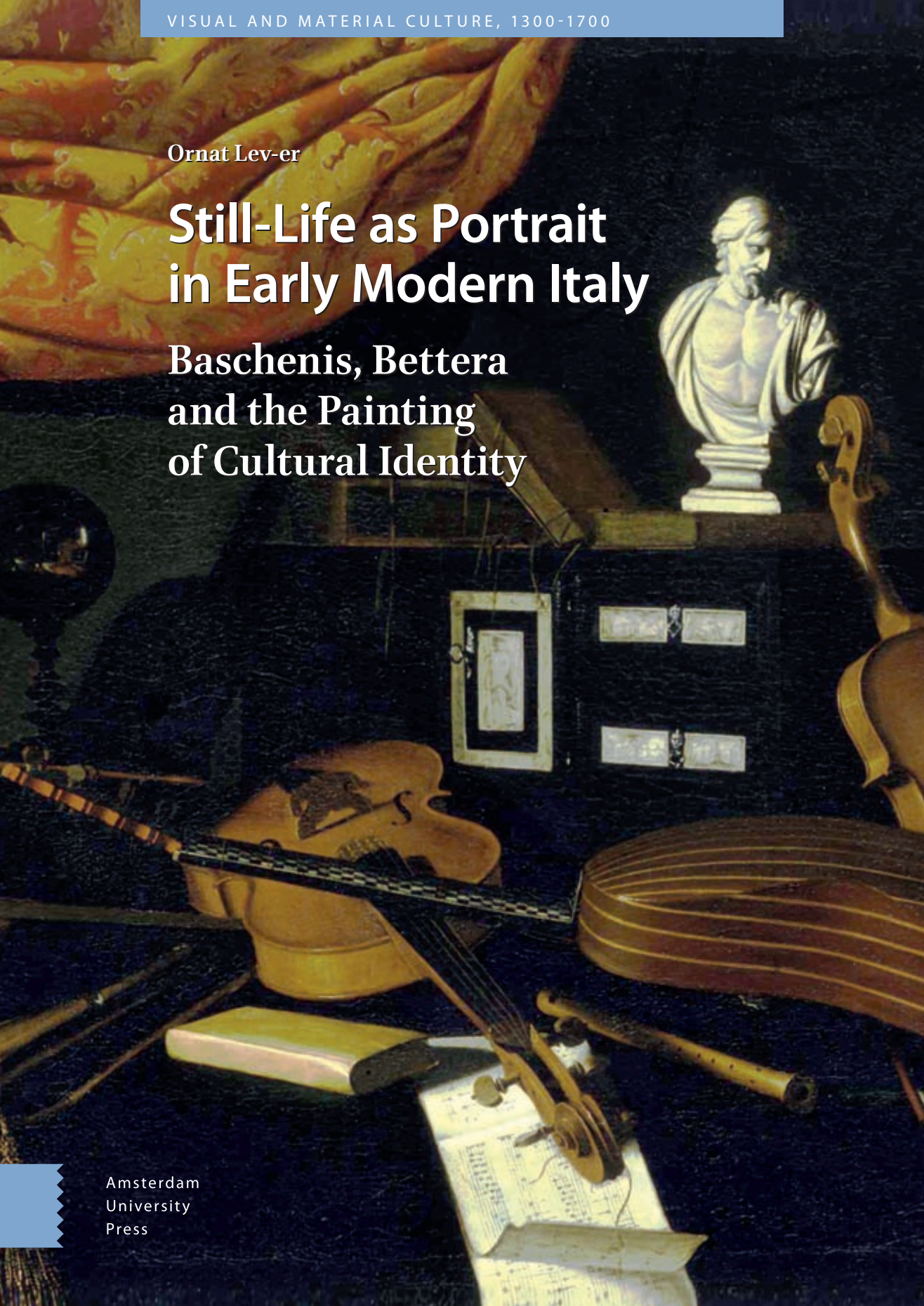


Ornat Lev-er

# Still-Life as Portrait in Early Modern Italy

## Baschenis, Bettera and the Painting of Cultural Identity



Amsterdam  
University  
Press

## Still-Life as Portrait in Early Modern Italy

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# Still-Life as Portrait in Early Modern Italy

*Baschenis, Bettera, and the Painting of Cultural Identity*

*Ornat Lev-er*

Amsterdam University Press

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For the two pillars of support in my life – my husband Udi, and my brother Oni.

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118. Bartolomeo Bettera, *Still Life with Musical Instruments*, 17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, 72x95cm, Bergamo, Fondazione Accademia Carrara, inv. n. 761 (detail).
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121. Bartolomeo Bettera, *Still Life with Musical Instruments*, 17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, 72x95cm, Bergamo, Accademia Carrara, inv. n. 761 (detail).
122. Bartolomeo Bettera, *Still Life with Musical Instruments*, 17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, 100x130cm, Prague, Narodni Galerie. Photo © Narodni Galerie, Prague, 2018.
123. Bartolomeo Bettera, *Still Life with Musical Instruments*, 17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, 100x130cm, Prague, Narodni Galerie (detail).
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125. Glycon of Athens (copy) Lysippos (original type), *Farnese Hercules*, marble, Naples National Archaeological Museum. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen, 2011.
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139. Evaristo Baschenis, *Still Life with Musical Instruments*, 17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas 83x98cm, Milan, Museo Teatrale della Scala. Photo by Ran Dotan, 2018.
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144. Evaristo Baschenis, *Still Life with Musical Instruments*, c. 1660, oil on canvas, 95.5x129cm Birmingham, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts (detail).
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148. Evaristo Baschenis, *Still Life with Musical Instruments*, 17<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, 115x163cm, Private Collection. Photo by author, 2010.

# 1. Introduction

*Still Life with Musical Instruments*, *The Music of Silence*, *Baroque Sonnet*.<sup>1</sup> These are some of the names used in art history books, articles, and exhibition catalogues for dozens of paintings by two artists from northern Italy: Evaristo Baschenis (1617–1677) and Bartolomeo Bettera (1639–1699), both natives of Bergamo in the region of Lombardy. These paintings belong to the still-life genre, which was considered by their contemporaries to be the most inferior of genres – a view that has largely persisted, albeit with less tenacity, among modern scholars. The existing scholarship on Baschenis and Bettera views them as talented painters specializing in musical instruments, with expertise in creating perspectival arrangements, impressive structural compositions, and trompe l'oeil imagery. In addition, they are considered experts in the representation of the notion of *vanitas* through their references to music and the dust accumulated on the depicted musical instruments.<sup>2</sup>

This study offers an additional interpretation: although still-life paintings are seemingly devoid of figures and narrative, Baschenis and Bettera's unique selection of objects and mode of representation paint a portrait of educated individuals versed in jurisprudence, literature, philosophy, poetry, music, and theatre. Their still-life compositions contain representations of curiosity, knowledge, and opinions regarding subjects which were central to the world of their contemporaries, and are filled with sophisticated allusions as well as implicit and explicit conceits, which weave a web of nuanced affinities. The musical instruments, sculptures, globes, and books in their works thus also paint a portrait of their creators, two artists residing in a small provincial city who endeavoured to participate in the cultural and theoretical discourse of their time through their artistic and intellectual creations. Ideas and themes traditionally found in the genres of historical, mythological, or religious painting are represented in a still-life context by these two painters, who extended the limits of this genre far beyond the accepted conventions of their time, as well as of subsequent centuries.

For a period of over 20 years, from 1645 to 1667, Baschenis enjoyed a monopoly in his area of speciality on the competitive Lombard market. Beginning in the last decade of his life and over the following century, numerous copies of his works were created in Bergamo and its environs. Most of these copies, whose varying quality depended on the demands and taste of their commissioners, were painted by

<sup>1</sup> *Still Life with Musical Instruments* is the generic title given to all of the paintings by Baschenis and Bettera discussed in this book. In some instances, this title is followed by a detailed description of the specific musical instruments included in the composition, as in *Still Life with Musical Instruments (Violin with Bow, Shawm, Mandola)*. The exhibition 'Music of Silence' was featured at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2000–2001. The exhibition 'Baroque Sonnet' was featured in Bergamo in 2008.

<sup>2</sup> A literature review of the still-life genre and of Baschenis's and Bettera's paintings appears in Chapter 2.

Bartolomeo Bettera's son, Bonaventura Bettera (1663–1718), as well as by an anonymous artist known as Maestro B.B., who was active in Bergamo beginning in the 1690s. These two artists painted 'after' Baschenis in a style that came to be known as the *Maniera Bergamasca* ('Style of Bergamo'), and which grew over time into a school in its own right. The painters affiliated with this school were derided as imitators and copiers, and were excluded from the period's artistic canon. Nevertheless, although their works were not technically or aesthetically innovative, responding instead to market demand, they represent a significant interest in the style of Baschenis and Bettera, who are the subjects of this study.

Baschenis's and Bettera's paintings were displayed in the mansions of local aristocrats, in respectable libraries in Bergamo and Venice, and in the residences of collectors in Milan and Rome. Despite their innovative bodies of work, they have yet to receive sufficient scholarly attention. In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the importance of their work, though its discussion is largely concerned with stylistic interpretations.<sup>3</sup>

This book presents a fresh perspective on their oeuvre, arguing that Baschenis and Bettera offered a distinct view of Bergamo and its inhabitants in their paintings, representing their native town not only as the home of Arlecchino, the *Commedia dell'arte* servant, but also as a city of intellectuals and cultivated men. Both painters saw themselves as active participants in the culture of a city whose ruling class, clergy, and aristocracy were familiar with religious, legal, historical, and philosophical texts, as well as innovative best-selling novels. The members of this elite also belonged to various academies, attended theatrical performances and concerts, and engaged in lively theoretical debates concerning the supremacy of one art form over another (the *paragone*).<sup>4</sup> Baschenis and Bettera may thus be described as seeking to create and represent what could be termed 'the painting of identity', of both a collective local culture, and of their own personal identities.

The themes explored in Baschenis's and Bettera's paintings attest first hand to the fact that both of these natives of Bergamo could be defined as 'scholarly painters', or *pictor doctus* – a Latin term coined by early modern theorists and historians of art and still in use today.<sup>5</sup> This term defines the painter as a humanist knowledgeable about a range of disciplines, such as literature, poetry, music, philosophy, and history, which are represented by the objects on display in Baschenis's and Bettera's compositions, revealing their depth of knowledge and intellectual motivation. They used the canvas as a stage on which they presented a unique subgenre of their own invention: the still-life as a cultural portrait of both an individual and a society, a composition made up entirely of objects that replace the narrative and figures required in other

3 See the comprehensive literature review in Chapter 2.

4 On the cultural life of seventeenth-century Bergamasque elite, see Chapter 2, pp. 58–69. Regarding the *paragone*, see the literature review and discussion in Chapter 6.

5 Damm, Thimann, and Zittel, 'Close and Extensive Reading', 3.

genres of painting, and serve as agents representing the scholarly painter and his educated circle of friends. Through a range of objects emblematic of their multifaceted interests, each of these painters offered a unique representation of his status as a scholarly painter.

In his book *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura, et architettura* ('Treatise on the Art of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture'), the painter and theorist Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538–1600) dedicated an entire chapter to the knowledge that would justify a painter's presumption in claiming the title 'scholarly painter'. Lomazzo recommended books necessary to the painter, yet did not mention any specific writers. Besides the customary fields in which the artist had to be knowledgeable – such as geometry, architecture, arithmetic, perspective, history, theology, anatomy, reading, and writing – he added astrology, music, poetry, and philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Lomazzo described the ideal painter as an enlightened man of culture who could be defined as an expert in the 'painting of identity'. Baschenis and Bettera both excelled at meeting these requirements.

Not all of the knowledge held by these scholarly painters was directly presented to the viewer. Their paintings also encode allusions known as 'conceits' – a Baroque form of sophisticated manipulation. A conceit is a visual manipulation or an extended and illogical metaphor which presents a surprising comparison between things or emotions that are seemingly incomparable, and is often hyperbolic and paradoxical. Baroque textual and visual art frequently aimed to provoke surprise, to astonish, to present unlikely juxtapositions, and to awaken both aesthetic and conceptual pleasure. Rules were simultaneously followed and disrupted by forging connections between incompatible or contrasting elements. The concurrent use of mimesis and fantasy was easily attainable by the art of painting. Such conceits were viewed as prestigious intellectual exercises performed by poets, composers, writers, and painters, and directed at a specific milieu of widely educated viewers who enjoyed deciphering the works in solitary contemplation.<sup>7</sup> The 'scholarly painters' Baschenis and Bettera made frequent use of such conceits. As humanists with wide-ranging knowledge in a variety of fields, they surprised their educated clients, presenting them with numerous challenges. Yet, unlike other painters during the same period, they did so by means of the still-life genre.

This study aims to formulate a new approach to reading still-life painting by offering an intriguing encounter with Baschenis's and Bettera's oeuvre. The work of these painters reveals the potential depth of the messages conveyed in this genre,

6 For Lomazzo see *ibid.*, 11, note 45. See also an additional chapter in the same volume: Hermans, 'Reading Rhetoric', 241, note 3.

7 Egri, 'Renaissance and Baroque Conceits', 89–105. Egri's article presents numerous examples from a range of cultural fields. This concept is also exemplified by painters such as Jan van Eyck, Pieter Brueghel the Elder, Leonardo, Titian, and Velázquez, who employed conceits in their paintings by means of mirrors, wordplay, or the creation of emblems representing familiar proverbs.

while presenting Bergamo as a sophisticated cultural sphere rather than a provincial city sequestered behind its walls. A careful and comprehensive examination of the objects painted by these artists reveals an intellectual world concerned with music, books, theatre, and the *paragone* – the world of a cultivated individual living in seventeenth-century northern Italy.

The objects depicted in Baschenis's and Bettera's paintings are markers of both visual and textual artistic representations informed by a range of disciplines, and thus require an interdisciplinary research methodology. This study employs a cultural-historical approach, analysing the works based on contextual matters relevant to the specific time and place in which they were created. The paintings serve as a metaphorical discussion table, a space for introducing various concerns and provoking debates through the use of musical instruments, sheet music, and books, among other objects. In some instances, the answers to the questions are found in the painting itself, while in others they must be sought in the humanist and theoretical texts alluded to in the compositions.

The majority of scholars have described these paintings as 'still-life with musical instruments'. This title is indeed appropriate, given the numerous musical instruments in the paintings. Yet the paintings also contain additional objects whose importance is equal to, or even greater than, that of the musical instruments. The definition of the paintings examined in this study as 'paintings of identity' is thus a result of an in-depth analysis, which led to a questioning of their generalized description as 'still-life with ...' as well as of their metaphorical 'stillness'. It must be noted that Baschenis's oeuvre also includes an impressive number of still-life paintings with food (kitchen scenes), and a number of portraits that are not discussed in this book.

The body of works explored in this study includes 36 paintings – 22 by Baschenis, thirteen by Bettera and one by 'Maestro B.B.' – most of which were shown in the major exhibitions that featured their works over the past two decades (see literature survey, Chapter 2, pp. 46–57). Approximately half of the paintings were reproduced especially for this study in high-resolution photographs that allow for an in-depth study of their details. The information revealed in these photographs was highly valuable, and allowed for a pioneering and detailed exploration of the works. The paintings were further divided into four main categories, each of which is examined in a separate chapter of this book. Some of the paintings are explored in just one chapter, while others are discussed from a number of perspectives in several chapters. In most cases, the objects in the paintings are charged with both a functional and a symbolic role that is familiar to art historians and can be identified with relative ease. Yet, according to the approach presented in this study, one must explore these objects and their details in greater depth, given their significant role in identifying and understanding both the explicit and the implicit themes and learned statements encoded by Baschenis and Bettera in their still-life paintings. Inventories

of musical instruments or books may capture the material and intellectual possessions of a given individual, yet do not necessarily prove he was a scholar. This study requires more than mentioning the name of a book. It is based on the premise that the presence of each book depicted in the paintings must be treated as a cultural and intellectual statement that was pertinent to the main issues discussed by the painters' contemporaries. This argument will be supported by various means, such as information about the author and content of each book, the number of published editions together with the languages that the book was translated into, and the person to which the book was dedicated. This information will enable the identification of the idea, debate, ideology, or critique represented in each composition.

It is worth noting that most of Baschenis's and Bettera's original paintings are located in private collections. The Agliardi Triptych, for example, which is considered to be a masterpiece, has remained in the Agliardi family mansion since Baschenis painted it some 350 years ago. Only a small number of works by both artists can be found in museums in Bergamo, Venice, Milan, Brussels, Vienna, and Jerusalem. Consequently, this study offers the first discussion of two previously unfamiliar works by Bettera, which have yet to be reproduced or discussed (Figure 72, p. 196, and Figure 129, p. 262).

This study relies on valuable primary sources, some of which will be discussed in the following chapters. The information it presents regarding culture and music in Bergamo is based on locally written books concerning the city's cultural and musical life. Other sources include the archives of regional churches and of a local charity organization, as well as the archive of the local academy, which includes, among other documents, a lecture delivered by an important patron of Baschenis's work. In exploring Baschenis's biography, information was gathered from primary sources found in Bergamo's archives and published mainly by Enrico De Pascale and Marco Rosci. Among these documents are the contract between Baschenis and his teacher, the two wills written by Baschenis, and an inventory of his possessions, together with the details of their sale following his death. These documents all reveal information about his private collection of paintings, his circle of clients and acquaintances, and his working methods. Moreover, his trips outside of Bergamo can be studied by examining the accounting books of the church where he served as priest. This and other documents have been gathered by De Pascale, whose contribution to the present study is significant and essential, and enrich our understanding of the artist and his works.<sup>8</sup> Another major primary source is a large number of the 54 letters exchanged between the French painter and priest Jacques Courtois, known as Il Borgognone, and the art dealer and collector Alberto Vanghetti, who was also a patron and friend of Baschenis. In these letters, Baschenis is mentioned as a painter whose professional opinion is valued by both parties. The professional status and esteem he

8 For a full list of publications related to Baschenis by De Pascale, see bibliography.



enjoyed are revealed by locally written texts, as well as by his biographer, F.M. Tassi. By contrast, there are only a few primary sources related to Bettera's biography, and their contribution to this study is limited: they consist of documents concerning the sale of the modest possessions owned by his family, and a number of letters referring to his economic status and debts. These documents were published by Rosci and Giulia Palloni.

The status of still-life painters and of the genre itself as discussed in this study was informed by the texts of seventeenth-century thinkers and theorists, including the above-mentioned Lomazzo, as well as Bellori, Mancini, and Comanini.<sup>9</sup> Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* shed light on the importance of music in seventeenth-century society, as did a range of theoretical texts expressing the views of painters such as Arcimboldo; letters by composers such as Monteverdi; and impressions and opinions written by composers who came to perform in Bergamo. The books within the paintings were a valuable primary source, revealing much about the writer, the reader, the audience's taste, and the subjects debated by the painters' contemporaries. Inventories of private libraries in residences and monasteries in Bergamo also provided important information. On the subject of theatre, seventeenth-century texts written by residents of Bergamo, as well as general books and articles on the importance of the theatre written by playwrights and theorists of the time, proved to be fruitful sources of information. Texts on the *paragone* written by Leonardo, Alberti, and Varchi, as well as by Vincenzo Galilei and his son Galileo Galilei, served as sources of knowledge concerning opinions and ideas on this subject. Equally enlightening were books, articles, and letters by early modern composers, sculptors, and painters such as Cardano and Vasari.

The subject of music and visual art is discussed from a methodological perspective in an article by the musicologist Antonio Baldassarre, who argues that one cannot make do with a schematic description of musical instruments in artworks. According to the British painter John Constable, who is quoted by Baldassarre, 'paintings are books'.<sup>10</sup> Like written texts, they provide the viewer with a wealth of information. On the importance of visual sources in acquiring knowledge, Baldassarre suggested that musicologists follow the academic discussion unfolding in recent years among art historians, who recommend an interdisciplinary methodology for studying the iconography of music in paintings. Baldassarre encourages an academic collaboration between experts in the two different fields, who could work together to achieve shared goals while preserving the independence of each discipline, and bemoans the fact that the iconography of music in painting remains an under-researched area.

9 Full references concerning these writers are included in Chapter 2.

10 Baldassarre, 'Reflections on Methods and Methodology in Music Iconography', 33–38. The quote 'paintings are books' appears in an article presented at the international conference on iconography held in Göteborg in 2006: Répertoire International d'Iconographie Musicale at the International Conference of IAML/IAMIC/IMS.

In the current study, Baldassarre's recommendations were implemented in a concrete manner: Roberto Gini, an Italian composer and musician who plays an ancient lute, contributed significantly to this study by sharing his knowledge of this musical instrument. Gini, who reads seventeenth-century musical notes, analysed and interpreted the notes in the paintings. Amit Tiefenbrunn, the musical director of the Barocada Ensemble and a maker of Baroque musical instruments, assessed the painted instruments to determine how precisely they are depicted, as well as the types of wood of which they were made. He pointed to different signs and subtleties that led to the formation of various conceptual matters and musical statements, and contributed significantly to the assertion that the musical instruments are not 'silent', in contrast to the common assumption made by most scholars. Beatrix Darmstädter, a musicologist and curator at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, contributed important information concerning the attributions of the manufacturers' stamps visible on the musical instruments in the paintings. Moreover, she turned my attention to a study that she herself conducted on the use of recorders as theatrical accessories, which attends to their presence in some of Baschenis's paintings (see Chapter 5, pp. 203–204, 214). The collaboration with these three leading experts – a composer and lute player, a musician and maker of Baroque musical instruments, and a musicologist specializing in early modern music – underscored one of the central questions explored in this study, which resurfaces in different variations throughout its chapters: Why did Baschenis – who meticulously depicted musical instruments in minute detail – represent musical notations with intentional imprecision? And why, by contrast, did he choose, albeit rarely, to paint melodically precise musical notes? Baschenis and Bettera appear to have painted details whose significance was obvious to any educated viewer at the time. Yet, as the following chapters reveal, this may not always have been the case.

The structure of this book presents a thematic journey through the life and culture of seventeenth-century Bergamo, as guided by the paintings of Baschenis and Bettera. The chapters are dedicated to an in-depth analysis of the paintings through four thematic prisms: music, theatre, books, and the *paragone*. This thematic division allows for a close reading of the paintings and the elements represented in them, giving rise to a comprehensive image of social and cultural life in Bergamo.

The second chapter, 'Still-Life as Culture', presents the biographical information concerning Baschenis's and Bettera's life and work, and a discussion of the characteristics of realist painting in Lombardy, whose defining traits are evident in the works of these two painters. The general literature survey of the still-life genre serves as a necessary background for an examination of the existing scholarly work on the still-life paintings of these two artists, followed by a discussion of the unique and innovative aspects of the current study. Information regarding Bergamo as the cultural and musical centre in which both artists worked concludes this chapter.

The subsequent chapters both build upon and deconstruct the literal understanding of the paintings as mere works of 'still-life'. The positioning of the objects in Baschenis's and Bettera's still-life paintings may initially appear simply as a virtuoso demonstration of foreshortening, of the calculated use of lighting, and of the depiction of materials and textures. Yet these chapters prove the objects to be imbued with great significance, as pieces in an intellectual chess game enacted by the painters. The musical instruments and sheet music, as well as the books, sculptures, curtains, and stage accessories, all represent social, cultural, and intellectual concerns that recur in different variations throughout almost all of the paintings: the right to a title of nobility, innovation and tradition, historical events and their writing in the service of interested patrons, truth as a relative concept, and the war of the arts. In order to allow for an in-depth discussion of these and many other themes, I divided the paintings into four thematically based chapters concerned, respectively, with music, books, theatre, and the *paragone*.

The third chapter, 'Keeping Score: Painting Music', examines the theme of music in the paintings. Terms such as colour, harmony, and rhythm point to the connections among music, painting, and text, and are expressed through the statements and allusions contained in the compositions. The introductory part of this chapter offers a survey of conceptions of music in early modern Italy and of its place in the cultural life of Bergamo. It is followed by a discussion of music as a representation of culture in the paintings, by means of a meticulous examination of the musical instruments, sheet music, and vocal texts inscribed among the rows of notations. Baschenis and Bettera did not paint the instruments only in a literal sense; and the educated viewer, who himself played music, saw the musical instruments and notes as active contributors to an intellectual and cultural discourse, and not merely as dusty objects representative of silence, death, and finality. The paintings presented in this chapter demonstrate the unique and innovative dimensions of Baschenis's and Bettera's representations of music, and reveal the degree to which these paintings exceed the notions of 'music of silence' or of a 'still-life with musical instruments', as they were previously described by other scholars.

The fourth chapter, 'Banned Books and Blockbusters', presents Baschenis's and Bettera's use of painted books as representations of knowledge and of intellectual debates among members of Bergamo's cultivated and educated elite. A survey of local libraries and the role of books within local society is followed by an examination of paintings containing books. The identification of the authors and their biographies, and the inspection of the main themes or statements of each book, reveal the preoccupations of the painters' cultivated contemporaries with subjects such as jurisprudence, poetry, religion, science, and history. By choosing these books and employing them as intellectual and cultural agents, the two painters were able to underscore their own scholarly pursuits, present controversial subjects, introduce scientific developments and innovations, recommend fashionable 'best-sellers', and

raise questions concerning the religious, legal, and economic dimensions of privileged status and rights.

The fifth chapter, 'A Double Act: Still-Life and Theatre', is devoted to the world of theatre and its conceptualization during the early modern period, which comes 'centre stage' in Baschenis's and Bettera's still-life paintings. The introductory section of this chapter explores the term *theatrum mundi* ('the theatre of the world') in the context of seventeenth-century Italian culture, and more specifically in the local context of Bergamo. That which is common to both the arts of theatre and painting is revealed by an analysis of the works, and is exemplified by the multi-disciplinary approach of these two painters. This approach is given expression in the design of the composition as a stage set, the employment of space and the representation of infinity, the use of theatrical curtains, and the presentation of 'imperfect' instruments as stage accessories. In their paintings, which created an illusion of depth and a dramatic atmosphere, Baschenis and Bettera appealed to the cultivated members of the local elite who attended opera performances on the city's stages, inviting them to gaze at the theatre they created in the works.

The innovation evidenced in Baschenis's and Bettera's works is not limited to the cultivated and scholarly use they made of the objects represented in their paintings. The sixth and last chapter, '*Paragone*: May the Best Art Win', reveals how they succeeded in engaging with the notion of the *paragone*, which preoccupied both artists and theorists during the early modern period, within the unexpected sphere of still-life painting, which is devoid of figures or narrative. Following a short theoretical discussion of the term *paragone*, particularly as viewed by the artists' contemporaries, the paintings will be examined based on a thematic division according to the way they enact the competition among the arts. This painted competition, as the discussion reveals, unfolds not only between painting and sculpture or painting and music, but also between additional artistic fields such as painting, music, sculpture, literature, and science.

The objects represented in Baschenis's and Bettera's paintings reveal their wide-ranging intellectual knowledge and motivation. They used their canvases as a stage on which they presented a unique subgenre: still-life as a cultural portrait of individuals and their society. These compositions of objects, which replace the presence of narrative and figures required in other painterly genres, serve to represent the scholarly painter and his educated milieu. The uniquely portrayed objects are thus used as cultural agents that create a multifaceted, intricate 'portrait of identity' of both the scholarly artists and their city. The seventeenth-century cultivated viewer is invited to engage with these paintings, which are by no means 'still', respond to their arguments, and reflect on the intellectual debates they offer.