

The Matter of Violence in Baroque Painting

Bogdan Cornea

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Cover illustration: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1614–1629, oil on canvas, 146.5 × 108 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	7
List of Images	9
An Introduction	13
1. Wound: On Caravaggio's <i>Martyrdom of Saint Ursula</i>	29
2. Touch: On Giovanni Lanfranco's <i>Saint Peter Healing Saint Agatha</i>	53
3. Skin: On Jusepe de Ribera's <i>Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew</i>	73
4. Flesh: On Georges de La Tour's <i>Penitent Saint Jerome</i>	97
5. Blood: On Artemisia Gentileschi's <i>Judith Slaying Holofernes</i>	119
6. Death: On Francisco de Zurbarán's <i>The Martyrdom of Saint Serapion</i>	141
Conclusion	161
General Bibliography	165
Index	183



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List of Images

Image 1.	Jusepe de Ribera, <i>Apollo Flaying Marsyas</i> , 1637, oil on canvas, 202 × 255 cm, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels. Image Credit: Open Access.	12
Image 2.	Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, <i>The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula</i> , 1610, oil on canvas, 143 × 180 cm, Palazzo Zevallos-Stigliano, Naples. Image Credit: Intesa Sanpaolo Collection.	28
Image 3.	Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, <i>The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula</i> , 1610, oil on canvas, 143 × 180 cm, Palazzo Zevallos-Stigliano, Naples. Image Credit: Intesa Sanpaolo Collection. DETAIL.	30
Image 4.	Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, <i>Judith Beheading Holofernes</i> , 1598, oil on canvas, 145 × 195 cm, Palazzo Barberini, Rome. Image Credit: Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, Roma (MiC) – Bibliotheca Hertziana, Istituto Max Planck per la storia dell'arte/Enrico Fontolan.	45
Image 5.	Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, <i>Incredulity of Saint Thomas</i> , 1602, Sanssouci Palace, Potsdam. Image Credit: Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg. Photographer: Hans Bach.	46
Image 6.	Giovanni Lanfranco, <i>Saint Peter Healing Saint Agatha</i> , 1613–1614, Galleria Nazionale, Parma. Image Credit: Licenced by Ministero dei Beni e Delle Attivita Culturali – Complesso Monumentale della Pilotta-Galleria Nazionale di Parma.	52
Image 7.	Giovanni Lanfranco, <i>Saint Peter Healing Saint Agatha</i> , 1613–1614, Galleria Nazionale, Parma. Image Credit: Licenced by Ministero dei Beni e Delle Attivita Culturali – Complesso Monumentale della Pilotta-Galleria Nazionale di Parma. DETAIL.	58
Image 8.	Jusepe de Ribera, <i>Apollo and Marsyas</i> , 1637, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples. Image Credit: Direzione Regionale Musei della Campania.	65
Image 9.	Jusepe de Ribera, <i>The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew</i> , 1644, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Image Credit: Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.	72

- Image 10. Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1644, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Image Credit: Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. 74
DETAIL.
- Image 11. Jusepe de Ribera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1634, oil on canvas, 104 × 113 cm, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Image Credit: Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. 83
- Image 12. Georges de La Tour, *Penitent Saint Jerome*, 1630–1635, oil on canvas, 157 × 100 cm, Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble. Image Credit: Ville de Grenoble/Musée de Grenoble – J.L. Lacroix. 96
- Image 13. Georges de La Tour, *Penitent Saint Jerome*, 1630–1635, oil on canvas, 157 × 100 cm, Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble. Image Credit: Ville de Grenoble/Musée de Grenoble – J.L. Lacroix. 102
DETAIL.
- Image 14. Titian Vecellio, *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness*, c. 1575, oil on canvas, 137 × 97 cm, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid. Image Credit: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. 107
- Image 15. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Saint Bartholomew*, 1661, oil on canvas, 86.7 × 75.6 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA. Image Credit: Open Content. 111
- Image 16. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1614–1629, oil on canvas, 146.5 × 108 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Image Credit: Gabinetto Fotografico delle Gallerie degli Uffizi. 118
- Image 17. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1614–1629, oil on canvas, 146.5 × 108 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Image Credit: Gabinetto Fotografico delle Gallerie degli Uffizi. 130
DETAIL.
- Image 18. Bernardo Cavallino, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1634, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples. Image Credit: Direzione Regionale Musei della Campania. 131
- Image 19. Bernardo Cavallino, *The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1634, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples. Image Credit: Direzione Regionale Musei della Campania. 132
DETAIL.
- Image 20. Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Martyrdom of Saint Serapion*, 1628, oil on canvas, 120.2 × 104 cm, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. Image Credit: Allen Phillips\Wadsworth Atheneum. 140

- Image 21. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Christ on the Cross*, 1627, oil on canvas, 290.3 × 165.5 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. Image Credit: Robert A. Waller Memorial Fund. 145
- Image 22. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Veil of Veronica*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, 107.3 × 79.4 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Image Credit: Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston. 149
- Image 23. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Francis of Assisi According to Pope Nicholas V's Vision*, c. 1640, oil on canvas, 180.5 × 110.5 cm, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Image Credit: Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, 2022. 153



Image 1. Jusepe de Ribera, *Apollo Flaying Marsyas*, 1637, oil on canvas, 202 × 255 cm, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels. Image Credit: Open Access.

An Introduction

Abstract

This introductory chapter maps the relation between violence, baroque painting, and materiality and sets forth the outlines and aims of the book. Materiality is taken as a central feature in the understanding of the art object – in particular, as a key factor in the production of violence by dislocating time, fragmenting surfaces, and transgressing representation. This approach emphasizes art's ability to *become*, to be *generative* and *transformative*. The transformational and generative potential of art is best exemplified in its propensity for *excess* – understood here as baroque's operative function. The relationship between violence and transformation is brought into focus in my interpretation of paintings as corporeal surfaces, meant to confront beholders with new and radical forms of violence.

Keywords: baroque, violence, materiality, excess, corporeality, phenomenology

For nothing was simply one thing.

– Virginia Woolf

A Work of Dissemblance, Most Difficult to Tell. It begins with a detail. The artist: Jusepe de Ribera; the painting: *Apollo Flaying Marsyas* (Image 1). At the centre of the canvas – a great billowing cloak, twisting and turning around the body of the young god.¹ Apollo stands proudly and detached, his hand plunged deep within the body of the satyr, his fingers separating skin from living flesh. The satyr is shown tied to a tree trunk; his bearded face hangs low into the foreground, his mouth opened in a deafening scream of silence. The entire canvas succumbs to a tension of stretch flesh, smiling and failing, worn out at the edge – open mouth to open skin – there, before us.

The cloak swirls around the pristine body of the ancient god like a protective metallic armour. Its subtle variations of reds and pinks are occasionally intermingled

¹ For a history on the representation of Apollo and Marsyas in Western art, see: Wyss, *The Myth of Apollo*.

with thin threads of white paint, all applied in swift touches of the brush; from this, a complex material relationship emerges that gives the surface its haptic quality: frothy and moist, fluid and tender like the open tissue of living flesh. The lower edge of Apollo's cloak falls into close proximity with Marsyas's wound. One can see it as a critical moment of confrontation, for the cloak and the wound draw towards each other, only to highlight the difference between the two. If the wound renders a correct anatomical interior – polished and detached – the materiality of the cloak achieves the potentiality of a trembling tissue of openly flayed skin. Its trailing texture evokes most strongly Ovid's description of Marsyas's torment, where 'his skin is torn off his whole body; ... his naked muscles become visible; a convulsive movement trembles the veins, lacking their covering of skin.'

The materiality of the cloak becomes something akin to an internal rupture, a distressing zone that impinges on the representational order of the painting. It becomes what Georges Didi-Huberman called a *pan* – namely, a pictorial moment that 'interrupts ostensibly the continuity of the picture's representational system.'² Inspired by Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the notion of the *pan* appears in a well-known passage where the writer Bergotte examines a yellow patch of paint in Vermeer's canvas *View of Delft* (1660–1661). In a moment of heightened intensity, Bergotte fixes his gaze on the patch of yellow and obsessively repeats the phrase 'petit pan de mur jaune' – the encounter yielding a devastating effect on the fictional writer who ostensibly dies in front of the canvas. Didi-Huberman writes 'the yellow in the painting by Vermeer, as color, is a whack, a distressing zone of paint, of paint considered as "precious" and traumatic material cause.'³

Didi-Huberman emphasizes the *pan's* phenomenology, and its capacity to disrupt and unsettle the spectator by appealing to Roland Barthes's *punctum*.⁴ By drawing on the phenomenology of Barthes's *punctum*, as 'that accident which pricks me,' Didi-Huberman describes the effect of the *pan* as more 'intense for me, panicked, vertiginous.'⁵ Like the *punctum*, the *pan* is haptic, a rupture in the picture plane that punctures and pierces the spectator. In Ribera's painting, the materiality of Apollo's cloak attains the phenomenological specificity of the *pan*. It becomes in the economy of the painting something like an opened wound whose carnality layers the figurative wound of the satyr with the phenomenological wounding of the painting. Thus freed from its restricted mimetic function as a mere theatrical prop, the materiality of the cloak achieves its full potentiality to become a flayed surface, thrust within the body of the painting. With every crease and every fold,

2 Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 266.

3 Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 17.

4 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 27.

5 Didi-Huberman, *La peinture incarnée*, pp. 44, 47–49.

a movement is enacted, yet one that does not gently glide across the surface of the painting, but abruptly carves into its body to manifest its violence and vulnerability.

Reception. Gabriel Paleotti writes in his *Il discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane* (1582):

To hear the narration of the martyrdom of a saint, the zeal and constancy of a virgin, the passion of Christ, are things that touch on the true; but to see with vivid colours of the martyred saint, the struggling Virgin, and Christ nailed, it is true that devotion swells and deeply strikes the viscera; and who does not recognize this is made of wood or of marble.⁶

Paleotti is careful to point out that the matter from which images are made is intimately connected with their visceral impact. For he recognizes the potential of matter to affect beholders spiritually as well as corporeally, bestowing upon matter the potential to produce fierce affects that penetrate the senses and violate the deep recesses of the body. As Paleotti goes on to write: 'If spoken or read words have the ability to transmute our senses, with how much more violence do depicted figures penetrate us and inspire pity.... [T]here is no stronger and more efficacious instrument than images made from life which violate our incautious senses.'⁷

Contemporaneous sources often introduced baroque paintings in terms of corporeal violence – the *impasto*, for instance, was interpreted as a technique that contributes to the extreme violence of the subject depicted; in the most extreme of situations, however, paintings could also be seen to cause terror, bodily harm, and even trauma. Jean-Baptiste Mercier Dupaty observed in his *Lettres sur l'Italie, en 1785* that Ribera's paintings 'strike with terror, and astonish the eye.'⁸ While in 1675, Palomino describes Ribera's depiction of *Ixion* 'in a state of such an extreme pain

6 'Il sentire narrare il martirio d'un santo, il zelo e costanza d'una vergine, la passione dello stesso Cristo, sono cose che toccano dentro di vero; ma l'esserci con vivi colori qua posto sotto gli occhi il santo martirizzato, colà la vergine combattuta e nell'altro lato Cristo inchiodato, egli è pur vero che tanto accresce la divozione e compunge le viscere, che chi non lo conosce è di legno o di marmo.' Paleotti, 'Discorso intorno,' pp. 171–172.

7 'Onde, se tanta efficacia hanno le parole, che si odono o leggono, di tramutare i sensi nostri, con molta maggiore violenza penetreranno dentro di noi quelle figure, dalle quali si vedrà spirare pietà.... Essendo dunque la imaginativa nostra così atta a ricevere tali impressioni, non è dubbio non ci essere istrumento più forte o più efficace a ciò delle immagini fatte al vivo, che quasi violentano i sensi incauti.' Paleotti, 'Discorso intorno,' pp. 228–230.

8 Dupaty, *Lettres sur l'Italie*, p. 189.

... that he keeps his fingers clenched in the struggle of his torment.⁹ This painting was in the home of Jacoba van Uffelen, the wife of the famous Dutch collector Lucas van Uffelen who was in Amsterdam during her pregnancy. Palomino goes on to mention that Jacoba was so distressed at the sight of the tormented figure that she gave birth to a child with similarly deformed hands: the fingers clenched 'just as in the painting.'¹⁰

What is striking about these accounts is their engagement with paintings in terms of not only what they *represent* or *mean*, but also what they *do* – the processes they enact and the affects they produce on beholders. Baroque paintings display an entire constellation of material riches, from surfaces, colours, and textures that were interpreted by early modern writers in strong physical terms – of flesh, skin, blood and so forth. Sometimes the canvas weave was interpreted as flesh, while at other times the textured impasto was seen as skin, or vice versa.¹¹ The identity of materials was never fixed in terms of their potential to produce a sense of corporeal presence. By insisting on the transformative power of materials – that is, their phenomenological specificity and generative potentiality – writers seemed more concerned with the ability of paintings to become corporeal surfaces, rather than to merely imitate and reflect an already existing reality. Paintings were seen to assert their materiality in terms of affects that renders violence in eminently physical and bodily terms.

The Excess of Violence. The subject of this book is art and violence, or more precisely: the violence of art.¹² Its scope: baroque painting. Baroque depictions of violence have often been perceived in art historical literature as 'over the top' and 'excessive.' The material richness of these paintings, their exciting visual complexity, and the visceral corporeal engagement they demand from beholders are often explained

9 'como lo manifiesta el San Bartolomé en el martirio, quitándole la piel, y descubierta la anatomía interior del brazo . . . Ixión, expresando (especialmente in éste) con tal extremo el dolor, atado a la rueda, donde era continuamente herido, y despedazado; que teniendo los dedos encogidos, para esforzar el sufrimiento; y estando esta pintura en casa de la senora Jacoba de Uffel en Amsterdam, a tiempo, que estaba preñada, parió un chicuelo con los dedos encogidos, a semejanza de dicha pintura.' Palomino, *Vidas*, p. 139.

10 The idea of an image being able to make an impression on a foetus was very well known in the late Middle Ages and by the time Palomino was writing, the concept was something of a 'throwaway' that most people 'knew'; see Pfisterer, *Kunst-Geburten*, pp. 57–60; Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual*, ch. 5.

11 For a discussion on how the materiality of canvas and paint were interpreted as corporeal surfaces, see: Pericolo, *Caravaggio and Pictorial Narrative*, ch. 13 and ch. 14.

12 A relevant theoretical text is Elaine Scarry's seminal study *The Body in Pain*, which focuses on the meaning-making of pain, especially the irreducible resistance to language and its un-shareability.

away as reflecting the presumed violence of early modern society. Recent studies have explored the various ways in which the material fabric of these images have served to articulate (as much as to conceal) the ideological agendas of their creators.¹³ A common thread among these studies is the interpretation of paintings as representations that reflect and mirror the violence manifested in the streets, in politics, in religion, and in judicial practices. Mostly concerned with the external factors surrounding a work of art, these approaches tend to run the risk of reducing paintings to illustrations of events produced or existing somewhere else.

This book moves away from interpretations that consider the violence of baroque art as an index of the physical violence that is presumed to pervade seventeenth-century society. Instead, I argue for an interpretation of paintings as corporeal presences, as *intensities*, capable of generating new senses, new perceptions, and new worlds. This approach offers an understanding of art as generative and transformative – of paintings as having the power to *become*. The focus on the creative potentiality of art reveals its disjointedness: namely, what these paintings produce cannot be easily contained or explained by a simple appeal to subject or context.¹⁴ Baroque paintings reveal a multitude of fractures and discontinuities that give rise to a radical form of violence that works in excess of any system of closure and continuity.

Violence therefore is approached as a refusal to square subject and technique; this allows us to discover and explore forms of violence that are pictorial and material. Hence canvas, paint, flesh, and skin are shown to work, not in literal reference to a ‘reality’ outside the canvas, and not in alignment or identity with each other, but in violent relations of displacement in relation to figure and surface. Thus, this book seeks to locate violence in terms, not of pictorial materiality working in identity with subject, but as a dislocation between meanings produced by materials and the subject depicted. This is a violence that *exceeds*. And while excess has usually been dismissed as something that forgoes interpretation, I recognize its power to radically challenge established norms; thus *excess* is treated here as a transgressive force, disruptive and transformative.

Baroque Excess. The origin of the notion of the baroque captures its propensity for abundance and excess. On the one hand, Erwin Panofsky argued for its origin

¹³ Terry-Fritsch and Labbie, *Beholding Violence*; Decker and Kirkland-Ives, *Death, Torture*; Nethersole, *Art and Violence*.

¹⁴ See the recent collection of studies edited by Graham and Kilroy-Ewbank, *Visualizing Sensuous Suffering*, which focuses on the constructive aspect of pain to become a powerful tool of self-fashioning.



in 'baroco' – a linguistic device denoting false or deceptive conclusions; namely, something that is 'obtuse, obscure, fanciful and useless.'¹⁵ On the other hand, there is a more common conception that goes back to the eighteenth-century writers, including Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who emphasize its derivation from the Portuguese term 'barroco,' meaning a flawed pearl. Both definitions, however, capture baroque's tendency to subvert systems. *Baroco* – the obtuse, obscure, fanciful, and useless – implies reasoning that crosses over the boundaries of strict systematic articulation, thus defying the system's aim at certainty and closure. And *Barroco* – the irregular, flawed pearl – can easily point to the overflowing of boundaries, to the ex-centric and the overabundant, the *excess par excellence*.¹⁶

The resistance of baroque art to coherency and continuity can also be seen in the work of Giambattista Marino, who himself acknowledged that his grand lyrical poems consist of many 'digressions and luxuriences,' excessive embellishment and intricate tableaux, rather than plot and orderly narrative. The numerous journals and letters of protestant travellers to Italy or Spain also make use of the word 'excess' to describe baroque art, although its connotation is largely used in pejorative ways. As the seventeenth century drew to a close, the voices of criticism became stronger while baroque's propensity for excess fell under the sharp criticism of a new breed of literati, today mostly associated with the Accademia degli Arcadi in Rome. This attitude still permeates most scholarship on the baroque even to this day, and while scholars are quick to acknowledge the excess of the baroque, this mostly happens in the desire to dispel its affects under the cloak of shallowness and sugary playfulness. More recent scholarship, however, has opened new and compelling ways of engaging with excess as an essential trait of the baroque.¹⁷ This book follows the new exploration of *excess* as the potential of matter to disrupt pictorial narratives, break iconographic conventions, dislocate time, and disturb identities.

Baroque Materiality. My approach takes materiality to be both historically contingent and historically productive. Baroque paintings often reveal or critically expose their own material presence. Victor Stoichita has pointed out the ability of baroque painting to reflect on itself, its limits, its potential, its claim to truth, and its material obscurity. In accordance with Hans Belting's definition of the 'era of art' as the period in art history in which the image emancipated itself from its predominantly

15 Panofsky, 'What Is Baroque?'

16 For a history of the term *baroque*, see: Hills, 'The Baroque.'

17 Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque*, pp. 47–67.



liturgical, cultic, and devotional functions, Stoichita traced the process of emergence through which painting became a distinct object of pictorial self-reflexivity.¹⁸ This phenomenon gave rise to a new poetics of *meta-painting* – a form of painting that critically refers to itself by pointing towards its own materiality.¹⁹ While Stoichita introduced the term of ‘meta-painting’ to the baroque period in art history, more recent scholarship has rightly signalled its relevance to earlier periods, some of which go back as far as Giotto and the Early Renaissance.²⁰

This brings into sharp focus the question: What distinguishes meta-painting of the baroque period from earlier examples? One remarkable difference is a drastic shift in the relationship between artwork and beholder. Lorenzo Pericolo has pointed out that during this period painting started to be scrutinized compulsively and scrupulously, and performed self-consciously for an audience cognizant of its historical implications and capable of interpreting its excessive demands.²¹ Baroque paintings therefore employ a vast resource of material richness, complex textures, colours, and pigments that do more than simply provide the material supports of the subject and the narrative depicted. They show materiality to be fluid and indeterminate, overflowing and excessive, affecting its transgressive force as baroque’s operative function.

By drawing on the work of Tim Ingold, Andrew Benjamin, Caroline Walker Bynum, and other scholars, I seek to show materiality as potential and productive.²² Benjamin argues for an understanding of materiality as the *insistence of the medium* within the creation of the work’s meaning. According to Benjamin, ‘meaning is always, and only, an after-effect of the way matter works. As such, the working of matter is the precondition for the possibility of meaning. This aspect of a work can be understood as it’s mattering.’²³ The *mattering* of matter allows for the possibility of relating materiality to the conceptual and ideational, disposing with the imposition of an idea upon matter. Unlike an iconic sign, which established reference through visual resemblance, the work of materiality shows change that offered identity without a complete dependence on the mimetic model.

This book explores the work of materiality by looking at its processes of dislocation and fracture. By materiality I do not simply refer to technique, nor the fixed function of paint and canvas to represent a given narrative or meaning. Instead, I

18 Belting, *Likeness and Presence*.

19 Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image*. For meta-painting (and meta-image), see: Mitchell, ‘Metapictures.’

20 See Bokody and Nagel, *Renaissance Meta-Painting*.

21 Pericolo, ‘What Is Metapainting?’ p. 31.

22 Ingold, ‘Materials against Materiality’; Benjamin, ‘Matter’s Insistence’; Benjamin, ‘Colouring Philosophy’; Benjamin, ‘Endless Touching’; Benjamin, ‘Surface Effects’; Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*; and Bynum, *Christian Materiality*.

23 Benjamin, ‘Colouring Philosophy,’ p. 401.



interpret materiality as matter's potential to exceed the literal object. Potentiality therefore can be thought as the work of materiality when matter (and its activity as *mattering*) is separated from its empirical presence.²⁴ Thus the complex material qualities of pictorial surfaces are more than simple consequences of the process of its creation; they are potentially active to effect and generate new meanings – they can operate to distribute their own programmes of violence. More importantly, materiality stages a form of corporeality that is not exclusively dependent on figuration and the credible imitation of reality but extends to the material processes at play on the pictorial surface.

The excessive demands made by baroque paintings in terms of violence can therefore be ascribed to the work of materiality that has the potential to exceed representation and mimesis – namely, the graphic depiction of physical acts of aggression. But how can violence be thought in excess of figuration? One way is to think of Caravaggio's sharp contrast between light and dark, described by seventeenth-century writers and contemporary art historians alike in terms of a violent juxtaposition. The same Caravaggio also staged the process of becoming holy as a violent event that radically transforms the body of Saint Ursula. Another way is to look at Ribera's depictions of flaying, where the materiality of the paint and canvas was interpreted as open flesh and ruptured skin. Zurbarán's Saint Serapion renders a violence of corporeal fragmentation through the folding of the white habit. The excess of materiality appears as a transgressive force that disturbs mimesis and representation. This is not to imply, however, that pictorial subjects are incidental to the production of violence; on the contrary, the subject remains essential to the interference of materiality, since it is through that process of dislocation that violence can take flight as a destructive force and turn against the system of its production.²⁵

Violent Corporeality. The relationship between materiality and violence allows for a new conception of corporeality to emerge – one that is not only restricted to figurative representation but also extends to the materiality of the surface. Georges Didi-Huberman has shown how the interpretation of paintings through the concept of *mimesis* has inadvertently striped art of its physicality and corporeality by reducing it to a form of 'disembodied imitation.'²⁶ In other words, mimesis has transformed art from a visceral – and violent – presence into an object of aesthetic

24 Benjamin, 'Endless Touching,' p. 76.

25 On the indeterminacy of the subject in painting, see: Pericolo and Nagel, *Subject as Aporia*.

26 Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*.



and intellectual appreciation.²⁷ This book seeks to explore the intense physicality of artworks by looking at their potential to become corporeal presences – of paint to become flayed flesh, of the threads of the canvas to become ruptured skin, and of the pigments to be staged as spilled blood.

My interpretation of paintings as corporeal surfaces is partly historical and partly contemporary. This book attends historically to paintings as corporeal surfaces – as pictorial bodies – grounded in a conception of matter as active. For this I draw on the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, who repositioned ‘the body’ from a simple conception of the ‘human individual’ to the notion of matter as active (*materia*).²⁸ Analysing the medieval conceptions of matter – between 1150 to 1550, with allusions to the late sixteenth century – Bynum draws attention to Isidore of Seville’s definition of matter as *mater* (mother), making the fundamental nature of matter maternal, namely fertile and capable of becoming.²⁹ She further points out that by ‘body,’ late medieval thinkers – including Isidore of Seville, Nicole Oresme, and Marsilio Ficino – understood ‘changeable things,’ from gems to trees, statues, rocks, paintings, and cadavers. According to Bynum, medieval art encapsulates this paradox of insistently displaying and commenting on its own materiality.³⁰ While Bynum’s own focus is on holy stuff – including relics and sacramental and religious images – her approach can be extended to artworks and objects that were not specifically used for religious practices.³¹

When I argue for an interpretation of paintings as pictorial bodies, I do not suggest a relationship of similitude between paintings and actual living bodies – as human individuals – nor do I attempt to instil them with anthropomorphic features. Instead, I argue that materiality works *analogously* in revealing matter’s ability to change. Contemporaneous sources reveal a rich web of corporeal and bodily references to materials such as canvas and paint. Titian’s approach to painting is emblematic in this regard. Marco Boschini, describes in his *Le minere della pittura veneziana* (1664), Giacomo Palma il Giovane’s recollection of Titian’s method of working, when the artist ‘proceeded like a good surgeon treating a patient, healing an injury, reducing a swelling, adjusting an arm, or setting a bone if he did not like that way it lay, paying no attention to the pain he was causing or to any such thing.’ The suggestion that a painting can be a patient and thus suffer the intervention of the painter-surgeon is poignantly supported by the next statement where Titian gradually covered the surface of his paintings with

27 Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, pp. 209–221. See also Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*

28 Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, p. 32.

29 Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, p. 231.

30 Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, pp. 34–35.

31 Ivanič et al., *Religious Materiality*, p. 17.

'living flesh, going over them many times, so that only breath was lacking from them to come to life.'³²

Palma il Giovane's comparison between the artist and a surgeon goes beyond an understanding of paint as a mere material support for the representation of figures; it seems to suggest that the figures and the painting itself as a material presence can feel pain and anguish just like a body. Another case in point is Bernardo De Dominici's description of Ribera's technique of painting 'with dense impasto so full of colour, he would not only turn [*girare*] the muscles of the human body, but every small part of the bones and of the hands and feet.'³³ De Dominici seems to conflate signifier with signified to describe a dynamic process of becoming. And while it is easy to dismiss these descriptions as mere rhetorical tropes – as empty jargon routinely employed by art critics and writers to praise the skill of artists and their artworks – a critical engagement with them reveals a radical new engagement with art. For it will allow us to attend to the phenomenological specificity of each painting and better understand the visceral responses contemporaneous viewers had when confronted with such depictions of violence.

My interpretation of the relationship between paintings as corporeal surfaces and violence is indebted to Gilles Deleuze's analysis of the art of Francis Bacon. In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981), Deleuze maps out how art can have an impact on the way we see, feel, and act.³⁴ According to Deleuze, the violence of Bacon's paintings is of a very special kind: it is not the representation of something horrible happening, for Bacon's paintings do not narrate a story; instead, he paints 'figures' that are seated or crouching, detached from any context of a story. Since all these connections – built through narrative and representation – 'disappear in favor of a *matter of fact* or a properly pictorial (or sculptural) ligature, which no longer tells a story and no longer represents anything but its own movement, and which makes these apparently arbitrary elements coagulate in a single continuous flow.'³⁵

For Deleuze, Bacon's figures 'are made of flesh, and what fascinate him are the invisible forces that model flesh or shake it. This is the relationship not of form and matter, but of materials and forces making these forces visible through their

32 '[S]e in loro poteva trovar effetto, e scoprendo alcuna cosa che non concordasse al delicato suo intendimento, come chirurgo benefico medicava l'infermo, se faceva di bisogno spolpargli qualche gonfiezza o soprabondanza di carne, radrizzandogli un braccio, se nella forma l'ossatura non fosse così aggiustata, se un piede nella positura avesse preso attitudine disconcia, mettendolo a lungo, senza compatir al suo dolore, e cose simili.... E di quando in quando poi copriva di carne viva quegli estratti di quinta essenza, riducendoli con molte repliche, che solo il respirare loro mancava.' Boschini, quoted from (altered) Ferino-Pagden, *Late Titian*, pp. 21–22.

33 For a more detailed discussion on De Dominici's description, see Chapter Three.

34 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*.

35 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p. 160.

effects on the flesh.³⁶ Deleuze points out that what emerges is another sort of violence, a *violence of sensation* that consists of the effects of colour and line more than anything else. This violence of sensation dissolves clichés of representation and instead releases intensive forces. As Deleuze says: ‘The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliché).’³⁷ Sensation, according to Deleuze, has an intensive reality of its own: and what it captures in his paintings are the invisible and intensive forces of *becoming*, those that act upon the body by seeping through its flesh.

Time and History. Violence brings to the fore the relationship between paintings, time, and history. Art historical scholarship has more often than not limited its scope of inquiry to establishing the significance of a work of art within the historical horizon of its creation – to ‘reconstruct’ a point of origin and then proceed to retrace its history in a linear trajectory of time. While understanding the context of its production is crucial in the process of interpretation, a mere historicist analysis risks abandoning the artwork to a mere index of history – of reducing it to the status of a document – and thereby severing it from its phenomenological specificity and material potentiality. A more balanced approach is needed between our engagement with the work of art and understanding the moment of its production. For paintings have traditionally been considered works of *art* precisely because of their ability to affect beholders in different periods and times – including the present. The affective response to a work of art is contingent on the temporal situation in which it occurs and thus its intensity and complexity is embedded in time as are the works themselves.

Paintings disturb and disrupt chronology rather than organize time and history in a linear succession. Aby Warburg recognized the power of images to break time. Working concepts such as *Nachleben* (survival or afterlife) and *Pathosformel* (emotional formula) have articulated the various ways in which images have lives that continue to haunt us long after the time of their creation.³⁸ The ability of paintings to produce their own time and temporality is convincingly argued by Georges Didi-Huberman. He interprets a painted surface as an extraordinary montage of heterogeneous times forming anachronism.³⁹ Christopher Wood and Alexander Nagel have shown that apart from understanding the context when a

36 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p. x.

37 Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p. 39.

38 Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*.

39 Didi-Huberman, ‘Before the Image, before Time.’



painting was created, it is equally important to understand the temporal instability of a work of art: how it points away from the moment of creation, backward to a remote ancestral origin, to a prior artefact or image, even to an origin outside of time, situated in divinity.⁴⁰ At times, artworks can also point to their own destiny. Amy Knight Powell showed how late medieval images of the deposition pre-figure not only the lowering of 'dead images' during the Protestant Reformation but also their subsequent later reappearances in the gallery context.⁴¹ The history of art therefore emerges as a history of objects that are temporarily impure and complex.

I interpret paintings as having the power to disturb our interpretation of linear history as well as creating their own time, which is neither uniform nor linear but rather multivalent and discontinuous.⁴² Time is thus treated as a duration that emerges from the materiality of the paintings with the potential to heightening or dislodging the violence of the scene depicted. At this point a brief cautionary note is necessary: I do not argue for an ahistorical approach to art history – the sort of context-less appreciation of art in a vacuum situated somewhere outside of time and history – but merely note that history is a construct whose limits are well tested by the artefacts. Artworks produce meaning across time, space, and peoples. They are material presences with a phenomenological specificity that create threads that disturb the past and complicate the present. Thus, rather than abolishing time and history, this book problematizes the temporal relation between our perception of time in history and the temporalities produced by artworks. For this I engage with contemporaneous sources as well as more recent theoretical writing in order to show how paintings disrupt linear trajectories of place and time to create new forms of violence.

Structure. Each chapter focuses on an individual painting by a particular artist, including Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Giovanni Lanfranco, Artemisia Gentileschi, Jusepe de Ribera, Georges de La Tour, and Francisco de Zurbarán. The study of individual paintings allows for an exploration of violence moving from the particular to the general. Thus each chapter is structured thematically around a number of corporeal attributes discussed in relation to a specific painting: wound, touch, skin, flesh, blood, and death.

The first two chapters are placed under the sign of the wound. Chapter One explores Caravaggio's peculiar strategy of constructing his canvas of the *Martyrdom*

40 On the temporal instability of images, see: Wood and Nagel, *Anachronic Renaissance*.

41 Knight Powell, *Depositions*.

42 Moxey, *Visual Time*, pp. 1–8.



of *Saint Ursula* (1610) around the depiction of a wound that is paradoxically hidden from sight. The obstruction of vision and the production of other forms of corporeal engagement are further investigated in Chapter Two, which focuses on Giovanni Lanfranco's *Saint Peter Healing Saint Agatha* (1613–1614). Both chapters parallel the interpretation of the wound as a pictorial moment of miraculous transformations where the sacred intervenes violently within matter.

The following chapters explore the notion of the painting as body by focusing on the potentiality of the pictorial surface to become either flesh or skin. Chapter Three discusses how Jusepe de Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (1644) stages the pictorial surface as having the potential to become skin, and thus rendering the violence of the flaying as an event enacted onto the corporeality of the painting. Chapter Four explores Georges de La Tour's *Penitent Saint Jerome* (1630s) as a painting where the potential of paint to become as flesh is conveyed through the violence of the artist's impasto. Both chapters set forth an interpretation of pictorial surfaces as either flesh or skin.

The last two chapters discuss the staging of the painting's surface as a threshold of life and death. As the most recognizable sign of life, blood appears in abundance in Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1614–1629). Chapter Five explores the abject viscosity of blood and its staging of pictorial surface as a liminal threshold of violence. Zurbarán's *The Martyrdom of Saint Serapion* (1628) is shown to display the fragmentation of the body as a violent act of baroque folding. Chapter Six explores Zurbarán's painting in relation to the notion of the painting as tomb.

As made clear by the structure and focus of each chapter, this book does not intend to provide a comprehensive history of violence in baroque paintings, nor does it attempt to offer a definitive view on the historical experiences of beholding violence. Instead, it focuses on the disquieting and unruly claims made by paintings in presenting violence as a forceful event that hinges on the opaque: violence as something that moves beyond the realm of form and visibility to create a violent rupture and contradiction.

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Image 2. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, 1610, oil on canvas, 143 × 180 cm, Palazzo Zevallos-Stigliano, Naples. Image Credit: Intesa Sanpaolo Collection.