

FROM PLEASURE TO DISGUST. THE GROTESQUE IN THE OEUVRE OF JOÃO DE RUÃO.

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Resumo

Operando no quadro teórico da investigação sobre o grotesco, o monstruoso, a marginalidade e a transgressão, nas margens físicas e epistemológicas da arte, este artigo pretende abordar a relação entre a produção escultórica de João de Ruão e o grotesco. A partir dos diversos desafios e estímulos lançados pelo longo século XVI ao aparato conceptual e visual de um artista tão industrioso e qualificado como João de Ruão, torna-se necessário questionar em que circunstâncias e com que recursos se terá apropriado do grotesco enquanto categoria expressiva e plástica. Para isso, é essencial iniciar o questionamento da natureza, contexto e função da expressão de qualidades como a bizarria, o hibridismo, a fealdade e a monstruosidade, a partir de figuras parergónicas como gárgulas e mascarões, mas também “infieis”, carrascos e até o próprio demónio, adversários últimos da Cristandade. A partir de quatro estudos de caso, que tentaremos contextualizar e compreender num quadro comparativo, ensaiar-se-á um primeiro olhar a estas imagens menos visíveis, na expectativa de contribuir para adensar o nosso conhecimento sobre o papel de João de Ruão enquanto artista do Renascimento Europeu.

Palavras-chave: grotesco, grutesco, iconologia, Coimbra, Renascimento

Abstract

Within the theoretical frame of recent research on grotesqueness and monstrosity, marginality and transgression, both on the physical and epistemological margins of art, this paper intends to approach the relationship between João de Ruão's oeuvre and the grotesque. In a long 16th century, with so many different challenges to the conceptual apparatus, and so many stimuli to the visual framework of an artist as industrious and as qualified as João de Ruão, it seems timely to question in what circumstances, and with what resources did he call upon the grotesque and the bizarre in his work. Qualities such as grotesqueness, ugliness, monstrosity and hybridism will be variably searched and inquired in their nature, context, and function. And parergonal figures, such as gargoyles and decorative masks, along with the traditional adversaries of Christianity, such as heathens and the devil himself, will be approached in four case studies tentatively put in a comparative context, regarding similar expressions in sculpture, painting and other media. By taking a closer look at these less visible images, we hope to contribute to deepen our insight into João de Ruão's role as an artist of European Renaissance.

Key-words: grotesque, grottesche, iconology, Coimbra, Renaissance

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As an artistic concept and as a word, the birth of the grotesque is contemporary with the life and work of João de Ruão. But beyond the lavish inventiveness displayed in the *grottesche*, though still mediated by the principle of *decorum*, there was yet another form of *inventio* particularly associated with proteiform hybridism, deformation, exaggeration, transgression, and borderline ugliness. It layed in the grotesqueness of demons, monsters, and *mascheroni*, as well as in the devilish ugliness of saint's executioners and enemies of the faith. The bizarre, the deformed or the ugly were then the main ingredients of a formula which, as complementary to that of the *grottesche*, aimed at something more than the display of artistic virtuousness and creative ability, or "the relaxation of the senses", as pointed out by Francisco de Holanda (Holanda, ed. Alves, 1984: 58). Its aim was, then, manifold but nevertheless specific: to teach, to amuse, to scare, to enrage, to move. A plethora of seemingly well calculated reactions, from pleasure to disgust.

Despite the preliminary nature of this approach, it is tempting to affirm from the start that in the global oeuvre of João de Ruão and his workshop, whether clearly identified or only attributed, the grotesque – here mostly considered as a quality and not only as a type of ornament – makes carefully dosed, yet quite impressive appearances. As it would be expected from an artist formed and affirmed in the acme of a humanist culture, his

approach to ugliness, wickedness, moral perversion and physical deformity, invariably starts in and with the human body. And, from such a long career – which left its mark for many decades after his death –, it is also obvious that this focus on humanity would inevitably cross the path of normalized, didactic Counter Reformation principles. Thus, in João de Ruão's work, explicit and unequivocal ugliness is usually linked to moral deformity and iniquity, and always counterbalanced by a powerful example of moral faultlessness and physical beauty. In this sense, hangmen become the perfect embodiments of human grotesque in João de Ruão's oeuvre, while the devil himself epitomizes the most expressive form of non-human grotesque.

This "ugly grotesque" is then complemented by a "bizarre grotesque" in which the figures are not necessarily ugly or evil, but rather bizarre, monstrous, hybrid, caricatured [Fig. 1]. At the margin, framing, decorating, and enhancing the central images and scenes, human and non-human becomes a blurred distinction, operating within the essential hybridism of the *grottesche*,



Fig. 1 - Experiments with grotesqueness. Grotesque head of an executioner and grotesque decorative mask. Grotesque head of one of the tormentors at the Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, ca. 1560-1580, unknown provenance, Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro. Grotesque decorative mask from a corbel of the Maggi Chapel's dome, ca. 1574, Monastery of São Marcos, Coimbra © Gabriel Pereira

the over-expressive and almost caricature nature of the *mascheroni*, and the monstrosity of gargoyles. At this marginal and truly parergonal level, bordering both fictive and real architectural volumes, the hybrid coexists with perfectly defined categories of human and animal, which occasionally poke out or peek from parapets, cornices, pediments, and moulding.

Each one of these creations is, nonetheless, meticulously placed, disposed, framed, controlled. And, perhaps, most of all, each one of them is the clear result of an inventiveness which not only relies in a fully mastered plasticity, as in a particular attention to detail. This skillful manipulation of the grotesque, whether it envisaged reactions of horror and disgust or surprise and wonder – and the many shades between these extremes –, is perfectly attuned with the (long) time of João de Ruão's life and work. In fact, and from the very beginning, the 16th century handled the affirmation of ugliness, monstrosity and horror as useful, or even necessary ingredients to a full artistic experience. If the short path from disgust to pleasure is theoretically grounded “on the opposition between the beautiful and the ugly” (Hendrix, 2005: 15), it is nevertheless a highly demanding challenge, which can only be achieved by the most excellent artists, since their virtuosity and skill rely on their power of *imitatio*.

Such ideas may be found, for instance, at the *Poetics* of Aristotle that, rediscovered in 1530s, would soon be accompanied by Longino's *On the Sublime* (1554/1555), both fueling the debate on beauty and its absence as artistic resources – a debate that would naturally keep up with the normative effects of Counter Reformation

(Hendrix, 2005: 14-15). But even before this intense moment of theoretical assessment of the sublime, with ugliness, displeasure, disgust and horror entering the realms of poetry and visual arts as dynamic counterforces to their positive equivalents, Italian artists were exploring it through “concepts like decorum, *affetto* and especially imitation” (Hendrix, 2005: 15). By rendering images plausible, there may be beauty in ugliness, as clearly stated by Saint Thomas Aquinas a long time before any renaissance artist began using the rhetorical device of *decorum*: “An image is called beautiful if it perfectly represents something, even something ugly” (*Summa Theologiae*, I: 39, 8c).

Among the cultors of this coexistence, João de Ruão deserves a particular attention, not only for his impeccable manipulation of the grotesque within the realms of the ideal, the beautiful and even the sacred through the mediation of *decorum*, but also for having tried, throughout his career, virtually all the possibilities of grotesqueness, confirming it as an immanent quality in art.

Modern Gargoyles

Manga Cloister (Claustro da Manga), Monastery of Santa Cruz, Coimbra 1533

At the Monastery of Santa Cruz de Coimbra, an institution whose connection with João de Ruão's career is well known (Craveiro, 2002: 125-133; Gonçalves, 2006; Gonçalves, 2011: 117-140), the fountain of the so-called Manga Cloister displays a total of sixteen gargoyles perched on the outer border of the central dome (eight) and the four

circular turrets (two per turret, in a total of eight) [Fig. 2]. Here, the baffling sophistication of the architectural setting – whose project may be attributed to João de Ruão even if its sources or immediate parallels are not yet clear (Dias, 2003: 128; Craveiro, 2011: 38) –, seems to commit to the survival of a figurative and plastic tradition which may be unmistakably identified with the “*lavoro tedesco*” so harshly criticized by the most distinguished heralds “*dalla Bella maniera de’romani*” (Visconti, 1840: 24), and by no means alien to the Portuguese renaissance elites (Francisco de Holanda, for instance, calls it a “*superfluidade bárbara*”, or barbarian superfluity (Holanda, ed. Alves, 1984: 58).

Even if Vitruvius mentions the use of gargoyles, he specifically recommends the lion head motive (De Architectura, Lib. III), leaving little space for the inventiveness of architects, whether ancient or modern. Indeed, the variety of figurative types carved at the Manga fountain is much closer to that of a gothic cathedral than to any classic building, combining naturalistic (although parodic) figures of humans and animals with monstrous hybrids born from the artist’s prodigious imagination. Meticulously placed over the tanks into which they would spout the rainwater, preventing it from running down the walls – and thus contributing positively to its good maintenance –, João de Ruão’s gargoyles present us with a cast of impressive characters which range from droll and amusing to bizarre and perhaps even terrifying. Although they are not in a perfect state of conservation, it is still possible to recognize some very frequent inhabitants of the porous margins of an artistic culture that is indelibly modern, without ever

ceasing to be medieval. Just like at the margins of an illuminated folio – from the *Leitura Nova* frontispieces to those of the Attavanti’s, just to draw on two main references in the Portuguese visual landscape – we find the usual nameless beasts made of many parts of animals (aerial, aquatic, terrestrial), but also other categorizable creatures, such as satyrs, griffins and dragons, and naturalistic depictions of *putti*, monkeys and men.

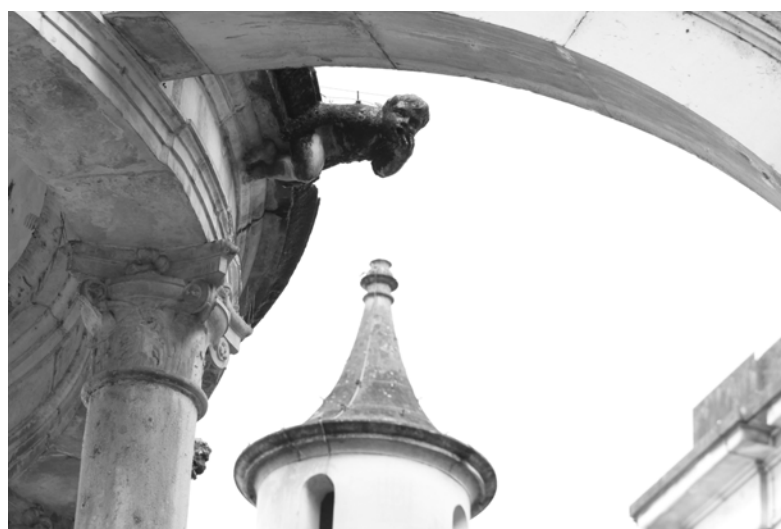


Fig. 2 - Gargoyle (putto), Manga Cloister (Claustro da Manga), 1533, Monastery of Santa Cruz, Coimbra © Gabriel Pereira

Interestingly enough, the most unexpected and seemingly anachronistic figures are those of the three men: wearing simple hooded doublets and partially rolled down working boots, these men are commoners whose plain simplicity is incredibly hard to find in Renaissance art, even when portraying common people. Realist enough and almost portrait-like, these figures are only grotesque by their role (spouting water) and their facial features, which are thick, bulky and grimacing [Fig. 3]. With one hand over the chest, almost at the level of the throat – a common bodily response to screaming or vomiting – one opens a wide mouth while the other two stretch it in a foolish grimace, emphasized by their round cheeks, huge bulbous nose and big protruding ears.

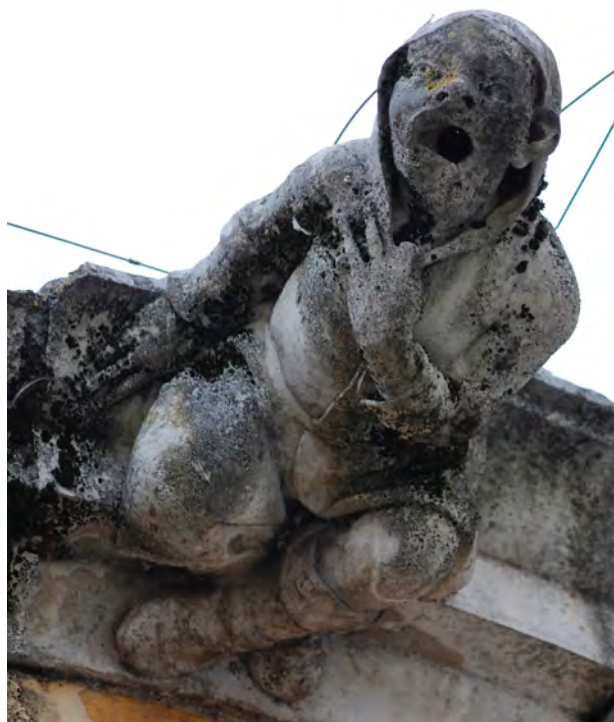


Fig. 3 - Gargoyle (man), Manga Cloister (Claustro da Manga), 1533, Monastery of Santa Cruz, Coimbra © Gabriel Pereira

Whether these figures were intended to depict some specific social type or human behavior suitable for such a marginal task, or to “simply” convey in very plain (but still expressive) plastic means the human act of vomiting or spouting water, we still don’t know, and perhaps never will. It is nevertheless tempting to indulge in the idea of a similitude between these figures and the all-time popular fool whose common caricatured features, inescapable from Pieter Brueghel’s popular crowds (such as *The Beggars*, 1586, Louvre or many characters from *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, 1559, Kunsthistorisches Museum), may be found in the rather humane portraits of famous characters like Pietro Gonella, the Ferrara Court jester (Jean Fouquet, ca. 1445, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) or Will Sommers, the fool of Henry VIII (Psalter of Henry VIII, ca. 1530-1547, BL Royal MS 2 A XVI, f. 63v, The British Library; *Henry the Eighth and His Family*, 1545, Royal Collection Trust). Just like these court fools, jesters or

buffoons were frequently chosen by their physical peculiarities and/or intellectual disabilities, the men portrayed by João de Ruão at the fountain, could be a humanized but still grotesque interpretation of the archetypal fool, incapable of fully controlling his body, thoughts and speech.

The gesture and performance of these gargoyles play, indeed, an important role in the inquiry of their iconography. On the one hand, the playfulness of human and animal figures pouring water is a well-known resource in fountains from virtually any time and culture, and thus the physical act of spouting (or spitting or vomiting) water may be a subject on its own.

And, in fact, this seems to be the case with another of these gargoyles, depicting a *putto* with his cheeks swollen like balloons, as he opens his mouth wide with the help of his hand to let the waters run down.

But, on the other hand, this same gesture may still be metonymically associated with screaming and speaking, which in the case of both the “fool” and the *putto* could imply saying nonsense, or babbling. The same may apply to another curious figure, common in both medieval and early modern *marginalia*, and twice depicted between the fountain’s gargoyles: the ape [Fig. 4]. Unable to refrain themselves from mimicking (aping) human behaviors and gestures, apes and monkeys could never profit from the precious and distinctively human gift of speech (Janson, 1952), just like (perhaps) nothing but thin air or running water would come out of the Manga’s apes mouths, even if they are dressed like men.

In Renaissance Europe, apes and monkeys were still a luxury item displayed in rich households in an ever-growing variety, due to an increasingly

intense commerce in which Portugal played a leading role (Gschwend, 2010: 7; Masseti, 2018: 52). Frequently fettered, to prevent the escape of such an expensive and prized possession, they appear in domestic settings as well as in the hands of their owners and, quite significantly, carried by court jesters or fools. Used as entertainment props, for their amusing nature, they were also an extension of the fool's real or fictional idiocy. Thus, we naturally find a fully dressed, fettered ape perched at the shoulders of Will Sommers, gleaning its master's hair, just like it happens in the depiction of a Man with a Monkey, attributed to Annibale Carracci (1590-1591, Gallerie degli Uffizi). Reestablishing thus a hypothetical symbolical connection between the men and the apes carved in João de Ruão's gargoyles, it is perhaps worth to point at the specific relationship between artistic skill, vice and folly often carried by simian depictions in Renaissance art.

In this period, and despite a progressive approximation to the representation of the animal's actual features, apes in art frequently kept a symbolical and allegorical aura, with their closeness to human nature acting as a particularly efficient pictorial tool. Just like apes mimic men, so art apes nature, and though art history is written over the battleground of mimesis versus *inventio*, the truth may be that all figurative art has to deal with being a simile of a reality that, despite being reinvented and eventually surpassed, is still there, acting as a matrix. In fact, just before David Teniers and many other painters of *singeries* from the 17th and 18th centuries used monkeys as a means of satire on the art market, and long before the 19th century turned them into sharp art critics, Pieter

Bruegel the Elder had already explored, with his customary wit, the full pictorial and semantic potential of these animals. "Two Chained Monkeys" (1562, Gemaldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin) is one of the smallest and most quiet, introspective, and melancholic of Bruegel's works – one that, despite of its original destination and display being unknown, seems to offer an intimate glimpse of the painter's thoughts on painting itself, as an illusionistic approach to the world. And, a few decades later, El Greco would also approach the subject with his *Fabula* (1580, Museo del Prado), where vice and mimicry, foolishness and pictorial skill are drawn together in a seemingly effortless painting.



Fig. 4 - Gargoyle (ape), Manga Cloister (Claustro da Manga), 1533, Monastery of Santa Cruz, Coimbra © Joana Antunes

“Ars simia naturae”, or art as the ape of nature, is then an expression that gains place in the conceptual framework of the renaissance artist, and not without its tensions and conflicts (Cohen, 2017: 219-220; Janson, 1952: 290-293). Apropos of this concept, Simona Cohen recalls that the Renaissance culture was permeable to both negative and positive uses of the ape imagery, suggestive enough to keep exposing and ridiculing human flaws through beastliness, but also human enough to act “the metaphoric alter-ego of the artist himself” (Cohen, 2017: 219). In more than one circumstance, thus, we will find apes and monkeys carefully and (more or less) discretely placed at the borders of both intimate pictures or great narrative cycles of paintings, while gazing outside the pictorial space or looking directly into the observer’s eyes – as it happens, for instance, in Albrecht Dürer’s *Virgin and Child with the Monkey* (c. 1498), where the animal’s tail even leads to (and almost touches) the artist’s monogram.

Beyond the challenges of the *paragone* debate which theoretically antagonized painters and sculptors, at a practical level, the creative role of the artist was commonly placed between the apparently unlimited resources of *inventio* and the *imitatio* of Nature, ultimately perceived as the work of God (for further readings on the implications and consequences of the *paragone*, see for instance the early works of Hecht, 1984: 125-136; Dundas, 1990: 87-92; and more recently Hendler, 2013). Placed at the edge of the fountain’s chapels, the two apes carved by João de Ruão (or his co-workers) may as well be a virtuous reminder of the sculptors’ ability to mimic nature in its real, tridimensional form, without ever being more than a trick performed by the artist, always fettered to a fiction to be

perceived by others. Indeed, the apes depicted in these gargoyles seem to be Barbary macaques (*Macaca sylvanus*), one of the African species most common in Europe since Antiquity and one of the most frequently portrayed in art. If this is the case, the sinuous line that appears under the animal’s legs, resting under its crossed feet, should be a rope or a chain, and not a tail. And this is, perhaps, why the ape’s left-hand rests on its ankle, as if directing our gaze to that detail. Beyond all speculation seems to be the fact that the sculptor wished to stress the ape’s feet mobility, as they gently grasp the rope just like another pair of hands.

Precariously hanging from the outer border of the four chapels, all the creatures carved in these gargoyles have a rather convincing physical connection with the frieze from which they spout. More than simple extensions of the architectural frame or, on the contrary, individual stone blocks projecting from the wall, they are illusionistically placed on its horizontal mouldings, where they sit and lean, and which they touch and grab, always keeping a natural and effortless connection with the support. This is not only important for the sake of the artistic statement itself, but also for the layered symbolical reading of these images, which may also depict the vices and sins which plague the worldly path of the men trying to achieve spiritual perfection through meditation, prayer, solitude and penance. This is, in fact, a logical assumption from the spiritual profile of such an exceptional architecture, indelibly connected with the reformation of the Monastery of Santa Cruz of Coimbra by Frei Brás de Barros, and probably impossible to frame within the scope of a single influence, model or inspiration source (Abreu, 2009: 33-52; Abreu and Barreira, 2010: 1-25).

In this sense, it is perhaps useful to step back and note that the images carved in the architectural body itself are but a few, and they clearly obey to a dialectic of opposites: inside/outside; central/liminal. Inside the circular turret-like chapels, four altarpieces display models of eremitic devotion: Saint John the Baptist; Saint Anthony the Great; Saint Paul the Hermit; and Saint Jerome, are all examples to meditate upon while experiencing a very alternative way of solitude (or *soledade*) within the very walls of the monastery. Outside the same chapels, exposed and harder to grasp, the gargoyles take the shape of three men with grinning, grotesque facial expressions, two fettered apes, and three hybrids: a faun, a griffin, and humanoid creature with reptilian feet whose state of conservation doesn't allow a precise identification. These are all categorizable creatures, whose grotesqueness plays upon a humanity which is never too far, and never too diluted. Even in the case of the griffin – which holds a plain heraldic shield –, the resonance of the flight of Alexander the Great, is almost immediate (Frugoni, 1973). All, except the griffin, are human or humanoid. All, except the griffin, are telluric and somewhat beastly creatures – from behavior even if not from nature, as it happens with the three men. And all of them, including the griffin, may serve the purpose of pointing to the earthly bounds of violence, lust, stupidity, ignorance, and foolishness – conveyed by bodily expression, since none of them masters proper verbal language – which the reformed *crúzios* should overcome. By connecting sky and earth, the griffin may be a reminder of the vanity of those who, like Alexander, search to know the unfathomable nature of Heaven without realizing that the path begins on the firm grounds of worldly hardships.

If these mildly hybrid and grotesque gargoyles have names and are easily identified (even if not easily interpreted), the figures carved around the *tempietto* are much more deceptive and complex. Flanking the flying buttresses which connect the central dome with the bodies of the chapels, as well as the staircases and pathways between the four tanks, a total of eight gargoyles release the rain waters in the central tank. Born from a prodigious imagination and a skillful hand, these are utterly grotesque creatures, highly hybridized, composite and proteiform [Fig. 5] – with the sole exception of the aforementioned *putto*. From the vigorous dragon that reinvents the late medieval models by providing them with an almost lifelike appearance, to the nameless and striking creature with quadruped legs and brush like paws, human torso with female soggy breasts, two little tortuous arms almost resembling wings, and a fearsome, leonine face, they are the offspring of the grotesque animals prescribed of Leonardo da Vinci. The formula, at least, is the same:

“Come devi far parere naturale un animale finto. Tu sai non potersi fare alcun animale, il quale non abbia le sue membra, e Che ciascuno per se non sia similitudine con qualcuno degli altri animali.” (Da Vinci, ed. Amoretti, 1804: 172-173. See also Tagliagambara and Versiero, 2016: 442-444).

If we read the human as animal (as Leonardo himself did, for instance, in his Two heads of grotesque animals, c. 1490-1495, Windsor, RL 12367), then we have the recipe for João de Ruão's gargoyles. Impossible to define with precision and to interpret from the more or less crystalized symbolism of each one of the animals from which they are made up, these gargoyles are made from the same matter as the *grotesche* that frame, ornament, and improve most artworks at this time. In fact, they are not too



Fig. 5 - Hybrid gargoyles, Manga Cloister (Claustro da Manga), 1533, Monastery of Santa Cruz, Coimbra © Joana Antunes

distant from the squatted hybrids framed at the top frieze of the church portal of Atalaia (c. 1528), the tomb of D. Luís da Silveira in Góis (1531) or the one of D. Duarte de Lemos in Trofa do Vouga (1534) (Pereira, 2020: 158-170), just to quote some examples of approximate dates.

And perhaps it is precisely this parallel with the inventiveness of the *grotesque* that will bring us back to the self-reflective qualities of these gargoyles – not (only) as mirrors of the observer's fears, but (mostly) as embodiments of the artist's creative powers. Far from being side notes to a main text, these sculptures are masterfully crafted in each detail, from expression to gesture, without one single repetition. They display the repertoire of a sculptor capable of creating convincing similes of real creatures, as well as vivid expressions of imaginary beings, crafted in such manner that their biological existence seems almost unquestionable. Drawing on traditional types, such as the (hypothetical) fool or the ape, João de Ruão recognizes a legacy; evoking classical references, such as the *putto* or the faun, he positions himself as a connoisseur of Antiquity; transforming the medieval prototypes of the monstrous gargoyle into wondrous visions of lifelike restlessness, he presents himself as an inventor. And this is not, I believe, something we can ascribe to the militant erudition of the commissioner or to the texts pointed by him as sources to the new cloister. Frei Brás de Barros could even have chosen a set of monstrous gargoyles to haunt and astonish the Saint Augustine canons during their retreats – but he certainly did not draw or imagine those striking hybrids, which could only sprout from a highly visual mind impregnated by a whole visual culture of grotesqueness.

Face to face: Mascheroni

**Maggi Chapel (Capela dos Reis Magos),
Monastery of São Marcos, Coimbra ca. 1574**

“Nell’inventioni delle grottesche più che in ogn'altra vi corte un certo furore, & una natural bizzarria, dellaquale essendone privi quei tali con tutta larte loro non fecero nulla” (Lomazzo, 1585: 424)

Fascinating and delightful, uncategorized and indescribable, bizarre and capricious, the *grottesche* are a form of *inventio* which stands by itself. In one of the longest theoretical texts dedicated to this kind of ornament, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo states that he will *not examine the grottesche in detail, for not even the artists themselves could help us understand of which parts were they made* (“Non starò ad investigar piu sotilmente ciò che siano grottesche, perche non lo sa manco l'istessa verità non che lo sappiano i pittori, ne di che cosa si cōpongono”, Lomazzo, 1585: 423). In fact, only in this art is it possible to use *anything one can recall or imagine* (“in soma tutto quello che si può trovare & imaginare”, Lomazzo, 1585: 423), and although most written sources insist on giving the protagonism to painters and paintings, the mastery of the *grottesche* imagery and compositions became a distinctive trait of any excellent artist. Indeed, the manipulation and deconstruction of reality – being it human, animal, plant or inanimate object – serves the fundamental purpose of its reconstruction and

reinvention, as means of presenting a new reality that only the artist can shape (Profumo, 1985: 15-32, 141-180; Zamperini, 2007; Craveiro, 2002: 377-420; Craveiro, 2009).

Even if this is not the time or the place (and space) to attempt such a demanding task as to take a closer and lengthy look at the *grottesche* in João de Ruão – a most necessary task which is nevertheless endeavored in other chapters of this volume –, it is still impossible to ignore their importance as one of the many approaches to grotesqueness. Indeed, it is at the frames, mouldings, friezes and margins, in *candelabra* and *candelieri*, or else symmetrically placed and encased in the geometry of the ever-present architectural settings, that we will find the other nature of João de Ruão's work. Spirited and lively, nervous, restless, and bold, the figures and ornamental motifs that populate church portals (Atalaia, Varziela, Sé Velha), funerary monuments (Góis, Trofa do Vouga, S. Marcos), and altarpieces (Varziela, Capela dos Vales, Nossa Senhora dos Anjos, S. Marcos) are certainly imbued with “un certo furore, & una natural bizzarria”. [Fig. 6]



Fig. 6 - Grottesche, Tomb of D. Duarte de Lemos, 1534, Church of São Salvador, Trofa do Vouga © Gabriel Pereira

To understand the adequacy of such dreamlike compositions and creatures to their place and context it is almost inevitable to recall the much quoted *Diálogos de Roma* (1548), where Francisco de Holanda presents himself discussing the rationale behind the *grotesche* with Michelangelo Buonarroti, and other illustrious guests. In these dialogues, they are significantly presented as a type of ornament *which pleases the painter the most and has never been seen in the world* (“aquilo de que maes deleita o pintor e que nunca se no mundo viu”, Holanda, ed. Alves, 1984: 58).

Result of the flamboyant imagination of the painter, who is capable of adding new forms and creatures to the world by fusing together human, animal and vegetable, this type of exercise is not only dignifying for the artist himself, but it also helps to *decorate reason by adding to paintings some monstrosity, for variety and relaxation of the senses of the observer* (“melhor se decora a razão quando se mete na pintura alguma monstruosidade (para a variação e relaxamento dos sentidos e cuidado dos olhos mortais)”, Holanda, ed. Alves, 1984: 58). Nonetheless, the fictive work (*falsa obra*), which is not natural since it doesn't simply rely on the faithful and direct observation of nature, has to obey the principle of conformity or adequacy to its own place.

Such a principle may be found, for instance, at the tomb of D. Luís da Silveira at the church of Góis (1531), where the celebration of the

deceased's memory and lineage is accompanied by the ever metamorphic *grotesche* displaying *bucrania* (a reminder of death and transformation), along with *candelieri* with the *Arma Christi* faced by trophies and musical instruments (notes on the worldly triumphs and pleasures redeemed by the sacrificial example of Christ). Indeed, and despite the disputed participation of João de Ruão in this monument (Pereira, 2020: 161), there are many other examples of this kind of adequacy in his work, for instance, at Trofa do Vouga and São Marcos.



Fig. 7 - Dome of the Maggi Chapel (Capela dos Reis Magos), c. 1574, Monastery of São Marcos, Coimbra. © Gabriel Pereira

And it is perhaps precisely at the Monastery of São Marcos that we will find one of the most extraordinary expressions of grotesqueness in the oeuvre of João de Ruão. The tomb of João da Silva (c. 1555-1559) announces a progressive absorption of another kind of grotesque ornament of Dutch influence, which blooms at the Maggi Chapel (Capela dos Reis Magos, c. 1570-1574). Here, the *candelieri* still mark the rhythm of all vertical frames and mouldings, but they are now accompanied by expressive and grotesque *mascheroni* which take the stage over corbels and strapwork cartouches [Fig. 7]. Through the

widespread prints of artists such as Cornelis Bos (c. 1508-1555), Cornelis Floris de Vriendt (1514-1575), Frans Huys (c. 1522-1562) and Hans Vredeman de Vries (1527-1609), a new generation of grotesque ornaments would appear in the repertoire of renaissance artists, and the works of João de Ruão were naturally permeable to this new trend. In fact, if the mid-century human figures trapped in strapwork structures which decorate the pillasters of João da Silva's tomb resonate the inventions of Cornelis Bos, by 1570s, the elaborate cartouches, and the auricular, frowning, and screaming masks, closer to the work of de Vries and Huys, seem to make clear the full digestion of this *new grottesche*.

The novelty of such interesting approaches to human facial expression is, however, far from literal. In fact, the research of the grotesque, the caricature, and the composite has long since been one of the (pre)occupations of Renaissance artists. Leonardo da Vinci, for instance, is known for his studies of grotesque faces, which are somewhere between the raw portraiture and the extreme distortion, and thus, between the anthropological research of the bizarre and the sharp, reactive experience of the grotesque caricature. At the margin of the ideals of beauty and proportion, these *visi monstrosi* may also be found in Michelangelo's drawings and finished works. If the sculpture – such as the *mascheroni* decorating the armor of Giuliano de Medici, and other sculptural details in the Medici Chapel –, seem necessarily influenced by the conventional symmetry of Flemish grotesques, natural inhabitants of the *cartouche*, the *ferronerie* and the *rollwerk*, the sketches have yet another humanity, and thus another restlessness about them. In the *Studies of Grotesque Heads* from 1524-1525 (Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt), and circa

1530 (British Museum, London), the masks become bodies: they are lively and almost lifelike, and thus highly unsettling for their jocose, spectral, and strangely hybrid faces, which seem to surface the paper just to tease and disturb the observer. Their divergent strabismus and their blank stares, their scathing grimaces and their spasmodic expressions are settled within the leonine faces and the cartilaginous, pending excrescences from the *ornement auriculaire* so typical of the grotesque ornament north of the Alps. And it works so efficiently because the human reference is ever so present. By becoming a mask, just like the ones at the Medici's Chapel, or being part of one of the frenzied compositions of Cornelis Floris, these grotesques become more artefactual, artificial, and unreal.

At the monastery of S. Marcos, the sculptural decoration of the Maggi Chapel makes the functional beauty of this grotesque very clear. Besides the suspended *candelieri* and the strapwork cartouches and frames, the masks carved at each one of the great dome's twelve corbels display a gallery of different grotesque faces which range from animal to monster and human(oid). Facing the observer, as one tilts the head back to gaze at the intricately carved dome, modelled by the light that flows from the central lantern, these faces are not welcoming nor friendly, just as they are not exactly fiendish or aggressive [Fig. 8]. Placed beyond the borders of any dualist symbolism (good or bad, beautiful or ugly, protective or menacing) these are plastic experiments on humanity itself: foolish, exasperated, testy and ludicrous; with crooked teeth or even toothless; with bulky or hooked noses and wrinkled and saggy faces; with strangely shaped, protruding ears, leafy or hirsute hair, and fanciful headgear. Impossible to

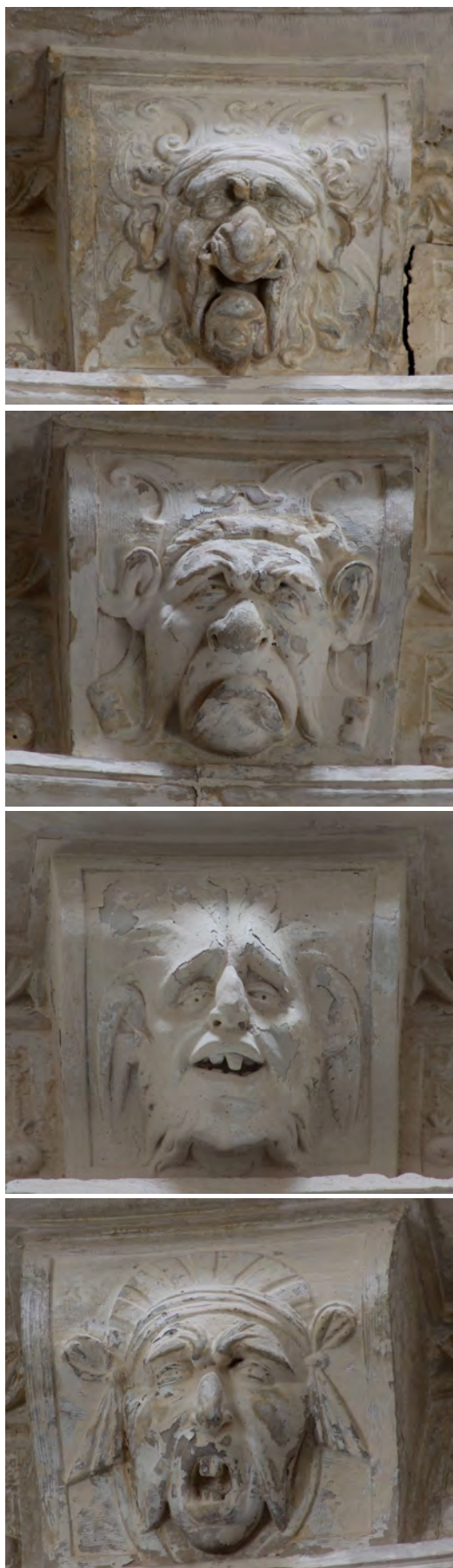


Fig. 8 - Grotesque masks, or mascheroni from the corbels of the Maggi Chapel's dome, c. 1574, Monastery of São Marcos, Coimbra © Gabriel Pereira

properly define or name, they are as resistant to interpretation. Nevertheless, they are long-lasting figural expressions which may find their ancestry in classical grotesque acroteria or antefixes, as well as in medieval corbels, gargoyles and misericords. And it is perhaps just here, at the very fertile ground of carved choirstalls, that they will leave their closest offspring, within the baroque grotesque masks abundantly carved in Portuguese misericords.

Even if a systematic study of the *grottesche* (in all its metamorphosis) in the work of João de Ruão is still necessary, with a logical comparative approach and a thorough survey of visual sources and parallels, within and outside the Portuguese territory, examples such as the ones briefly mentioned above point firmly towards an understanding of grotesqueness as an ornamental resource, as well as a means of artistic affirmation. Properly set within the limits of the margin, at the frames, corbels, capitals, as well as in carved bosses, they are also sign of a restless search for *aggiornamento*, framed by a workshop continually capable of meeting this purpose in the long run of an artistic challenging century.

The man in the Devil

Saint Michael fighting the Devil, Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Velha (MNMC), 1537

Beyond the rapture eventually provoked by the prodigious composite figures sprouting from the artist's imagination, there was another, perhaps less pleasant genre of invention: one expressed through strangeness, alterity, ugliness and

wickedness. Meandering through these concepts, while still drawing on formal strategies of hybridity and monstrosity, was the *portrait of the devil* which, during the 16th century, was progressively built at the image of man himself (Arasse, 2009), though never too far from the beastly composite creature evolved during previous centuries.

From the many instances where demonic creatures make their appearance in medieval and renaissance art, the fight between the archangel Saint Michael and Satan is one of the most interesting and intense. At a point of no return, the devil knows that he is irremediably defeated, but still struggles to free himself from under the feet of the archangel, howling and grimacing, his face contorted, and his elastic, repulsive body completely tense, while he grabs his opponent's spear, or pulls furiously the scale where the souls are about to be weighted. Whereas the painting of the period tends to display this ultimate fight in an aerial background, with both figures floating in the sky, sculpture usually suggests an earthy setting, following the appeal (and the restraints) of its material mass and heaviness. João de Ruão has addressed this theme various times (at the altarpieces of Saint Michael, from Santa Clara-a-Velha, 1537; Saint Mark, from the church of S. Salvador, c. 1545; from the altarpiece at the chapel of Vales, in the church of Santa Iria, Tomar, ca. 1536; and again at the Maggi Chapel, ca. 1574). In all these cases, he clearly defines the space of this ultimate fight between good and evil – which is also a fight between beauty and ugliness, humanity and inhumanity. Pinned down to the ground by the surprising weight of the gracious figure of the archangel, these devils are all the more horrifying because they are so reactive and combative.



Fig. 9 - Saint Michael Altarpiece, 1537, from the Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Velha (Coimbra), Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro © Joana Antunes



Fig. 10 - Saint Michael slaying the Devil, from Saint Mark Altarpiece, ca. 1545, Church of São Salvador, Coimbra © Gabriel Pereira

Particularly expressive, the images created for Santa Clara and São Salvador are probably separated by fifteen years. The first one, now kept in the National Museum of Machado de Castro [Fig. 9] was, without any doubt, more carefully planned and executed, as to render the contrast with the figure of the archangel all the more striking and the effect on the observer all the more unsettling. The difference may lie, in part, in the fact that this Saint Michael is a protagonist on its own, while the one at São Salvador is a devotional and iconographical complement to an altarpiece dedicated to Saint Mark [Fig. 10]. Perhaps this helps to explain why the later follows the conventional formula of the devil grabbing the scale held by Saint Michael, menacing to claim one more soul for the fire of hell, while the first one insidiously and abhorrently touches the body of the archangel, in a desperate attempt to grab his legs and thus fight the pressure of his right feet, which is about to force the devil's chest onto the ground and finally strike it with his (now lost) sword. The pose of the archangel is naturally triumphant and effortless, and while his magnificent wings and floating cape endow him with the presence of a portent, his juvenile looks, lean body, and delicate face betray any sort of *terribilità* [Fig. 11]. He is, on the contrary, a courtly, luxurious figure: bejeweled, embroidered, polished and shiny. Definitely made to look as alive and as convincingly real as possible, his clothes are bordered with real crocheted rims and his spear and scale (now gone) were originally removable, probably made out of wood and metal, just like they would in real life. Tempered with the supernatural quality of an ideal beauty, this immediacy is then again brutally imposed on the observer by the tactile, fiery and furious figure of the devil [Fig. 12]. This is not the

monstrous, beast-like demon of previous centuries anymore, yet it is not the fully humanized version attributed by Daniel Arasse to renaissance humanism still (Arasse, 2009: 71-94). Certainly composite, it sums up in a man-like body, scaled to the dimension of its angelic opponent, the many ingredients of a repulsive creature: his body is fully covered in a wavy fur that, with its twists and twirls, resembling the crackling incandescence of hellish fires. His hands and feet are reptilian, dragon-like, with knotty fingers ending in the sharpest black claws, matching his serpentine tail and wide, membranous wings. Finally, his head is a manifesto of artistic skill through the mastery of the most efficient formulas of ugliness.



Fig. 11 - Detail of Saint Michael Altarpiece, 1537, from the Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Velha (Coimbra), Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro © Joana Antunes



Fig. 12 - Detail of Saint Michael Altarpiece, 1537, from the Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Velha (Coimbra), Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro © Gabriel Pereira



Fig. 13 [a] - The devil's face: Saint Michael Altarpiece, 1537, from the Monastery of Santa Clara-a-Velha (Coimbra), Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro © Gabriel Pereira



Fig. 13 [b] - The devil's face: Saint Michael (attr. to Gil Eanes workshop), from the Church of Saint Michael (Castle of Montemor-o-Velho), Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro © Joana Antunes

The deep grooves and sharp volumes of his rugged ram-like horns, his exaggerated eyebrows and cheekbones and his widely open mouth create a dramatic chiaroscuro effect that should be amplified by the original polychromy [Fig. 13a]. The same wavy fur that coats his body, covers his face entirely, rendering it restless and accentuating its expression, while two pairs of sharp tusks projecting upwards and downwards his open mouth stress his predator and savage nature. The models of such an expression and complexion are not far from reach, as we find, for instance, on the same museum room, a similar approach on another sculpture of Saint Michael, this one attributed to Gil Eanes and approximately dated from 1425-1450 (MNM, from the church of Saint Michel in the castle of Montemor-o-velho) [Fig. 13b]. As we do find it on other media, such as embroidered textiles, like the chasuble kept at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (532 Tec, MNAA) . Indeed, this is not an uncommon type to international painting also – particularly Italian – as we find similar features, for instance, at the work of the Crivelli (Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Michael*, Four Panels from an Altarpiece, Ascoli Piceno, ca. 1476, National Gallery, London; Carlo and Vittore Crivelli, *Archangel Michael slaying the Devil*, Polyptych of Monte San Martino, ca. 1477-1480) or the miniatures of Giovan Pietro Birago (*The Sforza Hours*, 3, British Library, Add Ms 34294, fl. 186v).

In any case, the effect achieved by João de Ruão is far more refined and complex, drawing on a list of long lasting ingredients of the demonic portrait, but presenting them in a new way, which is not far from the formula established by Leonardo da Vinci for the invention of a fantastic animal (*animal finto*) (Da Vinci, ed. Amoretti, 1804: 172-173) or the one attributed by Francisco

de Holanda to Michelangelo. Instead of distorting reality and creating a disproportionate monster with no echo at all on the natural world, the artist should draw on nature to imitate and fuse together different parts of real animals into a new creature so plausible in its hybridity that its biological existence may seem almost unquestionable. Convincing as it is, João de Ruão's devil is no less detailed and appealing than his archangel Michael. By carefully scanning his face and body, one finds surprising additions which aim at rending him scarier, stranger and more repulsive altogether: these are, for instance, the beastly faces that appear in the place of his knees (a typical ingredient of the composite, proteiform demon of the 15th century); the long, black moustache which, by the 1530s is not yet fashionable and will remain associated with pagans and Ottoman Muslims (Harper, 2011: 45) and the lizard which nests on the top of his head, only clearly visible laterally and at a short distance.

Made for the monastery of Santa Clara-a-Velha in Coimbra, this altarpiece was originally kept at chapel not yet identified, and later transferred to a place of its own, the Chapel of Saint Michael placed at the high choir, built as a last attempt to avoid the damage of constant flooding of the river Mondego (Gonçalves, 2006: 790). The secluded nature of its successive settings, along with the richness of details in this altarpiece makes it plausible to assume that a certain proximity of observation was predicted and permitted. And perhaps this helps to explain the damage inflicted to the devil's face, repeated once and again on the monstrous faces carved on his knees. The defacement of the devil is, indeed, a typical feature of sculptures of Saint Michael (and Saint Bartholomew), which frequently present

marks of sharp blows or smashing directly on the nose, eyes and mouth. While some of these marks may be due to a hazardous or precarious keeping of the sculptures on the long run, others are too directed and precise not to be associated with iconoclasm. And although we may not be able to date these damages, they are nevertheless an unrelenting evidence of the disturbing power of these images, which crystallize a type of grotesqueness and monstrosity which is still effective today.

Wondrous and horrifying at the same time, this devil, embodiment of all grotesqueness, was made – and this is, perhaps, significant to note – for female beholders. The gendered gaze, which is always so hard to grasp, is nevertheless unavoidable when approaching the ways in which a work of art may have functioned in its reception time. In this light, the stark contrast between the devil's and the archangel's face become all the more remarkable, since they actually face each other, forcing the observer to enter the timeless loop of a momentous second when the gracile and graceful angel gazes into the devil's horrid face without showing the slightest sign of fear. It is almost impossible not to sense here a specific programming aimed at the Clarist nuns, so clearly mirrored in this exquisite interpretation of Saint Michael. Drawing on both old and new iconic and expressive resources, this devil is thus a powerful device of persuasion, stimulating negative responses on the observer and, by these means, confirming the creative power of the sculptor himself.

Regarding this specific role of the devil and grotesque figures, Daniel Arasse has argued in favor of a definite replacement of the medieval

composite monster by a rather humanized embodiment of evil, as part of the change in the pictorial paradigm that characterizes the Renaissance. As a consequence, the painted image of the devil should lose its active role at the intimidation of the beholder, acting instead as an artistic statement of skill and inventiveness (Arasse, 2009: 80).



Fig. 14 - Detail from the Saint Mark Altarpiece, ca. 1545, Church of São Salvador, Coimbra (© Gabriel Pereira)

Even though this replacement was never absolute, it is definitely visible in Italian (or Italianized) painting and engraving in the very first half of the 16th century, only slowly spread to other geographies during the second half of the century. Sculpture, on the other hand, seems to have been transversely prone to the monstrous versions and more resistant to this change.

In João de Ruão's oeuvre, the process seems to begin by the mid-century, with the Saint Michael of the church of São Salvador displaying a less monstrous, composite, and beastly devil.

Though some elements do remain, such as the dragon claws, the spiky membranous wings, the horns and the tail, the general appearance of this devil is that of a man [Fig. 14]. The thick fur disappears, such as the beast-faced joints, the facial hair, the monstrous face and the huge tusks. It is much more a fallen angel than the embodiment of chaos and inhumanity previously tested by painters and sculptors alike.

The devil in the man

The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew (MNMC) ca. 1560-1580

“Molto più mostrerebbe il pittore la forza de l'arte in farlo afflito, sanguinoso, pieno di sputi, depelato, piagato, difformato, livido e brutto, di maniera che non avesse forma d'uomo. Questo sarebbe l'ingegno, questa la forza e la virtù de l'arte, questo il decoro, questa la perfezzion de l'artefice.” (Gilio, 1564: 86)

In the Martyrdom of St. Bartholomew, whose authorship is not known but whose conception may not have been far from the sphere of João de Ruão's workshop [Fig. 15], the *baroque* (in the sense of Eugenio d'Ors') theatricality evoked by Gilio for painting is clearly being tested. Instead of the full display of pain, horror and cruelty, rendered credible and shocking by the complete mastery of naturalism *versus* realism, the viewer is persuaded of both the skill of the sculptor and the heroic virtue of the saint by a well calculated balance between tension and quietness, realism and idealism, verisimilitude and fiction, ugliness

and beauty, proportionate harmony and grotesqueness.

Of course, the model on which the sculptor draws is not new, as the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew received in the medieval period the fundamental iconographic features and variations it would keep through the modern age. With little space for euphemism, unlike the “solo” iconography of the saint, the depiction of the Apostle’s flaying at the hands of Polymius’ (or his brother Astyages) men would either consist on presenting the saint lying on a torture table or standing, tied to a vertical wooden structure or chained to a wall. Despite the number of spectators present at the scene, the gruesome process of skinning the saint alive would invariably be carried out by (at least) two men, who could either work on different



Fig. 15 - Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, ca. 1560-1580, unknown provenance, Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro © Gabriel Pereira

members at one time or help each other in the hard task of flaying one member. The precise moment of the punishment could also differ slightly, according to which the impact on the viewer would have been more or less intense. Although usually painters and illuminators presented the flaying of the arms or legs of St. Bartholomew, sometimes they went a little further as to present the top half of his body devoid of any skin: with exception (or not) to his head.

Many of these images should be observed in the context of a narrative – an altarpiece or a book – which would not only dilute their immediacy and impact, but also rend their graphic nature appropriate and purposeful. Nevertheless, there are some very exceptional (and eloquent) examples of the individual display of the saint’s more gruesome version.

After the artistic statement on the knowledge of man’s true and anatomical nature – which, in sculpture, seems to plateau with Marco d’Agrate’s St. Bartholomew (Milano, 1562) –, the pathetic potential of the apostle’s death becomes increasingly dependent on a tense insinuation of the torture (always about to happen) rather than on the depiction of the flaying itself. Painting, in particular, will rely on the *chiaroscuro*, with dramatic diagonals and abrupt gestures to precipitate the viewer into another type of suffering, perhaps more psychological than before, relying on anguish and despair rather than physical pain. The saint loses his tranquility, physical detachment, and heroism: now he suffers. And he not only suffers in pain as his skin is stripped of his muscles, as he suffers in the anticipation of the pain, and he struggles to

escape. He is, thus, scaled down at a human dimension. The process behind these slow and progressive – and never irreversible – changes is particularly interesting: instead of reacting to the crude exhibition of a suffering body, the observer now identifies with the humanity of a specific character.

In sculpture, the normalized depiction of the Apostle, simply holding the instrument of his martyrdom and/or the chained devil, will be the most common in the long term. Nevertheless, graphic displays of the flayed saint, just like the lively polychromed wooden image of Saint Bartholomew from the Chapelle Saint-Jean de Séglien (Morbihan), or the depiction of his flaying, just like the one attributed to João de Ruão, are rare for the 16th century, and will progressively lead to heroicized portraits of the Saint with two skins – his martyred skin he holds on his arm, and his glorious skin, covering his intact body – like the one presented by Michelangelo at the Sistine Chapel.

From whatever period it may belong to, more or less attuned with anatomical correction or with a naturalist view of the human body, the depiction of the flaying of St. Bartholomew is always a terrible, nerve wrecking, shuddering thing to see. The elasticity of the skin being pulled from the body or heavily pending from it, along with the gleaming viscosity of the bloody tissues and the vibrantly red muscles, are brutally imposed over the observer's body before anything else. Before any empathy with the saint or contempt for the torturers. Before any rational approach to narrative or composition. In a painted sculpture, such as the one kept at the Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro, the effect on the observer

should not be subtler. Even if we ignore its provenance and its original setting, this group sculpture's dimension is set to impress. As are the many details that build up the tension of observing the defenseless (though dignified) figure of the saint being tortured by two men. Drawing on a formula of contrasts, very close to the Petrarchian struggle between opposites, ugliness and disfigurement coexist with the beauty of resilience, acceptance, and retrain, all mediated by the power of art. The image of the saint, whose absolute (and in that sense somewhat artificial) detachment from the scene is only betrayed by the subtle signs of tension on his face, with slightly raised eyebrows and lips ajar, is grasped in the moment it becomes ugly, with the skin wide open and the flesh exposed. And yet he is still (in theory) a role model for the devout Christian, who learns the purifying effects of suffering and pain when humbly accepted and patiently experienced (Klemettilä, 2006: 33).

Nevertheless, it is the grotesque ugliness of the tormentors' physical portrait that is intended to unsettle the observer. While exuberantly dressed, they are both somewhat disheveled and slovenly. One of them is presented standing, flaying the back of the saint: one hand holding the knife close to his right arm, and the other pulling apart the skin to the level of the left shoulder. The imposing figure of this tormentor, who is even taller than saint Bartholomew, is a disturbing one: committed and focused on his task, he slightly sticks his tongue out, pressing it between his teeth, while making the effort of pulling a man's skin off. [Fig. 16] The choice of this specific trait, instead of pressing or biting the lips, is rather revealing of a physical portrait that goes beyond the natural expression of one's face while making a physical effort that requires

concentration and purpose. Indeed, the open mouth, pointy nose, tousled hair and beard, and even the detail of the left ear, folding under the weight of the hat, are all ingredients of a wicked ugliness that is in stark contrast with the much more peaceful, even traits of the saint's face.

At the ground level, and strategically positioned as to conceal the otherwise exposed genitals of the martyr, the other

tormentor's repulsive traits are yet intensified through his crooked body, whose energy is all directed towards the flaying of the saint's leg, and his grotesque face, with a huge nose, protruding eyes staring at the void, and his wide-open mouth showing his teeth in an overall inebriated expression of pleasure in torture. Contrarily to the well-crafted João de Ruão's *mascheroni* – of which it is not really far – this face is not ambiguous or morally indecipherable. It is, instead,

the very human face of the mindless wickedness of someone who simply follows given orders but nevertheless takes pleasure in the torture of another man.

But the play between real and symbolic extends also to the executioner's outfit. The slashed clothes, although fashionable throughout the 16th century for both men and women, have a military origin (Springer, 2010: 77) which makes them particularly appropriate for these figures of strength. The wicked tormentors of Saint Bartholomew would probably resonate

contemporary images of mercenary soldiers but also of proper executioners, men whose profession was to carry out legal sentences of capital punishment. If the public torture and execution of a convict was a socio-normative spectacle, requiring from the executioner a respectful look (not necessarily the black robed and hooded creepy figure from neo-medieval reenactments), it was also a physically demanding task, which required some practical



Fig. 16 - Detail from the Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, ca. 1560-1580, unknown provenance, Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro © Gabriel Pereira

solutions to ease the movements and spare clothes from blood and dirt (Klemettilä, 2006: 109-164). And that is exactly what João de Ruão portrays in the tormentors of Saint Bartholomew, whose sleeves are rolled up to the elbow or even tied in a knot at the level of the shoulder, leaving the full length of the arm exposed, with their nether hose (or stockings) sagging from the garters down, leaving the knees bare and free to move. But, to these seemingly practical details, which are a specific and much debated trait of the executioners' iconography (Melinkoff, 1993, I: 204-208), one must add some derogatory details intended to point to their low social status,

untidiness and marginality. Such a detail may be found at the shabby shoe and peeping toes of the kneeling tormentor who skins the leg of Saint Bartholomew, with a very close parallel, for instance, in one of the soldiers depicted by Pietro di Galeotto in the Flagellation of Christ of the Oratorio di San Francesco (Perugia, 1480).

Ugliness and grotesqueness were, indeed, part of the iconographic code for executioners, tormentors or hangmen throughout the Middle Ages, with a vast array of features frequently used by artists to stress the marginality and wickedness of these men, so strikingly opposite to the beatitude and righteousness of the holy individuals they torment. With big noses and mouths, sometimes toothless and sadistically grinning, bizarrely dressed in colorful, parted or stripe clothes, sometimes ragged and shabby, sometimes dark-skinned, they had a very own visual identity, which naturally transitioned to the modern age within contemporary formulas of representation (Klemettilä, 2006: 165-214). João de Ruão's oeuvre generally demonstrates that these formulas tend to the humanization of those characters, who are less and less caricature-like and demonic, and increasingly encompassing of the many shades and hues of human nature and behavior. The headsman that beheads Saint John the Baptist in the predella of the Baptism of Christ from the Monastery of Santa Maria de Celas (MNMC, E 132, ca. 1540), the soldiers that flog Christ at the column in another predella from the same

monastery (MNMC, 1540s), and the tormentors of Saint John the Evangelist in the altarpiece of Saints John and Martin (Monastery of Santa Maria de Celas, 1542) compose a gallery of marginal, and often overlooked characters whose variety and specificities deserve further attention [Fig. 17]. Some of them are vigorous, athletic and exuberant figures, just like the famous Landsknechte in puffed and slashed clothes, while others are poor, ragged and old men. Some are overtly sadistic, while others are industrious fulfillers of their duty. All of them embody,



Fig. 17 [a] - Tormentors from João de Ruão's altarpieces: The Flagellation of Christ, detail of the predella with the Passion of Christ, ca. 1540s, from the Monastery of Santa Maria de Celas, Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro © Gabriel Pereira



Fig. 17 [b] - Tormentors from João de Ruão's altarpieces: The Martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist, detail of the predella of the Baptism of Christ altarpiece ca. 1540, from the Monastery of Santa Maria de Celas, Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro © Gabriel Pereira



Fig. 17 [c] - Tormentors from João de Ruão's altarpieces: The Martyrdom of Saint John the Evangelist, altarpiece of Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Mark, ca. 1542, Monastery of Santa Maria de Celas © Maria de Lurdes Craveiro

though, the grotesqueness of human cruelty and lack of empathy in more than one detail of their conventional portraits. Without them, the approach to the work of a sculptor such as João de Ruão rests deprived of an important insight into humanism and human nature.

Final remarks

This permanent commitment with humanity is, in conclusion – and certainly with everything yet to be said – one of the most coherent marks of João de Ruão's oeuvre, the organic and rather efficient matter that glues together the centre and the margins, the devotional and the ornamental, the ideal beauty and the inventive grotesqueness. The search of a *limes*, a border or frontier between the intelligibility and verisimilitude (physiognomic and physiological, psychological

and moral) of the human face and body in its most extreme distortion, fluctuates then between an almost anthropological research on the ugly and the bizarre, and the anticipation of their visual efficacy as something more than rhetorical devices. In João de Ruão, as with the most acclaimed artists of his time, the dissection of the real serves, then, the fundamental goal of its (re)composition, as a way of suggesting a new reality to which only the artist, the *imagier* or *imaginador*, may give shape, leading the observer from pleasure to disgust and back again.

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