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Gray eminence

by Marco Grassi

More than fifty years after his death, Roberto Longhi is still remembered as one of the greatest and most influential art historians to have practiced that discipline. Although neither generous nor benevolent as a mentor, he nonetheless inspired generations of students through his incandescent lectures at the University of Florence and especially through his equally scintillating publications. In 1950, Longhi created the perfect vehicle for his torrent of critical opinions and scholarly insights, all based on exhaustive research and sheer inspiration. He called his bi-monthly periodical *Paragone Arte*. It alternated with a sister publication dedicated to literature, *Paragone Letteratura*, which was run by his wife, Anna Banti, a writer of middling accomplishment.

In mere literal translation, the Italian word *paragone* means “comparison,” but as it applies to art it represents a philosophical construct with roots in classical dialectics. It is expressed most famously in Horace’s phrase *ut pictura poesis* (“as is painting, so is poetry”), pointing to how the two forms of artistic expression mirror and complement one other. The early Renaissance Florentine polymath Leon Battista Alberti retrieved the concept in his seminal *De pictura*, broadening it to include sculpture. Thereafter, the *paragone* became firmly established in European thinking, echoing through the later writings of Leonardo, Vasari, and Benedetto Varchi, down to the Enlightenment critic Gotthold Lessing.

Roberto Longhi would have greatly enjoyed visiting this recent exhibition at the compact, elegant Nicholas Hall gallery.¹ With the intriguing title “Grey Matters,” the show comprises twenty-three items in various media: Limoges enamel, sculpture, drawing, and painting (on canvas, panel, and glass). The *paragone* we are asked to contemplate here is the one evinced by the dichotomy of painting and sculpture, referred to by Alberti when he squarely judged painting as superior: painting is able to depict and imitate sculpture, in contrast to the impossibility of the reverse. Giotto, in an early dramatic demonstration of such imitation from 1310, decorated the entire lower register of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua with fictive marble “sculptures” representing the Virtues and Vices.



Pontormo, Apollo and Cupid, 1513, Oil on canvas, Nicholas Hall.

The representation of white marble in painting is normally achieved with the technique of *grisaille* —the French etymology here being from *gris* (gray). It is an elegant strategy that makes use of a very limited range of hues within the black/white register, with occasional polychromatic reflections. One of the most sublime examples of the technique is the pair of *Annunciation* panels by Jan van Eyck, now housed in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid. The two “sculptures” stand in fictive architectural niches, their reflection subtly hinted against the polished black basalt backgrounds; a tour de force on a scale no larger than fifteen by nine inches. Had Alberti seen these two treasures, he would have considered them a perfect corroboration of his thesis.



Installation view, "Grey Matters," at Nicholas Hall.

"Grey Matters" greets the visitor with a mild surprise: three first-rate examples of sixteenth-century Limoges enamelware, their sparkling figural decoration in a counterpoint of white, blue, and gold, though *grisaille* nonetheless. Slightly more conventional but of greater significance artistically are three oil-on-canvas paintings with simple, uncluttered compositions. They are rare specimens of ephemeral, Renaissance *arte povera*: decorations that were originally part of elaborate floats, or *carri*, which were drawn through the city on festive occasions, such as for the triumphal re-entry of Pope Leo X (Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici) to his native city in 1516. The artist is Pontormo (Jacopo Carucci), and one of the three paintings is notable as being a recent addition to

the artist's canon.



Pontormo, Portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici, ca. 1537, Oil on panel, Nicholas Hall.

Somewhat off-theme, but of greater consequence, are two three-quarter length male portraits: one by the master (Pontormo), the other by his pupil (Bronzino). The sense of gravitas they exude mirrors the deadly serious debates that were roiling the political and religious waters in the years straddling the Reformation. Pontormo's sitter, Cosimo de' Medici, was later installed in 1537 by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V as the Grand Duke of Tuscany, initiating a Florentine dynasty that would last into the eighteenth century. Cosimo created Europe's first centralized, administrative state—a model perfected a century later by Cardinal Richelieu in the absolutist

monarchy of Louis xiii of France and his successors.

No visit to the Florentine sixteenth century would be complete without a pause at Giorgio Vasari's studio. He was the ultimate art insider and *macher* in the Florence of Cosimo I. An indefatigable writer, administrator, and teacher, he still found the time to cover, with febrile energy, thousands of square feet of Florentine walls and panels. Conceptual niceties such as the *paragone* were less important to him than *Disegno* (drawing). He emphatically wrote the word with a capital D, because *Disegno* was, in his scheme of things, the foundational principle of visual art. Not surprisingly, he went on to codify and promulgate his theories when he initiated the "Accademia del Disegno" in 1563. The academy's founding signaled that artists were no longer humble artisans beholden to their guild, but academically trained professionals—a goodly notch higher on the social ladder. Again, as with the centralized administrative state, Florence provided the model for the French monarchy's own *Académie*, an institution that survived into the nineteenth century and became the sworn antagonist of Impressionism. Unfortunately, Vasari is here represented by a largeish, unremarkable sheet that bears little trace of the artist's usual vigor and creative energy.

Every exhibition should have at least one item with which, ideally, the visitor would like to abscond. "Grey Matters" is no exception, and, were there no consequences, the splendid *Deposition* sheet by Baccio Bandinelli would have been firmly secreted in this writer's pocket. Bandinelli was a would-be Michelangelo and is chiefly remembered for a gigantic marble *Hercules and Cacus* still situated squarely in front of Florence's municipal palace (the Palazzo Vecchio), where it was placed in 1534. Meant to remind the unruly citizenry that the Medici were now returned to power after their brief expulsion, the statue has remained the butt of irreverent jokes and criticism ever since its installation. Not only did it contrast with the nearby *David*, a symbol of the "free" and "republican" city, but Florentines were quick to note the artistic disparity between Michelangelo heroically carving *away* the marble to free the figure, allowing it to emerge from the block as one integral form, and Bandinelli *adding* as many as twenty separate pieces, as if he were molding clay. If this was seen as timid in the statue, there is not a tremulous line in the drawing. Its teeming figures, arrayed obliquely towards the viewer, are hewn with forceful strokes that heighten the drama of the narrative. The drawing is a rare and precious specimen of Cinquecento art.

The *Paragone* periodicals struggle on but are still being published, a rare survival in an art world ever more averse to comparative discipline, connoisseurship, and research. Unfortunately, galleries of Old Master art are similarly threatened. Luckily, Nicholas Hall, though the only remaining active gallery in New York for European Old Master paintings and drawings, is flourishing. Although there are still a handful of "private" dealers, Nicholas Hall distinguishes itself as a walk-in gallery with a selection of works always on view. Over the past few years, the gallery has mounted a number of interesting and provocative shows, of which "Grey Matters" is only the most recent. The exhibitions are documented by scholarly catalogues, always replete with information specific to the items on view as well as more wide-ranging articles that would fit comfortably in the pages of publications such as *Paragone* or *The Burlington Magazine*. Professor Dennis V. Geronimus, Chair of nyu's Department of Art History, is the author of several essays that accompany this exhibition. Together, these essays trace the concept, origin, and development

of the *grisaille* technique and constitute a veritable monograph on the subject.

1. "Grey Matters" is on view at Nicholas Hall, New York, from January 25 through March 27, 2021.

Marco Grassi is a private paintings conservator and dealer in New York and the author of *In the Kitchen of Art*, forthcoming in April from Criterion Books.