

COMING TO LIFE AT THE SACRO MONTE OF VARALLO:
THE SACRED IMAGE *AL VIVO* IN POST-TRIDENTINE ITALY

Carla Benzan

Vividly painted life-size sculptures seem to come to life at the Sacro Monte of Varallo. Three-dimensional figures appear to have emerged, fully embodied, from the trompe l'oeil frescoes that decorate the chapel walls. The multimedia scenes themselves prompt this imaginative possibility. For example, the sculpted foot of a figure physically steps out into Pilate's palatial throne room in *Pilate Washes His Hands* (ca. 1608–1621) [Fig. 1]; Christ is presented in front of a painted architectural façade upon a high relief balcony that extends the wall's surface in the *Ecce Homo* (1608–1616) [Fig. 2]. These seventeenth-century chapels epitomize the possibility for the animation of images, by which I mean their apparent capacity for movement and life.¹ Yet animation could have troubling consequences at the Sacro Monte. The transformative potential of images was a central issue for early modern viewers and commentators during the period of Catholic image reform. At this time the chapels that staged the biblical *istorie* were placed behind metal grilles or carved wooden screens [Fig. 3]. Apparently, the animate image could be too powerful, yet chapel construction actually increased at precisely this moment.

¹ Animation has become a significant area of inquiry in recent early modern and medieval scholarship. Methodologically it offers a way to attend to the agency of objects and images, reconfiguring the subject-object relations on which the discipline was founded. More practically, animation is linked to the language of *al vivo* through the verb 'vivere'. See, for example, the second entry for 'vivente' in the *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*: 'Che è o pare animato; caratterizzato dalla presenza della vita (con riferimento al mondo naturale e ai suoi singoli aspetti).' Note that this entry includes reference to the 'Quadro vivente'. Battaglia S., *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* vol. XXI (Torino: 2009) 948.

This essay examines the use of the term *al vivo* in guidebooks to the Sacro Monte of Varallo after the 1560s, at which time proposed renovations began dramatically to transform the experience of visitors to the pilgrimage site. The Sacro Monte was founded in 1486 by the Observant Franciscan monk Fra Bernardino Caimi (ca. 1425–1499/1500). Having recently returned to Milan following his tenure as the custodian of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, Caimi created a surrogate ‘New Jerusalem’ at the base of the Italian Alps. Architectural replicas of key pilgrimage shrines from Jerusalem were positioned ‘topo-mimetically’ to recreate the sacred topography of the Holy Land. Gradually, sculptural and multi-media representations of key biblical narratives were incorporated into the scaled-down spatial double of Jerusalem and its environs. Visitors were able physically to enter the duplicated shrines as well as the narrative chapels and their sculptural scenes. In the second half of the sixteenth century, Caimi’s principle of spatial replication was gradually replaced by a reordering of the chapels according to the biblical accounts of Christ’s life. Galezzo Alessi (1512–1572) articulated these changes most formally and comprehensively in his *Libro dei Misteri* (Book of Mysteries) (1565–1569). In this manuscript, the Perugian architect proposed the installation of viewing screens to limit bodily access to the chapel interiors, the addition of new chapels depicting numerous additional scenes from Christ’s life and Passion, and the construction of urban piazzas and palaces to ensure narrative clarity. Many of these recommendations were supported by Carlo Borromeo (1538–1584), the influential reforming Archbishop of Milan, who made four well-known penitential pilgrimages to the Sacro Monte in addition to administrative visits. But it was not until Borromeo’s secretary and biographer, Carlo Bascapè (1550–1615), was placed in charge of Varallo’s development as Bishop of

Novara in 1593, that the Sacro Monte was more definitively transformed from a spatial double to a representational *percorso*. In his efforts to clarify the experience of images at Varallo, Bascapè would forbid the Franciscan custodians from guiding pilgrims through the itinerary, and it was around this time that the publication of printed guidebooks increased significantly. Serving these ‘liberated’ visitors, the guidebooks were written in the vernacular and sold alongside the ex-votos and candles at the entrance to the Sacro Monte. The printed guides sought to assist and direct visitors’ navigation of the large and unwieldy pilgrimage site: to clarify their orientation between chapels during their visit, focus their attention when kneeling at the chapels, and later recall their experience after returning home. As such, these texts negotiated the challenges of an innovative and potentially disorienting pilgrimage site where penitential devotion was increasingly focused on images.

This essay examines the emergence of the term *al vivo* in guidebooks to Varallo in the post-Tridentine period corresponding with the gradual implementation of Alessi’s plans for a narrative order. In this context, *al vivo* engenders an ambivalent relationship to the lifelike images at the Sacro Monte, negotiating changing epistemological claims of the sacred image in Catholic Italy after the Reformation. As Robert Felfe has argued, the term *ad vivum* fashioned a new relation between the truthfulness of images and the living entity.² Yet existing scholarship on *ad vivum* tends to focus on its use to describe images made from direct observation, its application to secular genres, and its importance in the

² On the new relation between life and truth in *ad vivum* images see Felfe R., “*Naer het leven*. Eine sprachliche Formel zwischen bildgenerierenden Übertragungsvorgängen und ästhetischer Vermittlung”, in Fritzsche C. – Leonhard K. – Weber G.J.M. (eds.), *Ad Fontes! Niederländische Kunst des 17. Jahrhunderts in Quellen* (Petersberg: 2012) 165–195, here: 168.

Dutch context.³ Its use in Italy and in relation to sacred images has been less systematically studied.⁴ This essay expands current understandings of *ad vivum* to include descriptions of sacred images in vernacular Italian. The meaning of *al vivo* in the guidebooks to the Sacro Monte is best translated as ‘to the life’ or ‘lifelike’, rather than with reference to the process of making an image directly before the model.⁵ This translation shifts the direction of animation: rather than being formed ‘from life’ in the sense of direct observation, images that are made ‘to life’ move the reader or beholder closer to the possibility of animation. Drawing on the verb ‘vivere’, *al vivo* takes on the valence of an acute intensity, not only of the representation itself, but its impact on the beholder.⁶

³ On *ad vivum* as a description of the artist working through direct observation of the model see Felfe, “*Naer het leven*” 168; Swan C., “*Ad vivum, naer het leven, from the life: Defining a Mode of Representation*”, *Word & Image* 11, 4 (1995) 353–372. On the dominance of the Dutch context in the literature on *ad vivum*: Felfe, “*Naer het leven*” 166. Felfe identifies portraiture, landscape, nature illustration and casting/material images as four important genres where *ad vivum* and its cognates are used to describe images: Felfe, “*Naer het leven*” 170–188.

⁴ Discussions of *ad vivum* in Italian and Spanish contexts (including the Italian vernacular *al vivo*) are dispersed but can be found in scholarship on sixteenth-century ‘naturalism’. See for example Clifton J. “‘*Ad vivum mire depinxit*’. Toward a Reconstruction of Ribera’s Art Theory”, *Storia dell’Arte* 83 (1995) 111–132; Göttler C., “The Temptation of the Senses at the Sacro Monte of Varallo”, in de Boer W. – Göttler C. (eds.), *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden – Boston: 2013) 393–451; Sassu G., “Sull’affidabilità dell’osservatore *al vivo*”, in Pigozzi M. (ed.), *Bologna al tempo di Cavazzoni: Approfondimenti* (Bologna: 1999) 45–110; Wilson B., “Visual Knowledge/Facing Blindness”, in Leibsohn D. – Favrot J. (eds.), *Seeing Across Cultures in the Early Modern World* (Farnham – Burlington: 2012) 97–123. It is possible that the lack of sustained scholarship on the Italian *al vivo* retains Vasari’s Platonic denigration of working *dal vivo* in preference for *da se*. The distinction between working from life and from imagination is examined by Claudia Swan in relation to Dutch art theory and the term *naer het leven*: Swan, “*Ad vivum*” 355. On Vasari’s privileging of *da se* see Felfe, “*Naer het leven*” 166.

⁵ Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario* 956. On the translation and emergence of the term in Italian ca. 1550 see Bakker B., “*Au vif – naar ‘t leven – ad vivum*: The Medieval Origin of a Humanist Concept”, in Boschloo A.W.A. et al. (eds.), *Aemulatio: Imitation, Emulation and Invention in Netherlandish Art from 1500 to 1800: Essays in Honor of Erik Jan Sluijter* (Zwolle: 2011) 46 n. 50.

⁶ Several entries on variants of ‘vivere’ suggest this link to the powerful impression of presence linked to mental imaging or rhetorical effect. One sense of *al vivo* connotes intensity, acuteness, and depth: Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario* 956. Similar valences are found in the following terms such as ‘vivido’: Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario* 955. On these issues in relation to the term *al vivo* in a Jesuit context see Zierholz S. “‘To Make Yourself Present’: Jesuit Sacred Space as Energetic Space”, in de Boer W. – Enenkel K. – Melion W. (eds.), *Jesuit Image Theory* (Leiden – Boston: 2016) 430–31 and 443.

During the Catholic reform of images the emphatic presence of the three-dimensional, life-size polychromatic sculptures at the Sacro Monte would certainly have raised the threat of idolatry, which is – after all – the dangerous potential for attributing life to images. *Al vivo* negotiates and mediates this possibility. In fact, the term performs a paradoxical function that reflects a fundamentally ambivalent attitude toward sacred images at this time: although *al vivo* certainly asserts the images' proximity to life, it does so only in order to imply a separation from the attendant propensity for animation. Through this interplay between proximity and distance, the image *al vivo* makes space between the image and referent, and this is mediated by the artist who plays a new active role highlighting the facture of the image, and the beholder, who is required to bring the image to life.⁷

Varallo's sacred images *al vivo* in post-Tridentine Italy

The first use of *al vivo* in a guidebook at Varallo appears in Giovanni Giacomo Ferrari's *Brevi Considerationi Sopra i Misteri del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (Brief Considerations on the Mysteries of the Sacro Monte of Varallo) in 1611. This popular guidebook was written at the request of Carlo Bascapè and was frequently republished during the seventeenth century.⁸ Ferrari was a priest and theologian of a collegiate church in Gozzano, a town located between Novara and Varallo, and the author's direction of the reader certainly served the aims of his patron Bascapè. Echoing Bascapè's concern with appropriate and accurate experience of the biblical narratives, the guide carefully directs

⁷ Felfe argues for the importance of the double figure of artist and onlooker in images that are described as *ad vivum*: Felfe, "Naer het leven" 192–193. Sachiko Kusakawa expands on the centrality of the beholder in her account of the term *al vivo* in the current volume.

⁸ Ferrari Giovanni Giacomo, *Brevi Considerationi Sopra i Misteri del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (Varallo, Pietro Revelli: 1611). Later editions are listed in Longo P.G. – Zardin D., *I Sacri Monti: Bibliografia Italiana* (Ponzano Monferrato: 2010) 68.

its readers. The entry for each chapel includes a standardized text that instructs them to ‘Consider’, ‘Contemplate’ and ‘Learn’ accompanied by small woodcut illustrations. *Al vivo* is used in the first entry of the *Brevi Considerationi* after the prologue and table of contents, introducing the reader to the entry door to the Sacro Monte: a large arched classical entryway located just past the shop where the guidebook itself could be purchased. The structure was proposed by Alessi in the *Libro dei Misteri* and completed in 1566 clearly to demarcate the threshold point at which the visitor had entered into the New Jerusalem at Varallo. This function is asserted in the guidebook’s text (as well as being inscribed on the door itself); the reader is asked to ‘Consider’ that this door represents the door to the city of Jerusalem. The second directive – to ‘Contemplate’ – reads as follows:

Contempla qui prima di ogni altra cosa, che per essa si entra come in una tragica Scena, & ad un mestissimo spettacolo, nel quale si rappresentano, & fanno vedere al vivo la vita & morte, che fece il figlio di Dio [...]

Contemplate here before anything else, that by this [door] you enter as though into a tragic stage, and into a great spectacle in which they represent and make you see the life and death of the son of God *al vivo* [...]⁹

Ferrari’s use of *al vivo* describes the chapels in general and thus, like the doorway itself, seeks to clarify and define the experience of the visitor who passes through it onto this sacred stage. In addition, the term *al vivo* is applied to both the act of representation and

⁹ Ferrari, *Brevi Considerationi* n.p.

the act of seeing (*si rappresentano, & fanno vedere*) and in this way emphasises two things about the lifelike images that visitors will encounter beyond this symbolic threshold: their manmade status, and the importance of the visitor who is made to behold ‘the life and death of the son of God’ at Varallo.

A decade later, *al vivo* is used in a guidebook written by a Franciscan Observant monk Fra Tommaso Nanni (dates unknown). First published in 1616, the *Dialogo sopra i misterij del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (Dialogues on the Mysteries of the Sacro Monte of Varallo) was republished during the seventeenth century.¹⁰ Like Ferrari, Nanni does not use *al vivo* to describe a specific chapel. Rather, the term describes the chapels more generally in the introductory chapter ‘ORIGINE et discretione del Sacro Monte di Varallo’. The focus of this chapter is Varallo’s role as a New Jerusalem, which would have been relatively recently transformed from a spatial double to a representational *percorso* at the time of the initial publication of the *Dialogo*. In an effort to clarify the purpose of making a pilgrimage to Varallo, Nanni’s guidebook offers the reader a highly structured set of directives for each chapel through the format of a dialogue between an unnamed visitor (or the ‘disciple’) and a Franciscan father who acts as a guide (or ‘master’). In each entry to a specific chapel, the master elaborates the theological meaning and import of the scene to the disciple. Nanni also adopts Ferrari’s structure of the directives to the reader to ‘Consider’ ‘Contemplate’ and ‘Learn’. The dialogue between master and disciple structures the introductory chapter as well: the disciple expresses his desire to visit the Holy Land and he asks the Franciscan interlocutor for

¹⁰ Nanni Tommaso, *Dialogo sopra i misterij del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (Varallo, Pietro Ravelli: 1616). Longo and Zardin only list a single later edition from 1633 in their bibliography: Longo – Zardin, *I Sacri Monti* 98 but research suggests numerous editions after 1616: 1621, 1624, 1626, 1627, 1633 and 1669.

advice. The author, in the voice of the master, begins by describing the challenges and limitations of travel to Palestine and then describes the Sacro Monte as a place that replicates the Holy Land. In the context of its status as a New Jerusalem, Nanni describes the Sacro Monte as a place where ‘con Fabriche Pitture, & Scolture al vivo si vedeno le attioni; fatiche, miserie, & pene, a quali si sottopose l’istesso figliolo di Dio per salute nostra’ (‘with paintings and sculptures fabricated *al vivo* we see the actions, deeds, mysteries and suffering which the son of God underwent for our salvation’).¹¹ Once again, as in the earlier guide by Ferrari, Nanni foregrounds the fabrication of images when he describes the painting and sculpture at Varallo as *al vivo*. By delimiting the lifelike image as necessarily fabricated, he emphasizes the distinction as well as the proximity between art and life. Finally, the author concludes the description by clearly directing the reader and viewer of these images to a (seemingly) self-evident goal of salvation.

Similar issues are raised again in the *Descrittione de Sacri Monti di San Carlo d’Arona, di San Francesco d’Horta, sopra Varese e di Varallo* (Description of the Sacred Mountains of Saint Carlo in Arona, Saint Francis in Orta, Varese and Varallo) (1628), written by Bartolomeo Manino (1580–1653) and published in Milan by Carlo Antonio Malatesta (dates unknown).¹² Manino was a curate of Pisogno near the Sacro Monte of Orta, a pilgrimage site quite nearby, modeled on Varallo and dedicated to the life of Saint

¹¹ Nanni, *Dialogo* 3v–r.

¹² Manino Bartolomeo, *Descrittione de Sacri Monti di San Carlo d’Arona, di San Francesco d’Horta, sopra Varese e di Varallo* (Milan, Carlo Antonio Malatesta: 1628).

Francis since 1583.¹³ Like Ferrari, Manino was closely associated with Bascapè, the biographer of Carlo Borromeo, who in addition to his involvement at Varallo was active at the Sacro Monte of Orta. Indeed, Manino's guide attempts to link together four of the existing Sacri Monti into a more systematic system of devotion, in line with Bascapè's Catholic reforms.¹⁴ Devotion to Sacri Monti is unique in that it is oriented towards images, raising the possibility of idolatry, and this troubling prospect seems to be signaled in the use of the term *al vivo* in the dedication by the printer Malatesta:

Pare che questo costume di far cose grandi ne monti, habbino preteso d'imitare alcuni de nostri tempi ò poco avanti, i quali sopra i monti di Varallo, e sopra Varese hanno con non minor pietà, che artificio fabricato molte Capelle, nelle quali al vivo si rappresentano i principali misteri della vita, e morte del nostro Beato Redentore.

It seems that this custom of doing great things in the mountains required some people of our own times or a little before to imitate those [things] on the Sacri Monti of Varallo and Varese. They have with no less piety than artifice fabricated many Chapels, in which they represented *al vivo* the principal mysteries of the life and death of our Blessed Redeemer.¹⁵

¹³ On Manino and the guidebook see Longo P.G., *Memorie di Gerusalemme e Sacri Monti in epoca barocca. Vincenzo Fani, devoti "misteri" e "magnanime imprese" nella sua Relatione del viaggio in Terra Santa dedicata a Carlo Emanuele I di Savoia (1615–1616)* (Crea: 2010) 80–84. Longo identifies Manino's vocation as curate of Pisogno: see Longo, *Memorie di Gerusalemme* 80 n. 78. In another section Longo claims he was also affiliated with the parish of Gozzano: see *ibidem* 155.

¹⁴ *Ibidem* 81.

¹⁵ Manino, *Descrittione* n.p.

Malatesta emphasizes the conjunction of piety and artifice at stake in representation *al vivo*. Like Ferrari and Nanni, the printer attempted to delimit the lifelike image as emphatically manmade, ‘by people of our own times or a little before’, while attributing its potential for animation toward appropriate devotional ends.

The insistence on the role of images as agents of conversion in pilgrimage suggests the problematic nature of such a claim rather than its assured outcome. As is well known, the material presence of sacred images was a problem for artists, writers and clerics after the Reformation.¹⁶ Protestant critics denounced Catholic image worship as idolatrous, forcing authorities to reconcile the agency of images with their material presence in new ways.¹⁷ During the final session of the Council of Trent (1563) – ‘On The Invocation, Veneration, And Relics, Of Saints, And On Sacred Images’ – the Council advocated the importance of sacred images at the same time as it qualified their use. Images were not venerated as literal embodiments of the divine, but only in so far as the representation of the prototype allowed the devout viewer to pay honor to the divine person depicted.¹⁸ Ultimately, Tridentine decrees did little to legislate image production and reception, leaving the question remarkably open to interpretation by local clerics and artists. The Sacro Monte of Varallo – a ‘New Jerusalem’ where indulgences could be attained through devotion to images – should be considered a vital site of experimentation and innovation in this

¹⁶ It is intriguing that the first instance of *ad vivum* in a printed source is John Calvin’s *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (1536): see Bakker, “*Au vif*” 46. This suggests that the intersection of *ad vivum* and the reform of sacred images between Protestant and Catholic discourse warrants more sustained consideration.

¹⁷ See, for example, Clark S., *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: 2007) 162–165; Eire C.M.N., *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: 1986) 43–45.

¹⁸ *The Council of Trent: The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth (London: 1848) 233–236.

regard. The proposed changes by Alessi in the *Libro dei Misteri* in the 1560s (and their implementation under Carlo Bascapè after 1593) corresponded to the post-Tridentine period of image reform. The life-sized sculptures being produced in great numbers for its chapels would certainly raise the uncertain power of images at this time. Thus, changes to the Sacro Monte after 1560 embodied the Church's ambivalent position towards representation: on the one hand, the construction of increasingly virtuosic new chapels signals an acceptance of the power of lifelike images; on the other hand, the installation of viewing screens suggests a concomitant anxiety about their animation.

One of the most substantial efforts to expand on Tridentine decrees is a well-known treatise composed by reforming archbishop of Bologna, Gabriele Paleotti (1522–1597). In the *Discorso Intorno alle Immagini Sacre e Profane* (Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images) (1582) Paleotti attempted to define and determine the appropriate creation and appreciation of images.¹⁹ In this project the term *al vivo* could describe both images that were literally made in the presence of the model and those that were created 'to the life' or in a lifelike way. Regarding the former, the archbishop mentions both botanical illustration and portraiture. In one important example, Paleotti describes a painted death mask – a type of image which, like the nature cast, is conventionally described as *al vivo*

¹⁹ Paleotti G., "Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane [1582]", in Barocchi P., *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, 3 vols. (Bari: 1960–1963), vol. II, 117–509. Paleotti's treatise has become mainstay in literature on sacred images after Trent including a recent monograph: Bianchini I., *La Politica delle Immagini nell'età della Controriforma. Gabriele Paleotti teorico e committente* (Bologna: 2008). On the ambivalent status of the image: Ganz D., "Tra Paura e Fascino: la funzione comunicative delle immagini visive del Discorso di Gabriele Paleotti," in Casey J. (ed.), *Imaging Humanity* (Lafayette, IN: 2000) 57–68. For a critical assessment of the impact of the *Discorso* and the limited success of Tridentine decrees see Noyes R.S., "Aut Numquid Post Annos Mille Quingentos Docenda Est Ecclesia Catholica Quomodo Sacrae Imagines Pingantur? Post-Tridentine Image Reform and the Myth of Gabriele Paleotti", *The Catholic Historical Review* 99, 2 (2013) 239–261.

based on the co-presence of image and model at the moment of facture.²⁰ Paleotti innovates in his description: ‘Sogliono ancor alcuni per via d’impronto dopo’ la morte formare le effigie e colorirle al vivo, o farne ancor ritratti molto al vero somiglianti.’ (‘Some artists make an imprint by means of a postmortem imprint and colour it *al vivo*, or make portraits that greatly resemble the truth [“al vero”]).²¹ Paleotti distinguishes between the physical imprint itself and the application of colour that brings it (closer) to life. In doing so, he suggests that artistic facture in the form of vivid colouring can be as effective and appropriate as a means of conveying ‘life’ as direct contact between model and image.

Paleotti also invokes *al vivo* in response to the critique of Catholic image worship in Book One, Chapter 15: ‘Con che occasione si introducessero da principio nel mondo gli idoli e simulacri’ (‘The occasion of the introduction of idols and simulacra into the world for the first time’). Denouncing idolatry as the work of the Devil, Paleotti proceeds to list the ways that men could be lured into idolatrous behaviour, including the image *al vivo*:

Altri prese con la esca della dilettazone, che naturalmente si piglia di cosa con leggiadria et artificio fatta, che ne rappresenti al vivo un’altra, apportando questa somiglianza non solo piacere, ma ancora ammirazione [...]

²⁰ On imprints of nature see Felfe, “*Naer het leven*” 184. On death masks see Sachiko Kusukawa’s contribution to this volume.

²¹ Paleotti, *Discorso* 338. English translation from Paleotti Gabriele, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, trans. W. McCuaig (Bologna: 1582; reprint Los Angeles: 2012) 205.

Yet others the Devil took with the bait of the delight we naturally derive from things made with graceful charm and artistry, that represent another *al vivo*, for the resemblance provokes not only pleasure but wonder [...]²²

Paleotti does not explicitly state whether or not this pleasure-inducing image is made through direct observation, but the sentence conveys a more general claim to being similar to life, or ‘to the life’.²³ Earthly pleasure, even when tempered by a more decorous sense of wonder towards religious images made *al vivo*, raises the problem of their ambiguous effects. As Paleotti writes immediately following this sentence: ‘[E] per questa via indusse gli uomini più rozzi e semplici a venerare le imagini come cose mandate dal cielo e che eccedessero la facultà delle forze umane [...]’ (‘In this manner he induced the crudest and simplest men to venerate images as things sent from heaven, things beyond the reach of human power [...]').²⁴ Thus, the danger of images lies in the uncertain direction of the beholder’s attention, which can confuse the layperson and their path to salvation. In another chapter in Book One, Chapter 26, ‘Dei varii effetti notabili causati dalle imagini pie e devote’ (‘On the various remarkable effects produced by pious and devout images’), Paleotti elaborates on this potential threat: ‘non è dubbio non ci essere istrumento più forte o più efficace a ciò delle imagini fatte al vivo, che quasi violentano i sensi incauti [...]’ (‘there is undoubtedly no stronger or more efficacious instrument than images made *al vivo* that almost violate the unwary senses’).²⁵ In this

²² Paleotti, *Discorso* 194; English translation from Paleotti, *Discourse* 97.

²³ William McCuaig translated *al vivo* as ‘to the life’. I have retained the original *al vivo* for the purposes of the current essay.

²⁴ Paleotti, *Discorso* 194; English translation from Paleotti, *Discourse* 97.

²⁵ Cited and translated in Göttler “The Temptation of the Senses” 401–402. Paleotti, *Discorso* 230. McCuaig translates *al vivo* as ‘life-like’ in this context: Paleotti, *Discourse* 121.

well-known passage, the archbishop evinces a conflicted and ambivalent position to images ‘fatte al vivo’: although he worries at their powerful effects, sacred images are nevertheless deemed powerful instruments of conversion.

Gabriele Paleotti’s 1582 defense of images has figured prominently in recent scholarship on sacred images after the Council of Trent, including the Sacro Monte.²⁶ For our purposes, the fact that *al vivo* is not used in guidebooks to Sacro Monte until 1611 complicates the argument that the concept of an *al vivo* image at this sacred site served solely Tridentine ends. The first guidebook to the Sacro Monte that was produced after the Council of Trent was published and possibly written by Francesco Sesalli (dates unknown). After its initial publication in 1566, Sesalli’s *Descrittione del Sacro Monte di Varallo di Valsesia* (Description of the Sacred Mountain of Varallo in Valsesia) was frequently reprinted and periodically updated to reflect the changes underway during this period of intense renovation. Although the author of the *Descrittione* celebrates the artifice and artistry used to decorate the chapels, none are described as *al vivo*. Likewise, Galeazzo Alessi’s *Libro dei Misteri* of 1565–1569 does not characterise the chapels as *al vivo*;²⁷ the architect describes the iconography of the proposed chapels but does not expand on their formal qualities in any way. The absence of the term in sixteenth-century guides to Varallo stands in striking contrast to its frequent use by Paleotti in the *Discorso* and suggests that the relationship between *al vivo* and the images at the Sacro Monte cannot be understood as direct responses to post-Tridentine reform. Of course, it is

²⁶ See n. 16 above. For example, Christine Göttler has recently argued that Paleotti’s image theory speaks to the affective power of images at Varallo after the Council of Trent: see Göttler, “The Temptation of the Senses” 402.

²⁷ Although the manuscript is not a guidebook, it was used as a guide for renovations.

possible that Paleotti's *Discorso* was a source for the authors of the seventeenth-century guidebooks. After all, the 1566 *Descrittione* was composed before the *Discorso* was written and was not substantively revised. In fact, *al vivo* is used in the first guide to be written after the publication of the *Discorso* in 1582. This assumption of influence is not entirely satisfying, however, given the questionable impact of Paleotti's text.²⁸ Thus, rather than passively reflecting post-Tridentine discourses, the seventeenth-century guides may be more convincingly understood as a response to their failure or limitations. As Ruth Noyes has recently argued, dissatisfaction with the efforts at Trent led to a boom in writings on art and images around 1600.²⁹ Following Noyes' opening, the consideration of texts outside the immediate post-Tridentine context (such as travel writing, art theory, and a later seventeenth-century guidebook and history of Varallo) will reveal the central importance of the beholder to our understanding of the terminology of *al vivo* with reference to Sacro Monte.

Animating images *al vivo* at the Sacro Monte

Artist and art theorist Federico Zuccaro (1542–1609) used the term *al vivo* to describe the chapels at the Sacro Monte in a letter written to the archbishop of Milan, Federico Borromeo (1564–1631), during his travels in northern Italy in 1604–1605.³⁰ Much like its author and his patron, the text straddles touristic, artistic, and religious interests, casting

²⁸ See Noyes, "Post-Tridentine Image Reform" 247–248.

²⁹ See *ibidem* 242–243.

³⁰ Zuccaro published a series of letters that sought to narrate his travels to diverse 'recreational' sites under the title *Il Passaggio per l'Italia* in 1608. Claretta G., *Il Pittore Federigo Zuccaro nel suo soggiorno in Piemonte e alla corte di Savoia (1604–1606) secondo il suo 'Passaggio per l'Italia'* (Turin: 1895). See Göttler, "The Temptation of the Senses" 395–396. See also Kim D., *The Travelling Artist in the Italian Renaissance: Geography, Mobility, and Style* (New Haven: 2014).

the Sacro Monte as a pleasurable sojourn with both artistic and devotional merits.³¹ It is significant that Borromeo sent the artist Zuccaro to report to him on its development, signalling the intersection of artistic and religious thought prompted by the Sacro Monte. These interests are translated into Zuccaro's account of the chapels at Varallo:

[...] et in ciascuna di dette capelle è rappresentato un misterio della Vita, Passione e Morte del nostro Signor Giesù Christo, ad imitatione di terra santa, di singular devotione per vedersi in esse rappresentate al vivo tutte le figure e misterii di rilieuo di terra cotta colorite, che vive e vere paiono.

[...] and in each of these chapels a mystery of the life, Passion, and death of our Lord Jesus Christ is represented, in imitation of the Holy Land, and with singular devotion; for one can see represented *al vivo* all the figures and mysteries in full terracotta relief and painted, so that they seem alive ['vive'] and real ['vero'].³²

When Zuccaro describes Varallo's chapels as 'represented *al vivo*', he does not refer to the artist working directly from the model. The literal co-presence of image and model is shifted to the polychromatic sculptures, producing a sense of immanent animation and presence 'so that they seem alive and real'. In this context the truth claims of the image *al vivo* take on a less directly religious inflection. Zuccaro subsumes the problematic

³¹ Zuccaro was closely connected to the reform of sacred images and devotion in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century. He was acquainted with Gabriele Paleotti and Carlo Borromeo as well as his patron, Federico Borromeo, who was instrumental in founding other Sacri Monti in the region and was a prolific art collector who composed two well-known treatises on art. On this milieu see Göttler, "The Temptation of the Senses" 393–394.

³² I use the citation and English translation found in Göttler, "The Temptation of the Senses" 444. For Zuccaro's full text (with minor differences from Göttler's) see: Cletta, *Il Pittore Federigo Zuccaro* 33;

experience of pilgrims within wider processes of artistic facture when he writes that the chapels are represented ‘with singular devotion’. Thus, this description of the Sacro Monte does not link the *al vivo* image as closely to the devotional function of the guidebooks or Paleotti’s *Discorso*. Zuccaro’s description is particularly notable for its broader epistemological suggestion that the lifelike image guarantees a claim to truth: ‘vive e vero paiono’.

Zuccaro expands on the relationship between lifelikeness and knowledge in painting in *L’Idea de’ Pittori, Scultori, ed Architetti* (The Idea of Sculptors, Painters, and Architects) (1607):

Ecco il vero, il proprio ed universale fine della pittura, cioè l’essere imitatrice della Natura e di tutte le cose artificiali, che illude e inganna gli occhi de’viventi e de’ più saputi. Inoltre esprime nei gesti, nei moti, nei movimenti della vita, nelli occhi, nella bocca, nelle mani tanto al vivo e al vero, che scuopre le passion interne [...] e insomma tutte le operazioni e effetti umani.³³

Here is the true, the right and universal end of painting, which is to be an imitator of Nature and of all the artificial things that deceive and mislead the eye of the living and of the most wise. Also [painting] expresses in the gestures, the movements of life, in the eyes, in the mouth, in the hands, so lifelike [*al vivo*] and

³³ Zuccaro Federico, *L’Idea de’ Pittori, Scultori, Architetti* (Turin: 1607; reprint, Rome, Marco Pagliarini: 1768) 100. English translation adapted from Hutson J., *Early Modern Art Theory: Visual Culture and Ideology, 1400–1700* (Hamburg: 2016) 142.

true [*al vero*], that one discovers the internal passions [...] and in short, all the human effects and operations.

Zuccaro here concerns himself most with the capacity for painting to imply, through a sense of physical animation, the ‘internal passions’ of depicted subjects as distinct from the inner movement of conversion and confirmation of faith in devout beholders. For Zuccaro *al vivo* is closely linked to the role of the artist (who mediates God’s creation) and a beholder who is looking for the possibility of the *pictorial* animation of visible ‘Nature’ and ‘artificial things’. In Chapter II of *L’Idea*, Zuccaro even more clearly links painting *al vivo* to the notion of the *Deus Artifex*:

Dunque solamente le forme esterne delle cose sensibili naturali ponno dalla pittura esser imitate: e questa può solamente quelle imitare al vivo, e vero modo. E cosi questo Mondo visibile create dal supremo facitore Iddio con tant’arte distinto, e con tanto magistero ornato è il primo, e principal nostro Disegno esterno, e questo principalmente e necessario per l’imitatione à noi Pittori.

Therefore only the outward forms of perceptible, natural things can be imitated by painting: and it can only imitate them in a lifelike [*al vivo*] and truthful way [*e vero modo*]. And so this visible World, made by the supreme Creator with such

exceptional art, and adorned with such mastery [...] is the primary and most essential object of our imitation as painters.³⁴

This account of painting focuses on the power of the artist to produce a lifelike and true imitation of the visible world, which was one of the ways that Ferrari, Nanni, and Malatesta qualified the power of the image *al vivo* at Varallo. What is different here is that the artist Zuccaro privileges visual effects and appreciation of artistic facture as a new form of proximity to God. The artist's mediating role between image and prototype could shape the truths experienced by the beholder.

An abiding concern with the effect of images *al vivo* links post-Tridentine guidebooks to Varallo's guidebooks and related art theory.³⁵ New notions of animation – images that approach the status of living beings – demanded a different kind of work from the beholder. At Varallo, the stakes of the experience would be profound for the visitors who travelled to the Sacro Monte seeking indulgences that would shorten their path to salvation, as well as for the clerics who were so concerned with the appropriate viewing of the chapels in the conversion of souls. As argued above, the ways in which early seventeenth-century guides qualified the term *al vivo* as emphatically manmade and devotionally effective suggests that the possibility of animation remained a threat. By the

³⁴ Zuccaro, *L'Idea de' Pittori* 74. English translation adapted from Weststeijn T., *The Visible World: Samuel Van Hoogstraten's Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age*, trans. B. Jackson – L. Richards (Amsterdam: 2008) 101.

³⁵ I have discussed Zuccaro because of his use of the term *al vivo*, but a related argument could be made in relation to Gian Paolo Lomazzo's use of the adjective 'vivamente' to describe the sculptures at the Sacro Monte. For an important account of this term in Lomazzo's treatise see Jacobs F., *The Living Image in Renaissance Art* (Cambridge: 2005) 19–20. As I have argued elsewhere, Lomazzo articulates the importance of the beholder's participation in the processes of animation: Benzan C., *Doubling Matters: The Place of the Image at the Sacro Monte of Varallo*, Ph.D. dissertation (UCL, University of London: 2015) 67–70.

second half of the seventeenth century, the use of *al vivo* pushed this approach even further, so that the burden of the image *al vivo* was increasingly placed on the beholder.

Published in 1671, *La Nuova Gierusalemme, o sia il Santo Sepolcro di Varallo* uses *al vivo* more frequently than Ferrari (1611), Nanni (1616) or Malatesta (1628). The deployment of the term by the author Giovanni Battista Fassola (1648–1713) also differs from the earlier guides because *al vivo* is used to describe specific chapels. Yet what is most remarkable in *La Nuova Gierusalemme* is the even stronger direction given with regards to forms of devotional experience. Fassola describes the depiction of Christ in the *Way to Calvary* (ca. 1599–1616) [Fig. 4]:

Giesù prima, che porta la Croce accompagnato dallo strepito popolare, prostrate dal peso quasi à terra [...] e nel cuore afflittissimo con gl'occhi rivoltati alli Visitanti non lascia partire alcuno se non mosso da pietà, e compassione. La Statua è tanto preziosa, ed al vivo fabricate che accompagnata insieme da divina rappresentzione move qualunque perverso.

Jesus, who carries the cross, surrounded by the din of the crowd, stooping almost to the ground under the weight [of the cross] [...] in [his] tormented heart with his eyes turned to the visitors [he] does not let anyone leave unmoved by piety and compassion. The Statue is so precious, and made *al vivo* so that together with divine representation it moves every wicked person.³⁶

³⁶ Fassola Giovanni Battista, *La Nuova Gerusalemme o sia il Santo Sepolcro di Varallo* (Milan, Federico Agnelli: 1671) 108.

Similarly to the early seventeenth-century guidebooks, but now by means of ekphrasis of a particular chapel, Fassola conjoins artistic fabrication *al vivo* with its devotional effects. Both terms of the equation are then further reinforced in the sentences that follow, in which Fassola remarks upon the important contributions of the artists of this extraordinary chapel, Tabacchetti and il Morazzone, and the great number of ex-votos and donations it inspired. In this way Fassola attributes a striking amount of agency to the sculpture of Christ in this passage; the sacred image makes a direct demand of the viewer, soliciting both piety and compassion, and its purported devotional efficacy renders the sculpture particularly precious. Yet the power of images that could approximate life is clearly redirected here when Fassola claims it can convert all those sinners who are most susceptible to its dangerous effects.

Thus, Fassola's approach to *al vivo* differs significantly from the earlier guidebooks. Ferrari and Nanni's remarks concerning the image *al vivo* remained general and brief, making no reference to specific chapels, nor specifically describing the moving effects of the *al vivo* image. These effects are the focus of the other uses of *al vivo* in *La Nuova Gierusalemme*. In his introductory section, Fassola describes a small grotto-like chapel encountered on the path that leads up from the town of Varallo Sesia to the Sacro Monte. Describing the representation of St Jerome (ca. 1617) [Fig. 5] Fassola writes: 'Viene d'indi poco sopra un'altra Capelletta, dove S. Gerolamo in una Statua Avanti un Christo al vivo move ogni concorrente' ('A little further up, you come to another small chapel,

where a sculpture of Saint Jerome in front of a Christ *al vivo* moves every participant’).³⁷ Fassola leaves some ambiguity as to whether the term *al vivo* refers to the sculptural image of St. Jerome or to the small crucifix of Christ that he venerates, which does not share the illusionistic qualities of life-size scale and polychromy. What is notable is that the author uses the term *al vivo* to encourage the viewer to take on an appropriate attitude toward the depicted scene by emulating Jerome’s meditation on a sacred image. Fassola’s text is even more unequivocal in its focus on the experience of the chapels in the entry on the *Last Supper* (ca. 1490–1779) [Fig. 6]: ‘Chi patisce debolezza di fede si raccomandì quì, che sentirassi mosso da vivo effetto verso Dio. Si fogliono intercedere grazie per gl’ostinati peccatori’ (‘Who is weak in faith is advised to come here, to feel moved by lifelike effect [‘da vivo effetto’] towards God. They wish to intercede for blessings for the obstinate sinners’).³⁸ Once again, Fassola attributes a remarkable amount of agency to the chapel decoration, yet the change from *al vivo* to ‘da vivo effetto’ markedly shifts the emphasis from the images’ resemblance to the life to their effects of animation as perceived by the beholder.

The disparate character of these three chapels suggests that the terminology of *al vivo* does not here refer exclusively to any generally acknowledged visual quality, such as ‘realism’ or ‘illusionism’. Although all three chapels contain life-size polychromatic sculpture, so too do the other chapels at the Sacro Monte, and yet only these three chapels are described as *al vivo* or *da vivo effetto* by Fassola. The formal differences between these chapels are marked: in the vast *Way to Calvary*, over forty bodies in action

³⁷ Fassola, *La Nuova Gierusalemme* 78. It is notable that Nanni’s guide mentions the same grotto in the introductory section on the origins of the Sacro Monte but does not use the term *al vivo*.

³⁸ Fassola, *La Nuova Gierusalemme* 95.

dramatize the cacophonous procession to Golgotha, as opposed to the solitary figure of Jerome who kneels in an introspective moment of meditation within the natural landscape, or the static and stoic Christ who lifts his hand in prescient anticipation of his betrayal by Judas (an early sculpture in wood rather than terracotta from ca. 1490). Yet in different ways, these chapels are all concerned with the visitor's role at this pilgrimage site: the *Way to Calvary* calls up the embodied labour of pilgrimage through its depiction of the procession to Golgotha and its connection to the *Via Crucis*; the small chapel dedicated to St Jerome prompts the pilgrim to relate their own immanent visit to the Sacro Monte to the ascetic practice of devotion; the *Last Supper* dramatizes a moment where the betrayal of Christ by Judas calls up the problem of sin for the penitential pilgrim. Ultimately *al vivo* and *da vivo effetto* are not descriptors of any fixed visual quality of the image as much as invocations of the beholder's share in that image. Fassola pulls out what remains implicit in earlier uses of the terminology, demanding that the animation of the life-like image come from the viewer who desires to guarantee their own salvation.

At a pilgrimage site focused on life-size, polychromatic sculpture, it is not surprising that the terminology of *al vivo* emerges in textual descriptions of the Sacro Monte of Varallo. As this essay has argued, the emergence of *al vivo* in seventeenth-century guidebooks to this unique pilgrimage site sought to negotiate the issue of animation at a time when the truth-claims of sacred images were the subject of considerable debate. Yet *al vivo* does not passively describe the illusionistic verisimilitude in its narrative chapels. Rather, the term constructs a new attitude toward these images and negotiates the troubling prospect

of their animation. *Al vivo* attempts to define and delimit the potential of the image to approximate life for the pilgrim; it is deployed to remind the reader that the animation of the image depends on their own imaginative capacity as beholders to make it come ‘to life’.

Selective Bibliography

The Council of Trent: The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth (London: 1848).

Bakker B., “*Au vif – naar ’t leven – ad vivum: The Medieval Origin of a Humanist Concept*”, in Boschloo A.W.A. et al. (eds.), *Aemulatio: Imitation, Emulation and Invention in Netherlandish Art from 1500 to 1800: Essays in Honor of Erik Jan Sluijter* (Zwolle: 2011) 37–52.

Battaglia S., *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* vol. XXI (Torino: 2009).

Bianchini I., *La Politica delle Immagini nell’età della Controriforma. Gabriele Paleotti teorico e committente* (Bologna: 2008).

Claretta G., *Il Pittore Federigo Zuccaro nel suo soggiorno in Piemonte e alla corte di Savoia (1604–1606) secondo il suo ‘Passaggio per l’Italia’* (Turin: 1895).

Fassola Giovanni Battista, *La Nuova Gerusalemme o sia il Santo Sepolcro di Varallo* (Milan, Federico Agnelli: 1671).

Felfe R., “*Naer het leven. Eine sprachliche Formel zwischen bildgenerierenden Übertragungsvorgängen und ästhetischer Vermittlung*”, in Fritzsche C. – Leonhard K. – Weber G.J.M. (eds.), *Ad Fontes! Niederländische Kunst des 17. Jahrhunderts in Quellen* (Petersberg: 2012) 165–195.

Ferrari Giovanni Giacomo, *Brevi Considerationi sopra i misteri del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (Varallo, Pietro Revelli: 1611).

Göttler C., “The Temptation of the Senses at the Sacro Monte of Varallo”, in de Boer W. – Göttler C. (eds.), *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden – Boston: 2013) 393–451.

Hutson J., *Early Modern Art Theory: Visual Culture and Ideology, 1400–1700* (Hamburg: 2016).

Jacobs F., *The Living Image in Renaissance Art* (Cambridge: 2005).

Longo P.G. – Zardin D., *I Sacri Monti: Bibliografia Italiana* (Ponzano Monferrato: 2010).

Longo P.G., *Memorie di Gerusalemme e Sacri Monti in epoca barocca. Vincenzo Fani, devoti “misteri” e “magnanime imprese” nella sua Relatione del viaggio in Terra Santa dedicata a Carlo Emanuele I di Savoia (1615–1616)* (Crea: 2010).

Manino Bartolomeo, *Descrittione de Sacri Monti di San Carlo d’Arona, di San Francesco d’Horta, sopra Varese e di Varallo* (Milan, Carlo Antonio Malatesta: 1628).

Nanni Tommaso, *Dialogo sopra i misteri del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (Varallo, Pietro Ravelli: 1616).

Noyes R.S., “Aut Numquid Post Annos Mille Quingentos Docenda Est Ecclesia Catholica Quomodo Sacrae Imagines Pingantur? Post-Tridentine Image Reform and the Myth of Gabriele Paleotti”, *The Catholic Historical Review* 99, 2 (2013) 239–261.

Paleotti G., “Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane [1582]”, in Barocchi P., *Trattati d’arte del Cinquecento*, 3 vols. (Bari: 1960–1963), vol. II, 117–509.

- Paleotti Gabriele, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, trans. W. McCuaig (Bologna: 1582; reprint Los Angeles: 2012).
- Sassu G., “Sull’affidabilità dell’osservatore al vivo”, in Pigozzi M. (ed.), *Bologna al tempo di Cavazzoni: Approfondimenti* (Bologna: 1999) 45–110;
- [Sesalli Francesco] *Descrittione del Sacro Monte di Varallo di Valsesia* (Novara: 1566).
- Swan C., “*Ad vivum, naer het leven*, from the life: Defining a Mode of Representation”, *Word & Image* 11, 4 (1995) 353–372.
- Weststeijn T., *The Visible World: Samuel Van Hoogstraten’s Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age*, trans. B. Jackson – L. Richards (Amsterdam: 2008).
- Wilson B., “Visual Knowledge/Facing Blindness”, in Leibsohn D. – Favrot J. (eds.), *Seeing Across Cultures in the Early Modern World* (Farnham – Burlington: 2012) 97–123.
- Zierholz S. “‘To Make Yourself Present’: Jesuit Sacred Space as Energetic Space”, in de Boer W. – Enenkel K. – Melion W. (eds.), *Jesuit Image Theory* (Leiden – Boston: 2016) 419–460.
- Zuccaro Federico, *L’Idea de’ Pittori, Scultori, Architetti* (Turin: 1607; reprint, Rome, Marco Pagliarini: 1768).

Index Nominum

Alessi, Galezzo

Bascapè, Carlo

Borromeo, Carlo

Borromeo, Federico

Caimi, Bernardino

Fassola, Giovanni Battista

Manino, Bartolomeo

Nanni, Tommaso

Paleotti, Gabriele

Zuccaro, Federico