

# Central Perspective in Catholic Churches and on Stage in Europe between the 15th and 17th Centuries<sup>1</sup>

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## 1.

The early 15th century produced the first painting in history to use geometric perspective. The fresco (circa 1425) of Masaccio (1401–1428), one of the leading painters of the Italian Renaissance, can be seen on the wall of the Church of Santa Maria Novella. It was based on a traditional image called “*Gnadenstuhl* (Throne of Grace),” depicting the Holy Trinity. Many art historians<sup>2</sup> have pointed out that this fresco belongs to the genealogy of so-called “visionary art,” and according to George Bent, the Holy Trinity, together with the Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist, who also appear in the alcove, is nothing but a “vision” of the two kneeling and praying donors depicted in both lower corners of the fresco:

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- 1 Part of this paper is an English translation of my previously published paper (Ishida 2019).
  - 2 Paul Barolsky is one of the first to be considered an art historian. He stated, “[A]lthough the general tendency of Italian Renaissance art is toward the imitation of nature, the religious art of the period is primarily visionary [...]. This art illustrates or embodies visions, whether of images of saints gazing heavenward in ecstasy or heavenly buildings of remarkable luminosity and geometric perfection; it also encourages the worshiper to enter the spirit of the very vision that he beholds in illusion” (Barolsky 1995: 174). He deems the so-called “naturalism” of religious art since the mid-13th century as “a means by which the artist can bring the viewer into an immediate relationship with the supernatural or the sacred” and refers to Masaccio’s fresco of the *Holy Trinity* as “a work which in the naturalistic power never ceases to hold us in thrall,” as an example of such “visionary art” (Barolsky 1997: 57, 62).

Their [the two kneeling donors'] inability to fix their gazes on the figures behind them suggests that the holy entourage is but a figment of their imagination, mystically produced because of proper devotional behavior. They enjoy a visionary experience invoked through prayer, which has in turn allowed them to imagine the broken body of the Savior. And we, in turn, have been granted access to their vision through the power of Masaccio's extraordinarily naturalistic rendering of it, as though the artist has informed us that if we adopt their pose and replicate their mental states, we too may experience this personal mystical revelation (Bent 2016: 274).

Masaccio created the impression by drawing a space with a vault ceiling strictly in accordance with the rules of geometric perspective in a semicircular arch painted on the wall so that, as Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) said in the second edition of the *Lives* in 1567, “the wall appears to be pierced (*che pare che sia bucato quel muro*)” (Vasari 1966: III, 127). To see the space opened in the wall, it would simply not be enough to stand in front of the fresco; rather, beholders must also piously take an appropriate perspective, only from which can they see an alcove in the wall in which the Virgin and St. John will appear, pointing with hand or gaze to the Father supporting the cross from behind, the Son on the cross, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a white dove spreading its wings. Indeed, according to Paul Barolsky, it is exactly this “pictorial ‘vision’ of the Trinity” that “all who beheld the fresco were intended to experience”:

We dwell on the perspective, modeling, and sculptural relief of the fresco, but to what end are these elements of art articulated? We are so overwhelmed by Masaccio's naturalism, and understandably so, that we rarely draw the obvious conclusion from a scrutiny of his fresco's eternal mystery that, in rendering the illusion of the presence of such a mystery, the painter's naturalism brings to the worshiper's mundane eyes an elevated, transcendental subject, which he thus sees as in a vision. Masaccio's naturalism serves his visionary purpose of affording the viewer an initial stage in the vision of the mystery of the trinity as if beheld in the church itself. (Barolsky 1997: 63)

In the mysticism of the late Middle Ages, devotions emphasizing visionary experiences in meditation and contemplation held a certain position. A manuscript of a treatise for nuns, *Livres de l'estat de l'ame* (*Books on the States of the Soul*), produced at the end of the 13th century, has a miniature illustrating such devotional work in four scenes. The first scene shows a nun confessing

to a monk and a speech scroll held by an angel says, “If you want to erase your sins, say, ‘Have mercy’” (*Si uis delere tua crimina dic miserere*). In the second scene, the nun is praying in front of the statue of the *Coronation of the Virgin*. In the third, a vision of Christ emerges from a circle of clouds, telling the prostrating nun, “See how much I bore for the life of the people!” (*pro vita populi respice quanta tuli*). In the final scene, the vision of the Holy Trinity appears in the circle of clouds, and the speech scroll says, “The Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, these three are one” (*Pater uerbum spiritus sanctus hii tres unum sunt*)—so the mystery of the Holy Trinity is revealed to the nun kneeling and staring at the vision. (Brantley 2007: 325; Belting 2011: 459–60; Falque 2019: 203–204)

This last stage, at which mystical devotions aim, is nothing less than what Masaccio painted on the wall of the Church of Santa Maria Novella. Just as the nun saw the vision of the Holy Trinity in the last scene of the miniature, the two donors see it in Masaccio’s fresco. Furthermore, this fresco, by using perspective, enables the vision that the donors in the painting are having to also be seen by the eyes of those who pray in front of the fresco. In other words, perspective was a technique to make those who gazed piously on religious paintings artificially experience visions that revealed the mysteries of the Christian faith to them.

## 2.

While the visionary experience had gained some position in the mystical devotions of the Middle Ages, according to art historian Kikuro Miyashita it was often perceived as dangerous by church authorities, and more than a few alleged seers of visions were executed for the sin of heresy. This was because visionary experiences established a direct relationship between an individual and God without church mediation. In the 16th century, the process of personalization and internalization of faith had already gone so far as to be undeniable, prompting the Catholic Church to treat it as a way to oppose the biblicism of the Protestant Church. Hence, the visionary experiences of saints such as St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Teresa of Avila, who led the Catholic Reformation, were actively proclaimed as “hallmarks of the saints” and were painted in many pictures (Miyashita 2004: 119–120). For example, St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, while praying at a chapel in the village of La Storta on his way to Rome, experienced a vision of God the Father and Christ holding

the cross, and he heard Christ saying, “My desire is that you will be my servant,” with the Father saying, “I shall be propitious to you in Rome.” According to William Bangert,

This vision left Ignatius with an increased desire that his little band be known as the Society of Jesus and with a deeper confidence in God’s protection regardless of what Rome might have in store for them (Bangert 1972: 19).

This visionary experience was handed down as the founding myth of the Jesuits, and many painters portrayed saints kneeling and praying, looking at the vision of the Father and Christ.

The saints wrote down their visionary experiences in their diaries and letters, which made their way into the saints’ respective biographies, but of course, none could share or experience for him- or herself such personal and internal occurrences as visions—at any rate, by means of narratives; even if visualized in a painting, the vision could never be experienced by viewers as their own, so long as it was depicted beside or above the saint who saw it, as is the case in many visionary paintings of early modern times.

However, in the 17th century, as the ceilings of churches were increasingly adorned with frescoes in perspective, those who looked upward in churches came to experience the saints’ vision themselves (Miyashita 2004: 120–121). For example, if one stands at a point marked with yellow marble on the floor in the nave of the Church of Sant’Ignazio in Rome and look up, they will see that the church’s real walls and pillars do not end where they reach the ceiling but continue further into the open sky that was filled with angels and various anthropomorphic figures. Then, at the vanishing point just above the position of the viewer, St. Ignatius’ vision at La Storta—the Father and Christ holding the cross—emerges as an image of the Holy Trinity, with a dove representing the Holy Spirit. In addition, St. Ignatius, who should be seeing this vision, also enters the vision itself, spreading his hands toward Christ, floating in the heavens, and catching the light emitted from Christ on his chest (Miyashita 2004: 121). From there, the light is reflected in all directions and reaches Europe, Asia, Africa, and America (Bangert 1972: 190; Japanese translation: upper, 365–366). E. H. Gombrich writes of this magnificent ceiling fresco, created by painter and architect Andrea Pozzo (1642–1709), a Jesuit lay brother:

To call such a composition, with all its attendant symbolic beings and signs, illusionistic seems to me again to be straining the meaning of the word; but we may call it an evocation which turns us into visionary eyewitnesses of

that mystery which the Church desires to convey to the faithful (Gombrich 1999: 43).

This “mystery,” which is no less than the one that St. Ignatius was called by Christ at La Storta to spread to the whole world, emerges in the eyes of the faithful viewers of the ceiling fresco as the rays emitted from Christ, reflecting off the chest of St. Ignatius and radiated in all directions, so that the viewers literally become “visionary eyewitnesses of that mystery.”

The ceiling frescoes adorning the interiors of Catholic churches are often viewed as the opposite of the internalized spirituality of the Protestant faith. However, it is not just a superficial decoration but rather, as Gombrich says, “an evocation which turns us into visionary eyewitnesses of that mystery which the Church desires to convey to the faithful,” so the mysteries and miracles can be experienced in an internalized way called “a vision.” In this regard, the following passage, described by Erwin Panofsky in the last paragraph of *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, is suggestive:

Perspective...pens it [religious art] to something entirely new, the realm of the visionary, where the miraculous becomes a direct experience of the beholder, in that the supernatural events in a sense erupt into his own, apparently natural, visual space and so permit him really to “internalize” their supernaturalness (Panofsky 1991: 72).

Miracles were once thought to take place in the public eye, with eyewitnesses, but since the 16th century, as religion became more and more individualized and internalized, miracles became an internal phenomenon that can be experienced in such personal ways as visions. In such an era, perspective was a means of opening “the realm of the visionary” where the miracles could be, as Panovsky says, “a direct experience of the beholder,” which was opened not simply to a chosen few such as saints, but also to all faithful people.

### 3.

Today, however, anyone who steps into Pozzo's church should have the following doubts, as expressed by French writer Dominique Fernandez in his book *Le Banquet des Anges* (*The Feast of Angels*):

As we go deep into the church, we may even ask ourselves: are we really in the church? Wasn't it rather to a theater that Pozzo invited us?...Would the

Catholic religion be just an illusion? Wouldn't the altar on which the divine sacrifice is performed have more consistency than an opera set? (Fernandez 1984: 77–80).

In the late 17th century, during Pozzo's time, as Fernandez put it, "Opera, a play of mirrors of all illusions, has definitively established itself as the first of the arts" (Fernandez 1984: 83). By Pozzo's birth in 1642, several public theaters had already stood in Venice, and the era of the public opera house had begun. In particular, the perspective stage of the Novissimo Theater was completed by Giacomo Torelli in 1641 and was used to instantaneously change the scenes, earning a great reputation (Visentin 2019: 391–392). Not surprisingly, on a stage where opera was performed, perspective was not intended to give the viewer a glimpse of the mystery of the church, but rather to create what Corneille called "*illusion comique* (theatrical illusion)." This being so, we cannot help supposing that Pozzo, who lived in such an era, looked at the interior of the cathedral he worked on and doubted himself, asking, "Would the Catholic religion be just an illusion?"

These suspicions deepen as Pozzo refers to his scenery or settings with which he decorated the high altar of churches during the Forty Hours' Devotion service with the term *theatrum* in his own book, *Perspectiva Pictorum et Architectorum* (Rome 1693–1702). Because it was a temporary setting that was removed at the end of the ceremony, no genuine example of it can be seen today. However, Pozzo's book includes ground plans, single-view drawings, and perspective drawings of such settings, the most famous example of which was one made for the ceremony at the Gesù Church in Rome in 1685. According to Pozzo's own commentary, this setting was perspectively constructed to visualize Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding feast in the town of Cana in Galilee. It is noteworthy that Pozzo calls it "*Theatrum repraesentans nuptias Cana Galileae* (*theatrum* that represents the wedding at Cana in Galilee)" (Pozzo 1706: Fig. 71) and that he also writes: "*Theatris quae jam delineavimus affinia sunt theatra scenica*" (the *Theatra*, which have been illustrated so far, is similar to theatrical *theatra*) (Pozzo 1706: Fig. 72). "*Theatris quae jam delineavimus affinia*" refers to the perspective settings that Pozzo created for church ceremonies, including the one in 1685, whereas "*theatra scenica*" means stages for theater performance as we know them today. In other words, Pozzo points out similarities between settings for altar decoration and those for theater stages, and some illustrations in his book showing the mechanism of his

altar decoration clearly show that it is a double of the stage settings that were designed and constructed for baroque theaters.

*Fig. 1: Theatrum sacrum (Fig. 71) erected in 1685 in the Jesuit church in Rome and representing the Marriage at Cana in Pozzo's Perspectivo Pictorum et Architectorum, Rome, 1693–1702*



If so, it must be said that Fernandez's statement that Pozzo "turned the church's most sacred place into a theater" (Fernandez 1984: 80; 70) would be justified. It should be noted, however, that Pozzo does not claim that his settings for altar decoration are similar to those for the theater stage, but rather that the latter are similar to the former, and that the term "*theatrum*" did not necessarily imply facilities for theater performances in the 17th century (Fischer-Lichte 1997: 12). In the classical Roman era, the term certainly indicated a building with an area where actors perform and a semicircular auditorium, but since the Middle Ages, such buildings have fallen into ruins and been forgotten and, as a result, "*theatrum*" has lost its classical meaning and been used instead in its broadest sense as simply a "place for seeing" (Marshall 1950: 382). The classical meaning of the word was revived in the *Ten Books on Architecture (De Architectura)*, written by ancient Roman architect Vitruvius (ca. 40 BC), "rediscovered" ca. 1414 CE, first edited by Giovanni Sulpicio of Veroli, and probably published in Rome in 1486. Its first illustrated edition edited by Fra Giocondo was published in Venice in 1511. However, as we can see from the term "*theatrum anatomicum*," which meant a hall used for anatomical lectures and demonstrations, the term "*theatrum*" was not limited to facilities for theatrical or dramatic performance but also had a more general meaning of "place for seeing," and its meaning was restricted only by adding adjectives (Anderson 1991: 7). Pozzo's use of "*theatrum*" in this broad sense can also be seen from the fact that he refers to the stage setting for theater performance with such compound terms as "*theatrum scenicum*" ("*scenicum*" means "theatrical" or "belonging to the stage") or "*theatrum comicum*" (Pozzo 1706: Fig. 72, Pozzo 1719: Figs. 37, xx), whereas he calls his altar decoration for church ceremonies "*theatrum sacrum*" (Pozzo 1719: Fig. 45). For him, the former is not at all the original meaning of the word "theatrum"; it is just one example of it. It would be no surprise, then, that Pozzo used the term "theatrum" to describe his scenery for altar decoration in church. His use of this term is not a metaphorical one that compares an altar to a theater. Rather, "*theatrum sacrum*" is a "place for seeing" the mysteries and miracles of God, and in this literal sense, it was worthy of being called a *theatrum*.

On the other hand, probably from the late 17th century, the visual space created by perspective underwent a significant change in its cultural connotation. With the rise of opera in the mid-17th century and the spread of perspective stage settings in public theaters, perspective itself became increasingly suggestive of theatrical illusionism, which was mainly aimed to provide spectators with visual amusement and distraction, and along with it, even

churches' ceiling and walls that were painted in perspective came to be perceived as being similar to a backdrop for theater performances, and consequently perspective lost religious significance. It was just this new perception that was, and is still today, repeatedly articulated by many critics and writers such as Fernandez. At the end of the 17th century, however, the faithful Jesuit lay brother Pozzo seems apparently to have been not seriously aware of this change yet, otherwise he could not so innocently have designed "*theatrum sacrum*" for church ceremonies on one hand, "*theatrum scenicum*" or "*theatrum comicum*" for such performances as "Jesuit school theater" on the other hand.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the interior space of churches did not abruptly cease to be decorated with perspective frescoes; even in the so-called Rococo era, the ceilings of many churches were, as formerly, adorned with such paintings, and even in the second half of the 18th century, the practice of decorating altars with perspective scenery for the Sunday of the Resurrection continued not only in the city's cathedrals but also in small churches and monasteries in rural areas such as Silesia and the Tyrol region. However, in 1782, such altar decorations for church ceremonies were banned by Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II (1741–1790) (Grass 1957; Töpler 1998). They were, in the eyes of the enlightened despot of the 18th century, no longer what Gombrich calls "an evocation which turns us into visionary eyewitnesses of that mystery which the Church desires to convey to the faithful," but rather theater settings that can only create empty illusions. This means that the curtain of the Baroque age has been closed, and that imaginary space that Panofsky calls the "realm of the visionary" has also been completely closed against "religious art." If this "realm" once opened by perspective was the last space where "the miraculous" could—albeit only

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3 Cp. Kemp 1987: 263. "Pozzo's use of illusion can be aligned with a range of images which use perspective and related optical techniques as a form of natural magic to evoke awe in the spectator. [...] A series of optical curiosities, including the magic lantern, came to serve the dual ends of entertainment and spiritual expression. The great German Jesuit philosopher in Rome around the middle of the century, Athanasius Kircher, perfectly expresses the extraordinary compound of scientific acumen, natural magic, astrological mysticism, Neoplatonic rapture and Cristian fervour which lies behind the ambitions of Pozzo and his patrons. It was in this context that sacred art could become a form of theater, expressing through illusion those spiritual truths whose presence on earth was manifested only through elusive reflections and shadows. Pozzo's placing of illusion in the service of mystical ends should not be taken to imply that he regarded the optical means as anything other than a wholly rational system which corresponded in a direct way to the physical-cum-mathematical basis of vision."

in completely “internalized” ways—be experienced, then after the complete closure of this space it is only natural that “the Life of Jesus” without mysteries and miracles would be told openly by such 19th-century writers as David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) and Ernest Renan (1823–1892).

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