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2018

## [Introduction to] Almost Eternal: Painting on Stone and Material Innovation in Early Modern Europe

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### Recommended Citation

Baker-Bates, Piers, and Elena M. Calvillo, eds. *Almost Eternal: Painting on Stone and Material Innovation in Early Modern Europe*. Leiden: Brill, 2018.

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# Almost Eternal

*Painting on Stone and Material Innovation  
in Early Modern Europe*

*Edited by*

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# Introduction

*Piers Baker-Bates and Elena Calvillo*

## Eternal Paintings?

On the night of 21 September 1936, almost exactly four hundred years after arriving in Úbeda (Andalusia), Sebastiano del Piombo's *Pietà* [Plate 1] in the funerary chapel of Francisco de los Cobos in San Salvador was bayoneted by an anti-clerical mob. Two other historically significant works suffered that evening: a statue of the young St. John the Baptist, whose attribution to Michelangelo has recently been widely accepted after an extensive restoration, was smashed into pieces, and a *retablo* by Alonso Berruguete perished in flames. That Sebastiano's painting on slate survived testified to one of the first claims made about the technique of oil painting on stone supports, which its earliest commentators said would withstand the destructive forces of time as "pittura poco meno che eterna," or painting little less than eternal.<sup>1</sup> Although this judgment was to be more than proved four centuries later, the question of durability and eternity has in many ways condemned the innovation and what motivated its development to simplistic explanations.

One context invoked to historicize Sebastiano's technique, one that lends particular irony to the event in 1936 given the sculptural casualty, has been the *paragone* between sculpture and painting, which commonly praised sculpture's durability over that of painting.<sup>2</sup> Another explanation for Sebastiano's

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- 1 The author of this description, Vittore Soranzo, continued by noting that the artist had tested his technique and found it durable; see his report to Pietro Bembo in *Delle Lettere da diversi Re et Principi et Cardinali et altri huomini dotti a Mons. Pietro Bembo scritte* (Venice, 1560), p. 110 "dovete sapere che Sebastianello nostro Venetiano ha trovato un segreto di pingere in marmo a olio bellissimo il quale farà la pittura poco meno che eterna. I colori ... si uniscono col marmo di maniera che quasi impetriscono ... ha fatto ogni prova & è durevole. Ne ha fatto una imagine di Christo & halla mostrato a N. Sig." Michael Hirst was the first to emphasize the significance of Soranzo's letter, *Sebastiano del Piombo* (Oxford, 1981), p. 124.
  - 2 The *paragone* has been the subject of several recent studies, since Leatrice Mendelsohn's *Paragoni: Benedetto Varchi's Due Lezioni and Cinquecento Art Theory* (Ann Arbor, 1982). See Ben Thomas, "The lantern of painting: Michelangelo, Daniele da Volterra and the *paragone*," *Apollo*, 154, no. 474 (2001), 46-53; Rudolph Preimesberger, *Paragons and Paragone: Van Eyck, Raphael, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Bernini*, trans. Sabine Eiche and Fiona Elliott (Los Angeles, 2011); Sefy Hendler, *La Guerre des arts Le Paragone Peinture-Sculpture en Italie xv-xvii siècle* (Rome, 2013); *Daniele da Volterra e la prima pietra del Paragone*, ed. Andrea G. de Marchi,

use of stone supports relates to formal appraisals of his late Roman practice; several art historians have explained the use of slate as a means to achieve the dark tonality and accomplished modeling, or *rilievo*, of these works, which have often been interpreted as a kind of austere proto-Counter-Reformatory response to the Sack of Rome in 1527.<sup>3</sup> Although Sebastiano's formally spare works do seem to have been understood by his contemporaries as evocative of the personal and intense devotional responses that would later be associated with the Counter Reformation, especially in Spain, the use of stone as a support was more likely employed for reasons that extended beyond formal choices and the emotive effects of a somber palette.<sup>4</sup> Many of the essays in this volume offer alternatives to these first explanations of the early modern phenomenon of oil painting on stone.

The 'Material Turn' in the research, theory and methodology of art history, represented by this and another forthcoming Brill series *Art and Materiality*, has initiated a discourse from which Sebastiano's technical and intellectual innovation and its legacy throughout Europe in the following two centuries might be better understood, beyond the fact of its innovation, for its signifying potential.<sup>5</sup> The essays that follow present close considerations of stone's particular ability to convey metaphorical meaning and ontological relationships through its materiality.<sup>6</sup> While the first chapters in Part One consider Sebastiano's invention, its initial reception, and historical context, the middle chapters in Part Two present various forms of painting on stone and its appeal to collectors throughout Europe at a moment when novelty in materials and

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(Rome, 2014); and Christiane Hessler, *Zum Paragone Malerei, Skulptur und Dichtung in der Rangstreitkultur des Quattrocento* (Berlin, 2014). Also see Christopher J. Nygren, "Titian's *Ecce Homo* on Slate: Stone, Oil and the Transubstantiation of Paint," *Art Bulletin* 99, 1 (2017), 36-66.

- 3 See for example the works of Marcia Hall, *Color and Meaning* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 137-42, 168; *The Sacred Image in the Age of Art, Titian, Tintoretto, Barocci, El Greco, Caravaggio*, (New Haven and London, 2011), p. 147-51.
- 4 Elena Calvillo, "Authoritative Copies and Divine Originals: Lucretian Metaphor, Painting on Stone, and the Problem of Originality in Michelangelo's Rome," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 66, no. 2 (2013), 453-508, especially pp. 483-85; Piers Baker-Bates, *Sebastiano del Piombo and the World of Spanish Rome* (New York and London, 2016), pp. 172-73, 180-81; Nygren, "Titian's *Ecce Homo*," p. 49.
- 5 See also the essays in *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c. 1250-1750*, eds. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith (Manchester, U.K., 2015).
- 6 For the most recent discussions of the technique in terms of early modern and contemporary theories of representations, see Anne-Laure Collomb, "Les traits artistiques et la peinture sur pierre, XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Histoire de l'art* 52 (2003), 11-20; Calvillo, "Authoritative Copies and Divine Originals"; Nygren, "Titian's *Ecce Homo* on Slate," which draws from material from his dissertation, "Vibrant Icons: Titian's Art and the Tradition of Christian Image-making," (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2011).

techniques and the conjunction of *ars* and *natura* were increasingly valued. The final chapters in Part Three address other technical developments in media and painting supports that seem related to oil painting on stone and to have been motivated by similar metaphors and concepts.

Previous investigations of this subject have appeared as broad surveys, whether in the form of exhibitions, such as that organized by the late Marco Chiarini at Palazzo Pitti in 1970 or the more recent exhibition in Palazzo Reale in Milan in 2000-01, or monographs such as those by Hana Seifertova (2007), Anne-Laure Collomb (2012), and most recently Mario Casaburo (2017).<sup>7</sup> The essays here focus on the ways in which stone supports might function as markers of artistic inventiveness and innovation and as agents of meaning; whether the lithic material signifies metaphorically or metonymically, suggests transubstantiation or consubstantiality, represents nature or the supernatural, the following chapters provide a variety of historical and theoretical emphases through specific case studies. Before turning to these, it would be best to begin with a brief history of the technical invention by Sebastiano del Piombo in Rome, which almost all of the authors reference before moving on to their specific examples of its legacy and efflorescence.

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7 For the first major exhibition of oil paintings on stone, see Marco Chiarini's pioneering *Pittura su Pietra*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Palatina (Florence, 1970). This precedent was followed thirty years later by *Pietra Dipinta: Tesori nascosti del '500 and '600 da una collezione*, ed. Marco Bona Castellotti (Milan, 2000). A number of recent monographs have also been devoted to the subject; see Hana Seifertova, *Malby na kameni: Uměcký experiment v 16. Na začátku 17 století/ Painting on Stone: an Artistic Experiment in the 16th and Early 17th centuries* (Prague, 2007); Anne-Laure Collomb, *Splendours de l'Italie: la Peinture sur Pierre à la Renaissance* (Rennes, 2012), whose research began as her doctoral dissertation; as did that of Johanna Beate Lohff's recent book, *Malerei auf Stein Antonio Tempesta's Bilder auf Stein im Kontext der Kunst- und Naturtheorie seiner Zeit* (Munich, 2015), and Mario Casaburo's most recent monograph, *Pittura su Pietra: Diffusione, Studie Materiali, ed Tecniche Artistiche* (Florence, 2017). Also see, Angela Cerasuolo, *Diligenza e Prestezza: La tecnica nella pittura e nella letteratura artistica del Cinquecento*, (Florence, 2014).