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in Zusammenarbeit mit Laura Veneskey

Synergies in Visual Culture
Bildkulturen im Dialog

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einem mexikanischen Federmosaik und der Mumie eines Krokodils
aus der Sammlung Ferdinando Cospis. Bologna, Museo Civico Medievale

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MIGRATION UND KULTURTRANSFER

AESTHETICS OF COLLECTING
SYSTEME DER ÄSTHETISCHEN ORDNUNG

Alina Payne

Renaissance *sgraffito* Facades and the Circulation of Objects in the Mediterranean

In scholarship on Renaissance architecture ornament has become synonymous with columns and entablatures, friezes and capitals. In effect this is the default setting for any discussion of the topic: in the wake of Leon Battista Alberti the column was acknowledged to be »the principal ornament without any doubt«, such that even applied carved panels and sculpture have remained on the periphery of theoretical attention at the time, and scholarly thereafter. Vitruvius was the reference point and what was not to be found in his text fell into oblivion no matter how much present in practice. Even figural sculpture, attached to so many early modern facades, fell outside of the discussions, as if extraneous to their architectural support.[1]

In this essay I would like to turn to a different and even more neglected architectural device – the *sgraffito* façade – a flamboyant, extreme instance of pure ornament, that has experienced an almost total eclipse in scholarly work, entirely eliminated from the Western scholar's *Aufgaben* (fig. 1). Indeed scholars' attention has been almost exclusively turned to the carved stone façade, that is, a tectonic construct that combines the ubiquitous orders with sculptural elements into a modulated three-dimensional structure. This is the tradition of the Bramante/Raphael/Peruzzi palace façade, subsequently modified by Michelangelo, and it is the tradition that derives from him that made this formulation into the predominant semiotic expression of architecture as tectonic/sculptural build-up. The sculpted façade remained the strong Renaissance position, underpinned by Antiquity, indeed the sign of its successful appropriation (fig. 2).[2]

By contrast the *sgraffito* façade is profoundly a-tectonic, completely surface dependent and unrelated to the structure of the building, its syntax or sections – lacy, transparent, and light, a complete opposite to the heavy, either rusticated or carved,

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* For Gerhard, as a token of friendship and of a shared interest in things Mediterranean that has spanned the better part of twenty years. This essay arises from papers given in Zurich, Harvard and KHI (Florence) in 2011 and 2012. It is a fragment of a larger forthcoming investigation on *sgraffito* façades and the exchanges between architecture and the minor arts on the terrain of ornament.

1 An isolated treatment of the topic is Alina Payne, »Reclining Bodies: Figural Ornament in Renaissance Architecture«, in *Sixteenth-Century Italian Art*, ed. Michael Cole, Oxford 2006, pp. 218-239.

2 The traditional and still current reference work remains Ludwig H. Heydenreich & Wolfgang Lotz, *Italian Renaissance Architecture 1400-1600*, 2 voll., Harmondsworth 1974; revised edition, New Haven 1996. The scholarly literature since has focused on the façade as an issue of the architectonic orders and as tectonic composition.

Fig. 1: Bernardino Poccetti, *sgraffito* façade, *Palazzo Bianca Cappello*. Florence

façade of the Renaissance palace. Something of an anomaly, it does not fit in and evidently for this reason it has been ignored, even eliminated from our histories. Yet the *sgraffito* facade was neither as rare nor as insignificant as accounts make it seem today. In fact, Florence steered a rather eccentric course in this respect and the tectonic sculpted façade was not actually a success there. The Albertian model of the Rucellai palace was not followed, although there are a few examples, such as the Palazzo Uguccioni or the Palazzo Bartolini Salimbeni (though, Vasari tells us, it was much derided at the time of its building). But on the whole, the Florentines remained faithful to their own tradition. The predominant models were the rusticated and dressed stone block and the *sgraffito* type, which enjoyed significant popularity, sadly belied by their low survival rate today.

The Renaissance texts do not dwell on this architectural type. Although Sebastiano Serlio addresses painted façades in his 1537 treatise on the orders, he presents them as cheap alternatives to stone facades and thus condemns them to be read as *Ersatz*-architecture thereafter, losing any kind of value as an architectural feature.[3] Critical of this practice he warns that painting disintegrates the solidity of the wall, which then becomes transparent and disappears altogether. And to this end he prohibits painting landscapes, colored figures or animals; he prefers *chiaroscuro* and he

3 Sebastiano Serlio, *Il quarto libro di Sebastiano Serlio Bolognese*, Venice 1537, f. 191v.

Fig. 2: Michelangelo, *Palazzo Nuovo*. Rome, Piazza del Campidoglio

refers the reader to painting in *grisaille,* which imitates marble or stone, and even bronze, which will enhance the mass effect of the front wall.[4] Yet, as far *sgraffito* goes, he ignores the practice entirely. Alone, Vasari discusses it (he designs such facades himself) and he does so at some length – both in the techniques segment of the *Vite* and when he comes to the lives of various artists known to have excelled at it. Most importantly, he includes it in the introduction to painting, and *severs it from architecture*. Indeed, in the painting section Vasari includes a number of crafts which by rights belong to other domains more closely connected with stone and carving, with the chisel rather than the soft brush: mosaic work, intarsia, *niello*, damaschina, engraving and woodcuts.[5]

Clearly the *sgraffito* façade posed problems – then as now. And it is this conflicted form of architectural treatment that I want to recuperate and to ask what it tells us about an alternative deployment of ornament in the Renaissance; about the definition of artistic – more specifically, architectural – practice; and about the presence of a pan-Mediterranean aesthetic.

4 Monika Schmitter, »Falling Through the Cracks: The Fate of Painted Palace Facades in Sixteenth-Century Italy«, in *The Built Surface*, ed. Christy Anderson, vol. 1, London 2002, pp. 130-161.

5 Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' piu eccelenti pittori, sculttori e architettori*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini & Paola Barocchi, Florence 1966, vol. 1, p. 72.

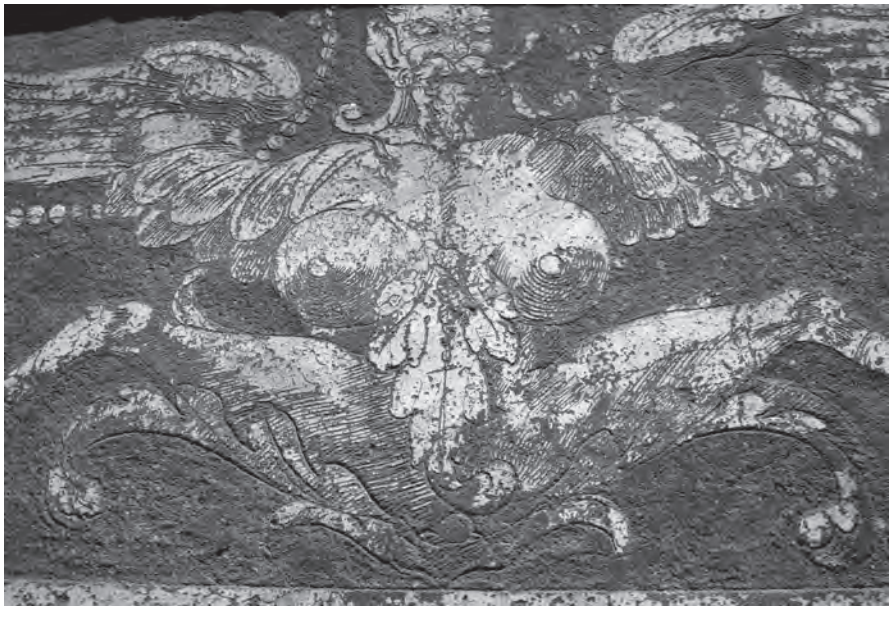


Fig. 3: Bartolomeo Ammannati, Giorgio Vasari and Bernardino Poccetti. Florence, *Palazzo Ramirez Montalvo*, detail of *sgraffito*

What modern research there is on this technique has been done by the Thiems in the 1960s and their catalogue of buildings, with an introductory survey of its development, is among our only sources.[6] There is clearly a continuity in the popularity of *sgraffito* facades in Florence and more generally (though perhaps less) in the rest of Tuscany – in Pienza, Pisa, Prato, Siena. The manner of *sgraffito* itself seems less widespread elsewhere in Italy, though there are examples in Rome, and certainly in the later Cinquecento, in the Trentino and also North of the Alps, from Switzerland to Prague. More common outside of Tuscany was the chiaroscuro façade widely associated with Polidoro da Caravaggio and Maturino da Firenze (another Florentine), who brought it to a height of fashion in Rome before the Sack; but it seems to have fallen off after Polidoro's death. This variant of painted grisaille facades, mostly figural, did not meet with much success in Florence itself as indeed was the case for painted facades, of which there are some very fine but few examples (such as the Palazzo Benci and the Palazzo dell'Antella). The patterned *sgraffito* façade remained the preferred Florentine choice across several centuries.

Evidently the practice of *sgraffito* is one intended for stucco facades. Although a number of Florentine palaces – Medici, Rucellai, Gondi, Pitti, Strozzi – were clearly part of a discourse about rough, rusticated stone and in a dialogue with the Signoria,

6 Gunther & Christel Thiem, *Toskanische Fassaden-Dekoration in Sgraffito und Fresko 14. bis 17. Jahrhundert*, Munich 1964.

Fig. 4: Florence, *Palazzo Coverelli*

stucco was probably as popular, if not more, both in the Trecento and later. Indeed, Alberti spends a fair amount of space in *De re aedificatoria* describing the process of obtaining exquisitely finished surfaces (VI, 10) and Vasari (another Tuscan) echoes this view a century later, thus indicating an enduring aesthetic preference.[7]

It is in this stucco surface, then, that the *sgraffito* designs were incised with a sharp, metal tool. As the Thiems rightly point out, it is wrong to refer to *sgraffito* as painting since it is a form of scratching, incising and minute carving; one could even construe it as a form of painting crossed with goldsmithry. In fact, *sgraffito* decoration was seen early on as similar to a pottery technique (*pâte-sur-pâte*) – an art of incision, based on the interplay of two layers of finished surfaces: one glazed, the other only fired (in the case of the potter) and white and black in the case of *sgraffito*. The relief obtained was less than one quarter inch but, even if minute, it was based on chiseling, scratching and peeling off; in other words it was a removing technique (rather like engraving) and recalls the work associated with bronze as well as stucco reliefs (fig. 3). Color washes could be added, but this was certainly

7 Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, Cambridge/MA 1988, pp. 176, 178 and 298-299. Vasari deals with the finish of surfaces mostly under painting in his introductions to the individual arts. Vasari, *Le vite* (note 5), vol. 1, pp. 139-145.

Fig. 5: Bartolomeo Ammannati, Giorgio Vasari and Bernardino Poccetti, *Palazzo Ramirez Montalvo*. Florence

not essential – the basis of the process was the coating of the wall and its incision to allow for selective subtraction of the material.[8]

Historically, the period of popularity of *sgraffito* can be divided into three phases: first, a Trecento to mid Quattrocento phase of borders and infill with imitation ashlar stone that evolves gradually into more complex figural bands for the borders, while maintaining the floor-by-floor divisions. This is the phase of the Medici palace courtyard of Maso di Batolomeo or that of the Palazzi Coverelli and Spinelli (fig. 4). The second, later Quattrocento to early Cinquecento phase, is that of Andrea Feltrini (student of Morto da Feltre, himself a student of Cosimo Rosselli). This phase is represented by the Palazzi Sertini, Lanfredini and Bartolini (where Feltrini worked with Baccio D'Agnolo) and is a phase of *grotteschi*, but also of a balance between pattern and geometrical arrangements. The final phase is that of the large scale *grotteschi* that cover the entire field with figural forms, the phase of the mid and later Cinquecento, of Poccetti and Vasari himself working with Buontalenti the one, and with Ammannati the other. Representative are the palaces of Bianca Cappello and Ramirez Montalvo in Florence and the Palazzo dei Cavalieri di San Stefano in Pisa (by Vasari) (fig. 5).

8 Thiem, *Toskanische Fassaden-Dekoration* (note 7), pp. 18-22.

It is clear that in all three periods the ambition was to cover the entire field of the façade: the difference is how. The effects are of lightness and transparency, but also of a certain brightness thanks to the use of white, which, when seen against the dark stucco, enhances the effect of fragility and delicacy. It has been argued that the ornamental patterns of early *sgraffito* work of fine borders and ornamental bands was indebted to sculpture, in particular to *festoni*, and to incrustation as well, halfway between *sgraffito* and sculpture, such as in the façade of Santa Maria Novella, which partakes of the *sgraffito* effects of lacy transparency. But the tradition of architecture and stone carving are not the only, and perhaps not even, the *main* referents here. The very nature of the ornament, its deployment, its two-tone quality and relief against a dark ground also suggest a range of sources among the minor arts: textiles, and silks in particular, ceramics, carpets, and metalwork.

As is well known, the silk trade and production was a major economic feature of Florence. Much of it, indeed the highest quality fabrics, depended on silks imported from the Caspian region (Asterabad: today, Iran); trade extended far and wide both for importing and exporting luxury textile wares and also tied Florence to Ragusa, Portugal, Valencia and Palermo.[9] Through this intermediary, new patterns had entered the Florentine repertoire that had come to the West from China (arabesques and asymmetrical arrangements, also dragons and other such animals) and been disseminated through the Mediterranean region. Some textiles were pattern on pattern, others were lace, while certain forms of brocades were actual relief work – rather like the *sgraffito* so called »alto basso« and »bouclé«. Work with silver and gold thread also meant collaboration with goldsmiths and other metal-working trades as well, and the production of complex and layered micro-masterpieces in which some of the major artists participated.

The connection of architecture to textile for the ornamentation of exterior walls is not that far-fetched, for there was another important tradition in Florence: one of covering walls with fabric on the occasion of major feasts – as in the images faithfully recorded by Apollonio di Giovanni and others on wedding *cassoni* (fig. 6). The ornamental pseudo-Kufic inscription speaks of an aesthetic interest in Islamic designs and calligraphy; the cloth with which the Baptistery is covered and the white/black effect is similar in *factura* to the *sgraffiti* then *en vogue*. Moreover, not only were external walls covered with silks (and carpets) but the piazza itself was covered with fabric on special occasions, thus creating a soft, textile indoors/outdoors, as documented by the Bargello *cassone* in which the Baptistery piazza is shown covered with billowing cloth.

Permanent references to such textiles would not have been out of place on the façade of a silk manufacturers' palace. Indeed, it is not entirely coincidental that the Spinelli palace façade recalls the ornamental strategies of lace and silk, for the fam-

9 Franco Franceschi, »Florence and Silk in the Fifteenth Century: the Origins of a Long and Felicitous Union«, in *Italian History and Culture*, ed. Michael Collins & Marcello Fantoni., Cadmo 1995, pp. 3-22; Sergio Tognetti, *Un'industria di lusso al servizio del grande commercio*, Florence 2002, pp. 39, 113 and 139.

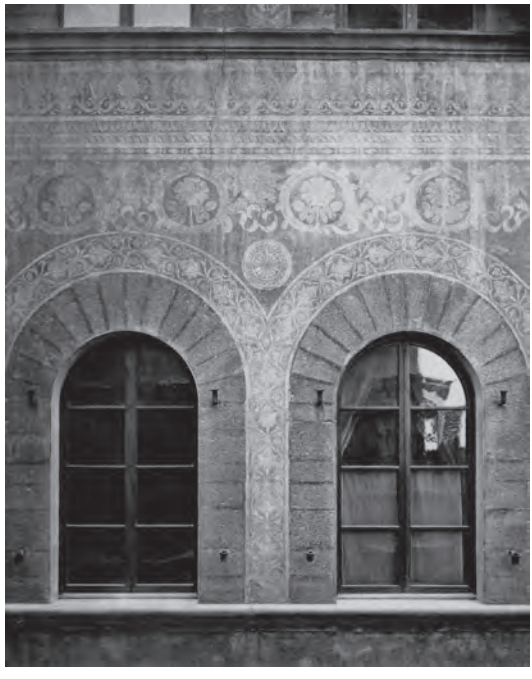
Fig. 6: Apollonio di Giovanni, *Cassone*. Florence, Bargello

ily owned one of the largest silk manufactures in Florence at the time, the heyday of this industry in the province (fig. 7). As scholars have noted, the Spinelli produced the most expensive silks and Tommaso, the palace's *committente* – also known as »il grande Tommaso« –, was the family's most remarkable member, whose business acumen had allowed the family to rise to great prominence. His patronage was lavish, especially for Santa Croce, where he built a chapel and presented gifts that included the most expensive vestments, of an approximate value of over 2000 florins, in 1454. Clearly, he wanted to be known through his own luxury products.[10]

The same link may be true of the facades of Andrea Feltrini, which also borrowed the aesthetic of all-over design from fabrics – brocades, lace, carpets – and where the use of black and white produces effects of transparency. If not the patterns, which are more *alla grottesca*, the *factura* is the same. Indeed, as Vasari records, Feltrini was an artist of many talents who worked on ephemeral *apparati*, on ornamentation of wooden ceilings, of *cassoni*, and, most interestingly, he designed *bandiere* and fabrics, suggesting the presence of one continuous field of ornament that circulated autonomously from one scale to another, from one medium to an-

10 Richard Goldthwaite, »An Entrepreneurial Silk Weaver in Renaissance Florence«, in *I Tatti Studies: Essays in the Renaissance*, 10, Florence 2005, pp. 69-126; Philip Jacks & William Cafero, *The Spinelli of Florence. Fortunes of a Renaissance Merchant Family*, University Park/PA 2001.

Fig. 7: Florence, *Palazzo Spinelli*, façade



other.[11] Feltrini was not alone: Antonio Pollaiolo, Botticelli, Raffaellino del Garbo, Cosimo Rosselli and the Ghirlandaios designed for silk weavers and in turn were influenced by them, an example of artistic circularity.[12] Vasari gives us a glimpse inside one of such artists' *botteghe* when he describes Perino del Vaga's:

> Perino had acquired such authority that all the work in Rome was allotted to him, […] having to draw night and day and to meet the demands of the Palace, and among other things, to make the designs of embroideries, of engravings for banner-makers, and of innumerable ornaments required by the caprice of Farnese and other Cardinals and noblemen. In short, having his mind incessantly occupied, and being always surrounded by sculptors, masters in stucco, wood-carvers, seamsters, embroiderers, painters, gilders, and other suchlike craftsmen, he had never an hour of repose […].[13]

That architecture and textiles, even clothes should enter into a dialogue is less odd than may seem. As the sixteenth-century *Libro del Sarto* testifies – a manuscript owned and updated by several generations of Milanese tailors – fabric and dress designs were often brought together within the same covers with architectural ornament. Indeed, the fabric for the dress *d'apparat*, be it for war or for display, ex-

11 Vasari, *Le Vite* (note 5), vol. 4, pp. 521-523.
12 Franceschi, »Florence and Silk« (note 10), pp. 13-14.
13 Vasari, *Le Vite* (note 5), vol. 5, p. 159.

Fig. 8: Campaign tent, in *Libro del Sarto*, cl. VIII, Cod. I, Ms. 944, 16th century. Venezia, Biblioteca Querini Stampalia

tended beyond the wearer's body and included the soft architecture of the tent, the horse, and the parasol, all of which partook of the same patterns and moved beyond the immediate body of the wearer to those things it touched, was in contact with (fig. 8). In short, the owner was part of the building brief. *Decorum*, as per Vitruvius, and later according to the sumptuary laws, provided a finely graded scale that calibrated personality and building, as well as richness. Cloth and its ornament would have probably been seen as a similar bridge between the person of the owner and his representation onto the street and the city at an iconographic level, but more importantly, as a gauge of magnificence.

Not all *sgraffito* facades were equally rich, and Spinelli's was a particularly extravagant one. Indeed, it might be worthwhile to ask if even more was at stake in these facades than self-representation and if the richness of the cloth was not also a reference to the wealth of the local industry. The same may well be true of the Palazzo dell'Arte della Seta, likewise *sgraffitato*. After all, the *quartiere* Santa Croce was the home of the silk industry, and displaying his riches in textile on his palace façade a stone's throw away from the church a likely strategy. A century later, Eleonora of Toledo and Cosimo I encouraged and supported the local cloth industry and tried to revive it to its former glory.[14] The commission of the Pontormo/

14 Roberta Orsi Landini & Bruna Niccoli, *Moda a Firenze 1540-1580: lo stile di Eleonora di Toledo e la sua influenza*, Florence 2005.

Fig. 9: Pisa, San Piero in Grado, detail of baccini

Bronzino tapestries was part of the same effort to create and re-create an industry. In such a context, the architectural references to the all-over pattern aesthetic of fabrics in contemporary palaces would have been immediately legible for the »"period eye«.[15]

But textiles were not the only crafts with which *sgraffito* stood in a condition of exchange. Pottery, embroidery, calligraphy were others and the »porcelana« patterns in Cipriano Piccolpasso's *Three Books of the Potter's Art* amply illustrate this fact. Like the trade in cloth and its ornament between Florence, Venice, and the East, Islamic pottery like the medieval *baccini* (glazed ceramic plates and bowls) mortared into church walls such as at San Piero a Grado (Pisa) signal the ways in which form translated across materials as well as across geographic confines (fig. 9). Moreover, treatises were written that brought together embroiderers and goldsmiths, and elsewhere calligraphers, between the covers of one book; cordovan leather panels from Spain – the *corami d'oro* or *corami di parato* – that often lined the walls of palaces were likewise imprinted with ornaments by goldsmiths and engravers and are recorded in the inventories of the Medici, the Barberini, the Piccolomini, and so on.[16] From surface layers to interior walls, they could easily invite transfer to the treatment of the external ones.

15 *Bronzino. Pittore e poeta alla corte dei Medici*, Exhib. Cat. (Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, 2010), ed. Carlo Falciani & Antonio Natali, Florence 2010, pp. 124-131.

16 On the demand for *corami d'oro* in Italy Leonardo Fioravanti, *Dello specchio di scientia universale*, Venice 1564. On Lorenzo de Medici's cordovans Cinzia Piglione and Francesca Tasso, »Corami d'oro«, in *Le arti minori nei secoli XV e XVI*, ed. Cinzia Piglione, Milan 2000,

Fig. 10: Majolica vessels. Florence, Bargello

All these were portable objects and as such may not seem to enter into a likely relationship with the immobile and monumental architecture.[17] But they were also the transporters of pattern and design ideas, of a sense of luxury and craftsmanship, of exquisite worked surfaces, no matter how small. What came through them was a taste for ›all-over‹ ornament, for filigree and rich, textured surfaces, for visible, intense craftsmanship – whether from the Eastern (from Byzantium and the Ottomans) or Western Mediterranean (majolica or cordovans from Spain). The actual *mudejar*, Mamluk or Ottoman architectural monuments need not have been experienced first hand – they travelled by proxy. In their stead, silk cloth traveled back and forth across the Mediterranean, wrapping relics and lining boxes, gifted to viziers and sultans and gifted back to ambassadors and princes.[18] Carpets travelled as

p. 149; on Barberini inventories Marilyn Aaronberg Lavin, *Seventeenth-century Barberini Documents and Inventories of Art*, New York 1975, p. 217.

17 On architecture and portability, Alina Payne, »Portable Ruins. The Pergamon Altar, Heinrich Wölfflin and German Art History at the ›fin de siècle‹«, in *Res: Aesthetics and Anthropology*, 53/54, 2008, pp. 168-189. On the intersections with *Kleinarchitektur* and sculpture see Alina Payne, »Materiality, Crafting, and Scale in Renaissance Architecture«, in *Oxford Art Journal*, 32 (3), 2009, pp. 365-386.

18 Thelma K. Thomas, »Silks«, in *Byzantium and Islam. Age of Transition*, Exhib. Cat. (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012), ed. Helen C. Evans with Brandie Ratliff,

well, so did metal objects, majolica pottery (in great demand in Florence and bearing the marks of the families commissioning it, like the Spinelli) and caused similar wares to be produced in imitation (fig. 10).[19] The pleasure of craftsmanship for architectural surfaces that Alberti records included the aesthetic of intarsia, of gem and majolica work, of mosaic, of brocade and silks; and they all converged. Found within the activities of the same *bottega* – like Feltrini's – they were also an expected visual stimulus for those moving in environments where all these materials and ornaments created a harmonious extension from one to the others, reaching even to the fabrics on the walls and those on the bodies wearing them.

The Florentine aesthetic preference for intricately worked surfaces, I would argue, competed with the growing Renaissance aesthetic for deep relief facades and became a site of significant overlaps with other media. A crafted surface, the *sgraffito* borrowed from other crafted surfaces no matter how small or diverse in materials – the silk cloths, the damasks, the *niello*, the damascene, the cameo, the engraving, majolica and the *corami* – and signals the participation of architecture in the luxury taste that Burckhardt identified long ago as the aesthetic motor of Renaissance invention.[20] It also signals an aesthetic that traversed geographic confines as well as artistic media. An acknowledged phenomenon in Islamic art, it has been virtually ignored by scholars of western architecture, where monumental art is seen to remain aloof of its ›minor‹ siblings. Indeed, here may lie the deepest prejudice and discomfort caused by the *sgraffito* aesthetic. Yet Mediterranean culture was more buoyant, more extrovert, more hybrid than the more normative sixteenth, as Fernand Braudel recognized several decades ago.[21] The promiscuous circulation of ornament across media and borders is a testimony to this fact, and illustrates alternative modes of architectural performance, of craft as *bravura*, before visual systems fell into a normative mode.

New York 2012, pp. 148-159; Kirstin Kennedy, »Ornament«, in *Medieval and Renaissance. People and Possessions*, ed. Glyn Davis & Kirstin Kennedy, London 2009, pp. 177-179.

19 Richard Goldthwaite, »The Economic and Social World of Italian Renaissance Maiolica«, in *Renaissance Quarterly*, 42 (1), 1989, pp. 1-32; Marco Spallanzani, *Maioliche Ispano-Moresche a Firenze nel Rinascimento*, Florence 2006, pp. 9-14; Marco Spallanzani, *Oriental Rugs in Renaissance Florence*, Florence 2007; Rosa Barovier Mentasti and Stefano Carboni, »Le verre émaillé, entre l'Orient méditerranéen et Venise«, in *Venise et l'Orient 828-1797*, Exhib. Cat. (Paris, Institut du monde arabe, 2006-2007 and New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), ed. Stefano Carboni, Paris 2006, pp. 253-275.

20 Jacob Burckhardt, *Geschichte der Renaissance*, Munich 2000, 1867[1], p. 287: »Im XV Jahrhundert war sowohl der edlere Prachtsinn als die Lust am höchsten Putz und Prunk gewaltig gestiegen […] und eine flüchtige Übersicht der wichtigeren Nachrichten […] wird zeigen welch ein Feld dieser Kunst offen war«.

21 Fernand Braudel, *La Mediterranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris 1949.