

DEPICTIONS OF TIME AND TRANSFORMATION: HERRI MET DE BLES' *COPPER MINE* (AROUND 1535) IN THE FORMER UFFIZI TRIBUNA – DISPLAY CONTEXT AS A KEY TO THE INTERPRETATION OF A WORK OF ART

This text proposes a new reading of Herri met de Bles' Florentine *Copper mine* (Fig. 1) and related works, based on the analysis of 16th century discourses on mining and metallurgy, and artefacts from the mining sphere within the *collezionismo mediceo*¹. The *Copper mine* (referred to in the Uffizi collection documentation as *Miniera di rame* by Civetta, Herri's Italian pseudonym) is a mid-sized landscape format, painted in oil on mounted oak wood panels². The mining plant is situated in the foreground, whereas the surroundings show a so-called 'world landscape' scenery with spectacular rock formations and a large sky that blends into riverbanks or a coastline in the far background³.

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¹ The article is based on my PhD thesis (BAUMGARTNER 2021), Open Access publication with Bern University of Applied Science's library service forthcoming. For further information see DOI: <https://arbor.bfh.ch/11917/> (<28 february 2025>).

² Ca 1500 / 1510, Bouvignes or Dinant, - ca 1560, Antwerpen (cfr. SERCK 2012, pp. 152-153, catalogue number 12, here p. 152 and WEEMANS 2013, p. 7). Instead of a signature, Herri placed a little owl in most of his paintings (hence the Italian nickname). The painting's title has been transferred incorrectly from the Uffizi's Tribuna inventory from 1589 (which presents the first source mentioning the painting), respectively from transcriptions from the 19th century and later. The title (or rather: the description) given in the inventory from 1589 is as follows: «Un quadro in tavola ritrattovi un paese dove si lavora più miniere, di mano del Civetta, con cornice d'ebano, alto braccia uno 7/8 e largo braccia 2 0/3 [sic], n. 1» (TRIBUNA 1589, ms. 70, published online by Paola Barocchi / Memofonte: <http://www.memofonte.it/home/files/pdf/inv.236.pdf>, <28 february 2025>). Furthermore, the ore that is being extracted in this scene is probably iron, not copper (cfr. BAUMAN 1985, pp. 279-280, catalogue number 177, here p. 280, CALMOTTI 1987, pp. 23-30 and MEIJER 1994, p. 300).

³ For explanations of the term 'world landscape' and its history, see PROSPERETTI 2009, p. 84 (who defines it as a microcosmic vision that encompasses the whole world, seen from a superior perspective), WEEMANS 2012, pp. 263-312, here p. 263 and WEEMANS 2013, pp. 60-69.

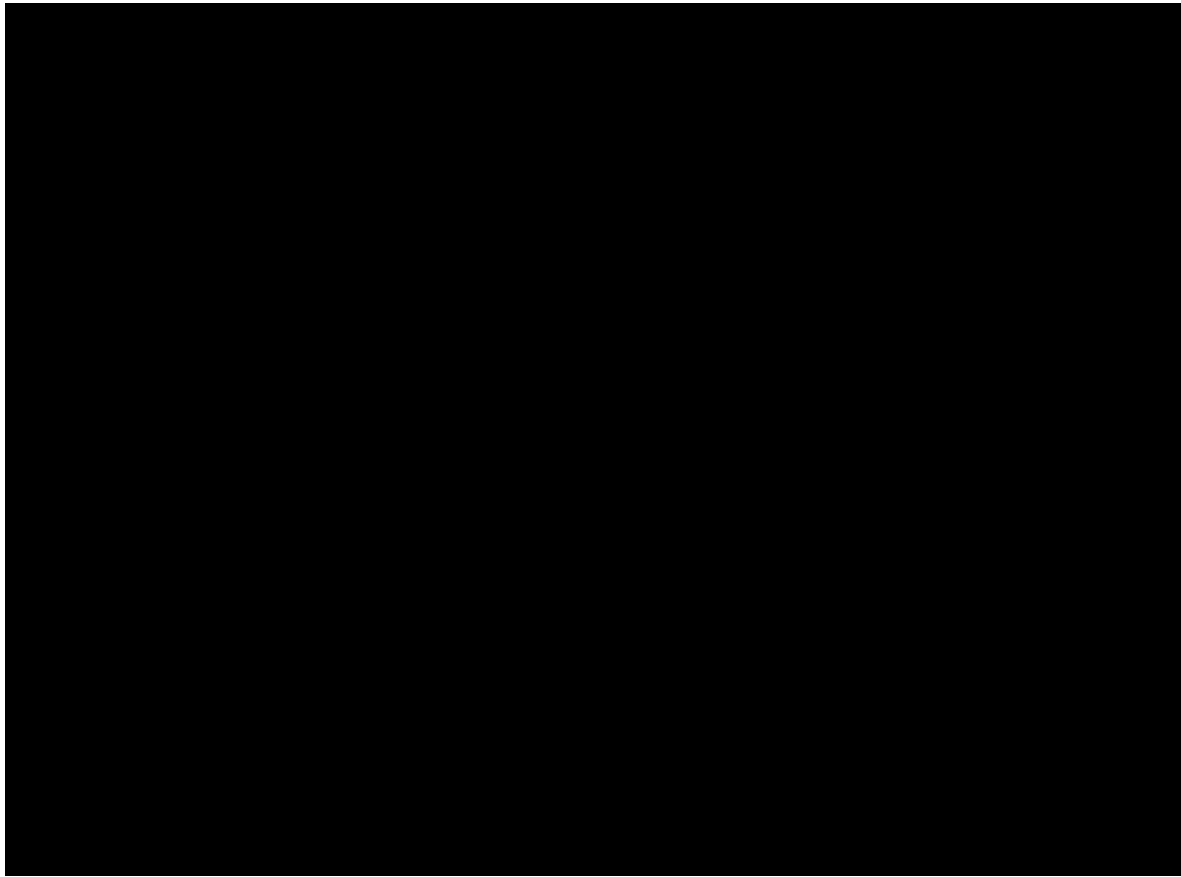


Fig. 1: Herri met de Bles, *Copper mine*, late 1530s, 83x114 cm, oil on oak wood panels, Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, inventory number 1051 (1890) / Kat.-Nr. 00289202. Foto: © Gabinetto Fotografico delle Gallerie degli Uffizi

This picture, somewhat erratic at first sight, has been part of the Medici collection ever since the late 16th century: the earliest document entry that mentions it as a collection item is the 1589 Tribuna (Fig. 2) inventory which was compiled two years after the death of grand duke Francesco I. de' Medici⁴. I would like to suggest Francesco as the one collector that purchased Herri's painting (I will expound on this hypothesis further below).

Nowadays, the *Copper mine*, is usually stored away in the Uffizi's deposit and sometimes temporarily exhibited among the museum's collection of Flemish / Netherlandish paintings. It is generally not seen as one of the Uffizi's major artworks anymore.

⁴ 1541, Florence, - 1587, Poggio a Caiano. Francesco functioned as a deputy for his father Cosimo I. from 1564 on, but only in 1574, when his father died, he officially became grand duke of Tuscany.

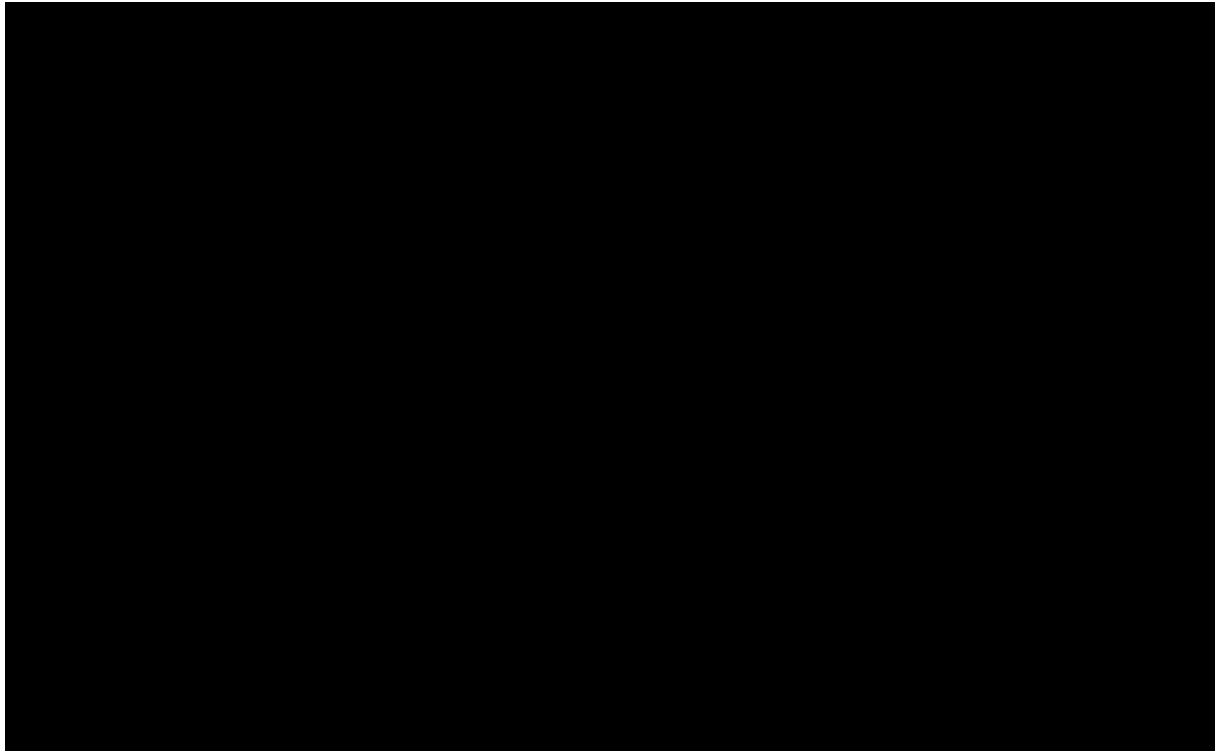


Fig. 2: View of the Tribuna in its current state, ibidem. Foto: © Gabinetto Fotografico delle Gallerie degli Uffizi

Metamorphoses of a painting. Original display context: the Tribuna and its history

The Uffizi Tribuna was installed in 1584. Designed by Francesco's preferred architect Bernardo Buontalenti, it represented the gallery's most precious room and served for the display of rare and luxuriously crafted objects that played on the various intersections of art and nature. For instance, the Tribuna collection famously featured metallurgical / mineralogical artefacts like antique bronze or stone figurines, gemstones and the so-called 'handstones', that originated from mines⁵. It also hosted paintings, the content of which thematically combined the subject matters of metallurgy and archeology and antiquity – most notably Giorgio Vasari's *Ingegno e Arte* (ca 1565-1567), (Fig. 3), which shows Minerva's visit in Vulcan's forge. At the same time, the Tribuna's floor and ceiling consisted of a skillful encrustation in *pietre dure* and mother-of-pearl⁶. The Tribuna was thus, with respect both to its ornamental materials and the displayed objects, conceived as a shrine.

⁵ See for example this specimen in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna: www.khm.at/en/object/90151/ (<28 february 2025>). In the Italian Cinquecento terminology, these handstones are also called «miniere».

⁶ Over the centuries, the Tribuna has undergone significant changes; it was recently completely restored. In this current state of display, the focus lies on the decorative elements of the floor and ceiling – since the Tribuna cannot be entered for conservation reasons, the curators chose paintings that are easily visible when looking into the room. Herri's *Copper mine*, with its minute depictions of technical installations, people, animals, and other figurative elements, is not suitable for this display concept anymore.

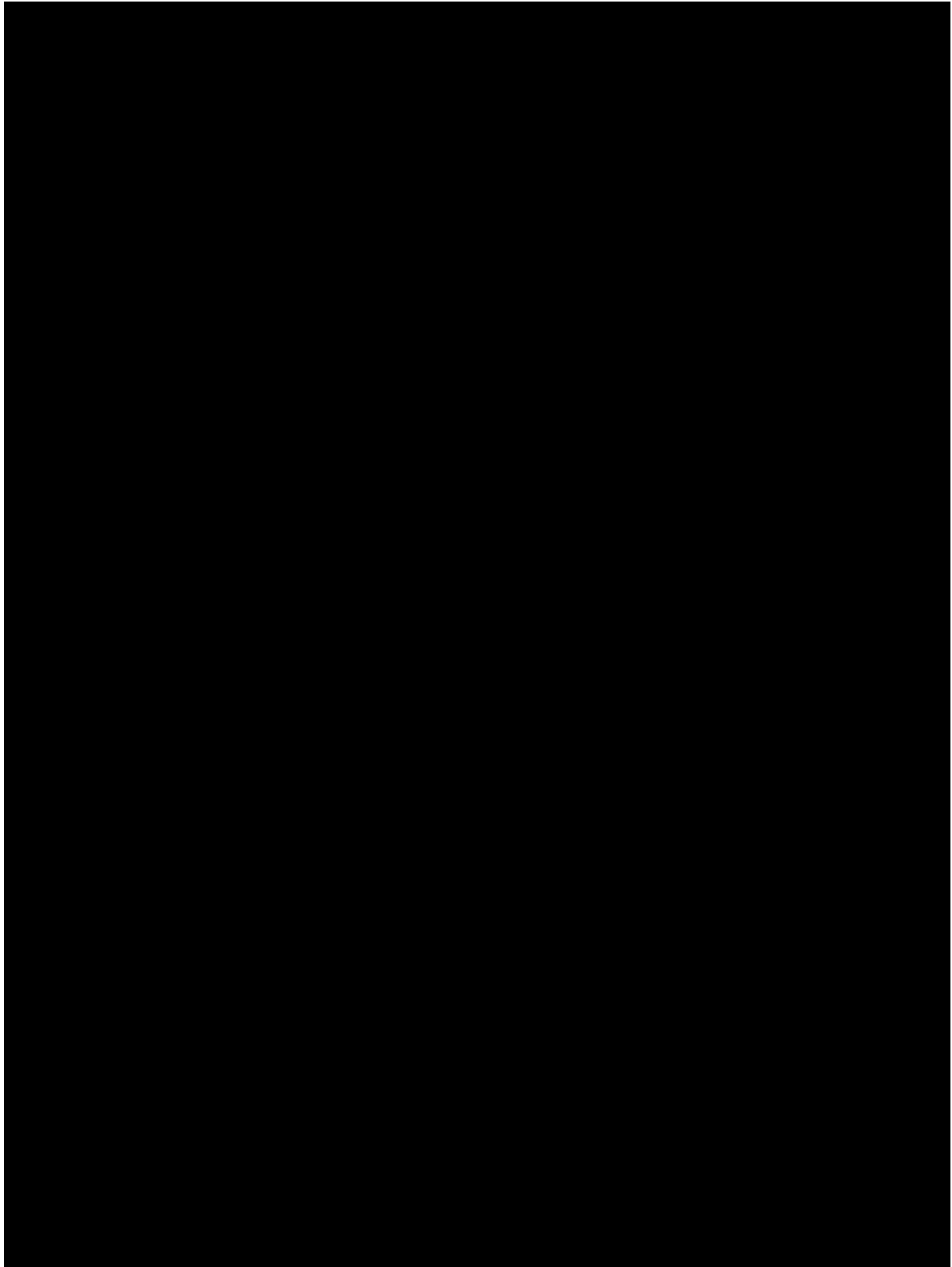


Fig. 3: Giorgio Vasari, *Ingegno e Arte (Fucina di Vulcano)*, 1565-1567, 38x28 cm, oil on copper, Florence, ibidem, inventory number 1558 (1890) / Kat.-Nr. 00021980. Foto: © Gabinetto Fotografico delle Gallerie degli Uffizi

Hence, it might seem surprising to find Herri's *Copper mine* with its peculiar landscape and the detailed depiction of everyday industrial working procedures (that typically would be received as the *parerga*, which the Netherlandish painters excelled in) to be among the most highly

esteemed artworks in the 1589 setting of the Tribuna. But the Medici (or rather: Francesco I.) were not the only princely collectors in Italy with a predilection for Netherlandish landscapes (a genre that was at the time only emerging into a pictorial category of its own).

At the beginning of the Cinquecento, Cardinal Rodolfo Pio da Carpi started his Roman collection of antiques and artworks, showing a particular interest in Netherlandish landscapes. The cardinal's treasures were either displayed *en plain air* in his spacious sculpture garden on the Quirinale hill (that was the case for the larger statues and fragments among his antiques) or in a series of rooms called *studii* in his Palazzo in the Campo di Marte area of the town. The collection and its presentation are described in the cardinal's estate inventory (dating from 1564); this document presents an invaluable source for tracing back the history of Cinquecento collections and the provenance of many artworks and antiques that circulated between different collectors in Italy and Europe after the cardinal's death.

The cardinal's collection (as it presented itself in the 1560s) thus served as an antetype for the Medici Tribuna which was to follow some 20 years later – both in terms of spatial design and of the specific objects, i.e. the combination of antiques with Netherlandish mining landscape imagery. In the 1564 inventory, we find the following painting:

«Un quadro in tavola di grandezza di tre palmi et un quarto, et largo dui et un quarto colorito a olio con varie et belle *fantasie* dentro di ferriere [iron forge, L.B.], *ingegni* da acqua et altre cose che si chiama dalla Civetta con ornamento di noces»⁷

The terms *fantasie* and *ingegni* are noteworthy. The latter calls to mind the aforementioned picture by Vasari, *spiritus rector* of the Medici collections, in the Uffizi Tribuna⁸. As will be shown below, these terms refer to a key concept in Mannerist, or rather: Academic, art theory in late Cinquecento Florence, which suggests an intrinsic similarity between artistic and divine (alternatively: natural) creation⁹.

Provenance of Antwerp landscapes in Italian collections: connections between Rome and Florence

The Cardinal's mining landscape by Herri met de Bles / Civetta has been lost over time. It would of course seem intriguing to speculate that the paintings mentioned in both the inventories from 1564 (Rome) and 1589 (Florence) respectively are identical (and thus, that the Civetta painting in the Tribuna collection stems from the Cardinal's estate) – as a matter of fact, items from the Cardinal's collection have been transferred to the Medici in the course of his inheritance's dissolution after 1564¹⁰. But, based on the measures provided by these sources, we must exclude this possibility. Nevertheless, it is highly probable that the Florentine version originally used to be part of a Roman collection, and that Francesco's art dealers and antiquarians purchased the painting, so to speak, second-hand on the Roman art market in the 1580s: As Donatella

⁷ Getty Provenance Index® databases. J. Paul Getty Trust, Archival Inventory I-3963 (Pio da Carpi), Item number 10; my emphases). This painting was displayed in the so-called «saletta delle anticaglie»; it will hence be referred to as *Fantasie dentro di ferriere*.

⁸ As for the record on the title *Ingegno e Arte* cfr. BARTSCH 2013, pp. 197-224, here p. 212 and WINNER 1962, pp. 150-185, here p. 158. In the Tribuna inventory of 1589, it says about Vasari's painting: «Un quadro a olio ritrattovi dentro la Fucina di Vulcano con altre figure, cornice d'ebano, alto braccia 5/6 largo braccia 2/3, di mano di Giorgio d'Arezzo, n. 1» (TRIBUNA 1589).

⁹ As Tatjana Bartsch and Matthias Winner have demonstrated, the *concetto* for Vasari's painting of Vulcan and Minerva was coined by Vincenzo Borghini, who had already devised the overall design for Francesco's Studiolo in the Palazzo Vecchio (1574).

¹⁰ Cosimo de' Medici had acquired the Cardinal's library in 1564, and Francesco's agents (like Alfonso Del Testa) procured two cameos for him in 1585, that had formerly belonged to Pio da Carpi's collection.

Pegazzano and Maia Wellington Gahtan have shown, Florentine collectors of the late 16th century generally drew inspiration from preceding Roman collections and their display paradigms¹¹. Also, there existed close relations between the Medici and the Pio da Carpi families: In 1565, Cosimo de' Medici, Francesco's father and predecessor as the first grand duke of Tuscany, arranged a marriage for a member of the Pio da Carpi clan, and the Cardinal Rodolfo Pio had already established profitable ties to Pope Leo X. (who, of course, was a Medici)¹².

As for Rodolfo Pio da Carpi, I presume that he had acquired the *Fantasia dentro di ferriere* in the 1530s, through the Haarlem-based Van der Molen family, a Netherlandish art dealer's enterprise specializing in the trade of artworks from the Netherlands (both North and South) to Italy¹³. Other leading patrons of the arts like the Venetian Cardinal Domenico Grimani, who might have served as an example to Cardinal Rodolfo Pio, as far as an aristocrat's taste in art is concerned, collected Netherlandish landscapes and were customers of the Van der Molen trading networks. Grimani also owned a garden for the display of monumental fragments of antiques (quite similar to Rodolfo Pio's neighbouring garden, that I mentioned above)¹⁴. Indeed, Herri met de Bles was not at all a marginal figure in the mid- to late Cinquecento. On the contrary, he was immensely popular, especially among North- / Central Italian art lovers. So it follows that Francesco's Tribuna collection, featuring the *Copper mine*, was quite *en vogue* at the time (despite Vasaris' little regard for Netherlandish painting).

Visual analysis of the painting: a moralizing point of view?

In terms of composition, Herri's Florentine *Copper mine* is formed by three layers that differ in colour and the rendering of topography: In the foreground, painted mainly in shades of brown, beige, and black, we see the mining scene, which the painting is commonly named after¹⁵. Amid the working men, women and even children, only attentive observers will perceive a small group of travelers (a man and a woman with a little child, riding a donkey), that are apparently unrelated to the rest of the figures on the mining plant. In the left corner, dominated by a forge with an artfully constructed roof (that delineates the central perspective in this part of the painting), a mask hangs from a wooden joist next to the chimney (Fig. 1, detailed view)¹⁶. Right in front of its gaping, cave-like mouth – which reminds us of the *grottesche* the Mannerist artists of the time were so fascinated with – Herri's famous little owl is seated on a stick.

¹¹ BAUMGARTNER 2021, pp. 128-129, PEGAZZANO 2014a, pp. 131-149, here p. 136 and PEGAZZANO 2014b, pp. 147-151, here p. 147, and WELLINGTON GAHTAN 2014, p. 7.

¹² BAUMGARTNER 2021, p. 176.

¹³ For details about the Van der Molen and their exports to Italy via Venice see BAUMGARTNER 2021, pp. 121-123, MAYHEW 2011, p. 62 and p. 150, and PUTTEVILS 2009, pp. 26-52, here p. 36 and 44-48.

¹⁴ FRANZONI 1981, pp. 212-220 and ROSSI 2001, p. 69.

¹⁵ Even though the artist often gives a detailed rendering of actual contemporary mining practices, we should not conclude that his paintings deliver a scientific documentation of real-life metallurgical standards of the time (EVRARD 1955, p. 31).

¹⁶ As Michel Weemans has shown, the mask stands for the Netherlandish word *gezicht*, denoting the faculty of vision, the view (understood as prospect) from a certain standpoint, and the face of a person / a figure (WEEMANS 2013, pp. 49-57).



Fig. 1: Detailed view

In the middle part of the picture, bizarre rock formations with caves, splendid castles and towers emerge between groups of dark-green trees. In the background, beyond the horizon, blueish mountains seem to grow into clouds; the borders between the sky and the waterfront become indistinguishable.

Herri's painterly ductus recalls the Venetian *colorito*, which, in traditional art-historical categories, is usually opposed to the Florentine *disegno* school of painting. If we consider the Venetian connections which I suggested for both Rodolfo Pio da Carpi and Francesco de' Medici, these collectors' taste for Northern painting becomes more plausible.

The miniature traveling figures in the foreground play a decisive role in guiding the viewer's sight and focusing on the main episode of the story that is told in this painting: The elderly man, who precedes the riding woman and child (probably the father), wears a glazing red jacket – a regular eye-catcher – while the woman's (the mother's) white head scarf and the child's yellow gown serve as further visual markers. Remarkably though, hardly any of the figures within the painting seems to take note of this family, which is merely passing through the margins of the scene of active metallurgical work. Only the two nearest persons, an adult and an infant, who function as *repoussoirs*, look directly at the small group; the grown-up to the left even holds back the child in order to make way for the three. It is quite telling that these two figures turn their backs to us onlookers (who stand outside the image's frame): We cannot see their faces and can only speculate about their expressions, which might reflect the vision of the passing family. These three marginal figures have commonly (and convincingly so) been identified as the Holy Family on their flight to Egypt¹⁷.

Earlier researchers often ascribed an unambiguously critical impetus to the depictions of mining created by Herri and his followers – the reference to the Holy Family, in this view, serves as a proof of the painter's supposed critique of mining as a violation of God's creation and a symbol for the vanity of human endeavours¹⁸. This interpretation, as I would like to argue, is not supported by either the contemporary scientific discourse on mining or descriptions of the paintings in inventories¹⁹. On the contrary, the two princely collections mentioned above celebrated the painter's *ingegno*, his imaginative power that created such fantastical machines and landscape sceneries, through the spatial display and the combination of the mining paintings with precious objects made of stone and metal, and particularly through glorifying inventorial descriptions (that can be read as testimonies of contemporary art theoretical principles). The mining landscape, on a symbolic level, thus is conceptualized as a genuine machine as well, constantly at work, and revealing underlying geological transformations that formed the depicted mountains, rocks and valleys.

¹⁷ On these «Marginal Motifs» see FALKENBURG 1998, pp. 153-169.

¹⁸ See for example PROSPERETTI 2009, p. 72.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the relevant 16th century treatises and other literature such as *De re metallica* by Georgius Agricola, *Ferraria* by Nicolas Bourbon or *De la pirotechnia* by Vannoccio Biringuccio see BAUMGARTNER 2021, pp. 64-69.

Herri's mining paintings themselves, too, present no visual evidence for such a moralizing anti-mining reading, which must therefore be rejected as reductionist²⁰. Instead, this article attempts a new approach to these depictions by focusing on the genesis of the genre of landscape painting during the Renaissance and the theoretical discussion surrounding this type of image (and the subgenre of the mining landscape in particular). It is only by considering the actual scenographic disposition in which Netherlandish mining paintings were exhibited in paradigmatic Italian Renaissance collections that one arrives at an interpretation which makes sense of fundamental conceptions of artistic, mechanical, industrial and metallurgical creation grounded in contemporary art theory and natural philosophy. These conceptions materialized in the universalist and encyclopedic model of the *Kunstammer* or *studiolo*.

Key concepts within the Italian art theory of Vasari and his contemporaries: fantasia, ingegno and the transformation of materials in and through painting

The terminology which the authors of Cardinal Pio da Carpi's quoted inventory applied to Herri's mining landscape tells us much about the high esteem in which Cinquecento art lovers held images of technological innovation. The word *fantasia* is used in this context to grasp a certain atmosphere of masking, concealment, and hidden dimensions in Herri's landscapes (his contemporaries would have used the word *dissimulazione*)²¹. The term *fantasia* or *fantasie* is often ascribed specifically to Netherlandish artists, and linked with the technique of oil painting, which enables the painter to simulate gleaming materials by means of working with fluent layers of paint and translucent glazing.

In Vasari's theoretical fundamentals, as delivered in his *Lives*, artistic *ingegno*, on the other hand, is characterized as the great artist's mental power that connects hand, body and spirit – a concept quite similar to the notion of *disegno*²². Vasari rendered this idea of *ingegno* tangible in the painting *Ingegno e Arte*, that once was displayed in the Tribuna along with Herri's *Copper mine*. Vulcan as a craftsman and metallurgist here appears as *ingegno* personified. Minerva, the goddess of the intellect (assisted by the little genius flying above her), acts as heavenly inspiration and reveals the spiritual powers the ideal artist must possess²³. It is notable that Vasari himself, although a champion for the Florentine school of *disegno*, here made use of the typically Northern oil paint technique. Interestingly, Cardinal Pio da Carpi, too, owned a painting showing Vulcan in his forge (a landscape by Maarten van Heemskerck). Vulcan was positively put forth by late Renaissance artists as a model for the intellectual *artifex*, combining mental abilities with supreme craftsmanship and physical strength²⁴.

Vasari's painting in the Tribuna can, accordingly, be interpreted as a token of painted art theory following the Florentine (Academic) tradition. At the same time, the painting self-referentially comments upon its own making, since the shimmering oil colour is painted on a slide of copper (which resembles a shield) – a substrate that conveys the content of the painting, the production of shining armour by metallurgical procedures. The act of painting thus resembles an alchemical process of transforming (transmuting) base substances into nobler ones.

²⁰ Such visual markers could, for instance, be a sudden change in the weather (weather extremes), miserable figures, and downright destruction of the environment (which is not the case in Herri's works, that show sublime panoramas in bright, even serene weather).

²¹ For these enigmatic elements in Herri's landscapes see WEEMANS 2013.

²² BAUMGARTNER 2021, pp. 80-83.

²³ On the terms *genius*, *ingenium*, *ingegno* cfr. BARTSCH 2013, p. 212, WINNER 1962, p. 158 and ZAGOURY 2018, pp. 61-93, here p. 61.

²⁴ An example of this aesthetic self-stylization is Benvenuto Cellini (1500, Florence, - 1571, *ibidem*), famous for his heroic (and extremely physical) creative act of founding the entire *Perseus* group all of one piece – of which he gave his own account of in his notorious autobiography. At the same time, in his autobiography Cellini appears very eager to demonstrate his erudition in terms of the reception of antiquity (for instance, when he writes at length about the origin of the grotesque ornament and the etymology of *grottesche*).

Herri's mining landscapes, as has been shown, were praised as renderings of *fantasie* and *ingegno*, the latter understood as the depiction of technical / industrial plants and the imaginative power of the artist, who invented the surrounding fantastical landscape. *Ingegno* in the sense of technical artistic proficiency is linked with notions of divine creation: In Herri's landscapes, we most often find a «vignette»²⁵ of a Biblical, eschatological episode (such as the Flight to Egypt). In the example by Vasari's, the artistic *ingegno* is ultimately a divine gift, as suggested by Minerva's presence in Vulcan's smithy. The painted world landscape is hence self-referentially revealed as the artist's creation, paralleling him with God as Maker of the world.

Landscape as a narrative medium

Existing interpretations of Herri's landscapes tend to overlook this genre's narrative qualities: The tiny figures, far from being of minor relevance, actually direct the viewers' attention to the historiographic and eschatological dimension of the image. For when landscape painting was just emerging as a distinct genre at the beginning of the 16th century in the Antwerp art scene (where Herri was active too), it usually intertwined depictions of nature with narrative elements from the Bible or Classical Mythology²⁶.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, of course, present an important intellectual framework for the humanist engagement with the human *virtus formativa*, since this text was extremely influential throughout the European 16th century. I would like to propose that the *Metamorphoses* also present a point of departure for a new understanding of Herri's *Copper mine* in the Medici collections context: already in his earlier collection chamber, the still existing Studiolo in the Palazzo Vecchio (dating from 1574), Francesco and his preferred court artists had created a wonderful interior ensemble, in which the prince interacted with his collection items, while the paintings on the walls and ceiling reflected his own practical experiments in metallurgy and related technologies. Some show episodes taken from the *Metamorphoses* (like the paintings by Francesco Morandini, aka Poppi, and Jacopo Zucchi or by Santi di Tito), and in the Tribuna inventory from 1589 we even find a depiction of the «età dell'oro» by Morandini – an homage to the Medici reign (and the flourishing of the industries under their rule) as the return of the Golden Age²⁷.

Herri's mining paintings should, in this context, be re-interpreted as a self-reflective artistic commentary on the conception of history that constructed the era we now call the Renaissance – an era which was already considered by contemporaries to represent a summit of human achievement within a teleological model of history. The learned reception of Greek and Roman antiquity not only provided the necessary paradigms for the *paragone* with and the *aemulatio* of the ancient antetypes, but also the sources of mythological cosmogonies and historiographies. These were typologically fused with the Christian narrative of salvation at the 'end of history'. After all, historiography came into being as a scientific discipline in its own right during the long 16th century – a development already remarked upon by contemporaries like Vasari, who serves here as the primary art historical reference point.

While it is certainly true that Renaissance intellectuals, though many of them were positively obsessed with machines, also took up a critical stance on industrial development as a violation of the divine / natural order of things, one can state that visual and literary figurations of machines were thoroughly ambiguous and hence simply fascinating to readers and viewers of this period. Human interaction with nature (i.e. the change of nature through human activity) presented an especially engaging topic that was dealt with by scholars, philosophers, writers,

²⁵ PROSPERETTI 2009, p. 72.

²⁶ BAUMGARTNER 2021, pp. 93-95. See especially Walter Melion's comments on Karel van Mander's and Dominicus Lampsonius' art theory and the genesis of genre / subject matter in the Netherlands around 1500: MELION 1991, pp. 4-11.

²⁷ «Un quadro con cornice di legname tinto nero, tocco d'oro macinato, dipintovi drento [sic] l'età dell'oro, di mano di Francesco Poppi, lungo soldi 19 e largo soldi 11, n. l.» (TRIBUNA 1589).

artists, artisans and, last but not least, collectors inside their *Kunstkammer*. These collection spaces can be understood as machines that constitute knowledge – just as the landscapes in Herri's works can be characterized as machines, mirroring the *ingegni* that serve metallurgical, transformative purposes²⁸.

Conclusion

To sum up: Herri's mining landscapes thus not only do not entail an unambiguous critique of contemporary mining and metallurgical practices. But by depicting (manmade and natural) processes of transformation, they convey a particular notion of temporality. The painterly process of transforming colour, applied to the substrate layer by layer (resembling the *stratae* of earth's surface!), is alluded to in a self-referential manner: The fantastical landscape vision, brought about by the artist's *ingegno*, reflects the geomorphic transformation that took place over time. Herri's *inventio* of the mining landscape thus corresponds with art theoretical *leitmotifs* of the Mannerist period, namely the *paragone* between artistic and natural (divine) creation and the development of artistic style according to Vasari's teleological model – which, then again, is paralleled with the development of human civilization after the antique legend of the Ages of Man.

²⁸ About machine culture in the Renaissance see SAWDAY 2007.