



THE MATERIALITY OF ENCHANTMENT: RETHINKING NEAPOLITAN BAROQUE MARBLE INTARSIA

Joris van Gastel

Abstract

From Alois Riegl's Stilfragen to Ernst Gombrich's The Sense of Order and beyond, discussions of ornament have focused largely on developments and the perception of abstract patterns, devoid of texture, materiality or presence. With its overt materiality, display of technical virtuosity and sculptural elements, Neapolitan baroque marble intarsia not only challenge this scholarly tradition, but also have been a stumbling block for scholars of baroque art and architecture. Looking into contemporary sources, in particular related to the Church of San Martino, and confronting these with recent more theoretical debates, this essay aims to develop an alternative account. It will explore two theoretical approaches: firstly, Alfred Gell's work on the 'enchantment of technology', in which the author argues that responses to art are conditioned not by art's mimetic faculties, but rather by an awareness of the technological sophistication involved in the radical transformation of materials. And secondly, the definition of image (Bild) developed by Horst Bredekamp in his Theorie des Bildakts, which stresses the inherent materiality of images, as well as the inherent image-forming activity of inorganic matter. Together, these approaches help to explore aspects of marble intarsia that resonate clearly with contemporary descriptions: that of their material richness and the technical feat involved in producing them. Furthermore, they will help to explore the specificity of these kinds of decorations, that is, the manners in which they are rooted in the specific place that is Naples.

Keywords: Naples, baroque, ornament, Cosimo Fanzago, marble intarsia, materiality

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Biographical note

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In his early homage to Johann Joachim Winckelmann of 1872, the German art historian Carl Justi sketches for his readers an 'impression of Naples':

Friends of older art used to ... feel themselves rather unhappy in Naples. So characterless is Naples' monumental physiognomy that a traveller of the time said: if the old royal palace had not been there, one would doubt if Naples had ever known real architecture. Only those who searched, would, in the end, find some things of value hidden in its chaos. But these high-stacked, statue-rich mausoleums to Aragonese kings, of a romantic beauty, these Giottesque frescoes and a few further offerings of northern- and southern-Italian sculpture, contribute nothing to the city's overall character. As the tropical vegetation has overgrown Indian temples, so the baroque style has covered everything.

(Justi, 1956, vol.2, pp.202–3)¹

Without doubt, Justi's own experience of Naples played a central role here. 'Naples', he wrote in one of his letters from Italy, 'has nothing in terms of monuments of antiquity, no architecture of any artistic value; rather, everything it has from the last couple of centuries – churches, fountains, and obelisks – is tasteless to the point of excess' (Justi, 1922, p.79).² And yet, the author sketches an image here that, though maybe in less explicitly negative terms, still determines much of the scholarship today. Roberto Pane argued already in 1939 that the Neapolitan baroque 'expressed itself, not so much in monumental forms [*la imponentza delle masse*], but rather in the preciousness of the ornamental' (p.18). The 'specifically Neapolitan sense for the decorative', argues Christof Thoenes (1971, p.24), **found its expression not in broad architectural gestures, but in marble and stucco, materials that have gradually 'overgrown'** – a reference to Justi – the city's structures. If Pane's and Thoenes' remarks suggest an important shift of attention, they

do not fully annul Justi's negative evaluation. Neapolitan baroque ornament is still seen as something added on, something that, 'as a tropical vegetation', has overgrown the actual fabric of the city, and thus is essentially foreign, essentially out of place.

Only more recently, scholars have picked up on the idea that that which characterises the Neapolitan baroque, and sets it apart from the more extensively studied city of Rome, should be sought in the field of the applied arts (De Cavi, 2012). 'Painting and sculpture', thus argues Nicholas Napoli (2013, p.310), 'were almost always featured in conjunction with other media from silverwork to embroidery, forming a seamless continuity of material and form and blurring the distinction between fine art and decorative art.' In an art history that is mainly concerned with the isolated work of art – that is, isolated from its embeddedness in artistic ensembles – and, as far as architecture is concerned, with ground plans and the question of space, the for Naples so characteristic material and formal continuities have remained largely unexplored (Hills, 2016). This paper aims to focus precisely on such an apparently marginal phenomenon, arguing that it is all but marginal for the Neapolitan baroque, namely the so-called *marmi commessi*, **highly complex decorations of inlaid marbles and sculpted forms, decorating numerous Neapolitan churches and chapels.**³ Therefore, this paper deals with one of the most important expressions of the Neapolitan baroque and, at the same time, one of the largest stumbling blocks in its historiography. Typical is the discussion of marble revetment by Cornelius Gurlitt (1850–1938), one of the first architectural historians to take a serious look at the Neapolitan baroque. Though in his *Geschichte des Barockstiles in Italien* of 1887 he speaks of a 'highly justified art form' (p.228), he does not recognise these decorations as actually being a part of the architecture. Rather, in his view, they actually work against architecture. It is deplorable, he writes referring explicitly to Naples, 'when incrustation becomes an end in itself, and the luxuriousness of the materials comes to determine the structure, when the coloured marbles outdo the effect of the spatial organisation, thus impairing the architecture' (p.228).⁴ **In his discussion of the Church of San Martino this is brought to a point: though clearly fascinated by the impression of the whole, he speaks of 'colours that sound in disarray' and 'wantonly obtrusive materials'** (p.422).⁵

This paper seeks to counter such negative evaluations by readdressing the role of materials in Neapolitan marble intarsia. Firstly, it will draw attention to a trend in the study of ornament in which ornament is fully dissociated from its material and technical

implementation. Then, it seeks to indicate why this trend is problematic, and what it would mean to take materials seriously. In doing so, it takes the initial steps of an exploration of Neapolitan marble intarsia as something proper, rather than foreign, something intrinsically bound to local artistic traditions and the geological context, and as a result, as constitutive of the place that is baroque Naples.

The disembodiment of ornament

Even though recent years have seen a growing interest in ornament, including from a more theoretical angle, the scholarly debate is still very much determined by ideas formulated around the turn of the previous century.⁶ At times these can, of course, be very insightful. The frequently noted connection between marble intarsia and tapestries easily brings to mind the work of Gottfried Semper, whose ideas about ornament are inherently connected with the textile arts. Moreover, for Semper textiles play a determining role in the history of architecture in general.⁷ His concept of *Bekleidung*, 'clothing' or 'dressing', is in fact close to the Italian *vestire*, which is used time and again in seventeenth-century sources to describe marble revetments. Carlo Celano, for example, writes of the Church of San Martino, that it was 'clothed [*vestita*], on the pilasters and in the chapels, by the most gentle marble intarsia [*marmi commessi*]...' (1692, vol.6, p.26).⁸ It appears, then, that Semper provides good grounds to discuss Neapolitan marble intarsia as something that is central, rather than peripheral, to the understanding of Neapolitan baroque architecture, and also to give a role to the material properties of this decoration. To understand how this is the case, we'll have to look at Semper's idea of *Stoffwechsel*. Semper writes:

Every material conditions its own particular manner of formation by the properties that distinguish it from other materials and that demand a technical treatment appropriate to it. When an artistic motive has been subjected to any kind of material treatment, its originating type will be modified, having acquired a certain tone as it were. The type no longer rests at its primary stage of development, but has passed through a more or less distinct metamorphosis. When from this secondary or, according to the circumstances, multiply graded modification, the motive now undergoes a new material transformation [*Stoffwechsel*], the form emerging from it will be a mixed result, one that expresses its primordial type and all stages of modification that preceded the last formation.

(1860, vol. I, pp.233–4)⁹

For Semper, then, techniques are inherent in the material. Yet, in the end, he tries to exclude the physical presence of materials so central to marble decorations. As Alina Payne (2012, pp.45–6) has shown, it was one of the author's central aims to formulate an account of the use of polychromy in Greek architecture. Semper writes:

the Hellenic building principle had to vindicate and nurture *colour* as the subtlest, most bodiless dressing. It is the most perfect way to do away with reality, for while it dresses the material it is itself immaterial ... Polychromy replaces the barbaric dressing of noble metals, incrustations, inlaid gems, panelling, and the other accessories with which Asiatic works are so extravagantly outfitted.

(Semper, 1860, vol. I, p.445, in Mallgrave, 1996, p.208)⁹

If Semper thus lays the foundations for a theory of ornament which allows us to thematise its materiality, the author himself, in a profoundly Hegelian move, discards overt materiality in favour of polychromy.

As such, he may be said to close the door he himself opened. The true stab of death to his theory, however, came from art historian Alois Riegl. Even though Riegl explicitly avoids criticising Semper directly, with his *Stilfragen* of 1893 he has written a history of ornament that is no less explicit in debunking Semper's fundamental thesis, namely that of the essential role of *Bekleidung*. In his introduction, he argues that there is 'not only ... no definitive ground for assuming that the oldest geometrical decorations were executed with a particular technique, and the textile arts in particular, but also, the oldest, truly historical monuments actually disprove this assumption' (p.viii).¹¹ This is also the message of the first chapter of *Stilfragen*, in which the author provides an alternative theory of the origins of ornament. His point of departure is a number of then-recent archaeological finds, objects created by what Riegl calls 'half-cannibalistic cave dwellers'. With just two images – a figure sculpted fully in the round and an engraved figure – we have, Riegl (p.20) argues, 'the full ladder of the developmental phases in which, step by step, the physical character evaporates'¹² (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2). Riegl develops this observation into a general principle. Art, including decorative art, has its origins in the 'unmediated reproduction of the beings of nature in their fully embodied appearance.' He continues:

As one sees the beings of nature always from one side only, one learns to be satisfied with the relief, which leaves just as much of the appearance of physical presence as is required by



Figure 3.1: Image 1 from Riegl's *Stilfragen*.

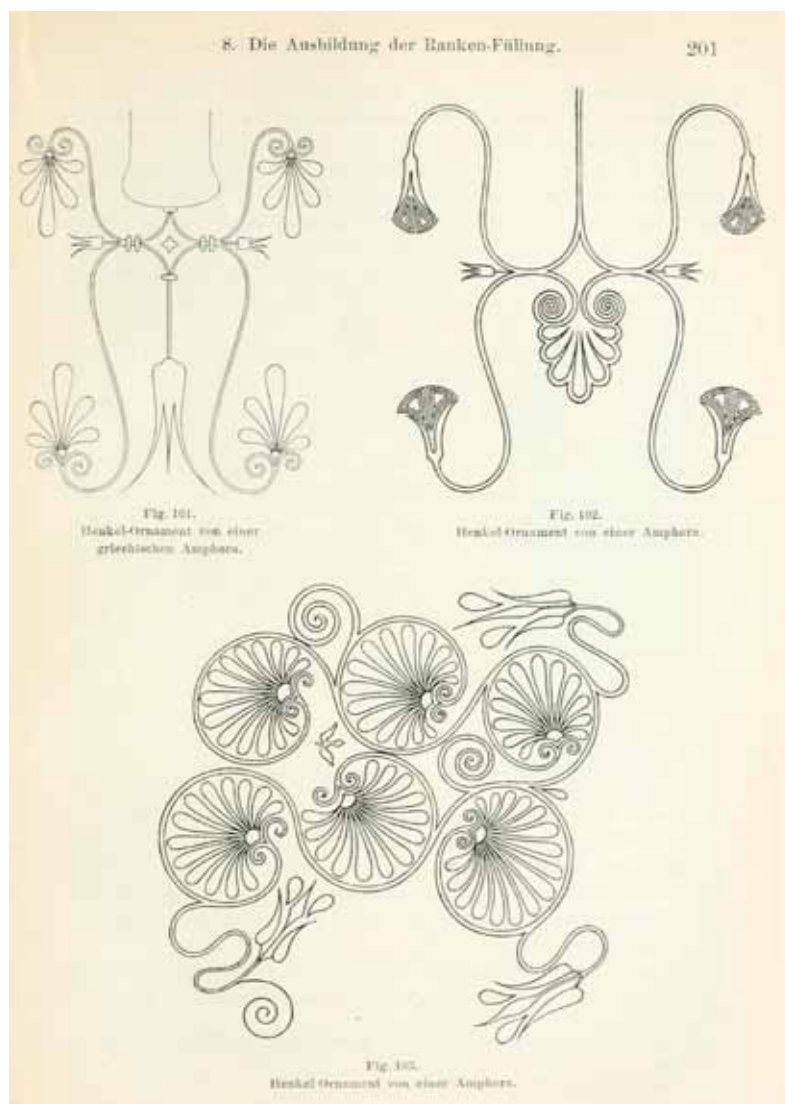


Figure 3.3: Ornament dissociated from its material carrier from Riegl's *Stilfragen*.

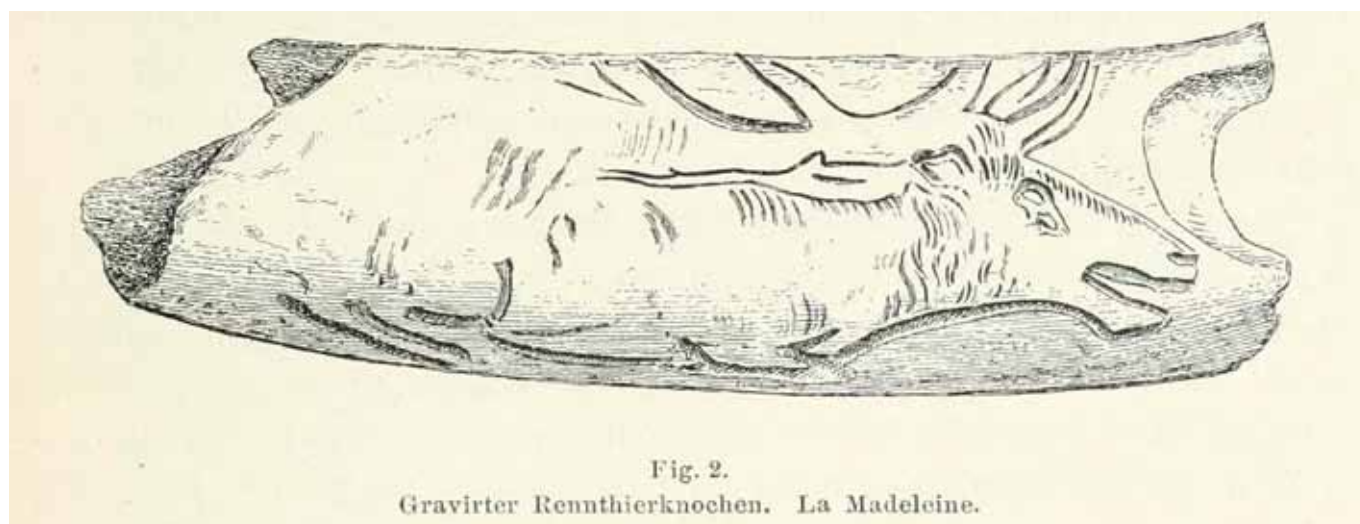


Figure 3.2: Image 2 from Riegl's *Stilfragen*.



Figure 3.4: Greek ornament from Jones' *Grammar of Ornament*.

the human eye. Thus, one gets used to depictions on a flat surface, and starts to comprehend the contour line. Finally, the appearance of physical presence is wholly abandoned, and replaced by modelling through drawing.

(p.20)¹³

Riegl's idea of the two-dimensionality of vision, clearly influenced by Adolf von Hildebrand's *Problem der Form*, allows him to fully dissociate ornament from its

material (Gastel, 2013). There was an ulterior motive for Riegl's disembodiment of ornament, however. By reducing ornament to patterns of lines, Riegl could write a history of forms wholly independent from the material carrier. This approach is echoed in Riegl's use of images. Throughout his book, he starts by displaying particular objects and then dissociates the patterns from these objects, depicting them as abstract plays of lines (Fig. 3.3). It could even be argued that images



Figure 3.5: Interior of the church of San Martino, seen towards the right nave, Naples. (Photo: Joris van Gastel)

contributed significantly to his ideas. In fact, Riegl relies heavily on Owen Jones' *The Grammar of Ornament*, a collection of images that reduces ornament to two-dimensional patterns (Frank, 2001) (Fig. 3.4).

Riegl's conception of ornament was further consolidated by another classic in the study of ornament: Ernst Gombrich's *The Sense of Order*, published in 1979. Indeed, Gombrich openly agrees with Riegl's critique of 'the so-called doctrine of materialism' (p.64) and pays homage to Riegl throughout his book. Still, he realises that material cannot be left fully out of the picture. 'We may not want the material', he writes, 'to deny its identity, wood being turned into a semblance of lace or needlework into painting, but the craftsman's ambition to effect such miraculous transformations cannot be left out of the history of art' (p.66). But what could the role of such an ambition be? This question remains unanswered in the book, and it certainly does not play a role in Gombrich's discussion of the effects of ornament. Ornament, here, is no less disembodied than it was for Riegl. The reason for Gombrich's disembodiment of ornament is different from Riegl's, however. As an avid student of experimental psychology, he conceives of the effect of ornament as a problem of visual perception. To facilitate the exchange between art history and psychology,

'ornament' becomes 'pattern', a two-dimensional, purely visual abstraction. Interestingly, as Gombrich turns to ornament in non-Western art in the last chapter of his book, 'The Edge of Chaos', he does deal with its agency beyond the psychology of visual perception. Only the non-Western canon, it seems, requires an anthropological approach, whereas Western art merits a more 'rational' analysis. The line set out by Riegl and Gombrich has continued to determine the direction of the scholarly debate, from Oleg Grabar's *The Mediation of Ornament*, up to the more recent developments related to digital images. Ornament becomes 'pattern', becomes 'image', a two-dimensional, purely visual and immaterial abstraction.

Fanzago at San Martino: Embodied ornament

A consideration of the marble decoration of the church of San Martino, makes clear how problematic such a view of ornament is (Fig. 3.5). Commissioned from the sculptor-architect Cosimo Fanzago (1591–1678) around 1623 and finished only in the course of the eighteenth century, it is evident that, even though patterns play a significant role here, they account for only part of the effect of this ornament. First, it is clear that ornament has significant sculptural



Figure 3.6: Cosimo Fanzago and workshop, Marble decorations, Chapel of Saint Bruno, San Martino, Naples. (Photo: Joris van Gastel)

qualities. And second, as already hinted by Gurlitt, the materials themselves play a central role (Figs. 3.6 and 3.7). As German art historian Georg Weise has shown in a series of papers published in 1959–60, significant elements of Fanzago's formal repertoire can be related to the elaborately sculpted frames of coats of arms. This connection with the *stemma* allows for a fruitful perspective on the more theoretical aspects of this ornament. Filippo Baldinucci writes in his 1681 *Vocabolario toscano dell'arte del disegno*: 'the ornament surrounding [the coat of arms] is created by the artist according to his own good taste; and it is herein that consists the artist's concept and invention' (p. 14 [s.v. 'arme']).¹⁴ The frame of the coat of arms thus forms a kind of free space, a space that is not subjected to the rules of art and architecture, wholly in the hand of the artist. It is this very ornament – significantly enough, a sculptural ornament – that in Naples turns into architecture.

Weise explicitly excludes marble incrustations from his argument, and one can indeed argue that they have a different origin, namely, with the Florentine tradition of *pietre dure*. Ferdinando I de' Medici gave this tradition an important impulse with the foundation of the *Opificio delle pietre dure* in 1588, a foundation that was directly connected with his commission of the *Cappella*



Figure 3.7: Detail of a pilaster, San Martino, Naples. (Photo: Joris van Gastel)



Figure 3.8: View towards the main altar of San Domenico Maggiore, Naples. (Photo: Joris van Gastel)

dei Principi in the church of San Lorenzo (Giusti, 2015). Around the turn of the sixteenth century, numerous Tuscan artists travelled south to seek a future, among them architect Giovanni Antonio Dosio (1533–1611) and sculptor Michelangelo Naccherino (1550–1622), both of whom had worked at San Martino when Fanzago arrived there. More important, arguably, were the stone carvers trained at the *Opificio delle pietre dure*, who brought with them the technical skills that made Fanzago's invention possible.

There is yet another tradition that should be taken into account, one that relates more directly to Gottfried Semper's concept of *Bekleidung*, namely that of the textile arts. An impression of the importance textiles may be gathered by looking at the example of the Neapolitan church of San Domenico Maggiore – even though the nineteenth century re-gothification of the church has left little of the original decorations (Fig. 3.8). Only the richly decorated high altar, created after the designs of Fanzago, is retained, be it with some later modifications (Gastel, in press). In his travel guide *Notitie del bello, del antico e del curioso della città di Napoli* of 1692, Canon Carlo Celano gives an impression of the church's decorations at the beginning of the seventeenth century:

in this church one could see a striking quantity of the richest velvet drapes and of equally precious drapes of gold and brocade *riccio sopra riccio*, that in the middle aisle were hung in three orders per part, and two in the side aisles, and in addition there were those that decorated the crossing, so that the whole church was decked out with drapes.

(p. 115)¹⁵

Religious festivities resulted in a further intensification of the textile decorations, as was for example the case with the canonisation in 1641 of Saint Dominic as Naples' patron saint, an honour he shared with several other saints. A description of the decorations in San Domenico on this occasion can be found in a book titled *Il trionfo di San Domenico*, written by Paolo Caracciolo and published in Naples in 1644:

The altars of the chapels were decorated with rich silk drapes of silver *contratagliato*, and *chermisino* velvet worked in the same manner, all newly made, and on top of them were candelabras, and flowers, with other embellishments: but the main altar formed an almost too outstanding and stupendous spectacle. There were various silver vases with many



Figure 3.9: Cosimo Fanzago and workshop, Marble decorations, Chapel of Saint Bruno, San Martino, Naples. (Photo: Joris van Gastel)

variously coloured artificial flowers, so that it seemed a delightful throne of Spring.

On the altar's front was an extraordinarily rich *paliotto*, of great cost, a most glorious work of embroidery. There were embroidered lilies, hyacinths, roses, and other flowers, so lifelike, that one would have sworn they breathed the sweetest fragrance.

(pp.108–9)¹⁶

In the hands of Fanzago and his team these three traditions – the frame of the coat of arms, the *pietre dure* and the textile arts – come together, merging into one.¹⁷ **Sculptural forms are inlaid with patterns of coloured marble, while they themselves break forth from inlaid marble patterns.** The floral motifs of the textile arts are integrated and, at times, the decorations follow a rigid, self-imposed system of tapestry-like frames; elsewhere, however, these frames are broken by spiralling forms of sculptural ornament (Fig. 3.9).

That contemporaries, too, had difficulty in making sense of this intricate interweaving of forms and techniques, follows from an appraisal of the works in



Figure 3.10: Cosimo Fanzago and workshop, Marble decorations, Chapel of Saint Bruno, San Martino, Naples. (Photo: Joris van Gastel)

San Martino, written by Fanzago's own assistants in order to determine if he was asking a fair price for his work (Napoli, 2009) (Fig. 3.10).

First there are two ornaments where the pictures of Jusepe de Ribera are placed, that is, Moses and Elijah. Because these two ornaments are contained by their frames both above and below, it is understood however that the thin arms of *verde antico* marble, which go up to the *collarino* of the capital, are excluded. All of these are measured, but the ornament one understands as the framing inside and outside, that on one side [outside] has a shell [*gusso*, *guscio*], and the other side an ovolo with its flat surfaces and its *cimacie* [projecting rings] with studs and triangles, with *mischio* of *breccia di francia*, with the background of *breccia minuta*, which is joined [*fà fuso*] to the framework with drops [*gocciole*], brackets [*menzoletti*], cartouches [*scartocci*], half jars, and a *cimacio* in the framework. And within the jars here and there [on both frames] there are inlays of *verde antico* marble, with thin strips [*listello*] of white and black, and a background of *breccia di francia*.

If the ensemble of these ornaments can be appraised all together so as not to confuse the matter, this should be sufficient.

(Napoli, 2009, p.219)¹⁸

The manner in which the appraisers struggle with trying to explain what should be counted as being part of the ornament and what not is rather striking. And if Ribera's painting is mentioned only in passing, it is interesting to see how the work too is integrated into the decorations. Although not actually part of the ornament as it is described here, the marbles function both as the painting's frame and are part of the architecture. The painting, in turn, responds to the colours of the marble decorations, as is to be seen, for example, in the stone-like grey in the background of the picture, thus becoming an integral part of a decorative whole.

That invention – *invenzione* – forms an important aesthetic category here is, becomes clear from Bernardo de' Dominici's discussion of marble decorations in his *vita* of Cosimo Fanzago:

having been asked his opinion about the works they were planning to have done..., he promised [the monks] to create something of such a sheer novelty, that it would incite marvel and delight to

the eyes of the viewers. And indeed, no less were the marble decorations that he, with marvellous invention [*invenzione*], had made for the church, giving daily guidance with his words... [And] these marbles, inlayed so artfully, were the first to be seen to have been worked in this manner.

(2003–14, vol.3.1, p.349)¹⁹

As if not wanting to leave any doubt of Fanzago's personal involvement in the creation of this novelty, De' Dominici (p.349) adds that Fanzago sculpted 'with his own hands ... the large roses with their petals on the pilasters.'¹⁹

Thus, artistic invention – *invenzione* – is here connected with the technical feat of artful inlay. The commission for the chapel of Sant'Antonio in the Church of San Lorenzo, in which, coincidentally, San Martino is explicitly referred to, makes clear that such technical aspects are central (Fig. 3.11):

all coloured marbles [*mischì*] should be worked with the utmost perfection, excellence and mastery, both the monochrome, and those with [patterns of] stars and leaves, with the utmost perfection and mastery, without an excessive use of stucco, precisely as in the other works at San Martino. ...



Figure 3.11: Cosimo Fanzago and workshop, Chapel of Sant'Antonio (detail), San Lorenzo, Naples. (Photo: Joris van Gastel)

all the carvings should be of the perfect design and invention by the aforementioned Cavaliere, corresponding to other similar works and models, and particularly those at San Martino, and [they] should be well cut, cleaned, and polished, with the highest possible finish and care.

(Filangieri, 1883–91, vol.2, pp.216–17)²¹

Although the materials themselves might appear to be of a lesser interest here, the contracts for such commissions tell a different story. Almost without exception they contain long lists of the different kinds of marbles and stones to be used, an indication that artist and patron shared an extensive knowledge of the materials involved. The Carthusians of San Martino were evidently concerned about the variety of stones that decorated their church and monastery. The French visitor Alexandre, Sieur de Rogissart mentions in his *Les delices de l'Italie* of 1707 'four oval pearls of exceptional size, four pieces of topaz and other precious stones' in the treasury of the monastery (vol.3, p.199).²² Another author speaks of 'crosses from amber and engraved rock crystal, altar frontals embroidered with gold and pearls, images from mother of pearl and embroidery, almost outdoing the [art of] painting', and large amounts of silver (Parrino, 1700, vol.1, p.124).²³ The decoration of the main altar of the church should have reflected the riches of the treasury; though never actually executed – what can be seen today in the church is a wooden model after the design of the Neapolitan painter-architect Francesco Solimena – the monks had planned something with 'precious stones and gilded bronze'. Rogissart writes: 'The high altar will be absolutely magnificent. They use exclusively precious stones, diamonds, silver, or gold' (p.198).²⁴

That the interest of the monks went beyond a love for splendour, becomes clear when we look at the rich collections of the monastery's library, a catalogue of which was published in 1764 (Fabricius).²⁵ Surprisingly, there are few books in the catalogue that suggest a particular interest in the visual arts. The only real exception is Carlo Ridolfi's *Maraviglia dell'arte* of 1648 (Fabricius, 1764, p.261), a book that, with its focus on Venice, is somewhat out of place here – though with the *Last supper* by the Veronese workshop installed among the paintings in the church choir, the monks did have something Venetian in their collections (Causa, 1973, p.53). In contrast, the number of books concerned with natural history is striking: Georgius Agricola's *De re metallica* (1621), various works by Ulisse Aldrovandi, Ferrante Imperato's *Historia naturale* (1599), various works by Athanasius Kircher,

Giambattista della Porta's *Magia naturalis* (1650) and so forth. Worthy of note are also the books on the natural history of the New World, as, for example, Willem Piso's *Historia Naturalis Brasiliae* (1648) and the so-called *Tesoro Messicano* (1651), the latter a work that was partly edited in Naples itself (Freedberg, 2002, pp.245–74). And finally, there are works that deal specifically with stones and their virtues or powers, such as Anselmus Boethius de Boodt's *Gemmarum et lapidum historia* (1639), Girolamo Cardano's *De subtilitate* (1551) and Giovanni Battista Ardemani's *Tesoro delle Gioie* (1630).

Although this is not the place for a full analysis of these works, two significant points may be made. A returning topic in these books is nature's capacity to create images. Maybe Kircher is here the best known example. In his *Mundus subterraneus* or *Underground World* of 1665 he seeks to explain the images found in nature by referring to formative processes in geology, hereby relating to a longstanding discussion (Felfe, 2015). As such, nature's image-creating force is directly connected with a second important recurrent theme, namely, that of the life of nature. Stones and metals, thus was the common conception, as a part of nature continuously renew, procreate, and undergo ever new transformations. In Naples, such an idea of the earth as living entity was particularly widespread, which had everything to do with the volcanic activity in its vicinity (Hills 2016; Cocco, 2013).

The technology of enchantment

Material and technique are central aspects of the appreciation or even agency of Neapolitan marble decorations – aspects that, however, have received little scholarly attention. In the final part of this paper, some new approaches to these decorations will be formulated, whereby their material presence is put at the core of the argument. For a first point of departure, it is instructive to look outside of the field of art history and turn, for a moment, to anthropology.

In his paper 'The technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology,' British anthropologist Alfred Gell (1992) has attempted to explain the fascinating power of images with a phenomenon that he has called the 'enchantment of technology'. Rather than focusing on the formal aspects of art, Gell argues, 'the attitude of the spectator towards the work of art is fundamentally conditioned by his [or her] notion of the technical processes which gave rise to it, and the fact that it was created by the agency of another person, the artist' (p.51). As a result, '[t]he power of art objects stems from the technical processes they objectively embody' (p.44). Herewith, technique is

not something secondary, a means through which something else – form, meaning etc. – is achieved. Important for our discussion is Gell's remark about the role of technology outside the domain of 'fine art': 'The kind of technical sophistication involved is not the technology of illusionism but the technology of the radical transformation of materials' (p.54).

Surprisingly enough, when Gell comes to speak of ornament in his book *Art and Agency*, he is still very much indebted to the tradition of Gombrich, a tradition that, as we have seen, denies ornament's physical presence (1998, pp.73–95). To counter the disembodiment of ornament inherent to this tradition, it is helpful to confront Gell's ideas with the concept of image as it has been defined by Horst Bredekamp in his *Theorie des Bildakts* (2010). Referring, significantly enough, to Leon Battista Alberti's *De statua* (c. 1445), Bredekamp writes:

Following Alberti, we can speak of an image [*Bild*] (*simulacrum*) from that moment onwards, in which natural objects ... present a minimum of human manipulation. As soon as a natural structure [*Naturgebilde*] shows a trace of human intervention, it can be defined as image.

(p.34)²⁶

'In such a definition', Bredekamp explains, 'non-physical images are not part of the equation, as only the material resistance allows for the peculiar latency that builds the ground for the larger question asked here' (p.34).²⁷ Thus, Bredekamp gives the materiality of the image a central role, seeing it, moreover, as something that is explicitly made. Here, the 'larger question' refers, of course, to the power of images to affect the beholder, what Bredekamp calls *Bildakt*.

Taken together, Gell and Bredekamp provide the first argument for a new approach to Neapolitan marble decoration, in which the impact, in addition to the *concetto* or *invenzione*, is primarily determined by the technique and the material, as well as its radical transformation.²⁸ What would it mean to take the role of materials seriously here? In the first place, one would maybe inquire into its religious significance. Visitors often associated the decorations with the Heavenly Jerusalem, a city, as one may read in the book of revelations, of pure gold, with walls of precious stones (Rev. 21:18–21). Moreover, a parallel could be drawn between the treasures of faith and the richness of the church interior. The Neapolitan priest Emanuele di Gesù Maria in a sermon titled *Il doppio tesoro* (*The Double Treasure*, 1681) draws attention to the idea of the body and blood of Christ as treasures, treasures that here form a parallel to the treasures hidden in the earth:

May it be blessed for all eternity, the mighty hand of the Creator, for while in the works of nature he has achieved such strange miracles – stones producing gems, the earth's bosom fecund with silver and gold, the entrails of mountains hiding treasures – he has done the same in his works of grace: for in the mines of that sphere, in the bosom of that altar, in the entrails of the consecrated host, with renewed marvel, he has hidden the silver and the gold of humanity, and of the divinity of Christ.

(p.173)²⁹

Fundamentally, this text deals with a series of miraculous transformations – host becomes flesh, wine becomes blood, but also: stone becomes gem, silver becomes gold. Accordingly, we find also a further explanation for the interest in natural history in San Martino's library: the miracles of faith are directly related to the miracles of nature.

As to the role of technique, it is vital to look beyond the basic inquiries of technical art history. Of particular interest is here the concept of socio-technological system, defined by anthropologist Bryan Pfaffenberger (1992, p.497) as 'the distinctive technological activity that stems from the linkage of techniques and material culture to the social coordination of labour.' In other words, technique is here understood as being embedded in a larger system of social and non-social 'actors', ranging from tools to materials, from hierarchic and political structures to economic concerns, indeed even to geology. That such an idea can be applied fruitfully to the case of San Martino, follows already from De' Dominici's remark, quoted above, that Fanzago guided his workers with his words. These words, it could be argued, are as much a part of the technique as the tools and skills of the stone mason. Indeed, a clear division of labour is central to the mobilising and coordinating of larger groups of workers, as it is central to gaining access to a variety of materials. The decoration at San Martino, though often conceived as the result of a single artist, relies as much on the numerous Tuscan stone masons who, frequently after a training at the *Opificio delle pietre dure*, came to Naples at the turn of the sixteenth century. In 1618 they founded the *Corporazione degli scultori e marmorai*, a guild for sculptors and stonemasons, that controlled the quality of the work produced in the city, but also worked as a social safety net (Capobianco, 1985; Strazzullo, 1962; Ceci, 1897). If it was arguably Fanzago's merit to see the potential of this workforce, the social structures provided by the guild formed a fundamental precondition for the works at San Martino.



Figure 3.12: Balustrade in San Martino, Naples.
(Photo: Joris van Gastel)

When the materials and their ‘radical transformation’ are followed beyond the Neapolitan workshop of San Martino, one gets a sense of the far reach of the sociotechnical system. Lapis lazuli, for example, used extensively in the balustrade of the choir at San Martino, was in all probability imported from Badakshan in what today is Afghanistan, from where it travelled over land to Bagdad, and then over the sea to Italy (Searight, 2010; Bucklow, 2009) (Fig. 3.12). The silver, which was abundantly present in the treasure and should also decorate the altar, in all probability came to Naples from the mines of Mexico and Peru, where it was mined by slaves, who, like the Neapolitans themselves, were subjected to the Spanish crown (Hills, in press; TePaske, 2010). Closer to home, traces of lapis lazuli and also silver were found in the midst of the lava, expelled at the catastrophic eruption of Vesuvius in 1631 (Gimma, 1730, vol.2, p.500). Herewith, the materials are again connected with a moment of radical transformation, one that leads us back to natural history. Referring once more to Bredekamp’s Albertian idea about images, it becomes clear that these two moments of radical transformation – that brought

about by nature and that brought about by the artist – are intrinsically connected; the artist engages a material that always already has a history, a history that is as much part of the working of the image, as the social and technical history that is inscribed in the material through the artisan. The question then is, how precisely such histories are inscribed in the material and become part of its agency.

Postscript

Art history has been primarily interested in that which takes place within the frame; the frame itself, all too easily gets left out of the equation. And yet, in the example discussed above, it is precisely here that the most important processes take place. If Naples has been allotted only a marginal place in the history of art, particularly in comparison to the ‘golden triangle’ of Florence, Venice and Rome, this might be due to the fact that it stands out in those areas that often have been banned to the periphery of scholarly inquiry. What could be gained by shifting focusses to these ‘peripheral’ phenomena? And what, more specifically, could be won by drawing attention to the materiality of ornament? First and foremost, a focus on material and technique may give new insights in the character of the Neapolitan baroque, not as derivative of Rome, but rather as a place with its own traditions and dynamic, anchored in a specific geological situation. In addition, the approach formulated here may open a way to newly discuss the artistic cultures in further Southern Italian centres, such as Lecce or Palermo, but also in the Iberian Peninsula and, significantly, Latin America. As in Naples, in Sicily, Spain and Latin America, too, one finds the prejudice of the excessive, not infrequently related to colonial ideas of a periphery that is too slow to catch up (Vlachou, 2016). Rather than part of a not unproblematic history of influences and adaptations, these continuities could be more readily understood in terms of materials and techniques, as well as the social structures they embody. Naples could function as a key here, as the city demands a new approach to the history of art and its techniques.

Notes

¹ 'Freunde ältere Kunst pflegten sich freilich in Neapel ziemlich unglücklich zu fühlen. So charakterlos ist Neapels monumentale Physiognomie, daß ein damaliger Reisender meint, wenn der alte Königspalast nicht wäre, so würde man zweifeln, ob Neapel je die Architektur gekannt habe. Nur wer suchte, fand doch noch manches Kleinod in seinem Chaos versteckt. Aber diese hoch aufgetürmten statuenreichen Mausoleen aragonesischer Könige von romantischer Pracht, diese Reste giottesker Fresken und so manche Gaben norditalienischer und südlicher Bildhauerei tragen nichts bei zum Gepräge der Stadt. Wie die tropische Vegetation indische Tempel überwuchert hat, so bedeckte der Barockstil alles.' All translations are by the author unless otherwise stated.

² 'Neapel enthält nichts von Denkmälern des Alterthums, nichts von künstlerisch werthvollen Gebäuden, im Gegenteil, alles was es aus den letzten Jahrhunderten giebt an Kirchen, Brunnen, Obelisken ist geschmacklos zum Exceß...' Justi was in Naples in August–November 1867 and February–March 1869; cf. Justi (1922, pp.72–131, 258–73). For the earlier critical reception of the Neapolitan baroque, see: Riedle (1977) and Blunt (1974).

³ For a recent discussion (with further references), see Del Pesco (2016).

⁴ 'Schlimmer ist es jedoch, wenn die Inkrustation Selbstzweck und der Luxus mit dem *Material* bestimmend für den Gebilde wird, wenn die farbigen Marmorsorten die Wirkung der plastischen Gliederungen übertönen und somit die Architektur beeinträchtigen, wie dies namentlich in Neapel geschieht.'

⁵ 'durcheinander klingenden Farben [und] an sich rücksichtslos aufdringlichen Materialien'.

⁶ Among recent publications, see Necipoğlu and Payne (2016), Dekoninck, Heering and Lefftz (2013), Beyer and Spies (2012), Payne (2012), Frank and Hartung (2001), and Raulet and Schmidt (2001). For a comprehensive overview, cf. Raulet and Kroll (2002).

⁷ Cf. Semper (1860, vol. I, p.227) 'immer bleibt gewiss dass die Anfänge des Bauens mit den Anfängen der Textur zusammenfallen.' For Semper's ideas about veiling, see Payne (2012, pp.35–46) and Mallgrave (1996, pp.290–302).

⁸ 'Viene questa [chiesa] vestita, ne' pilastri e nelle cappelle, di gentilissimi marmi commessi'.

⁹ 'Jeder Stoff bedingt seine besondere Art des bildnerischen Darstellens durch die Eigenschaften, die ihn von andern Stoffen unterscheiden und eine ihm angehörige Technik der Behandlung erheischen. Ist nun ein Kunstmotiv durch irgend eine stoffliche Behandlung hindurchgeführt worden, so wird sein ursprünglicher Typus durch sie modificirt worden sein, gleichsam eine bestimmte Färbung erhalten haben; der Typus steht nicht mehr auf seiner primären Entwicklungsstufe, sondern eine mehr oder minder ausgesprochene Metamorphose ist mit ihm vorgegangen. Geht nun das Motiv aus dieser sekundären oder nach Umständen mehrfach graduirten Umbildung einen neuen Stoffwechsel ein, dann wird das sich daraus Gestaltende ein gemischtes Resultat

sein, das den Urtypus und alle Stufen seiner Umbildung, die der letzten Gestaltung vorangingen, in dieser ausspricht.' Translation adapted from Semper (1989, pp.258–59).

¹⁰ Semper makes a similar point about Greek sculpture (1860, vol. I, p.236).

¹¹ 'In diesem Kapitel ... hoffe ich dargelegt zu haben, dass nicht bloss kein zwingender Anlass vorliegt, der uns nöthigen würde a priori die ältesten geometrischen Verzierungen in einer bestimmten Technik, insbesondere der textilen Künste, ausgeführt zu vermuthen, sondern, dass die ältesten wirklich historischen Kunstdenkmäler den bezüglichen Annahmen viel eher widersprechen.'

¹² 'Dann haben wir eine ganze Stufenleiter von Entwicklungsphasen, in denen sich der plastische Charakter allmähig verflüchtigt...'

¹³ 'Die unmittelbare Reproduktion der Naturwesen in ihrer vollen körperlichen Erscheinung, im Wege des durch einen weiter unten zu bezeichnenden psychischen Vorgang zur Bethätigung angespornten Nachahmungstriebes, steht hiernach am Anfange alles Kunstschaffens: die ältesten Kunstwerke sind plastischer Natur. Da man die Naturwesen immer nur von einer Seite sieht, lernt man sich mit dem Relief begnügen, das eben nur so viel vom plastischen Scheine wiedergiebt, als das menschliche Auge braucht. So gewöhnt man sich an die Darstellung in einer Fläche und gelangt zum Begriffe der Umrisslinie. Endlich verzichtet man auf den plastischen Schein vollständig, und ersetzt denselben durch die Modellirung mittels der Zeichnung.'

¹⁴ 'l'ornamento intorno ad esso farsi dall'Artefice secondo il suo buon gusto; ed è quello nel quale consiste il concetto ed invenzione del medesimo Artefice...'

¹⁵ 'in questa chiesa vi si vedeva una quantità maravigliosa di ricchissime coltre di velluti e di ricchissimi drappi d'oro e di broccati ricci sopra ricci, che nella nave di mezzo se ne ponevano tre ordini per parte e due nelle navi minori, oltre quelle che adornavano la croce, in modo che tutta la chiesa veniva adobbata di coltre.'

¹⁶ 'Gli altari delle Cappelle erano apparati di ricchi panni di contratagliato di lama d'argento, e velluto chermisino di un'istessa divisa, fatti nuovamente, e sopra vi erano candelieri, e fiori, con altri abbellimenti: ma l'altar maggiore rendeva uno spettacolo troppo raguardevole, e stupendo. Vi erano diversi vasi d'argento con molti fiori artificiali di variati colori, che sembrava un vezoso trono di Primavera... Nella facciata dell'altare era un ricchissimo paliotto di molto prezzo, gloria maggiore del ricamo. Vi erano trapunti i gigli, i giacinti, le rose, & altri fiori, così al naturale, c'havresti giurato di sentirne spirare soavissimi gli odori...' For a further discussion of this source, see Gastel (in press).

¹⁷ A similar point, with regard to Sicilian decorations, was made by Hills (1999).

¹⁸ Archivio di Stato di Napoli, Monasteri Soppressi, fasc. 2143, fol. 315, transcribed and translated in Napoli (2009, p.219).

¹⁹ 'Che però chiamato il Cav. Cosimo vollero udire il suo parere circa quei lavori che avean disegnato di fare, ed egli facendogli animo gli promise fare opere tali, le quali recassero

maraviglia, e diletto agli occhi de' riguardanti per la novità dell'oggetto. Tali appunto furono i marmi commessi che con mirabile invenzione ei fece lavorar per la Chiesa assistendovi quotidianamente per l'impegno di sua parola ... questi marmi così artifiziosamente commessi, furono i primi ad esser veduti lavorati in tal sorta...

²⁰ 'E per rendersi più cospicui, ed aggiungere magnificenza, e particolarità alla chiesa, vi lavorò di sua mano i rosoni, con le folia, che si veggono ne' pilastri...'

²¹ 'Item che tutti li mischi habbiano da essere lavorati de tutta perfettione et eccellenza et bontà tanti li piani come quelli stellati et fogliati siano commessi di ogni perfettione et bontà senza stucchi esorbitanti simili alle altreopere fatte in San Mar[ti]no et cosi anco li marmi lavorati di quella perfettione come sono lavorati in San Martino. ... Item che tutti li intagli habbiano da essere de perfetto disegno et inventione del Cavalier predetto conforme alle altre opere simili et li modelli et in particolare fatti a San Martino siano ben lavorati, politi, et specchiati con ogni perfettione et diligenza...'

²² 'On y voit encore quatre perles ovales d'une grandeur peu commune, quatre topazes & autres pierres précieuses...'

²³ 'vi sono croci d'ambra e cristallo di rocca intagliati, palliotti ricamati di perle ed oro, quadretti di madri perle, di ricamo, che quasi han superato la pittura.'

²⁴ 'Le maître Autel sera touy-à-fait magnifique. On n'y employe que pierres precieuses, diamans, perles, argent, ou or.'

²⁵ I have used the copy of the Biblioteca Nazionale di Napoli (SALA FARN. 62. H 2), which includes handwritten additions and appears to come from the monastery itself.

²⁶ 'Alberti zufolge ist von einem Bild (*simulacrum*) von dem Moment an zu sprechen, in dem Gegenstände der Natur ... ein Minimum an menschlicher Bearbeitung aufweisen. Sobald ein Naturgebilde eine Spur menschlichen Eingriffs erkennen lasse, erfülle es den Begriff des Bildes.'

²⁷ 'In dieser Definition scheiden nichtphysische Bilder aus der Betrachtung aus, weil erst die materielle Widerstandsfähigkeit die Möglichkeit jener eigenwilligen Latenz begründet, die für die hier verfolgte Fragestellung die Basis bildet.'

²⁸ Of course, other scholars have shown an interest in materials as well; for an overview, see Cole (2011).

²⁹ 'Sia ella per sempre benedetta la possente mano del Creatore, poiche se nell'opre della natura hà fatto un così strano miracolo, che le pietre habbino miniere produttrici di Gemme, che la terra habbi il seno fecondo d'argento, e d'oro, che i Monti habbino viscere da nasconder tesori; Hallo fatto altresì nell'opre della Gratia; Conciosiacosache nella miniera di quella sfera, nel seno di quell'Altare, nelle viscere di quell'Ostia Sagramentata hà egli con nuovo stupore ascosto l'argento, e l'oro dell'umanità, e della Divinità di Cristo.'

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