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## Providing Evidence in Early Modern Bologna

Where does the Truth lie? In this painting by the young Annibale Carracci (now in the Royal Collection at Hampton Court: Fig. 1), she is literally installed on a well, an image referencing the classical theme of Time rescuing Truth. The work depicts the aged, winged figure of Time seated on the edge of the proverbial well from which he has raised his daughter, Truth, so that she may appear in the light of day. Lying on the step of the well is a female figure, the personification of everything that Truth triumphantly tramples under her foot: lies, falsehood, hypocrisy and deceit – all that is contrary to truth and that will be eclipsed by her shining and radiant emergence from the dark. The reference here is to a fragment of Democritus, reported in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives*, that states, "Of reality we know nothing, because Truth is in a well" (or in a depth, according to other versions), a maxim that skeptically denies any ability to know, any capacity to obtain reliable knowledge from the experience of the real. Nothing can be said to be true, because Truth is not accessible. And yet Truth will triumph with the help of Time (which means that temporal distance is needed in order for the truth to emerge), bringing success and happiness – the two allegories framing the composition – in a newly ordered, more truthful world.

There are two aspects here that immediately catch the attention of the viewer, evoking familiar and less familiar tenets about the condition of being true in the late Renaissance period. The first is that the androgynous figure of Truth is naked, meaning that nudity – the state of being uncovered, or without protection: optically vulnerable and subject to scrutiny – is the precondition for facts to be assessed, confronted, assayed, in order to establish their true component. The second is embedded in the very act of mirroring that the young personification so eminently performs. Truth is self-reflection, in that it is a process of recognition that implies acknowledging consonances, resemblance, and possible coincidences between facts, words, or concepts. Truth is a demonstrative process, verifiable (and, conversely, deniable), that is based on the idea of the equivalence, mostly visual, between the events in the world and their representation. (One cannot help but notice that Truth here is also a self-sufficient, self-standing, isolated figure – she does not take part in the events, but is just mirroring herself. Truth is where narrative comes to an end, and pure meditation begins).

Carracci's allegory perfectly epitomizes an idea of Truth that was widespread at the end of the Renaissance, a moment when – as art historian Howard Hibbard recalled in the first pages

of his *Bernini* – “the main intellectual problem was the separation of the true from the false”.<sup>1</sup> The painting is not mentioned in contemporary literature, and all the efforts to retrace its origins as well as to provide it with a more substantial intellectual context have proven unsuccessful.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, this image offers an effective entry point to the questions raised in this collection of essays, for such aspects as the attitudes concerning truth and falsehood in the visual domain, the manipulation of information, and the emergence of an objective scientific gaze in a context, such as late Renaissance Bologna, that appears particularly open to pondering, supporting, or denying notions of facts and norms.

Why Bologna? It is not my intention to stretch the municipal metaphor too far – and I would like to keep it as a provisional, working hypothesis rather than a firm statement – but incidentally a series of local factors seems to have contributed to promote a sort of civic affinity for facts, laws, and principles in Bologna, and to encourage what I would call a native epistemology of the true. Needless to say, the presence of the *Studium*, with its long-standing tradition of teaching and research, plays a central role in this. Even though, throughout the course of the Seicento, the University was steadily decaying and falling behind similar institutions in continental Europe (a situation also reflecting the progressive loss of momentum in the Italian educational system and its relative marginalization), its impact on the local cultural debate cannot be underestimated. It was the tradition of legal studies and medicine – two fields where the determination of truth and false is, literally, vital – that was particularly strong in the local curriculum. As Agostino Carracci’s inscription on the 1581 map of Bologna shows, the city came to be identified with its own University: *Bononia Docet Mater Studiorum*. Also, the peripheral position in the State of the Church, as well as the latent antagonism with Rome, plausibly contributed to the maintenance of a partially independent, anti-dogmatic approach in many cultural respects, fostering a genuine sense of pride for its intellectual roots. Finally, the geographical projection toward the north and the cosmopolitan environment (numerous were, in fact, the foreign communities in the city) were also crucial in sustaining an intellectual foundation in its wide-ranging, encyclopedic ambitions in all fields of cultural production, and especially in the arts, nurturing what appears to be a genuinely open approach to science and investigation.

But the humanistic environment and the more-or-less favorable *genius loci* cannot be deemed solely responsible, and the contributions of the individuals within the society need to be assessed, together with their biographies, cultural interests, and personal idiosyncrasies, as well as their lives and works, their words and concepts. Consider, for one, the case of Gabriele Paleotti (1522-1597), the Bolognese archbishop and the author of the 1582 *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, arguably the most remarkable example of theoretical concerns about images of the period conventionally known as the Counter-Reformation. This is not, of course, the case for a fresh examination of Paleotti’s work, but some brief observations on his historical and scriptural realism, and how it affects the notion of the true image, are in order here.<sup>3</sup> The term “vero” (and its derivative “verosimile”) is a crucial heading in the *Discourse*, appearing more than 100 times throughout the text. Its importance appears immediately in the opening remarks to readers, where Paleotti clarifies his procedure as “rather scientific,

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Hibbard 1965, 19.

<sup>2</sup> See most recently Robertson 2008, 50 and 88 (with previous bibliography).

<sup>3</sup> See Prodi 1984 and Paleotti 2012.

(where) doctrinal concepts are introduced, the better to ground noble characters in the Truth (*per meglio stabilirli nella verità*)”.<sup>4</sup> The choice relates to the need to discuss concepts in their original language, without translation, in an effort to narrow down the chain of references, as well as to explain everything as fully as possible. The shorter the links in the chain of reference and the fewer separating words and concepts, the truer was the principle. The philological strategy followed by Paleotti is to cut off the critical paraphernalia in order to be closer to the source. This approach relates to the need for clarification and directness, with no further intermediation, as is typical of a culture – like the one of the late Renaissance – deeply embedded in doctrinal controversies about true and false.

It is, however, in book 2 that Truth emerges as a critical paradigm to understand the sacred and profane images, particularly in connection with the most challenging field of non-verisimilar pictures, those “knowable only to the extent one knows the true”.<sup>5</sup> Here, Paleotti subscribes to a minimal definition of Truth, explaining that “the true is taken in various ways, as the authors write, but we will leave the other definitions aside and take the true to mean the equality of the sign and signified, in other words, a picture that conforms entirely to what it is meant to represent.” In Paleotti’s words, Truth is defined as an equivalence of sign and signified, a definition that the author derives from Aquinas’s *Summa*. The archbishop takes a notion developed in dogmatic contexts, and applies it directly to the visual domain – a strategy that, while legitimate, ends up providing what appears to be a rather logocentric approach, according to which words and language are the only viable expression of external reality, and images can only adapt to them. What emerges here is an idea of Truth as conformation, as a reflection, a notion that once again resonates with the almost contemporary allegory by Annibale Carracci. Painters, Paleotti then argues, have the responsibility of imitating the true, paying special attention to the circumstances in which Truth is asserted, following the content and sequence of facts very closely, and organizing the design accordingly. When they fail to follow those principles, we have non-verisimilar images that deceive the observers, are ambiguous, and cast doubts on the figural rendition. Examples here include subjects frequently depicted by painters, such as “Magdalenes with utterly vain adornments,” displaced monuments, or even the anachronistic coupling of saints who lived at different times shown together in the same painting. In all this rather restrictive approach (one inspired by a profound skepticism about images, as typical of a culture deeply rooted in rhetoric), images become nothing else than a literal transcription (indeed, a reflection) of a mere propositional content.

Only a few of Paleotti’s major theoretical concerns were passed on to the other great protagonist of Bolognese art criticism, Count Carlo Cesare Malvasia (1616-1693), whose *Felsina Pittrice* – published in two volumes in Bologna in 1678 – appears inspired by a more radical historical vein, by a more pragmatic sense for Truth. One can even describe Malvasia’s strategies towards reality as utterly apologetic, in that they hide (but also altogether aim to reveal) an effort to re-establish a critical piece of evidence that was undermined in previous historical accounts: the key role played by Bologna and its school in the arts of Italy. Originally trained as a lawyer (a subject that he also lectured on at the University of Bologna), Malvasia approached the artistic facts with a forensic eye, calling a large range of evidence – both histori-

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<sup>4</sup> Paleotti 2012, 50.

<sup>5</sup> Paleotti 2012, 222 ff.

cal and visual – to the stand. His long periods, his convoluted expressions, subsume the idea that truth is now becoming a vehicle of persuasion, “a phenomenon of general agreement”.<sup>6</sup>

It is with particular thanks to the pioneering work of Giovanna Perini Folesani, and the concerted efforts of Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey, that we have finally reached a better understanding of the intellectual and cultural procedures underscoring Malvasia’s *Lives* of Bolognese painters. As Perini Folesani has shown in a series of critical interventions spanning over three decades, Malvasia’s criticism appears inspired by accuracy and reliability – “his long, meticulous quest for original documents, his extensive visual reconnaissance of unknown or little known Bolognese paintings and drawings, and his request at home and abroad for new information ... mark a radical reform of the very structure of biography, and a decisive step toward a real [and, I would add, also more truthful] history of art”.<sup>7</sup> Whether he was dealing with the “*primi lumi*” of Bologna or the great masters of his age, Malvasia’s approach is driven by a constant effort to provide the reader with a more authentic picture of Bologna’s artistic milieu, where the reality is constantly assessed according to a notion of factuality, both documentary and visual.

This crucial statement is confirmed also elsewhere in the work of the Bolognese, as is shown for example in the introduction of his 1686 *Pitture di Bologna*, a guidebook describing the most notable works of art in Bologna. Here, Malvasia extolled those who, “moved by mere truth, and by the evidence of facts” (*mossi dalla mera verità e dall’evidenza del fatto*), had contributed to re-establishing the importance of Bolognese art against the detractors who had denied its relevance. This sentence sounds like a critical manifesto, where *verità* and *evidenza del fatto*, truth and evidence, intersect and define the model for a new critical epistemology of the visual world – one that, incidentally, can be seen as an operative statement valuable for today’s art historical analysis.

These and other major theoretical concerns converge in the papers that are collected in this section of *Acta*, originating from a workshop on “The Art of Truth: Providing Evidence in Early Modern Bologna” organized at the Norwegian Institute in Rome in October 2019. In a historical period marked by profound revisions and opportunistic interpretations of the external reality, this meeting offered an opportunity to discuss and evaluate strategies of truth implemented and employed by Early Modern artists and critics, taking the case of Bologna as its entry point. The workshop was divided into two sections, the first dealing with approaches adopted to convey notions of truthfulness in the visual domain, mostly in terms of transcription, adaptation, and illusion, thus providing clues to complicate Paleotti’s notion of *verosimile*. Here, Esposito’s essay analytically explores the strategies of truth as they result from the employment of the figure seen from behind, which provides a means to convey the “effect of the real” that, according to Roland Barthes, lies at the core of every artistic endeavor. Similarly, Matarazzo’s paper investigates the historical and critical salience of the *telamoni*, those structural elements framing the composition that appear to play a central role in many frescoed cycles by the Carracci, and that serve as a sort of metapictorial introduction to the painted narratives, participating in revealing their truthful, or deceitful, component. (A similar framing device appears also on the threshold of the *Allegory of Truth* by Annibale, revealing

<sup>6</sup> Hempfer 1993, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Perini 1988.

an additional level of metapictorial interaction between visual representation and figural rendition). Moving toward a more contextual approach, the second part tackled truth in its more culturally-oriented form, showing how the visual and the literal domains interacted in order to obtain a more comprehensive view of the true. In this light, Samantha Smith's essay discusses Alfonso Paleotti's *Esplicatione del lenzuolo ove fu involto il Signore* (1598), examining the production of copies of the most revered Holy Shroud, and showing how the distance from the original (the chain of references that Paleotti describes in his introduction) had an impact on the truthfulness of the image. More than its content, it is the process of creation of an image that guarantees its truthful component. Along the same lines, Florike Egmond's paper on the botanist and naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) explores the chain of transfers that lead from the living specimens to their visual reproductions, a process that allowed the image to preserve intact its referentiality, thus revealing its epistemic value. This process of transposition vs. transformation, Egmond argues, is not exclusive to Aldrovandi alone, who was exploiting strategies of visual rendition widely practiced in Europe since the 1550s – here Bologna appears as the institutional stage where these strategies were adopted and implemented. In a sudden move toward a more historiographically oriented approach, Giovanna Perini Folesani provides a new reading of Ludovico Carracci's difficult relationship with the Roman background, showing how his model was received in Rome, and how Rome had an impact on his works. Providing new visual evidence and shedding new light on little known episodes, the author exemplarily displays a “percorso critico e storico di verità”, revealing how real is the lesson of Malvasia.

Approaches will be different, as will be results as well, since truth cannot be constrained in a single, one-sided definition, but is fluid and polymorphic, stemming from the force of persuasion that our arguments contribute to forging – a notion to which Count Malvasia would have probably fully subscribed.<sup>8</sup>

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FIG. 1 – Annibale Carracci (Bologna 1560-Rome 1609). *An Allegory of Truth and Time* c.1584-1585.  
Oil on canvas | 130.0 x 169.6 cm  
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