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More Than Mere Ornament: The Cultural Impact of the Grotesque

Maria Fabricius Hansen
The Art of Transformation: Grotesques in Sixteenth-Century Italy. Rome, Edizioni Quasar 2018.
473 p., 400 ill.
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The serious study of sixteenth-century *grottesche* (grotesques) is undergoing a long overdue revival. Much new work has appeared in the last few years, or is about to appear. Notable recent volumes include: Dorothea Scholl, *Von den "Grottesken" zum Grotesken: die Konstituierung einer Poetik des Grotesken in der italienischen Renaissance* (Münster 2004); Alessandra Zamperini, *Le Grottesche: Il sogno della pittura nella decorazione parietale* (Verona 2007; Engl. ed. London 2008); Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge 2012); Claire Lapraik Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden 2016), and Valentina Conticelli, *Le Grottesche degli Uffizi* (Florence 2018). Gabriele Paleotti's Post-Tridentine diatribe against the grotesque, *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane* (1582), received its first full English edition in 2012 (published in the Getty Research Institute's *Texts and Documents* series), renewing interest in the final, late sixteenth-century phase of *grottesche* and the debates about their validity during the Counter-Reformation (Gabriele Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, trans. William McCuaig, Los Angeles 2012). Damiano Acciarino's *Lettere sulle grottesche* (1580/81, Rome 2018) adds another dimension to the study of this period through its presentation of several unpublished letters written to Paleotti about *grottesche* with an extensive scholarly apparatus. Two forthcoming edited collections (both 2019) will soon augment further this growing literature: *Ornament and Monstrosity: Visual Paradoxes in Sixteenth-Century Art*, edited by Chris Askholt Hammeken and Maria Fabricius Hansen (Amsterdam University Press), and *Paradigms of Renaissance Grotesques* (Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Toronto), edited by Damiano Acciarino.

The foci and objectives of these studies range widely, from broad accounts of the grotesque and its legacy (e.g. Zamperini and Connelly) to detailed studies of the sixteenth century (e.g. Scholl and Guest), and critical editions (e.g. Paleotti and Acciarino). Together they build on the fundamental works of Nicole Dacos, André Chastel, Cristina Acidini Luchinat, Philippe Morel and Mikhail Bakhtin, revisiting key complexes of grotesque imagery and in some cases extending the field into other mediums and places, such as landscape design and Latin America (see Dacos, *La découverte de la Domus Aurea et la formation des grotesques à la Renaissance*, London 1969; Chastel, *La Grottesque. Essai sur l'ornement sans nom*, Paris 1988; Acidini Luchinat, La Grottesca, in: *Storia dell'arte italiana* XI, 1982, 161–200; Morel, *Les grotesques: Les figures de l'imaginaire dans la peinture italienne de la fin de la Renaissance*, Paris 1997; Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington 1984). Maria Fabricius Hansen's important new book, *The Art of Transformation*, is, like those of Scholl, Guest and Morel, focused on the sixteenth century in Italy, but it deals with a wide range of visual phenomena. It thus corresponds to the developing tendency in the recent literature to trace the cultural impact of the grotesque, conceived as a modality and *mentalité*, rather than exclusively as a decorative motif or a style of painting.

Early in *The Art of Transformation*, Hansen discusses a poem by the so-called Prospettivo Milanese ("Prospectivo melanese depictore") in which he describes a visit to the Domus Aurea in c. 1500: "Now they [Rome's ancient palaces] are skeletal ruins / with fragments of stucco reliefs and paintings / by the hand of Cimabue, Apelles, Giotto. // Though painters crowd the grottoes in every season / summer seems favored over winter / according to the name given to their works. // We crawl into them [the grottoes, i.e. the Domus Aurea] on our bellies / with bread and ham, apples and wine, / to behave more peculiar than the grotesques [*grottesche*]. // Our guide is Mastro Pinzino / who makes us rub our faces and eyes in the dirt / indeed, each of us looks like a chimney sweep. // He brings us to see toads, frogs, / owls, barn owls and bats / while we break our backs on our knees." (84)

NEW HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

As Hansen points out, this is one of the first documented usages of the word *grottesche* (perhaps even preceding Pinturicchio's contract of 1502 for the Libreria Piccolomini in the Duomo in Siena, which is usually thought to contain the earliest reference to grotesques). The Prospettivo Milanese's comparison of the extant buildings of ancient Rome to "skeletal ruins" had by the turn of the century become a familiar *topos*. In 1430, for example, the humanist and manuscript hunter, Poggio Bracciolini, described Rome as a "giant corpse, decayed and everywhere eaten away." (Quoted in John T. Paoletti and Gary M. Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, London ^{3}2005, 293). Just as intact buildings were, from Filarete onwards, compared with living bodies that needed to be 'nourished,' so too were ruins compared with lifeless or diseased cadavers (Antonio Averlino Filarete, *Treatise on Architecture*, trans. John R. Spencer, 2 vols., New Haven 1965).

This is a topic on which Hansen has previously made important contributions (e.g. Representing the Past: The Concept and Study of Antique Architecture in Fifteenth-Century Italy, in: *Analecta romana: Instituti danici* 23, 1996). She has, likewise, addressed sixteenth-century attitudes towards temporality and the idea of *all'antica* in her prior work. The Prospettivo Milanese's lack of differentiation between Apelles, Cimabue, and Giotto, despite the centuries that separate them, is suggestive of a quite different concept of the past and of historical time to our own (discussed in detail by Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood in their *Anachronic Renaissance* [New York 2010]).

In her book, Hansen extends and develops her thinking on these subjects (see, for example, the sections "Figures of Time: Grotesques, Ruins, and the Attraction of Obscurities," 105–117, and "*Intermezzo*: All'antica?" 164–168). She argues that to the sixteenth century all pre-modern art (in Giorgio Vasari's sense of the *maniera moderna*), was *antica*. On this basis, Hansen proposes a continuous history between the medieval and renaissance periods in place of the traditional art historical account of the latter as a deliberate recovery of ancient Roman art founded on a radically new historical consciousness. Hansen convincingly argues that the representation of transformation, or metamorphosis, which is a defining quality of sixteenth-century grotesques, has its most immediate antecedents in medieval rather than ancient art. It is certainly true that, as Hansen emphasises, the hybrid creatures of Renaissance *grottesche* have few sources in the Domus Aurea or other Roman decorative complexes. (For earlier statements of this hypothesis about the greater importance of the historical continuity of visual motifs and themes than the self-conscious 'rebirth' of the art of the distant past, see Dacos's seminal *La découverte*, for whom this was a central argument, as well as Jurgis Baltrušaitis's *Réveils et prodiges: Les métamorphoses du gothique* [Paris 1988].)

Hansen may have explored some of these ideas in her earlier publications, but the ambitions of *The Art of Transformation* are much greater. Although the book begins as a study of *grottesche* in a wide range of mediums from the late fifteenth century to the end of the sixteenth century, as it progresses it increasingly becomes a kind of de facto history of art during the period. Hansen herself proposes that the grotesque offers a "key to

Fig. 1 Alessandro Allori, Satyr with a bow, aiming his arrow towards the buttocks of another male figure. Detail from the ceiling of the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1579–81, vault #25 (Hansen 2018, fig. 3.52, p. 125)

constructing an alternative art-historical narrative" (29) and that it constitutes a "*pars pro toto* of sixteenth-century culture" (30).

METAMORPHOSIS AND TRANSFORMATION

The Art of Transformation is organized thematically. Hansen compares her book to a *cassoulet* – composed of multiple sources and liberally drawing on the work of other scholars. She quite openly states that "originality is not the primary aim" (10). One of the implications of this approach is that the book itself mirrors the composite, heterogeneous, and referential character of its subject. Indeed, Hansen's volume is a rich, speculative work that traverses an expansive territory. In the "Introduction" she introduces her central argument that *grottesche* are, at the most fundamental level, an art of "transformation." This term has multiple dimensions in Hansen's usage. It refers to the artist's inventive transformation of nature into unprecedented images through powerful acts of imagination; to the disquieting, uncanny, and even "monstrous" potential of images; and to the very basis of the visual arts of the sixteenth century in the concept of transformation. Hansen argues that the grotesque should be understood as a "strategy of change and ambivalence" and not just as a genre of ornamental mural painting.

This premise underpins each subsequent section. Section 2: "Brief Surveys" considers the place of grotesques in the history of art. Hansen notes that the traditional emphasis of the discipline on great masters and easel paintings has lead to the neglect of *grottesche*. In contrast, she argues that, conceived as an art of transformation, the grotesque has the potential to illuminate the art of the whole period. She then provides a useful selective history of the development of *grottesche* from Pinturicchio's work in Rome (e.g. Alexander VI's Appartamento Borgia, 1492–94), to the work of the mysterious Morto da Feltre (whom Vasari considered to be a pioneer of the field), Cesare Cesariano, Andrea di Cosimo da Feltre, Raphael's workshop, Bernardino Poccetti's *sgraffito* façades in Florence (e.g. the façade of the Palazzo di Bianca Capello) and artists such as Giuseppe Arcimboldo who worked outside Italy. The section concludes with a discussion of the debate about artistic license and its legitimacy in the sixteenth century, the parameters of which were determined by the criticisms of Vitruvius and Horace in Antiquity. The former deplored the "grotesque" paintings of his own period as "monstrosities," while the latter compared pictures of hybrid creatures to "a sick man's dreams." Hansen also draws attention to Paleotti's trenchant arguments against *grottesche*.

Section 3: "In the Grottoes" considers the rediscovery of the frescoes of the Domus Aurea, which was misunderstood as an underground complex of rooms (hence the term *grottesche* – a misnomer derived from *grotta* or cave). Hansen also draws attention to the frequent association of the grotesque with women in sixteenth-century art, arguing that *grottesche* are indicative of the period's misogynist anxieties about female allure and sexuality. Next come subsections on temporality and the representation of ruins within grotesque schemes as well as the concomitant, if contradictory, responses of humor and horror with which they were received.

HORROR AND HUMOR

The humor of these images is often scatological, as in for example, Alessandro Allori's image of a satyr aiming his bow and arrow at the bare buttocks of a bearded male figure (ceiling of the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, 1579–81; *fig. 1*). Others, such as Cesare Baglione's fountain with a urinating figure in the Sala delle Grottesche (Rocca di Meli Lupi, Soragna) or another male figure by Allori from the ceiling of the Uffizi, who is depicted relieving himself into the mouth of a winged hybrid recall contemporary fountain design. The Lavandaia in the Villa Medici garden at Pratolino, for example, depicted a boy continuously soiling the sheets of the washerwoman. Another fountain of c. 1544, which – perhaps more than any other example – is suggestive of Hansen's theme (but not mentioned in the book), was once installed in the garden of the Palazzo Pucci in Florence and is now

Fig. 2 Chiostro dello Scalzo with grisaille frescoes, 1509–26, Florence. Scenes of the Life of St. John the Baptist by Andrea del Sarto and ornamental sections by Andrea di Cosimo Feltrini (Hansen 2018, fig. 3.68, p. 138)

in the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Medievale e Moderna in Arezzo. Sculpted by Pierino da Vinci, it depicts a putto urinating through a grimacing grotesque mask. Hansen could perhaps have made more here of Bakhtin's study of "grotesque realism" in the work of François Rabelais, especially his analysis of body fluids as a recurring motif of the grotesque.

The section concludes with a discussion of the chthonic imagery (death and the underworld) of *grottesche*. Two of Hansen's examples are worth briefly commenting on. She draws attention to the juxtaposition of skulls and *grottesche*, painted in grisaille, in the Chiostro dello Scalzo in Florence (1509–26; *fig. 2*). The scenes of the life of John the Baptist in the Scalzo are by Andrea del Sarto, but – as Hansen notes – there has always been a question mark over whether Andrea di Cosimo Feltrini was also involved in the commission. It may therefore be of interest that a payment to Feltrini has recently been discovered that confirms his responsibility for the ornamental elements that frame del Sarto's narrative frescoes, indicating that the dense *grottesche* of the painted entablature (and the skulls) can be assigned to him (Alana O'Brien, "Maestri d'alcune arti miste e d'ingegno": Artists and Artisans in the Compagnia dello Scalzo, in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 55/3, 2013, 359–433, here 375).

Hansen also discusses the colossal Hell Mouth in Vicino Orsini's enigmatic Sacro Bosco in Bomarzo (near Viterbo), which was carved out of the 'living' volcanic tuff (peperino) of the site, as a prime example of the oscillation between horror and humor in grotesque work of the sixteenth century. This is convincing: the Hell Mouth is simultaneously a menacing image of the entrance to Hell and a convivial dining chamber complete with an extant stone table. A drawing by Giovanni Guerra of 1604, now in the Albertina in Vienna, depicts a diner and a musician inside the Hell Mouth. (The lips of the mouth are even inscribed with a witty misquotation of the forbidding proclamation over the entrance to Hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy* – "Lasciate ogni pensiero voi ch'entrate" instead of "Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate".) Hansen's suggestion that Pirro Ligorio was involved in its design is, however, less convincing. Ligorio did design a garden – at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli – and, moreover, composed a detailed interpretation of ancient *grottesche*, but there is no evidence that he worked with Orsini at Bomarzo. His known projects – for example the Casino of Pius IV in the Vatican and the garden of the Villa d'Este – are more antiquarian in character, lacking the fantastic, transgressive quality of the rock-cut monsters of the Sacro Bosco.

AESTHETIC EXPERIMENTS

In Section 4: "Traditions and Transformations," Hansen again takes up the story of artists' explorations of the Domus Aurea, so evocatively described by the Prospettivo Milanese, this time drawing on Dacos's research on the many signatures that were scratched into its walls from the late fifteenth century onwards. This is also the section in which Hansen explores further the concept of *all'antica* and the continuities between the medieval and renaissance periods. She makes the important point that "grotesques were a powerful field for experimenting with subjects that were not yet possible or acceptable as motifs in their own right" (188). This is one of the most notable contributions of her book.

Hansen demonstrates, cumulatively and across the many subsections of the volume, that later genres and preoccupations of art, including the new concepts of historical time that are foregrounded by the depiction of ruins, the representation of landscape for its own sake (inserted within *grottesche* decorative schemes and often presented as *quadri riportati* or as if seen through an oculus or portal), still-lives, the interface of and intersections between the natural and the technological, and numerous other themes and motifs, are first explored in sixteenth-century grotesques. In this sense, painted *grottesche* schemes are conceptually close to gardens (especially, in fact, the Sacro Bosco) – privileged realms outside the usual strictures and conventions governing artistic *decorum* and social acceptability and, as a consequence, experimental sites that afforded a greater degree of freedom to artists than most.

The section concludes with the vexed question of whether the ancient prototypes of *grottesche* were meaningful or merely ornamental. Ligorio believed that they comprised a symbolic language not unlike hieroglyphs and, as Acciarino has recently made clear, argued strenuously in response to Paleotti and elsewhere for their symbolic content. In his study of grotesques, for example, Ligorio mentions Empedocles, Pythagoras and Aesop, insisting that *grottesche*, far from being gratuitously "extravagant" and "monstrous," have their origins in the thought of these "poets and philosophers of transmutation." (See Dacos, *La découverte*, 163).

NATURE, ART AND A VISUAL THEORY OF THE IMAGE

The fifth section focuses on the respective roles of and exchanges between nature and art in *grottesche*. Hansen discusses a wide range of mediums and works, including paintings on stone, *objets d'art*, lacework, intarsia decoration, armour, garden grottoes, architecture (emphasizing the use of spolia), art collections and alchemical practices. The relationship between the two terms over the course of the century is framed by the earlier concept of the *terza natura* (third nature) in which the garden (or other work of art) is conceived as the product of a collaboration between art and nature and Paleotti's later doctrinaire assertion that: "If art imitates nature, then grotesques fall outside the bounds of art." (Paleotti, *Discourse*, 274). The earlier concept has many nuances: it is suggestive of nature as an active participant in creation but it is also relevant to the intersection between the twin discourses of the grotesque and the monstrous. For example, it is remarkable how similar the premises and language of medical and teratological treatises such as Ambroise Paré's *Des monstres et prodiges* (1573) are to those of aesthetic treatises on the grotesque. In both, nature and the natural are implicitly normative. Like monsters, *grottesche* were for writers on one side of the debate (e.g. Paleotti) "against nature" and thus unacceptable. For others, however, the monstrous and the grotesque were evidence of the creative play of nature, the "chambermaid," as Paré writes, of the "great God."

In Section 6: "Defining Art," Hansen argues that *grottesche* present a visual theory of the image. They offer perhaps the clearest example of the sixteenth century's fascination with the transformation of the natural into the artificial. Ligorio thought something similar about ancient grotesques, but for him their significance derived from what he believed to be their density of concealed meanings. For Hansen, *grottesche* not only foreground the central concept of transformation, but also, through their insistent linearity, comprise a kind of handwriting and artistic self-expression ("figurations of the artist himself" [338]). She has in mind here the sixteenth-century concept of the artist's *fantasia*, in which nature is again a central term. Anton Francesco Doni, for example, attempted to reconcile the "chimeras" of painters with the laws of nature. His argument was that nature itself produced strange and outlandish forms. This, he claimed, justified the *fantasia* of the artist.

In the context of these arguments, one of Sodoma's painted pilasters for the cloister of the Abbazia di Monteoliveto Maggiore (1505–08), is particularly interesting (reproduced by Hansen as Figure 6.39; *fig. 3*). Inserted within the *grottesche* there is a small depiction of a bearded painter working on a representation of the Madonna and Child. The painting hangs precariously from a tendril and the artist sits astride another shoot jutting laterally from the border of the pilaster. Hansen plausibly suggests that this is an image of St. Luke painting the Virgin – the first true likeness of Mary. She goes on to propose that Sodoma, whose portrait appears prominently in the scene with St. Benedict, associates himself with St. Luke. But perhaps the inclusion of this scene within the elaborate *grottesche* of the abbey is even more significant. The story of St. Luke's portrait of the Madonna is one of the foundational ones of Christian art – the *fons et origo* of the icon tradition. It is, in other words, an idea and image of great importance and prestige. Sodoma may be making a claim here for the comparable prestige of his (or his workshop's) fantastic inventions, which is to say that the *grottesche* acquire reflected value through

Fig. 3 Sodoma, An artist painting the Madonna. Detail of grotesques on painted pilaster, 1505–08. Cloister of the Abbazia di Monteoliveto Maggiore (Hansen 2018, fig. 6.39, p. 302)

the presence of the image of St. Luke painting the Virgin. The juxtaposition of the first sacred painting and the phytomorphic motifs of the pilaster could be interpreted as a claim for the fundamental importance of *fantasia* to the painter's art.

In Section 7: "Moving Images," Hansen discusses the relationship between the period's love of irony and *contrapposto* and the appeal of grotesques: "As figures of *contrapposto*, grotesques are visualizations of fundamental contemporary conditions, an overarching worldview, which includes the contradictory, unstable, ambiguous, ironic, and paradoxical" (344). She also discusses the typical locations of *grottesche* in transitional zones, itemized by Giovan Battista Armenini in 1587 as "loggias, studies, gardens, rooms, courtyards, stairways, baths, galleries and all manner of minor spaces." Few prior writers have explored the significance of the physical locations of *grottesche*, which make Hansen's comments particularly valuable. Just as the grotesque figure is itself, typically, a figure in a state of change (one of Bakhtin's key insights is that the grotesque body is in a perpetual state of "becoming"), so too are *grottesche* most often depicted in spaces that serve as thresholds or transitional areas. This idea of movement, not just between physical states or from place to place, is – as Hansen recognizes – an important one. Her analysis would, however, have been further strengthened through reference to Michel Jeanneret's excellent book *Perpetuum mobile: Métamorphoses des corps et des œuvres, de Vinci à Montaigne* (Paris 1997; Engl. ed. Baltimore 2001). Jeanneret argues "for a sixteenth century swept up in change and fascinated by genesis and metamorphosis" – a "metamorphic sensibility" – which is very close to Hansen's argument about the centrality of transformation to sixteenth-century aesthetics.

Hansen's conclusion brings the multiple strands of the book together. She reiterates her two key claims: first, "that the grotesques should be re-evaluated and assigned a more decisive role in art-historical analyses of sixteenth-century imagemaking" (397) and, second, that transformation is "characteristic of art, nature, and a wide range of scientific and alchemical practices in

the sixteenth century and evident in the disquieting and attractive uncertainties of perception manifested in the visual culture of this period" (399). Hansen certainly achieves her aims – to argue the case for the central importance of *grottesche* in sixteenth-century art and to trace the theme of transformation across many mediums and phenomena, but her approach raises intriguing questions about methodology.

AN ALTERNATIVE ART-HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

One of the difficulties inherent in the study of *grottesche* is the sheer mass of material. The sixteenth-century proliferation of grotesques throughout Italy and beyond is an extraordinary historical phenomenon. Not only are there countless examples scattered all over the peninsula, but grotesque painting is a site-specific art of space (as well as imagery). One of the great strengths of Hansen's book is the number and very high quality of the figures. Indeed, this in itself – quite apart from the text – makes the volume an important resource for scholars. Yet photographs (even the multi-page lift-outs of Hansen's book), obviously cannot reproduce the experience of *grottesche in situ* and it would be beyond the resources of most historians to make a study of every example (though a comprehensive catalogue raisonné would be an immensely valuable tool).

Hansen's approach significantly expands the category of the grotesque. This is a strength of the book, and it enables her to persuasively argue for *grottesche* as not only the foremost example of the theme of transformation, but as a key to the underlying logic of *Cinquecento* visual culture. It does, however, contrast with the approach of other scholars, especially that of Morel's classic study. In his *Les grotesques* (1997), Morel performs a close analysis of standard motifs and compositions in sixteenth-century *grottesche*, developing a kind of lexicon or vocabulary of forms. To give an example: according to Morel, the "langage des grotesques" includes human figures (often mythological); animal figures (especially swans, peacocks, owls, goats, lions, fish, and birds); and hybrid figures. This last category can be subdivided into four types: the anthropomorphic (generally mythological monsters such as sirens and sphinxes), the zoomorphic (mixed creatures with, for example, terrestrial and marine characteristics), the teratomorphic (dragons for example), and the phytomorphic – in which human and vegetal characteristics are combined. Other motifs include truncated figures, often lacking their lower halves and fused to a structure; various objects (such as masks, weapons, musical instruments, foliage, drapery, lamps and furniture); and the aforementioned historical or landscape scenes (Morel, *Les grotesques*, 48sq.).

The contrasting methods of Hansen and Morel call to mind the distinction between 'lumpers' and 'splitters'. Lumpers favour broad categories and perceive connections between many different categories of phenomena whereas splitters prefer fine distinctions. Hansen acknowledges the value of both approaches at the beginning of her book, but implicitly aligns herself with the broader perspective. As she states: "Generalizations imply a certain distance from individual artworks, with all the problems of simplification this distance implies; however, readers interested in understanding grotesques from the broader perspective of a history of ideas and mentalities, willing to acknowledge a certain 'unity of thought' in a given time period, will hopefully agree that generalizations are not just unavoidable but are integral to such an analysis" (30). This reviewer agrees, but others will have their own preferences. Either way, Hansen's volume is an important addition to the literature, which like its subject, should be a broad church.

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