The Architecture of the Underworld

15th-century Pictorial Rocks in a Field of Conflict between Middle Ages, Modernity and Renaissance

Introduction

AS THE CONCLUDING operation in my survey of the early modern landscape image, I shall look down into the depths, towards the rock-solid subsurface and its eruptions into the light through the earth's surface layer of soil and grass. If anything, the rock masses appear as zones of conflict for the cultural tensions of the 15th-16th century, a virtual epicentre, in which the collisions between the three continental plates of fading Middle Ages, emerging modernity and regressive Renaissance would seem to have left clear and often paradoxical scars in the geology of the stone formations. For even though the key trend of the modern paradigm confronts the absolute rule of the rocks in pre-modern painting – eroding them, covering them with plains, displacing them to distant horizons – the rocks also offer a notable resistance. As Kenneth Clark observes of the 15th-century successors to the Byzantine and Gothic "irrational" mountains:

> When, later in the century, they appear in more classical designs, they have obviously been left over from another style. They shoot up surprisingly out of the flat, prosaic landscapes of Patenier; and Breughel, that master of natural observation, puts into the background of his *St. John Preaching*, a rock as crazily improbable as any in a Byzantine mosaic, but modelled with an air of truth [...]. It is one of the last survivors of the landscape of symbols.[1]

But if the rocks really are the last representatives of a "landscape of symbols", it must also be possible to attribute them significance beyond Clark's more stylistically-qualified label "crazily improbable". Despite the hitherto unseen visual features elicited from the stony masses by the new naturalism, this significance is at least

partially made up of the subterranean chaos we met in the post-Egyptian pre-modern images (cf. chapter 2). Paradoxically, naturalism re-exposes the chthonic forces in the broadest sense, not merely the dynamic, catastrophic and growth forces, but also the potential of design inherent in *prima materia*, the chaotic substance at the bottom of the world hierarchy.

If we enlarge upon Clark's 16th-century Northern examples by means of material from the late Italian 15th century, however, it becomes clear that the pictorial rocks not only repeat a medieval tradition, but also go beyond it – into the zone of tension between modernity and resuscitated antiquity, or to use terms from my analytical viewpoint of middle distance: between the work-influenced nature of the Iron Age paradigm and the demonstratively work-free nature of the Golden Age paradigm. Numerous rocks in the Italian Quattrocento images would thus seem to represent a form of primeval architecture, rudimentary monuments halfway between nature and culture. In Mantegna's *Agony in the Garden* (c. 1460), for example, one of the rocks is twisted spirally like a Tower of Babel, while an adjacent rock has markedly cubic blocks as if it had been hewn with an enormous chisel (FIG. 11.42). And in an extreme case such as the background of the *Saint Peter* panel from Francesco del Cossa's *Griffoni Polyptych* (c. 1473-75), a rock sprouting from a partially ruined arcade looks like a variety of growing crystal (FIG. 12.4A). As we can already see from this example, the artificiality is typically clad in such ambiguous visual information that we promptly feel ourselves entangled in a speculative riddle as to the actual origin of these stone formations. As Lauro Martines, one of the surprisingly few scholars to have commented on this phenomenon at all, writes:

> [...] one of the most salient and persistent motifs of Italian painting in the second half of the fifteenth century [is] the imagery of strange rock formations – architectonic, fantastic, lovingly delineated. [...] Again and again we find on close scrutiny that we cannot tell whether the oddly mannered constructions are natural geological formations or the ruins of ancient structures and urban sites. The guiding vision is intensely urban, the forms often resembling or suggesting bits of city.[2]

Martines thus feels caught between two explanatory regimes: an internal, in which the architectonic aspect derives from the rock itself; and an external, where it is due to humankind's purposive shaping succeeded by the blind ruination wreaked by time. Although these two explanatory regimes, architectonic rock and ruin, incorporate conflicting arrows of genesis – pointing to, respectively, nature in transformation into architecture and architecture in the process of being returned to the embrace of nature – their visual appearance, then, is almost interchangeable. As if Martines' complexity were not enough, the spectrum of possible origins can

actually be expanded with three more: are the rocks' elaborate surfaces the vestiges of quarrying or mining; are they part of a planned landscape design; or are they perhaps simply the result of the beholder's imagination?

An analysis of this ambiguity and its fractures will benefit from the application of my sociological developmental framework, the evolution going from Golden Age to Iron Age paradigm, and an investigation of the position of the rocks herein. In the Golden Age myth, the rock masses represent, after all, the final frontier of the ages of the world, the domain where the Iron Age invades Mother Earth and cuts away forbidden minerals for the purposes of technology and art (cf. chapter 4). When the rocks in 15th-century painting partially exhibit signs of architectural forms, which seem to exist latently in the stone, do they thus appear as a last bastion against the Iron Age – i.e. as a Golden-Age-like nature that creates art autochthonically and thereby renders mine-work superfluous – or do they, on the contrary, represent the final surrender of the Golden Age to the era of technology, a Faustian vision of the rocks as automatons for the technological wishes of humankind? A branch of knowledge that mediates between these two outer poles, and which will accordingly prove significant for the interpretation of the architectonic rocks, is alchemy. While retaining the pre-modern belief in a cosmos endowed with spirit, including ideas of minerals growing in the womb of the earth, alchemy takes issue with the Golden Age *field*'s criminalisation of mine-work and quarrying and, in contrast, sees mining and refining as assistance to nature's urge towards perfection.

Even though the content of the architectonic rocks is, to a large extent, transferred to the paradigm with its assorted and, by definition, flimsier meaning, fortunately it can also be condensed in acute iconographic situations, which can cast their light back on the paradigm – albeit in practice we will often find ourselves in an unspecified spot between paradigm and iconography. In a wilderness motif such as Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* (begun 1483; PLATE 36), it will be shown, by way of example, that the virginity of the otherwise so ingenious-looking rocks is crucial to the iconography, a nest of Chinese boxes that interconnects the immaculate wombs of the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth with John the Baptist's wilderness, the forecourt to Hell and Francis of Assisi's La Verna rock. But, in accordance with society's incipient work ethic, landscape images of the late medieval period also see the beginnings of a turning away from virginity towards the mining and quarrying of the Iron Age. In the paintings of Mantegna, for example, which will be a recurring topic of interpretation in this chapter, quarrying appears to be extremely ambivalent – on the one hand, the indispensable prerequisite of the Gonzaga prince's opulent building activities (PLATE 37), on the other hand, an earth-raping, Iron-Age-marked idolatry which is played off against Christ's both work- and sexuality-free – and therefore Golden-Age-marked – origins in the womb of the earth (PLATE 38).

The 15th-16th-century rock thematics thus ultimately provides the opportunity for a contemplation of the essence of art – art understood both in its antique sense as all forms of technological cultivation of nature (*ars*, *techné*), and in its modern meaning as sublimated, autonomous representation (*fine art*). At the interpretative pole that sees architectonic forms as inherent in the rocks (natural architecture and growing crystals), we are still in the vicinity of the Golden-Age-marked philosophy of antiquity, in which forms are the result of the heavens' fertilisation and impregnation of matter. The pole of external influence, on the other hand, points primarily in the direction of a modern, Iron-Age-infiltrated universe, in which nature is drained of spirit and blind (ruination wreaked by time), and in which humankind can therefore either consume it at will (mine-work, quarrying and technological design) or fantasise about its randomly generated forms (subjective visions reproduced in the fine art of painting). Even though the compass of analysis is complex and often ambivalent, for the sake of manageability I shall make these two poles the fixed points of my exposition, so thus we will ideally move from a neo-antique to a modern reading of the architectonic rocks.

Using the same framework, I shall in conclusion venture an expansion of the corpus of fossil themes and generally analyse examples of early modern pictorial phenomena in the zone of tension between nature and art. This does not just mean images set within stone and clouds ('images made by chance'), but also the figurative counterpart to the rock landscapes – namely, the strangely statue-like figures which populate so many Northern Italian images in the second half of the 15th century.

12.1   Self-grown architecture

Exposing the tensions of the paradigm-shift:
Filippo Lippi's rocks versus those of the Ferrarese

Although the 15th-16th-century artists are handed a new paradigm – a paradigm with the potential to reproduce the surrounding environment in its optical, instantaneous form of appearance – the pictorial motifs do not all behave with equal smoothness in their adherence to the demands of the paradigm. Especially in pre-High Renaissance Italy and north of the Alps in the latter period, the pictorial rocks display an idiosyncratic conflict between way of seeing and object being seen, as if the naturalistic lens taking in the rocks gets embroiled with a hibernated pre-modern content. The rocks seem phantasmagorical, monumental, artificial, ruin-like, organic or just strangely insistent.

A good example of this tension can be observed in Filippo Lippi's landscapes.

Fig. 12.1. Francesco del Cossa,
Triumph of Minerva (1469-70), fresco,
upper section of *March*. Ferrara,
Palazzo Schifanoia, Sala dei Mesi.

The wilderness landscape surrounding John the Baptist in Prato Cathedral (painted 1452-65; PLATE 39) is, in a way, but a hair's breadth from Giotto's Byzantine-derived terraced rocks (FIGS. 9.19 and 9.20). But whereas Giotto's land formations still seem compatible with the partially pre-modern way of seeing through which they are apprehended, the rocks look decidedly bizarre in Lippi's now more zealously naturalistic lens that transforms the hitherto monolithic masses into fantastic accumulations of strata and blocks. Behind the preacher we see a towering rock formation that could well be the corner of a ruined building. In the right foreground, the rocks are cleft by a groove whose identity is uncertainly located between hewn-out path and natural chasm. And what about John's cave, in the depths of which a similar 'path' wedges its way in: is it natural or hewn out? Is it possibly a quarry or mining cave, the architecture of which appears in the negative as residual forms from the hewn-away stone? The answers are uncertain since the whole landscape seems to fluctuate between chaos, natural architecture, ruin, quarry and purposeful
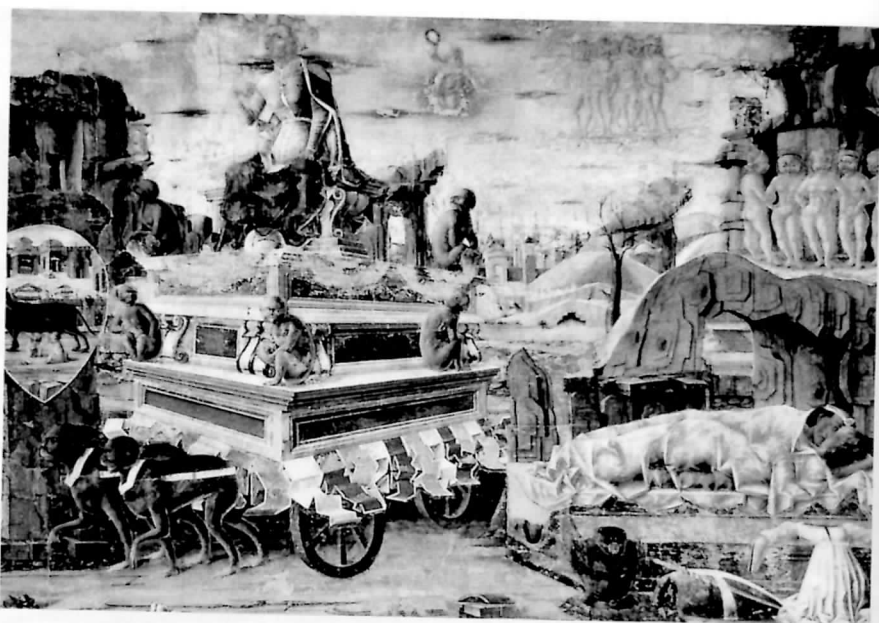
Fig. 12.2. Cosmè Tura, *Triumph of Vulcan* (1469-70), fresco, upper part of *September* (section). Ferrara, Palazzo Schifanoia, Sala dei Mesi.

hewing out. This ambiguous attitude to orderliness can only be highlighted by the right-hand side where Lippi has wedged the Baptist family's house in between the thickset rocks. Architecture is here confronted with its origins in chaos.

The sceptical reader will now object that Lippi's landscape was not intended to be anything other than 'ordinary' stony wilderness, and that the anomalies I have read into it are purely the vagaries of style caused by the movement from conventional rock formations to a more consistently naturalistic style. In response, we could move our gaze across to painting in the contemporaneous and slightly later Ferrara, a city which could be hailed as the centre of bizarre rocks in the 15th century.[3] What can we make of the artists' intentions when we see the throng of fantastic rock formations in Palazzo Schifanoia's cycle of the months (1469-70)? In the *Triumph of Minerva* from Francesco del Cossa's *March*, brick houses are built into the rocks, creating peculiar hybrids (FIG. 12.1); and behind Mars' and Rhea Silvia's couch in Cosmè Tura's *September* scene we see a rock structure penetrated by caves and a natural arch and, furthermore, divided into veritable storeys separated by protruding segments (FIG. 12.2). Cossa manifestly brings the rock fantasia to its

Fig. 12.3. Detail from Francesco del Cossa's *Saint John the Baptist*, plate 8.

culmination, focussing intensely on the paradoxes of creation in his *Griffoni Polyptych* from *c.* 1473-75. Behind the saints we see rocks growing from otherwise perfect walls or balancing on partially ruined arcades (FIGS. 12.3 and 12.4A). In other instances they seem to be half-way transformed into architecture and, indicative of the dark foundations of the whole spectacle, the ground is penetrated by black holes into the underworld (FIG. 12.4B and PLATE 8).

Fig. 12.4a. Francesco del Cossa, *Saint Peter*
(c. 1473-75) (detail), tempera on wood,
left panel of the *Griffoni Polyptych*. Milan,
Pinacoteca di Brera.

Fig. 12.4b. Francesco del Cossa, *Saint
Vincent Ferrer* (c. 1473-75) (detail), tempera
on wood, central panel of the *Griffoni
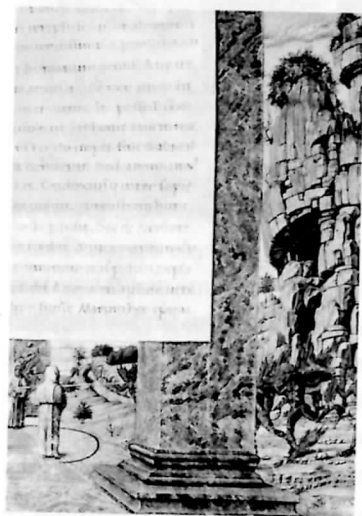Polyptych*. London, National Gallery.

Fig. 12.5. Pietro Guindaleri, miniature from the
opening of Book 30 in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis
historia* (completed after 1489) (detail). Turin,
Biblioteca Nazionale, ms J.I. 22-23, f. 425 (min.20).

Vando si parte il giucho'dela zara
colui che perde si man dolente'
R ipetendo leuolte el tristo impara
C on laltro sene ua tutta la gente
Quak ua dinanzi et qual di dietro il prende'

Fig. 12.6. Franco de' Russi and Guglielmo
Giraldi, initital Q (c. 1480), miniature
from manuscript of Dante's *Divine Comedy*,
Purgatory 6, 72. Rome, Vatican, Biblioteca
Apostolica Vaticana, ms Urb. lat. 365, f. 112.

In images by the Ferrarese artists, no one can be in any doubt that the rocks treat of something thematic beyond their own pure and innocent existence – a theme pertaining to the relationship between unfinished and finished, nature and art, underworld chaos and architectonic order (see also FIGS. 12.5 and 12.6).[4] But the Ferrarese visions, then, are not transferred on a *tabula rasa*, a stylistic language that is wiped clean of meaning, because in Filippo Lippi's wilderness we see exactly the same tendencies, just in a more tacit form. Lippi's visions can only be explained away as stylistic accident if seen in isolation. In other words, the Ferrarese painters only articulate the tensions that arise when the rock forms handed down from the Golden Age paradigm are exposed in the new and more naturalistic landscape paradigm of the period. Any rock formation in the contemporaneous Italian painting will be marked by these tensions, however implicit they might seem. As the tensions of the paradigm thus condense, in terms of meaning we move into a borderland between what is describing and what is being described, between language and content, between paradigm and iconography. Where does the paradigm stop and where does the iconography begin?

Natural architecture

If we want to pin down the significance of the rock forms more specifically, we must first accept that it remains open and ambiguous. We can, at most, sketch in the structures around which meaning can be condensed. To begin with, the rocks perpetuate the entire complex of meaning I discussed in the pre-modern section, the rocks as signifiers of Mother Earth, the chthonic, *chora*, the underworld. If matter is understood as Mother Earth, then the architectonic character of the rocks could be linked with their function as denoting special sacred places or primordial architecture, the protective building of the depths of the earth. As we saw in the section dealing with sacral-idyllic painting (chapter 6), projecting or conspicuous rocks have often had a sacred function because the essence of the earth was concentrated in their solid and yet clear-cut forms. They were the site for visions, protection or cure.[5]

Such rocks were the obvious resort of ascetic saints renouncing the world and seeking contact with God. Athanasius describes, for example, how an inner voice leads Anthony through the desert of Thebaid and on to his new place of abode, a high mountain at the foot of which there is fresh, cold water and a plain with a couple of uncultivated palms.[6] Similarly, in Jerome's letter to his friend Eustochium (*c.* 384 AD), we read: "[...] and, stern and angry with myself, I used to make my way alone into the desert. Wherever I saw hollow valleys, craggy mountains, steep cliffs, there I made my oratory, there the house of correction for my unhappy

Fig. 12.7. Marco Zoppo, *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* (1460-70), tempera on wood. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.

flesh."[7] Many of the fantastic rock formations in 15th-century painting appear in depictions of just such a hermitic life in the wilderness, be it with all the saints in the Thebaid or with saints John the Baptist, Anthony, Jerome or Francis of Assisi on their own (PLATES 4, 36 and 39, FIGS. 11.53, 12.26, 12.44 and 12.47). In one of the more spectacular examples, Marco Zoppo's *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness* (FIG. 12.7), the rock is a natural arch constructed of stone blocks which look both organic and architectonic.[8] Proof that formations such as these are not simply the figment of an imagination can be gathered by ascending the Tuscan La Verna, the mountain where Saint Francis lived and where his stigmatisation took place. To a visitor today, too, the rock looks like a bizarre piece of natural architecture with flat-walled chasms, stone pillars, plateaus, tracks and caves. And, indeed, how deeply it is loaded with meaning will be examined in my analysis of Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*.

In the subterranean zones, with their labyrinthine cavities, we find the primordial forms of architecture: vaulting, columns, arches, openings.[9] In antique theories of

the origins of architecture, the protective cavity, the grotto, in particular played an important role. Vitruvius believes, for example, that the first humans lived in caves, a practice that continues with the treeless Phrygians who cannot, as others, build wooden huts, but have to dig out earth mounds instead.[10] Like the sequence followed by the Golden Age myth, this belief also refers to actual practice, given that Neolithic burial mounds could actually be said to reconstruct the caves which had for millennia, before the agricultural revolution, served as humankind's primary place of abode. A form like this – which goes under names such as barrow or dolmen – occasionally features in the landscape painting of antiquity; for example, in the *Punishment of Dirce*, where a flat capstone has been placed across the top of two upright stones (FIG. 12.8).[11] Apparently without recourse to the paintings of antiquity, the 15th century revives this form: examples can be seen in Filippo Lippi's *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* (c. 1450; FIG. 12.9) or Jacopo del Sellaio's *Pietà with Scenes of Hermit Life* (1480s?; FIG. 12.10) where the 'dolmens' are even divided into several levels.[12] The natural arch in 15th-century painting also has forerunners in Roman painting; for example, in the *Odyssey Landscapes* where some blocks by the sea are riddled with holes.

Fig. 12.9. Filippo Lippi, *Madonna and Child with Two Angels* (c. 1450), tempera on wood. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

Protected by such forms of natural architecture, humans found shelter in the womb of the earth. Catacombs were placed in the depths of the earth, because Christians could thereby gain sustenance from the subterranean, chthonic energy. And, later, persecuted Christians sought safe haven in the earth's womb when, from the 8th century onwards, the tufa rocks of the Göreme dale in Cappadocia were converted into a veritable beehive of chapels and monk's cells (FIG. 12.11). Innumerable sacred caves far and wide have gained the status of such chapels, either in their

Fig. 12.10. Jacopo del Sellaio, *Pietà with Scenes of Hermit Life* (1480s?), tempera on wood. Berlin, Staatliche Museen (earlier cat. no. III. 97).

Fig. 12.11. Rock chapels in Göreme, Cappadocia (8th century onward).

undressed form or with architectonic elaboration. This is the case with the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Santa Maria de Praesaepio (*præsæpio*=enclosure, stable, manger), and it is the case with the many cult grottos in Italy dedicated to Santa Rosalia, the Virgin Mary or Saint Michael, subjugator of the subterranean dragon.

This entire cult tradition has to be borne in mind when looking at the architectonic rocks of Quattrocento painting. Besides hermit themes, they can be generated

Fig. 12.12. Cosmè Tura, *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* (1469),
tempera on canvas, organ shutters. Ferrara, Museo della Cattedrale.

by cave motifs such as Saint George (for example, Cosmè Tura's organ shutters with
Saint George Slaying the Dragon (1469; FIG. 12.12)), the birth of Christ (for example,
Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1462; FIG. 12.13)) or the resurrection of Christ
(for example, Giovanni Bellini (c. 1480; FIG. 11.16)). The descent to hell is also fertile
with spectacular natural architecture, as can be seen in the school of Mantegna
engraving (1460s; FIG. 12.14)[13], where Christ is forcing a sturdy stone gateway in the
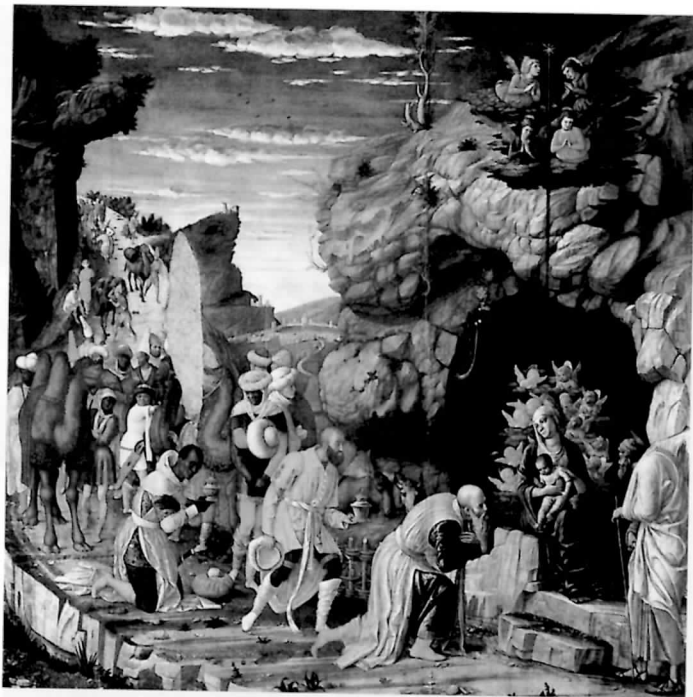raw rock.

Fig. 12.13. Andrea Mantegna,
Adoration of the Magi (c. 1462),
tempera on wood. Florence,
Galleria degli Uffizi.

Fig. 12.14. School of
Andrea Mantegna,
*Christ's Descent
into Limbo* (1460s),
engraving.

The art-philosophical and alchemical context

A tradition born of this millennia-long experience of rock dwellings and chthonic relief, and at the same time providing the rocks in 15th-century painting with a more conceptual framework, is the philosophy of art. How does art come into being and what is its relation to nature? Ronald Lightbown remarks incisively of Mantegna's rocks:

> Indeed it might almost be said that for Mantegna mountains were rude monuments and that he saw in their irregular heaps of rock, which sometimes he echoes in irregular piles of man-shaped stones, heaped up from the ruins of antiquity, a sort of natural architecture, interpreting literally the Renaissance concept of 'fabrica mundi'.[14]

To regard the rocks as kin to the art of humankind, because the world edifice is in itself an elaborate work, is perfectly in keeping with pre-modern, geocentric thinking in which art is inscribed in the total work of creation. Nature was not only perceived as an organism of divine origin, it was also believed to be controlled according to principles similar to those found in art. As it says in Plato's *Sophist*:

> I will only lay it down that the products of nature, as they are called, are works of divine art, as things made out of them by man are works of human art. Accordingly there will be two kinds of production, one human, the other divine.[15]

That man-made works, like nature's organisms, can be included in the overall phenomenon 'art', is due to the circumstance, as shown by Aristotle (cf. chapter 4), that both are characterised by a process in which the male precept of motion transfers nature's form to the passive and female matter. As ratified by the Dominican Aristotelian Thomas Aquinas, the form in the woodworker's soul belongs just as much to nature as does the form residing in the semen, because art is part of the creative force of nature.[16] The role of art in relation to nature is formulated more explicitly by, for example, the Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino in 1474: "In sum, man imitates all the works of divine nature, and perfects all the works of lower nature, correcting and emending them."[17] Antiquity's belief in the extreme meaningfulness of nature is hereby rekindled: that nature does not create works of art by itself is merely due to a failing power of implementation given that works of art, no less than organisms, are part of nature's intention.

But even though works of art thus complete and perfect nature, they are still not the "divine art" of the virgin works of nature. While nature gives birth, i.e. produces in the closest relationship between form and matter, art is obliged to

construe, i.e. via the strenuous intervention of the hand to assemble and design scattered materials. As already suggested in chapter 4, the distance between nature and art is particularly conspicuous when it comes to mining-work and quarrying, the violent removal of materials from the interior of Mother Earth. Painting could be said to be at a plausible distance from this encroachment, inasmuch as its pigments, the pulverised stone, constitute a kind of sublimation of the gravitational bedrock, a transfer to a more ethereal and thereby spiritual sphere. Architecture and sculpture, on the other hand, are kept much closer to the body of the earth, the tangible materiality of which is retained in the stone and metal, while their form-inducing moulding extends the process through which they are violently wrested from the living rock.

A Renaissance example of the reawakened resistance to mining-work and quarrying, the mark of the Iron Age, is found in, for example, Alberti's dialogue *Theogenius*: "Nature has hidden away [...] the gold and the other metals under enormous mountains and in deserted places. We brisk small humans [...] collect it from the outermost and most extreme regions and cut it apart, giving it new polishing and form." Furthermore:

> The marble lies resting in the earth: we place it on the fronts of temples and above our heads. And so displeased are we by the natural freedom belonging to every created thing, that we dare subjugate it to our own service. And countless artificers were born from and believed in this misery, clear signs and arguments for our foolishness. Add to this the poor concord man has with all the created things and with himself, almost as if he swore to observe the utmost cruelty and monstrosity. His stomach wished to be a public grave for all things, herbs, plants, fruits, birds, quadrupeds, worms, fish; nothing above earth, nothing under earth, nothing that he does not devour.[18]

This citation implies a whole chain of mortal sins brought about by the infringement on the earth. Number one, pride (*superbia*), arrogance in having subjugated creation to the service of humankind in the first place. Next, greed (*avaritia*), lust (*luxuria*) and gluttony (*gula*): covetousness of the treasures found in the terrestrial caves, an obvious parallel to sexual lust, leads to unnecessary architectonic luxury – by means of which these treasures are, as it were, ruined, devoured into the same grave as the food at the very moment they are brought to light. Lastly, this sexually-tinged desire and waste leads to disagreements between people, i.e. anger (*ira*).

In order to establish how this distrust of mining-work and quarrying was gradually transformed into affirmation of the same – how Golden Age *field* was turned into Iron Age *field* – it is necessary to involve a more esoteric, but therefore no less crucial, agent: *alchemy*. At a time when the desacralisation of nature had only just

Fig. 12.15. *The Licorice Plant* and *Growth and Mining*
of the Lapis Lazuli stone (c. 1320), miniatures from
Provençal herbarium. Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale.

begun, and it was still possible, like Alberti, to lament the Iron Age encroachment of the earth, alchemy took on an alleviating role since, unlike the main thrust of the Golden Age *field*, it did not look upon mineral extraction as a symptom of the criminalisation of culture, but on the contrary as a measure on the way towards its perfection. Fertilised by celestial seed, metals and minerals lay in the earth's womb and slowly grew towards more perfect phases, with gold as the ultimate objective. As can be seen from writings on alchemy such as, for example, *Bergbüchlein*, the first book in German on the secrets of metallurgy, published in Augsburg in 1505, every metal, whether it went on with the transformation towards gold or remained in a less noble, 'miscarried' state, was controlled by a planet: silver grew under the moon, gold under the sun, iron under Mars, lead under Saturn, and so forth.[19]

A visual testimony to this belief in the growing and also benign character of minerals, and in humankind's corresponding right to wrest them from earth, can be seen in, for example, a miniature of lapis lazuli mining in a Provençal herbarium (*c.* 1320; FIG. 12.15).[20] The precious, sparkling stone, which was of value both in pictorial art (as pigment) and medicine (such as a cure for blindness and fever), apparently grew from the depths of the earth under the influence of the rays of the sun. The

Fig. 12.16. Cave with mine-work and alchemist, frontispiece engraving from J.B. von Helmont, *Opera omnia* (1682).

miniature accordingly shows a miner swinging his mattock in front of a sunlit blue solid block, from which additionally a demonic claw is sticking out – the claw of the stone's protective dragon, which in a wider sense means the chthonic dragon. If this dragon can be vanquished, then the earth's store will be released.

Alchemy, with its artificial means of intervention, was now assigned to accelerate and refine that transformation of matter which is naturally underway in the depths of the earth. In *Summa perfectionis*, a 14th-century alchemical treatise, it is said that "what Nature cannot perfect in a vast space of time we can achieve in a short space of time by our art".[21] This collaboration between nature and art is later rendered pictorially in engravings such as the frontispiece to van Helmont's *Opera omnia* (1682; FIG. 12.16), which juxtaposes cave and alchemical work (*labor*),[22] or an allegory from the *Musaeum Hermeticum* compendium (1627; FIG. 12.17). In the latter, the growing metals are depicted as muses around a lyre-playing Apollo – Gold – in a cave, while their designers, the alchemists, sit in state on the earth immediately above the cave. The Philosophers' Stone, the *lapis* of alchemy, which can transform metals to gold, here appears as a star made up of two triangles: one pointing downwards, earthly, for water, and one pointing upwards, celestial, for fire.[23]

If the alchemists thus clad their ideas in an often esoteric symbolism, it has to be stressed that their basic vision is part of the Aristotelian world hierarchy with its aspiration to perfection and a buoyancy in which the more perfect bodies attract the less perfect. This attraction is principally due to the upper spheres, i.e. the divine heavens including *primum mobile*, the intelligences and celestial bodies. But not only: as Thomas Aquinas mentions, objects in the earthly world also influence

Fig. 12.17. Principles of alchemy:
the 'designers' sit in state above the earth
while the growing metals make music in the
cave; in the spandrels, the four elements.
Engraving from *Musaeum Hermeticum* (1627).

one another,[24] an upward urge summed up in the idea of *potential* and *action*.[25] Every body has the inherent potential to become more perfect, and this vanishes in step with the fulfilment of this perfection. In turn, the body becomes an *agens* that can influence other, less perfect bodies.[26] All this thinking around the aspiration to perfection and the mutual attraction of bodies is also fundamental to alchemy, not least the idea of pure potential, the totally unstructured *prima materia* at the bottom of the world hierarchy.

Returning to the architectonic rocks of Quattrocento painting, I would now suggest that on one level of interpretation, at least – the one rooted in the Golden Age *field* and its reformation in alchemy – they can be read as a visual homology to this nature's aspiration to perfection, an aspiration that would here seem to be so irresistible as to break forth without the mediation of work. The architectonic features hover tensely between Iron Age and Golden Age: architecture belongs to the Iron Age, humankind's most cultivated epoch, and yet it crops up Golden-Age-like in the solid rock, as if under the direct influence of the upper spheres. That the forms should emerge from the rock itself would seem logical given that this earth's most concentrated state is akin to, if not identical with, *prima materia*, the matter with the greatest potential and the basis for alchemical transformation. In alchemical texts, *prima materia* is often referred to as "our stone", which "is a stone and yet not a stone",[27] and it is also called "the Chaos of the Wise" as it recalled the unity before Creation.[28] A German poem, *De prima materia lapidis philosophorum*, written in 1598 at the latest, presumably based on an earlier Latin original, says *inter alia* of *prima materia*:

> It is a stone, and yet not a stone,
> In this lies the art alone:
> Nature has made it so,
> Not brought it to perfection, though:
> On earth its equal will not be found,
> It grows on mountains and in ground,
> *Materiam Primam* its name should ring:
> He is quite wise, who knows this thing.[29]

The emergence of architecture in natural forms is made so much the more logical when Aristotle actually discusses the idea of a house produced by nature: "The operation is directed by a purpose; we may, therefore, infer that the natural process was guided by a purpose to the end that is realized. Thus, if a house were a natural product, the process would pass through the same stages that it in fact passes through when it is produced by art."[30] That this idea should be understood in an organic light is emphasised by Frederick Woodbridge: "[...] if a house came into being as a plant grows, we should call a house natural and a product of nature, and if a plant came into being as a house is built, we should call it artificial and a product of art."[31] The juxtaposition of mountain and architecture is perhaps particularly pertinent in an alchemical context since the alchemical synthesis container, the artificial womb in which the vein completes its gestation, went under the name *domus* and could also be symbolised by the mountain itself.[32] The house is, like the mountain, a container that both protects and nourishes.

Fig. 12.18. Francesco del Cossa, *Triumph of Venus* (1469-70), fresco, upper section of *April*. Ferrara, Palazzo Schifanoia, Sala dei Mesi.

But if the stone in 15th-century painting aspires to the higher perfection through growth, it is an obvious step to couple this aspiration with the rocks' 'ordinary' capacity for growth (also cf. the alchemical poem's mention of *prima materia* as *growing* on mountain and in ground). Growing towards the light then becomes identical with aspiration to perfection. There are actually many instances in 15th-century painting of architectonic rocks that also grow. One spectacular example is the Pesaro *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (PLATE 4), mentioned in chapter 2. Here the Byzantine rocks grow into natural arches, and the middle rock has also moulded a narrow window framed by cubic ashlars. In Palazzo Schifanoia's *Triumph of Venus* in the *April* section, we see the same coupling, only now in a more illusionistic light (FIG. 12.18). Both of the pink rock formations flanking the triumphal vessel have small plant-like peaks at the bottom, while their structural division into storeys is striking, especially in the natural arch rising over the left formation's capstone. Their fecundity, appropriate to the month of love, is substantiated on the right-hand side where rabbits, the classic symbol of fertility, sniff small 'rock shoots'.[33]

Other examples of natural arches resulting from peaks growing towards one

Fig. 12.19. Carlo Crivelli, *Saint George and the Dragon* (c. 1490), tempera on wood, predella panel from the *Odoni Altarpiece*. London, National Gallery.

Fig. 12.20. Vittore Carpaccio, *Sacra conversazione* (c. 1500), oil on canvas. Chantilly, Musée Condé.

Fig. 12.21. *Saint John the Baptist Bearing*

Witness to Christ (c. 1315-21), mosaic.

Istanbul, Kariye Church (Kora).

another are Crivelli's *Saint George and the Dragon* from the *Odoni Altarpiece* (c. 1490; FIG. 12.19) and Carpaccio's *Sacra conversazione* (c. 1500; FIG. 12.20). The architectural potential of the latter arch is confirmed by the fact that is has become the dwelling place of hermits. As we can see from the Kariye Church (Kora) in the former Constantinople (decorated 1315-21; FIG. 12.21), growing natural arches such as these go back at least to the Middle Ages. The arches call to mind Diana's previously mentioned cave in Ovid, where nature "had shaped a native arch of the living rock and soft tufa".[34] (Cf. chapter 2)

The idea of growing stone indeed thrived in the Renaissance. Alberti devotes a whole page of his *De re aedificatoria* to the phenomenon.[35] Here we read about, for example: marble growing in its quarries; small pieces of Tiburtine stone that grow together as if they were nourished by time and the earth; enormous, still growing stalactites by a waterfall; stones that turn into soil and soil that turns into stone; and large stones born in the bowels of the earth, later to be brought

to light on a riverbank in the Cisalpine Gaul.[36] Leonardo, too, mentions the strata in the "living stone" cut through by the northern rivers of the Alps;[37] and in a letter to Titian, Pietro Aretino writes about the view across the Canal Grande: "As I describe it, see first the houses which, although of living stone, appear to be of some artificial substance."[38]

Lastly, considering the continued belief in fertility of rocks, it should come as no surprise that the mountain masses of Quattrocento images not only swell with architectural forms, but also with precious minerals. While these minerals can be dug out from earth cavities in special iconographic contexts such as Mantegna's *Meeting* scene or *Madonna of the Stonecutters* (more on this later), they can also be spread all the way to the surface of the earth without further reason, i.e. determined by the paradigm. In Mantegna, the thickset rocks often gleam as if they were quite generally made of precious materials. And a number of Ferrarese images, for example Palazzo Schifanoia's *June* and the Guglielmo Giraldi workshop's miniatures, show small red or blue stones lying on the bare ground with no specific – i.e. iconographic – explanation.[39]

Mountain alchemy

In seeking further substantiation that the architectonic rocks in 15th-century painting comprise locations where the alchemical transformation towards perfection might be contemplated, we could turn to a structuralist argument highlighting the tension between upper and lower strata in the mountain. An appropriate iconographic condensation of such a reading can be found in the 1475 wedding festivities held in Pesaro, which are recorded both in an unsigned description and a miniature by Lionardo da Colle.[40] The festivities, which brought together Constanzo Sforza and Camilla of Aragon, had been orchestrated by the Ferrarese duke Ercole d'Este's Jewish dance master, Guglielmo Ebreo, and included a pair of rolling mountains made of painted wood. As an indication of their fecundity, the mountains were covered with plants and trees plus wild animals such as hares, goats, deer, bears and rabbits. The aim of the pageant was partly to disseminate Ercole's pro-Jewish policy, for the Queen of Sheba on a mock elephant and King Rehoboam on a "Monte delli ebrei" made speeches to the newlyweds in which they requested tolerance for the couple's Jewish subjects. In this campaign, Guglielmo obviously drew on *kabbala*, the Jewish mystical teachings, because the mountain proved to be full of fantastical persons. Through two holes in one of the mountains, "the Mountain of Humans", the following emerged: "the Saved Man" fighting a lion, plus fourteen Moors. "The Mountain of Hebrews", for its part, contained an old Hebrew man accompanied by twelve Moors, and at its

Fig. 12.22. Lionardo da Colle, *Monte delli ebrei* (c. 1485), miniature. Rome, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms Vat. Urb. 899, f. 91.

summit there was a tower housing "a spirit". In Lionardo da Colle's miniature of the *Monte delli ebrei*, an illustration for a *c.* 1485 account of the wedding, this spirit takes the form of an angel (FIG. 12.22).[41]

Although the symbolism of the pageant is not explained in the surviving description, and might seem quite cryptic for a present-day analyst, there can be no doubt as to its use of alchemy and the related astrology. The roof of the ceremonial hall was decorated to resemble a firmament with signs of the zodiac, and the entourage accompanying "the Mountain of Humans" included figures of the seven planets, guides of the metals. Perhaps Guglielmo Ebreo made use of a specifically Christianised alchemy, so that each of the mountains comprised a *domus*, alchemy's artificial womb, and the Jews and the Moors in their interiors comprised a form of religious *prima materia*, potential Christians en route to perfection. Beyond seeing metals represented as human figures in FIG. 12.17, we could also consider the hypothesis corroborated by Titus Burckhard who, writing about the alchemical mountain in general, states that it contains "an indefinite collection of uncreated things".[42] The popular belief was maintained, quite literally, that the mountain mines were protected by spirits, genies and phantoms such as, for example, the Monk of the

Mountain (Master Hoemmerling) or The White Lady who warned of landslips.[43] The angel at the summit of "the Mountain of Hebrews" could thus be the spiritual outcome of this, when the volatile substance, Christian faith, was released via heating. In the illustration for Lambspringk's "De lapide philosophico" (1678), discussed in chapter 2, a winged Hermes has been placed on a mountaintop alongside the "son of the king", precisely as symbols of Soul and Spirit respectively, metaphors for the volatile substances of the heating process (FIG. 2.40).

And as far as the Jewish and Moorish identity of the figures is concerned, it is further parallelised by a miniature in *Splendor Solis*, an alchemical treatise by Salomon Trismosin, allegedly teacher to the alchemist physician Paracelsus (1493-1541) (FIG. 12.23).[44] The 1582 miniature, derived from a German original of *c.* 1525-30, shows two miners working their way into a mountain via two caves. Under the mountain, in the underworld, we again encounter a hall with figures, this time from the Book of Esther: besides Esther herself, Mordecai, Ahasuerus, Bigthan, and Teresh. The scene might again be dealing with Jews as Christian *prima materia* and could also have links to kabbala given that Trismosin claims to have translated kabbalistic and magic books from Egyptian to Greek and Latin during his years of wandering after 1473.[45]
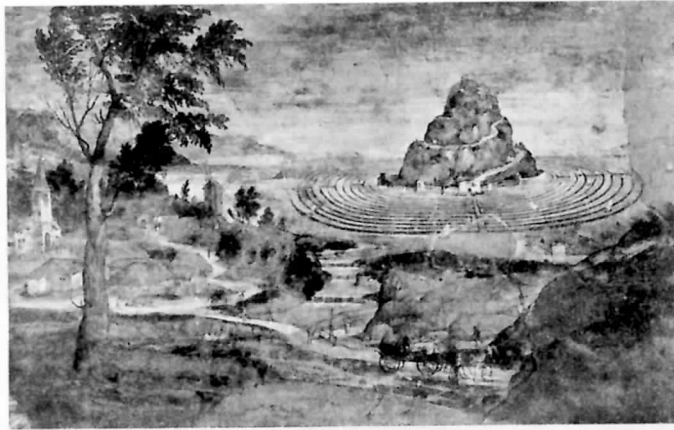
Fig. 12.24. Lorenzo Leonbruno or his school,
Gonzaga Mountain (c. 1510), fresco. Mantua,
Palazzo Ducale, Sala dei Cavalli.

Although I cannot here deliver a rigorous decoding of the alchemical iconography of 15th-century art, we can at least note that a hierarchical mountain was also part of the Gonzaga dynasty's symbol repertoire. When rewarding Federico II Gonzaga (b. *c.* 1500) for his efforts in the 1525 Battle of Pavia, Charles V gave him an *impresa* decorated with Olympus Mons and with the accompanying motto "Ad montem duc nos" ("Lead us to the mountain"). This emblem, which can be traced back in the Gonzaga dynasty to at least 1457-58, can also be seen depicted in a fresco in Palazzo Ducale's Sala dei Cavalli, decorated around 1510 by Lorenzo Leonbruno or his school (FIG. 12.24).[46] In the fresco, the Olympus mountain rises from the middle of a circular labyrinth located out in a bay. A spiralling track winds its way from a city gate up towards the top of the mountain. Given that the labyrinth is an underworld symbol, this mountain too must deal with the ascent from fallen matter to purity of spirit. The labyrinth plays a similar role in an illustration for Filarete's treatise on architecture: here it encircles an earth surrounded by water, with King Zogalia's pleasure garden in the middle, "the garden of the new taste".[47] It would seem probable that this hierarchical symbolism lurks in many of the contemporaneous more iconographically-determined depictions of rocks. A striking example would be Cosmè Tura's *Pietà* in Museo Correr (c. 1460; FIG. 12.25). Here the Golgatha rock is also wound round by a spiralling track and rises up on a sort of peninsula in an underworld-like labyrinth of a bay. The rock thus becomes a Mountain of Life with the Cross as the Tree of Life.[48]

Fig. 12.25. Cosmè Tura, *Pietà*
(c. 1460), tempera on wood.
Venice, Museo Correr.

In symbol-laden rocks such as these, we thus see the same tension that can be perceived in the 15th-century general pictorial paradigm, the tension between chaotic matter and elaborate form. On the paradigmatic level, this duality is not merely rendered visible by the rocks being marked with artificial features, but also by architecture and raw foundation being juxtaposed in a contradictory and yet cohesive manner. An arresting phenomenon in landscape images of the period is thus the many castles and cities lingering on the ridges of rocks in the backgrounds, as if they had grown from their foundation like a kind of bud. Obviously Italy actually teems with installations such as these located on dizzying heights, often constructed for reasons of defence, but this does not strip the visual impression of its art-philosophical connotations. An anthropomorphic consolidation of such connotations can be seen, for example, in Roman sculptures of Cybele in which the earth goddess is crowned by a wreath of turrets and thereby avows that cities have their foundations in the body of Mother Earth and will be protected by Cybele.[49]

Fig. 12.26. Giovanni di Paolo, *Saint Galganus and Female Hermit* (1450s?), tempera on wood, predella panel from the *Saint Galganus Polyptych*. Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale.

The annular city wall crowning the spherical mountain in Camera degli Sposi could be seen as just such a crowning of the earth (PLATE 37).

The 15th-century artists would often seem, moreover, consciously to bring the castles into a sort of semantic border zone, a *parergon* field, where distance is transformed into thematic ambiguity. Giovanni di Paolo utilises, for example, the fact that their turrets are so distant that they can be described with single, slightly irregular brushstrokes, by means of which they resemble disturbing, spiked stone formations and thereby continue to develop the idea of natural architecture (FIG. 12.26).[50] Other examples of this semiotic game in the border regions of the eye's power of resolution are found in Ferrarese manuscripts such as the *Bible of Borso d'Este* (1455-61; FIG. 12.27) or in Pietro Guindaleri's illuminations for Pliny's *Naturalis historia* (begun c. 1475, completed after 1489; PLATE 41). In Guindaleri's otherwise so peaceful sunlit landscapes, the game becomes almost surreal in the way it lets the gaze stumble between sturdy rock ramparts and raw fortress walls.[51] With sights such as these

Fig. 12.27. Taddeo Crivelli, Franco de' Russi
et al., *Joshua Speaking to the People* (1455-61),
miniature from the *Bible of Borso d'Este*. Modena,
Biblioteca Estense, ms V. G. 12=Lat. 429, f. 96v.

we are approaching the chaos-born forms in Leonardo's contemplation of stained walls, and with it also the tradition for naturally-created images in stone as evolved from the Late Middle Ages up into the time of the *Wunderkammern*. Among the forms semi-growing from such *pietre fiorentine*, architectural phenomena such as cities, turrets and ruins indeed featured prominently (**FIGS. 12.28** and **12.29**).[52]

A type of role reversal between architecture and rocks – with architecture keeping its form intact, but, on the other hand, with emphasis on the rocks' closeness to *prima materia* – is seen in *Liber secretorum fidelium crucis* of *c.* 1320, Marino Sanudo's previously mentioned call for a new crusade (cf. chapter 8). As already stated, this

Fig. 12.28. *Urbs turrita* (natural image in marble), engraving from Athanasius Kircher's *Mundus subterraneus* (Amsterdam 1664), vol. 2, p. 30.

Fig. 12.29. *Marble from Ferrara* (1703), engraving. Amsterdam, private collection.

Fig. 12.30. Border illuminations from an Avignon manuscript (1321-22) of Marino Sanudo's *Liber secretorum fidelium crucis*. Rome, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms Vat. lat. 2971, f. 159.
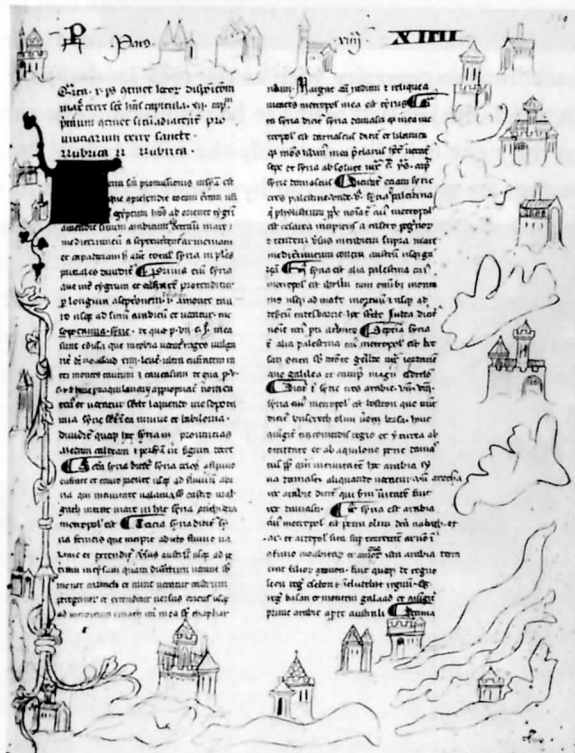
work is remarkable for including one of the first maps in Western culture to be overlaid with a gridwork, Pietro Vesconte's map of the Holy Land (FIG. 8.8). But there is an area still beyond the control of land surveying: rocks spread across the otherwise so clean mesh like the indigestible remains of chaos. As an indication of this indigestibility, a number of borders in the Avignon edition of 1321-22 have jettisoned the mesh in order solely to be the forum for these amorphous rocks along with small castles, the maps' specification of cities (FIG. 12.30).[53] As the two parties – chaotic rocks and clear-cut architecture – here float around in the book's own indeterminate semantic zones, sometimes linked, sometimes scattered, they seem to comment on the mysteries of creation. Is it possible to imagine a more illustrative image formation, according to which Plato's *chora*, the primordial re-ceptacle, approaches Kristeva's semiotic namesake, the linguistic primordial chaos, where the indexical meaning is shaped and disseminated in a perpetual process?[54]

Rocks and pictorial space

The architectonic game that 15th-century art channels into its rocks eventually flows over into a game with the pictorial space as such. The landscape in its entirety here becomes a variety of architecture that can be perforated, stacked up or subjected to absurd displacements. The game is familiar in a gentler form from backdrops to portraits, such as the rock landscape in *Mona Lisa* (1503; FIG. 12.31) in which the left half seems to be countersunk in a montage-like way in relation to the right half. But probably the most radical landscape experiments in this respect are again carried out by Ferrarese painters in the 1470s. In the lower part of Cossa's *March* scene in Palazzo Schifanoia, the pruning of vines and Borso's ride take place on something that, at first glance, could look like a natural arch since the rock opening underneath allows for a view of a distant landscape (FIG. 12.32). But on the upper plateau the houses are also displaced perspectively towards the background, as if there was a boundless supply of space. The 'natural arch' curves itself into sheer nothingness.[55]

Even though this absurd effect is exposed in a pictorial space that employs the most advanced illusionistic language of the time, it is not merely 'modern'. If any-thing, it could again be said to appear in the fracture between modern and archaic, between the homogenous space of naturalism and the aggregate space of antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the Gothic *villes sur arcatures*, the diminutive architecture is used to crown arcades and alcoves, which otherwise serve as the surroundings for human figures of a quite different and larger size.[56] The jump in scale from the large foreground figure to the minor architecture above is accepted here because the space is still determined cumulatively. However, when Cossa subjects it to a naturalistic

Fig. 12.31. Leonardo da Vinci,
Mona Lisa (1503), oil on wood.
Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Fig. 12.32. Francesco del Cossa,
*Scenes from the Life of Borso
d'Este* (1469-70), fresco, lower
part of *March*. Ferrara, Palazzo
Schifanoia, Sala dei Mesi.

treatment, in the *March* fresco or in the *Griffoni Polyptych*, it appears absurd and fragmented. It is the underworld being forced up into the sober light of naturalism, so that the black caves are penetrated and become gateways to nothingness.

<div align="center">

The mirror image of the abyss:
Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks

</div>

In Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* (c. 1483-90; **PLATE 36**) we find an illuminating example of how 15th-century architectonic rocks can be condensed to a complex iconography. The thickset, artificial-looking rocks have led art historians to suggest that the setting was based on the quarries in Monte Ceceri, the source of *pietra serena*, the 'Firenzuola stone'.[57] A closer analysis will nonetheless give an indication of just how paradoxical the artificiality of 15th-century rocks actually is, in that Leonardo's landscape points as far away from the production sphere as is imaginable – on one interpretive level to the uncorrupted wilderness, if not to a distant geological primeval time, on another level to the fecund and yet virginally untouched womb.

Precisely because the most generally prevalent 15th-century landscapes featured as green parks (cf. chapter II), Leonardo could here produce a desolate wilderness, a body of the world laid bare and, as Alexander Perrig writes, without "the idea of an invisible gardener".[58] In Perrig's opinion, the rocks growing mirage-like in the watery wilderness of the background allude to ideas about the origins of the earth, the primeval time after the floods when the continents began to emerge little by little. With reference to the mountaintops in this process, Leonardo remarks in his writings that they "for a long time rise constantly."[59] In the background of the *Virgin of the Rocks*, however, the rocks seem to have been jutting out into the blue-tinted mist for so long that they are being eaten into by the early stages of erosion.

Yet, in order to gain an impression of how Leonardo activates this scientific, almost geological, understanding of the rocks in a context that is in other respects religious, we must look closer at the requirements of the commission. The painting was commissioned by a Franciscan order in Milan, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, and was to form part of an opulent altarpiece in its chapel, constructed in San Francesco Grande in the years following 1475. As Regina Stefaniak and Joanne Snow-Smith have demonstrated in two ground-breaking articles, the painting is steeped in Franciscan iconography, with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, the Confraternity's speciality, as the main catalyst.[60] The question of whether Mary was free of original sin from her very conception or if she was not purified until later, by means of the Annunciation for example, was the object of an intense debate during the Late Middle Ages, in which the Franciscans emerged as sworn immaculists and the Dominicans were just as inveterate advocates of a

later redemption. Even though the *Virgin of the Rocks* was painted at a time when the immaculist doctrine had spread – in 1476, Pope Sixtus IV recognised the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary – the discussion was no less heated, and it is therefore likely that the painting's iconography, including the allegorical traits of the rock landscape, has been influenced by and comments on some of the tensions in the debate.[61]

That the landscape held meaning for the painting's Franciscan commissioners as something other and more than decorative background, is already evident from the contract made in 1483, which refers meticulously to "le montagne e sassi lavorati aolio divisati de piu collori".[62] The primary function of these "mountains and rocks" was apparently to render visible *abyssus*, the primordial abyss, as it was pervaded by Wisdom, here associated with Mary's immaculate spirit. For, as pointed out by Stefaniak, the landscape has striking similarities with the Bible text approved by Sixtus IV as the introductory reading for the Mass of the Immaculate Conception, a passage about Wisdom taken from the Book of Proverbs (8: 22-25):

> The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth [...].

As the divine light that was created before anything else in the world, the female Wisdom (Greek: *Sophia*, Latin: *Sapientia*) became an obvious alter ego for the immaculately conceived Virgin, for through the archaic understanding of the womb as the womb of Mother Earth, Wisdom could permeate the depths of the earth in the same way as Mary's pure spirit made Saint Anne's womb fertile.

The primordial geological era invoked by Leonardo is thereby in a very real sense primordial biblical time in which Wisdom pervades the just-formed mountains, hills, springs and depths of the earth. This iconography is not only supported by pictorial elements such as the rocks themselves, the deserted waters of the right background and the plant life projecting from the otherwise bare stone as if fertilised by a spring; in addition, Mary has lowered her eyes – a lingering gaze directed, via the figureless passage between Saint John and Christ, towards something invisible to the observer in the darkness under the rock bank along the bottom edge of the painting. What could she be looking at other than *abyssus*, the bottomless depths of the earth which was, according to myth, the source of all water on the earth and at the same time the place whereto water returned through hidden channels (cf. chapter 2)?

In order to validate that this must in fact be what she faces, we can start by

turning to a medieval tradition revived, in particular, by the Franciscans, which not only saw Mary permeating the abyss, but also defining it. In consulting a contemporaneous Franciscan thinker such as the Milanese Bernardino de' Busti (1450-c. 1513), a prominent Mariological exegetic scholar who is also known to have been involved in the 1506 judgement on the extended dispute concerning Leonardo's altarpiece, we find in his *Mariale* (1480-93) a passage such as this:

> All the doctors [say] that [the Latin name] *Maria* is derived from the [Latin word for] 'sea' [nominative plural *maria*], because as all rivers enter into the sea, and go out from it, according to Ecclesiastes 1, so all divine graces enter into the blessed Virgin. [...] Remarking on this derivation Albertus Magnus says: 'She is called *Maria* because just as there is in the sea [*mare*] a congregation of all waters, so there is in her a union of all graces.'[63]

Leonardo thus evokes a dual image of a Mary who lowers her gaze towards *abyssus* and from the immaculate position of distance pervades it with her wise graces, and yet is also identical with the object of her gaze, by means of which the cyclical function of *abyssus* and the sea – the place from which the water goes out and to which it returns – is substantiated. An obvious explanation of this identification with otherness would be that Mary is quite simply looking at her reflection in the depths of the rock spring – a reading that is made plausible by the narcissus growing on the edge of the rock to the left in the London version of the painting.[64]

This, in a literal sense, deep self-reflection enlarges, moreover, Mary's incarnation of Wisdom for, justified by a remark in the Book of Wisdom (7: 26) about how nothing contaminated can come close to Wisdom since "she is the refulgence of eternal light, the spotless mirror of the power of God", *speculum sine macula* became a recurrent emblem of the Immaculate Conception. In response to geographical locations of Wisdom such as the one in the apocryphal Book of Ecclesiasticus (Jesus Syrach) (24: 39) – "For her thoughts are more vast than the sea and her counsels more deep than the abyss" – Sixtus IV, in his sermon on the Immaculate Conception, was therefore able to state that: "No one has penetrated the depths of divine Wisdom like the Virgin."[65]

Could it be possible that this embrace of Wisdom, via the Virgin Mary's profound contemplation of her own reflection, entails a meta-commentary on the genesis of painting and, more generally, on the scrutiny of the mysteries of nature? Alberti, after all, described painting as "the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool",[66] and what the beholder sees in Leonardo's painting is surely almost a laterally reversed rendering of Mary's unseen reflection in the surface of *abyssus*' water. If Mary alias Wisdom knew "the structure of the world and the activity of

the elements; the beginning and end and middle of times, [...] [s]uch things as are hidden [...] and such as are plain" (Book of Wisdom 7: 17-21), then Leonardo poaches on her preserves in his dual role of painter and natural scientist, inasmuch as both roles derive from the profound eye, that organ which, according to Leonardo, is "the master of astronomy [and] cosmography", whose "sciences are most certain" and which has created "divine painting".[67] By, like a new Luke, portraying the source of her wisdom, the reflection on the water mirror, Leonardo is in a position to reconstruct the whole of Mary's immaculate knowledge. It could thus be argued that the theme of Leonardo's painting is the source point of art itself, a source point, however, not found in virgin nature, but shifted in the direction of a more auto-referential – and thereby modern – form of creation, namely Wisdom's self-reflection in the bottomless *abyssus*. Literally, a *mise en abyme*.[68]

Through her connection with the depths of the world and its spring source, Mary can also be interpreted in a more pagan direction – as the foam-born Venus or as a graceful nymph. The moist, plant-covered rocky setting hereby becomes a more surface-related *locus amoenus* along the lines of the satyric cave. Considering the dripstone-like rocks along the left cave entrance, our thoughts are led in particular to Virgil's description of the Libyan nymph cave with its "hanging rocks [,] [...] fresh waters and seats in the living stone".[69]

The basis on which the Immaculate Conception could be understood as Wisdom's permeation of the depths of the world was, as suggested, a comparison between the damp cavity *abyssus* and Saint Anne's womb. This topicalises the entire pre-modern understanding of the depths of the earth as a maternal womb, including Isidore of Seville's coupling of *abyssus* and matrix (cf. chapter 2) and the late antique Calcidius' commentary to the creation myth in Plato's *Timaeus*, where the womb concept, *gremium*, is linked with considerations of the nature of matter.[70] The associations are indeed so supra-temporal that the abyss-like setting also alludes to the Virgin Mary's own womb, *beatus venter*, by means of which the connection is bound to the painting's two male infants exchanging gestures: the blessing Jesus and the worshipping John the Baptist. For these two met for the first time in an unborn state during the Visitation when the Holy Spirit fills Elizabeth and causes the foetus to leap in her womb.[71]

This womb identity is emphasised by the placing of the Infant Jesus on the bare ground and, moreover, by the crossing of his legs, a posture that replicates the foetal position as drawn in Leonardo's anatomical studies (**FIG. 12.33**). Additionally, with her right arm and ample cloak, Mary seems to be drawing the infant John into a secure cavity marked on her left side by a gesture of blessing, an open hand hovering above Christ's head like a veritable dove of the Holy Spirit. In a metonymic identification, which again points back to the Immaculate Conception, this airborne

hand could possibly refer to the beloved in the Song of Songs: "Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff."[72] Finally, as Stefaniak perspicaciously suggests, the markedly sinusoidal folds of Mary's cloak, winding across her stomach with the golden lining turned out, also presumably entail an allusion to the womb and the chaos partially impregnated with forms. In *Timaeus* the formations in the recipient primordial nature are thus similarly compared with those patterns, for example triangles, that appear and disappear when a person has to make many kinds of forms in gold[73] – a metaphor which elegantly links up with the Virgin Mary's bodice via the assorted allusions of the Latin word *sinus* to twisting, fold, cavity and womb.[74]

The specific arrangement of the figure group is additionally legitimised by another and more 'real' interpretative level, which again changes the rock setting's referent from vertical *abyssus* to horizontal wilderness. According to an apocryphal legend, John the Baptist was sought out in the wilderness by the Holy Family when, on their way back from Egypt, they heard about Elizabeth's death and wanted to

comfort him. The 14th-century Pseudo-Cavalca version describes how the Baptist is here blessed by Christ and embraced by Mary: two gestures that have both found their way into Leonardo's painting. Serapion's late antique *Vita* (written 385-95) provides an added explanation as to why there is an angel present, and why this angel is pointing towards John: "Here is also Gabriel, the head of the angels, whom I have appointed to protect him [i.e. John the Baptist] and to grant to him power from heaven."[75]

This multilayered symbolic structure – linking, that is, Anne's, Mary's and Elizabeth's wombs with *abyssus* and John the Baptist's wilderness – is even extended with two further levels. Given that the painting is a Franciscan commission, there is also a requirement to portray aspects of Saint Francis's life, particularly his retreat on the Tuscan rock massif La Verna, which render him an *alter Ioannes*. Late medieval painting often brings Francis and John together,[76] and in Dante's *Paradiso* John assumes the highest position in Empyreum after Mary, while Francis, at his feet, is at the head of Benedict and Augustine, two other founders of monastic orders.[77] Francis's life on the wild rock can also, more particularly, be connected with John's life in Elizabeth's womb, for in Thomas of Celano's *Vita* (c. 1246-47) we find the following passage: "John prophesied enclosed within the hidden places of his mother's womb; Francis prophesied future events enclosed within the prison of this world while he was still ignorant of the divine counsel."[78] The rock cave on La Verna is thus here to be understood as both a womb and a Platonic world cave.

Whatever kind of screening from an external reality the *Virgin of the Rocks* might allude to, it is a screening with many openings. To the left, the hanging rocks open onto a view of a distant mist-wreathed stony wilderness; to the right, an opening provides a view of a solitary rock peak; and above, there would seem to be an open view towards the blue sky. On a Christian level, these openings must be interpreted as entrances to the celestial light that broke through when "the earth shook, and the rocks were split" and "[t]he tombs [...] opened" at the moment of Christ's death.[79] The link to John the Baptist's mission as pioneer for Christ is thereby established. For according to the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, a 2nd-3rd-century apocryphal scripture, the dark regions were bathed in a vast light when Christ yielded up the ghost, and among patriarchs and prophets John the Baptist stepped forward and declared:

> I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, John the Baptist and the prophet of the most High who went before his coming to prepare his way [...]. And now while I was going before him I came down hither to acquaint you, that the Son of God will next visit us, and, as the dayspring from on high, will come to us, who are in darkness and the shadow of death.[80]

As Francis was an *alter Ioannes*, it was similarly revealed posthumously to the Franciscans that every year, on the anniversary of his death, Francis has the privilege of descending to Purgatorio and releasing some souls.

As the host setting for Francis, then, the La Verna rock has a similar function to that of the passage to Inferno, the split Golgotha rock. In the anonymous Franciscan *Le considerazioni sulle sacre stigmate*, an appendix to *I Fioretti di San Francesco* (c. 1370-85), we read the following:

> [...] St. Francis was standing beside that cell, gazing at the form of the mountain and marvelling at the great chasms and openings in the massive rocks. And he began to pray, and then it was revealed to him by God that those striking chasms had been made in a miraculous way at the hour of Christ's Passion when, as the Gospel says, "the rocks split." And God wanted this to be manifested in a special way here on Mount Alverna in order to show that the Passion of Christ was to be renewed on that mountain in the soul of St. Francis by love and compassion and in his body by the imprinting of the Stigmata.[81]

Besides the chasm-pitted La Verna mountain being thus endowed with the same renewing function as the rocks that split at the moment of Christ's Passion, it should be noted that both Christ and Francis display a fluid transition between tortured body and rock; the wounds of the stigmatisation, which penetrate the saint's body, can therefore be compared with the chasms that open up La Verna, his dwelling in the womb of the earth. This connection, which thus shifts Leonardo's rocks from womb to martyred body, from vagina to wound, is corroborated in the widely read *Liber de conformitate vitae beati Francisci ad vitam Domini Jesu*, a work written by Francesco Bartolommeo di Pisa:

> The said Mount Alverna was prepared for the Blessed Francis so that he might receive the Stigmata on his own person. This mountain is exalted to the heights; it is greatly cherished both because in its simplicity and naturalness it is completely set apart from all the other mountains that have been eroded by the weather and because it was singularly ruined as a sign of the Passion of Christ. Since at the time of the Passion, as is revealed in the Gospels [Matthew 27: 51] "the rocks were split," an event which is revealed in a unique manner on this very mountain. Thus it is divided continuously from the top downwards in order that we might see for ourselves, verily, the rocks were rent one from the other.[82]

Could it be that Leonardo had wanted to emphasise the La Verna rock's exceptionally fresh ruination, simplicity and naturalness by setting it in contrast to "all the
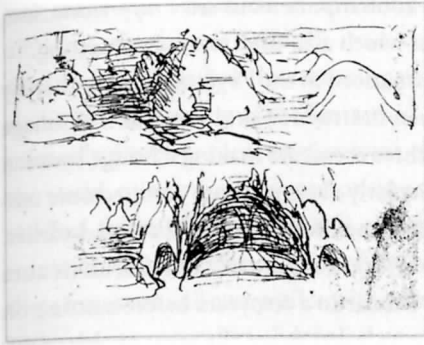
Fig. 12.34. Leonardo da Vinci, sketch (*c.* 1506-08) of stage set from a production of Poliziano's *Orfeo* in Mantua 1490, pen and ink on paper. London, British Library, Cod. Arundel, f. 231v.
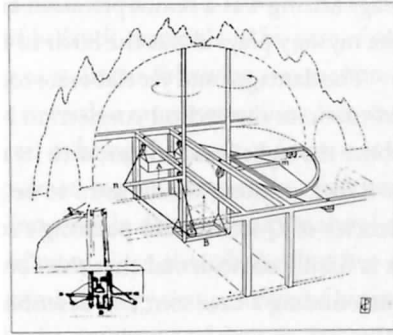
Fig. 12.35. Leonardo's stage machinery for *Orfeo* (reconstruction by R. Guatelli and C.A. Pedretti).

other mountains that have been eroded by the weather"? If so, these mountains could be accounted for by the distant, misty peaks visible through the two openings in the foreground. These rocks would have been fresh at the Creation, whereas now they have been worn down by the humid air. Conversely, the crumbling rocks in the foreground are a sign of the mythical renewal that is first generated by the Passion of Christ, later by Francis's stigmatisation. Hence, there could be a point in Perrig's symbolic reading of the one opening as paganism and the other as Judaism.[83] In any event, the mist increases the gap between present and past, foreground and distance. The aerial-perspectival vanishing point is also the point where oblivion engulfs the past and positions it beyond the renewals of Christ and Saint Francis.

That Leonardo was happy for the cave's subterranean symbolism to fluctuate unproblematically between a Christian and a pagan context is corroborated by his stage scenery for Poliziano's contemporaneous drama *Orfeo*. The play was originally written to be performed in Mantua around 1480 (if not earlier), but was restaged in the same city in 1490, when Leonardo was working for Lodovico il Moro in Milan. Two later drawings show that Leonardo – with striking traces of antique stage scenery – had set the play in a mountain landscape with two or three caves (**FIG. 12.34**). The middle and largest of these opened to the underworld and could only be seen when a semi-circular disc revolved 180 degrees and opened the mountain (**FIG. 12.35**). According to Leonardo's notes, this gave access to a "Pluto's Paradise" with devils, Furies, Cerberus, a horde of naked, weeping children and a variety of coloured flames. As this was the "Paradise" from which Orpheus rose again, Leonardo's

stage setting was a reinterpretation of the contemporaneous *sacre rappresentazioni*, the mystery plays about the birth of Christ which also used the cave as setting.[84]

The damaged and yet elaborate rock formations in the *Virgin of the Rocks* thereby corroborate the cyclical connection between destruction and renewal. The image above the right-hand corner, with its two-three crossbars making a bridge between two rock sections, would seem to be particularly close to those architectonic tendencies of Quattrocento painting's standard rock formations I discussed earlier. It is hardly coincidental that this form generation is part of the miraculous aura surrounding a cave seen and described by Leonardo a few years before starting on the painting: "And driven by my craving desire, eager to see the great wealth of different and strange forms made by artful nature, which were partially hidden from me among the dark rocks, I entered the opening of a big cave [...]." Leonardo is struck, however, by amazement and bewilderment, and he tries in vain to distinguish something in the darkness. "And [...] suddenly two things arose in me, fear and desire: fear of the threatening and dark cave, desire to see if something miraculous should be in there."[85]

The *Virgin of the Rocks* is thus the domicile of a force that is not only capable of immaculately creating humans, but also – like the primordial container in Plato's *Timaeus* – fantastical art shapes. And it thereby, on the iconographic level, condenses the autochthonic tendency to create formations found in so many of the Quattrocento painting's rocks exclusively promoted by the paradigm. Accordingly, as Patricia Emison has pointed out, the rock's virginity can also be seen in contrast to the consumed state caused by human greed and rape of the interior of the rock. This rock, victim of the Iron Age, is actually touched on by Leonardo in his writings: "On money and gold. From the cave-like grottoes will emerge that which will exhaust all the peoples of the world, with huge efforts, fear, sweat, in order to be helped by it." Conversely, he declares: "Wild is that which is preserved [intact]."[86]

Just such a rocky wilderness – preserved for the Iron Age intrusion of the earth and the corroding weather alike – is, then, at the heart of the *Virgin of the Rocks*.

12.2   Hewing, mine-work and quarrying

Between autochthony and cultivation

So far I have chiefly focused on rocks in 15th-century painting on the basis of the epistemic *field* they were in the process of leaving: the Golden Age *field*. The architectonic and fertile look of the rocks was mainly seen as being the result of nature's inner impetus, an autochthonic power pregnant with forms. This interpretation

was made more rigorous by involving an undercurrent of the Golden Age *field*, alchemy, which considered the unearthing of bedrock materials to be part of nature's intention rather than running counter to it. In the following two sections I shall shift the reading of the fantastical rocks towards a more naturalistic lens that primarily perceives their architectonic character as being the result of forces out in the world, meaning either enterprising design (man-made construction of nature), residual forms after mining and quarrying (man-made destruction of nature) or ruination (nature's destruction of the work of man). Even though the first two of these forces are still compatible with an alchemical ideology that perceives of human enterprise as naturally validated, they can also be symptoms of the new epistemic *field*, modernity, which is characterised by human separation from nature and by the desacralisation of nature. This is how the ruin, especially, with its traces of nature's blind, destructive forces, must be categorised.

As self-consciousness matures, and humankind cuts the last ties to nature, its art can obviously no longer be seen as a fulfilment of nature, as a transfer of celestial ideas to matter. Freedom of the soul is more a case of nature being drained of purpose, so that its cultivation becomes the result of humankind's free will. The first outcome of this rise of alleged human sovereignty is competition between nature and humankind. William of Malmesbury (*c.* 1094-1143) is already in a position to call the art of gardening a "competition between nature and art – what the former does not generate is created by the latter".[87] This train of thought reaches extremes in Ficino's *Neoplatonic Theology* (1474), which, to be sure, includes a lengthy paraphrase of Aristotelian philosophy of art, but gradually turns into a delirious celebration of human abilities. Apropos the Archimedian celestial model, he states: "Since this person sees the order of the heavens, [...] who will deny both that he has almost the same genius, so to speak, as the author of the heavens, and that he is capable in a way of making the heavens, should he ever obtain the instruments and the celestial material?"[88] The idea of the human being as rival to God is perhaps particularly prominent in the aesthetic branches of the arts. In 1480, the humanist Cristoforo Landino cautiously voices the opinion that the poet is creative, a sort of mortal god, whereas Leonardo is more smug when calling the painter a "signore et Dio".[89]

Seen in this light, the artificiality of the rocks therefore also has touches of megalomania, of a dream about reducing nature to an unresisting servant to human will. In his reference to the rocks' ruinous appearance (cf. the opening of this chapter), it is to the Renaissance princes' self-assurance and zeal to master nature that Lauro Martines turns:

When it looked to the rural space outside cities, this taste drew away from endowing it with an air of naturalness. Rather, the countryside had to be altered to hint at the grand surroundings of princes and oligarchies, with their great masses of cut and shaped and arranged stone, the proud *palazzi* and churches under their possessive patronage. This was self-confidence of a sort prepared to remake the face of nature.[90]

Ferrara, the centre of pictorial culture's bizarre rock formations, provides an actual example of this eagerness to create nature from scratch. In January 1471, Borso d'Este suddenly decided that a place called Monte Sancto beyond the Porta San Georgio should be extended by means of a mountain – a man-made mountain. All the farmers in the area were put to forced labour; carts, carriages and ships were put to work fetching soil. This exploit led to suffering and complaint as the farmers could not cultivate their land while the work was going on and, moreover, they thought the whole enterprise useless.[91] What was the point of the mountain? Apart from demonstrating Borso's infinite – albeit not completely tranquil – capacity to give nature a makeover and inject the flat Po Plain with undulations, the name of the spot, Monte Sancto, indicates that the location was sacred beforehand. Hence this artificial mountain might perhaps be one of the series of symbolic rocks the ascent of which makes for purification. Whether the mountain also related to Saint George, the patron saint of the city gate, is uncertain. If it did, it might be kin to the mountain pictured in the background of Tura's just two-years-younger Saint George's battle in the cathedral, a tall, cone-like peak wound round with as many as three circular city walls (FIG. 12.12).

The artificiality of the painted rocks could therefore also be understood essentially as an actual belabouring such as this, so that the rock nature itself is embraced by the modern, cultivated landscape. Doubt as to the extent to which a cave is the result of nature's or man's hand strikes a pair of shepherds in *Arcadia*, Sannazaro's pastoral novel of around 1489-91: "And upon entering the holy pine wood we found, under a hanging bank between ruined rocks, an ancient and big cave, I do not know if it was hewn in the hard mountain naturally or by manual artifice [...]."[92] In the work of artists such as Mantegna and Cosmè Tura, then, this ambiguity can be said to be extended to the landscape in its entirety. Their roads do not appear merely as levelled out parts of the surface of the earth, but wedge themselves into the rock mass as deeply countersunk components which, provided they are read as man-made, testify to extensive hewing and extraction. In Mantegna's Louvre *Crucifixion*, the Golgotha rock's large ashlars almost seem to be a continuation of the road winding down along the rock wall from Jerusalem (FIG. 12.36). The dizzying, perspectival curves carving their way across its spherical surface could be suggestive of the headway made by the horsemen on the road. Hence, in this cutting
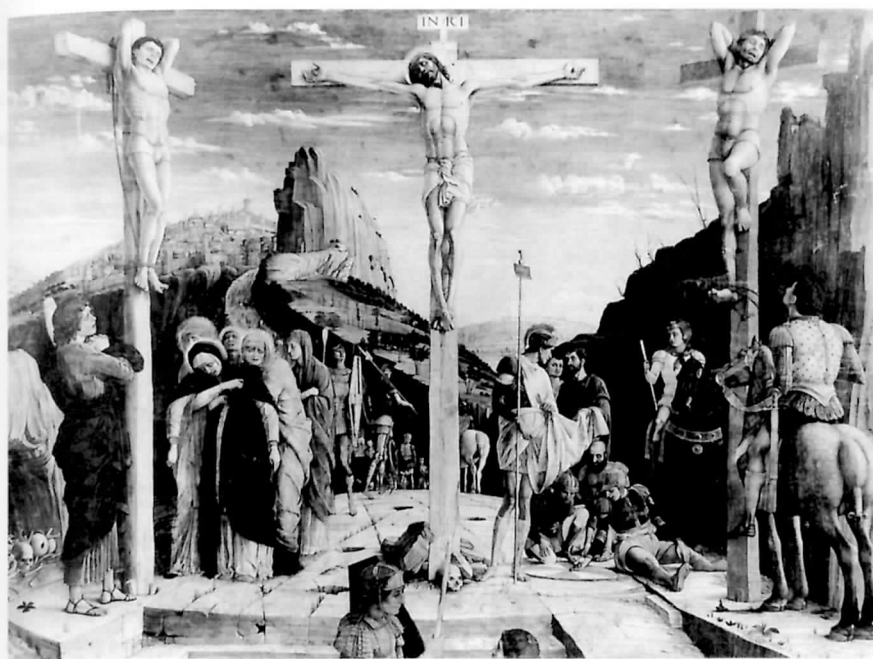
Fig. 12.36. Andrea Mantegna, *Crucifixion*
(1459-60), tempera on wood, predella
panel from the *San Zeno Altarpiece*.
Paris, Musée du Louvre.

out of the landscape's rocks we again find ourselves in a transition zone between paradigm and iconography, gaze and manufacture.[93]

The working-up effect in the rocks of the general landscape image is condensed to actual iconographies in the manuscripts of the Sienese engineer Mariano Taccola (1382-after 1453) (FIGS. 12.37-41). The Gothic republic, which turns its cultivated territory into images (cf. chapter 10), also ushers in the first European visions of the impact of machines on the landscape formations. The visions are rooted in practice since Siena was famous for its technological projects, particularly those dealing with hydraulics. In the high hills around the city there were many natural mineral springs and the Sienese connected them with the city centre via a network of underground aqueducts, what were known as *butini*. The network supplied water in quantities only surpassed by the contemporary Roman aqueducts and could provide for the needs of, among other institutions, Spedale di Santa Maria della Scala, which was one of the largest complexes in Siena at the time. Only

Fig. 12.37. Mariano Taccola, *Water Mill Supplied with Water by a Spring*, drawing from *De ingeneis* manuscript (1433), book III. Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, ms Pal. 766, f. 22.

Fig. 12.38. Mariano Taccola, *Transporting a Column from Quarry*, drawing from *De ingeneis* manuscript (1433), book III. Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, ms Pal. 766, ff. 14v-15.
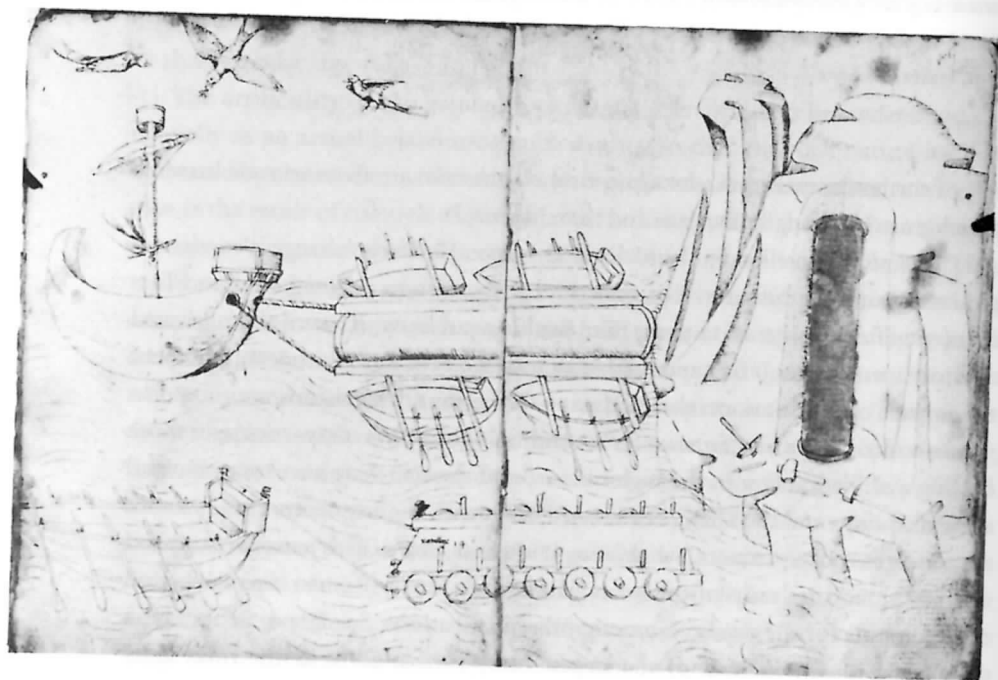
Fig. 12.39. Mariano Taccola, *Aqueduct*, drawing from *De ingeneis* manuscript (1433), book III. Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, ms Pal. 766, ff.29v-30.
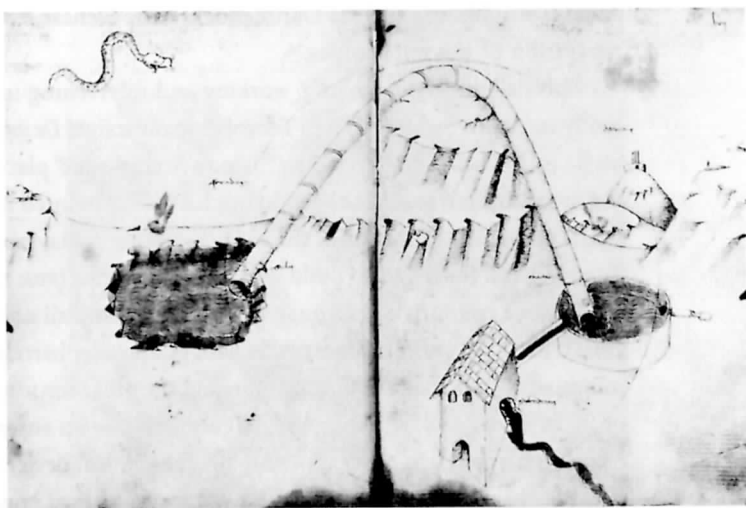
Fig. 12.40. Mariano Taccola, *Underground Mine Causing a Fortress to Collapse*, drawing from *De machinis* manuscript (1449). Munich, Staatsbibliothek, ms Clm. 28800, f. 48v.
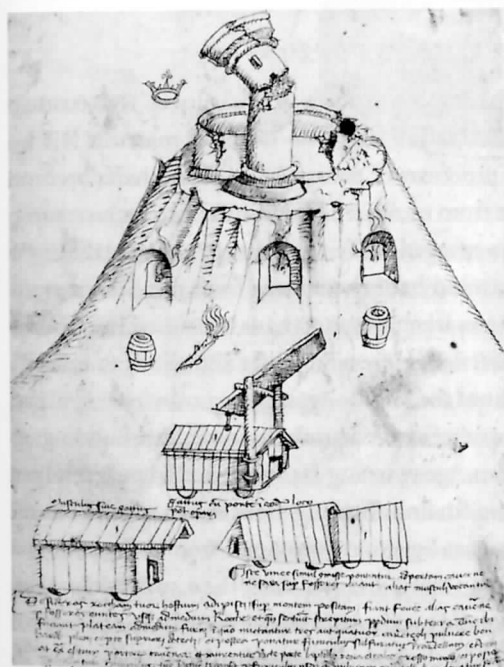
Fig. 12.41. Mariano Taccola, *Saint George and the Dragon*, drawing from *De ingeneis* manuscript (1433), book III. Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, ms Pal. 766, f. 76.

envious neighbours such as Dante mocked the Sienese frequent construction and reparation of the water pipes.[94]

This delight in controlling, working and intervening in the earth mass has patently spread to the drawings in Taccola's manuscripts *De ingeneis* (1433) and *De machinis* (1449).[95] The manner in which "Siena's Archimedes" places his inventions among the Byzantine terraced rocks would not have disappointed the American land artists of the 1960s. The raw mass of the rocks looks like a playground of nature, in which Taccola has a free hand to build bridges, set up mills (FIG. 12.37), lay out ports, drill holes, carve columns out of quarries (FIG. 12.38), install aqueducts to fishing reservoirs (FIG. 12.39) or explode fortresses with gunpowder barrels placed in underground mineshafts (FIG. 12.40). Even the chain and the pillar securing the princess in a scene of Saint George's battle with the dragon look like an enterprising intervention in nature (FIG. 12.41). In order to justify his mechanical devices as free intellectual art, Taccola expressed in verse his opinion that mechanical power (*ingenio*) was a direct extension of mental power (*ingenium*), and that ingenuity was a superior quality in a ruler than brute strength.[96] In his drawings he would seem to entertain a predilection for artificial, often round-arched, openings in the rock, be they access to canals, mineshafts or recesses for watermills. All in all, his worked rocks bear a striking resemblance to the rocks that feature in the ordinary landscape images – with the one difference that he displays the tools where they are otherwise concealed.

Quarrying and mining

If we look to Taccola in particular as our witness, the artificiality of 15th-century rocks not only indicates positive cultivation, but also negative matrices left by quarrying and mining, the primary processes of construction. Mineshafts become architectonic gateways, the imprints from excavated blocks turn into architectonic expanses. Landscape thus becomes a ravaged wilderness along the lines of Pliny's lament: "We quarry these mountains and haul them away for a mere whim; and yet there was a time when it seemed remarkable even to have succeeded in crossing them."[97] (Cf. chapter 4.) The rocks' quarried impression might also allude to ruins in the physical world given that throughout the Middle Ages, indeed culminating in the 15th century, Roman relics were stripped of raw materials for use in new buildings.[98]

As we saw in chapter 4, the Golden Age yearning for virgin soil impeded minework, the aberration of the Iron Age, in finding anything more than a sporadic foothold as pictorial motif in pre-modern post-Egyptian time. Apart from the small wave crests in Greek archaic and Late Roman time, it is not until the Late Middle Ages with its new work ethic and corresponding industrial boom that the motif begins to assert itself – but then again, and like the agrarian motif, it has come to stay.[99]

After trial runs in the 13th-14th centuries when mine-workers appear on corbels or, like peasants (cf. chapter 10), as donors in the lower sections of glass paintings, the motif reaches an initial independent try-out in what is known as the *Kuttenberger Kanzionale* (c. 1490), a manuscript of hymns from mine-rich Bohemia (**PLATE 42**).[100] In the frontispiece miniature we are looking across a divided landscape teeming with people, which could be seen as a secularised version of the Day of Judgement, transforming the sinners into initiators of an overall process of refinement. At the bottom there is what resembles a sectional view of an underworld full of cavities, in which small cowl-clad mountain folk are energetically working to relieve the bluish bedrock of its riches. Above ground, where a panoramic view takes over, the gaze is led not to a gem-studded New Jerusalem but to a courtyard where a buzzing crowd of people are processing the blue stone for its core of silver. Even if we are looking

for the Doomsday trumpeters, we can identify a successor in an encouraging little trumpet player next to the entrance.

Behind images such as this and its more factually illustrative 16th-century descendants – the woodcuts in Georgius Agricola's *De re metallica* (1556), for example – there is clearly an enterprising spirit at work, that of modernity, which is no longer weighed down with scruples about intruding into the earth. The growth of this spirit did not occur painlessly, however, but was to the very last accompanied by primitivist voices underpinned by the neo-antique movement, the Renaissance. The aggressive consequences of the Iron Age are subjected to critical treatment in, for example, an image that was almost a contemporary of the *Kuttenberger Kanzionale*, a drawing made in the 1480s and inserted into the Wolfeggian *Master of the Housebook Manuscript* (c. 1480; FIG. 12.42).[101] Like in the Bohemian miniature, a mountain has here been perforated with caves in which miners hack loose the nuggets of mineral. The felled trees from the mountain are either found scattered across its flanks, used to shore up the mineshafts or included in the building of a house in the foreground. As an indication of the alarming aspect of this entire exhaustion of nature, four labourers in front of the house have come to blows with iron swords, the end product of this exploitation.

But the Renaissance could not, of course, make do with a rebirth of the self-hatred of antiquity. Antique architecture, the end product of mining, also represented *magnificentia*, grandeur, and furthermore it could be justified by the less primitivist components of antique philosophy. Even though Pliny certainly often complained about the invasion of the earth, he could also – with a typically antique paradox – be appropriated as an example of the opposite standpoint: that he nonetheless writes his art history as a direct extension of the section of natural history dealing with quarrying and mining, bears witness to his belief in the connection between nature and art. As mentioned earlier, according to classical, non-primitivist thought, design constituted an elevation of the basis material, whether originating from celestial, preordained ideas (Plato), or tied to the material in which it grew (Aristotle).

Fascination with the architectonic effect of quarrying was expressed as early as Pausanias. Of the Pentelic quarries, he writes:

Here the rock has been quarried away so as to leave a smooth perpendicular wall. [...] The marks, delicate and regular, of the ancient chisels may be seen in horizontal rows on the face. The marks show that the ancients regularly quarried the marble in rectangular blocks, first running a groove round each block with the chisel and then forcing it out with wedges. The effect of this has been to leave huge rectangular cuttings in the side of the mountain.[102]

Fig. 12.43. Albrecht Dürer, *Quarry* (c. 1495-96), watercolour and gouache on paper. Formerly in Bremen, Kunsthalle (whereabouts unknown since 1945).

Quarried rocks such as these are the subject of several of Dürer's nature studies (FIG. 12.43).[103] With an unprejudiced gaze approaching the photographic, Dürer draws the raw hewn surfaces that expose the interior of the earth so that trees and roots balance vulnerably along the upper rim of the quarry. But again: despite the searching, almost excruciating naturalism, in the shapes of the quarried rock we recall the artificiality that moulds so many rocks in the paradigmatically-determined landscape image. In fact, these stone blocks often look just like that, a sectional view
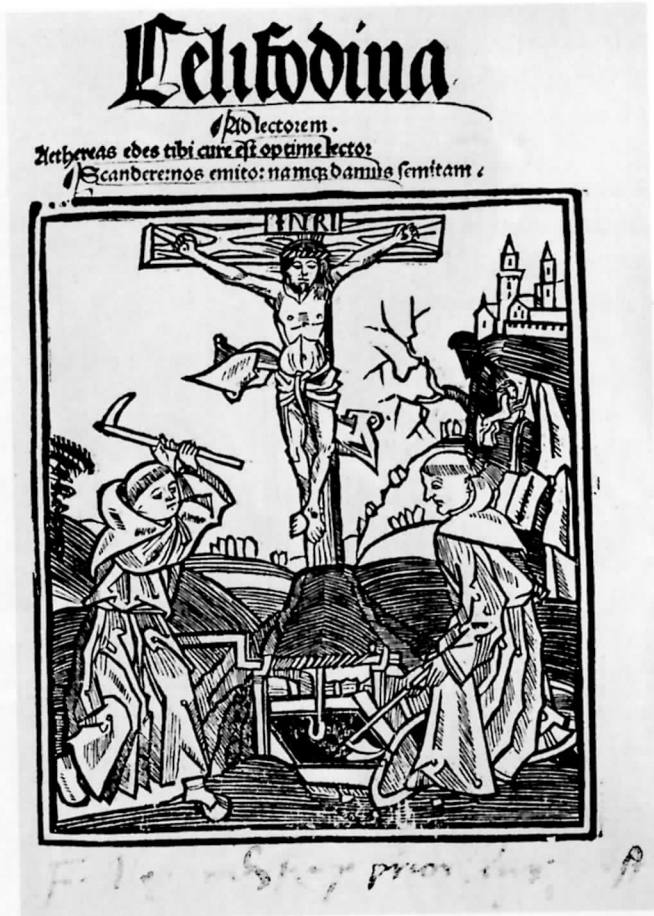
through the earth – with a layer of vegetation and roots at the top and raw stone masses underneath. It would seem that we are here faced with an archaeological investigation, which for the first time lays bare the underground, in the same way as doctors slice through the human body and architects cut sectional views of the body of buildings (FIGS. 8.17 and 8.20). Dürer's quarry studies are therefore just as much examples of the literally in-depth probing of the modern gaze as they are explorations of industrially exploited slopes in front of that gaze.

The full potential of these studies is, however, first exposed when one of them is put into an engraving of *Saint Jerome Penitent in the Wilderness, c.* 1496 (FIG. 12.44).[104] Here the wound left by civilisation's most drastic infringement of nature, quarrying, is thus paradoxically turned into the virgin mountains which bring the saint into contact with God. That this is a case of more than a merely superficial visual

coincidence would seem to be indicated by a frontispiece woodcut of the Crucifixion in Johannes von Palz's mining treatise *Celifodina* (Erfurt 1502; **FIG. 12.45**), in which the Golgotha death cave itself is transformed into a mineshaft around which two monks are swinging their mattocks.[105] As we move into the vicinity of professional mining and its legitimisation in alchemy, we notice that the Iron Age rape of the earth is here ostensibly blessed, in that the minerals originate from the same depths of the earth as the resurrected Christ and are processed in a way which is analogous with Christ and his successors' – the monks – spiritual route. Might it be possible that just as in Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* we witnessed how the freshly ruined underworld becomes restorative – a parallel to both Christ's and Saint Francis' scratched and nail-pierced bodies – so we here encounter a plaidoyer for the redeeming function of an industrially exploited earth? When in another portrait of the penitent Jerome, by

Cosmè Tura (*c.* 1474; **FIG. 12.46**), our gaze moves to one of the typically bizarre rock formations in the background and here, on the narrow rock path, spots yet another of these monks with a mattock on his shoulder, we have again but to believe that he is on his way to some kind of hewing work – possibly the work that has cut free the knowledge-evoking stone with which the hermit is beating his breast.

The implementation of this kind of pictorial short-circuiting between reclusive shelter and quarry is possibly assisted by actual shared physical experiences. Since antiquity, it was normal that mineshafts also served as – not particularly comfortable – dwellings for the mine workers;[106] and the catacombs, places of prayer for the early Christians, emerged, as we saw in chapter 2, as a huge mine complex prepared by professional *fossores.* Even though it would take further research to provide proof, it seems not unlikely that in the Late Middle Ages there was a common culture for mine workers and monks, a culture that may have produced, *inter alia,* the aforementioned Monk of the Mountain, Master Hoemmerling.

How far the visual play on the anchorite and mining milieus can be driven is apparent, for example, from a comparison between Bernardo Parentino's *Christ Carrying the Cross with Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome* (*c.* 1480; **FIG. 12.47**) and a later mining scene such as *Mining of Diamonds,* Maso da San Friano's illustration of *terra* from a cycle of the four elements for the *Studiolo* of Francesco I (completed 1570-72; **FIG. 12.48**).[107] Both show sheer rocks with openings, paths and various arrangements of wooden slats for safety purposes. But whereas Maso's rocks serve as work area, Parentino's function as a habitation complex for the dozen or so hermits who lead there lives here. A structurally-related observation can be made in the 16th-century Netherlandish world landscape. The rocks in Herri met de Bles' mining scenes are riddled with caves (**FIG. 12.49**), but the same beehive-like perforated rocks are also to be found in a variety of contexts in the contemporary Flemish landscape backgrounds, sometimes given over to the anchorite milieu and at other times with no iconographic label.[108] We thus again find ourselves in a borderland between paradigm and iconography.

Francesco del Cossa, whose father was a stonemason and builder,[109] would also seem to play with mining iconography. To the right in his *Saint John the Baptist* (from the *Griffoni Polyptych,* (*c.* 1473-75; **FIG. 12.3**) there is a rock passage which bears a striking resemblance to open-pit mines – such as those we see in, for example, the woodcut illustrations for Georgius Agricola's *De re metallica* (1556; **FIG. 12.50**). And the

Fig. 12.46. Cosmè Tura, *The Penitent Saint Jerome* (*c.* 1474), oil and tempera on wood. London, National Gallery.

Fig. 12.47. Bernardo Parentino, *Christ Carrying the Cross with Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome* (detail) (*c.* 1480), tempera on wood. Modena, Galleria Estense.

Fig. 12.48. Maso da San Friano, *Mining of Diamonds* (1570-72), oil on canvas. Florence, Palazzo Vecchio, *Studiolo* of Francesco I.

Fig. 12.49. Herri met de Bles, *Landscape with Mining Scenes* (1540s [?]), oil on wood. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

fox-like animal which, in the same panel by Cossa, is on its way into an underground passage, is echoed much later in a engraving in J.E. Boeck's *Uraltes chymisches Werk* (1760; FIG. 12.51).[110] Here, against the background of the legendary rabbi Abraham Eleazar, it would seem to be a weasel, the fleetness of which corresponds to the dry process of alchemy, i.e. the secret salt-flame's short, yet hazardous route, involving, *inter alia*, saltpetre. If there is an alchemical symbolism lurking throughout Cossa's many earth apertures, it is particularly evident in the arch of the drain pipe seen above the flowing water in the *Miracles of Saint Vincent Ferrer* (also part of the *Griffoni Polyptych*, but possibly painted by the assistant, Ercole de' Roberti; FIG. 12.52). On a number of occasions in alchemical treatises of a later date, a stream such as this is to be seen in front of a cave entrance – one example being again the abovementioned illustration from Boeck's alchemy (FIG. 12.51), where the watercourse represents the long process of alchemy, the wet, but sure route involving many distillations.[111]

Although these and many other 15th-century pictorial landscape riddles await

Fig. 12.50. *Mining*,
woodcut from Georgius
Agricola, *De re metallica*
(Basle, 1556), Book 6.
Bochum, Deutsches
Bergbau-Museum.

Fig. 12.51. *The Legendary
Rabbi Abraham Eleazar*,
engraving from J.E. Boeck,
Uraltes chymisches Werk
(Leipzig, 1760).

Fig. 12.52. Ercole de' Roberti, *Miracles of Saint Vincent Ferrer*
(c. 1473-75), tempera on wood, predella panel of the *Griffoni
Polyptych* (section). Rome, Vatican, Pinacoteca Vaticana.

further deciphering – to the extent that their deliberate ambiguities can be unravelled at all – it is at least undeniable that the artists often produce almost surreal visions based on underworld symbolism, dealing with the entire spectrum from alchemical creation to architectonic rock and on to ruin.

Mantegna I: Camera degli Sposi

A defence for mountain encroachment finds iconographic condensation in Mantegna's decoration of Camera degli Sposi in Mantua, Marquess Lodovico Gonzaga's commission, executed 1465-74. In the background of the scene *Lodovico Gonzaga Meets Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, His Son*, we see a huge hemispherical mountain (PLATE 37). The upper half of the mountain is covered with a mighty city encircled by a wall, and below the city, in the bare rock, various work activities are taking place. To the right, below a hunter running across a meadow with his dogs, three stonemasons are sitting in front of their quarry, a dark cave, chiselling a column and a block (FIG. 12.53A). To the left, the rock is perforated by smaller caves, out of which lumps of minerals are being carried away on a kind of stretcher (FIG. 12.53B). They will be carried via narrow paths up to the building on the plateau above, a temple complex surrounded by an as of yet unfinished arcade.

As Rodolfo Signorini has shown, the setting in which the *Meeting* takes place can be connected with the Gonzagas' undertakings in 1461-62, when Francesco was appointed cardinal by Pius II.[112] In the summer of 1461, just before this politically crucial appointment, Pius had been engaged in a war with the Neapolitan kingdom, supported by, *inter alios*, the Lazionian Baron Giacomo Savelli and the Ghibelline-oriented Tivoli. In July, with assistance from Alessandro Sforza, a brother of the Gonzaga-family friend Francesco Sforza from Milan, Pius won a victory at Tivoli and decided to spend the summer there in order to supervise the building of Rocca Pia, his new fortress intended to prevent further insurrection. The Gonzaga agent Bartolomeo Bonatto, who was working energetically for Francesco's appointment to the rank of Cardinal, also resided in Tivoli. In preparation for the ecclesiastical welding together of Rome and Mantua, Bonatto turned to geography. In a letter to Lodovico, he vows that the prince's villa Cavriana, which was in the process of being built, is not only at the same distance from Mantua as Tivoli is from Rome (*c.* 31 km), but that it eclipses Tivoli's beauty.

As Signorini demonstrates, this and other letters must have informed the programme behind the Camera degli Sposi's landscape. As indicated by the Hercules statue in front of the unfinished temple, and the small seated Hercules Victor figure in its tympanon, this is the Temple of Hercules in Tivoli – the place in whose gateway Emperor Augustus had often meted out the law. This identification is extended in

Fig. 12.53a. Detail of Andrea Mantegna's
*Lodovico Gonzaga Meets Cardinal Francesco
Gonzaga, His Son*, plate 37.

the fresco sections with their grooms and putti on the left, where in addition to a
Rocca Pia under construction we spot, *inter alia*, the gigantic Temple of Fortuna in
Palestrina. As to the big city, its Rome identity is apparent from elements such as
the Pyramid of Cestius, the Colosseum and Castel Sant'Angelo. That all this archi-
tecture also alludes to Cavriana-Mantua is apparent from the Gonzagas' coat of
arms, a cross, which is inserted into the square tower immediately to the left of the
Temple of Hercules and is also a feature in the tower above the antique-looking city
gate. With meticulously differentiated texture, Mantegna shows that in both cases
the coat of arms is an element of a new building constructed on a ruined founda-
tion. By so doing, we are presented with a tangible statement that the Renaissance
princes' new buildings are restoring the Rome of antiquity. The binding substance
in this synthesis is, of course, Christianity incarnated in Francesco's appointment
as Cardinal. The event is reflected in the foreground where Lodovico, on New Year's
Day 1462, immediately after his appointment, meets Francesco outside Bozzolo,
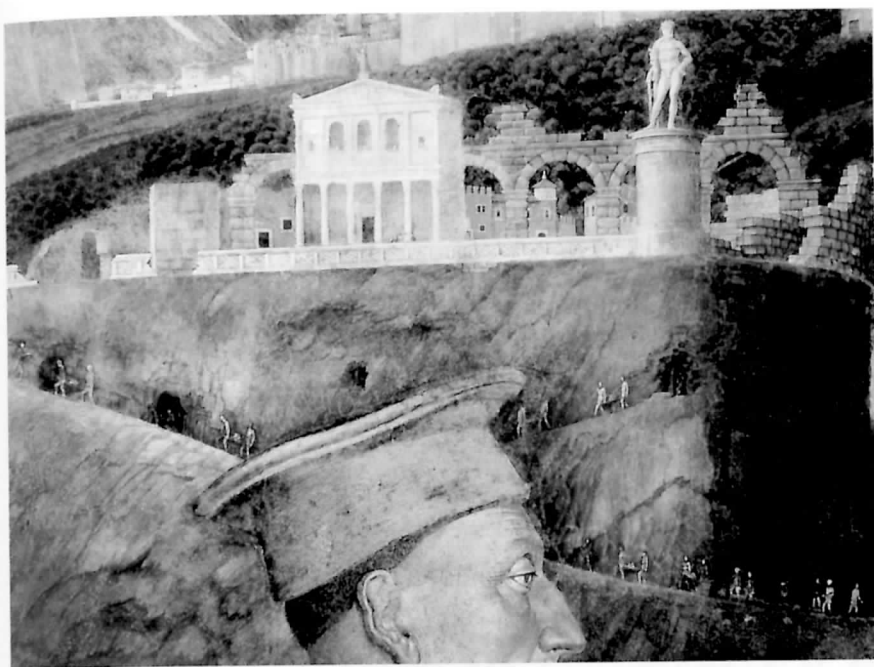midway between Mantua and Milan.

Fig. 12.53b. Detail of Andrea Mantegna's
*Lodovico Gonzaga Meets Cardinal Francesco
Gonzaga, His Son*, plate 37.

The play on the topography continues as we look from city and temple down to the mountain caves below. According to Strabo, a writer the Gonzagas demonstrably have read, the area around Tivoli was known for its quarries: the river Anio

> flows out through a very fruitful plain past the quarries of the Tiburtine stone, and
> of the stone of Gabii, and of what is called "red stone"; so that the delivery from the
> quarries and the transportation by water are perfectly easy – most of the works of
> art at Rome being constructed of stone brought thence.[113]

The stone that is dug out is patently red, and thus their quarrying symbolises nothing less than *the main source of works of art in the Rome of antiquity*. The motif of the stonemason cave near the city belongs, as shown in chapter 7, to a late antique Virgil tradition in which Carthage is built under the vigilant eye of Aeneas (FIG. 7.29). The motif is given a further patriotic slant in Lorenzo Valla's *Oratio in principio sui studii*, the opening address given on a course in rhetoric, Rome 1455. Here it is claimed

Fig. 12.54a. Pietro Guindaleri, *Sculptors* (finished after 1489), miniature from manuscript of Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia*. Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale, ms J.I. 22-23, f. 496 (min. 9).


Fig. 12.54b. Pietro Guindaleri, *Copper Mining* (finished after 1489), miniature from manuscript of Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia*. Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale, ms J.I. 22-23, f. 469 (min. 28).

that the arts, for example urban construction as depicted in the *Aeneid* Carthage episode, derive benefit from competition, and that Roman culture united the many competitors so as not to end up with a Babel. By contrasting Babylon, the all-time stock nightmare vision of the perverted city, the legitimacy of Roman-Mantuan quarrying is thus put into further relief.[114]

What architecture in tandem with quarrying scenes symbolises, then, is the intimate connection between nature and art prescribed in non-primitivist antique philosophy. Art not only completes the raw material provided by nature but, in the most literal of senses, it is nature's superstructure, because architecture, the city surrounded by ring-wall, crowns a hierarchy built up from a base of quarry caves.

Fig. 12.55. Jan van Eyck, *Saint Barbara* (1437), oil on wood. Antwerp, Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts.
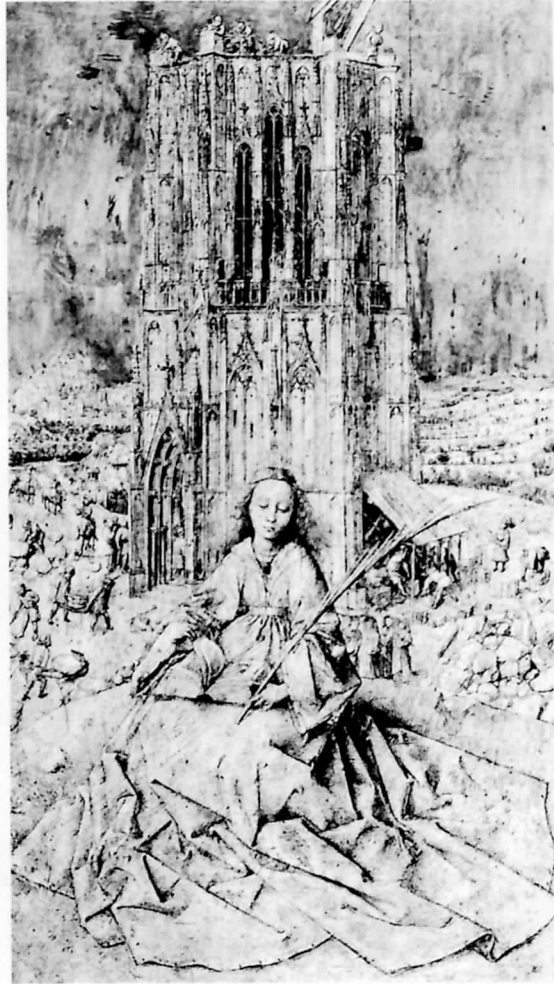
How closely Pliny in particular lurks in the background is apparent from an-other of the Gonzagas' commissioned works: the large, now unfortunately partially burned, Pliny manuscript in Turin, attributed to Pietro Guindaleri of Cremona (completed after 1489).[115] In the art history section of this manuscript we find both a medallion showing sculptors working in a workshop (FIG. 12.54A) and a medallion illustrating copper mining (FIG. 12.54B).[116] Like the paths below Mantegna's Temple of Hercules, the miners here are carrying lumps of minerals on stretchers – a visual similarity that corroborates the conceptual kinship between mining and quarry-ing. The area around Tivoli was particularly suitable for visualisation of a Plinian iconography since in the ancient Tiburtine cult Hercules Saxanus was both tutelary

deity for the quarrymen and for the caves themselves.[117] The Gonzagas could thus scarcely have rooted their city state more effectively in the earth's womb.

A thematic parallel to the building activity and stonemasons of Camera degli Sposi can be seen in the background of *Saint Barbara*, an unfinished painting from 1437 by Jan van Eyck (FIG. 12.55). Like the Camera degli Sposi, the motif concerns the conversion of a pagan to a properly Christian architecture. According to legend, Barbara's father, wealthy Dioscorus, was opposed to her marriage and had therefore locked her up in a tower where she secretly converted to Christianity. Wanting to turn the tower into a chapel, she had another window added to the two already there, as a symbol of the Trinity. However, even though the three windows dominate the second storey in the painting, van Eyck's labourers have evidently built the Gothic tower-chapel from the base up. All in all, it looks like a sacred forerunner to Brueghel's Tower of Babel, a motif with more direct references to the pagan Rome (Colosseum). Albeit no rock caves, but only heaps of rough broken stones, are to be seen in van Eyck, the work of his stonemasons is, like that of Mantegna's, to be understood as being closely linked to the earth; for, besides protecting soldiers, artillerymen and weapon smiths, Barbara is also the patron saint of mine-workers. Having been prosecuted by her father and the prefects, she flees to a rock which opens and envelops her in its protective embrace – in the same way as the earth shelters the miners.[118] For this reason, the van Eyckian Barbara is also placed, like a veritable *Madonna dell'umiltà*, on the bare ground, stone's place of origin.[119]

Mantegna II: Madonna of the Stonecutters *and* Christ as the Suffering Redeemer

In Camera degli Sposi and the Barbara panel, the stonemasons' work is blessed. The iconography is, however, charged with ambivalence, and it takes literally nothing before it fluctuates and turns into its opposite, the demonic art production associated with *luxuria*. Sitting on the bare earth against a background of stonemasons, Barbara can quite reasonably lead us on to two other Mantegna pictures in which the same disposition of a seated *humilitas* foreground figure and stonemasons is split into an antagonistic tension. This is the case in *Madonna of the Stonecutters* (FIG. 12.56), possibly painted during Mantegna's stay in Rome 1488-90, and *Christ as the Suffering Redeemer* (PLATE 38), most likely painted in Mantua in the mid 1490s. Nothing more is known, however, of the paintings' early provenance.[120]

As Frederick Hartt has pointed out in a somewhat neglected article written in 1952,[121] the two paintings are related in terms of genre. The Madonna and Child and the Pietà motif were often put on an equal footing in 15th-century Passion theology, given that the support the Infant Jesus received from his mother was akin to

Fig. 12.56. Andrea Mantegna, *Madonna of the Stonecutters* (c. 1488-90), tempera on wood. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

Fig. 12.56a. Detail of Andrea Mantegna's *Madonna of the Stonecutters* (c. 1488-90), fig. 12.56.

that which *post mortem* fell to his lot in the Pietà situation after the Crucifixion. And whereas the child Jesus had just left the mother's womb, his adult counterpart also, as in a mirror image, is on the point of being taken back into the rock tomb, Mother Earth's womb. It is therefore an obvious inference to interpret the rock caves in the pictorial backgrounds as essentially the same cave: the mystic nativity grotto whence Christ was born, descended to the dead and rose again (FIGS. 12.56A and 12.57). This

idea, juxtaposing Mary's body and that of Mother Earth has, as discussed in chapter 2, a rich tradition in Christianity. A line in an Ambrosian Easter hymn reads, for example: "Thou who were before born of a virgin, art born now of the grave."[122]

Furthermore, in both paintings Christ is shown with open mouth, as if he is singing. In the Copenhagen picture he even seems to be doing so in chorus with the two supporting angels. If we consult a source which was much read in the Late Middle Ages, the 9th-century Abbot Hrabanus Maurus' *Allegoriæ in sacram scripturam*, under the word *carmen* (song) we find a reference to the following passage in the Book Of Psalms (40: 2):

He drew me up from the pit of destruction,

out of the miry bog,

and set my feet upon a rock,

making my steps secure.

He put a new song in my mouth

a song of praise to our God.[123]

Even though in *Madonna of the Stonecutters* it is the Virgin Mary, and not Christ, who has her foot placed on the exposed rock, both paintings would seem to resonate with this kind of song of praise about being drawn out of the rock cave, the pit of destruction. The symbolism is particularly purposeful in the Copenhagen painting since the Suffering Redeemer, most unusually in an Italian art context, seems to be getting up, a movement that is highlighted by the pale-yellow glow of the rising Easter sun. In fact, this full-figure breathing Suffering Redeemer is unique in Italian art.[124] The Easter symbolism is possibly enlarged upon by the four small women walking in the direction of the crosses on Golgotha. They might include the three Marys who find Christ's tomb empty.

But parallel to the aforementioned title page in *Celifodina*, where mining monks have made a metal mine out of the Golgotha death cave, the cave tomb here is invaded by stonemasons. In the Uffizi painting, the area in front of the cave is being used to work on a column shaft, a capital, a sarcophagus lid and, on a rock plateau further down, the sarcophagus itself. In front of the Copenhagen painting's tunnel of a cave tomb, workers are struggling with a column shaft, a statue and what looks like a sarcophagus, while the sarcophagus lid and a large hemispherical bowl with pedestal have already been finished. The scenes are formally identical with their counterparts below the city in Camera degli Sposi, but have now changed agenda. What we are looking at is not material provision for the civilised city state, but rather the greedy Iron Age people assaulting the earth. As he embarks on the gold and silver section in his *Natural History*, Pliny for example laments:

We trace out all the fibres of the earth, and live above the hollows we have made in her, marvelling that occasionally she gapes open or begins to tremble – as if forsooth it were not possible that this may be an expression of the indignation of our holy parent! We penetrate her inner parts and seek for riches in the abode of the spirits of the departed, as though the part where we tread upon her were not sufficiently bounteous and fertile. [...] How innocent, how blissful, nay even how luxurious life might be, if it coveted nothing from any source but the surface of the earth, and, to speak briefly, nothing but what lies ready to her hand![125]

Is it possible to imagine a more evocative pictorial rendition of this seeking for wealth in the realm of the dead than Mantegna's, which turns Christ's freshly-hewn tomb into a quarry? Once the earth has been subject to rape by greed, its protective function as grave, in particular, will cease. It is therefore an insult akin to Jezebel's bared remains upon the field in Jezreel when Isaiah condemns the King of Babylon to the quarry: "[...] but you are cast out away from your grave, like a loathed branch, clothed with the slain, those pierced by the sword, who go down to the stones of the pit, like a dead body trampled underfoot."[126]

That Mantegna is actually referring to the Golden Age topos – and thereby condenses my standard reference of cultural evolution – is apparent from the fact that both quarries are part of a split landscape structured according to the myth's narrative sequence. The raped cave tomb, civilisation's ultimate decadence, is thus found to the left of Christ, a side traditionally linked with furtiveness (cf. *sinister*). To his right, conversely, we see landscapes characterised by all the surface activities renounced by the Iron Age stonemasons. Alongside the road in the Copenhagen painting, we see an idyllic meadow with resting and pipe-playing shepherds and their flock; and the meadow is bounded by a field with sparse vegetation, possibly arable land. On the same side in *Madonna of the Stonecutters*, we see shepherds and peasants harvesting stacks of green grass.[127] These landscapes thus depict a space spanning from the completely virgin Golden Age soil to a Silver and Bronze Age agriculture which might well process the earth but which as of yet stays on its surface. That agriculture, the work of the Fall, is registered in the 'good' side of the picture testifies to the incipient rehabilitation of farming introduced by the modernity *field*. The division is emphasised in the Copenhagen painting where Christ is supported on his left-hand side by a seraph dressed in blue, while his right side is attended to by a cherub in red. The seraph, originally a serpent monster, was lower down the celestial hierarchy than the cherub, and so is shown by Mantegna with a hopeful upward gaze. The cherub, on the other hand, can look downwards from a superior position.

Having been abused by the stonemasons, the entrails within the cavity of the tomb are not transformed into flesh that rises again, but to stone which through the pains of endeavour is converted into art works. On the spectrum of iniquity to which these art works correlate – *luxuria*, idolatry, aggression – the latter, destructive, aspect features because the works can be read, at least in part, as *Arma Christi*, instruments of torment used in Christ's Passion. The column and the statue could therefore allude to flagellation, for in Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation* (FIG. 12.58), for example, Christ is bound to a column topped with a golden idol. It was actually normal practice to surround the Pietà motif (in Venice also the Madonna and Child) with these instruments, so here the pictogram is, as it were, absorbed by the landscape setting.

Fig. 12.58. Piero della Francesca, *Flagellation* (1450s), oil and tempera on wood. Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche.
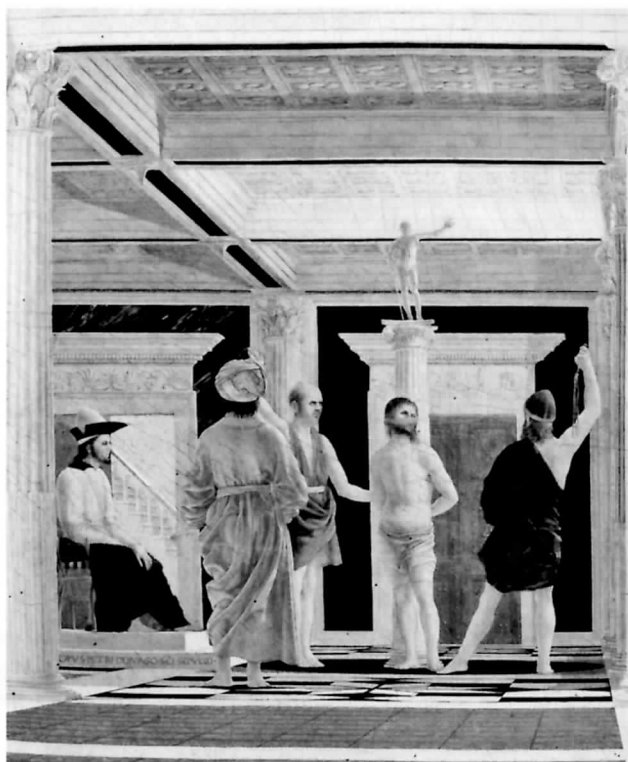

Fig. 12.59. Bartolomeo di Giovanni, *Saint Clement's Penal Work in a Quarry* (c. 1485), tempera on wood, predella panel from *Madonna Enthroned with Saints* (detail). Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

But, more generally, the art works represent *luxuria,* and the culmination of materiality: the pagan idolatry which Christ upturned.[128] The column, which was also seen in Camera degli Sposi, was the epitome of antique culture, and the hewing of it and its capitals is thus also conspicuous when Bartolomeo di Giovanni depicts Saint Clement's penal work in a Roman quarry (FIG. 12.59).[129] In the more specific choice of objects, particularly those in the Copenhagen picture, Mantegna was influenced by a source that was just as influential for his own art as for the Paduan-Venetian art in general: the sketchbooks of his father-in-law, Jacopo Bellini. Jacopo's sketchbooks are not merely full of ruined relics and idols of antiquity,

lingering in contrapposto on Corinthian columns or smashed on the ground, as in two Christian wilderness scenes (FIG. 12.60).[130] The stonemasons themselves, in the process of making the idol, can be traced to this source: in the *Louvre Sketchbook*'s *Christ Carrying the Cross* the familiar symbol of pride, the fallen horseman, is coupled with one of these idolmakers working on a column, a capital and a supine statue with a cornucopia slung across its loins (FIG. 12.61).[131] The large bowl of the Copenhagen painting also features in Jacopo's works, sometimes as a basin in pagan fountains with Corinthian columns crowned by idols (FIG. 12.62).[132]

Whether or not Mantegna's stonemasons planned on assembling one of these fountains, it is certain that the idol and the bowl are to be confronted with the Suffering Redeemer on the sarcophagus. A confrontation between *Idolatry* and *Faith*, mounted on tall columns, had already greeted Borso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, when he arrived in Reggio d'Emilia in 1453 and received homage in various spectacles. As

Fig. 12.61. Jacopo Bellini, *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1440s), metal stylus on parchment, later reworked with pen and ink, from the *Louvre Sketchbook* (f. 20). Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.
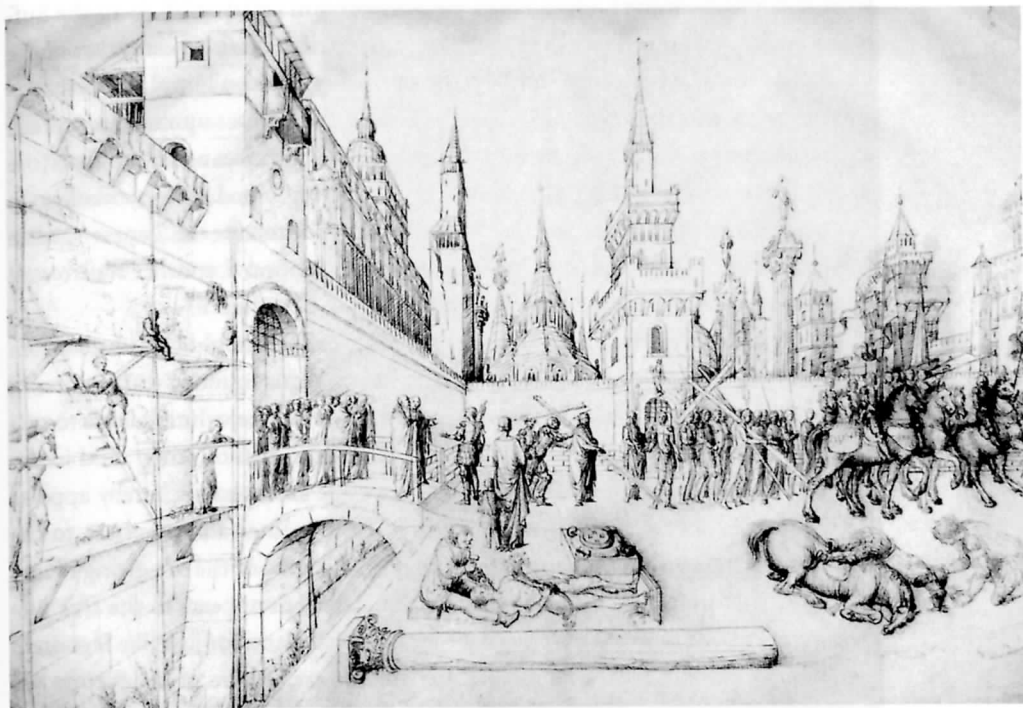

Fig. 12.62. Jacopo Bellini, *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* (1440s), metal stylus on parchment, later reworked with pen and ink, from the *Louvre Sketchbook* (f. 7). Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques.

soon as *Faith* had recited a salutation, the idol column collapsed.[133] As to the Suffering Redeemer, an 11th-12th-century Byzantine motif, he is the incarnation of the Eucharist. Stretched out in an indefinable time span between burial and resurrection, he represents the corporeal force that renews the believer upon consumption of the host and wine. The sarcophagus from which Christ rises again can therefore be compared to the chalice that catches the life-giving blood. This symbolism is emphasised, for example, by Vecchietta who, in his ciborium for the Sienese Spedale di Santa Maria della Scala (1467-72; FIG. 12.63), has mounted another resurrected figure, known as the *Eucharistic Redeemer*, on the top of a chalice.

That this symbolism was also close to Mantegna's heart might be deduced from his placing of Christ on an imperial porphyry sarcophagus rounded with volutes in preference to the usual cubic coffin. In the first instance, the volutes allude to *sella curulis*, the folding chair used in antiquity as a seat for men of power, and in the Middle Ages also used to bear the sarcophagus. The sarcophagus hereby appears as the throne for the triumphant Christ.[134] But the volutes also associate to the chalice, by means of which the throne becomes the source of the life-giving blood. In comparison with the pagan fountain idol, Christ thus appears as the true life-giving source. The symbolism is given a further sexual slant, for just like Signorelli placed the world-governing Pan's genitalia at the exact centre of the picture (cf. chapter 11), so Mantegna has arranged Christ's shroud at the centre in a conspicuous knot that cannot be anything but a veiling of an erection. Considering that Bellini's aforementioned supine statue was equipped with a phallic cornucopia, there can be little doubt that Christ's bandaged member is to be interpreted as yet another attempt to surpass the pagan idol: the bodily fluids emanating from the Eucharist are life-giving in every sense, so that the stiffness of physical desire – *rigor mortis*, as it were – is also transformed into divine sexual ecstasy, just as the blood sacrifice of circumcision becomes a fertilizing ejaculation.[135]

However, to gain a more precise understanding of why Mantegna contrasts Christ with art works *in the process* of being made, we must again turn to the fundamental structure of the Golden Age myth. To begin with, we could draw in the Book of Wisdom, an apocryphal 1st-century book which the Middle Ages assigned to the Old Testament.[136] Here we read about the potter and his suspect earthenware products. "[W]ith misspent toil" and "lawless hands" he makes brittle vessels and graven images, even though these objects remain dead, and the clay of which he is himself made will soon be just as soulless.[137] Contrary to the stonemasons' dead idols, Christ must therefore be supreme, given that his clay is not only endowed with spirit but is, moreover, in the process of vanquishing death.

In addition, we can consult another Judaic variant of the Golden Age myth, found in one of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams in the Book of Daniel:

Fig. 12.63. Vecchietta (Lorenzo di Pietro), bronze ciborium with the *Eucharistic Redeemer* mounted on top (1467-72), from Spedale di Santa Maria della Scala. Siena, Cathedral.

You saw, O king, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver; its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, a stone was cut out [from the mountain] by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that stuck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.[138]

In the subsequent verses, this shattering of the idol is interpreted as the Kingdom of God's destruction of the fourth kingdom, the kingdom of iron, which follows on from the kingdoms of gold, silver and bronze. That Christianity regarded the

mountain from which the stone is cut to be the Virgin Mary's body, is corroborated, for example, in a hymn to Mary written by the Constantinopolitanian Saint Germanus in the 8th century: "Hail, bountiful and sheltering mountain of God: where the redeeming Lamb was nourished Who bore our sins and infirmities, the mountain whence descended that stone, cut by no hand, which crushed the altars of the idols, and was made 'the capstone, marvellous in our eyes!'"[139] This reading also emerges if we, as Hartt recommends, again consult Hrabanus Maurus. Under the words *mons* and *lapis* it is asserted that the mountain is the Virgin Mary, and furthermore that the stone which detaches itself from the mountain without the agency of human hands, and having crushed the idols fills the entire world, is Christ born without "conjugal labour" [*sine opere conjugali*] and "without male semen" [*sine virili semine*], later to "fecundate" [*fecundeverat*] Jews and pagans with the words of his doctrine.[140]

If we return now to the two paintings – and beyond Hartt's observations – we come to an understanding of why Christ must be superior to the idols: he evades work in every sense. Both Christ and the art works originate in the Golgotha rock, alias the Virgin Mary's body, but whereas art derives from an excessive penetration of Mother Earth and is formed from the stonemasons' laborious craft – both being analogous to fallen sexuality – Christ bypasses the labour of matrimony and hand alike. The Holy Spirit descends directly into the earthly matter, whereupon Christ is born by means of a Golden-Age-like autochthony, the stone spontaneously detaching itself from the body of the earth and, completely in accordance with Christ's conspicuous erection, fecundating Jews and pagans.

Mantegna is presumably alluding to this detachment in the strange crystalline formations jutting out of the rock above the quarry in *Madonna of the Stonecutters*.[141] Here the archaic notion of the growing rock is transformed into a sacred autochthony in the same way as it was in the stone-generating paradise of the Caucasus where Zarathustra was born (cf. chapter 2). According to Eliade, the idea of Christ's birth from stone is also well-known in Christian folklore, such as in some Romanian Christmas carols.[142] Mantegna, furthermore, brings to mind Pliny's words about marble actually growing in its quarries so that the scars on the mountainsides fill up of their own accord (cf. again chapter 2). After the stonemasons' rape, the mountainside is thus healed by means of Christ's resurrection, which will break up the idols. Even the upward pointing rock in the 'good' side of the Copenhagen picture could be included in this symbolism. In that case it should be read as the idol-crushing stone in the process of becoming a world-spanning mountain since it follows the direction of the sunrise, the birth of the Kingdom of God.

In the light of the number of interpretative levels here intended for Christ along with dynamic and fertilising stone, it would seem obvious also to connect him with alchemy's miracle agency, the all-transforming Philosophers' Stone. Right from the

time alchemy was imported to the Western sphere from the Islamic world in the 12th century, focus is on the correspondence between alchemy's wonderful stone and the living stone, the spiritual rock, that is Christ.[143] In the same way as Christ descended to the dead in order to become immortal, the Philosophers' Stone is made of *prima materia* which passes through the *nigredo* stage, the lowest form of earth, in order to be cleansed. And just as Christ through his example changes pagans into believers, the Philosophers' Stone converts impure matter into gold. In support of an analysis that this exegesis must be intended, it should be noted that the *Madonna of the Stonecutters* was later housed in Francesco dei Medici's aforementioned *Studiolo*, a *Wunderkammer* and room in which to contemplate nature's secrets, which, not unlike the cutting out of Christ's tomb in the mountain, was carved into Palazzo Vecchio's thick walls. The panels painted by the Vasari workshop specifically for the *Studiolo* included Jacopo Zucchi's *Gold Mining* and the *Mining of Diamonds* by Maso da San Friano mentioned earlier (FIG. 12.48). The *Madonna of the Stonecutters* could here be part of the same meditation on art's nature as applied to the mining scenes. In the words of the planner behind the cycle, the learned Benedictine Vincenzo Borghini: "[S]imilar things are not created completely by nature nor completely by art, but we have two parts helping each other – as, to give an example, nature gives her diamond or carbuncle or crystal and similar unformed material, and art polishes, hews and carves it, etc. [...]."[144]

In this later, art-reflexive context, then, it is clear that the stonemasons' activities were not exclusively denounced, and indeed it is likely that in Mantegna's setting they were also enveloped in mixed values, for which reason the leap to *Celifodina*'s frontispiece with its affirmation of mining is perhaps not so very big after all. In Mantegna's *Madonna della Vittoria* (1496; Paris, Musée du Louvre), the Madonna's throne pedestal is, at all events, equipped with three bronze and stone reliefs with motifs taken from Genesis, of which one – on the left, an illustration of God sculpting Adam from the earth – allows us a glimpse of a hand holding the chisel carving a half-finished marble statue.[145] Mantegna thus takes the biblical idea of Adam being created from the dead clay completely literally, and in so doing highlights that God himself is a common sculptor who has to make use of his hands in order to transfer the form to the material. It is a fine line between divine and human art.

Also the Copenhagen painting could be read as just such an allegory of art's nature and the preconditions for depicting Christian motifs.[146] Even though Christ appears as superior to the idols, he is himself endowed with a strangely sculptural and marble-like body which, in its paleness, detaches itself from his greyish head and throat. By means of this body picture, which is again very concretely highlighting Christ's identity as stone, Mantegna is possibly paraphrasing the Hellenistic *Torso Belvedere*, which he might have seen on Monte Cavallo during his recent stay

in Rome (FIG. 12.64), for the two works share the seated motif, the slant of the body and the direction of the spread thighs. In any event, he composes a montage similar to those in the gatehouses of Camera degli Sposi: an antique ruin is restored with a Christian superstructure. Is this montage thus a sign that Christianity now rises again with its head on an ancient body? And that the corporality of antiquity is hereby made acceptable? If so, the rebirth still does not mean victory to the idolaters since it takes place in a painting.

Thus, the Copenhagen painting could be a contribution to painting's contemporaneous struggle to become a liberal art, an art created by spirit as opposed to the stonemasons' craft.[147] As Michael Camille and Joseph Koerner have demonstrated, the image made without the work of human hand, known as *acheiropoietos*, is a widespread myth in a number of pre-modern cultures, including Western antiquity and Byzantium.[148] Daniel's prophecy of the Messiah as a stone thus cut out without the work of hands is quite tangibly realised by Mantegna, for Christ's body is indeed a stone which is not hewn but re-created in paint. This quasi-stoniness is but strengthened in an alchemical light since Christ's alter ego, the Philosophers' Stone, is often described, like *prima materia*, as "a stone and yet not a stone", implying a spiritual just as much as material metamorphosis of matter. Additionally, Mantegna recalls Alberti's assertion that "[p]ainting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present [...], but it also represents the dead to the living [...], so that [...] the faces of the dead go on living [...]",[149] by means of which he again holds his own against the potters in the Book of Wisdom. Through the painting, Mantegna repeats the divine act of creation in that he *almost* enables the dead Christ to rise again from the rock. Also, if the act of creation is understood as a resuscitation of antiquity, it is made clear that it cannot take place in sculpture, antiquity's principal medium of survival, but in painting. As Filarete remarks, a sculpture is irredeemably damaged if something breaks off; in painting, on the other hand, flaws can be corrected "a thousand times" with more painting.[150] Christ's painted head on the broken sculptural torso is just such an addition. The sculptural closedness of antiquity is not dead, but merely ruined, for which reason it can only be repaired with the flexibility of the modern painting.

Allowing for Mantegna's play on antique sources, it is in conclusion not improbable that the seated, singing figure of Christ alludes to ancient god-musicians such as Orpheus or Apollo.[151] These gods are often – as we will see shortly – depicted making music in a sitting pose similar to that assumed by Christ (PLATE 43), but their song also implies a spiritual power in the broadest sense, from genesis of form to poetry and philosophy and on to fertility (cf. my analysis of Signorelli in the previous chapter), which corroborates the Suffering Redeemer's erotic strength. In Propertius' *Elegies*, Orpheus' animal- and river-taming lyre playing is principally

Fig. 12.64. Apollonius (?), *Torso Belvedere* (1st century BC), marble. Rome, Vatican, Musei Vaticani.

illuminated on the basis of a legend in which "the rocks of Cithaeron, they say, stirred by a Theban's art, joined together of their own accord to form a wall [...]."[152] As Christ's effortless birth could earlier be compared with a stone that was cut out from the mountain without the aid of human hands and then went on to fill the whole earth, the leap cannot be so very big to a metaphor for his creative force according to which the song of Orpheus-Christ drives rocks to form a wall on their own. And besides, the idea of such a rock-born wall must be said to be strikingly close to that autochthonic tendency which, on a paradigmatic level, marks the rocks of Quattrocento painting as a whole.

Mantegna III: Parnassus

The Copenhagen picture's reference to ancient musician-gods, and accordingly to the power of poetry in the broadest sense, makes for an appropriate bridge across to the last of my Mantegna case stories for the moment, the antique allegory *Parnassus* (c. 1496-97) painted for the Mantovian marchesa Isabella d'Este's *Studiolo* (PLATE 43).

In this monumental painting Apollo strikes up his lyre for the Muses' dance, the poetic unsullied power of which again spreads to the surrounding natural formations and on to the making of the image itself. And in the same way as in both *Christ as the Suffering Redeemer* and *Madonna of the Stonecutters*, the corrupting power contrasted with this pure source is once again concentrated on an Iron-Age-like rock cave, where the art works are produced with sweat and toil.

To ensure an appropriately learned atmosphere in the *Studiolo*, the *Parnassus* and its later counterpart *Pallas Expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue* (c. 1499-1502; FIG. 12.77; see also the forthcoming discussion) were presumably devised in collaboration between Mantegna and the meddlesome Isabella, plus the latter's humanist adviser Paride da Ceresara (1466-1532), a nobleman knowledgeable in languages and astrology. The picture can in itself be read as an allegory on the mysteries of Creation, more precisely the balance of gender forces necessary for poetry – and in extension of this: image making – to spring pure and unsullied. According to Lucian's defensive *Astrology*, Homer's poetry – primordial poetry itself – is a result of the conjunction between Venus and Mars, and in a form of self-referential loop, Mantegna has taken his starting point in the *Odyssey*'s own reference to their affair, where Aphrodite's (Venus's) disabled husband, Hephaestus (Vulcan), is cuckolded while Olympus shakes with laughter.[153] Just as Homer's poetry is thus born of a love encounter contained within the same poetry, I shall show that Mantegna's picture contains the conditions for its own creation, a source from which the picture crystallises autochthonically.

In Mantegna's free adaptation of the story, however, we are not on Mount Olympus but in a mixed scene that places Parnassus and Mount Helicon as the background setting for a natural arch on which Mars and Venus meet.[154] Similarly, the lyre-playing bard Demodocus, who is singing about the love couple while a troupe of boys dance, is transformed into one of the commentators on the love rendezvous, an again Orpheus-like Apollo seated on a tree stump (cf. Christ's pose in the Copenhagen painting) and accompanying his usual companions, the nine Muses, as they all the while sing and dance in a circle in front of the natural arch.[155] In the left background, however, in front of his cave forge, the deceived husband Vulcan shakes his hand threateningly at the amorous couple. Additionally in the background, from the crater in the dark-brown Etna – here moved to Greece and merged with Parnassus – a chaotic mass of grey crystals spout into the air, recalling those in *Madonna of the Stonecutters*. In antiquity, volcanic eruption was understood to be Vulcan's anger, and so it is tempting, as Edgar Wind has suggested, to interpret the formations as being the result of a cuckold's rage.[156]

On the opposite side of the painting, Pegasus paws the ground alongside his keeper, Mercury, another commentator at the Homeric love rendezvous. As

mentioned in chapter 2, the winged horse's stamping causes the Hippocrene spring, the home of the Muses, to rise on Mount Helicon, so it must be this spring that can be seen trickling out between the porous rocks in the foreground of the painting. A Renaissance topos saw poets drinking from Hippocrene when they wrote verse. For example, with a little play on words, the poet Cariteo calls his Anconian colleague Marco Cavallo (1475-1524) "a new Pegasus at whose feet a flowing spring rises from arid ground".[157] When requesting Francesco Gonzaga's favour in a letter dated August 3 1490, the poet Francesco Roello even proclaims that the prince is "very learned, that he has been at Mount Parnassus and at the spring of Pegasus", and furthermore that he is "totally dedicated to the Muses".[158] In Mantegna, however, the Hippocrene spring does not feature on its own, but is accompanied by a small layout of discreet springs: besides a diminutive one in the left foreground, there are also the narrow waterfalls in the two background mountains. As Andreas Hauser has convincingly argued, this discretion of physical springs highlights the intention that the main poetic source should be read, in a more spiritual fashion, into the Muses' dance itself, which, with its flowing movements, makes comprehensible the frequency with which the Muses decorate fountains.[159]

A more explicit exposition of the conditions for the fertilising activities of the Muse spring is given by the affair between Mars and Venus. The mythological lovers are positioned in front of their bed of passion on the natural arch behind the Muses, and their union is indicated via a subtle play of lines comparable with that seen in the contemporaneous *School of Pan* by Signorelli (FIG. 11.60; see chapter 11). Firstly, the two Muses on the right form a coitus sign: a thumb passing through the hole made by the thumb and forefinger is aiming – reinforced by another forefinger and, displaced on the parallel, by Mercury's staff – in the direction of Mars' genitals.[160] Even though Venus is thus unfaithful to her husband, Vulcan, it is apparent from another play of lines that infidelity is here more noble than marriage. Anteros, the son of infidelity, has aimed his blowpipe at Vulcan's genitals. Anteros (Anti-Eros) was the chaste half-brother of Cupid, the arouser of desire, and his triumph over this half-brother is apparent from Cupid's golden arrow, which Venus has confiscated, and from the rods, to be used for Cupid's punishment, on the ground to the left. The line extending from Anteros' blowpipe in the opposite direction ends in Venus' crotch.

Being the metalworking god labouring in the heat of the underworld, Vulcan represented the sultry, Iron-Age-like sexuality, conjugal labour, but in being struck by Anteros' arrows, the cleansed sexual force from Venus' crotch, his potency is lifted into that purer and more Golden-Age-like sphere incarnated in the embrace between Mars and Venus.[161] In accordance with one of Neoplatonism's key texts, Plato's *Symposium*, Venus on the natural arch, then, represents the celestial Venus

superior to her married terrestrial counterpart. Here Mantegna is addressing the tradition according to which the amorous encounter produces the daughter *Harmonia*, the ultimate harmony between loving gentleness and aggressive strength. This progeny of Mars and Venus is omnipresent in late medieval astrological treatises, and it received further metaphysical interpretation by Florentine Neoplatonists such as Ficino and Pico della Mirandola.[162] That it is superior to the more prosaic offspring of conjugal labour is corroborated by Leone Ebreo who, in his *Dialoghi d'Amore* notes that: "when this union of the two parents occurs regularly in nature, it is called marriage by the poets, and the partners are called husband and wife; but when the union is an extraordinary one, it is styled amorous or adulterous, and the parents who bring forth are styled lovers."[163] Despite infidelity, coitus is thus again most beautiful when it – like hierogamy's coupling of heaven and earth – can be performed with love, an attraction free of the fallen and dreary toil of conjugal labour.

If we now turn to the Hippocrene spring in the painting's foreground, we will see that crystal formations also grow alongside this spring, in the countersinking between the porous rocks. An interspersion of yellow gems attests to their preciousness and in so doing makes them apposite symbols for the poetic fecundity of the spring. That they really are growing can be confirmed by Nicander's assertion that the Muses' singing made Helicon rise towards heaven, a growth that was not stopped until Pegasus stamped his hoof.[164] In the rocks to the left, there is another accumulation of pebbles, which could perhaps be interpreted as fossilised shells. Whatever the case, the deposit of fossils in mountains had been noted since antiquity and was usually explained with reference to the Flood. Mantegna's fossils would, in that case, testify that Deucalion and Pyrrha sought refuge on the twin peaks of Mount Parnassus after the Flood[165] – the peaks, through which another of the Muses' streams, the Castalia cascade, flows, and which are riddled with caves, are seen in the right background. Given that Deucalion and Pyrrha recreated humankind by throwing the stones of the earth, "the bones of your great mother",[166] over their shoulders, the crystals with their fecund appearance thus assume a broader function. Exactly like the crystals in *Madonna of the Stonecutters*, they are charged with autochthonic forces.

If we compare these precious minerals with the crystalline formation growing up from Vulcan's mountain, then it acquires a symbolism that is almost the opposite of the formations in *Madonna of the Stonecutters*. Vulcan's genitals have yet to be cleansed by Anteros' arrows, and so the crystals grow chaotically and in vain. Far greater fertility is manifest in the crystals which are called forth by the Muses' singing, and whose growth is curbed by Pegasus' stamping hoof, which in turn releases Hippocrene's source and thereby fertilises the crystals with poetic creative

power. That they really are more noble than those of the volcano is apparent from the latter's uniform grey colour, whereas the former are interspersed with yellow gems. The crystals of the Hippocrene spring are consequently a representation of the free art inspired by the Muses, communicated without the agency of exertion and desire.

The painting thus focusses on the same natural force, the Muses' poetic inspiration, that we see in Signorelli's *School of Pan* and, in a Christianised version, in Mantegna's *Christ as the Suffering Redeemer*. That Mantegna, exactly like Signorelli, also embeds image-making and thereby the painting itself within this force becomes apparent if we turn to the following Pliny anecdote concerning a famous *acheiropoietos*, a myth repeated in the late Middle Ages by Marbode of Rennes and Alberti:

> [King Pyrrhus] is said to have possessed an agate on which could be seen the Nine Muses with Apollo holding his lyre. This was due not to any artistic intention, but to nature unaided; and the markings spread in such a way that even the individual Muses had their appropriate emblems allotted to them.[167]

Might it not be the case that *Parnassus*, in itself a detailed portrait of the lyre-playing Apollo and the Muses, should be understood as an evocation of this image-breeding agate? At the Hippocrene spring, the poetic power centre, Mantegna has, after all, interspersed the rocks with yellow gems; and, geologically, agate is just this kind of filling in cavities. If we zoomed in on one of these yellow stones, we might therefore imagine that we would come across the very painting that depicts the landscape in which the stones are found: i.e., a painting that contains a landscape with an agate with a painting that contains a landscape with an agate with a painting... and so on and so forth in endless self-reflection. The agate is consequently no longer, as it was in antiquity, conceived by a virgin nature, but within the self-same artificially manufactured painting it has itself 'produced' – a painting that has already displaced poetry's origins in nature's springs to a depiction of the Muses' flowing dance. Mantegna therefore shows himself to be an unmistakeably modern artist – an artist who places the power of conception, the natural source of art, in an art that sets up nature as a mirror for the beholding consciousness. When Leonardo suggests that the painter should devise images in, *inter alia*, "stones of various mixed colors" (cf. chapter 9), Mantegna can then add that this devising in the most literal sense is made real via the agency of self-reflection. Just as Leonardo displaces Wisdom's source of insight in the *Virgin of the Rocks* to her self-reflection in the bottomless deep, a literal *mise en abyme*, so too Mantegna stages the Hippocrene spring's picture-making and picture-made crystal image as an auto-referentiality without limits.

12.3   Ruins

If we now zoom out again from these case stories and into the bird's-eye perspective of the paradigm, we can shift the interpretation of the common theme, the architectonic rock, another fraction – not as self-grown architecture, not as the result of conscious design, nor as residue from mining or quarrying, but purely and simply as ruin. Here it is thus a case of an original man-made structure which, with the gradual affects of time and weather, perhaps aided by deliberate destruction, has reached such a state of decay that it has become almost indistinguishable from geological formations – even though the never quite vanished artificial mien attests to some kind of over-and-above-natural genesis.

Given that the ruin appears as the specific result of the influence of the modern paradigm – the eating-away of time (cf. chapters 10 and 11) – a more comprehensive particularisation could appropriately take the renowned quotation from Walter Benjamin's late history theses as its benchmark:

> There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.[168]

The debris – ruins – hurled at the feet of the angel of history could thus be said, for the first time, to be depicted in the painting of modernity. In the civilisation that has taken on the Fall and made it its own motive force, the visual rendition of the eating-away of time is a permanent phenomenon of its art. The storm, which drives the angel backwards from Paradise and towards the future, is a laborious wind that erodes, destroys, pulverises. It is the weather-time when not merely manifested as day-and-night variations and seasons, but also shows that there has been a past before the moment. This past is depicted via the traces deposited by time on the object, by means of which we can see that it once existed in a more complete, more virginal state. Were I to supplement this with Serresque terminology, the extended catastrophe that piles wreckage upon wreckage could then be understood as the unburied dead, death stretched out in time.

This ruination makes itself felt in all sorts of pictorial ingredients after 1420. Clothing fades, trees wilt, faces wrinkle and become weather-beaten, fruit rots, walls crumble and get overgrown, mountains erode. The decay is particularly welcome in the expanses of the landscape. In van Mander's *Het Schilder-Boeck*, landscape painters are quite simply advised not to depict buildings in their pristine state: "Roofs and walls ought not to be shown with bright red bricks, but rather in turf, reeds, or straw, holed and patched. You can also plaster them in a fantastic manner, and show moss growing on them."[169] With ruination we are at the heart of the modern pictorial gaze. Where the rock as self-grown architecture bears witness to a still intentional nature, nature with a semi-innate art, the ruin on the other hand bears witness to a nature that has broken every contract with humankind and works in defiance of its projects – to indomitable, blindly destructive forces that are realised by the simple passage of time. "Time has deformed everything" declares Pius II in his *Commentarii* at the sight of the ruined architecture of antiquity.[170] And in the letter from Raphael and Castiglione to Leo X (*c.* 1519), time is said to be "envious of the glory of mortals" and is equipped with "gouging file and poisonous bite".[171] The ruin thereby becomes a visible manifestation of entropy, the thermodynamic term for the steadily spreading disorder in a closed system.

The strongest manifestation of the entropy of weather-time in modernity's pictorial paradigm is seen, as mentioned above, in the expanses of the landscape, more specifically in the main topic of this chapter: *the stone*. It is precisely because stone contains the hardest and most imperishable materials in nature that its transitoriness makes such an impact. Stone also mirrors the lengthy duration and permanence of the process of disintegration: that it can be so broken down attests to the length of time since it was virginal. In post-1420 painting, this ruined stone is seen in battered buildings, from antiquity as well as later, in sculptural fragments, and in the eroded flanks of distant, air-blue mountains – i.e. mountains shrouded in the very same medium which, in the course of time, wears them away.

This latter mode of appearance signals an aesthetic appreciation that bursts the pre-modern reins on pictorial space. Rather than, as in the Middle Ages, being made up of claustrophobic piles of chaotic stone, the mountains move out into the wide expanses of the landscape, the grandeur of which they incarnate. As a sign that this transformation is not confined to the mountains' projection on the surface of the painting, but amounts to a general shift in the sensibility of the times, we can see how Petrarch's solitary 14th-century mountain ecstasy is transformed two centuries later into a minor trend. Numerous Alpine peaks are consequently ascended, some even for the first time, and men of letters such as Erasmus, Johannes Secundus and Montaigne extol the Alps for their beautiful views. The Swiss themselves were especially enthusiastic. In a letter written in 1541 to the physician Jakob Vogel, the

naturalist Conrad Gesner describes the Alps as "Theatre of the Universe". "What delight for the soul [...] to admire the spectacle offered by the enormous mass of these mountains. [...] Without being able to explain it, I sense my spirit struck by their astonishing heights and ravished in the contemplation of the Sovereign Architect."[172] Even though the new panoramic mountain vision tendencially breaks with every ideal derived from an iconographically meaningful, closed art, here we see how the classical ideas of nature as theatre and architecture are still reproduced. As is the case with so many other modern phenomena, appraisal of the mountains first matures in earnest with the birth of romanticism around 1700 when Northern poets and painters vie to represent mountain magnificence. In her eminent study, Marjorie Hope Nicolson links this breakthrough to the emergence of Newtonian physics, by means of which mountain homage becomes the expression of "the aesthetics of the infinite".[173]

Erosion, the gradual decomposition by weather and water, is acknowledged as a key designer of these new mountains, those of reality as well as the pictorial ones. Avicenna (980-1037), a forerunner of modern geologists, thought that fossils in the mountains meant the earth had originally been completely covered with water, and that many mountains emerged as the water receded, so that the clayey seabed was fossilised "during ages of which we have no record". But because most of the mountains by his day had lost contact with this water, they were now in a state of decay and disintegration.[174] This theory later finds resonance with Leonardo, the pioneer of sublime landscape depiction. He also thought the earth's plains in ancient times had been "covered up and hidden by salt water", and that later the water contributed both to the formation and decomposition of the mountains. At one point he notes "that the rocks and promontories of the sea are constantly being ruined and worn away".[175] The Dutch Carel van Mander pronounces the wind an unequivocal part of these erosive forces, for in his art history the Alps are referred to as the target of the north wind, just as streams splash through the "weathered" rocks.[176]

Not least as contrast to the hard rocks' dominance of the pre-modern landscape images, it is tempting to see the new ruining forces also reflected in the gravel and the soil depicted in the modern landscape image. Here, however, the thoroughly pulverised stone, evidence of nature's destructive powers, is simultaneously reshaped through its opposite, the constructive territorial division of the landscape into fields and roads.

The forces that wear down landscape's macrostructures, the mountains, are thus the same forces that cause humankind's architectonic structures to converge towards small mountains and rocks, and make them confusable with self-grown architecture. That this nature's recapturing of art must be seen as one of the modern painting's chief emblems is evident from the mere fact of its relative absence

in pre-modern painting.[177] As suggested in chapter 6, only Roman wall painting displays single, rare candidates of temporally worn-down buildings. What might lurk of ruins in the pre-modern painting is predominantly concentrated in the rocks, fragments left by calamities such as floods, earthquakes and subterranean winds. Here the underworld still adheres to death, whereas the above-ground is structured by the Golden Age paradigm and accordingly by closed, integrated and supra-temporal forms. In this paradigm, where the reconstruction of Paradise by the Golden Age *field* is dominant, and the angel of history has yet to be blown out of the evergreen and closed garden, depiction of the ruin – the temporally worn-away and un-closed object – is impossible. Consequently, items of fruit in the Roman still lifes remain intact and show no signs of decomposition, unlike those in the 17th-century Netherlands.

The taboo in pre-modern painting is thus depiction of the worn-away or collapsed building, destruction of which is due to unspecified forces in the past, particularly the effect of time itself. If the buildings are to be destroyed before modernity, then the overriding norm is that they are done so by a tangible cause in the present

Fig. 12.66. Bartolo di Fredi, *Earthquake Destroys Job's House*, fresco from *Stories of Job* cycle (1367). San Gimignano, Collegiata.

or the immediate past. This might be a case of cities demolished by God or man – Babylon, Sodom and Gomorrah, Jericho or Troy;[178] or buildings that collapse on top of innocent people, who are then restored to life by means of a miracle performed by a saint. And, what is more, these episodes of ruination always take place in a remarkably well-ordered manner.[179] Now and then, as in Cimabue's *Fall of Babylon* (*c.* 1279-84; Assisi, San Francesco, Upper Basilica), the buildings are simply slanting; or they are turned upside down, as in the *Fall of Babylon* scene from the *Bamberg Apocalypse* (11th century; FIG. 12.65) – inversion, also familiar from fallen idols, is in itself a powerful sign of rejection.[180] And if the buildings should finally fall to pieces, the fragments are never infinitesimal, just as they are always confined by sharp-edged and not too irregular cracks (FIGS. 8.18 and 10.1B). In a scene of collapse such as Bartolo di Fredi's *Earthquake Destroys Job's House* from the *Stories of Job* (1367;

Fig. 12.67. Maso di Banco, *Saint Sylvester's Miracle* (c. 1340), fresco. Florence, Santa Croce.

FIG. 12.66), there are no transitional zones, but a quantum-like leap from intact to destroyed. In W.S. Heckscher's apt words: "The actual outlines of those scattered pieces could be rejoined as if they were pieces of a jig-saw puzzle."[181]

This well-defined destruction must therefore be read as a manifestation of the fundamental closedness of the pre-modern pictorial vision, the Golden Age paradigm. Even in the breaking-up process, the gaze refuses to catch the infinitesimal, which is considered unsightly and incomprehensible. Rather than disintegrating in a shapeless infinity, the building is split into an aggregate of smaller self-contained units, which correspond structurally to the aggregate in the pre-modern space as such.[182]

In modernity, however, visual continuity emerges at exactly the same time as destruction is stretched indefinitely backwards in time. The ruined building is brutally fragmented and exposes sections that are otherwise concealed, but simultaneously, with the gradual erosion of time, its parts merge in a mellow continuum. In this the mathematical sectional view, with its measurable lines and surfaces, turns into an incalculable chaos. Through the wear and tear caused by air mist to the surface, this surface is itself endowed with misty transitions attesting to the transformation that it is in the process of undertaking: the temporally infinite is transformed into the spatially infinite. Just as the well-defined fragments in the pre-modern ruin reflect

the closedness of vision, so the continuous fragments in its modern successor refer to the openness of vision. *Sfumato* is not content to be embedded between gaze and object, but is etched into matter so that the object itself is transformed from closed body to open image. The ruin thereby becomes a prototype of the painterly sight, of the sketch, of what is fundamentally incomplete in modern pictorial production. It attests to the consumption of the perspectival gaze, to the ferocity of oblivion. It attests to the fierceness of isolation from the world as the individual is blown backwards towards the future.

This new ruin is almost materialised in Maso di Banco's *Saint Sylvester's Miracle* (c. 1340; FIG. 12.67). The miracle of the saint rendering the dragon harmless takes place in Constantinian time and, as paganism also fell in this period, there is a rationale for depicting the imperial forum as already bearing signs of the ravages of time. Several of the antique walls are half-collapsed and traversed by weed-covered cracks, and in the foreground there is a heap of rubble. Although the decay is portrayed with a degree of realism that is otherwise unseen at the period, the transitions from destroyed to whole are still very abrupt. Through decay, the ruins become an upward extension of the dragon's infernal hollow. Pagan Rome becomes a destroyed Babylon or Edom as described by Isaiah: "Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches. And wild animals shall meet with hyenas; the wild goat shall cry to his fellow [...]."[183] Rather than wild animals and satyric wild goats, the dragon here assumes the role as representative of the underworld. In this vision of Rome, it is not such a great leap to Lorenzetti's contemporaneous *Bad Government*, in which buildings are also transformed into ruins as a consequence of Lucifer's regime (FIG. 10.1B). Lucifer can here be described as the absence of an organised society. As soon as maintenance qualified by work lapses, chaotic nature takes over.

Like most other modern pictorial phenomena, however, the ruin is not explored in earnest until after the paradigm shift around 1420. Gentile da Fabriano and Robert Campin agree that their nativity stables should be made up of ruined buildings: a round-arched stone building and a tumbledown wooden hut (PLATE 7), respectively.[184] And both artists pitch into the building, into the ashlars and into the fillets behind the crumbled plaster. Motifs involving the holy family – the *Nativity*, the *Adoration of the Magi* and the *Adoration of the Shepherds* – constitute a generally dominating forum for the early representation of the ruin. The iconographic reason for this is a proximity of the underworld similar to that seen in Maso, for, as shown in chapter 2, in accordance with Jacob's and Matthew's pseudo-gospels, Byzantine tradition located the nativity in a cave. The tradition actually lives on in Italy far into the 15th century, as demonstrated by Gentile, for example, who has the ass and the ox placed in a cave right next to the ruin. Whether it appears alone or as
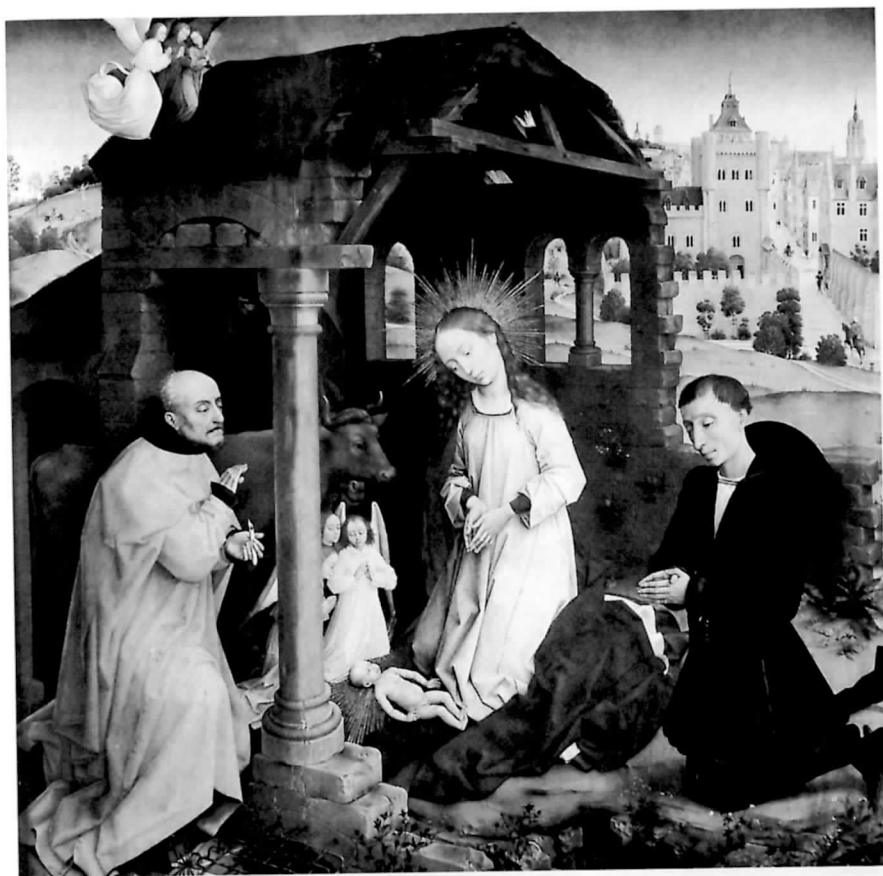
Fig. 12.68. Roger van der Weyden, *Nativity* (*c.* 1452-55),
oil on wood, centre panel from the *Bladelin Altarpiece*.
Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie.

an extension of the birth cave, the ruin becomes an index of the matter from which Christ is born.

But Maso's pagan connotations also play a role, for it soon becomes the rule that the stable is a former monumental edifice, often a temple or palace. Especially north of the Alps, for example in Roger van der Weyden's *Bladelin Altarpiece* (*c.* 1452-55; FIG. 12.68), the architecture is quite unequivocally Roman, for, in contrast to the usual pointed arches, an indication of the modern and reverential architecture, the windows are circumscribed by semi-circular arcade arches, the formula for its antique forerunners. The architecture is thus not merely stating that Christianity arises from fallen matter, but also that this matter comprises the ruins of pagan

Fig. 12.69. Andrea Mantegna, *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (c. 1458-59), tempera on wood. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.
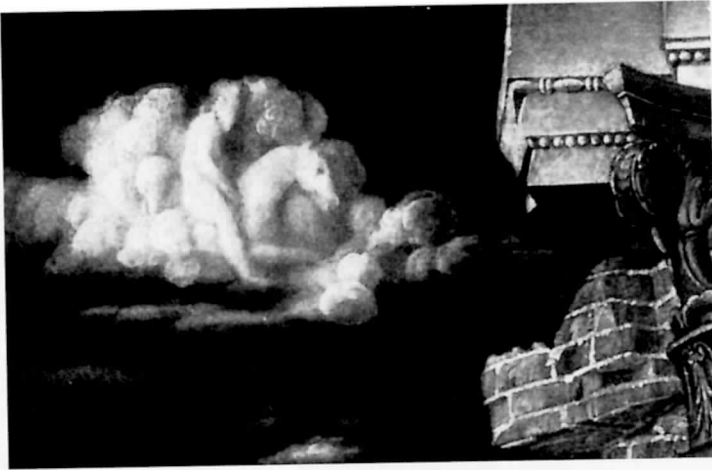
civilisation. Even though paganism is primarily clad in architecture associating to Rome or antiquity, it also takes in Judaism, the period *sub lege*. The new era, which destroys the buildings of the past, thus becomes *sub gratia*.

Another 15th-century theme setting the scene for ancient ruins is found in the Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. As this saint, who lived under the rule of Diocletian, was punctured by arrows in the Colosseum itself, the heart of Rome, there is every reason to place him among all sorts of broken down monumental architecture: arcades and a column (Mantegna, *c.* 1458-59; FIG. 12.69); a triumphal arch (Pollaiuolo Brothers, 1475; FIG. 11.49); a triumphal arch and an amphitheatre (Signorelli, *c.* 1500, Città di Castello, Pinacoteca).

However conducive to ruins these themes might be, they should still not be read as anything other than powerful incentive, condensations, in a broader paradigm, for the ruin appears with increasing frequency in a variety of motifs, and after 1500 it can be said to have vanquished the paradigmatic landscape backgrounds both north and south of the Alps. The following few examples will demonstrate the prevalence of the motif. In Petrus Christus' (?) *Friedsam Annunciation* (1450s; FIG. 12.70), not only is the wall around the *hortus conclusus* ruined and overgrown, but the weeds and decay have also started to invade the very church where the Madonna is receiving the annunciation. Flowers are growing on the buttress to the left, and the doorsteps are quite battered. In the nominalistic and proto-Protestant

Fig. 12.70. Petrus Christus (?), *Annunciation*
(*"Friedsam Annunciation"*) (1450s), oil on wood.
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights
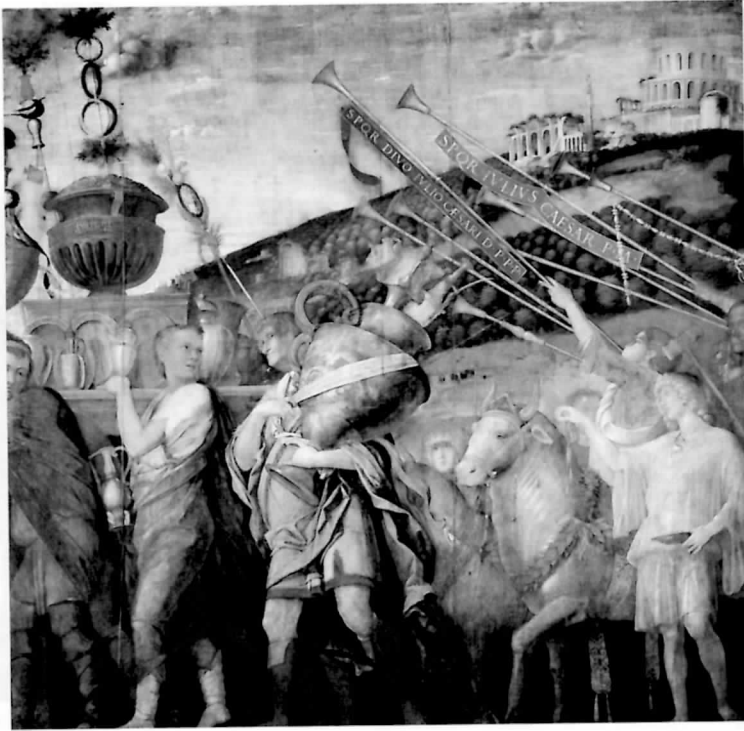reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 12.71. Andrea Mantegna, episode from the
Triumphs of Caesar (*c.* 1484-92), tempera on canvas.
London, Hampton Court Palace, Royal Collection.

countries north of the Alps, not even the communal Judeo-Christian building can any longer be considered "indestructible", as Panofsky would have it.[185] Faith may rather seek refuge from the passage of time in a spiritual building, the as of yet immortal soul of humankind.

Mantegna's *Triumphs of Caesar* (*c.* 1484-92; **FIG. 12.71**) is another example of unruly ruination. Although the motif takes place at the very climax of pagan antiquity, there are still ruins in the background. And in Patinir's *Landscape with Saint Jerome* (*c.* 1516-17; **FIG. 12.72**) there is a group of ruined buildings immediately behind the rock within which the saint lives; they are now a standard element in the world panorama surrounding the saint. Making a generalisation, it could perhaps be said that whereas the Italians mainly concentrate the ruination on selected pieces of antique architecture – as a kind of emblem of the nostalgia in the midst of the reawakened ideality – the painters north of the Alps spread it out into a general

Fig. 12.72. Joachim Patinir, *Landscape with Saint Jerome* (c. 1516-17), oil on wood (detail). Madrid, Museo del Prado.

patination that effects all buildings. This patination represents a broader particularised picturesqueness of which antiquity alone is a special case.

Nonetheless, it was difficult for the Italians to restrict the ruin simply to emblem status. The ruins were too intrusive in the landscape for that. Over large areas of Italy, fragments of architecture and sculpture lay on or stuck out of the earth like unburied corpses. The ruin was, quite tangibly, the unburied dead, death stretched out indefinitely in time. In so saying, it also becomes clear just why the Renaissance was ultimately impossible to realise. In order for a rebirth to be able to generate an integrated resurrection, its subject must have been properly descended to the dead. But this is exactly what the new concept of ruin rendered impossible since it did not, as before, connote definitive death but, on the contrary, a death displaced by indeterminate past, i.e. a past whose vestiges extended into the present. Panofsky wrote: "The Middle Ages had left antiquity unburied and alternately galvanized and exorcized its corpse. The Renaissance stood weeping at its grave and tried to

resurrect its soul."[186] This characterisation is particularly correct if the range of the Middle Ages is extended up to modernity, the period that is aware of having abandoned antiquity to the past so that it features as a half-decomposed corpse. The characterisation also tallies well with the Renaissance, because the self-deception of the Renaissance is specifically to look upon antiquity as being so dead that it could be resuscitated. The Italians might do what they could to realise the Renaissance, but the ruin represents the futility of the project, not because antiquity was dead, but because it belonged only to the past.

Consequently, it also becomes clear why the ruin is by no means a 'Renaissance invention' inevitably requiring the Middle Ages as a fence over which to look. A significant reason for the great frequency with which the ruins can be identified as antique is simply that antiquity constituted the past par excellence, the time before the modernity of Christianity. In that sense, even Robert Campin's thatched stable becomes 'antique' inasmuch as it was presumably executed in the pagan period before the birth of Christ. Conversely, the reason that church architecture is only rarely seen to be crumbling in early modern images is not the theoretical unfeasibility of this decay, but that the church, by definition, represents the viable present.

When the ruin first appears in pictorial art, it is connected with negative feelings. It represents the underworld, the fallen paganism or Judaism, the transitoriness that takes over when the Good Government fails. Even in connection with the dawning appreciation of Roman culture in Petrarch, Giovanni Dondi, Giovanni Rucellai and others, the connotations are still negative: so sad is the decline of the grand classical culture. As Maria Fabricius Hansen has shown, it is not until a surprisingly late date that it becomes possible to demonstrate an unambiguous aesthetic appreciation of the ruin for its own sake, a nostalgic cult that emerges at the same time as the ruin's diffusion in the general landscape backgrounds.[187] Nevertheless, the ruin has to be seen as a coherent phenomenon within the modern paradigm. Its developmental process is strikingly reminiscent of that undertaken by the stormy sky: first a demonic phenomenon tied to specific themes and then later, around 1500, a positive entity creating atmosphere in the general landscape image. Neither ruin nor storm can be said to 'arise from' specific themes whence they then spread; rather, these themes are midwives for a motif that is pushed out by the most comprehensive forces conceivable in the paradigm, indeed in the epistemic *field*.

Despite the ruin's emblematic connection to the new paradigm, the concept of ruin as unburied corpse should also be taken quite literally. As we saw in chapter I, it was a topos of classical theory to compare the building – a re-organised part of Mother Earth's body – with an organic body. Even Alberti often compares architecture with the bodies of humans and animals and talks of bone, flesh, muscles and nerves.[188] Manetti does the same in his biography of Brunelleschi: "a certain

arrangement of members and bones".[189] This line of thought logically leads to the ruin as body in decomposition. Pius II refers to a ruined gateway as "denuded of its marble". In the letter to Leo X, Rome's ruins are quite simply called "cadaver" and – in an actualisation of the archaic understanding of stone as the bones of Mother Earth – "the bones of the body without flesh". In a particularly evocative manner, in 1448 Poggio Bracciolini refers to Rome as being "stripped of all decency, as it lies overthrown on the earth as a rotting, gigantic corpse".[190] With this stripped and rotting appearance, the buildings are not only robbed of their external cladding; their identity could be said to be displaced from an antique to a Gothic sensibility. For just as the infinity and immeasurability of the ruins are characteristics of the Gothic style, so too is the case with their rawness and decay (cf. chapter 9).[191]

That Poggio even used the term "indecency" could be linked to the aforementioned fact that in pre-modern time it was considered a curse not to be buried. After Jezebel has been thrown down and trodden underfoot by her subjugator Jehu's horses, he decides that she should be buried, given that she is, after all, a king's daughter. All that remains, however, are her skull, feet and palms of her hands, which are therefore spread on the Jezreel field as manure, "So that no one can say, This is Jezebel."[192] Rome's punishment was that it ended up thus unburied. Ruins therefore crop up as a kind of visual manure for the landscape image, which also depicts the fields, the thoroughly crumbled stone. Ruins are consumed by the modern gaze, which in a nominalistic way lives from that which is fundamentally unidentifiable, objects in the process of being devoured by Cronos. It comes, therefore, as no surprise when, around 1398, Pier Paolo Vergerio the Elder reports that some people find the air in ruined Rome downright unhealthy.[193] These comments about air and putrefaction place the ruin in relation to the corroding atmosphere rendered visible by painting alongside the ruin itself. The air of weather-time is poisoned by the unburied dead.

The architecture as it was found in this horrendous decay would have to awaken ambivalent feelings. The body was what had been disowned throughout the Middle Ages, and here it appeared broken down as if it had been punished for hybris. At the same time, the somatic dimension occasioned intense fascination and a desire to reawaken it in the new contemporary culture, the Renaissance, not least as a protest against the Gothic 'incorporeality'. But the corporeality of the Renaissance – architectonic as well as pictorial – did not actually become more somatic than its Gothic equivalent, it merely became ideal, heroic and weighty. The apparent enormity of the blocks of stone from antiquity was therefore considered particularly impressive. Pius II refers to ancient walls with "square stone of an almost incomprehensible magnitude".[194] And according to Alberti, ancient peoples, especially the Etruscans, used "vast, squared stone for their walls [...]."[195]

The architectonic rock, then, can be seen as a borderline case of the ruin, a zone in which the work of nature has intervened to such an extent in the structure that it is impossible to determine how far it is a matter of art on its way to becoming nature, or nature being converted into art. In practice, it seems for the most part possible to distinguish between the authentic ruin and the idiosyncratic phenomenon of the architectonic rock, but, obviously, we can never be completely certain. And, at all events, the ruin – both in its visual mode of appearance and in the associations connected with its hybridity – constitutes an indispensable premise for the architectonic rock.

12.4   Latent images in nature

In relation to the interpretation of architectonic rock, the ruin signified an outward shift of forces: rather than understanding the hybrid features as being innate to the rock, they were seen to be the result of the impact of external forces, human-induced forms surrendered to weather and time. This simultaneously denotes an evolutionary inflection in the direction of modernity, inasmuch as nature is no longer seen as being allied to humankind's projects, but as being their unsighted destroyer. The topic of my final section, latent figurative images in nature's matter, expands these interpretative possibilities whilst simultaneously clarifying another stratum in the movement towards the modern era: artificiality not as a result of forces *out there* – internal or external natural forces around the object – but as determined by forces *in here*, viz. the beholder's own conception. In Peircean terms, attention hereby turns from the sign's *object* towards its *representamen* and *interpretant* – towards those ambiguous forms traced by the paint and the conceptual images these raise in the human *fantasia*.

This shift of fulcrum from architecture to sculpture and painting, and at the same time from external world to internal consciousness, inevitably invokes Hegel's aesthetics. The sequence architecture, sculpture, picture can be said, as does Hegel, to comprise a development towards decreasing materiality and increasing consciousness. Architecture encloses in the same way as the body of the earth, sculpture denotes a section of this body, and the picture regards the body from a distance. Having been inside, we step out into the open – the free reflection undertaken by self-consciousness. Having mainly looked at the innate architecture in the mountains of 15th-century paintings, we thus let the gaze glide towards the more 'exterior' art forms, sculpture and picture, since forms like these can lurk latently in the chaos of the landscape image, be it in the rocks, trees or clouds. By reflecting on these primarily human- and animal-like forms, we are approaching the question of the

make-up of image creation in early modernity. In this respect the clouds, the least material forms, are particularly eloquent, given that their transience in itself gives them kinship with modernity's fluctuating self-consciousness and its projections in painting (cf. chapter 11).

The pre-modern sacralisation of rocks or trees was due to a conception of them as possessed by *numen*. If this attribution was because the rock or tree looked like an animal or a human, then it is an understandable assumption that the likeness should be conceived as an identity. The natural form *was* the creature it resembled. The similarity was not a 'coincidence' from nature's side, and it existed before it was beheld. However, this is no longer the case when Leonardo sees landscapes and battle scenes on the stained wall. These apparitions stem from the beholder's *fantasia*, an imagination able to work precisely because the surroundings are so suitably form-less and chaotic that the inner visions can be projected out onto them. Despite the essentially modern character of these apparitions, they do have precursors in antiq-uity. Pliny, for example, cites the anecdote about Protogenes who only succeeds in making a lifelike depiction of the steaming breath of a dog when, in desperation, he throws a paint-soaked sponge at the picture.[196] For the classic artist, however, the formlessness of vapour is an extreme instance in the making of an image, a phenom-enon that has to be depicted with just as extreme a medium, the sponge's index.[197]

But as the fulcrum of visual art is displaced from plastic to optic in modernity, this extremum is sucked from periphery to centre, from *parergon* to *ergon*. When Botticelli, according to Leonardo, revives Protogenes' trick and throws a multico-loured sponge at a wall, he is thus not just trying to make a lifelike representation of the close encounter of the steam, but the landscape in all its spatial abundance.[198] Leonardo might certainly censure Botticelli for his lack of finish, but, as Leonardo's own wall-stain-gazing bears out, there is actually the subtlest of distinctions between the totally amorphous paint smudge and the pinnacle of finicky illusionism, the landscape image (cf. chapter 9). Conversely, pre-modern cultures' inability to depict the landscape pictorially could be said to stem from the lack of an eye for amor-phousness. They still consider the natural elements to be numinous and therefore circumscribed by their inherent corporeal, i.e. closed, forms.

Allowing anthropomorphic forms to appear in the chaos of the landscape image – a chaos that can first be depicted by means of the new illusionism – is thus, *inter alia*, to inscribe them in an evolutionary charged field: do they lie latently hidden within nature, or do they first occur – as puzzle pictures – when the painter's *fantasia* is projected out onto the surrounding environment?

The potential of the puzzle picture is so much the more urgent that in even the keenest illusionistic representation there will be parts that resist predetermined defi-nition. One topos along these lines, a remembrance of chaos, is the multicoloured
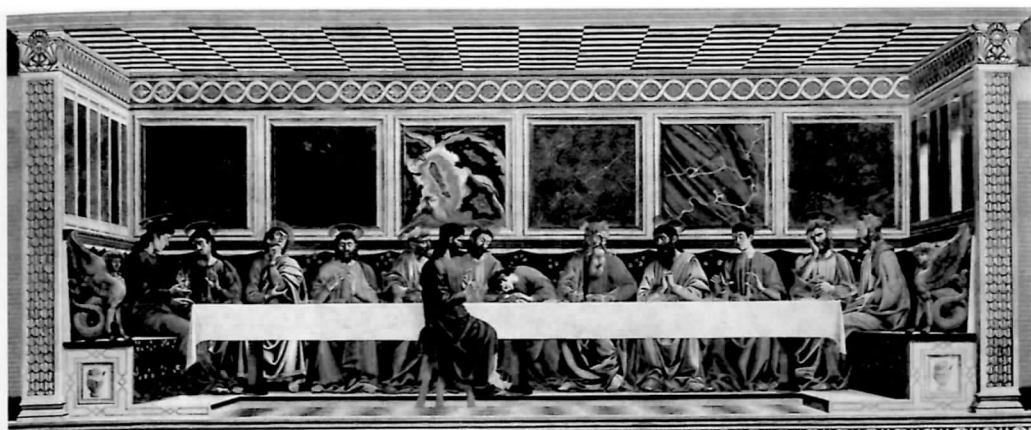
Fig. 12.73. Andrea del Castagno,
Last Supper (1447), fresco. Florence,
Sant'Apollonia, Cenacolo.

stone panel found on the walls in so many 14th-15th-century Italian paintings, including, as Didi-Huberman discusses, those by Fra Angelico.[199] It is only because the gigantic stone squares in Andrea del Castagno's *Last Supper* (1447; FIG. 12.73) are circumscribed by rectangular frames and, moreover, inserted in a well-defined pictorial space, that we can ascribe them significance in terms of form. Seen in isolation, they could almost be taken for abstract expressionism.

Images in stone, trees and clouds

The new illusionism's chaos repertoire of turbulent folds, gnarled trees, peeling walls, rugged rocks and hazy clouds would seem to comprise a whole meditative sphere for the genesis of forms. This repertoire reconstructs amorphous matter, which in its real version, especially stone, was also considered to be pregnant with forms. Until late in the 1700s, the princes' *Wunderkammern* were thus filled with precious stones and pieces of marble impregnated, by the mediation of demons, stars or chance, with images.[200]

Even though 15th-16th-century landscape images normally leave such apparitions to the beholder's imagination, now and then the visual pun is more explicit. In this the North Europeans' rocks are a particularly susceptible forum because they seem more turbulent and less angular than those of the Italians. Just to mention two examples of the most common latent form, concealed faces: in Dürer's

Fig. 12.74. Roger van der Weyden, *Saint George and the Dragon* (c. 1432-35), oil on panel. Washington, National Gallery of Art.

engraving, the *Penance of Saint John Chrysostom* (c. 1497), a male profile with a heavy jaw is concealed in the shaded left-hand side of the rock; in Roger van der Weyden's *Saint George and the Dragon* (c. 1432-35; FIG. 12.74) there is one, if not two, profiles in the rock section to the right of the horse's neck.[201]

Anthropomorphic rocks such as these would seem to be rarer in Italian art of the time. One example is Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1462; FIG. 12.13) in which the left-hand corner above the nativity cave contains a skull-like mask, possibly an allusion to the death aspect of the cave.[202] Another, iconographically abundant, example is Cosmè Tura's *Annunciation* on the organ shutters from the cathedral in Ferrara (1469; FIG. 12.75). Among the architectonic rocks here, the massif behind the messenger Gabriel assumes a sphinx-like form, as if it were a half-finished version of the Great Sphinx of Giza. As Stephen Campbell has argued convincingly, the immediate iconography is presumably Hermetic.[203] Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian figure of legend associated with alchemy, astrology and Neoplatonism, experienced a vigorous revival in humanist circles of the 1460s when Marsilio Ficino translated

Fig. 12.75. Cosmè Tura, *Annunciation* (1469), tempera on canvas, organ shutters from the Cathedral of Ferrara. Ferrara, Museo della Cattedrale.

the writings attributed to Hermes into Latin and circulated them under the title *Pimander* [*De potestate et sapientia Dei*]. His influence on the design of the sphinx-rock is due to the fact that Hermes, in the text *Asclepius*, states that the Egyptians invented the art of creating handmade gods at the same time as religion.[204] In *Della pittura* the Hermetically-influenced Alberti reworks this passage to make a general description of the origins of sculpture and painting.[205] The reason the origins are assigned specifically to the Great Sphinx of Giza is apparent from Pliny's description in which, besides the local population worshipping the sphinx as a deity, it is "fashioned from the native rock".[206] Tura's sphinx-mountain must thus be understood as this living rock, the shape of which has already been half-developed by the stone itself, and which consequently initiates the worship and creation of the deity. It is present in the *Annunciation* scene because Egypt often incarnated the pagan culture in its entirety, and Hermes Trismegistus, in the *Asclepius* passage mentioned, heralds the overthrow of Egypt.

The half-finished images of the stones also harmonise with Alberti's other ideas about the origins of sculpture. In the introduction to *De statua*, he states:

> Those [who were inclined to express and represent the bodies brought forth by nature] would at times observe in tree trunks, clumps of earth, or other objects of this sort certain outlines [*lineamenti*] which through some slight changes could be made to resemble a natural shape. They thereupon took thought and tried, by adding or taking away here and there, to render the resemblance complete.[207]

Michelangelo's later reference to "liberating" the figures that are "hidden" or "imprisoned" in the block of marble,[208] can therefore be read as a continuation of this notion of the pre-existence of forms in the matter.

As mentioned in my analysis of Mantegna's *Parnassus*, the stones were also assumed to hoard images of a more two-dimensional character. In his defence of painting in *Della pittura* (Book Two), just before he mentions Pyrrhus' gem and its innate images, Alberti states that "nature herself seems to take delight in painting, as when she depicts centaurs and the faces of bearded kings in cracked blocks of marble."[209] Alberti's sources include Pliny and Albertus Magnus, both of whom mention natural pictures in split marble of, respectively, a silen and a bearded king.[210]

As Maria Fabricius Hansen has pointed out, Camera degli Sposi might well also contain a reference to literature's discussion of natural images. In a simulated marble panel in the window recess to the right of the *Meeting*, the artist has inserted the date on which he began the fresco cycle, June 16 1465. With this graffito, which has an undulating and chaotic appearance like the coloured veins of the background and would therefore seem to indicate that the work was 'born' of the cloven marble

Fig. 12.76. Andrea Mantegna, *Trivulzio Madonna*
(1497), tempera on canvas. Milan, Castello
Sforzesco, Civico Museo d'Arte Antica.

on that very day, Mantegna surpasses Alberti, whose *Della pittura* is stated to have been finished on July 17 1436. By being, so to speak, one day, one month and one year ahead of Alberti, Mantegna suggests that the practice of art – 'born' as it is of nature's matter – precedes its theory.[211] The word born must nonetheless be furnished with modernist inverted commas because, like the *Parnassus* agate with its innate pictures, the marble block itself is already imitated by art. Who gives birth to whom? The awareness that it would take more than simply the forces of nature to create art had already been corroborated by Cicero. For it might well be the case

that random images, for example of Pan in a block of marble, could be lifelike, but "we may be sure that it was not so perfect a reproduction as to lead one to imagine that it had been wrought by Scopas, for it goes without saying that perfection has never been achieved by accident."[212]

The other main forum for images created by nature, clouds in the sky, is charged with pictorial representations as it is. The icon marked the barrier between heaven and earth, and by means of cloud, mandorla and halo, the celestial bodies assumed material form. In the discussion of Carolingian miniatures in chapter 3, we also saw how the clouds could become the material of which entire landscapes were made. The extent to which this tradition is active in the 15th century can be seen from, for example, the mandorla in Mantegna's *Trivulzio Madonna* (1497; FIG. 12.76); here we see putto heads depicted in every phase from misty grey cloud to fully-formed pink flesh.

It is the same theme, just with a more self-referential twist, that we encountered in Signorelli's *School of Pan* (FIG. 11.60). Here the gradual clarification of the cloud forms not only signified their ingress into the earthly sphere, but also their encounter with the artist's craft and *fantasia*. The theme is presumably developed by Piero di Cosimo, whose gnarled primeval trees already look as if they are bearing anthropomorphic tendencies (FIG. 11.25). In the *Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci* (FIG. 11.24), the woman's likeness seems thus to be but the final crystallisation of forms pending in the white and black clouds around her. Indeed Vasari also verifies that Piero – just like Leonardo and Botticelli – found battles of horsemen, fantastical cities and gigantic landscapes in clouds and stained walls.

The cloud images, too, were phenomena that had been discussed since antiquity. Were they caused by chance, demonic forces, the influence of the heavens on matter, or the beholder's imagination? As late as the 13th century, Albertus Magnus quotes Avicenna for the following model: exhalations from the earth can, influenced by the stars, create perfect, albeit lifeless, animal bodies; such a calf-shaped form was even once reported to have fallen to earth.[213] Although antiquity had never developed a theory about imagination, the late antique Philostratus was, however, of the opinion that cloud pictures were not of divine origin, but were more likely created by humankind's instinct to make things credible – which in turn means that they are located in modernity's mutually dependent field of external accident and internal *fantasia*.[214] This proto-nominalistic stance was re-strengthened by 14th-century individualism, for in Poem 129 of the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch mentions how he finds his beloved Laura's face again, not just in a white cloud, but everywhere in the wilderness: in the clear water, on the green meadow, on a beech tree stump and again – particularly – in a rock, where "with all my mind I etch her lovely face". However, when "the truth" – not unlike Petrarch's aesthetic experience on Mont

Ventoux – "dispels that sweet mistake", Laura's identikit picture looks back with a kind of Gorgo gaze, and the poet finds himself sitting "cold as dead stone set on living rock [...]."[215] The cost paid by the artist for being able, like some kind of God or Pygmalion, to breathe life into the stone, is that he himself becomes petrified by modernity's disease of the genius: leaden melancholy.

Mantegna IV: Pallas Expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue

As was the case with the architectural forms' marking out of the rocks, the anthro-pomorphic outlines in the clouds are also afforded generous treatment in Mantegna. In the *Bearers of Trophies and Bullion* from the *Triumphs of Caesar* (c. 1484-92; FIG. 12.71), a cloud becomes a circular face (albeit re-traced with little sensitivity). In the top-most cloud in the Vienna version of the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (c. 1458-59; FIG. 12.69a), a small horseman comes into view. And in the clouds off the side of the mountain in *Pallas Expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue* (c. 1499-1502; FIG. 12.77), Mantegna's second painting for Isabella d'Este's *Studiolo*, we see the profiles of two, perhaps three, large male heads.[216]

If we take a closer look at the *Pallas* clouds, it is no great leap to the assump-tion of an allusion to Albertus Magnus' ideas about earth exhalation, for Mantegna plays on the ambiguity of whether the clouds are *behind* the mountain or if they are actually exuding straight *from* it. Given that the painting is composed follow-ing the same structural principles as the *Parnassus*, this mountain seems to parallel Etna with its growing crystal formation. In *Pallas*, too, the mountain is in eruption. Above a greyish lower section, where a cave entrance can just be made out above the garden hedge, the mountain changes abruptly into light-brown and then, a little further up, it throws out a growing magma-like mass. This lava-like quality is pointed up by the black peak behind, which might suggest a crater. It is from this growing mass that the cloud is born, or, more exactly, *transformed*, for the line between rock and cloud is completely fuzzy.

This softening could play on the fact that seen towards the horizon a mountain will merge with the atmosphere, and that clouds per se can look like mountains. Not least the sight of the glittering sunset light in the painting brings to mind Leonardo's slightly later observation as recorded in the Codex Leicester (c. 1506-09):

> And lately over Milan towards Lago Maggiore I saw a cloud in the form of an immense mountain full of rifts of glowing light, because the rays of the sun, which was already close to the horizon and red, tinged the cloud with its own hue. And this cloud attracted to it all the little clouds that were near.[217]

Fig. 12.77. Andrea Mantegna, *Pallas Expelling
the Vices from the Garden of Virtue* (c. 1499-1502),
tempera on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

This mountain aspect of clouds, and their delivery of faces, is a topic of discussion
as early as Lucretius:

> [Images] which formed in many ways are carried aloft and melting incessantly change
> their shapes and turn themselves into the outlines of all manner of figures: as we
> often see clouds quickly massing together on high and marring the serene face of
> the firmament, while they carress the air with their motion. For often giants' counte-
> nances appear to fly over and to draw their shadow afar, sometimes great mountains
> and rocks torn from the mountains to go before and to pass by the sun, after them
> some monster pulling and dragging other clouds.[218]

In fact, even the shadows left by the giants' countenances seem here to be directly translated into Mantegna's paint, and his fuzzy retinue of mountain-lava-cloud must refer to Lucretius' cloudy "rocks torn from the mountains".

Again we recall the stone cut out from the mountain without the aid of human hand, for the growing magma that goes on to be transformed into clouds could be interpreted on the same conceptual basis as its kindred crystal formations in *Madonna of the Stonecutters* and *Parnassus*. The faces in the clouds are thus to be perceived as painting's image generation, the free art produced when the artist's *fantasia* is transferred to nature's randomly generated forms. The clouds, with their buoyancy, pliability and changeability, and their capacity to capture all the colours of the rainbow, thereby become an image of painting's basic matter, the Damischian /cloud/ or smudge of paint that can be shaped and mixed and which is superior to sculpture's hard stone. The latter is presumably signified in the grey part of the rock where there is an opening, which could be a forge or a stonemason's cave as in the two other pictures. Again, then, a montage of hard, ruined antiquity and its soft, modern superstructure. The soft contour smoothing out the difference between rock and cloud could be perceived in particular as a comment on Mantegna's own late style, saturated as it is with sunset light and a milder atmosphere influenced by the new trends in Venice, advocated by his brother-in-law Giovanni Bellini. A farewell to the hard rocks and statuesque human figures.

This interpretation of the mountain seems to fit in beautifully with the rest of the iconography in the painting.[219] In accordance with Isabella d'Este's virtue-seeking ideology, the theme is closely related to that of *Parnassus*, albeit the scene is more conflict-ridden. As a consequence of the Vices' invasion of the Garden of Virtue, symbol of the human mind, lustful materiality has temporarily taken over. Chasteness, in the figure of Daphne, is petrified in an olive tree, Pallus Athene's sacred plant, while the four cardinal virtues are distributed between the sky and the square rock to the right. An inscription on a fluttering banderole intimates that the Mother of Virtue, *Prudentia* (Prudence), is imprisoned behind the brick wall.[220]

However, the painting depicts that hopeful moment when the trio of Justice, Strength and Moderation have again broken through a cloud mandorla in the sky, so that the whole crowd of monstrous Vices – cupids, Venus Impudica, a satyr carrying Cupid, a hermaphrodite monkey (wickedness), the stump-armed *Accidia* (sloth), etc. – have to take flight, some through the pond in the foreground. This expulsion fulfils a vision expressed by of Battista Spagnoli, one of Isabella's court poets. In the elegy *Contra impudice scribentes* we read: "All true poetry loves chastity. Helicon is a virgin: a virgin too is Peneian Daphne, and they say the daughters of the Castalian fount were sprung of a virgin mother. Depart, ye poets of Venus, from the river of Helicon: your mouth pollutes the virgin waters."[221] The vices in the pond can thus

be understood as the obscene poets' words, which sully Helicon's virginal waters. Similarly, the rock prison to the right is an inverted Parnassus, which entraps the free soul, *Prudentia*, rather than giving birth to the Castalian fount, river of the Muses. In the background mountain, on the other hand, pure poetic creation rises again as an echo – in terms of composition as well as iconography – of Pallas' conduct.

Mantegna V: the Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian *in Vienna*

The issue of the origins of art is also raised by the cloud horseman at the top of Mantegna's *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (c. 1458-59; FIGS. 12.69 and 12.69A). Sebastian was the patron saint of plague victims – the plague had been associated with arrows since antiquity[222] – and in 1456-57 Padua had been ravaged by the plague.[223] It would seem likely that the painting plays on this epidemic at a number of levels because, although we know nothing about who commissioned it, Mantegna himself both suffered from and survived the plague.

The cloud horseman is thus presumably an allusion to Saturn, the instigator and conciliator of the plague, for, as we saw in chapter II, Saturn was the clouded star, in Boccaccio's words a "cloud-enveloped sight".[224] The cloud picture's more precise representation of a horse and rider is partly due to the legend of Saturn changing into a horse when he was paying court to Philyra and thus fearful of Rhea's jealousy.[225] In addition, Gregory the Great makes a relevant comment apropos Isaiah's Prophecy about the fall of Babylon. In the Book of Isaiah, Babylon dreams of storming heaven and ascending "above the heights of the clouds, [...] like the Most High", but the "Day Star, son of Dawn" is going to be overthrown.[226] Gregory juxtaposes this fall – somewhat cryptically – with Job's remark about the ostrich who blithely rushes away when the gamekeeper arrives: "she laughs at the horse and his rider".[227] This ostrich laughter makes mockery of the rider's arrogance, and thus in a wider sense this becomes an allegory of the world that disappears into vapour during the flight of time.[228] That the cloud picture only shows the front part of the horse bears out Gregory's influence on Mantegna, for according to Gregory, the vanished hindquarters of the horse, being in the act of falling backwards, should be understood as sudden death and ignorance about the torments which life deals out to the individual. These torments could readily be interpreted as the plague.

To distil a more coherent interpretation from this somewhat cryptic line of thought: Babylon, who ascends to the clouds only to be destroyed during the rushing flight of time – Cronus-Saturn, who consumes his children – must of course be compared with Rome, among whose ruins Sebastian is placed.[229] Time – Raphael's "gouging file and poisonous bite" – devours Rome's proud edifices and sculptures just as thoroughly as it wears down the cloud picture, and could it be that it also

(viz. the metaphor intersection of Saturn-plague/plague-arrow) pierces Sebastian's –
and in an identification with this: the plague-ridden Mantegna's – body? As Andreas
Hauser has pointed out, however, the architectonic decomposition is concentrated
on Sebastian's right side – the domain towards which his uplifted eyes are also
directed – whereas the decoration to his left is relatively intact. Hence a two-part
landscape is again constructed, one part being the Christian era, whose eroding
weather surmounts the proud architecture of the other part, antiquity (whose
spandrel's Victoria sculpture is thus only provisionally exultant).[230] Saturn's work
is thus no more destructive than it is also good for something, and in a further
meta-comment to painting's modus operandi, the cloud image could in fact also be
seen as the result of the recurring artist infliction – and one Mantegna was known
to have suffered – Saturnal melancholy. The poisoned weather-time, which rises
like steam from ancient Rome after it has ruined its hard art forms of architecture
and sculpture – the clouds seem again to be almost smoking from the ruins' brick
sections via the sprouting grass – is consequently so opportunely chaotic that it
allows the softer art form of painting to take over. As the flexible paint mass reacts
to the chaos of the clouds, it becomes receptive for visions from the artist's *inven-
zioni*, here, as was the case with Petrarch, governed by his melancholy temperament.
If it is a fact that time consumes its own offspring, this offspring is nevertheless
retained in painting, the frozen time which, via its flexibility and higher degree of
spirituality, Christianity's revenue, is superior to the fragile ancient stones.[231]

The Gorgo gaze of the Po Plain: stone
guests in 15th-century painting

As a final point, it would be quite apposite to turn my analytical gaze from the
landscape image and into the figures that inhabit it. For during the culmination of
the rock landscape in 15th-century Italian art, it is a disturbing fact that not only
nature but also the human body is infected by stone.

Although rocks are ubiquitous in late Italian 15th-century painting, and every-
where might be marked by architectonic and organic features, the stone *fantasias*
must nonetheless be said to culminate within a specific area and a specific genera-
tion. The area is the eastern Po Plain, from Venice across Padua and on to Ferrara,
Mantua and Bologna. And the generation is that of the painters born around 1430:
Mantegna (1431), Tura (c. 1430), Cossa (1435/36), Zoppo (1433), Crivelli (c. 1430/35) and
also, as far as the early phase is concerned, Bellini (1431). The quantity of fantastic
rocks in the works of these artists seems to be almost inversely proportional to the
flatness of the terrain across which they looked.

In fact, they do not restrict the stone to the setting, for the figures within it are

also strangely petrified, as if the rocks have entered an equilibrium of sorts with the living creatures: while the rock is characterised by an inner vitality, the bodies seem to be encapsulated in stone or metal. The artistic gaze is that of the Late Gothic style with its sharp definition of material particularity, but here it functions as a Gorgo gaze before which everything, in being perceived, turns to stone. Crivelli's hyperrealistic figures would make a metallic clang if struck on their shiny surfaces. And although the fabric around Tura's London *Muse* (*c.* 1455-60; FIG. 12.78) drapes in an absurd number of folds, these folds do not divest the figure of its essentially petrified quality, as if it were made of the same precious stones and metals that make up the throne with its prickly, vaginal dolphins. The painful, idiosyncratic sensation

emanated by so many of Tura's figures could thus be seen as the convulsive battle of the soul against its hard mortal frame.

This petrified characteristic can no more be regarded as simply the product of reception by a posterity than can the rocks' fantastical quality. Francesco Squarcione, Mantegna's Paduan teacher, was struck by this when he saw his former pupil's frescoes in the Ovetari Chapel of the Church of the Eremitani (decorated 1448-57, almost totally destroyed in 1944). In Vasari's retelling, 1568, derived from a 15th-century source, we read:

> Hearing this [i.e. that Jacopo Bellini, his rival, had forged an association with Mantegna by, in 1453, giving him his daughter's hand in marriage], Squarcione fell into such disdain against Andrea that they were enemies ever afterwards; and in proportion as Squarcione had formerly been ever praising the works of Andrea, so from that day onward did he ever decry them in public. Above all did he censure without reserve the pictures that Andrea had made in the said Chapel of S. Cristofano, saying that they were worthless, because in making them he had imitated the ancient works in marble, from which it is not possible to learn painting perfectly, for the reason that stone is ever from its very essence hard, and never has that tender softness that is found in flesh and in things of nature, which are pliant and move in various ways; adding that Andrea would have made those figures much better, and that they would have been more perfect, if he had given them the colour of marble and not such a quantity of colours, because his pictures resembled not living figures but ancient statues of marble or other suchlike things.[232]

However much Squarcione's criticism might have been fuelled by resentment, it is essentially precise. Mantegna paints statues, not living human beings. But is this simply due to flaw, an unthinking imitation of those hard ancient works which Squarcione had, incidentally, let him copy in paint at his school? The style employed by the Ferrarese and Crivelli has often been called mannerism, and this is exactly how the petrifying manner of painting should be read: a play on style.

This stylistic game deals with modernity's first conflict-ridden encounter with the Renaissance. Flat Northern Italy was the centre of the Late Gothic hypernaturalistic style focussing on wealth of detail, texture and temporal signs. It was here that Giovannino dei Grassi, Gentile da Fabriano, Pisanello and Jacopo Bellini worked and thrived. How was the Renaissance, with its emphasis on the ideal, the closed form and the timeless, meant to take root here? The statue-like aspect could be seen as a self-aware response to the artificiality of the project. Rather than penetrating the principles behind the classical style and recreating them convincingly, the artists focussed on the external, on sculpture, because by the chance of time this constituted

the one medium in which the ancient pictorial art survived prior to the excavation in the 1490s of Nero's Domus Aurea. The statues represent the corporeality which modernity lacks, but through their literal reproduction the flesh is petrified and the project exposed as a construction.

When the figures are converted into statues, they are, moreover, of one piece with another rudiment from the past: the selfsame rock landscape in which they are set, and from which the stone and the metal that makes up their bodies is derived. The rocks incarnate the pre-modern landscape image, the material underground, which prevents the landscape from being at an infinite distance from a correspondingly self-conscious beholder. Along with the statuesque bodies, they draw attention to the actual weighty substance of which things are made.

Florence was already too idealising for this kind of self-ironic strategy, and north of the Alps the artistic culture was too naturalistically-minded and still too far removed from Renaissance pressure for it to be implemented. The petrifying mannerism required a head-on clash between Late Gothic nominalism and dawning Renaissance, and there was only one area that had the necessary conditions for this collision, the eastern Po Plain in the second half of the 15th century.

When looking for the more specific roots of this vision, we should not expect to find an 'inventor' who then went on to 'disperse' it. At most it is possible to pin down a milieu in which the abovementioned temporal forces wrestled with particular vigour, so that the style reached a marked degree of maturity. This milieu is the axis between Padua and Venice in the years around 1450. The central figure would have to be Mantegna, for besides the fact that he has to be considered the most prominent artist personality of the time, he had links to Venice and from 1447 also to the Bellini family, and it is known that in 1449 he was in Ferrara.[233] Ironically, a Paduan node was to be found in the very man who had scornfully put the petrified style into words, this being the hyper-ambitious Francesco Squarcione, in whose school Mantegna and Zoppo are documented as having been pupils (1441/2-48 and 1442-55, respectively), and where, due to stylistic common denominators such as fruit garlands, it is assumed that Tura and Crivelli possibly also studied.[234] Discussion continues as to whether such a weak painter as Squarcione can have borne any responsibility for his pupils' innovations, but, via his collection of drawings, medals, statues, reliefs and casts, he certainly introduced them to both the art of antiquity and the Florentine avant-garde art. Considering the dominance of the sculptural media in Squarcione's studio, it is not improbable that they actually acted as a catalyst to the development of the petrified style.

Given that Paduan mannerism unites nominalistic observation with conscious artificiality, we also have to ask if the artists might have been influenced by the milieu around the University of Padua, the stronghold of Aristotelianism in the 15th

Fig. 12.79. Giusto de' Menabuoi, *Stories of Jacob*
(late 1370s), fresco. Padua, Baptistry, tambour.

century.[235] In Padua, humanism was apparently closer to Aristotelian scholasticism than it was elsewhere in Italy.[236] In view of the Aristotelian thought pertaining to the architectonic rocks, it is certainly interesting to see that the issue of the production of a house is among the topics discussed by Gaetano de' Thiene, professor in philosophy 1429-65 at the Paduan university, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* (1439). Gaetano, however, sees the production of a house as a mixed business. The purpose of the materials is not necessarily the building, which is primarily the work of the architect.[237] So, again, in the midst of Aristotelianism: an anti-idealistic, nominalistic viewpoint. However that may be, Paduan fascination with rocks can be traced back to the 14th-century painters Altichiero and Giusto de' Menabuoi. In the latter's decoration of the Baptistry of the Cathedral (late 1370s; FIG. 12.79), many of the drummer's scenes are separated by rock embankments so that the entirety would seem to be taking place in a gigantic nature-architectonic complex.

Mantegna's Copenhagen *Christ as the Suffering Redeemer* with its montage of marble body and fleshy face is, as intimated, emblematic of the whole issue. In a single image, and triggered by a specific iconography, Mantegna impeccably pins down the attempt to resuscitate the ruined foundation of antiquity by supplying

Fig. 12.80. Andrea Mantegna,
The Vestal Virgin Tuccia with a Sieve
(1505-06), tempera on wood.
London, National Gallery.

it with a superstructure of painted frail flesh. An even more sharply-defined illustration can be seen in his *trompe l'oeil* reliefs from the 1490s, presumably installed in Isabella's *Studiolo* (FIG. 12.80). Here Mantegna has, doubtless with subtle irony, realised Squarcione's proposal vis-à-vis replacing the flesh- and cloth-colours of reality with those of the statue: the paintings depict, in the most literal sense, the relief figures in grey marble or gilt bronze placed against some of the aforementioned square panels of amorphous, multicoloured stone. If we are not dealing with a case of random images in split blocks of stone, at least the origin of the carved image in the heart of the earth is underscored.

But, to make a link from here to the Po-artists' paintings in general, it was of course not a question of imitating the ancient statues with archeological accuracy and then transferring them precisely to painting. The statuesque aspect related to the fundamental issue of creating a renaissance art, an art based on the body. *Rilievo* (relief) is one of the qualities on which the Renaissance was judged, and in the works of these artists it was realised tangibly. Perhaps it was the consciousness of the problems of this realisation that led them eventually to shift the focus from the surface of the relief to the very act of painting that captured it. The atmosphere emanating from the *Pallas* picture's mountain carries over into the painterly style, which it was to be the assignment of Venice and Northern Europe to cultivate. The rock is milled to pigment, which is applied with wet strokes – by means of which the modern paradigm may overcome the Renaissance.