

Fables, Ruins, and the “bell'imperfetto” in the Art of Dosso Dossi



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In 1528 Bernardo Cles, the Prince Bishop and future Cardinal of Trent, began construction on the Magno Palazzo, a lavish extension of the medieval Castello del Buonconsiglio. The development of the Magno Palazzo transformed the seat of the bishop of Trent into a modern Renaissance palace.¹ The new building boasted such elaborate spaces as a grand reception hall, an impressive library, and a classically inspired courtyard complete with an open loggia. The palace rests on a small hill with a view of the city and Trentine mountains. Beginning in 1531 Cles employed a number of the north Italian artists, including Girolamo Romanino, Marcello Fogolino, and Dosso Dossi, to decorate nearly all the rooms in the new palace with expansive fresco cycles of secular and religious subjects. Although Cles was away in central Europe on diplomatic missions during most of the painting campaign, he kept in close contact with the project supervisors (*soprastanti*) and frequently wrote letters directly to the artists. As patron, he demanded regular progress reports on the development of his palace, scrutinizing and commenting upon

I wish to thank Walter Stephens for inviting me to participate in this most welcome tribute to the late Salvatore Camporeale. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

¹ For an overview of the palace, its decorations, and its patron, see Castelnovo; and Chini and de Gramatica.

preliminary designs supplied by the artists. The wealth of written correspondence between Cles and his supervisors reveals that the decoration of the palace evolved through a dialogue between patron and artist.² There is no evidence that the artist's followed a preconceived or fixed program. Instead, the cardinal relied heavily on the painters he employed to devise their own pictorial inventions, and he frequently staged competitions among the artists for the most prestigious and lucrative commissions.

Dosso, who traveled from the Este court of Ferrara to Trent in the summer of 1531, played a major role in decorating the palace, painting nineteen rooms in collaboration with his brother and assistant Battista. Among the seven remaining fresco cycles by Dosso to survive, his decoration of Aesop's fables in the dining room of the Magno Palazzo offers a provocative example of his powers of invention (Fig. 1). Known as the *Stua de la Famea*, the dining room is located on the second floor between two other rooms decorated by Dosso and his brother: the *Camera del Camin Nero* and the *Volto avanti la Chapela*, the latter serving as the entrance of the Magno Palazzo from the medieval castle. Dosso painted the dining room in the heart of winter at the end of 1531. Although his frescoes have suffered numerous losses and general fading, they still retain their original lyric beauty and irresistible charm.³ The cycle consists of ten lunettes representing the fables of Aesop set in expansive landscapes. Three of the best-preserved lunettes represent the fables "The Frog and the Ox," "The Horse and the Lion," "The Fox and the Crow" and "The Kite and the Doves"—the latter of which appear together in a single lunette.⁴ The playful and sometimes unruly animals are painted so small that they appear almost incidental. All of the lunettes have the same horizon line, which features a serene, late afternoon sky streaked with yellow and orange sunsets. Perhaps the most extraordi-

² The majority of documents and correspondence have been published by Ausserer and Gerola; and Semper. Gibbons, 40–76, traces Dosso's entire work at Trent.

³ See Rasmò, 319–26, for the recent discovery and condition of the frescoes. Two lunettes were repainted in later years, perhaps eliminating additional fables represented by Dosso.

⁴ Other fables illustrated that are legible include, "The Fox and the Stork" (the two parts of the story are shown in two separate lunettes); "The Wolf and the Crane"; "The Rat, the Frog, and the Kite" (sometimes identified as "The Eagle, the Cat, and the Boar"); and "The Wolf and the Shepherd" (sometimes identified as "The Hunter and the Faithful Dog"). See Michelangelo Lupo, "*Il Magno Palazzo* annotato," in Castelnovo, vol. 1, 154–55; and Gibbons, 54–59.



Fig. 1. Dosso Dossi, *Fables and Ruins*. Stua de la Famea, Castello del Buonconsiglio, Trento.

nary images in the room are the fragmented antique statues painted in monochrome that flank each lunette in the spandrels, numbering fourteen in all (Fig. 2). It is important to note that their nudity was painted over with drapery at a later date. The meaning of the ruined statuary, along with their agonized expressions and agitated poses, has resisted explanation. But neither the fables nor the monochrome statues should be studied in isolation of one another. By investigating Dosso's assumptions and methods in conceiving his pictorial imagery for the dining room, I hope to illuminate what the juxtaposition of Aesop's fables and fragmented ancient statues would have engendered in the minds of Dosso's contemporary audience.



Fig. 2. Dosso Dossi, *Fables and Ruins*. Stua de la Famea, Castello del Buonconsiglio, Trento.

Important insight into how the decoration may have been experienced comes from the writings of Pietro Andrea Mattioli (1501–1577), the cardinal’s court physician. As a tribute to the newly built palace, which was completed in 1536, Mattioli composed a poem of 445 stanzas in *ottava rima* dedicated to the description of the Magno Palazzo and its decorations. The poem, *Il Magno Palazzo del Cardinale di Trento*, was published in 1539, and contains sensitive observations of the artists’ works. Mattioli composed his poem as an *ekphrasis* (or description), modeled in part after Philostratus the Elder’s *Imagines*, a text which describes ancient paintings the author claims to have seen in a gallery in Naples. Philostratus even mentions a painting of Aesop surrounded by the animals in his fables.⁵ It is therefore reasonable to assume that the cardinal, who was well versed in classical cultural, wished his palace decoration to rival the ancients. The poet Mattioli, by means of *ekphrasis*, aims first and foremost to display his skill in imaginatively and vividly recreating the mythological and historical narratives depicted in fresco, bringing the imagery before the mind’s eye with a visual and emotive force comparable to the paintings

⁵ Philostratus the Elder, 1.3.

themselves.⁶ Yet his description of Dosso's frescoes in the dining room emphasizes not so much the visual character of the decoration as recreating the effect the frescoes have on the beholder. Especially relevant to our discussion is Mattioli's internal image of Dosso's representations of Aesop's fables, as well as the aesthetic paradigm he follows when describing the controversy over the representation of ruined statuary. Mattioli's profession as a botanist and natural scientist enhances the descriptive character of his poem. He is perhaps most famous for his translation and commentary on Dioscorides's *De materia medica*, an ancient encyclopedia of known plants.⁷ Mattioli, who originated from Siena, intensified his studies of indigenous plants in North Italy when he transferred to Trent in 1527. There he combined his philological investigation into Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* with direct observations of nature. When he turned to compose his panegyric of the Magno Palazzo, the poet chose as his allegorical guide Iatria, a personification of the art of healing. In fact, the opening stanzas of his poem discuss the philosophical and medicinal properties of plants growing in and around Trent. His descriptive journey thus unfolds as a form of poetic therapy. Governing Mattioli's text as he imaginatively tours the palace with a friend is the notion that curiosity, discovery, and discussion are specific social attributes of court culture.⁸ In other words, the value of the literary experience he offers lies in contributing to a collective intellectual activity—one predicated on sensory perception and interpretation. It follows that Dosso's decoration must be studied in the broader context of how Cardinal Bernardo Cles developed his palace as a locus for civil conversation where urbanity, scholarship, and art converge.

Mattioli's description of Dosso's frescoes is perceptual rather than objective; he does not identify the individual scenes, but instead conjures up in a few eloquent lines his personal, emotional response to the imagery. The poet addresses the lasting impression the fables make upon his mind and heart with the following words:

Pinte in le faccie son più favolette,
Che benchè molto trite a ciascun sieno,
Han non dimen le sentenze perfette,

⁶ My definition of the aims of *ekphrasis* owes much to the article by James and Webb.

⁷ For Mattioli, see Edward Lee Greene, 798–806.

⁸ Findlen offers a comprehensive study of the development of natural science and its impact on Italian court culture in the Renaissance.

E di moralità l'intento pieno,
 Ne son da me per al presente dette,
 Perchè me le riserbo ascose in seno.⁹

(stanza 266.1–6)

(Painted in the lunettes are a number of fables; and although each one may be very commonplace, they are nonetheless perfect aphorisms full of moral intent. They are known to me at present, because I keep them concealed in my breast.)

The relationship between image and text—between Dosso's representation of Aesop's fables and Mattioli's *ekphrasis*—is not aesthetic but intellectual. The impact of Dosso's subject matter appealed to the literary interests of his audience. By the sixteenth century, the practice of reading and imitating Aesop's fables had permeated court culture. Renaissance humanists appealed to the authority of Aulus Gellius, whose *Attic Nights* labels Aesop "sapiens" because of his ability to nourish the mind and perpetuate wisdom through delightful fictions: "[...] since he taught what it was salutary to call to mind and to recommend, not in an austere and dictatorial manner, as in the way of philosophers, but by inventing witty and entertaining fables he put into men's minds and hearts ideas that were wholesome and carefully considered, while at the same time he enticed their attention."¹⁰ Moreover, Giovanni Boccaccio endorsed the fables of Aesop in his famous *Defense of Poetry* as prime examples of incredible fiction that combine wisdom with delight.¹¹ Boccaccio makes reference to Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1393a–b), in which the philosopher demonstrates the virtue of fable as a type of argument by example. Notably, Aristotle stresses the pleasure and persuasiveness of hearing particular facts (invented or actual) that apply to general situations, and cites

⁹ All citations of the poem are from Mattioli. The poem is also reprinted and annotated with reference to the decorations in the Magno Palazzo in Castelnuovo, vol. 1, 73–227.

¹⁰ Aulus Gellius, 2.29.1: "[...] cum quae utilia monitu suasque erant, non severe neque imperiose praecepit et censuit, ut philosophis mos est, sed festivos delectabilesque apologos commentus, res salubriter ac prospicienter animadversas in mentes animosque hominum cum audiendi quadam inlecebra induit."

¹¹ Boccaccio on *Poetry*, 48: "Fiction (*fabula*) is a form of discourse, which, under the guise of invention, illustrates or proves an idea; and, as its superficial aspect is removed, the meaning of the author is clear. [...] The first [kind of fiction] superficially lacks all appearance of truth; for example, when brutes or inanimate things converse. Aesop, an ancient Greek, grave and venerable, was past master in this form; and though it is a common and popular form both in city and country, yet Aristotle, chief of the Peripatetics, and a man of divine intellect, did not scorn to use it in his books."

the example of Aesop's fables used in judicial oratory.¹² Because Aesop's fables were seen as a window to the wisdom and teachings of the ancient world, translating them became a philological activity for Renaissance humanists on the order of Guarino da Verona, Vittorino da Feltre, Leon Battista Alberti, and Lorenzo Valla.¹³ In 1438, Valla translated thirty-three Aesopian fables from Greek into Latin, dedicating them to his friend and mentor, Arnaldo Fenolleda. According to Salvatore Camporeale, translating Aesop's fables helped Valla to retain affinities among the diverse grammar structures and etymologies of Latin and Greek.¹⁴ In his dedication Valla compares his work to a gift of fighting quails, implying in humorous fashion the ability of the fables to amuse ("quibus oblectare te possis ac ludere").¹⁵ The fables stood as models of *brevitas*, or eloquent simplicity, fresh and memorable. In the early sixteenth century, Erasmus defined the adage *Ne Aesopum quidem trivisti* (You have not even thumbed your Aesop), as an indication of the vital role fables played in the dissemination of knowledge to all members of society from antiquity to his own time.¹⁶ In this regard, it is significant that Cardinal Cles was a close friend of Erasmus. The renowned theologian visited the Castello del Buonconsiglio in 1529, and the two maintained a written correspondence. At Trent, Mattioli's response to Dosso's portrayal of Aesop's fables therefore merges visual into literary experience when he praises the frescoes ability to stir the mind with pleasure.

By the close of the fifteenth century, which saw the advent of printing, a much broader audience—ranging from princes to courtiers, schoolchildren to humanists, lay to religious people—encountered the fables primarily in the vernacular, not in the original Greek or Latin. The earliest and most popular vernacular translation printed in Italy was the edition published in Verona in 1479: *Aesopus moralisatus, latine et italice*. This edition was the first to publish the Latin verse translation of the Greek fables by Walter of England,

¹² Aristotle, 1394a.

¹³ On the importance of Aesop's fables for Renaissance humanists, I have consulted, among other studies, Branca; Cifarelli; Fumaroli; Galli; and Patterson. See also my article "Pandolfo Collenuccio's *Specchio d'Esopo* and the Portrait of the Courtier," *I Tatti Studies* 9 (2001): 63–87.

¹⁴ Camporeale, 174. Galli, 112–88, usefully discusses and reproduces Valla's translation.

¹⁵ Galli, 150.

¹⁶ *The Collected Works of Erasmus* (1991), trans. and annotated by R. A. B. Mynors, vol. 33, 304–05.

accompanied by a vernacular translation in double sonnet (*sonetto materiale* and *sonetto morale*) by Accio Zucco. The publication, which includes lively woodcuts illustrating each fable, served as the prototype for subsequent illustrated vernacular editions printed in Italy.¹⁷ So popular was the Verona edition of Aesop's fables that Dosso himself assimilated the woodcuts into his pictorial compositions.

Consider, for example, the lunette containing two fables, "The Fox and the Crow," and "The Kite and the Doves" (Fig. 3). On the left, a large tree sets the scene for a foolish crow who holds a piece of cheese in its beak, and a cunning fox at its base looking for an easy meal. According to the *sonetto materiale* of the 1479 Verona Aesop, the hungry fox praises the crow's plumage and explains that if he only had a voice, no bird could compare to his majesty. The crow, anxious to show off his voice, opens its beak to sing and consequently drops the piece of cheese into the eager jaws of the fox.¹⁸ Dosso paints the fox leaping up to snatch its meal. Because the crow sought vainglory, he was left ashamed and empty-handed; the *sonetto morale* advises humility and warns against the self-serving nature of wicked flattery. A river separates this scene from the fable represented in the right foreground, where a kite is seen devouring a group of white doves on the ground. The *sonetto materiale* relates how a group of white doves, in order to settle an age-old struggle between themselves and a menacing kite, acquiesce and decide to nominate the predatory bird as their king and arbiter. As ruler, however, the kite takes advantage of

¹⁷ For an analysis of the Verona edition and its woodcuts, see Mardersteig.

¹⁸ All quotations are from the *Aesopus moralisatus*; 27v–28r: *De vulpe et corvo f[abula] XVI [...]*:

Sonetto materiale

[T]rovo nel libro dil maestro mio
che la volpe affamata, pasturando
un corvo vidde che un caso portando
in beccho andava, dove li andò drio.

E quella a lui con lo parlar pio:
"Tu che su larbor te vai diportando,
cotanto bello e adorno vagegiando
e sopra ogn'altro uciel bianco e polio,

tu mi asimigli al cigno di paragio.
Se dil tuo canto sol fusse contenta,
certo tu vinci tutto di vantaggio."

Il mato agrolizar sì se exprimenta,
unde dil beccho gli cade il formagio.
La volpe il prese, dove il corvo stenta.

La vanagloria ti mostra dolcezza
che vergogna ti rende e gran tristezza.



Fig. 3. Dosso Dossi, *The Fox and the Crow; The Kite and the Doves*. Stua de la Famea, Castello del Buonconsiglio, Trent.

his power and exercises his royal privileges by devouring their offspring one by one.¹⁹ The doomed creatures realize too late that it was better to suffer in war (“*melius bella pati erat*”) than to be murdered without question. The fable admonishes that he who

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40v–42r: *De accipitare et columbis Fabula XXIII* [...]:

Sonetto materiale

[D]ice il maistro che una grande guerra
era fra il nibio e le columbe bianche,
et eran per lo assedio tanto stanche
che quasi per paura se sotterra.

E per so scampo al sparavier se afferra
per che de capitani stavan manche
tenendose per lui libere e franche
libero arbitrio a lui dona e disserra.

entrusts himself to a scoundrel for protection is looking for help, but what he finds is total ruin. To the right, Dosso depicts a farmer plowing his field with two oxen. The farmer is not mentioned in either fable, yet appears exclusively in the woodcut illustrating the “The Fox and the Crow” in the 1479 Verona Aesop (Fig. 4). This peculiar detail offers strong evidence that Dosso referred to this edition when he conceived his decoration.²⁰ The artist probably admired the quotidian aspect of the detail.

That the 1479 vernacular edition of Aesop’s fables formed the basis of Dosso’s imagery underwrites the wide cultural value of the Aesopian curriculum as both communal and courtly possession.²¹ The library of Bernardo Cles, so rich in classical literature, also housed an unspecified edition of Aesop’s fables in the vernacular.²² Dosso would have been counting on his audience to recognize the visual references to the woodcuts in the vernacular Aesop. In essence, the artist adapts his pictorial language to contemporary reading and viewing habits, thereby reinforcing memory and cognitive skills.

The arrangement of the lunettes around the dining room allows the spectator to scan the walls for a fable suitable to express an idea, invite discourse, or serve as a supporting argumentative example. The experience ostensibly puts into practice the premise behind Leon Battista Alberti’s *Intercenales* (*Dinner Pieces*), a collection of short dialogues and fables that he composed from the 1420s through the 1440s. In his preface to the first book, addressed to his friend Paolo Toscanelli, Alberti writes that his collection is meant to be read over

Mangiava il sparavier gli lor picioni
unde le matre querendo lor nati
dispersi fuora per le lor magioni.

Tra lor dicendo “*melius bella pati*
erat che morir senza questioni
che piu siamo dal re danegiati.”

Se tu fai cosa alcuna guarda il fine
a ciò che in le più grave non ruine.

²⁰ The connection between Dosso’s fresco and the woodcut was first made by Laura Dal Prà, “Johannes Hinderbach e Bernardo Cles: funzionalità e decorazione nella sede dei principi vescovi di Trento; Spunta per una ricerca,” in *Castelnuovo*, vol. 2, 44–45. See also Lupo, *cit.*, 154–55. That Dosso referred to prints when composing other pictorial cycles is also demonstrated by Frangenberg, “A Lost Decoration by the Dossi Brothers at Trent.”

²¹ Dionisotti, 125–78, describes just how embedded vernacular translations of the classics were in the literary culture of the Italian courts.

²² Bonelli, 382, no. 84: “Cod. Memb. in foglio, in quo sunt Fabulae Aesopi, carminice conscriptae cum Commentario.”



Fig. 4. *The Fox and the Crow*, woodcut from the *Aesopus moralisatus* (Verona, 1479).

dinner and drinks (*inter cenas*) in order to arouse laughter and thereby dispel anxiety better than any nauseous medicine.²³ He composed a number of his dinner pieces in imitation of Aesop's fables. The amusing tales, a welcome complement to edifying dinner conversation, are a typological precursor to Dosso's decoration in the dining room of the Magno Palazzo. In fact, a number of the fables Dosso illustrated involve the subject of food. While dining, the cardinal and his companions could reflect upon or discuss the

²³ Alberti, 15.

vicissitudes of daily events as well as exercise their powers of reasoning in a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere. Although it is tempting to assign a particular allegorical reading to each fable with regard to the cardinal's political career, I find that the collection of fables is intended to be accessible to various beholding groups and flexible enough to be meaningful to a broad range of discourses.

Even today, who would not enjoy and relate to the fable of the "Frog and the Ox" so beautifully illustrated in the *Stua de la Famea* (Fig. 5)? The artist situates the two animals confronting each other in a watery meadow (Fig. 85). The *sonetto materiale* of the 1479 Verona edition of Aesop's fables relates how a frog, envious of the ox's size, puffs itself up in order to overshadow the larger animal. When the frog's offspring witnesses this event, it objects to the futility of the task. Refusing to be discouraged, the parent frog, in a final effort to puff itself up still more, bursts open and falls flat.²⁴ This ridiculous tragedy resulted from the frog's failure to recognize its own limitations. The *sonetto morale* asks the reader to reflect on Christ's humility and reject insidious pride. Rather than illustrating a continuous narrative, Dosso has compressed the story, depicting only the two protagonists on a diminutive scale and omitting the frog's child from the composition. In this way, the artist follows the same economic format of the woodcut illustration, which also includes the frog's child (Fig. 6).

Dosso's landscapes serve to amplify the experience of learning and enjoyment inherent in the fables. The uniform horizon lines, shown at sunset, situate the fables at the time of the evening meal. The artist

²⁴ *Aesopus moralisatus*, 70r–71v: *Da rana et bove F[abula] XXXXII [...]*:

Sonetto materiale

[L]a rana per volerse asimigliare
al bove de persona e de grandezza
se puose a voller farse a sua gualezza
eferamente se prese a sgonfiare.

El figlio suo li dice deh: "Non fare
perchè al bove sei niente de parezza
esel non cessa quella tua ferezza
ben lie vemente potresti crepare."

Corociossi fiermente alhor la rana
ede sgonfiarse sfordia sua natura
credendo pur compir sua voglia vana.

Unde sgonfiata fuor de la mesura
l'interior li cadde in terra piana,
si che disfata iace sua figura.

Non voglia al grande el picol simigliarsi
pria se consigli e voglia temperarsi.



Fig. 5. Dosso Dossi, *The Frog and the Ox*. Stua de la Famea, Castello del Buonconsiglio, Trent.

treats fresco much in the same way as canvas to give the impression of atmosphere and depict the particular effects of lights. The landscapes, moreover, conform to the appropriate character of palace decoration as prescribed by the Renaissance architect Sebastiano Serlio. Writing in his fourth book on architecture, which was published in 1537, Serlio endorsed painted ornaments for the interior of a palace, and considers landscapes suitable for interior rooms because of the “charm of the colors.”²⁵ Dosso’s lyrical descriptions of

²⁵ *Sebastiano Serlio on Architecture*, 378. According to Paolo Cortesi’s *De Cardinalatu* (1510), a text which surely served as a model for the development of the Magno Palazzo, the main dining room of a Renaissance cardinal’s palace should “overlook [...] a covered walk (*xystus*) and a garden (*topiarium*) so that their cheerful aspect will make dining (*accubatio*) the more pleasant.” See Weil-Garris and D’Amico.

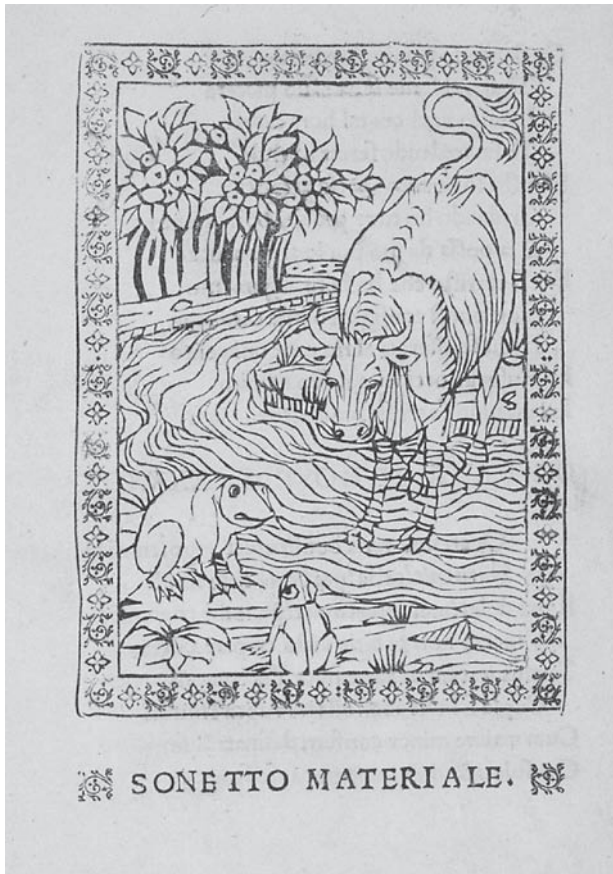


Fig. 6. *The Frog and the Ox*, woodcut from the *Aesopus moralisatus* (Verona, 1479).

nature direct the beholder to the experience of looking, offering a sensory response to the enchanting colors of dusk. “Reading” the fables in the dining room thus entails a visual exploration of surfaces, where beholding becomes in effect an activity of sight and insight.

But how does the ruined statuary that frames each lunette condition our reading of the fables? We can study Dosso’s depiction of monochrome fragmented statues with regard to theory and practice of Renaissance palace decoration. Serlio recommends monochrome statues as painted ornaments, not for a palace interior, but instead for the exterior façade. The architect refers to such fictive statues as

“carvings,” and explains how they “keep buildings solid and decorate them, but also confer on them great presence.”²⁶ In order to cite an illustrative example, Serlio praises Dosso’s now lost decoration of monochrome figures supporting illusionistic architecture on the façade of the ducal palace in Ferrara. It must be said that Dosso’s monochrome figures at Trent loom large in their interior setting, but not without a touch of humor. The artist, in a clever use of architectural space, positions some the figures to fit the curves of the spandrels, with their broken limbs resting on the arches. The decoration notionally brings the outside world into the home. Such an incongruity of placing exterior motifs in an interior space transforms the dining room into a locus of inquiry.

Dosso’s portrayal of ruined statuary frames each fable lunette and unifies the decoration both visually and conceptually. On one level, the painted fragments invite a discourse on the relationship of the part to the whole. Erasmus defines the adage *Leonem ex unguibus aestimare* (To know the lion by his claws), as the ability “to form an idea of an entire object from one single inference, to infer much from little evidence and great results from small indications.”²⁷ Erasmus’s exegesis of the adage helps us to study some of the broader contexts of the decoration in the dining room. In essence, the spectator at Trent is able to learn about the wisdom and experience of the ancients from a selection—or better a fragment—of the many fables of Aesop. In addition, the fragmented statues depicted around the room relate to the ways in which collectors, including Cardinal Bernardo Cles, gathered fragmentary information, both artistic and literary, from ancient cultures with the desire to form a unified conception of the past. Artist themselves assembled, recycled, and even copied in wax ancient statuettes in their studios, which they later refashioned in their own works.²⁸ Ruins, as Terence Cave has noted, are also powerful images advertising the death of ancient cultures and the notion of irreparable fragmentation.²⁹ Prime examples of this humanist lament are found in Petrarch’s 1341 letter to the Dominican friar Giovanni Colonna, written shortly after their visit to Rome, and in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, published in Venice in 1499. In

²⁶ *Sebastiano Serlio on Architecture*, 378.

²⁷ *Collected Works of Erasmus* (1989), trans. and annotated by R. A. B. Mynors, vol. 32, p. 200. Melinda Schlitt offered helpful insight into the relevance of this adage to my argument.

²⁸ See Franzoni; and Mendelsohn.

²⁹ Cave, 68–69.

particular, Petrarch calls into question the possibility of the retrieval of the past among the vestiges (*vestigia*) of ancient Rome.³⁰ For the remainder of this study, I will address how Dosso's ruins signify the dichotomy of unity versus fracture in humanist, artistic, and Christian discourses, all of which converge in the cardinal's palace.

Mattioli's *ekphrasis* of the dining room frescoes alludes to the controversy these fragmented images incited. His description provides important information about what Dosso's decoration provoked in the minds of his contemporary audience:

Nei capitelli, ove posan le volte,
 Statue antiche in pittura son finte,
 C'han molte membra via troncate, e tolte:
 Perchè dal natural son state pinte,
 Bench' alcune persone ignare, e stolte
 Vorrien fussen di quindi via sospinte,
 Perch'al suo dire all'occhio non diletta
 Il rimirar una cosa imperfetta.
 Vadino adunque a Roma questi tali,
 A cui questi secreti non son noti,
 E mirin bene gli archi triumphali,
 Hoggi frammenti de gli inculti Gothi;
 E discernen potran senza gli occhiali
 Si sono stati i pittori idioti,
 E vedran quante braccia, e quante teste
 Manchino a quelle, a cui s'assembran queste.
 Quivi'l saggio pittor quel c'ha trovato
 D'antichi essempi ha voluto mostrare,
 E'l bel lavoro imperfetto ha lasciato,
 Perchè l'antico ha voluto imitare,
 Perdoni adunque Iddio il suo peccato
 A chi tal opra non ben fatta pare,
 E tu pittor, che la degna opra festi,
 Perdona l'ignoranza anchora a questi.

(stanzas 263–265)

(Above the capitals, on which the vaults rest, antique statues are feigned in paint. They have many limbs broken off, or removed, on account of being painted from life. Since some people are ignorant, or stupid, they wish to have them eliminated, because in their opinion the remains of an imperfect thing do not delight the eye. Yet off to Rome go these

³⁰ Galbraith provides a perceptive interpretation of Petrarch's letter.

characters, to whom such secrets are not known, in order to admire the triumphal arches, today left fragmented by the uncultured Goths. There they can discern without glasses how they themselves are the idiotic painters, observing that the many arms and many heads missing in those [at Rome], resemble these [at Trent]. Whatever ancient examples the learned painter found there he wanted to show. He thereby left behind a beautiful work of imperfection, because he wanted to imitate the antique. God therefore will pardon his sin of this work which does not seem well made; and you painter, who made this laudable work, will likewise excuse the ignorance of such individuals.)

It would be a mistake to dismiss Mattioli's characterization of Dosso's frescoes as mere rhetorical ornament. Rather, his emotional vividness is a sign of a legitimate response. Dosso goes beyond engaging in the *paragone* of painting and sculpture; the artist presents the past in the historical present, and intellectually so. Felton Gibbons, in his 1968 monograph on the artist, rightly argued that Dosso's images are presented so provocatively as to arouse a response; their imperfect condition is the subject in and of itself.³¹ The statues provide a topic of discourse on the appropriation of antiquity in the Renaissance—its art as much as its teachings.³² Mattioli's insistence that the artist based his decoration on the direct observation of found objects—ruins—relates to his own studies: the discovery and classification of nature according to ancient taxonomies.³³ Regardless of whether or not Dosso actually traveled to Rome, what is important for Mattioli is the idea that the artist did not portray an idealized recreation of the past but instead depicted the antique as it exists in the present—imperfect and fragmented. His *ekphrasis* offers a didactic confrontation with divergent paradigms concerning the antique and the cultural authority of ancient Rome.

Ancient ruins and fragmented remains of statuary are, of course, a frequent motif in painting of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Take, for example, Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), an extraordinary image most likely painted for the Venetian Jacopo Antonio Marcello around 1460 (Fig. 7). The picture shows fragments from a Bacchic relief, portrait heads, and a

³¹ Gibbons, 58 n. 50. See also Frangenberg, "Decorum in the *Magno Palazzo* in Trent," 366.

³² The literature on antiquity in the Renaissance is vast, and I have consulted, among other excellent studies, Barkan, Fortini Brown, Settis, and Weiss.

³³ See Findlen, 158, 164, 170, for Mattioli's pilgrimages and collecting activities.



Fig. 7. Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

disembodied foot wearing a Roman sandal. The triumphal arch to which the saint is bound is ruined and decayed, and shows in its spandrel a personification of Victory. The assembly of ruins is complemented by the artist's signature on the classical pier in Greek, "work of Andrea."³⁴ Mantegna's picture is emblematic of an antiquarian zeal that permeated the north Italian courts and city states. The appreciation of classical ruins and their discovery was largely dependent on the earlier writings and ideas of Manuel Chrysoloras, the great Greek scholar whose pedagogy, as Christine Smith has demonstrated, changed the shape of the scholarship of the Italian humanists at the beginning of the fifteenth century. In the preface to his *Comparison of Old and New Rome* (1411), he begins with the description of Rome as he saw it—almost all in ruins. Yet the ruins of monuments and fragments of statues "were beautiful not only in their original composition and organization; they seem beautiful even in their dismembered state. Just as in a body that is beautiful as a whole, so the hand or foot or head is also beautiful; or, in a body of outstanding size, each of the limbs is large."³⁵ Such enlightened approaches to the remains of antiquity already appear in the famous twelfth-century verses of Hildebert of Lavardin, Bishop of Tours. Although the bishop laments the loss of the cultural patrimony of Rome—exclaiming "Roma fuit"—he nevertheless envisions the pagan gods looking down at their marble effigies and wishing they could obtain the same degree of beauty that the artists gave them.³⁶

As Mattioli's poem suggests, by the sixteenth century not everyone endorsed this aesthetic principle. The Renaissance view of antiquity was by no means monolithic. Giorgio Vasari strongly endorsed completing and therefore perfecting sculpture in his 1568 biography of Lorenzetto (1490–1541), the Florentine sculptor and architect. Vasari praised Lorenzetto for restoring the missing parts of the ancient statues and sarcophagi arranged in the gardens and stalls of Cardinal Andrea della Valle. He states that carefully restored antiquities embodied more grace (*grazia*), whereas dismembered works were

³⁴ Matthew, 622, states that Mantegna's signature "is a self-consciously inventive and learned signature, restrained in its presentation and concerned with writing as epigraphy, which was appropriate to an artist conscious of his status among the elite." See also Lightbown, 78–80, 408.

³⁵ Quoted in Smith, 158.

³⁶ See also chapter four, "Antique Fragments, Renaissance Eyes," in Fortini Brown, 75–92.

defective (*difettose*) or lacking (*manche*).³⁷ If we compare Mattioli's praise of Dosso's "bel lavoro del imperfetto" to Vasari's preference for finished and complete sculpture, we can trace how art literature constitutes part of a larger process of cultural formation. Dosso's artistic performance evolved with sensitivity to the responsive practices of various audiences concerning analogies of past and present. As representations of found objects, at least in Mattioli's literary imagination, Dosso's painted statues can furthermore be seen as the creation of Nature as much as the artist's ingenuity. Herein lies the paradox: the effects of nature on the beautiful fragment serve as both the destroyer and creator of art. As Georg Simmel notes in his important essay on the ruin, Nature, in its struggle with culture, intervenes to reclaim and return the work of art's raw material to its natural, peaceful state.³⁸ The effect is aesthetically satisfying, often "more beautiful". For Mattioli, the beautiful fragment is where his interests in art and nature intersect.

Despite Mattioli's insistence that Dosso represented ruins as they existed in Rome, the painted fragments bear little relation to ancient statues. As ornaments, they serve to display the virtuosity of the artist; they are a sign of his creativity and singular appropriation of the antique. It is helpful at this point to return to the adage *Leonem ex unguibus aestimare*, which the Greek satirist Lucian employed to describe how the ancient sculptor Phidias was able to judge the size of a sculpted lion from only its fragmented claw.³⁹ Lucian's praise of Phidias's excellence in judging symmetry and proportion can be applied, to a certain extent, to Dosso as well. However much his painted fragments call to mind the essence and greatness of antiquity,

³⁷ Vasari, 579–80: "[...] accomodò nel partimento di quell'opera colonne, base e capitegli antichi; e sparti attorno, per basamento di tutta quell'opera, pili antichi pieni di storie; e più alto fece sotto certe nicchione un altro fregio di rottami di cose antiche, e di sopra nelle dette nicchie pose alcune statue pur antiche e di marmo, le quali sebbene non erano intiere per essere quale senza testa, quale senza braccia, ed alcuna senza gambe, ed insomma ciascuna con qualche cosa meno, l'accomodò nondimeno benissimo, avendo fatto rifare a buoni scultori tutto quello che mancava: la quale cosa fu cagione che altri signori hanno poi fatto il medesimo, e restaurato molte cose antiche; come il cardinale Cesis, Ferrara, Farnese, e, per dirlo una parola, tutta Roma. E nel vero, hanno molto più grazia queste anticaglie in questa maniera restaurate, che non hanno que' tronchi imperfetti, e le membra senza capo, o in altro modo difettose e manche." This passage is discussed by Barkan, 188–89.

³⁸ Simmel, 124–30. I wish to thank Nancy Struever for discussing Simmel's essay with me.

³⁹ Lucian, 54. For a study of this adage with regard to the sixteenth-century notion of *disegno*, see Williams, 33–51.

they more readily advertise the ingenuity of Dosso's own artifice. The artist displays all sides of the body: some raise their fractured arms in the air, others turn their back to the viewer, and some twist their heads around. Their lively poses seem to deliberately transgress the boundaries of proper movement and embellishment of form as endorsed by Leon Battista Alberti in his *De pictura* of 1435. Some appear ridiculous as they attempt to strike dignified poses in spite of their fractured limbs. Their mutilated condition is also complemented by pained expressions. Such animated states make their status as objects ambiguous and reveal the painter's Promethean ability to animate matter. Although there is no room to explore it here, Dosso's depiction of ruined statuary may also call attention to the historical moment of the Sack of Rome in 1527, a subject that the artist desired to paint in another room of the palace, but was ultimately denied the opportunity by the cardinal.⁴⁰ In any event, the painted fragments harness multiple layers of context. Dosso's refashioning of classical art into a new context and for his own purposes follows the principles of emulation, or what Thomas Greene calls heuristic imitation, and carries with it a charged meaning.⁴¹

At the same time Dosso was executing his frescoes at Trent, Giulio Romano was developing the Palazzo Te in Mantua for Federico II Gonzaga. One of the decorations was a stucco and fresco ensemble of Aesop's fables in the *giardino segreto*, a courtly space built from 1531 to 1534 (Fig. 8).⁴² Ten of the original seventeen fables (eight in stucco and two in fresco) run along the frieze of the inner courtyard of Federico's secret garden. A number of the fables depicted by Giulio also appear in Dosso's decoration at Trent, including "The Fox and the Crow," "The Fox and the Stork," and "The Horse and the Lion."

⁴⁰ In a letter sent to Dosso, Bernardo Cles states that the subject of the Sack of Rome and the Battle of Pavia, as proposed by the artist, would be offensive to the pope and the king of France; Ausserer and Gerola, 21–22.

⁴¹ Greene, esp. 4–170, provides a sensitive analysis of Renaissance theories of imitation. Annibale Carracci, so attuned to the achievements of his Emilian predecessors, framed his fresco of *Diana and Endymion* in the Farnese Gallery with an ancient statue painted in monochrome with its right arm dismembered. This attempt to "antique" his decoration amazed his pupil Domenichino, as the art critic Giovanni Agucchi recorded in a letter of 31 January 1609: "Il Sig. Annibale, per ingannare l'occhio col verisimile ne hà finti molti pezzi rotti nella galleria, e pur sono in luogo, dove non potevano rompersi se non à posta: e tali rotture, benchè fossero di stuccho vero, non sarebbono da essere racconcie, per accrescere bellezza all'opera." The letter is cited and discussed by Mahon, 123 n. 49; and Dempsey, 371.

⁴² Verheyen, 33–35, 130.



Fig. 8. Giulio Romano, *Fables and Terms*. Giardino segreto, Palazzo Te, Mantua.

Dosso, in fact, had close connections with the Gonzaga court in Mantua. There can be little doubt that the two artists communicated with each other about their projects and rivaled one another. Moreover, in a study of Giulio Romano's decoration, Rodolfo Signorini has convincingly demonstrated that the artist used the 1479 Verona Aesop as an iconographic source: the same edition that Dosso used as a guide for his frescoes.⁴³ The decorations in Mantua and Trent establish a pattern of iconography for Christian rulers in the north Italian courts. Giulio separated his representations of Aesop's fables with classically inspired Terms (both male and female), conventional ancient boundary markers, most with missing arms.

By contrast, Dosso's statues are anything but conventional. Within the space of a cardinal's palace, and juxtaposed with Aesop's fables, such a transgression with regard to agonized expressions and extravagant gestures of the beautiful fragment can be seen to contribute to a discourse on idols and idolatry. The artist's emphasis on the materiality of ancient statues and their subsequent disintegration underscores their artificiality. According to Saint Paul, "an idol has no real

⁴³ Signorini, 21–25.

existence" (1 Corinthians 8). Furthermore, Saint Augustine expressed that the trepidation and grief of idols amounts to the approach of the Savior.⁴⁴ The *Golden Legend* is also filled with accounts of saints destroying idols both physically and with the power of prayer, pronouncing the omnipotence of the Word of God. A notable example involves Saint Catherine of Alexandria's argument with Emperor Maxentius over her refusal to worship idols and ends with the following admonition by the saint: "Thou admirest this temple wrought by the hands of artisans, thou admirest its precious adornments which will be as dust before the face of the wind?"⁴⁵ Dosso's representation of the beautiful fragment finds a correlation with a painting of the *Madonna and Child with Saints* by the Bolognese artist Amico Aspertini (Fig. 9). In this remarkable work, datable to 1530 and now in National Museums and Galleries of Wales (Cardiff), Aspertini shows on a fictive relief the fall of pagan idols at the advent of Christ.⁴⁶ The crumbling and toppled idols appear next to an Old Testament scene of idolatry: the adoration of the golden calf. In the cases of Dosso and Aspertini, ruins, and specifically vandalized idols, indicate the end of pagan antiquity and the manifestation of Divine Providence. In other words, the interpenetration of the divine Word and the pictorial performances of the *bell'imperfetto* evince what Leonard Barkan calls both the attractiveness and the danger of ancient ruins from the point of view of Christianity.⁴⁷

Dosso's visual references to the woodcuts from the 1479 *Aesopus moralisatus*, as well as Mattioli's discussion of the fables' moral value, reinforce the moralized context for his decoration in the dining room. It is possible that the representation of Aesop's fables in the cardinal's palace appealed to earlier decorative cycles in refectories in ecclesiastical buildings. In one case, frescoes (now lost) of Aesop's fables accompanied by their texts were painted in the refectory of the monastery of Fleury at St. Benoît-sur-Loire at the beginning of the eleventh century.⁴⁸ Represented alongside the glorification of Christ

⁴⁴ Campbell, 115, in his study of the grieving pagan divinities displayed in Cosmè Tura's Organ Shutters for Ferrara Cathedral (1469), has assembled a variety of textual sources affirming that demons themselves in their anguish acclaimed the advent of the Savior, most notably book 8 of Augustine's *De civitate Dei contra paganos*.

⁴⁵ Cited and discussed by Camille, 117.

⁴⁶ Faietti and Scaglietti Kelesian, 175–77.

⁴⁷ Barkan, 122–23.

⁴⁸ Goldschmidt, 44–47. Frescoes of Aesop's fables (dated 1297) decorate the walls in the Sala dei Notari in the Palazzo dei Priori in Perugia, for which see Reiss.



Fig. 9. Amico Aspertini, *Madonna and Child with Saints*. National Museums and Galleries of Wales, Cardiff.

and saints, the fables fostered the religious edification of the monks as they dined in silence. By the sixteenth century, the fables gained the status of the divine word. The German theologian Martin Luther considered Aesop's fables a form of secular scripture available for communal enlightenment. Luther, in a letter written to the German humanist and Reformer Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560), dated 23

April 1530, writes the following: “We have arrived at our Sinai, dearest Philip, but we will make a Zion out of this Sinai and build here three tabernacles: one of the Psalter, one of the Prophets, and one of Aesop.”⁴⁹ In the years following Dosso’s work at Trent, Aesop’s fables were strongly promoted as a means of moral instruction in didactic painting. In his Counter-Reformist text, *Discorso Intorno alle Imagini Sacre e Profane* (1582), Gabriele Paleotti encouraged the representation of fables as a means of delightful instruction. Paleotti, Bishop of Bologna, defined fable as a species of symbol, to be grouped together with the hieroglyphs of Horapollo and the parables of Christ. Paleotti considered symbols precious jewels that ornament and enrich any didactic pictorial invention; they express a universal wisdom and moral efficacy in an economic format.⁵⁰ The fables of Aesop, in Paleotti’s words, are the choicest symbols because of their ability to teach virtue without sacrificing pleasure.⁵¹

The decoration of the Stua de la Famea is emblematic of Cardinal Bernardo Cles’s learning: it subsumes ethical and Christian teaching into a courtly context. The fables and ruined statuary painted by Dosso engage the audience in a peculiar type of moral work that underwrites a continuity between learned and popular forms of knowledge. Dosso’s art also caters to the sense of discovery and dialogue cultivated at Trent by Cles and his physician Mattioli. By means of his singular pictorial language, Dosso unleashes the symbolic power and expressive potential of Aesop’s fables. His decoration, moreover, creates a sociable and pleasurable space that facilitates learning and discussion still viable today.

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⁴⁹ Quoted in Carnes, 179.

⁵⁰ Paleotti, 463: “Talmente che il simbolo propriamente cava da cose particolari un precetto universale, che serve al vivere morale e mostra la via d’abbracciare la virtù e fuggire il vizio.”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 463–64: “E tra gli altri, allargando assai questa invenzione, si sono in ciò serviti grandemente alcuni degli apologi di Esopo, commendati molto dagli autori per essere vaghi, onesti e molto efficaci per fare con diletto impressione negli animi, massime de’ fanciulli, applicando i modi e maniere degli animali ai costumi e nature degli uomini; a imitazione del quale altri di poi hanno da sé stessi composto et imaginatosi altre favole e ragionamenti d’animali, tutte però dirizzate al vivere virtuoso, si come tuttavia si leggono non senza frutto e dilettazone.”

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