head cranes in the opposite direction. The right arm’s elbow makes a hard twist to the left, and its hand curls back in to reconnect with the right shoulder. The victorious figure rests his knee atop the defeated foe hunched below, who becomes a pedestal for the upper figure. The limbs of the *Victory* and the drapery that winds across his back act as lyrical decoration which follows this same structure. The serpentine positioning of figures into elegant torsions exhibits a decorative rather than naturalistic intention. The Sistine Chapel ceiling prophets and sibyls who twist out of their spaces, so suggestive of a natural ability to move, stand in marked contrast to *figure serpentinate*, in which, to cite Shearman’s famous phrase - “torsions are not accompanied by effort,


125 Carved in Florence in the 1520s, the Victory was initially conceived to form part of the Julius tomb. It was presented to Grand Duke Cosimo after Michelangelo’s death and installed by Vasari in the Palazzo Vecchio, where it remains today. The basic problems related to the history and iconography of the *Victory* are summarized in, amongst others, John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture, An Introduction to Italian Sculpture*. Vol. III, 4th edition (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 433-434. This figure was never used for the tomb; Michelangelo later intended to decorate the tomb with the *Slaves* now in the Accademia, 434.
The classical principles of contrapposto which govern the natural weight shift, balance, and the effects of gravity on the human form are here pushed to the extreme for a new method of creating Polykleitos’s concept of \textit{rhythmos} (which in reference to a figure implies harmonious movement), one far less concerned with the practical matter of natural human movement than with beauty. \footnote{Shearman, \textit{Mannerism}, 83.} Lomazzo says, “It will never have grace if it does not have this serpentine form.” \footnote{Lomazzo, \textit{Trattato}, II: 97.} Even Leon Battista Alberti, who as a proponent of moderation would not have approved of such excessive twisting, wrote “Therefore the painter, wishing to express life in things, will make every part in motion – but in motion he will keep loveliness and grace. The most graceful movements and the most lively are those which move upwards into the air,” \textit{On Painting}, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press 1956; 1966), 74.

\footnote{Summers, \textit{Michelangelo and the Language of Art}, 82, identifies the role contrapposto plays in Lomazzo’s description of creating the serpentine figure. He relates the word to the Latin contrapositum, a term derived from the Greek antithesis which is “the rhetorical figure in which opposites were set directly against each other,” 76. In “\textit{Maniera} and Movement” Summers states that the concept of contrapposto had a very general meaning in the Renaissance, one which would have encompassed both the classical, Polykleitan sense of natural movement and the more extreme positioning of the \textit{figura serpentinata}, 273. The idea of contrapposto and antithesis will be discussed more fully below in Chapter Four.}

\footnote{Summers, “\textit{Maniera} and Movement,” 294, cites the Laocoön and the Pasquino as examples and even the Apollo Belvedere as “mildly serpentine.”}
from a vertical core. Standard grotesque design differs from the serpentine figure in that it typically does not spiral in space, but is comparable in its forms which lace up and out from itself. While Pontormo’s figures cannot be said to be true *figure serpentine*, as it had not been codified yet, this decorative form seems incipient here. The appreciation of such forms might have found its nascence in the similar, but more delicate coiling of the grotesque, laying groundwork for the application of the more extreme decorative positioning of the fully-fledged *figura serpentinata*.

Many sixteenth-century images exhibit some of these same traits, traits which are considered Mannerist but which are founded on the grotesque aesthetic. In the vault of Santa Maria della Steccata in Parma (1531-1539), Parmigianino depicted female figures supporting vases on their heads (fig. 56). The figures themselves are very elegant and graceful and intensely decorative: “Movement flows seamlessly from one beautiful woman to the next, from one arabesque of classicizing drapery to the next. Each triad of maidens, with its intricate harmony of interlaced poses, moreover seems to invite comparison with the Three Graces, personifying every aspect of grace, charm and splendour.” These figures have been identified as depictions as the wise and foolish virgins, thus iconographically explaining their bearing vases and lamps. They are clearly to be read as living, acting figures, and yet the artist has deliberately recalled the structure

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130 Lomazzo, *Trattato*, I: 33. Summers, in “Maniera and Movement,” suggests that the snake reference in the term might have been derived from the Laocoön’s serpent, which causes such twisting movement, 284.


of the grotesque in both this vertical stacking and their context. He has placed them in
the vault of the arch, the common situation for grotesque painting. They are
accompanied by other grotesque motifs: masks, foliage, animal heads, and tiny stacked
figures which metamorphose from one form to the next, linking to objects above and
below them in decorative chains. The “virgins” here, while purportedly part of a
narrative, still primarily act as grotesque decoration.

What coined the name for Parmigianino’s famous Madonna of the Long Neck
(1534-1539) is yet another decorative effect typically heralded as a Mannerist
characteristic – a pronounced extension and elongation of figural form (fig. 57). The
figures have repeatedly been exalted because of the delicate and graceful beauty caused
by just this artificiality. The bodies of the Virgin and Child are composed of parts
which are unnatural yet seem overwhelmingly graceful because of their elongation: the
too-long body of Christ undulates across the lap of his mother, the delicacy of the
Virgin’s touch is implied by her long, tendril-like fingers, and, most conspicuously, the
Virgin’s bare, elongated neck stretches and curves to create a passage more like an
ornamental embellishment than a human body component. Natural anatomy, just like
natural movement, has been discarded in favor of graceful stylization, much like that seen

133 Purchased by the Medici in 1698, the painting is now in the Uffizi, Florence. For the history of this painting, see Cecil Gould, Parmigianino (New York: Abbeville Press, c. 1994), 140-1 and Chiusa, Parmigianino (Milan: Electa, 2001), 160-164.

134 See Elizabeth Cropper’s “On Beautiful Women, Pamigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style,” Art Bulletin 58 (1976), 374-394, for the discussion of ideal female beauty, especially in his Madonna of the Long Neck, based on the proportions of antique vases. Vaccaro, “Resplendent Vessels”, 134-146, also takes up the impulse to create beautiful form with this model, as well as the iconography of the vases, with the female vase-bearing figures in the vault of the Steccata.
in antique grotesque, wherein slender arabesques, the curves of swans’ necks and wings, and the horns and tails of various beasts form elegant and decorative passages (fig. 58).

The left-most angelic attendant in Parmigianino’s painting is posed in a subtle serpentine position, his shoulders twisting to the left of the panel and his hips turning in toward the enthroned figures. His visible right leg seems only a fragment, dislocated from his torso by the vase he holds. The angel acts as a vertical border which extends up the left side of the panel: the visual route starts at the curving leg at the bottom, passes through the vase the angel holds at the center, and continues upward along the swag of drapery to conclude at the top. The extension composes the left side of a frame for the central figures. At the other side of the painting is a column, which although deceptively appears as a compressed colonnade at ground level, is clearly a single unit. The column provides the right hand border for the seated figures. It is a foundation structure which in fact supports nothing. The iconography of vase and column in images of the Madonna has been much discussed; the vase may symbolize the Virgin as vessel and the column might relate to ideas of Mary as the Church. But these objects too are recurrent components of the decoration for Nero’s Golden House. Some of its narrative frescoes contain these same items: The Birth of Dionysus depicts a prominent vase in the foreground, and The Youth and Education of Dionysus shows a column with no

supported figure at its top. (figs. 59 & 60). Furthermore, the objects are constituents of
grotesque border-work wherein the vase functions to support and connect disparate forms
(fig. 61), and the column a common part of grotesque architectural structures (which
frequently house nothing). Typically in the grotesque these extensions act as marginal
borders for a central scene; Parmigianino follows suit, setting his angel/vase/curtain
concoction and his column up to serve as a frame for his Madonna and Child.

Parmigianino depicts the fixtures of the grotesque, but also makes them function in two
ways – as commonplace furniture for the central scene but also, by implication of their
composition, as border-work, both of which are applications seen in the Domus Aurea
frescoes. While Parmigianino’s composition is not an exact quote of an individual
grotesque design, it partakes of many grotesque qualities.

Pontormo’s Visdomini altarpiece, already mentioned for its muddling the
distinction between sculpture and purportedly real figures, displays an almost acrobatic
vision of a sacra conversazione and yields a further example of the integration of
classical grotesque traits, specifically in its patterning, framing function, and stacked
composition.136 Although at the top of the painting the room is defined by a diagonal
recession toward an apse-like niche, the space seems insufficient for this large group.
The figures are pressed close to the picture plane, yet rather than forming a frieze-like
composition, these figures are piled one on top of the other in order to fit within the
shallow space. The figures compose a decorative surface made more pronounced by the
highlighting and sometimes vivid colors that are pressed emphatically forward by their
contrast with the murky shadows.

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The composition of the painting takes the form of a mandorla flanked by vertical columns. The horizontal perimeter of the mandorla is demarcated by the torso of Joseph and the shoulder of Francis, and vertically it is delimited by the head of the Madonna at its top and the left foot of the infant John at its base. To the sides of this central zone are two bordering columns of figures. Although, at the left, the Evangelist’s legs seem to mirror the lower part of the central mandorla, his torso and his arm are vertically braced; the pedestal above him appears to rest on his head, and it in turn supports the putto who extends his right leg down to meet it and his right arm up to the top of the painting. On the right side, James’s firmly planted left leg visually extends through his left arm, meeting it at his hip, and this arm seems either to convert into the leg of the putto above him, or to create a horizontal ledge on which the putto stands. The shallow space and the consequent stacking of figures create a visual pattern of limbs. The splayed legs of the infants John and Christ mirror each other, creating a laddering design which zigzags up to the enthroned Virgin. Even the Baptist’s pointing finger, symbolic of his signaling Christ as the Saviour, appears to make a pedestal, however implausibly, for his divine cousin.

A few drawings by Pontormo may further demonstrate this inclination toward creating figures that form intricate interlaced patterns à la grotesque design. A sketch of a group of the dead for San Lorenzo (fig. 62), never executed in paint, show piles of human forms that twist, elegantly and ornately, around each other.137 Deep space seems completely rejected by the artist in favor of the design achieved by the undulation of line

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formed by the twisting of the bodies in and out of the heap. Another drawing for the same commission, the Christ in Glory (fig. 63), shows the same intertwined figures, but in this image their bodies link up to make a mandorla for the figure of Christ at the center. The body, while still human, has become ornament. Indeed, Freedberg’s description of this sketch could be mistaken for a visual response to the grotesque: “Jacopo’s designs are abstract arabesques…within them the human shapes of which they are composed assume a spectral malleability, fluctuating endlessly.”138

An early preparatory drawing for the lunette at Poggio a Caiano (fig. 64), a design which was abandoned in favor of that now seen in the completed Vertumnus and Pomona fresco, shows this same impulse to create figures which are indeed decorative motifs. They are framing elements that have become animated, rather than actors within a narrative.139 The sketch depicts two groups of three figures each flanking the central part of the drawing. At the center a ring is drawn, delineating the placement of a window. Circumscribing the window space is a looped, sinuous form. This framework encircles the window overlapping itself at the top, each end extending into branchlike forms held by the uppermost flanking figures. Branches of foliage encircle the oculus in the final version of the frescoed scene, thus this appears to have been the visual objective of the forms in this preliminary sketch. According to this understanding of the drawing, Pontormo limits his framing elements to solely organic design, rejecting the hybrid creatures typically found amid the antique grotesque foliage.


And yet, at first glance, the wooden wreath in the sketch appears not as bare limbs, but, oddly, as bare bodies. The top overlapping section of the branch gives the impression of two human torsos which reach their arms or legs out to be grasped by the side figures. The one on the left, beginning at the point of overlap and reading to the right, suggests the cleft of a hip bone, the swell of a stomach, the curvature of a back, and rounded breasts and shoulders which extend into arms above. The illusion dissolves upon reaching the point where the head should be, there is nothing but a tree branch groin present in that spot. The left “trunk” looks like the lower end of a torso; the belly extends leftward from the point of overlap to split into two “legs,” and at this “groin” is another indicator of humanness, a quick squiggly sketch that can be read as male genitalia. The elegant torsions of the flanking figures are echoed in this deceptively human decorative motif. The grotesque structure of forms which extend and meld into each other clearly underlies this sensibility. The conjunction of diverse parts which become indistinguishable one from the other is the common element. What initially appears as one thing mutates into something else. Just as leaves of foliage transform into the tail of a dragon or the lower body of a putto in the grotesque (fig. 65), so Pontormo transforms his tree limbs into human bodies. The grotesque as framework has shifted: here the hybrids are first perceived not just stemming from organic forms, but actually constituting them.

The grotesque provided a model for the elegant transitions of forms which branch upward, creating characteristically delicate patterns. Their framing function seems also to have affected cinquecento depictions of “non-decorative” subjects. A series of etchings thought to be by Juste de Juste, dated to around 1543, show a similar adaptation
of human bodies into structural motifs (fig. 66). The intricate compositions are formed solely by stacked, nude, male bodies. In each of these the male figures are composed of elongated bones enveloped in knotty, stringy musculature. The emphatic portrayal of these muscles is evocative of the exposed layers of tissue seen in écorchés. They are contorted in their individual positions but made more so by their function as structural

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140 While the prints have always been linked to the School of Fontainebleau, their authorship has been the subject of some confusion. Jules Renouvier, in *Des Types et des Manières des Maîtres Graveurs pour Servir a L’Histoire de la Gravure en Italie, en Allemagne, dans les Pays-Bas et en France: Seizième Siècle* (Montpellier: Boehm, 1853), 185, attributed them to Juste based on his interpretation of the monogram inscribed on the “pyramid” etchings, “EVSTI”; Thomas Arnaudet suggested another possible artist, Jean Viset, whose name may also be read in the monograms, in “Noël Garnier et Jean Viset, orfèvres-graveurs en taille-douce,” *Archives de l’Art Français*, 1861, 157-69. See also Henri Zerner, *The School of Fontainebleau: Etchings and Engravings*, trans. Stanley Baron (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1969), 33-34, cats. J1-J5. See Bruce Davis, *Mannerist Prints: International Style in the Sixteenth Century*, exh. cat. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 28 July – 9 October 1988 (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1988), Cat. 82, 194-195. Zerner, *School of Fontainebleau*, states that etching was not practiced at Fontainebleau until 1542, 33, and goes on in his “Notes to the Plates” to conclude that although there is no evidence the date for these prints “cannot have been far from” the year 1543.

141 Because we know so little about Juste de Juste, if indeed he is the artist who produced the pictures, it is impossible to establish any link between him and Pontormo or to ascertain his presence in Rome to view the Domus Aurea frescoes or any Italian copies thereof. A link does exist, however, between this presumed artist and an Italian artist of Pontormo’s generation, one renowned for his production of grotesques all’antica. Juste has been identified as one of Rosso Fiorentino’s assistants at the Galleria Fontainebleau, where Rosso produced the largest body of grotesques in his career. The eccentrically tall, lanky figures have been identified as beholden to figures from Rosso’s oeuvre by Davis in *Mannerist Prints*, 195, and also by Henri Zerner, in *L’Art de la Renaissance en France: L’Invention du classicisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 120-121. The depiction of figures can be related to Rosso’s tall, thin body types found in the flanking saints in the Villamagna altarpiece or to the lumpy musculature seen in studies such as his *Nude with a Standard* in the Uffizi. Zerner, *School of Fontainebleau*, 33, and Davis, 195, both write that Juste was one of Rosso’s assistants. Renouvier, 185, states that Juste was working at Fontainebleau in 1535. Also Juste would presumably have known Primaticcio, who executed many grotesques and who also worked with Giulio Romano at the Palazzo del Té, providing a link with the Raphael’s workshop in Rome and their production of grotesque inspired motifs, Zerner, *School of Fontainebleau*, 9. For more on the decoration of Fontainebleau, see below, chapter VI.
supports for the others. The figures make pedestals for one another. They stretch and bend in bizarre acrobatic movements to form a web-like composition. The figures compose scaffolding. They work much in the same way as antique grotesque structural elements, in that they create an elaborate framework, but one which supports nothing other than itself and one which is implemented only to draw attention to itself. It is interesting to note that Juste’s figural studies, influenced by the grotesque, in turn promoted grotesque design – the 1584 to 1586 frescoed grotesque in the salon des Acrobats at the Château Torrechiara (fig. 67). Yet unlike the impulses toward incorporating grotesque decorative elements to achieve the decorative or beautiful, fully operative in the paintings discussed above, no ornamental element is present in Juste’s images. While still utilizing certain qualities of the grotesque, the structuring and stacking and complexity of supporting forms, Juste has eliminated any of the lyricism or grace of the grotesque that seemed to motivate artists like Pontormo or Parmigianino to employ it.

Juste’s images start to reveal the perusal of some of the more disturbing aspects of the grotesque. It is important to note here an element of the grotesque which has only been discussed in a very limited way. Hybridism is one of the main qualities of the style. Hybrid monsters are almost always components of the grotesque. Some types of hybridization have already been seen appearing in the Mannerist images discussed above. What is clear is that the hybridism of the grotesque was not always employed to create beauty, but sometimes to create images that are much more disturbing.

142 For a discussion of the Torrechiara frescoes by Cesare Baglioni, see Morel, 103-106.
CHAPTER 4

THE GROTESQUE MADE MONSTROUS

One of the most pronounced aspects of the Renaissance is that it concerned itself with ideal beauty, whether drawn from nature or ancient forms. Leonardo’s drawing of Phillip for the Last Supper (fig. 68) is a perfect example of the natural and yet highly idealized Renaissance depiction. His words explain his favored method for facial depictions: on the subject of remembering the form of a face, Leonardo exhorts the artist to memorize the many types of possible features so that he may better categorize the features of a face immediately and accurately reproduce them later. He then can use the remembered features and select among them to concoct the desired face. This idea of cobbling together parts is also seen in this statement: “Look about you and take the best parts of many beautiful faces…select beauties as I tell you, and fix them in your mind.”

Michelangelo produced such heads, called *teste divine* by Vasari. The faces are ideal, seemingly composed of the “best parts of many beautiful faces,” yet their decorative enhancements are based on the grotesque. In the Ideal Head of a Young Woman drawing in the British Museum, London, (fig. 69) coils of braided hair, lacings of straps, and an elaborate headpiece ornamented with a *putto* mask all enhance the

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143 *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. Pamela Taylor (New York: New American Library, 1960), 64. The idea is derived from Zeuxis painting Helen’s body by composing her of the most beautiful parts of other women, Pliny, *Natural History*, 35:36. Apelles when painting Diana of Ephesus was said to have done the same.
woman’s head, creating grotesque-styled decoration as well as grotesque-inspired framing for that beautiful face.\textsuperscript{144}

Leonardo goes on to encourage the painter to choose faces which are famed for being beautiful and not to rely solely on his own judgment, since an ugly painter likely would mistake ugly faces for beautiful ones. In this he makes clear that while one should seek one’s models in nature, nature is not always beautiful. While the above passage suggests that Leonardo was intent on reproducing the beautiful, both his words and his works exhibit his frequent interest in its opposite. He writes that the artist

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ought to mingle direct contraries so that they may afford a great contrast to one another, and all the more when they are in close proximity; that is, the ugly next to the beautiful, the big to the small, the old to the young, the strong to the weak; all should be varied as much as possible and close together.\textsuperscript{145}
\end{quote}

Although Leonardo here is discussing juxtaposition in narrative painting, some of his head studies show such combinations of seeming oppositions. His \textit{Old Man and a Youth in Facing Profile} (fig. 70) in the Uffizi depicts an obvious contrast between the old and the young and the beautiful and the decrepit, the distinction of each figure’s qualities wholly reliant on his contrast to his counterpart – the young man is emphatically youthful because of his comparison to the old man. The disparities are made more pronounced by the figures’ proximity to each other. This manner of amplifying appearance through its


\textsuperscript{145} See David Summers, “Contrapposto: Style and Meaning in Renaissance Art,” \textit{Art Bulletin}, 59, no. 3 (September 1977). This passage is quoted on 348.
placement next to a contrasting feature was not a new idea; the idea of antithesis had long been in discussion in the literary realm in both poetry and rhetoric and had by the time of the Renaissance started to shape the principles of the visual arts.\textsuperscript{146} As Clayton points out, the term contrapposto in the Renaissance could be used to convey the idea of disparate elements or qualities placed in juxtaposition “in order to explore and magnify each one.”\textsuperscript{147} This counter-positioning may have been the real essence of these studies. Alberti wrote in \textit{Della Pittura} that the artist should juxtapose opposites in color, figural forms, and in groups of figures to attain \textit{varietà} – a variety of forms to delight the eye, harmoniously blending disparate elements.\textsuperscript{148} As noted by Pseudo Hugh in the presumed unauthentic seventh book of Hugh of St. Victor’s Didascalicon, harmonious proportion gives pleasure but so too does that which exceeds or falls below it.\textsuperscript{149}

Another drawing by Michelangelo describes how this combining of disparate things can achieve another type of delight, one might even say a grotesque delight. The head of Cleopatra (fig. 71), like the \textit{testa divina} described above, describes a complex decorative hairstyle which has much in common with the intertwining stems and slender ornamental candelabrum of the Domus Aurea patterns. But another more horrible component has been added here. Michelangelo juxtaposes his elegant beauty with the


\textsuperscript{148} Alberti, \textit{On Painting}, 75.

\textsuperscript{149} Quoted in John Block Friedman, \textit{The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 185.
deadly asp, winding around Cleopatra as gracefully as her braids of hair, its body delineating the breast of the ancient queen and then viciously biting into it. This drawing joins the grotesque’s lyrical decorativeness with its other chief feature – the component of the horrific.

The quality of the grotesque that has been all but ignored thus far is the element, not of beauty and grace, but of something more unsettling. A juxtaposition is seen in the grotesque’s disparate combination of elegant decoration with horrors. The incongruity is best examined by beginning with the word *grottesche*, or, in English, grotesques, which within a few years after the discovery of the Domus Aurea frescoes, was coined to describe the contemporary productions of like imagery. The creation of a new word for the unearthed style of painting illustrates the strong impression the discovery had on artists and patrons at the turn of the century. The first recorded mention of this new term is found in the document concerning the painter Pinturicchio’s commission to paint the Piccolomini Library wherein the Cardinal specified that “*grottesche*” to grace his walls. The appellation quickly found footing and was in common use by artists of the mid-sixteenth century, as in Vasari’s first edition of *The Lives* and in Cellini’s *Autobiography*. Cellini, apparently feeling the need to explain the term for a larger audience, describes the derivation of the term, saying that the paintings were so named from being found in underground caves.150 Vasari too, tells us the origins of the term: “che grottesche furono dette dall’essere state entro alle grotte ritrovate.”151 While the word was clearly used by

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151 Vasari, Milanesi, VI: 551; De Vere, II: 488, “which were called grotesques from their having been discovered in the underground grottoes.”
Piccolomini to designate a desired type of all’antica painting, examining the etymological origins may help demonstrate the deeper implications of the word.

The name was invented to describe images that represented or mimicked excavated Roman paintings and continues to be used to designate this type of imagery in art historical terminology.\textsuperscript{152} The word was first coined as a description based on setting rather than painting style. \textit{Grottesca} took form as a variant of \textit{grotta} or cave, used sometimes to refer to excavation sites.\textsuperscript{153} The locational implications of this word are not inconsequential. While the Renaissance term \textit{grottesca} was inspired by their situation within these antique sites, there remains a duality embedded in the root word – in \textit{grotto}, the idea of subterranean dreadfulness elides with the pleasurable or adventurous experience. For the fifteenth-century the word grotto had varied meanings: a grotto could

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\textsuperscript{152} \textit{Il Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana}, ed. Salvatore Battaglia, Turin: Unione Tipografico. “grottesca: Opulent and fantastical painted or sculptural wall decoration born around the middle of the fifteenth century coinciding with the rediscovery of a type of ornamental motif of Roman art…composed of vegetal elements which are interwoven with birds, insects, human figures, amphorae, and trophies…” My translation. \textit{The Oxford Dictionary of Art}, ed. Ian Chilvers and Harold Osbourne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), defines grotesque as “a type of mural decoration, painted, carved, or moulded in stucco, which in the early 16\textsuperscript{th} century spread from Italy to most countries in Europe. It was characterized by the use of floral motifs, animal and human figures, masks, etc., copied from the ornament in Roman buildings (called grotte), such as the Domus Aurea of Nero, excavated c. 1500, the whole being imaginatively combined into fanciful and playful schemes…The grotesque style was distinguished by its disintegration of natural forms and the redistribution of the parts in accordance with the fantasy of the artist.”

\textsuperscript{153} \textit{The Oxford English Dictionary}, s.v. “grotto. 1. A cave or cavern, esp. one which is picturesque, or which forms an agreeable retreat. 2. An excavation or structure made to imitate a rocky cave, often adorned with shell-work, etc., and serving as a place of recreation or a cool retreat;” The Oxford English Dictionary has it that this was popular name in Rome for the chambers of ancient buildings which had been revealed by excavations. \textit{Dizionario etimologico della lingua Italiana}, ed. Manlio Corte and Paolo Zolli (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1979), has this definition: “Grotta. natural cavity usually formed in limestone due to the action of water; a fraecism of architectural language indicating any concealed or subterranean site.”
\end{flushright}
imply a pleasurable garden setting or a site where great treasures, such as the frescoes found in the Domus Aurea, were entombed.\textsuperscript{154} And the word also was suggestive of dank regions, even tomb chambers, beneath the earth, since “grotto” finds its etymological roots in the Latin \textit{crypta}, or crypt, which refers variously to covered galleries, vaults, grottoes, or tombs.\textsuperscript{155} Such a laden root word had similar implications for its offspring. Antique sculptures found in this type of site did not receive this label, thus the painted images must have in some way warranted such a distinction. Rather than calling the images found in these sites something more pleasant, it seems the originators of this word intended to imbue the art with a particular perception, perhaps the one they themselves experienced in their journey underground. For the early explorers of the Domus Aurea, crawling into these rooms to see the paintings was neither easy nor elegant: the curious had to be lowered into the dig site and then to pass through what were described by a contemporary visitor as dank, dirty, frog-, bat-, and snake-ridden passageways.\textsuperscript{156} The rooms were filled with debris, and to glimpse the newfound paintings required inserting one’s head or body through holes broken high on the wall, and then, turning upside down to view the delicate designs laced across the ceiling (fig. 72).\textsuperscript{157} This creepy and

\textsuperscript{154} For the Renaissance perception of grottoes and their construction of them as delightful respites, see Claudia Lazzaro, \textit{The Italian Renaissance Garden: From the Conventions of Planting, Design, and Ornament to the Grand Gardens of Sixteenth-Century Central Italy} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), esp. chapter six.


\textsuperscript{156} A poem which describes the passage into the Domus Aurea, \textit{Le Antiquarie prospettiche romane}, by an anonymous Milanese artist is translated in Rowland, \textit{Culture of the High Renaissance}, 106: “We crawl along the dirt upon our bellies…Becoming more bizarre than the grottette.”

\textsuperscript{157} Segala and Sciortino, \textit{Domus Aurea}, 47.
disorienting experience must have in some way enhanced the charm of the images, and unlike the study of fragments of ancient sculpture, the images could not be separated from their buried situation. The incongruity of such opulence found in this foul setting may have recommended the paradoxical roots of the term: crypts are both natural caverns and tombs; grottoes are places where one may encounter both delight and horror.\textsuperscript{158} And the duality of the word perfectly illustrates the paintings found within: these are images that are beautiful in their fantasy while disturbing in their hybrid components. Presumably the earliest Renaissance copiers of these images would have grasped this undercurrent: both the word’s origins and the images it described were imbued with this luxurious yet still disturbing meaning.

Already clear is that Nero’s fantasy palace and its equally fantastic frescoes proved a desirable model; that these inspirations were drawn from the antique world increased the favor of these images, laudable for their antiquity. Yet their adoption seems a strange occurrence when one considers their original patron. The introduction of this style within a Christian context, whether to decorate a pope’s living quarters or to adorn chapel walls and ceilings, seems incongruous – these paintings were, after all, ornament for the house of an emperor who was infamous for his persecution of Christians. Tacitus writes that after a group of Christian men were convicted of the 64 C.E. Roman fire,

\begin{quote}
they were put to death with exquisite cruelty, and to their sufferings Nero added mockery and derision. Some were covered with the skins of wild beasts, and left to be devoured by dogs; others were nailed to the cross; numbers were burnt alive; and many, covered with inflammable matter, were lighted up, when the day declined to serve as
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{158} See Vasari’s description of decorative grottoes in \textit{Vasari on Technique}, 87-90.
torches during the night. For the convenience of seeing this tragic spectacle the emperor lent his own gardens.\textsuperscript{159}

It was even believed that Nero had put Peter, revered by the Church as the first pope, to death.\textsuperscript{160} These were painting drawn from the underworld, ruled by Nero, the emperor who provided a model for the Antichrist himself.

Although they knew about Nero’s Golden House from the descriptions of it in Pliny’s \textit{Natural History} and Suetonius’ \textit{Lives}, at the onset of the excavation into this site, the discoverers were uncertain what it was they were uncovering. The ruins were referred to as the Baths of Titus for more than a century after its discovery in the 1480s, but there are indications that some were almost immediately aware that the Golden House was what they had found interred beneath the misidentified baths.\textsuperscript{161} A letter believed to have been penned by Raphael to Pope Leo X discusses antiquities and makes reference to Nero’s’ palace “on which site were constructed the baths of Titus.”\textsuperscript{162} The name also appears in the caption of a drawing by Francisco de Hollanda: “De Domo Aurea Neronis

\textsuperscript{159} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 116-117.


\textsuperscript{161} Dacos, \textit{Découverte de la Domus Aurea}, 9.

\textsuperscript{162} “E ben que molto volte molti edificii dali medesimi antichi fossero ristaurati, come si legge che nel medesimo luoco dov’era la casa aurea di Nerone di poi furono edificate le therme di Tito e la sua casa, e l’Amphitheatro, niente di meno erano facti con la medisima maniera e ragione, che gli altri edificii anchor piu antichi che ’l tempo di Nerone e coetanei della casa aurea,” from Vincenzo Golzio, \textit{Raffaello nei documenti, nelle testimonianze dei contemporanei a nella letteratura del suo secolo}, (Vatican: 1936), 85.
apud amphiteatrum.” 163 Yet the appalling origins of the site do not seem to have been a
deterrent to the new audience of Nero’s quarters. The paintings that adorned the
detestable emperor’s palace took hold of the Renaissance imagination; the reproduction
of those images, in whatever context, became the latest in artistic fashion. The strange
origin of the frescoes, both in their eerie locale and their loathsome ancestry, could act as
a spur to even stranger images than were found at the site.

Already mentioned are the ways in which grotesque art was refashioned after its
discovery. The word, too, underwent modifications in the years after its conception. At
its nascence the word grotesque brought up dual notions, both of a delightful respite and a
dank, tomb-like cave. Further complications arise when the word’s permutations through
time are examined. In its common present-day usage, the word is used almost solely as
an adjective to designate that which is incongruous, distorted, and even repulsive. 164 The
word’s more recent derivation, grotty, albeit a slang term, has further entrenched this
notion of disgust. 165 What began as an identifier of a particular type of ancient painted

163 E. Tormo, Os desenhos das antigualhas que vio Francisco d’Ollanda,
(Madrid: 1940), 13v-14.

164 Because the Oxford English Dictionary arranges its definitions according to a
word’s first appearances in the English language, it does commence with the art historical
definition of grotesque, but then continues on to demonstrate the adaptation of the word
from that original, very specific designation; its usage as an adjective is defined as
follows: “B. 2. a. In a wider sense, of designs or forms: Characterized by distortion or
unnatural combinations; fantastically extravagant; bizarre, quaint.” Following this is an
alternate, and later, adjectival meaning: “3. Ludicrous from incongruity; fantastically
absurd.” The Oxford American College Dictionary, ed. Christine A. Lindberg, Artemis
Grace, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), is even more extreme in its
negative implications of the word: “Comically repulsive, ugly or distorted. Incongruous
or inappropriate to a shocking degree.” Its usage as a noun as defined in this dictionary
begins with “a very ugly or comically distorted figure.”

165 Oxford English Dictionary: s.v. “Shortened form of grotesque. Unpleasant,
dirty, nasty, ugly, etc.: a general term of disapproval.”
decoration became a word to characterize the bizarre, ugly, and incongruous. In cases such as Piccolomini’s contract, the use of the word meant replication of the style of the Domus Aurea images. Within the first century of the word’s employment a shift in perception is obvious.

The word metamorphosed, much like the figures it was invented to describe. I posit that the implications of the word, as it was coined, caused its own shift in meaning. The dualities present in the term, and in the art itself, created a particular idea of the word and the images it defined, and these connotations shaped the ensuing art. As the art which followed the grotesque became more extravagant, so did the meaning of the term. The very definition of grotesque painting is one of an incongruous duality: the grotesque is fashioned by the decorative qualities discussed throughout Chapters Two and Four, but marries these pretty ornaments with hybrids, figures concocted of many parts, which can either be whimsical or frankly monstrous. Many of the antique grotesque restatements are characterized by their combination of these incongruous notions – the decorative conjoining with the disturbing. The hybrid aspect of the grotesque – its constant shifts between architectural, vegetal, and animal forms – has been mentioned. These mutating forms are not the only hybrids within the grotesque; other identifying constituents are the beasts which exist among the grotesque structure. The grotesque’s hybrid components, once limited to their marginal framework and wholly fictive in appearance, begin at the turn of the sixteenth century to exceed these bounds. The change in the concept of the grotesque can be found in the writings of the time as well as in the art that utilized a new license with the model.
Benvenuto Cellini used grotesque motifs to enhance the decorative appearance of works such as the outside edge of the morse made for Clement VII and the base of his Perseus, but he cannot be called a strict copier of them (fig. 73). For Cellini they provided stylish patterns which could be employed where he needed an ornamental band or an ornamental base. In his autobiography’s discussion of trying to copy, and then best, the intricate foliage of Turkish dagger handle design, Cellini’s words reveal the contemporary concept of the grotesque:

Grotesque is not the right name, because just as the ancients loved to create monsters by having intercourse with goats, and cows, and horses, and calling their hybrid offspring, monsters, so our artists create another kind of monster…so monsters, not grotesques, is the correct term.

Cellini’s “monstrousness” is founded in the grotesque’s hybrid quality. His own designs, culled from both Turkish foliate pattern and antique design, is a further hybrid. Yet his

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“le qual cose son chiamate, da quelli che non sanno, grottesche. Queste grottesche hanno acquistato questo nome dai moderni, per essersi trovate in certe caverne della terra in Roma dagli studiosi, le quali caverne anticamente erano camere, stufe, studii, sale e altre cotai cose. Questi studiosi trovandole in questi luoghi cavernosi, per essere alzato dagli antichi in qua il terreno e restare quelle in basso, e perché il vocabolo chiamà quei luoghi bassi in Roma, grotte; da questo si acquistò il nome di grottesche. Il qual non è il suo nome; perché sì bene, come gli antichi si dilettavano di comporre de' mostri usando con capre, con vache e con cavalle, nascendo questi miscugli gli domandavano mostri; così quelli artefici facevano con i loro fogliami questa sorte di mostri: e mostri è 'l vero lor nome e non grottesche.”
use of the word monster, as well as his description of human and animal combined forms, 
still leads to another, more disturbing perception of this imagery. The delight found in 
grotesque imagery by the excavators of the dark caves seems by Cellini’s time to have 
been imbued with a disquieting notion, presumably drawn from the monstrous beasts 
which comprised them. The incongruity of their splendor having been found amid dank 
holes, grottoes which verbally still retained the echo of the crypt, the delight caused by 
this art which graced the palace of this most infamous persecutor of Christians and now 
used to adorn even the most sacred Christian spaces, the monsters which cavorted amid 
the most graceful and elegant of design – all of this created a two-fold idea surrounding 
the grotesque: it is beautiful and it is a thing of horror. For Cellini, it is a monster, one 
which for him provided a vision of graceful ornament, but a monster nonetheless.  
The grotesque is fashioned by the marriage of beautiful ornament with creatures 
which can either be whimsical or frankly monstrous. Hybrid creatures, harpies, griffins, 
dragons, devils other imaginative beasts, and any possible combination of melding forms 
were regular constituents of the Domus Aurea frescoes and their Renaissance 
correspondents. The hybridism of the Neronian paintings, both in their overall 
composition and in the mystifying beasts that inhabited them, was the feature most 
derided by ancient authors. Horace railed against the ridiculous nature of these 
concoctions cobbled together out of many diverse parts: 

A painter who puts a horse’s mane
on a man’s neck – who pulls feathers
from canaries and doves and parrots and owls
and grows them on a sheep’s back—who lets
the upper half of a beautiful woman come
to a bad end, wriggling like a black
fish: if he let you see her, friends,
could you keep your laughter down?
And books are like pictures, and any book written as that canvas was slopped, empty-brained, like a sick man’s nocturnal editions, will read like a portrait of a one-footed hero, maybe blessed with a head at the top, even resembling *Homo sapiens* perhaps.

Poets, like painters, can do as they like, have always done what they pleased. Let it be what it wants to, but let it be what it is, just what it is, please...  

Vitruvius found them less humorous:

But these paintings, which had taken their models from real things, now fall foul of depraved taste. For monsters now are painted in frescoes rather than reliable images of definite things... Now these things do not exist nor can they exist nor have they ever existed, and thus new fashion has brought things to such a pass that bad judges have condemned the right practice of the arts as lack of skill. How, pray tell, can a reed really sustain a roof, or a candelabrum hold the decorations of a pediment, or an acanthus shoot, so soft and slender, loft a tiny statue perched upon it, or can flowers be produced from the roots and shoots on the one hand and figurines on the other? Yet when they see these deceptions, people never criticize them, but rather take delight in them, nor do they ever notice whether any of these things are possible or not.  

Cellini, while apparently not swayed from using such imagery, seems to be taking his description of hybrid concoctions from Horace’s vivid quote. His qualification of the grotesque as monsters may even be derived from Vitruvius’s condemnatory passage.

While he might have been informed by the ancient criticisms for his own words, clearly he felt they echoed the beliefs of his own time.

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The word monster, in Italian *monstro*, comes from the Latin *monstrum*, which originally meant a divine portent or warning and came to imply something marvelous.\textsuperscript{170} Under the heading are placed many definitions – deviations from nature, imaginary animals, persons of horrible wickedness, and creatures of immense size. Cellini’s use of the term implies his understanding of it in both the deviant and imaginary animal subheadings. Grotesques are not the first monsters they encounter. The sixteenth-century understanding of monsters came from many sources, both spiritual and natural: the Christian types, dragons, devils, winged animals like the Evangelical Beasts, which appear throughout Medieval and Renaissance art; Pliny’s monstrous races, which could be read about in the Natural History; and misunderstood “prodigies,” animals or humans born with horrible and suspect deformities.

Many such monstrosities and unlikely “structures” were produced in medieval manuscript marginalia, sometimes to illustrate sacred passages and sometimes wholly unrelated to the texts they border.\textsuperscript{171} They have much in common with grotesque imagery: their framing function, the lyrical passages of lacing design, their arbitrary shifts between figural, vegetal, and architectural matter, and the frequent appearance of monstrous beings within the borderwork. Demons and dragons, derived from Judaeo-Christian beliefs are represented, but so too are certain antique creatures, sphinxes, sirens, and griffins, beasts adopted from ancient mythology or literature. Pliny’s *Natural History* and its successive commentaries and reprints were a vast resource of possible horrors, but

\textsuperscript{170} *Il Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, s.v. “monstro.”

\textsuperscript{171} For a general studies, see Lillian M. C. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), and more recently, Alixe Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
human ones. In the text, he describes monstrous races thought to inhabit the margins of
the earth. The medieval artist employed Pliny’s descriptions of these mysterious
peoples for their own margins, to create framing elements for illustrated copies of *Natural
History* and even, oddly, to adorn the pages of unrelated texts. Creatures such as the
scipod resting under its sheltering foot atop a plant stem in the thirteenth-century French
Leonardo d’Fieschi manuscript (fig. 74) bring to mind Vitruvius’s comment about the
absurdity of delicate foliage supporting heavy figures. These monstrous beings seem
many times to have had a moralizing purpose, their deformities indicating some fault
with the soul much like an aberrant version of physiognomy – for example, the Panotii’s
big ears were indicative of its penchant for listening to evil. And yet, many of the
writings about these races label the creatures as marvels, mysteries of God’s creations,
and for that reason they should provoke wonder in the Christian. They too are
incongruous, both in their dual capacity to charm and cause fearful wonder, and in their

172 Although Pliny was not the first to describe these races and was getting much
of his information from Greek writers like Herodotus, his writings were well known in
the Middle Ages. Solinus, writing in the third century, abridged his work, and the tenth
century publication of *The Wonders of the East*, written in both Latin and English,
compiled all of these legends for the Medieval reader, Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques*,
7-8. On these monsters, see Rudolf Wittkower, “Marvels of the East: A Study in the
History of Monsters,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942), 159-
197.

173 For a full discussion of these indications of sinful nature, see Friedman, 124-
130.

174 That these creatures were linked to the idea of the marvelous is illustrated in
the following passage in the prologue to 3rd Decision of *Otia Imperiala of Gervase of
Tilbury*: “We customarily call miracles those things outside nature which we ascribe to a
divine power, as when a virgin bears, and those things marvels which do not yield to our
understanding, even when they be natural,” ed. G. W. Liebnitz, in *Scriptores Rerum
Brunsvicensium* (Hanover: 1701), 1.3, p. 960, quoted in Friedman, 118.
frequently illogical juxtapositions with the texts, whether religious or secular. Such creations were not limited to painted manuscripts; sculptors too busied themselves with such monstrous images which sometimes inhabit the holiest of spaces. Gargoyles, combined human and animal forms, monstrous races, and other seemingly incongruous ornaments were plentiful in church and monastic settings. The discovery of the grotesque only added further examples of monsters, providing new, all’antica fantasies to the already extensive Medieval repertoire. These grotesques were also frequently relegated to the margins, what Michael Camille calls “the site of illusion.” Camille argues that, with the advent of the Renaissance, marginalia was displaced, even rejected, in favor of centered images. This same idea seems also to have affected the monstrous imagery found in grotesque framework – they too shifted position. The monsters from both sources made their way from the edge of the picture to its center.

And not only were monsters elements of Judaeo-Christian mythology, imaginative constructs of the ancient world, or beings which possibly inhabited little-
traveled regions of the world; they too were creatures found in one’s own barnyard. Albrecht Dürer’s *Monstrous Pig of Landser*, engraved in 1496, shows the mutated pig with eight legs, four ears and composed partially of two lower bodies (fig. 75).  

Sebastian Brandt published a broadsheet that called the birth of the pig an evil omen, a portent of the coming of the Antichrist. The creature was a source of superstitious fear certainly, but it appears that for Dürer it also inspired some sort of scientific fascination.

These creatures are hybrids. Spiritual monsters, like demons and angels, were composed of recognizably human forms joined with animal parts. Antique monsters, such as the harpy, are the mingling of disparate animal parts. Monstrous races seem human in many of their bodily features, but are combined with elements of animals or with other types of human parts. Prodigies were made of too many or not enough of the correct components for a natural makeup. The monster had many forms and proved wide-ranging: “In some cases, dichotomy itself was constructed as monstrous, for in Renaissance culture a monster was often no more than an unexpected montage of disparate elements.”

The medieval world, like the antique world, had its detractors of such fanciful and gruesome imagery. Although some must have believed medieval marginalia, in sculpture and in manuscripts, was in some sense apotropaic, they were believed wholly improper to

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An early thirteenth-century tract on painting, “Pictor in Carmine,” speaks out against “the criminal presumption of painters” who decorated with “sports of fancy which the church ought not to have countenanced for so long” in their inclusion of mythological beasts and monstrous beings and in their imaginative creation of further human/animal hybrids. The criticism seems to stem from the fact that these monstrosities encroach upon and distract from the center, not clarifying but rather muddying the pious intention of the manuscripts. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in his *Apologia* to William, Abbot of St.-Thierry, recounts his distress over similar sculpted decorations:

. . . in the cloisters, before the eyes of the brothers while they read – what is that ridiculous deformity doing, an amazing kind of deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity? What are the filthy apes doing there? The fierce lions? The monstrous centaurs? The creatures part man and part beast? You see many bodies under one head, and conversely many heads on one body. On one side the tail of a serpent is seen on a quadruped, on the other side the head of a quadruped is on the body of a fish. Over there an animal has a horse for the front half and a goat for the back; here a creature which is horned in front is equine in back.

This passage, though the most famous of the *Apologia*, is only part of his treatise which put forward ideas of how to reform some of the excesses and indulgences that had sprung

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up in monastic settings. Bernard discourages such imagery for its ability to divert from worship but also for its wastefulness:

In short, everywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms is seen that one would rather read in the marble than in the books, and spend the whole day wondering at every single one of them than in meditating on the law of God. Good God! If one is not ashamed of the absurdity, why is one at least not troubled by the expense? 

For the “Pictor in Carmine” author and St. Bernard, the imagery threatens the centrality of the religious text or activity and thus the focus upon Christian devotion. Such decoration, whether sculptures at the corners of cloisters or illuminated frames for texts, was, like the sixteenth-century grotesque, vying for attention with the purported focal point. The intention of including such monsters in the margins of Christian texts is still not fully understood, but the effect they desired and produced was the same as that of the antique grotesque, to create delight paired with unease.

Even the Cinquecento had its critics of the grotesque: in his Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images, Gabriele Paleotti disparaged this type of painting—“who doubts that to give candelabra the shape of faces of men with flames issuing from their heads, or shells that spout rivers of water, or trees emerging from serpents…is repugnant not only to the profession of the painter but also to nature, to reason.” At the heart of this argument, as with those of Vitruvius and Horace, is the idea that these monsters are

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186 Rudolf, Things of Greater Importance, 12.

unnatural and untrue, thus the images deceive. This vein of criticism had further antique support. In his *Sophist*, Plato employs the visual artist as an example to illustrate the crafty illusions that can sway humans to mistake falsehood for truth.\textsuperscript{188} His speaker Theaetetus makes the distinction between “likeness-making” (the direct imitation of the look of an object) and “appearance-making” (the distortion of an object, including adjusting size and proportion, to cause a more convincingly “real” appearance). While even “likeness-making” is, according to Plato, only the reflection of a reflection and thus already substantially removed from the essential truth, “appearance-making” is the graver deception: if the distortion appears to be more naturalistic to the eye than an image in which no adjustments have been made, it deceives, and thus the image is further removed from the truth. The most famous instance of this deception is found in Pliny’s tale of Zeuxis tricking sparrows into trying to eat his painted grapes, so life-like was the image.\textsuperscript{189}

Certainly there was a want for the depiction of naturalistic, idealized, heroic figures, but Renaissance artists were also called upon to depict figures that were not so ideal, things that indeed were not of the natural world. Recounted in Francisco de Hollanda’s “Third Dialogue,” Zapata the Spaniard, making reference to Horace’s words, queries of Michelangelo,


\textsuperscript{189} Pliny, *Natural History*, 35:65.
Why is it that artists sometimes paint a thousand monsters and animals, some of them with a woman’s face and the lower parts and tail of a fish, others with the arms of tigers and with wings, or with a man’s face; anything in fact that delights the painter’s fancy and has never existed?\footnote{Francisco de Hollanda, \textit{Four Dialogues on Painting}, trans. Aubrey F. G. Bell (Westport, CT: Hyperion, 1979) 3\textsuperscript{rd} dialogue, 60.}

Michelangelo replies:

I shall be glad to tell you why it is the custom to paint things that have never existed and how reasonable is this license and how it accords with the truth; for some critics, not understanding the matter, are wont to say that Horace, the lyric poet, wrote these lines in dispraise of painters…he does in nowise blame painters but praises and favors them, since he says that poets and painters have license to dare, that is to dare do what they choose… If, in order to observe what is proper to a time and place, he exchange the parts or limbs (as in grotesque work which would otherwise be very false and insipid) and convert a griffin or deer downwards into a dolphin or upwards into any shape he may choose, putting wings in place of arms, and cutting away the arms if wings are more suitable, this converted limb, of lion or horse or bird, will be most perfect according to its nature; and this may seem false but can really only be called ingenious or monstrous.\footnote{Ibid., 60-62.}

He goes on to include what seems a rejoinder to Vitruvius’s discussion of grotesque architecture:

This insatiable desire of man sometimes prefers to an ordinary building, with its pillars and windows and doors, one falsely constructed in grotesque style, with pillars formed of children growing out of the stalks of flowers, with architraves and cornices of branches of myrtle and doorways of reeds and other things, all seemingly impossible and contrary to reason; yet, it may be really great work if made by a skilful artist.\footnote{Ibid., 62.}
Thus, according to one of the Renaissance’s most esteemed artists, sometimes hybrids are less false than non-hybrids and the impossible preferable to the ordinary.

That artists allowed themselves a certain freedom within this arena is proven not only by the works of the artists of the period, but also by their own words on the process of creation. Hollanda’s contribution to the discussion above drew concurrence from Michelangelo:

> It is much more false to set correct things out of their place than to invent an imaginary one in a place that fits it. If any be unconvinced and say ‘How is it possible that a woman with a beautiful face have the tail of a fish or the feet of a swift deer or ounce or wings on her sides like an angel?’ one might answer that, if the anomaly be rightly proportioned in each of its parts, then it is normal and very natural; and that a painter is worthy of great praise if he paint an impossible thing which has never been seen with such art and skill that it seems alive and possible and causes men to wish that such things did actually exist.193

Leonardo wrote scores of pages on the adjustments to nature, of light, color, size, perspective, and proportion, that the artist should make when painting. His approval of what Plato would call “appearance-making” can be recognized in his statement that,

> if a painter wishes to see beauties that would enrapture him, he is master of their production, and if he wishes to see monstrous things which might terrify or which would be buffoonish and laughable or truly pitiful, he is their lord and god.194

193 Ibid., 62-63.

The artist can create a direct reflection of the natural world, as Titian’s portrait of Pope Paul III, after having been set in the window to dry, caused passers-by on the street to genuflect, but also has license to enhance a natural object’s qualities or even conjure up things that are not of this world.\textsuperscript{195} In this sense the artist is not only deceiver, but also magician.\textsuperscript{196} The better the illusion or deception, the greater the magic of the artist. Because they could give form to and thus imbue life in things that only existed in dreams, they are conjurors – whether demonic or divine. The artist has the ability to make real things that previously only existed in the imagination.

While the representation of monsters certainly preceded the quattrocento excavations that revealed antique decorative schemes, the Domus Aurea paintings provided yet another model for the creation of such imaginative creatures, the production of monsters, especially hybrid ones. That model gave new form to fantastic and frequently horrible things not seen in nature, adding to the Renaissance’s existing repertoire of monsters. Regardless of the grotesque’s ancient critics, the style was highly respected for its antique origin. The frequent requirement of depicting such monsters in the Renaissance made the flights of fancy acceptable; the application of the ancient grotesque lent them a higher level of estimation in a world awed by the antique.


Monstrous Bodies

Michelangelo’s words to Hollanda and Zapata on producing a proper and perfect monster, by converting wings and seemingly disparate limbs, took form in his Sistine Chapel Last Judgment wherein his demons display such hybrid combinations intended to make real the otherworldly devils (fig. 76). Leonardo describes a similar concoctive method for creating monsters:

You know that you cannot invent animals without limbs, each of which, in itself, must resemble those of some other animal. Hence if you wish to make an animal, imagined by you, appear natural – let us say a dragon – take for its head that of a mastiff or hound, with the eyes of a cat, the ears of a porcupine, the nose of a greyhound, the brow of a lion, the temples of an old cock, the neck of a water tortoise.197

Examples of such hybrids in Leonardo’s work are many. According to Vasari, in his youth Leonardo reworked and painted a buckler, a small shield, with the combined features of many creatures (lizards, crickets, and bats among them) and in so doing, “he formed a great ugly creature, most horrible and terrifying.”198 Apparently, this creation was only intended to produce the particular effect of startling his father, and then Leonardo was no longer interested in it, having proven that he had created a believable thing. The “Life” continues on to give the subsequent fortune of the buckler; Vasari asserts that it was sold for one hundred ducats to some Florentine merchants and then later was acquired by the Duke of Milan for three hundred ducats.199 While his tale about Leonardo’s inventive buckler might be disbelieved as another one of Vasari’s fabulous

197 Notebooks, 63.

198 “…dalle moltitudine de’ quail variamante adattata insieme cavò un animalaccio molto orribile e spaventoso,” Vasari, Milanesi, IV: 24; translation from De Vere, 1: 629.

199 Ibid., Milanesi, IV: 25; De Vere, 1: 629.
inventions, it speaks volumes about the perception of Leonardo and the worth of such fantasies. If indeed Vasari invented the story to support his glowing account of that artist, then obviously this ability to create a monstrosity was considered by Vasari to be a laudable one. The later purchases of it proved that Vasari was not alone in his esteem for such inventions. Evidently some sort of enjoyment came through the monstrosity, some delight was found within the horrific.

Leonardo’s invention of fanciful and horrible creatures did not end with that youthful experiment. Vasari writes that Leonardo drew a Neptune surrounded by “fantastic creatures, marine monsters and winds” for his friend Antonio Segni. Vasari’s praise for these works is rooted in Leonardo’s ability to make them seem so convincing and alive – his father did not believe that the buckler was a buckler, but a monster and a miracle; the Neptune seemed “tutto vivo.” His Sketches of Dragons (fig.77) in the Royal Library, Windsor, shows another amalgamation of animal forms. The dragons themselves are composed of parts of dogs, lions, snakes, birds and bats, and chickens. The effectiveness of Leonardo’s unnatural creations comes through their being based on nature. And it is just this – the imagery’s derivation from natural forms – with which Vitruvius, Horace, and Plato would have taken issue. By creating his monsters from


201 Vasari, Milanesi, II: 25; De Vere, 1: 630.

natural and known forms, Leonardo forces the viewer’s suspension of disbelief and enables a moment of conviction that the existence of such creatures is possible.

In his discussion of the merits of painting versus poetry, Leonardo writes:

> Supposing that the poet, like the painter, depicts beauty, fierceness, an evil or ugly thing, or something monstrous, by transforming objects in whatever manner he wishes, then the painter will give greater satisfaction. Have we not seen paintings that had such a conformity with the imitated object that they have deceived both men and animals?”

For Leonardo the painter is better able to distort and reformulate, to “transform objects in whatever manner he wishes” than the poet, and thus is more successful at achieving his desired end: persuading his audience of the truth of the beings he depicts and giving greater satisfaction because of his deception.

**Monstrous Heads**

Leonardo employed a similar method for creating monstrous faces. The Head of a Devil (fig. 78), attributed to Leonardo’s student Francesco Melzi but believed to be a copy after Leonardo, shows a hybrid comprised of human parts as well as animal ones. The basic form is clearly modeled on a man’s head and shoulders, but the monstrosity of it comes through its bizarre concoction of facial features: ram’s horns twist out of a heavy, furrowed brow, furry animal ears – which may also be read as wings – grow from its head, and there is a lightly inscribed suggestion of wings sprouting from the beast’s back. Even its ostensibly human neck shows the ravages of disease. The goiters, which

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203 *Leonardo on Painting*, 34.

204 Also in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle; see Clayton, *The Divine and the Grotesque*, fig. 63, 162-163.
Clayton quite aptly compares to testicles, are one of the devil’s most repulsive features, and their shape is again echoed in the pendulous nipples.\textsuperscript{205} The horror of the consequent beast does not come through the individual animals used in fashioning it. Its gruesomeness arises through forming a beast from many animals. Its hybrid nature, its incongruity of parts, makes it a monster. Leonardo painted a Medusa head that Vasari calls “the most strange and extravagant invention that can ever be imagined.”\textsuperscript{206} Here the strange delight in seeing a monster becomes even more intense; this face ostensibly could turn its viewer into stone.

And yet sometimes monsters were not so clearly identifiable. Under the definition of monster there is another option not yet discussed – a person of horrible wickedness whose monstrousness was an internal rather than an external quality. Sometimes a monster was just a man. For representing a monstrous human the artist could employ the same method Leonardo proposed above, by fabricating him of parts of different things. The hybrid can function in both directions – the demon is horrible because assembled of some human components; the human horrible because he has characteristics fit for a demon.

With the rising interest in naturalism in the early Renaissance came a concern for naturalistic depiction of not only figural form and movement but also of natural human emotion shown through gesture, facial characteristics, and expressions. Giotto was at the

\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 162.

\textsuperscript{206} Milanesi, IV: 25. See John Varriano, “Leonardo’s Lost Medusa and Other Medici Medusas from the Tazza Farnese to Caravaggio,” \textit{Gazette des Beaux-Arts} ser. 6, 130 (1997), 73-80, in which Varriano argues that although the Tazza Farnese provided Leonardo with the idea for his creation, it was his employment of dramatic facial expression that began a line of similar productions.
forefront of this new experimentation in characterization through facial features and expressions. In the Arena Chapel’s **Expulsion of Joachim** (fig. 79), Joachim is heartrending both in his pathetic stance and in the aching sense of failure seen in his face. The embracing posture, as well as the tender expression of the Virgin in the **Nativity**, evoke the feelings of new motherhood. Not all of Giotto’s visual characterizations are so benevolent; the traitor Judas in the **Pact** and the ** Arrest of Christ** (fig. 80) is depicted as an ugly, feral-looking man, a clear indicator of his moral deficiencies. Masaccio continued in this vein in his Brancacci Chapel frescoes: the main characters in the **Tribute Money** (fig. 81) are individualized, even to the point of declaring, just by their facial features, their personalities, their roles within the narrative, and their own moral qualities. Peter, known through the Gospel texts as a rather gruff and belligerent personality, here betrays these human qualities in his jutting jaw line, glaring eyes, and heavy brows. There has even been speculation that Masaccio, knowing his own limitations and his partner’s strengths, asked Masolino, the painter of some of the more delicate images in the Chapel, to step in and paint the face of Christ in the **Tribute Money** so that he would have features more befitting the Christian saviour. These artists allowed the viewer clues to the innermost soul and morality of their actors through facial characterization.

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208 Barasch notes the relationship of this face to Jewish stereotypes and negative physiognomic indications, Ibid., 159-163.

209 Andrew Ladis, *The Brancacci Chapel, Florence* (New York: George Braziller, 1993), 28. In the gospel of John (18:10), Peter is identified as the apostle who cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant, Malchus, at Christ’s arrest; In *The Golden Legend*, Voragine writes that if Peter had known of Judas’s intended betrayal, he would have “torn the traitor to pieces with his teeth,” vol. I, 340.
Leonardo encourages the artist to depict a figure in a way that explicates personality, intention, even the essential nature. “When you make a figure, think well about what it is and what you want it to do, and see that the work is in keeping with the figure’s aim and character.”\textsuperscript{210} Obviously implied in this passage is that for the depiction of un-virtuous characters, a beautiful exterior form would be antithetical to the moral state of the figure. The artist must be prepared and able to create something uglier and more disturbing when it is in keeping with a corruption of the soul. This too can be enacted by a hybridization of form, much like that used to create images of monsters.

There are some drawings by Leonardo which show quite clearly his adaptation of animal facial characteristics to human heads. His \textit{Bust of a Man, Full Face, and the Head of a Lion} drawing (fig. 82) shows a man with leonine features, an impression underscored by Leonardo’s inclusion of a looser sketch of that beast in the lower right corner.\textsuperscript{211} While not necessarily bowing to the beliefs of the physiognomists – that a person’s facial structure dictates his personality – with this type of image he clearly acknowledges the capacity to characterize a man by his similarity to an animal.\textsuperscript{212} In the example cited

\textsuperscript{210} Clayton, \textit{The Divine and the Grotesque}, 12.

\textsuperscript{211} Royal Library 12502. See also his preliminary sketch for the Battle of Anghiari, \textit{Heads of Horses, a Lion, and Man}, Royal Library 12326, which shows a similar comparison, but of expression, not of features.

\textsuperscript{212} Although they have sometimes been assessed as the beginnings of a treatise on physiognomy, Leonardo’s own words imply his disbelief in such theories, aside from his observation that a person’s facial expressions over time would cause wrinkles or other distortions of the skin of the face which could give a good indication of his temperament. While not embracing the notions of physiognomy, some of its traits and its teachings, especially the relationships between the features of men and animals, still surface within his work. For Leonardo’s many head sketches and how they relate to ideas of physiognomy, see Flavio Caroli, \textit{Leonardo: Studi di fisiognomica} (Milan: Leonardo editore, 1991), and for a broader study see, Idem., \textit{Storia della Fisognomica: Arte e psicologia da Leonardo a Freud}, \textit{2}nd ed. (Milan: Leonardo editore, 1995); Piers Dominic
above, a lion’s bravery and ferocity, preconceived notions of the animal’s disposition, are implied traits of the depicted man.

A similar facial characterization, whether drawn from Leonardo or from the general ideas in circulation at the time, is seen in Bandinelli’s Hercules and Cacus (fig. 83a), the much derided companion for Michelangelo’s David at the front steps of the Palazzo Vecchio. Contemporary ridicule revolved around the lumpy, over-developed musculature and the composition of body parts; Cellini’s humiliating criticism of the sculptor, purportedly voiced in the presence of Bandinelli and their patron, Grand Duke Cosimo I, provides the perfect example of such disparagement. Cellini began his rant with the caveat that although it pained him to point out the statue’s faults, he was only repeating what “the artists of Florence say about it.” Among the Florentine criticisms Cellini listed were that Hercules’s “breasts and the rest of his muscles aren’t based on a man’s but are copied from a great sack full of melons… the loins look as if they are copied from a sack of ling marrows.” Further, “(the face is) badly joined to the neck, so clumsily and unskillfully that nothing worse was ever seen…” and “one can’t be sure whether his face is that of a man or a cross between a lion and an ox.” Some recent

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214 Cellini, 336-338.

215 Ibid., 337.
scholarship has also disparaged the sculpture, setting it up as the antithesis of Michelangelo’s David:

(the two marbles) symbolize the Janus face of the Renaissance, illustrating as they do the positive and negative elements which every great epoch contains. The David is the expression of the noblest spirit of fighting youth, a spirit kindled by supernatural aspirations, the Hercules that of satanic power, slaying mankind with bestial brutality.216

While much of this perception of brutality springs from Hercules’s depicted activity, the physical overpowering of Cacus, the response also seems to be elicited by the hero’s facial characterization. Cellini’s description of the face is not off the mark; it does indeed seem to have derived its features from beasts, primarily a lion and a boar. Since Bandinelli sculpted both of these animals on the base, along with a dog and a wolf, they provide a ready comparison (fig. 83b).217 Hercules’s heavy brow, drawn together in lumpy folds above the nose, coincides with the growling lion below and his curls of hair on his brow seem to parallel the lion’s mane (fig. 83c). His bearded, jutting jaw and the wide irises of his upturned eyes might be features derived from the boar. These animals have in turn informed the depiction of the mythological man. The brute, animalistic strength of the hero is evoked by a depiction of his nature, only at a slight remove from

216 W. R. Valentiner, “Bandinelli, Rival of Michelangelo,” Art Quarterly 17, no. 3 (1955), 241-263.
217 Weil-Garris, 394-395, n. 76, believes that because a dog and a wolf make no reference to the Labors, these heads should be read allegorically. She finds the boar a strange choice, but proposes that the pairings of boar with wolf and dog with lion may exemplify the active and contemplative lives. Francesco Vossilla, on the other hand, believes the beasts are all related to the Labors, identifying the dog as one of the heads of Cerberus and the “wolf” as one of the Hydra’s nine heads, “Baccio Bandinelli’s Colossus in the Piazza della Signoria,” Baccio Bandinelli’s Hercules and Cacus, from The Ornament of Florence series (Florence: Alinea, 1999), 33.
the animals. Presumably Bandinelli was attempting to characterize the superhuman strength of the hero and the brutality of his task. Even the disparaged heavy musculature has been interpreted in this way; the body is over-inflated to show the titanic strength of the hero.

These characterizations are taken even further in the figure of Cacus (fig. 83d). Indeed, Virgil writes that Cacus was “a bestial form, half-man.” The figure’s traits are indeed those derived from animals. His mouth is drawn back, baring his teeth in a grimace much like a snarl, evocative of the animals on the base’s corners, especially of the dog. The muscles around his mouth parallel the folds of muscle in the dog’s jowls. Cacus is crouching on the ground, not only forced into submission, but positioned like an animal on all fours. His blank eyes and position of his head show his glance upward, like the boar, toward Hercules above him, foreshadowing his becoming another trophy to join the four beasts below. Again, as with Hercules, the furrowed brow, fur-like curls of hair and beard, are features shared with the animals on the base. By employing the features of animals that imply certain traits, Bandinelli follows Leonardo’s instructions, not just for how to depict a figure according to his character and activity, but for how to depict a hybrid creature.

Some of these same principles can be seen occurring in Leonardo’s production of wholly human countenances, where the hybridization is a combination of human traits not animal ones. Just as Leonardo recommended “taking the parts of many beautiful

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219 The beastlike depiction is noted by Vossilla: “the appearance of an unconscious beast with lifeless eyes, whose vulgar grimace is a mixture of the unconscious state induced by the club blows and the ferocity of evil animals,” 32.
faces” to create a perfect beauty, it appears that, to create the perfectly ugly, one should follow the same course. On remembering the features of the ugly, Leonardo writes, “of monstrous faces I need say nothing, because they are kept in mind without difficulty.”\(^{220}\)

Leonardo produced many images of such faces; he sketched men and women who range from laughable to horrific in their deformities, some of which are so excessive and pronounced that they must have found their origin not in an extant individual’s unfortunate genetic makeup but in the artist’s own imagination. All of their facial characteristics are excessively ugly, as though Leonardo is combining elements from many ugly faces to create a perfect ugliness, not relieved by even one ordinary feature, much less a pleasing one. Leonardo’s production of these heads has long puzzled art historians. Whether the sketches are individual portraits is highly debatable. Vasari claimed that the artist would sometimes follow people with “\textit{teste bizarre}” for a whole day to imprint their peculiar features on his memory.\(^{221}\) Leonardo’s notes record a woman, Giovannina, with a “\textit{viso fantasticho}” who was in the hospital of St. Catherine. This notation implies that he either went to study her face at some point or that he wanted to be sure to remember her location and name so that he could go back to see her extraordinary face again. Gombrich believes that while Leonardo was influenced by facial features seen in nature, most of his head sketches are improvisations on what the artist saw, and that most depict a “type” rather than a true portrait of an individual, just as the Mona Lisa seems to fall within Leonardo’s beautiful woman category.\(^{222}\)

\(^{220}\) \textit{Notebooks}, 62.

\(^{221}\) Vasari, Milanese, IV: 26.

Many of Leonardo’s heads are fragments cut from their original sheet, believed to have been separated by Francesco Melzi, for ease in organizing the drawings after he inherited them, or by later collectors. Some drawings after Leonardo’s sketches are composed not as individual head studies but as groupings, evidently following the Leonardo’s original compositions. Most of the heads are believed to have been arranged originally as pairs or groups, like with his *Old Man and a Youth*, and perhaps to suit some similar notion of juxtaposition. The groupings of some of these drawings differ from that manner of contrapposto however – the combination of old with young and ugliness with beauty – in that they are limited to the ugly. Leonardo juxtaposes these heads to emphasize different types of facial distortions. For example, in a copy after Leonardo’s *Seven Grotesque Heads* (fig. 84), presumed to have been drawn before Melzi cut up the original sheet, the top two bust-length “portraits” seem, save for their mutual ugliness, to be the very antithesis of each other; the left man’s long pointed chin, small hooked nose, and overly animated expression stands in counterpose to the right figure’s stunted chin, long, straight nose, and somewhat dour expression. That this figure might be identified as a woman contributes yet another contrast between the two. In

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224 Venice, Gallerie dell’Accademia, inv. 229, reproduced in Clayton, fig. 20, 89 and in Forcione, fig. 113, discussed on 215-216.

225 Clayton, 89.
terms of the visual interaction of the two bust-length sketches, it appears almost as though they are puzzle pieces: the convex right head seeming almost a fit for the concave left one. In the same drawing’s lower half, a snubbed, almost pig-nosed woman confronts three men with various downward slanting noses. Her lips, peeled back to expose large chunky rows of teeth, are in direct contrast to the loosely hanging upper lips of two of the men opposite her. In terms of dental work, her exaggeratedly prominent set of teeth provides a further contrast to the toothless man at the far right. While these pairings set up contrasts between seemingly endless varieties of ugly features, their ultimate contrast is with something not shown. These creations are emphatically ugly, but only made so through the viewer’s inherent understanding of what constitutes the beautiful.

Leonardo’s word for these types of faces is *visi mostruosi* or monstrous visages; the late sixteenth-century critic Lomazzo termed them *faccie monstruose*, monstrous faces. Knowing that the means to portray ideal proportion was firmly established in the artist’s mind, his grotesque heads and corresponding grotesque bodies appear to be very intentional explorations of incongruity and disharmony. Leonardo called them monsters; both his name for them and his depiction of them reveal his impulse to show the ugly, the most extreme contrast to his perfect beauty, to create human monsters to stand in contrast to his saintly or angelic types. These heads have now come to be

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226 A part of Leonardo’s notebooks, intended to be the beginnings of a treatise on painting and the body, is devoted to discussions, drawings, and ratios which seek a formula for perfect and naturalistic proportions of human body parts, such as in his *Proportions of a Standing, Kneeling, and Sitting Man*, in the Royal Collection at Windsor. See Clayton, cat. no. 2, and his discussion of Leonardo’s’ other drawings on proportions, 21-39.

known as “grotesque heads,” clearly not in original sense of the word, but in the more modern meaning, bizarre and horrible. Yet they can still be seen as fitting into a type of grotesque mold – they are images which can only exist within the framework of the beautiful. The heads are not hybrids in the true sense of the word, yet they are similar in that they are concoctions made up, not of disparate animal parts, but of disparate human ones. That the sixteenth century perceived a connection between grotesques and “grotesque heads” perhaps their similar evocation of some sort of dreadful delight, is revealed in their literal integration in the frescoed vault in the Villa Medici, Frascarolo, executed around 1545 (fig. 85), in which grotesque masks, sea creatures, and foliage surround a copy of one of Leonardo’s ugly portraits.

The “grotesque heads” resounded within the artistic community for years after their production and dissemination: Quinten Massys used direct copies of them as models for his paintings, in the seventeenth century Wenceslaus Hollar not only incorporated copies of Leonardo’s heads in his own compositions, but etched a series of engraved duplications of them. They were repeatedly copied in drawings and prints, and many of these were collected into albums, such as that in the Louvre etched by the Count of Caylus. Arcimboldo surely knew them – not only are his heads grotesque in many of the same ways, his play with invertible heads could have come from images like the grotesque “terrier” in Leonardo’s Two Heads of Grotesque Animals (fig. 86) which can

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228 I have not been able to establish when this term was first applied to these drawings.

229 *Master Draftsman*, 211-213

230 Ibid., cat. 138, pp. 702-722. The full name of the artist is Anne-Claude-Philippe de Thubières, de Grimoard, de Pestels, de Lévis.
be read right side up and upside down.\textsuperscript{231} The appreciation of the grotesque heads for artists and collectors seems inextricably linked to their ability to delight, much as is found in the sixteenth-century enjoyment of antique grotesques. They, too, became a curiosity to be collected, “to be gaped at in a mixture of sensationalism, low humor, and scientific detachment.”\textsuperscript{232} Many utilized the faces for their creation of what Leonardo called the “buffoonish and laughable or truly pitiful.” The other, less delightful quality of grotesques, too, is appreciated within these images; they display more serious, and frequently more horrifying, natures. John Tenniel, the illustrator of Lewis Carroll’s \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland} (fig. 87), found in Leonardo’s \textit{Bust of a Grotesque Old Woman} (fig. 88) a model for his horrid Red Queen.\textsuperscript{233} Tenniel’s idea of applying this face to elicit a nasty character was not a novel one; Hieronymus Bosch employed faces copied from Leonardo’s repertoire of deformed creatures in his \textit{Christ Carrying the Cross} (fig. 89), in the Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent.\textsuperscript{234} Here we see Leonardo’s “monstrous things which might terrify”: a negative characterization, the reflection of a wicked soul.\textsuperscript{235}

\textsuperscript{231} Royal Library 12367; Clayton, cat. 64, pp.64-65.

\textsuperscript{232} Gombrich, “The Grotesque Heads,” 57, 144, n. 5, who cites for an example K. F. Flögel’s \textit{Geschichte des Grotesk-Komisschen} (1788).

\textsuperscript{233} Lewis Carroll, \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland} (London: 1865).


\textsuperscript{235} See the full quote above, page 85.
The artist must be, in Leonardo’s words, the creator of beauty as well as lord and god of “monstrosities that are frightful, buffoonish or ridiculous.” These two seemingly contrasting impulses are revealed throughout Leonardo’s oeuvre: he creates the pronouncedly beautiful and the emphatically disfigured. The counter-positioning of these disparate creations is what seems the most disturbing, and yet both are found in nature and one necessitates the other. Just as the study of these opposites formed a task for Leonardo, the artistic world learned that it too could investigate this duality. That beauty is found amid monstrousness is a notion that is embedded in the grotesque itself. Choosing from among the most beautiful “faces” was the impulse of the Renaissance artists who copied after antique monumental sculpture; probing for beauty intertwined with the monstrous was the impulse of those who followed the grotesque.
CHAPTER 5
ROSSO AND THE IDIOSYNCRATIC GROTESQUE

The grotesque, reborn from the ground to find its adolescence in the Renaissance, wherein it was reanimated as a copy of its original self to perform as it originally did, reached adulthood in the Mannerist era. Although some continued to replicate the grotesque in its original format, the previous chapters identified several artists who employed the qualities of the grotesque to fashion non-grotesque works: whether utilizing grotesque compositional structures and its grotesque decorative effects to create beauty, or incorporating monstrous participants and increasing the liveliness and the emphasis of these monstrosities to provoke unease. To see how pervasive the influence of the grotesque was and how the aesthetic of the grotesque had indeed become an integral part of the sixteenth-century visual vocabulary, we may now examine one artist, a Mannerist also, but in some sense the opposite of Pontormo, who fully embodies this achievement.

Rosso Fiorentino was born Giovanni Battista di Jacopo di Guaspare in 1494 in Florence.236 He had begun work as an artist by, at earliest, 1513, when he is first

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236 The literature on the painter Rosso Fiorentino is vast and complex. He has, since the time of Vasari, been understood as one of the major Florentine painters of the sixteenth century, and, since its earliest articulation, as one of the chief proponents of the Mannerist style. Much of the essential literature is cited in David Franklin’s monograph on the artist’s Italian career from 1994: Rosso in Italy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). All of the essential, factual information about Rosso’s Italian paintings discussed in the following two chapters is easily accessible in that publication and is, therefore, not reproduced below. In that same year, 1994, the 500th anniversary of Rosso’s birth, several important exhibitions were held in Italy under the umbrella title: Pontormo e Rosso; la “maniera moderna” in Toscana, 1494-1994. Iniziative per il V centenario della nascita di Jacopo Carucci detto il Pontormo e di Giovanni Battista di Jacopo detto il Rosso Fiorentino. Of special note in this series is Il Rosso e Volterra, exh. cat.,
recorded working at Santissima Annunziata in Florence, where he produced frescoes alongside Andrea del Sarto and Pontormo. He entered the Arte degli Speziali in 1517. He worked in Florence until his departure for Rome around 1524, but was in 1527 forced by the Sack of Rome to leave and travel to smaller towns to perform his work. In 1530 he left Italy for France to work for Francis I, where he died just ten years later.

Vasari describes Rosso as a man “endowed with a most beautiful presence; his manner of speech was gracious and grave; he was an excellent musician, and had a fine knowledge of philosophy.” As an artist, he “showed the invention of a poet, graceful, sublime in the highest flights of imagination, and a master of beautiful composition of scenes.” Vasari employs key Renaissance theory words repeatedly in his “Life of Rosso” – *invenzione, imaginazione, grazia*, and, of course, *maniera*. He parallels

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237 Franklin, in his first chapter of *Rosso in Italy*, rehearses the facts of and suppositions about Rosso’s early life, and includes the important documents on his early career. See Louis Alexander Waldman’s new findings on Rosso’s family origins in “The Origins and Family of Rosso Fiorentino,” *The Burlington Magazine* 142, no. 1171 (October 2000), 607-612.

238 Vasari, Milanesi V: 155-156; De Vere I: 899.

239 Ibid., Milanesi V: 156; De Vere I: 899.

Rosso’s art and his person: Vasari calls him graceful and uses the same term for his art; Rosso was well-mannered in his deportment and his works show a grace in manner. And yet in modern times Rosso has been pictured as a desperate eccentric. This notion also comes from Vasari. He recounts anecdotes from Rosso’s life that show another side of the charming man. In these Vasari again creates parallels between the art and the artist, but showing praiseworthy qualities in his art that correspond to negative qualities in his life. The “boldness” in his works is acted out by the artist in his life – he fought with priests at Arezzo; he accused his friend, Francesco Pellegrino, of stealing from him; he committed suicide by drinking a poison upon realizing that his accusation was in error.\textsuperscript{241} Bizarreness, strangeness, extravagance, adjectives Vasari used over and over again to describe his art, seems equally as applicable to his life.\textsuperscript{242} Barolsky has shown many correspondences between Vasari’s description of artists and their characters, exhibiting that the author frequently used his portrayal of the man to illuminate the style of his art.\textsuperscript{243} Here is another example. The “Life of Rosso” produces a portrait that is a confluence of extreme beauty and horror. Even his death is such a combination: his nobility of spirit and remorse for falsely accusing a friend brings about his sinful and hideously violent end. The personality Vasari presents is beautiful and dangerous, both attractive and repellant; these extremes also characterize Rosso’s art. If we seek the type of art or style that Vasari implies with his characterization of Rosso, it is not the grace


\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., Milanesi, V: 156,166-167, 172-173; De Vere I: 899, 906-907, 910-911.

\textsuperscript{242} Ibid., Milanesi, V: 158, 159, 167, 168, 170, 172.

\textsuperscript{243} Again, see Barolsky’s Why Mona Lisa Smiles and Giotto’s Father.
and beauty of a Raphael, the scientific study of a Leonardo, or the *terribilità* of a Michelangelo marble, all of which are revealed by Vasari’s descriptions. It is instead the sometimes graceful but often dreadful art of the grotesque.

Vasari writes about Rosso’s boldness and invention, that he was “sublime in the highest flights of imagination,” and that Rosso “would study art with but few masters, having a certain opinion of his own that conflicted with their manners.” The implication here is that he rejected any guidance from outside sources, dogmatically carving out his own eccentric path. Yet Vasari tempers this by calling Rosso “an ardent student of all things relating to art,” and that the young artist drew from Michelangelo’s Cascina cartoon. Through these seemingly inconsistent statements, Vasari implies that while Rosso’s inventiveness was the most admirable aspect of his art, this invention was grounded in the study of select models which he then could refashion and adapt to his own peculiar vision. Rosso’s works, however individualized, attest to his attention to various influences: “even in the age of Mannerism no painter was so original, almost to the pint of eccentricity, yet so receptive to influences, impressions and suggestions of all kinds as Rosso.”

Most evident to both his sixteenth-century audience and to modern viewers is his devotion to Michelangelo’s works. Another traditional influence on

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244 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 155; De Vere, I: 899.

245 Ibid., Milanesi, V: 156 and 166; De Vere, I: 899 and 906.


247 This has been noted too frequently to mention every source. Vasari mentions not only his cartoon, but the fact that Michelangelo’s influence on Rosso in the younger artist’s first few projects in Rome “might have thrown him off balance,” Milanesi, 162; De Vere, 903. Among the modern scholarship on Rosso’s attention to Michelangelo are John Shearman, “The ‘Dead Christ’ by Rosso Fiorentino,” *Boston Museum Bulletin* 64
sixteenth-century artists, inspired in part by Michelangelo’s own interests, was classical
sculpture. Rosso’s reworking of ancient sculptural models has been identified in works
such as his Death of Cleopatra which has been linked to the Sleeping Ariadne in the
Vatican Museum collection.\(^{248}\) He adapted the pose of the male figure in the Bed of
Polykleitos for both his Volterra altarpiece’s Christ and the Boston Dead Christ.\(^{249}\) But
Rosso’s interest in classical models was not limited to ancient sculpture; ancient paintings
and their reproductions influenced many of Rosso’s works.\(^{250}\) No graffiti on the walls of
the Domus Aurea refer to his possible presence in the grottoes, so his contact with this
primary source of ancient designs cannot be established with any certainty. Yet his
secondhand knowledge is certain: by his time in Rome (sometime between 1523 and
1527), prints and drawings made in the site were in circulation and painted reproductions

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storia dell’arte in onore di Federico Zeri}, (Milan: 1984), 323-331, 323; Franklin, \textit{Rosso in Italy};
Stephen J. Campbell, “Fare una Cosa Morta Parer Viva”: Michelangelo, Rosso, and the (Un)Divinity of Art,” \textit{Art Bulletin}, vol. 84, no. 4
(December 2002), 596-620; and my own, “A Reconsideration of Rosso Fiorentino’s
Dead Christ,” M.A. Thesis (Athens: The University of Georgia, 1996).

\(^{249}\) Franklin, \textit{Rosso in Italy}, 64, 144, 151. See Bober and Rubenstein, 127, cat. 94,
for a discussion of the relief panel and its copies.

\(^{250}\) An inventory of Rosso’s possessions, reproduced in Carroll, \textit{Drawings, Prints,
and Decorative Arts}, 25-29, attests to Rosso’s interest in ancient literature as well; both
Vitruvius’s \textit{On Architecture} and Pliny’s \textit{Natural History} were in the artist’s possessions
when he left Arezzo in 1529.
of its imagery were already widespread. Rosso followed fashion and crafted grotesques of his own. He produced what we may term pure grotesques, images which follow the construction, function, and style of the ancient model and its Renaissance facsimiles, and then went on to utilize all of those qualities to create something wholly different.

Pure Grotesques

The following three instances produced by the Rosso after his stay in Rome show his ability to reproduce the grotesque. Rosso executed grotesque motifs to ornament his Design for a Chapel (fig. 90), sketched while the painter was in Arezzo. In this he followed what was by this point a well-accepted decorative mode for chapel elaboration. The rectangular insets on the side pilasters are inscribed with scribbled lines which appear to form masks and some sort of wings or vegetal motif piled vertically. The four small pilasters on the structure’s top register are decorated with scrolled, vase-like candelabra. The appearance of these motifs echoes the popularity of grotesque relief sculpture or stucco work, and here Rosso utilizes it as a standard framing

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251 See Franklin, Rosso in Italy, 119, for Rosso’s Roman sojourn. See above, Chapter One, for the wealth of grotesque decoration that had been executed by Rosso’s time.

252 The drawing is in the British Museum, London and has been dated to 1528-1529. See Eugene A. Carroll, Rosso Fiorentino: Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1987), 25, fig. 5, for its dating and Rosso’s stay in Arezzo, and Carroll’s comparison of it to Rosso’s 1529 Design for an Altar, cat. no. 55, pp.162-168.

253 As for example the grotesque ornament on pilasters in Filippino’s Strozzi and Carafa Chapels.
device, both according to the antique use of it and much like the marginal paintings seen earlier in the Renaissance, as in Filippo’s Strozzi and Carafa Chapels.

A much later work, his c.1534 drawing depicting the Death of Laura (fig. 91a), Petrarch’s first vision on his love’s death, shows similar ease in handling antique ornamental features. The lyricism in this drawing elucidates both the strange visionary quality of Petrarch’s dream and his consistent reference throughout his poetry to the ideal beauty of his love. The tomb at the right (fig. 91b) is clearly derived from ancient sarcophagi like the one at St. Irene, Istanbul (fig. 92). The lower platform depicts swags of drapery beneath horned skulls affixed by Roman medallions. The second tier of the base features relief putti on the sides and terms at its corners. The sarcophagus is set between four ornamental candelabra at the corners of the upper base. Ruined walls, antique entablatures, and Doric and Corinthian columns define the background space. Rosso’s familiarity with antique sculpture and architecture is evident through his depiction of those fixtures. A further debt to ancient design may also be seen. The borders of the entire drawing are clearly derived from a knowledge of the Domus Aurea style. Further, his composition may be easily related to more current grotesque designs seen in French tapestries (fig. 93). The fictive pilaster which divides the drawing in half is composed of all manner of grotesque objects: masks, scrollwork, putti which support capitals atop their heads, even a half-length, winged woman, presumably a sphinx or harpy, which grows from a small, scrolled platform below, above supporting a coat of

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254 This drawing is in Christ Church, Oxford. See Carroll, Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts, 208-212. Carroll argues that the level of sophistication in this drawing demands dating it after the work at Fontainebleau had been begun, 208.
arms within a complex cartouche.\textsuperscript{255} Hybrid creatures, presumably dragons or griffins, flank the bottom of the central pilaster’s socle.

His application of grotesque motifs for framing devices is in some ways at the heart of his designs in France, where Francis I, according to Vasari, finally granted Rosso the recognition and recompense he had not been able to achieve in his own native land.\textsuperscript{256} The king was renowned for his desire to collect antiquities; when the genuine article was not available, he had copies made, thus his desire for walls decorated all’antica is not surprising.\textsuperscript{257} Francis I placed Rosso at the head of the decoration of his palace at Fontainebleau and he served there between around 1532 and 1539.\textsuperscript{258} The ornamental scheme Rosso devised made use of many components of the grotesque: architectural motifs, garlands, terms, scrollwork, masks, and hybrids. These elements transform and mutate, melding into and stemming from each other and providing implausible pedestals for each other, within the structure (fig. 94). Like the standard grotesque, they function as framing and supporting devices for the mythological images, like the Death of Adonis and the Danaë, and allegorical scenes, like the Enlightenment of Francis I, in the king’s

\textsuperscript{255} The coat of arms is that of the Cardinal Jean de Lorraine; Carroll, 208.

\textsuperscript{256} Vasari, Milanesi, V: 155.

\textsuperscript{257} See Janet Cox-Rearick, The Collection of Francis I: Royal Treasures (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), for a discussion not only of Rosso’s patronage by the king and the works he produced, 258-281, but also for Francis’s desire to acquire both ancient art and art which makes reference to the classical world, 65-95.

\textsuperscript{258} For a review of the progress of the entire decoration and, in consequence, of the literature associated with the Fontainebleau project, see Sylvie Béguin, “‘La Scuola di Fontainebleau’: ‘Storia antiche e moderne’,” in La bottega dell’artista tra medioevo e rinsascimento, ed. Roberto Cassanelli (Milan: Jaca Books, 1998), 275-295. For the iconography of the cycle, see Dora and Erwin Panofsky, “The Iconography of the Gallerie François 1er,” 113-177.
galleries. The decorative scheme as a whole fits the function of the ancient model, seemingly a quality most desired by the king. The iconography of the images has been related to the power of the king. That he had them surrounded with ornamentation well-recognized as that for the palace of a Roman emperor is clearly yet another reference to his royal standing.

Rosso’s talent in reproducing grotesque design is unquestionable; his work at Fontainebleau has been identified as one of the main vehicles for the spread of the ancient style through Northern Europe. This does not mean he did not employ the grotesque in its pure state in these cases. Rosso’s influence by the grotesque did not merely extend to mere reproductions of it. While he utilized the grotesque in its pure state in the above cases, Rosso, like many artists of the Mannerist period, found in its typical forms and in its aesthetic suggestions ways to represent designs in a different format and for a different context.

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259 See my discussion of the dissemination of the grotesque, above, Chapter One.

260 Zerner, School of Fontainebleau, 11, says of these, “The various elements are not new... The originality of the Fontainebleau ornamentation lies in the utilization of these elements, in the ambiguity of their function, which causes them all to participate in the structure of the decoration while at the same time they are subject to the general animation.”
Much as he had revised the forms in the Bed of Polykleitos and the Sleeping Ariadne, in his use of the grotesque model Rosso exhibited Vasari’s “license within order.” He created works that were redolent of the grotesque, not their function, but their appearance. These images, though inspired by the grotesque, do not fit fully within that definition.

As described in Chapter Four, the grotesque provided a model for the construction of a painting. Rosso’s Volterra Deposition of 1521 (fig. 95), follows this compositional mode.261 The Deposition takes place in a very compressed space. The landscape behind is only minimally defined and appears as a flat wall set directly behind the figures. All of the figures stand on a narrow ledge of ground pressed up against the picture plane. The figures are piled in this limited foreground. The grid of ladders leaning against the cross provide a framework on which figures may assemble almost directly above the standing mourners, thus providing a rational motive for this stacking. And yet, as in Pontormo’s 1523 Deposition, there still exists a perception of illogical support. The man in yellow hanging from the ladder at left, though it is understood that his unseen foot must be placed on the ladder, seems to stand on, or even grow from, the shoulder of the Mary dressed in orange and yellow below. The ladder on the right bisects the back of the grieving St. John and then appears below as a parallel to his lower leg. As in Pontormo’s Visdomini altarpiece, these confusions of support create the appearance of linked chains of figures which stretch up the sides of the panel to either side of the central image. On the left, the Mary in orange and yellow provides a visual base for the man in the yellow loincloth. The screaming man above him seems to rest one knee on his back, and

moreover, that leg continues the upward thrust, appearing as an extension of the lower man’s leg. On the right side, where the vertical body of John links to the ladder, the ladder then lifts the man in blue. This man’s legs, one seemingly stemming from the knee of the other, form another parallel band to the ladder, reinforcing its upward thrust. The body of Christ that he holds parallels his own upper body, both lines bringing the visual pathway up to the figure of Joseph of Arimathea at the top of the panel. This grid of figures who uphold and arch across each other even seem a likely source for his assistant Juste de Juste’s compositions of stacked nudes.262

Rosso’s composition clearly pushes these figures to the sides, creating vertical borders out of living figures. He also encases, or “boxes in,” the picture, making a parallelogram, a rectangular frame out of these frantically active figures: Joseph’s upper arms and blown drapery parallel the horizontal upright of the cross creating a terminal ceiling; Mary Magdalene creates a border for the bottom of the panel in her almost horizontal lunge. Rosso’s Christ sags away from the center to lean against the figures who form the border at the right of the panel. As with Pontormo’s Deposition, the center seems vacant of any important figure. Pontormo filled his center with an intersection of hands, Rosso with Christ’s feet and the footrest of the cross. Indeed it is only this wooden piece and the feet that have been nailed down on it, that do not seem to partake in the anxious activity which otherwise pervades the image. Thus what takes center stage is the cross. This seemingly random arrangement has, in fact, a strong iconographical intention. The cross was the central object of devotion of the confraternity of Santa

262 These prints are discussed in Chapter Three.
Croce, and the object to which the oratory was dedicated. All figures, save for the body of Christ just being moved away, flank the cross; the figures make a frame for it. The narrative constituents have been relegated to borderwork to in order to frame the object of utmost importance. Rosso has constructed a visual framework much like the structure of the grotesque. Here, instead of vertical chains of foliage and vases, Rosso makes his figures into tall structures which border the center of the panel. Unlike its usage by Pontormo, Rosso does not employ the grotesque for actual decoration. This image is not the beautiful vision of Pontormo’s Deposition. Rosso had incorporated grotesque structure in an image which is really non-decorative, far more strident and more disturbing.

**Grotesque Heads**

The ornamental quality so intrinsic to the grotesque and translated by Michelangelo into *teste divine*, are also seen in Rosso’s work. Rosso’s decorative heads of women were clearly influenced by Michelangelo’s drawings which he could have seen in Florence. His early drawing, Profile Head of a Young Woman (fig. 96), follows Michelangelo’s Head of a Woman and Zenobia drawings (figs. 69 & 97) evident in the profile view and the elaborate hair styles, braids combined with loosened hair in

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263 See Smith, “On the Original Location,” *Zeitschrift fur Kunstgeschichte*, 70. See also Franklin, 57-66, who, because the chapel and the confraternity shared a dedication to the Virgin, also present in the image, does not see the cross as the focus, but as an important element of a narrative presumably chosen because of its inclusion of both figures.

264 Carroll, *Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts*, 138.
Rosso’s *Ideal Bust of a Young Woman* (fig. 98), although inscribed with an identification as a portrait of Giulia Gonzaga, Duchess of Mantua, is not an individualized portrait but another *testa divina*.

Here again Rosso has produced an elaborate coiffure, with braids not only intertwined but joined together to produce knots. These, in turn, are echoed by the back of the dress, which is tied into a knot. This combined with the elaborately decorative hairstyle and dress, not to mention the small mask which adorns the back of her dress, evokes many of the elements of the grotesque. The ornament and complexity are imbued with grotesque decorative qualities.

And yet, Rosso also allows for the other, more disturbing side of the grotesque, its hybridism, an appearance in these otherwise beautiful drawings. Again a comparison with Michelangelo’s models is instructive. Michelangelo’s *Zenobia* and Head of a *Woman* depict curving portions, much like ram’s horns, that stem out of the headdresses the women wear. *Zenobia* wears what appears to be a tiara, set on the back of her head, from which scrolls stem upward and downward. Michelangelo’s Head of a *Woman* shows a scaly cap on which the horns are attached and this headpiece is visibly strapped under the woman’s chin. Yet, unlike Michelangelo, Rosso provides the viewer with no such practical information about the structure of the headgear he provides his *Ideal Bust*;

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265 The *Zenobia*, Florence, Uffizi, 598Er is discussed by Michael Hirst, *Michelangelo and His Drawings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 107-9, where he notes that although this drawing later came to be known as *Zenobia*, it probably represents Venus, Mars, and Cupid. It is one of the three drawing that, according to Vasari, were given to Gherardo Perini by Michelangelo and that later passes into the hands of the Medici. It is these three drawing, the so-called *Zenobia*, the Fury, and the *Three Heads*, also in the Uffizi, which Vasari describes as “teste divine.” This drawing is discussed along with the *Ideal Head of a Woman* in the British Museum, London by Wallace, “Instruction and Originality in Michelangelo’s Drawings,” 113-33, esp. 125-30.

266 Carroll, *Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts*, 150, no. 2.
his woman’s horns seem to spring from her head. He makes these appear to be actual horns, thus ascribing a strange hybrid quality to this woman. Thus, Rosso adds in a more monstrous quality to the elegant decoration, permeating their charm with a certain unease. Their composition of both the graceful and the monstrous is indeed the duality of the grotesque.

We also find Rosso pulling away from even these decorative embellishments to create faces that are solely monstrous. Like Leonardo’s grotesque heads, these are grotesque in their more modern sense. The head of Rosso’s Fury (fig. 99), known through the engraving by Gian Jacopo Caraglio is clearly related to Michelangelo’s drawing in the Uffizi, usually entitled Damned Soul (fig. 100), which too is sometimes identified as an image of Fury. The facial features of both are contorted by their raging emotion. There is no decorative impulse in Michelangelo’s Damned Soul save for the arabesque-like sweep of cloak surrounding the head. The face is not a hybrid concoction, but is horrible in its distortion of its human features. This man is just a man, but one shown monstrous in its rage. Rosso employs this model for his screaming flayed man, but here exaggerates the expression to create a look of insanity. He makes his Fury’s head far less palatable, and almost fiendish, by its hanging flesh.

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267 Ibid., 150, writes that the horns may relate her to Venus and that Rosso may have intended her to be seen as a depiction of this goddess.

268 The original drawing is no longer extant. See Gilbert, “Uno viso quasiache di furia,” 218-221, who believes that Michelangelo’s drawing is so unlike the rest of his canon that he must have drawn it intentionally in the strange idiom of Rosso for Rosso to use it as a model for his image. Franklin, Rosso in Italy, 132, n. 47, disputes this proposition because Rosso’s result differs enough from Michelangelo’s sketch to distrust it as a preparatory drawing made specifically for Rosso’s figure.
A similar screaming head may also be found in Rosso’s Moses Defending the Daughters of Jethro (fig. 101), but one characterized not just by its emotional dissonance but also by its animalistic qualities. The man to the right of Moses in the image rears up to shout at his adversary. His face seems drawn from the same source as the Fury, presumably Michelangelo’s Damned Soul, but seems far less human than these representations. Like Bandinelli’s beast-like characterizations seen in the Hercules, Rosso seems to model his face on an animal. This man’s position on all fours, his “roaring” mouth, and his blonde shaggy hair are almost more suggestive of a lion than a man. His rage and pain have made him less than human, a hybrid. The daughter who stands behind this crouched figure is grouped with a small flock of sheep. Her facial characteristics, the dark almond-shaped eyes, the highlighted lids, and the long straight nose, are a variation on the faces of the sheep, further eliciting her helplessness, that she like the sheep needs Moses’ protection.

This animalistic characterization is taken up even further in Rosso’s Allegorical Scene of Rage and Madness (fig. 102), a design for the stucco relief under the Combat of the Centaurs and Lapiths fresco in the Gallery of Fontainebleau and printed by an anonymous artist. It has been understandably linked to Rosso’s Fury because of its

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269 As Franklin, Painting in Florence, 2001, 189, points out this unusual work could “easily be misconstrued as a mythological rather than a religious work.” He associates this violation of genre expectations with the evident quotes from both Leonardo and Michelangelo’s battle cartoons for the Palazzo della Signoria. But the jumble of bodies, the blending of limbs, and the illogical, but almost decorative placement of figures reiterates all the tenets previously associated with the grotesque decorative aesthetic. Here, of course, it is conveniently allied with hybrid, almost monstrous forms. See also Graham Smith, “Moses and the Daughters of Jethro by Rosso Fiorentino,” Pantheon, 35 (1977), 198-204; Edward J. Olszewski, “The Subject of Rosso’s Painting of Moses in the Uffiizi,” Source 4 (1984), 1-6.

270 See Carroll, Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts, cat. 72, 232-234.
violent activity and aggressive emotion. Yet the emotional excess is here expressed differently. A strange parallel can be identified between the four humans and the four animals that accompany them. Three of the figures seem to form pairs with three of the animals. The standing woman with mouth wide mimics the bray of the donkey. The person hunched beneath the cloak at the left wear the same hang-dog expression as the downcast canine at the right. The man who raises himself on bent elbows from the ground sneers out a grunt that echoes the expression, and the bestial violence, of the boar. And his right leg melds with the body of the boar, physically linking the two. The only figure who does not have this visual animal counterpart is the blindfolded man with the mask; perhaps though the remaining beast which has been identified as a bear may be read as a mole, thus providing a physical comparison of a similar disability? The animals have been read as symbolizing the vices.\(^{271}\) The seemingly intentional physical resemblance between the humans and these beasts only help elicit the parallel presence of those passions in humankind.

**Grotesque Bodies**

The idea of monstrousness so intrinsic to the grotesque takes a different turn under Rosso’s direction. A return to Rosso’s *Death of Laura* will help illuminate this point. While the decorative grotesque components and the composition of grotesque framework remain within the limits of the antique genre and its Renaissance recreations, a hybrid beast with muscular animal forelimbs like a dog’s, long serpentine neck, the face of a woman, and, strangely, breasts which jut out from below, is placed in the center of

\(^{271}\) Dora and Erwin Panofsky, “The Iconography of the Gallerie François,” 156.
the enframed scene (fig. 103). This is the sad creature, attacked by dogs, whose sacrifice symbolizes the cruel death of Laura. The inspiration for the imagery comes from the phantasms of Petrarch’s dreams of death and horror. Petrarch called the creature from this first vision a beauty, “a beast with a semblance that Jove would love to woo.” He then goes on to describe more embodiments of his love – in the second vision he sees Laura as a ship, shattered against rock by the storm; in the third, she is a tree struck by lightening; in the fourth, a fountain swallowed by a cave; in the fifth, a phoenix which disappears after seeing the fate of the tree and fountain. This shifting of form, the human Laura appearing in all of these different shapes to change analogies, seems to motivate Rosso’s depiction of Laura in Petrarch’s first vision. Rosso’s creation of a hybrid is sanctioned by Petrarch’s dreams yet the artist’s sensibility is one drawn from the grotesque. The grotesque easily gave birth to such fantastic and monstrous beings; they are indeed one of its major components. Rosso even fashions his Laura from one of the marginal grotesques. She is nearly identical to the dragon or griffin creature under the scroll directly below her. This beast seems to be one broken free from its grotesque border to act as the protagonist in the central narrative.

The lyrical borders frame the scene of a horrible death; the attacking dogs are seen tearing at “Laura”’s flesh. While the Laura beast plays the sympathetic victim, she

272 “One day out my window I espied,/ Being alone, so many things and new,/ That I became almost tired with their sight:/ A beast appeared to me from the right side/ With a semblance Jove would love to woo, / Hunted down by two hounds, one black, one white./ That did either side bite/ Of the sweet beast, with such a savage breath/ That in an instant they had pushed her on/ Where, trapped into a stone,/ Her great beauty was slain by cruel death;/ and her fate lamented by my faith,” Petrarch, Sonnets and Songs, “Rima CCCXXIII,” trans. Anna Maria Armi (New York: AMS Press, Inc. 1978, reprinted from New York: Pantheon, 1946), 445.

is still a monster and is made more horrible in some sense by her decorative effect – the slender twisting neck is graceful and adorned with a woman’s necklace, but because it is not just elongated but inhuman and snake-like, it is repellant. Ornate beauty combined with monstrous beings are both in the margins and in the center of the image. Rosso is utilizing all elements of the grotesque: the juxtapositioning of elegant beauty with revulsion and horror, indeed the primary quality of the ancient style and its Renaissance reproductions.

The c.1537 Pietà (fig. 104) etched by one of Rosso’s disciples in France, the Bolognese Antonio Fantuzzi, shows and in this is found more monstrosities. The dead Christ is seated on an antique-inspired base decorated with sculpted beasts amid two mourning saints and the Madonna at the foot of the cross. The type of creature carved onto this base is difficult to identify; they are presumed harpies, but no wings are visible since the upper bodies are hidden from view by the lolling arm of Christ and the cushion and drape above them.274 These figures are amplified versions of the nearly lifelike beasts in Andrea del Sarto’s Madonna of the Harpies. The one most visible expresses despair by hanging its head, showing an emotion comparable to Andrea’s suffering harpies. Yet, however animate they appear, Andrea’s harpies are still clearly intended to be read as sculpture; they are painted in grisaille to appear as forms carved in marble. Because the printed image is not executed in color, that contrast is not offered. Rosso’s harpies seem to be made from the same substance as the human group, and no visual distinction, save for their placement, is made between them and the living participants in the print. Moreover, they are larger in scale than Andrea’s relief figures, almost the size

274 Carroll, *Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts*, 316.
of human children. This increased size causes the figures to have a more pronounced presence— they seem more significant than mere sculpted decoration. The harpy at the right has short, choppy hair which hangs down into its eyes and appears too scruffy for sculpted material, especially classically inspired decoration. This more realistically tangible treatment of a marginal figure is reminiscent of the extraordinarily tactile fleshiness of Perino del Vaga’s harpies in the Sistine spalliere. The right harpy’s cloven hooves extend not just out from the base, but emphatically off of it.\(^{275}\) He seems not entirely attached to the marble. The mostly hidden left harpy likewise has a foot which extends off of the pedestal. These figures are too present to be dismissed as sculptural embellishment for Christ’s seat. They seem to be living monsters, hybrid creatures, although not depicted with the same grace as his Laura.

Even figures which are ostensibly not monsters are frequently characterized by Rosso in similarly disturbing ways. That these were perceived as monstrous in the sixteenth century is attested to in a story by Vasari. He tells of the unfortunate reception of Rosso’s Ognissanti altarpiece now in the Uffizi (fig. 105): the director of the Hospital of Sta. Maria Nuova who had commissioned the painting came into the studio to view the unfinished image. Upon seeing it, he fled, horrified over what he saw because “…the

\(^{275}\) The introduction of organic forms as the base for a pedestal is transformed into a hybrid of animal and stone on Cellini’s marble base for the bronze Perseus in the Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence. Produced after his return from France and the service of Francis I, Cellini’s interest in this hybrid form may reflect ideas developed in Rosso’s circle. See Pope-Hennessy, \textit{Cellini}, 133-146 and for the marble base, plate 108. Here, one might say, the painted grotesque has been transformed back into marble decoration. The row of seven feet spaced across the bottom of the sheet seems peculiar. All except the feet of the harpies are entirely too small for the bodies they compose and are strangely placed, especially the feet at the left which are impossible to link to their owners.
Saints appeared to him like devils. Franklin believes that this may have been another of Vasari’s anti-ecclesiastic anecdote – a literary poking of fun at clerics which is seen throughout the Lives. Yet this story also conveys the sixteenth-century perception of a characteristic of Rosso’s style – his predilection for the macabre. Saint Jerome who stands to the right of the enthroned Virgin and Child is horribly gruesome in his withered body and bony fingers and this fearsome appearance is heightened by what could be called a leering expression of his mouth. That the Sta. Maria Nuova director saw the painted saints as devils is not surprising when viewing this figure. Friedlaender describes Pontormo’s painted figures as transformed from bodies into spirits Rosso’s depiction and the director’s perception made them into monsters.

The body type that Rosso employed for his saints has been the subject of much confusion. While an elongation and tapering of appendages could be related to Parmigianino’s attempts to show a heightened grace, this does not seem Rosso’s motivation. Saints were frequently unidealized in their depictions. The emaciated type was used to characterize certain types of saints, most often hermits, as seen in Donatello’s

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276 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 157; De Vere, I: 900. While the truth of Vasari’s account of the patron’s reaction cannot be established, it is certain that there was some sort of dispute over the altarpiece – two artists were called in to make a judgment about the quality of the finished work and the price Rosso was to be paid, ASF, NA 5718, C660, Alfonso Corsi, 1517-21, fols. 82-83, reprinted in Franklin, Rosso in Italy, Appendix B, Document 7, 300-301.

277 Franklin, Rosso in Italy, 41.

278 Friedlaender, 26.

279 See my discussion of demons, devils, and other Christian monsters, above, Chapter Four.
wooden Magdalene of date.\textsuperscript{280} Perhaps these depictions are to suggest a moral – a recognition that the mortal body decays while the soul is everlasting. Yet many of Rosso’s saintly figures are not just unidealized but indeed emphatically ghastly.\textsuperscript{281} The John the Baptist and Bartholomew in the Villamagna Madonna (fig. 106) and Child and the Jerome in the Ognissanti altarpiece seem not just thin but nearly skeletal, almost like animated corpses.\textsuperscript{282} In the Los Angeles County’s \textit{Holy Family} (fig. 107), the recoiling of the Christ Child seems to be a frightened reaction to the touch of the wasted figure of Elizabeth. Though she is traditionally depicted as elderly, Rosso’s portrayal of Elizabeth exaggerates this aspect so much that he makes her more a portrait of a ghoul than of a holy figure.\textsuperscript{283}

Rosso’s “devilish” saints have never had a proper apology; the best by Vasari only claims that it was Rosso’s working method to “give a sort of savage and desperate air to the faces, after which, in finishing them, he would sweeten the expressions and


\textsuperscript{281} See Campbell’s interpretation of these being created as opposition to Michelangelo’s more “divine” figural canon in “Fare una Cosa Morta Parer Viva,” 596-620, in which he discusses these figures as “re-clothed” corpses and as the revivifying of the dead by the so-called divine abilities of the artist.

\textsuperscript{282} For the Villamagna altarpiece, see Franklin, \textit{Rosso in Italy}, 69-73; for the Ognissanti altarpiece, ibid., 35-51; and idem., “Rosso, Leonardo Buonafé and the Francesca de Ripoi altar-piece,” \textit{The Burlington Magazine}, 129 (October 1987), 652-662.

\textsuperscript{283} For the Los Angeles panel, see Franklin, \textit{Rosso in Italy}, 76-80. Also notably strange are the putti above the Holy Family. Their ambiguous expressions and that they are equally as large as the adult figures add to the nightmarish impression of this painting. Even John the Baptist, presumed sleeping, appears to be dead. Each decision Rosso made in his depiction of the scene seems employed to create anxiety and dread.
bring them to proper form.”284 Even this explanation falls short: looking at Rosso’s preliminary sketches does not bear out Vasari’s theory. There are numerous of sketches, like the Annunciation (fig.108), now in the Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna, which are, even though preparatory drawings, quite elegant and beautiful.285 Conversely, there exist several finished altarpieces by Rosso and prints executed by other hands which in their finished state still exhibit this same “savage and desperate air.” Rosso’s sketch for Judith and Holofernes (fig. 109) contains both types of figures: the quite beautiful nude body of Judith and the protruding bones and disturbingly wilting flesh of her maid. The diversity of depiction, whether horrific or beautiful, and sometimes a combination of the two, seems to be entirely of Rosso’s own choosing.

Rosso’s saints seem more in accordance with his skeletal and flayed figures than with traditional depictions of holy personages.286 With the increase in human dissections performed for the examination of internal human structure that occurred in the sixteenth century, depictions of the dead from this era are not rare.287 Flayed figures, or écorchés, and figures represented with no flesh on them at all were quite popular as tools for study,

284 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 157; translation from De Vere, I: 900.

285 See Carroll, Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts, cat. 60, 182.


287 The literature on the history of dissections is extensive. For antique sources for Renaissance anatomical studies, see Andrew Cunningham, The Anatomical Renaissance: The Resurrection of the Anatomical Projects of the Ancients (Hants, England: Scolar, 1997); for a discussion of the Church’s outlook on dissection, see Katherine Park’s “The Criminal and the Saintly Body: Autopsy and Dissection in Renaissance Italy,” Renaissance Quarterly, 47, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 1-33.
and were later compiled and printed in anatomical treatises. Vasari states that while Rosso was working in Borgo San Sepolcro on the Città di Castello altarpiece, the painter disinterred bodies and made “una bellissima notomia,” an anatomical model, and that he was producing anatomical studies that he intended to compile into a book to be printed in France. Among the images presumably intended for his book of anatomy, now lost if it was ever actually produced, is a print by Domenico del Barbiere after a drawing by Rosso. Écorchés and Skeletons (fig. 110) depicts a group of four male figures, two flayed and two skeletal. Urns, weapons, and armor are piled in the left background of the print. The figures are paired, one skeleton with one flayed figure, on each side of the page. The left pair facing forward, and the two at the right face backwards toward a curtain. Each pair stands in poses similar to their counterparts at the other side of the page. Presumably this opposition of stance was intended to allow the viewer the opportunity to examine both skeleton and flayed body from both angles. Yet while the image has been supposed to be an illustration for an anatomical publication, the drawing suggests a more narrative reading than is usual in that scientific genre. There are marked differences in the écorchés which disinclines the viewer to read them as a mirror image of each other. While the position of the legs of the left écorché is replicated in the right one, the gesture of his arm is not mimicked by the right écorché. That figure instead grasps the drapery and pulls it to cover his midsection. The écorché at the left is bald and wears a laurel wreath on its head, contrasting to the shoulder-length hair of the one on the

288 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 166, 171.


290 From the Ruiz Collection. See Davis, cat. no. 64, pp.166-167.
right which has no head gear. Further, there is a suggestion of an interaction, possibly aggressive, between the two flayed men. Not only does the left figure gesture toward and look at the man on the right, the removal of skin from his mouth causes him to appear to grin, while the one on the right, with full lips, parted mouth, and furrowed brow, seems to swivel his head worriedly toward the confronting left man.

A *memento mori* interpretation has been suggested for the image: the laurel crown and the piles of goods possibly refer to the ephemeral nature of human achievements. The accoutrements heaped at the left suggest this moralizing quality, but they also show Rosso’s familiarity with grotesque-type armor design. A helmet is ornamented with the head of a lion, and two sword hilts transform from their practical grips into the heads of beasts. A grimacing human face stares out from one shield (oddly, from the back side, not the side seen by the foe in battle) and another face, partly human but with curling horns, scowls from the body of a pitcher. Even the mouth of this decanter has been decorated with a raised pattern which strangely appears as teeth. These bestial hybrid ornamentations were common in battle armor decoration, and yet are also features of grotesque design.

Remarkable, too, is the narrative animation of dead figures in a manual of anatomy, a genre that is traditionally didactic. Activation of the figures alone was not particularly rare. Frequently dead bodies were depicted in lively positions to illustrate the

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292 An interesting comparison can be seen between these “teeth” and the teeth of the gaping beast in Rosso’s *Fury* (fig. 99).

293 For Cellini’s *Bust of Cosimo*, see Pope-Hennessy, *Cellini*, 215-218, and 307-8, esp. note 7.
movements of bones, musculature, and sinew in the living body. Leonardo’s drawings of dissections frequently showed limbs in motion to illustrate the inner workings of the moving human (fig. 111). Andreas Vesalius’s famous treatise shows the dead standing, gesturing, sitting on chairs, all positions of the living, but doing so is an attempt to explicate the underlying physiology of the living body (fig. 112). Rosso has produced an image that seems more about the activity and psychology of the figures, rather than depicting a straightforward representation of the bones and muscles that constitute the human form. These are not in imagined lifelike movements like Leonardo’s, nor are they positioned like puppets in the manner of Vesalius; they are living dead, fascinating and horrible.

The early date of Rosso’s Allegory of Death and Fame drawing (1517) and its ensuing prints imply that the image was not intended as an addition to Rosso’s book of anatomy (fig. 113). This image seems to have been intended not as an anatomical study but as a narrative scene. It too has been identified as a memento mori; save for the fact that it provided Rosso authorization for depicting activated corpses, the subject and meaning of the image is not at issue in this paper, but rather how he represented his

294 Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*, 1543. The treatise was not published until after Rosso’s death, but presumably images were accessible before that. At the very least, the idea of setting the flayed figures in “living” positions would have been in circulation. On Vesalius’s life and work, see C.D. O’Malley, *Andreas Vesalius of Brussels, 1514-1564* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965). Roger French notes another reason for the active figures placed in real landscapes in *Dissection and Vivisection in the European Renaissance* (Hants, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1999), 171; they are made more believable, almost more like portraits, through the particulars included in the drawings.

forms. While the idea of the transitory nature of mortal life surely motivated Rosso’s depiction of the dying and the dead, his exaggeratedly gruesome depiction is surprising. His design shows figural types similar to his “devilish” saints – the figures represented are shown in stages from desiccation to decomposition, from the emaciated to the wholly skeletal. The grisly depictions of the forms are made even more disturbing by the vigorous and unnatural activity which rightly only should be seen in living beings.

A parallel animation of the nominally inanimate can be seen in Baccio Bandinelli’s drawing of Skeletons (fig. 114) which has been related to Rosso’s Allegory. As with Rosso’s design, Bandinelli’s skeletons are not intended as anatomical investigations; they are quite clearly part of a narrative. The subject of Baccio’s image was presumably an allegory similar to Rosso’s scene. Even the style of the Skeletons drawing is believed to follow Rosso’s: both the manner of the pen

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297 Carroll states, “There is no work of around this time by any artist in Rome or in Florence that remotely approaches this image in its bizarreness,” Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts, 56.

298 In the Gabinetto nazionale dei disegni e delle stampe, Rome. See Maria Ciardi Dupré, “Per la cronologia dei disegni di Baccio Bandinelli fino al 1540,” Commentari, XVII, no. 1-3 (Jan.-Sept. 1966), 146-170. Ciardi Dupré writes that the Roman Skeletons was a design for a print, now lost, 153-154.

299 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 416, VI: 140, writes that Marcantonio Raimondi produced a print from a drawing by Bandinelli on this subject. Scholarship long mistook Marcantonio’s print of Rosso’s Triumph of Death as the Bandinelli until Rosso’s original drawing surfaced. Perhaps Vasari knew another, autograph Bandinelli drawing of this subject, or he too misattributed the print he saw to Bandinelli’s design.
strokes and the “slender and elegant” figural type.\textsuperscript{300} Bandinelli’s jagged pen strokes in the Roman drawing add to the jarring tension of an already disturbing scene. This sketch depicts five seated or kneeling men in various attitudes of fear, pleading, and despair. The cause of their distress is the active skeletons at the right of the page. One of these ghouls partially reclines on the ground and grins up toward the group of the living, and another appears to be rising from a seated position, reaching out for the men with his bony hand. Both Rosso’s and Bandinelli’s scenes serve to not only remind the viewer of the fleeting nature of life and the end result of the decaying dead, but show Death coming to life in order to snatch fresh recruits. The duality in the skeletons lies in their capacity as dead men to move, leer, caper about; they are horrible things which menace the living. Rather than purportedly inanimate statues which have been imbued with life, these are things that were formerly human. The activation of what should not stir has now become far more frightening and more threatening than the confusion between marble and flesh. While enlivened marble statues are incongruous, they still have the capacity to be beautiful. The eeriness of this effect being utilized for the dead pushes this grotesque aesthetic to its more gruesome implications. These are grotesques that bring us closer to the more modern and more disquieting sense of the word.

Even more horrific in some ways is Rosso’s \textit{Fury} (fig. 99). Although it portrays a flayed figure, the image hardly pretends to be a straightforward anatomical study. The subject has been identified as a depiction of the state of fury or frenzy, but some have suggested that it, too, may be an allegory of death.\textsuperscript{301} The figure’s posture and his

\textsuperscript{300} Ciardi Dupré, 154.

\textsuperscript{301} Davis, 71.
grappling with a snake knotted around his arm has provoked speculation that this is a
strange variation on the Laocoön, the Apollo Belvedere, or even Michelangelo’s Sistine
Chapel ceiling *ignudi.* Such monumental sources, while possible, do not explain the
dreadfulness of the depiction or the horror and disgust it triggers. Even if Rosso intended
to make reference to these icons of classical art, the figure seems antithetical to the
idealized, beautiful forms drawn from the monumental canon of the antique or
Michelangelo; it is a lean, sinewy, and distinctly awkward man. Further, the virility
perceived in the heroic figures of Michelangelo and the ancients is emphatically
emasculated by the castration of the figure’s penis. Standing in marked contrast to the
castrated man is the beast behind him, whose swollen penis is clearly displayed on a rock
directly below the man’s groin. This creature, called a dragon by Carroll, is formed
from a dog’s head, some gargantuan but unidentifiable creature’s body, and birdlike feet

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302 That Rosso was intimately familiar with the *ignudi* on the ceiling is
demonstrated by a red chalk drawing in the Chatsworth Collection: see Michael Jaffé,
*Renaissance and Baroque Drawings from Chatsworth: A Great Heritage*, exh. cat.
(Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1995), cat. no. 20. Carroll proposes the
Laocoön and *ignudi* comparisons, *Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts*, 72 and 74;
Davis mentions those as well as the Apollo Belvedere, 71. The bird at the left has been
identified as a swan, an attribute of Apollo. Davis points out that the swan carries the
implications of death because of its dying song, or swan song, and believes that this helps
support the allegory of death interpretation.

303 Carroll, *Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts*, 74, notes that the absence of
the penis may make reference to the frequent loss of these appendages in unearthed,
ancient statues.

304 Carroll, *Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts*, 74, identifies this appendage
as a breast, presumably due to the nipple shape atop it and his reading that it is placed on
the chest of the body, that the creature’s visible right leg is a foreleg. That leg appears to
me as a hind leg, thus making the appendage grow from the belly of the beast. This
positioning, as well as the shape of the member, that there is only one of them instead of
a pair, or pairs, had by most animals, and the direct contrast evoked by its placement
beneath the area where the man’s genitalia should be, leads me to interpret this as a penis.
See also Rosso’s hybrid breasts, much rounder and not so long, in the depiction of Laura
in the *Death of Laura* (fig. 103).
and talons. Not only is this creature a hybrid, but other figures in the image seem to act as hybrids as well: the snakes which curl down from the trees are almost indistinguishable from the limbs, and some seem, like the limbs, to grow directly out of the tree trunks, creating wood and serpent hybrids. When seeking the tail of the dragon, at first glance it appears to end in a tree and what then is perceived as the dragon’s tail curls out from the right of the male figure. But even the tail is depicted exactly like the tree branches behind it, only distinguished from them by its lighter modeling. The twisted form in the left foreground of the print is impossible to differentiate between tree root and snake. These sinuous forms are echoed in the curve of the swan’s neck and the rippling musculature of the dragon. The skull he holds furthers this hybrid suggestion: it is a disembodied human skull but also seems connected to, almost a head for the body of, the snake form which is twisted around the écorthé’s forearm.

Thus, here Rosso rejects what could have been a standard anatomical display by conveying a narrative sense much as he later did with the Écorchés and Skeletons. And here he includes an actual monster with his activated corpse to invoke even greater horror. Even those figures which are not monsters, the snakes and tree limbs, exhibit the monstrous characteristic of metamorphosis and hybridism. The image is disturbing in almost all of it parts. Carroll describes the Fury as “without any sensuous appeal…and it lacks any element of grace…It is totally negative in its effect; even the swan, or goose, appears monstrous and repellent.” And yet, like the grotesques combination of the monstrous with the decorative, there is a graceful aspect found amid its monstrosity.

Winding forms are dispersed all around the flayed figure created by the various snakes,

305 Ibid., 74.
tree branches, and the necks of both bird and dragon. These form passages which, although muscular and not delicate, still create a manner of ornate pattern. The sometimes graceful sometimes knotty loops of form do create a lyrical effect, albeit one imbued with revulsion. This combination of horror with a strange fascination, and even a decorative appeal, can be linked to the grotesque’s constitution. It too showed monstrous beasts within a network of decorative, branching forms. What is not a quality of the grotesque, the heightened gruesomeness Rosso bestows, does however lend itself to the more current and common definition of “grotesque.”

Rosso’s oeuvre is remarkable in the seemingly disproportionate number of dead bodies he depicts throughout his career. Many of these are not anonymous skeletons or allegorical écorchés as discussed above, but representations of the most eminent lifeless character in Christian narrative, the dead Christ. The next chapter will examine one of these images and how the monstrous body and the other qualities of the grotesque resurface in a painting which has only ever been called grotesque in the word’s modern usage.

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306 See my discussion of the permutations of the word over time, above, Chapter Four.
CHAPTER 6

ROSSO AND THE GROTESQUE RESURRECTED

The Sansepolcro Deposition from the Cross (fig. 115a) is one of Rosso’s least understood images even though the painting is one of his most well-documented.\textsuperscript{307} In the months after the 1527 Sack of Rome, Rosso Fiorentino fled from that city, first to Perugia and then to Borgo Sansepolcro. Vasari tells us that Rosso’s second stop in Sansepolcro was with the explicit purpose of finding his friend, the Bishop of Sansepolcro, the Florentine Leonardo Tornabuoni, who, because of his position, could help provide Rosso with shelter and work.\textsuperscript{308} Indeed, the bishop proved himself a true friend to the artist: he procured a commission for Rosso: a Deposition from the Cross for the Confraternity of Santa Croce.\textsuperscript{309} Vasari states that the confraternity was offended by this maneuver, presumably by what they perceived to be Tornabuoni’s bureaucratic interference, since they had already given the commission to Raffaellino del Colle. But this replacement seemed not to have annoyed Raffaellino, who, according to Vasari, “lovingly resigned the commission and gave it to Rosso, to the end that he might leave

\textsuperscript{307} For documentation of the panel, see David Franklin’s, “New Documents for Rosso Fiorentino in Sansepolcro,” \textit{The Burlington Magazine} 131 (1989), 817-827, and Idem., \textit{Rosso in Italy}, appendix F, 305-310. For discussions of the style and iconography of the painting, see \textit{Rosso in Italy}, 161-183; Freedberg, \textit{Painting in Italy 1500-1600}, 201-203.

\textsuperscript{308} Vasari, Milanesi, V: 162-163.

\textsuperscript{309} For further information on confraternities in Sansepolcro, see James R. Banker, \textit{Death in the Community: Memorialization and Confraternities in an Italian Commune in the Late Middle Ages} (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988).
some example of his handiwork in that place,” and Raffaellino even agreed to act as guarantor of the project in the event that Rosso did not complete the work. The altarpiece was completed in 1528 and it apparently pleased the confraternity – they never had it removed from its site, even when under pressure from a visiting Counter-Reformation bishop, who wanted the panel taken away because he found Christ’s nudity “indecent.” The painting’s history is not the problem; it is its formal appearance that is bewildering.

Although the Sansepolcro painting is usually labeled a Deposition, it is more correctly described as a Lamentation at the Foot of the Cross since the moment depicted is after Christ’s body has been released and lowered from the cross and rests on the swooning Virgin’s lap. Although the subject is a traditional one, the painting is anything but conventional. Vasari’s description of it as a “cosa molto raro,” “a very rare thing,” seems an understatement for the vision Rosso has created. This painting is extremely

310 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 163; translation from De Vere, I: 904.

311 This quote is from a document in the Archivio Vescovile in Sansepolcro, Visitatio Civitatis et dioceses Burgi Sancti Sepulcri factta al Reverendissimo visitatore Apostholico – 1583, fol.83v, and is reproduced and cited in Franklin’s, “New Documents for Rosso Fiorentino,” 817-827, 820, no. 19.

312 Compare to Perugino’s Lamentation, Fra Bartolomeo’s Pieta, or the Lamentation by Andrea del Sarto, all in the Palatine Galleries, Pitti Palace. All seem variations on the same image with nearly identical bodies of Christ, shown as a graceful “sleeping” figure in each. The colors range from subdued hues in the Perugino to the more vivid coloration of Andrea’s but none reach the stridency of Rosso’s painting. For Perugino’s Lamentation see Pietro Scarpellini, Perugino (Milan: Electa, 1984), cat. no. 63, 89; for the painting by Fra Bartolomeo see L’Etat di Savonarola: Fra Bartolomeo e la Scuola di san Marco, ed. Serena Padovani (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), cat. no. 23, 107-111; for Andrea’s Lamentation, see Andrea del Sarto 1486-1530 Dipinti e disegni a firenze ex cat, Flo: Pallazo Pitti, 8 November 1986- 1 March 1987, (Milan: Ruppo Zelig, 1986) cat no 17, 129-131.

313 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 163.
eccentric in numerous aspects. The compression of space, the limited palette composed of acid greens and oranges amid a darkened background, the appearance of the figures as both fragmented but then strangely interconnected, the nearly gruesome depiction of the body of Christ, and the inclusion of an unnatural apparition behind the main group all set this painting apart from the traditional depiction of this type of scene. Rosso’s inspiration for this representation is not adequately explained with reference to previous Depositions and Lamentations. The artist chose elements of traditional depictions he wished to include and rejected others. Rosso’s visualization of this Christian narrative scene is based on the grotesque; indeed, this panel may be seen as an expression of Rosso’s full embrace of that aesthetic.

**Grotesque Composition**

The scene takes place at Golgotha; the cross and three ladders define the background and a group of figures surrounds the Virgin and Christ in the space in front of the cross. The Virgin extends her arms and collapses back into the arms of the figures behind her. The body of Christ is stretched across her lap. A number of figures are present: the central mourners on level with the Virgin attend to her while the outermost figures exhibit clear attitudes of sorrow. Two kneel in the lower foreground corners, at the head and feet of Christ. Clearly the moment is just after the deposition of the body; one of the workers who performed this action is still on the ladder above the lamentation group. Notionally this assemblage of mourners should have plenty of available space in which to stand, and yet the figures seem compressed, crowded together. The clarity of their outlines which would have been allowed by a more ample stage seems to have been
intentionally rejected in favor of making the figures appear piled up one on top of the other.

Rosso’s color choices throughout are equally remarkable; his palette is limited to just a few colors: greens which range from the icy teal of the foreground female to the grass-green tone of Joseph of Arimathea’s robe; the pale yellows seen in the prostrate figure of the Magdalene shift to deep oranges in Nicodemus’ robes and then darken into muddy browns in the background. The murkiness of the scene, while supportable by the Biblical accounts that darkness veiled the world at the Crucifixion, here seems employed to heighten not only the bleakness of mood, but also to emphasize the ribbon-like connections of colors, producing an interlace effect and making an almost decorative pattern across the dark surface of the panel. 314

Set in front of the stable, balanced grid work defined by the cross and ladders, is a veritable jumble of bodies. Frantic activity at the edges of the painting is juxtaposed with the stillness of the central group. The man in orange lunges in from the top right grasping at the empty air, and the billowing scarf of the man on the ladder seems to fly out, fully extended, creating dramatic movement from the edges toward the center of the panel. In contrast, much of the rest of the painting is tied up in knots. A bunched drape rests directly below Christ’s ribcage. He does this not only with knots of clothing, like that seen looped up over Nicodemus’ back, the loosely wound turban of Joseph of Arimathea, or the tight knot at the back of the pants of the man on the ladder, but also in the contracting of figural form – the woman in tightly wrapped teal seems tensely hunched

314 Luke 23:44-45: “And it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all of the earth until the ninth hour. Then the sun was darkened and the veil of the temple was torn into.” The account of the darkness is also found in Matthew 27:45 and Mark 15:33.
into herself, while the Magdalene laces herself around the foot of Christ, a knotted human form.

While some forms are tightly compressed, others are broken apart, divided by the interference of another form or color. This fragmenting seen in the faceted folds of garments on the Magdalene (fig. 115b), or in the bright splashes of color which sporadically crop up throughout the painting and disappear and then reappear in another figure, notably in the play of oranges throughout. Rosso even intentionally fragmented the figures; the bodies are oddly disjointed. The face tucked under the Virgin’s right arm seems a disembodied head. Christ’s head is thrown back so far that he appears decapitated. Three hands seem to come out of nowhere to converge on the Virgin’s chest (fig. 115c). Her pose is extremely difficult to trace: her left arm reaches up, supported by a disembodied arm, disappears behind the golden-haired man and then, clasped by yet another hand which has no easily distinguished source, seems to be growing from the top of his head. The path her right arm follows is equally confusing: it is hidden and then resurfaces as a form extending from Nicodemus’ head, and further extends to connect with the head of the grieving figure behind him.

Paradoxically this disjunction does actually conjoin the figures; the disorder leads to unity. Because limbs seem to join diverse bodies, all the figures seem melded together. Limbs are oddly coupled with neighboring bodies so that one must carefully scrutinize each form in order to assign appendages to their proper owners. Rosso’s arms and legs branch from one body to the next, leading the eye off in many different directions, and frequently away from the central part of the panel. The two females who are firmly rooted at the bottom of the painting provide a base for the figures above them.
The Magdalene provides two branches of support: Christ’s leg seems to stem from her head to connect with Nicodemus’ arm above (fig. 115d). Her torso is a trunk for the upper body of Nicodemus, above which the Virgin’s right hand stretches this figural link to the uppermost figure in the orange veil. The woman in teal seems to support the curly-haired man (fig. 115e); the virgin’s arm seems to then branch from his head. These limbs lead up to connect to the leg of the ladder-borne figure, and his tail-like drapery flings even further up to the top of the painting.

These aesthetic choices are the same as the composition of the grotesque. Interlocking elements coil across the surface of the Sansepolcro panel much like grotesque tapestry designs wind across a Renaissance tapestry surface (fig. 116). Intricately designed clothing, twisting draperies, and elaborate braids of hair reiterate grotesque decorative patterning. Rosso’s assemblages of forms and limbs correspond to the figural metamorphosis so prevalent in modern grotesque works.

The interlacing of form also defines a web-like framework for the central scene, following the framing function of the grotesque. The painting’s figural conjunctions stack to form columnar borders at the sides of the pietà. Notionally, if not formally, these figures become the human equivalent of grotesque border work. These same stacked figures are further emphasized as framing devices by the interlocking oranges and yellows that do not enter the central, more muted portion of the panel. The eclipsed night amplifies the vivid yellows, deep oranges and phosphorescent greens, and although simulating traditional black-ground grotesque painting, here the darkness is used to further intensify the dreadful mood, even to evoke the dank subterranean atmosphere of the Domus Aurea grottoes. This dread reaches its height in the center of the picture, in
the tortured corpse of Christ, the horror of which is underscored by its placement within this stridently-colored and tightly-laced framework. His lifeless hand, which lies wilted on his leg, seems joined at the wrist to a living hand which supports his fainting mother. Here is yet another instance of stacking, but one which shows a grisly union of the living and the dead.

**The Grotesque Body**

Chapter Six discussed the many types of disturbing figures Rosso produced, hybrid monsters and humans made monstrous by their gruesome depictions. Too, his depictions of the alarmingly animated dead seem to fall into the category of the monstrous. Rosso’s expertise with the dead which arose with his anatomical investigations here has another outcome. Not only did it assist him in creating accurate skeletal and flayed figures, it provided a model for faithful representation of the lifeless. Rosso produced a truly remarkable number of images of the Dead Christ. In painted versions are the Volterra Deposition, the Boston Dead Christ, the Louvre’s Pietà, the possible Pietà now almost completely vanished in a tabernacle on the Marignolle Hill outside of the Porta Romana in Florence, as well as the Deposition at Sansepolcro.\(^\text{315}\) In print is the Fantuzzi Pietà, and a pen and ink sketch of a tomb attributed to Rosso depicts a panel sculpted with the Entombment.\(^\text{316}\) Even his Triumph of Death has been proposed

\(^{315}\) More citations for the Volterra panel and the Dead Christ painting are found above in notes 250 and 238, respectively. For the Dead Christ also see below. For the Louvre Pietà, see Kusenburg, 97-99; for the Marignolle Hill Pietà see Franklin, *Rosso in Italy*, 8-11.

\(^{316}\) For my discussion of the Fantuzzi print, see above, Chapter Five. See Carroll, *Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts*, cat. no. 112, 354-357, for his discussion of the tomb drawing.
as a play on an Entombment or a Pietà scene. Rosso’s experience with performing
dissections meant that he was familiar with the viler aspects of working with the dead,
not just the academic learning that could be gleaned from them. A credible vision of
one that is dead seems to have been his ambition in most of these images. His Volterra
Christ, considered odd in its greenish complexion, has been explained by its reliance on
Cennino Cennini’s description of the way one should paint the dead. He also seems to
have taken note of the most celebrated Dead Christ of his time – Michelangelo’s St.
Peter’s Pietà (fig. 117). Not only was this an Michelangelo’s figure extraordinarily
beautiful but it was highly praised for its realistic depiction of death – Vasari extolled it
for this reason, saying that no one could ever hope to see “a corpse more similar than this
to a real corpse.” The influence of Michelangelo’s work on the younger artist has
already been noted, and it seems in this, too, he chose to follow the example of that
master in order to create a realistically deathly corpse.


318 See my discussion above, Chapter Five.

94-95. This connection was noted by T. Leoni Zanobini in “Cangiante di Rosso
Fiorentino,” *Critica d’Arte* 51 (1986), 94, and reiterated in Franklin, *Rosso in Italy*, 64.

320 Vasari, Milanesi, VII: 151, “nè ancora un morto più simile al morto, di
quello.” Translation from De Vere, II: 652.

321 Eugene Carroll, *The Drawings of Rosso Fiorentino* (New York: Garland
Publishing, 1976), 164, says the pose of Rosso’s Christ was derived from Michelangelo’s
St. Peter’s Pietà, and that the preparatory drawing for it was even thought initially by
some to have been not only by Michelangelo’s hand, but a study by him for that
sculpture, 162.
The body of Christ, limp and gracefully arced across the lap of the Virgin in typical Renaissance depictions like Botticelli’s Munich Pietà, or elegantly draped into the Virgin’s lap as in Michelangelo’s St. Peter’s Pietà, is extraordinarily angular, even awkward in Rosso’s translation. Christ’s body, lifeless in the Botticelli and the Michelangelo, here appears not only dead, but decomposing. The preliminary sketch for the Sansepolcro figure in the Albertina (fig. 118) offers insight into Rosso’s intentions. The harsh, jagged pen strokes impart little grace to the form; the deliberately angular positioning of the body, the sharply pointed edges of the knees and the fingers, shows a body that is brittle, not supple. The foot has been flexed to its fullest extent, making the sinewy muscles of the legs stand out. Rosso may have even made this drawing using a cadaver as his model. Carroll describes the painted figure (fig. 119) as “even more grotesque” than the model on which it was based. The already emaciated body in the drawing was pushed to even further gruesomeness. Indeed, in the final, painted version, the condition of this figure reads as the rigor of death.

Rosso’s Boston Dead Christ (fig. 120), painted only a few years earlier and commissioned by the same Leonardo Tornabuoni who procured the Sansepolcro commission for Rosso, provides an illuminating comparison with the Sansepolcro

322 The figure seems more like Pietà sculptures coming out of the North. For the typical style of these carved images, see Joanna E. Ziegler, *Sculpture of Compassion: The Pietà and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries, c. 1300-ca. 1600*, Institut Historique Belge de Rome. Etudes d’histoire de l’Art (Brussels: Brepols, 1992), and Jane van Nuis Cahill, “A Franco-Flemish Pieta,” *The Dayton Art Institute Bulletin* 29 (March 1971), 8-16.


324 Ibid..

325 Ibid., 165.
The Boston figure, limp yet elegantly posed, sits up with only nominal support by one of the angels. The body is slim but healthily muscled. This all’antica heroic musculature has been discarded in the Sansepolcro image in favor of a cadaver. Rosso reduces the stomach to a shadowed, sunken hollow, made even more pronounced by the exaggeratedly protruding ribcage and the skin stretched tautly over the almost skeletal remains. Whereas the Boston Christ’s head lolls gently to rest on his raised left shoulder, the Sansepolcro Christ’s head is dangerously pitched back with no visible support. The complexion, while somewhat pallid, stands in stark contrast to the Sansepolcro Christ where the skin tone has been darkened to the dirty purple of a bruise. No blush of blood flow remains. Rosso’s Sansepolcro Christ is a body so cadaver-like and so bloodless that it seems to belie any possibility of revivification. Shearman believes the moment depicted in the Boston painting to be just before the body is brought again to life, a scene of his triumph over death.\footnote{\textit{See} Shearman, “The ‘Dead Christ’,” 151.} Where the Boston Christ is imbued with the hope, even certainty, of resurrection, the Sansepolcro Christ produces an anxious fear of that body being forever dead. This is, in some sense, a true portrait of a corpse, more fully dead than even the scientific renderings produced by Vesalius and other physicians. This emphasis on deadness leads back to the original idea of the grotesque – a thing unearthed from a crypt.

The deathly emphasis also, strangely, leads back to one of Vasari’s noted painters of the grotesque, the man himself called “Dead.” The case of formulating an identity for Morto da Feltro is an intriguing one. Even the very fact of his existence has been called
into question. He has many times been identified as Lorenzo Luzzo da Feltre. Paul Barolsky, on the other hand, poses an alternate possibility: that no such artist ever existed, and that the life is a telling construct by Vasari. His name, after all, means “the dead one of Feltro” as if he were one of the living dead. Regardless of whether or not he ever lived, by calling him “dead,” Vasari leads his reader toward a particular notion of the artist and his productions. His ability to “restore the painting of the grotesque in a manner more like the ancient” implies his kinship with the deceased artists of the antique world. According to Vasari, his attempt to create images of figures drawn from life was so unsuccessful that he was forced to return to his former expertise in producing the art of the dead. His real achievement came through copying an art practiced by the long-dead, that which he brought to life by studying sarcophagi and grottoes and vaults which had long been interred. That he is immortalized through his facility in reproducing these long buried works makes Vasari’s name for him quite appropriate. The biographer leaves the reader with the impression that for all the beauty of Morto’s images, they still retained some morbid vestige of their original entombment. Here the grotto-ness or crypt-ness of the grotesque spills over into the literary world to provide similar implications for the artists who made grotesques.

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329 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 205; De Vere, I: 926.

330 Ibid., Milanesi, V: 203; De Vere, I: 925.
The “Life of Morto da Feltro” is clearly presented as an antecedent to that of Giovanni da Udine – it is within this parallel that our perception of both artists and Vasari’s estimation of them must lie. While Vasari recognizes that the strict following of the designs from the antique excavations done by Morto da Feltro was impressive and extremely praiseworthy, he implies that this “copying” was mostly valuable in its carving out a pathway for later artists: “…It is after his (Morto’s) example that they (grotesques) have been brought in our day, by the hands of Giovanni da Udine and other craftsmen, to the great beauty and excellence we see.” Because he had Morto’s example, Giovanni could improve upon the old art and create works better than the ancients because, among other improvements, his productions were more “lifelike.” The living Giovanni breathes new life into dead Morto’s work and the buried art of the Romans. Rosso goes a further step. He does not just give the grotesque new life, but indeed makes them actors in the scene providing a human framework for the dead Christ. His further revivification comes through the understanding of his dead body of Christ – it is the only one which, like the grotesque, could rise up again from its tomb.


332 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 205; De Vere, I: 926.

333 Ibid., Milanesi, VI: 553; De Vere, II: 489.
The Grotesque Head

While the Sansepolcro figure of Christ has been called “grotesque,” it is only so in the more modern definition implying its horrific ugliness. Yes Rosso does provide passages more in line with the original terminology; his conjunction of figural parts stemming from one into another make of the figures strange hybrids, seemingly composed of parts not derived from different beasts, but from the other surrounding humans. Yet some of these do appear as hybrids created from animals. The head of man in green with the intense orange veil is set just above that of the horse he rides. His mouth appears to gape out from the midst of his beard in three-quarter view. At second glance, this “mouth” is seen not as belonging to the man, whose head is in fact turned to the left of the panel in strict profile, but as part of the horse’s head and forelock. Here Rosso’s confuses the constitution of both man and horse by visually mingling their facial features. And there is a further, even more “grotesque” and grotesque hybrid to be found here, one not just formed by a deceptive convergence of two figures, but described within only one entity.

Out of this dismal scene, only one figure confronts us directly (fig. 121) It – for surely this form is too inhuman for the pronoun he – lurks at the back of the gathering of mourners, just glimpsed above the heads of the two Marys. Its crossed eyes stare maniacally out of the altarpiece; its hair blows violently in the strong wind which rushes through the middle-ground of the setting. This is not the face of a human, but of an atrocity composed of animal and human parts: an ape, verifiable by its shaggy simian

Along with the quote included above, Carroll says of the Albertina drawing, “the cadaverous quality of his chest and torso is exaggerated to the point of being grotesque,” *Drawings of Rosso Fiorentino*, 164.
features, and a man who wields a spear with human hands, clearly identified as a Roman centurion by the shield it carries. The gruesome thing is a hybrid, concocted of parts not joined by nature.

A precedent for this can be found in Donatello’s San Lorenzo pulpit relief of the Deposition (fig. 122). Numerous intimidating figures of Roman centurions surround the lamenting assembly; most daunting is one mask-like face in the left side of the relief, the only directly frontal face we see, glaring fiercely out at the viewer. And yet this menace does not approach what we find in Rosso’s painting; his gladiator’s face is unquestionably not human, but ape.

It has been posited that Rosso’s own traumatic experience with marauding soldiers caused the gruesome appearance of this figure – a painted insult to and expression of the painter’s bitterness toward the soldiers who, during the Sack of Rome and just prior to this picture’s execution, stripped him bare of clothing and shoes and forced him into the cruel labor of transporting the entire stock from a cheese shop. Presumably the artist was distressed by these remembered tribulations in the wake of his flight from the occupied city, but it is difficult to believe that such a personal statement would have been permitted if understood as such by the commissioners of the panel. While Rosso might have taken self-righteous pleasure in giving the hated figure of a soldier the head of an ape, that motivation cannot explain this apparition fully.

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335 Both Fulton, “Present at the Inception,” 180-182 and Franklin, Rosso in Italy, 172-174, make a comparison between Rosso’s Sansepolcro image and Donatello’s’ relief.

336 Franklin, Rosso in Italy, 172-174. Freedberg, 201-203, believes that this trauma caused the “high-pitched passion” of the whole painting. Vasari, Milanesi, V:162.
The face of the thing, if it can be identified as a Roman centurion, might be explained by sixteenth-century battle armor decoration. Designs for helmets, such as the drawing by Salviati (fig. 123), show grotesque designs ornamenting nearly every inch of the surface. Along with decorative twisting pilasters and foliage, hybrid creatures are also present: a sphinx provides a base for the feathers which sprout from the top of the helmet. Further, the headpiece and visor are drawn to look like the face of some sort of beast. Sixteenth-century helmets often incorporated such embellishment, implicitly placing a beast’s head on a soldier’s body to inspire terror in their opponents and intentionally evoke the horror of the warrior’s bloody task. Sometimes these helmets even sported simian features (fig. 124). This idea is a hybrid one – creating a combined form of man and beast and would certainly provoke horror – it creates a monster of the warrior who wears it. And yet, while the idea of creating the head of this beast may have stemmed from knowledge of armor design, Rosso’s face is no mask. It is not a visage cast in metal, but appears as a flesh and blood ape.

For anyone familiar with Vasari’s “Life of Rosso,” the creature’s simian face is sure to bring to mind the Barbary ape, legendarily owned by Rosso, which, after being made to wear a ball and chain to keep him from stealing the grapes of the prior who lived next door, wreaked his vengeance by making his way up on the prior’s roof and breaking

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337 For a reproduction and discussion of the lively design, see Barolsky, *Infinite Jest*, 149-150.

all of the tiles with the weight of his shackles. This pet, which Vasari says “possessed a spirit more human than animal,” might have been Rosso’s inspiration for the painting’s hybridism. And yet, according to Vasari, the painter “held the animal most dear and loved it as he did himself.” The characterization of the form in the Sansepolcro picture is hardly that of a well-loved pet – the very glare of its eyes tells us that we are to recognize this beast as a threat. The tale of the ape punishing the prior for his offense to the animal certainly smacks of mischievousness and even some bestial justice, but not of the evil clearly intended to be read within the painted animal.

Perhaps a better predecessor for Rosso’s gladiator can be found in Northern European imagery, which offered many examples of hideously deformed humans and beasts and monstrous, hybrid concoctions drawn from legend and imagination. The most notable creator of these frequently horrific and always disturbing creatures is Hieronymus Bosch. Although great gaps exist in scholarly knowledge of the artist’s career, timeline, and travels, it has been securely established that his works did make their way down into Italy, into the collection of the Venetian cardinal Domenico Grimani. Much speculation about the acquisition of these paintings has arisen over the years; it is

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339 Vasari, Milanesi, V: 160-161; translations from De Vere, I: 902-903.

340 While Vasari describes the diligence of Rosso’s execution of this altarpiece as well as its “effect of darkness,” interestingly he makes no mention of the ape, surely its most unique element, Milanesi, V: 163. It is possible that he never saw the image, although unlikely since it was so near to his home. As Vasari is known to have constructed images and artistic personas from whatever information he had, he might have decided that since Rosso depicted an ape in this painting, in order to round out his eccentric portrait of the artist, Rosso should be described as having one as a pet.

possible that Bosch himself visited the peninsula in the early 1500s, a period in his life which is completely undocumented, or that Grimani obtained the works through a merchant without ever having come into contact with the artist. Which of the two proposals is correct makes no difference, since either answer provides only a tenuous connection for Rosso to have seen these works himself. Certainly none of Rosso’s more aberrant creations can be traced directly to images in Bosch’s works. Yet, certain elements do seem to connect the works.

Some of Bosch’s works seem to rely on Italian imagery, most notably his “grotesque heads,” possibly modeled on Leonardo’s sketched visages, seen in Christ Carrying the Cross. That he employed these types of faces in a religious, narrative context imbued meaning in them that goes beyond Leonardo’s more scientific recording of facial features. His grotesques are almost always interpreted through a lens of moralization and admonition. Quinten Massys followed this same path again in later years, using these unfortunate countenances to illustrate the ugliness of the souls beneath them, especially obvious in such works as his Bust of a Grotesque Old Woman (fig. 125) in the last in the National Gallery, London, and his Ill-Matched Lovers. Rosso’s gladiator is an even further perversity.

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343 See above, Chapter Four.

344 See Larry Silver, The Paintings of Quinten Massys with Catalogue Raisonné, (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld and Schram, 1984). For the Grotesque Old Woman, see Jill Dunkerton, Susan Forster, and Nicholas Penny, Dürer to Veronese: Sixteenth-Century
Another, possibly more enlightening, comparison can be found in Bosch’s *Crowning with Thorns*, now in the National Gallery, London, wherein the hideous, brutal countenances of the tormentors stand in stark contrast to the delicate, rather sweet features of Christ. Bosch gives us yet another clue to the underlying evil in the souls of the men circling their victim: a spiked collar is buckled around the neck of the man in the top right of the panel. This has been linked effectively to similar collars Bosch includes on threatening dogs in his images of peddlers.345 The peddler on the exterior of the Prado’s *Hay Wain* uses his walking stick to ward off a fox-like dog that crouches, slavering in his direction. The man in Rotterdam’s *Prodigal Son* (fig. 126), identified sometimes as a peddler, hastily leaves an inn where just behind him a crouching dog seems ready to attack if the man attempts to return to the yard. Both dogs are posed menacingly and wear a spiked collar. Interpretations of these canine figures revolve around an allegorical link between biting dogs and the temptation of the devil – the bite occurs to the sinful person who falls into the devil’s temptation, thus the dog is the vehicle for the act and the repercussions of sin.346 By the bandage tied around his leg, the peddler appears to have been bitten once and rushes out of the yard to avoid a second attack. Bosch’s placement of the same spiky collar around the neck of Christ’s torturer in

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346 Ibid., 138.
The Crowning with Thorns (fig. 127) allows us to see his Satan-inspired purpose, a further clarification of this man’s evil nature first elicited by his horrible appearance.

In the Sansepolcro painting, Rosso, too, relies on a bestial indicator, an ape, to show his gladiator’s true character, and his animal is no less menacing. That the human is combined with this beast may be interpreted in the context of Christian symbolism. Monkeys were considered to be symbols of sin and sinners in that, having characteristics so close to those of men, they intend to deceive by their very appearance.\textsuperscript{347} That Rosso’s monkey/man embodies sin is evidenced by his active role in the execution of Christ; that he is a trickster is manifest in his pretense of humanity.\textsuperscript{348}

Rosso’s gruesome creature is clearly a monster. This is not an allegory, though it refers to one. Rosso makes it clear that this thing inhabits the natural world. It is an earth-bound evil which disguises itself in a man’s body, yet Rosso allows us a glimpse beneath the human mask. Just as Giotto revealed Judas’s true sinful character through the awful satanic presence pushing him to make his evil pact and through the calculated ugliness of his features in both the Pact (fig. 128) and the Betrayal, so Rosso exposes the monstrous inner nature of a man who could enact the murder of Christ.

While the insight into the soul and moralizing meaning is clearly embedded in the figure’s depiction, that this creature is not just ugly but a hybrid should not be ignored. Could this too be a grotesque fashioned from antique models? Rosso’s hybrid does not

\textsuperscript{347} See H. W. Janson’s chapter “The Ape as the Sinner” in Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (London: The Warburg Institute, 1952), 29-71.

\textsuperscript{348} Rosso’s trickster ape may also make reference to art as the ape of nature to show some connection, as described in Chapter Five, with the artist as deceiver.
adhere to Vasari’s concept of beautiful decoration unearthed from the grave à la Morto da Feltro; his figure is closer to Cellini’s ideation, already quoted above, but worth restating,

“[Grotesque] is not the right name; because, just as the ancients loved to create monsters by having intercourse with goats, and cows, and horses, and calling their hybrid offspring, monsters, so our artists create another sort of monster…So monsters, not grotesques, is the correct term.349

For Cellini, it is hybridization that produces monsters - whether the hybrids found in the caves of the ancients or the hybrids he makes when choosing from disparate forms from nature to inform his art. Under Rosso’s brush, the executioner’s incalculable wickedness has physically perverted him from a man into a verifiable monster. Michelangelo said:

…sometimes it is more in accordance with reason to paint a monstrosity, for mortal eyes sometimes desire to see that which they never see and think cannot exist, rather than the accustomed figure of men and animals.350

Unlike the antique grotesque, which decoratively lined the margins, or the medieval images of beasts which lurked at the corners of sculpted capitals or scurried about the margins of holy texts and thus distracted from the center – Rosso has moved the hybrid to the center. His monster is no longer relegated to the periphery, but exists in this sphere. It cannot have any apotropaic qualities since evil has not been warded off – this figure is the evil itself. Michelangelo’s words express not only the defense of the depiction of bizarre constructs of the imagination, but even propose that they are on occasion more suitable and desirable than a “real” figure. That Rosso’s choice might have been for the relaxation of the senses is preposterous. Instead, Rosso has allowed us

349 Cellini, 63.
350 Hollanda, 62.
a vision of that thing we would like to think cannot exist but must confront – the irrationality of true evil.

The indictment of hybrid creations in the antique world and the modern one seemed to stem from a desire to have things faithfully and genuinely represented. After his tirade against bizarre artistic concoctions, Horace goes on to entreat the artist in his creation of figures to “let it be what it wants to, but let it be what it is, just what it is, please.” Rosso does just that. He, through his artistic deceit, convinces us that what we see is “what it is, just what it is,” and in so doing, shows a thing not necessarily as it should appear, but as it truly is. For him no “accustomed” figure would do; nothing would suffice but to paint a monstrosity.

With this hybrid we see, finally, the grotesque as it is known today – not elegant decoration, but inner darkness brought to light through invention. It is my contention that in Rosso’s depiction of the dead Christ, for the town called “the city of His tomb” – Borgo Sansepolcro – he deliberately employed images which were called the same thing – grotto-esques – images from the crypt. In this panel we can identify all of the impulses which define the grotesque: to decorate, to cause wonder, to disturb. But here the grotesque is metamorphosed, or like Christ himself, brought back from the dead.
CONCLUSION

By the second decade of the sixteenth century the grotesque had gained wide acceptance both in Rome and across Europe, reflecting the “fondness for the fanciful and marvelous that was to color the whole period.” Artists like Giovanni da Udine could reproduce, even improve, the basic style of the grotesque to make modern palatial ornamentation. Perino del Vaga could translate the grotesque into more prominent, more vigorous figures, adapting the style to different physical contexts and to changing iconographic needs. Pontormo could apply grotesque notions of beauty and ornament to works that bore, at least at first glance, little relationship to the notions of the grotesque inherited from classical models. And Rosso Fiorentino could conflate the decorative and monstrous affects learned from the grotesque in the creation of an image like the Sansepolcro altarpiece, in order to provoke marvel, even shock, from his viewers. Here, finally, the grotesque took on a new life, not just providing a stylistic model, but also a means to advance the narrative. Rosso employed it to arouse emotions appropriate to a scene that represented at one and the same time the most horrific and most awe-inspiring moment in Christian art.

The taste for the fanciful united with the horrifying awakened a new cinquecento aesthetic that also gave birth to another phenomenon. Around the mid-century, a type of collecting began to develop that reflected a growing interest in acquiring anything that

would stimulate wonder or marvel.\textsuperscript{352} These collections were called “cabinet of curiosities” or Kunst- und Wunderkammern (fig. 129). This fascination with marvels has been linked to a new outlook on the world which came through discoveries of heretofore unknown worlds, the examination of ancient texts, and the introduction of science. The amazing fictions and even more amazing facts that were generated not only by the exploration of the physical world but also through the exposure to classical knowledge led to the increasing recognition that the world was made of wonders both beautiful and horrible.\textsuperscript{353} Literal and physical evidence of these marvels were compiled into collections by scholars and connoisseurs. They sought out the rare, the unique, the very small, the very large, the ugly, the beautiful, the foreign, and the fantastic.\textsuperscript{354} Among these were images or artifacts taken from the natural world – enormous bones of sea creatures, prints of amazing animals ranging from mythological creatures to real ones distorted from the norm by birth defects, depictions of human/animal hybrids believed to inhabit other lands as well as real animals and humans actually found and recorded in exotic locales, prints or paintings of rare vegetation, even maps of previously unknown lands. All of these wonders were rooted in the real world, but marvels could also partake of the supernatural. Collections that included bones from the Americas also contained religious images depicting miraculous events from the Bible and the lives of the saints, and also more disturbing images related to witchcraft or demonology. Also among these


\textsuperscript{353} Ibid., 27.

collections were artificial objects – tiny sculptures made from peach pits, intricately crafted sculptures or paintings, cherished for their virtuosity – amazing works produced by the human *ingenio* which could be so marvelous as to be almost divine and which could excite the imagination and emotions to the highest levels of wonder.\(^{355}\) The essential prerequisite for all such curiosities was that they demanded a reaction from their audience: astonishment, awe, shock, reverence.

What should be gleaned from the fascination with these objects is an over-arching sense of what was important and desirable to a sixteenth-century audience. The cabinet of curiosities seems to have been a consequence of a new type of taste: the taste for the bizarre, in whatever mode it could be found, bones and beetles as well as exquisite, even miraculous, works of art. Renaissance collecting of the antique, which was yet another seeking out of curious objects – sculpture fragments, tiny coins, books which told of monstrous races and even more “monstrous” emperors – played a role in creating this desire for objects of wonderment. Discovering beneath the earth gorgeous grotesques which contained such monsters augmented the allure of the bizarre.

The ways in which cinquecento artists employed these novel or rediscovered influences initially varied widely. Paintings produced by early Mannerist artists like Pontormo and Rosso each seemed a unique refashioning or even rejection of High Renaissance assumptions about clarity, balance, and naturalism. By the 1550s, however, a certain “standardization” occurred. Painters as diverse as Agnolo Bronzino, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Quinten Massys, and the artists of the School of Fontainebleau all were producing works that reveal a similar and shared taste for bizarre visions. At that point

strange imagery seems to have been codified into a cult of the weird, in which was found an appropriate place, a pigeonhole, for such marvels. Mid-century artists who created monstrous images were considered very fashionable and admirable. Arcimboldo, for example, was very highly praised for his bizarre portraits of humans inhumanly composed of fish, fowl, or foliage (fig. 130). Yet some artists in the years before the full establishment of this fashion came to be looked upon with disdain for their more peculiar visions. There appear to have been boundaries settled upon which allowed some artists to be extolled for their work in this vein while others were not. The distinction seems to fall within the function or intention of a work of art – decorative, comical, or amusing works could use the imagery; works of a more serious subject matter, such as altarpieces, should not. I argue that this distinction was drawn later, not at the incipience of the style. Rosso Fiorentino’s oeuvre is in some ways a perfect case study of this phenomenon – he worked in many different modes, creating both the inordinately beautiful and the bizarre and alarmingly monstrous. His Ognissanti altarpiece was considered horrific because of its somewhat monstrous rendition of its saints, yet his far more bizarre designs for the gallery at Fontainebleau were praised for their inventiveness and beauty. Rosso was caught in a period with no rules for the marvelous, when the weirdness was in vogue but had not yet learned its place.

Rosso used the grotesque as a model, as a springboard to new inventions, and as a conceptual frame for abnormal, frightening, and even horrifying images. Yet each of these responses still presumes his knowledge of a specific antique source, classical

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decorative painting. His ability to supercede these prototypes, to improve upon them, and
to create something wholly new can be compared to Michelangelo’s much praised ability
to carve sculpture that was better than the antique. Indeed, the divine Michelangelo
triumphed over the past, becoming greater than the sum of all of the ancient sculptors
before him: a poem written for the tomb of Michelangelo reads:

Halt, wayfarer – I shall make you see a marvel:
This little urn contains Appeles and Dinocrates and Phidias.
Does then a single tomb enclose three men? You err:
Only one rests here, but of threefold stature.

Rosso, too, surpassed the ancients; Rosso’s production of beautiful things with monstrous
components show him to be a painter of the innovated grotesque. Vasari describes Rosso
as “grave” as well as “sublime in the highest flights of imagination,” or perhaps better to
use the words of Pliny, “gravis ac severus, idemque floridus et vividus.” Thus if
Michelangelo was the new Phidias, Rosso was the modern Famulus.

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357 Vasari writes that Michelangelo did not only best the artists of his own time, but also surpassed the artists of the classical world, Milanesi VI: 13, De Vere, I: 621-622.

358 The verse was written by Fabio Segni and is reproduced in *The Divine Michelangelo: The Florentine Academy’s Homage on his Death in 1564, a facsimile edition of Esequie del Divino Michelangelo Buonarroti, Florence 1564.* trans. Rudolf and Margot Wittkower (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1964), 78.


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4. ground plan of the Domus Aurea (from “Terme di Tito”, VI).
5. view into Domus Aurea corridor (from Segala and Sciortino, 72).
10. Domenico Ghirlandaio, page from the *Codex Escurialensis* (from Dacos, *Découverte de la Domus Aurea*, fig. 79).
16. Pinturicchio’s name in the Domus Aurea (from Dacos, *Découverte de la Domus Aurea*, fig. 55).
17. Pinturicchio, view into Hall of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Borgia Apartments, Vatican City, Rome (from Phillipps, 87).
25. Filippino Lippi, Departure of Hippolytus for the Hunt, a Harpy, and a Decorative Frieze from the Domus Aurea, 1490s, leadpoint, Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi (from Drawings of Filippino Lippi, cat. no. 65, 236).
26. Filippino Lippi, *Two Sea Creatures Holding an Urn*, early 1490s, pen and brown ink and brown wash over traces of black chalk, Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi (in *Drawings of Filippino Lippi*, cat. no. 61, 228).
37. Bacchic Dancers, candelabrum base, 1st C. E., Venice, Museo Archeologico (from Bober and Rubenstein, cat. no. 89).
42. Perino del Vaga, frescoes from the Sala Paolina, Castel Sant’Angelo, Rome, 1545-1546 (from Parma, 215).
44. Bachiacca (Francesco Ubertini), Charity, 1545, tapestry, Florence, Palazzo Pitti (from Campbell, cat. no. 60).
47. Jacopo Pontormo, Deposition, 1525-1528, panel, Capponi Chapel, Sta. Felicita, Florence (from Berti, 245).
50. Perino del Vaga, *Apollo with the Signs of the Zodiac, detail*, c.1540-1545, tapestry, St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum (from Campbell, cat. no. 44).
53. grotesque border, Domus Aurea, reproduction by Ludovico Mirri, 1776, in Terme di Tito, Paris, Louvre (from “Terme di Tito”, cat. no. 50).
58. grotesque marginalia, Domus Aurea, reproduction by Ludovico Mirri, 1776, in Terme di Tito, Paris, Louvre (from “Terme di Tito”, cat. no. 45).

63. Jacopo Pontormo, study for Christ in Glory, c.1555, black chalk, Florence, Galleria della Uffizi (from Berti, 272).
64. Jacopo Pontormo, design for a lunette at Poggio a Caiano, 1519-1520, pen and bistre wash over traces of black chalk, Gabinetto disegni e stampe degli Uffizi (from Berti, 216).
65. grotesque detail, Domus Aurea, reproduction by Ludovico Mirri, 1776, in *Terme di Tito*, Paris, Louvre (from "Terme di Tito", cat. no. 9).
66. Juste de Juste, Pyramid of Six Men, c.1540s, etching, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mary Stansbury Ruiz Collection (from Davis, cat. no. 82, 194).
68. Leonardo da Vinci, The Head of St. Philip, c.1495, black chalk, Royal Library, Windsor Castle (from Clayton, cat. no. 52, 135).
72. hole in Domus Aurea ceiling, Rome (from Segala and Sciortino, 38).
74. page from Psalter of Leonardo d’Fieschi, thirteenth century, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery (from Friedman, 138).
78. Francesco Melzi, after Leonardo da Vinci, The Head of a Devil, after c.1510, red, black and white chalk and grey wash, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, (from Clayton, cat. no. 63, 163).
82. Leonardo da Vinci, The Bust of a Man, Full Face, and the Head of a Lion, c.1505-1510, red and white chalk, Royal Library, Windsor Castle (from Clayton, cat. no. 22, 65).
83a. Baccio Bandinelli, Hercules and Cacus, 1525-1534, marble, Palazzo Vecchio, Piazza della Signoria, Florence (from Bandinelli’s Hercules and Cacus, pl. 1).
83b. Baccio Bandinelli, Hercules and Cacus, detail, 1525-1534, marble, Palazzo Vecchio, Piazza della Signoria, Florence (from Bandinelli’s Hercules and Cacus, pl. XII).
83c. Baccio Bandinelli, Hercules and Cacus, detail 1525-1534, marble, Palazzo Vecchio, Piazza della Signoria, Florence (from Bandinelli’s Hercules and Cacus, pl. VII).
85. Campi School, Grotesque with Leonardo grotesque head, c.1545, fresco, Villa Medici, Frascarolo, Italy (from Rabisch, 30).
91a. Rosso Fiorentino, Petrarch’s First Vision on the Death of Laura, c.1534, pen and brown ink and grey brown washes, heightened with white, Christ Church, Oxford (from Carroll, *Drawings, Prints and Decorative Arts*, cat. no. 67, 209).
91b. Rosso Fiorentino, Petrarch’s First Vision on the Death of Laura, detail, c.1534, pen and brown ink and grey brown washes, heightened with white, Christ Church, Oxford (from Carroll, *Drawings, Prints and Decorative Arts*, cat. no. 67, 209).
95. Rosso Fiorentino, *Deposition from the Cross*, 1521, panel, Volterra, Pinacoteca (from Franklin, *Rosso in Italy*, 61).
96. Rosso Fiorentino, Profile Head of a Young Woman, 1527, black chalk, Cambridge, Harvard University Art Museums, Fogg Art Museum, Bequest of Frances L. Hofer (from Carroll, *Drawings, Prints and Decorative Arts*, cat. no. 46, 139).
102. Rosso Fiorentino, *Allegorical Scene of Rage and Madness*, 1535 or 1536, anonymous etching, London, Trustees of the British Museum (from Carroll, *Drawings, Prints and Decorative Arts*, cat. no. 72, 133).
103. Rosso Fiorentino, *Petrarch’s First Vision on the Death of Laura*, detail, c.1534, pen and brown ink and grey brown washes, heightened with white, Christ Church, Oxford (from Carroll, *Drawings, Prints and Decorative Arts*, cat. no. 67, 209).
106. Rosso Fiorentino, Virgin and Child Enthroned with Sts. John the Baptist and Bartholomew (Villamagna altarpiece), 1521, panel, Volterra, Museo Diocesano (from Franklin, Rosso in Italy, 71).
107. Rosso Fiorentino, *Holy Family*, before 1530, panel, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Herbert T. Kalmus (from Franklin, *Rosso in Italy*, 77).
108. Rosso Fiorentino, *Annunciation*, 1531 or 1532, pen and ink and brown washes, heightened with white washes, over traces of black chalk, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina (from Carroll, *Drawings, Prints and Decorative Arts*, cat. no. 60, 183).
109. Rosso Fiorentino, Judith and Holofernes, 1540, red chalk over traces of black chalk, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Dalzell-Hatfield Memorial Fund (from Carroll, *Drawings, Prints and Decorative Arts*, cat. no. 116, 365).
110. Rosso Fiorentino, Écorchés and Skeletons, engraving by Domenico del Barbiere, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mary Stansbury Ruiz Collection (from Davis, cat. no. 64, 166).
111. Leonardo da Vinci, Detail Section of the Mouth and Throat; the Muscular System of the Shoulder and Arm, c. 1508, pen and dark brown ink, brush and brown wash, over leadpoint or black chalk, Royal Library, Windsor Castle (from Master Draftsman, cat. 113, 581).
112. Andreas Vesalius, “Fifth Muscle Man” from the Fabrica (1555) (from O’Malley, plate 31).
113. Rosso Fiorentino, Allegory of Death and Fame, 1517, red chalk heightened with white chalk, Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi (from Carroll, Drawings, Prints and Decorative Arts, 54).
115e. Rosso Fiorentino, Deposition from the Cross (Sansepolcro altarpiece), detail, 1527-1528, panel, Sansepolcro, San Lorenzo, Convent delle Sorelle delle Orfanelle (from Franklin, *Rosso in Italy*, 169).
117. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Pietà, begun 1498, marble, St. Peter’s, Rome (from Hirst and Dunkerton, 48).
118. Rosso Fiorentino, study for Christ in the Sansepolcro Deposition, 1527, pen and ink possibly over outlines in black chalk, Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina (from Carroll, *Drawings, Prints and Decorative Arts*, cat. no. 51, 153).
119. Rosso Fiorentino, Deposition from the Cross (Sansepolcro altarpiece), detail, 1527-1528, panel, Sansepolcro, San Lorenzo, Convent delle Sorelle delle Orfanelle (from Franklin, Rosso in Italy, 169).
120. Rosso Fiorentino, Dead Christ, 1525/6, panel, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts (from Franklin, *Rosso in Italy*, 143).