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ARTICLE

'Touch the truth'?: Desiderio da Settignano, Renaissance relief and the body of Christ

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From the late nineteenth century, relief sculpture has been taken as a locus classicus for understanding new engagements with spatial and volumetric effects in the art of fifteenth-century Florence, with Ghiberti usually taking the Academy award for the second set of Baptistery doors.¹ The art historical field has traditionally been dominated by German scholarship both in artist-centred studies and in the discussion of the so-called 'malerischens Relief'.² An alternative tradition, likewise originating in the nineteenth-century, has been claimed by English aesthetics where relief has offered a place of poetic meditation and insight. John Ruskin memorably championed the chromatic possibilities of low relief architectural carving in *The Stones of Venice* (early 1850s) and in his 1872 essay on Luca della Robbia. Walter Pater mused on how 'resistant' sculpture could become a vehicle of expression.³ For Adrian Stokes (1934) the very low relief figures by Agostino di Duccio at the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini represented a vital 'blooming' of luminous limestone.⁴ Stokes' insistence that sculptural values were not reducible to modelling, which he identified with the Germanic conception of 'Plastik', is apparent already in his Ruskinian tribute to the hand-worn and weathered stone of Venice in which he asserts that 'Hand-finish is the most vivid testimony of sculpture [...] Perfect sculpture needs your hand to communicate some pulse and warmth, to reveal subtleties unnoticed by the eye, needs your hand to enhance them'.⁵ The disarming focus on the sculpture's expressive need to be touched rather than the compulsion of the touching hand serves his larger argument that carving, in contrast to mere plasticity, brings out a vitality and movement that is inherent to the medium and not simply imposed upon it. This, then, is an argument from 'truth to materials' that is defiantly set against the Renaissance poetic trope of the resistant coldness of stone.⁶ Instead, Stokes's argument is better aligned with that strand in the Renaissance art theoretical debate known as the *paragone* according to which sculpture, which could be appreciated even by the hands of a blind man, was 'true' in a way that illusionistic painting was not.⁷ What such differently motivated, though equally rhetorical, claims share is their basis in the idea of carved relief as provoking a strong sensual and emotional engagement on the part of an embodied viewer. In each case touch reveals truth.

The haptic lure of Renaissance sculpture provoked, as both Ruskin and Stokes insist, by the first-hand experience of carved stone, has been acknowledged by a recent focus on relief works brought together at exhibition.⁸ While the exploring hand is strictly off limits in this context, it was the visual clues internal to a number of early Renaissance reliefs, freshly juxtaposed, that provided the opportunity for insights into the complex interplay of vision and visibility, touch and medium in relief carving in this period. It is this interplay that I wish to explore, above all in relation to the low relief religious sculpture of Desiderio da Settignano (exhibited in Paris, Florence and Washington 2006-7) with a view to sharpening awareness of the potential of relief modes as bearers of meaning. Desiderio's work has a transitional position in the history of Renaissance carving, being in close dialogue with the technical and

emotive achievements of the older Donatello even as it achieved a distinctive subtlety that was neither equalled nor, it seems, aspired to, by a subsequent generation of Florentine sculptors. Its significance in relief terms is arguably better placed, then, by prefacing the discussion with a slightly earlier work that reveals how relief could provide something like a material commentary on the sacred truths it was given to represent.

At the centre of the Leeds exhibition *Depth of Field: relief sculpture in the age of Donatello*, the long narrow slab of Donatello's white marble *Ascension of Christ and Giving of the Keys to St. Peter* (c. 1430, fig. 1) showed, in its highly compressed space, how the surface of stone could be coaxed to dramatise or re-enact disappearance. As Amanda Lillie has eloquently described them, the figures of Christ seated on cloud and his ministering angels are in the very process of being absorbed into a heaven dramatically reconceived as an atmospheric continuum.⁹ This continuum inflects the entire, undulating and cloudy surface of the block. The observation can be extended, moreover, to the viewer's experience of the extremely low, or *schacciato*, relief carving since, by stepping to an oblique position, or just looking at the work in the 'wrong' light, the image can be made to evaporate or become illegible, as though re-enacting the moment of Christ's bodily disappearance from earth.¹⁰ Even when peering into the surface face-on, the viewing experience is demanding and uncomfortable as well as revelatory. Jesus' head, in highest relief, is squeezed in at the uppermost edge of the block in a posture so uncomfortable as to encourage the beholder to want his release: Christ *must* depart, leaving his authority on earth to Peter. Moreover Donatello's use of atmospheric effects to produce spatial depth within the few millimetres salience of the surface creates a productive ambiguity in the relation between the disappearing Christ and his vicar on earth. The viewer is unable to judge their physical separation; are they actually touching or not (fig. 2)? Like Peter, the beholder is in limbo, anticipating resolution but also loss. Peter's space, we are given to understand, is about to become like our own, a place where belief is a matter of faith. Knowledge of God will no longer be based on touch but, at best, on a partial and above all immaterial vision of the kind St. Paul described as seeing in a glass, darkly.¹¹

In this reading of the *Ascension*, what has always been taken as a problem for assessing the sculpture's original - and still elusive - function, namely its incomplete legibility, becomes productive for an understanding of the relationship between sculptural mode and the stimulus to faith provided by religious imagery. The forging of such an intimate relation between choices in carving and religious message emerges with still greater clarity in Desiderio da Settignano's carvings of a couple of decades later, before eventually taking on a new, more plastic even bossy, shape in the work of the next generation of sculptors exemplified by Andrea del Verrocchio. By addressing the relationship between these two factors, imagery and sculptural mode, as a dialectical one, we can highlight its implications for the status of the religious image in this period as mediating a claim to a higher or sacred truth. This is not to argue for the possession of abstruse theological knowledge on the part of individual sculptors but, rather, to insist on a sophisticated understanding of the capacities of sculpture that was being placed at the service of commonly available devotional and liturgical conceptions about the status and accessibility of Christ and the saints.

The phrase 'touch the truth' ('toccate il vero') of my title comes from the first line of a Florentine poem composed by Franco Sacchetti to accompany a lost fourteenth-century image of *Doubting Thomas* touching the wound in Christ's side.¹² Addressing himself to the judges of the Florentine government and their supplicants, Thomas orders: 'Touch the truth as I do, and you will believe in the absolute justice of the Trinity/ which always exalts each one who sits in judgement'.¹³ In this image for the town hall, the weakness of the disciple who refused to believe in Christ's bodily resurrection without the witness of both his own eyes *and* his hand is construed as strength: Thomas's action represents the search for God-given truth. His action is literally one of 'manifestation', or of *probing* - of touching in order to prove.

The theme of *Doubting Thomas* 'making sure' of Christ's risen body received its canonical Florentine treatment after Desiderio's death in Verrocchio's bronze group designed for the Merchant Tribunal (*Mercanzia*)'s niche on the church of Orsanmichele (1467-1483, fig. 3). In these ingeniously cast figures, which are actually high reliefs, the bodily existence of the protagonists is reinforced by every stratagem and, above all, by a light-catching projection enhanced by St Thomas's transgression of the niche.¹⁴ The apostle mediates the viewer's approach to Christ and the proximity of his fingers to the shadowed and framed hole in Christ's side is highly charged, inviting the beholder simultaneously to imagine the pierced flesh and suspend disbelief. Christ's hand draws back the mandorla-shaped opening in his garment as though opening the sides of the wound whose form it imitates.¹⁵ Thus even the heavy drapery is dramatised as a material presence: Christ is incarnate as 'il vero', substantive flesh in a way that seems to call the beholder to discipleship. Tellingly though, Verrocchio does not show the actual moment of St. Thomas's touch, but allows the action to be completed in the viewer's imagination. Hence the expressive emphasis falls on a theological truth: it is both the fact of the invitation to touch and the conversion or 'turn' in the doubter's mind that counts, not his action. Indeed the inscription of Christ's words from St. John's Gospel on the hem of his garment reads: "Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet believed" asking the viewer to question the epistemological value of the experience of both touching and looking that the sculpture thematizes.¹⁶ The theological message ultimately works against the grain both of the emphatic physicality of the sculpture and the judicial imprimatur imposed by Verrocchio's patrons. Put another way, the gap between the poised fingers and the wound, which excites the beholder's own desire to touch and is vital to the sculpture as a dramatic narrative, is also the essential ontological gap without which faith is obsolete.

The appeal to touch in Christian devotional imagery is frequently predicated on a set of circumstances, sometimes physical and material but also theological that either circumscribe or actually prevent touching. While the power of human touch for comprehending the humanity of Christ is recurrent in the presentation of the mystery of the bodily Resurrection in John's Gospel, the possibility of touch is suspended as well as proffered. Though Christ sanctions touch to verify his resurrection to the empirically-minded Thomas he just as decisively withdraws that possibility in his earlier encounter with Mary Magdalen near the empty tomb. Essentially Christ's 'Noli me tangere' was a rebuke to the effect that, after resurrection, his body no longer belonged in the world and should not be clung to.¹⁷ As Jean-Luc Nancy articulates, it is the *not* touching of Christ's resurrected body that accesses its reality as eternal.¹⁸

The interplay between sight and touch, the visible and tactile and, above all, the potential for their meaningful activation or withdrawal, emerge as central to understanding what is at stake in Desiderio da Settignano's highly meditated sculptures of the body of Christ. His works mark a peculiar convergence between technical difficulty in the handling of still fresh sculptural techniques, like Donatello's *schacciato* relief and 'pictorial' perspective, and an acute sensitivity to the manipulation of the devotee's attention, for whom the experience of the body of Christ in the liturgy is both real and proscribed. The most telling work in this respect is the sacrament tabernacle of San Lorenzo in Florence completed around 1461 to adorn the altar of the Medici chapel of Sts. Cosimus and Damian (fig. 4).¹⁹ Designed to reserve the eucharistic Body in the form of the Host left unconsumed at the Mass, this work shows in full operation the logic of the sculptor's treatment of relief to signify different kinds of presence and availability, contriving to present Christ's Body in at least three different ways. The logic is above all a relational one, showing that the particular eloquence of any one choice of relief mode is constituted by juxtaposition or interplay with other modes of carving.

The ensemble as it has stood since 1948 is mounted, using additional pietra serena

elements, against the wall of the south aisle just before the transept. Now revolving around a blank, this is a partial reconstruction that affirms the tabernacle's latter day status as a desanctified, essentially ornamental, work of art. Where once the place of the sacrament would have been marked by a metal door the viewer finds an empty wall that emphatically voids the sculpture's commemorative and cultic function. Reactivating the work requires mentally reinstalling it above an altar and reinserting at its centre what was perceived as Christ's Real Presence in the Host. Only then can the tabernacle sustain the liturgical miracle of the Mass, effectively perpetuating the 'Hoc est corpus meum' pronounced by the officiating priest.

At every level, sculpture provides a purely visual commentary on the ontological state of that which it represents. The central field is conceived as a freestanding barrel-vaulted tabernacle that recedes to a measured depth. The perspectival effect - a dramatisation of a feature developed in Bernardo Rossellino's tabernacle for the hospital of S. Egidio - imaginatively pulls back the place of reservation away from the surface. In the process, it illusionistically magnifies its scale so that the metal *sportello* would have appeared to occupy the height of the whole 'back' wall. Enticing the devotee to imagine what could not be seen beyond the door, angels rush in from the wings into the space opened up by the relief. The latter exists in actuality to just a few centimetres but is marked out by the pavement and the emphatic orthogonals of the barrel vault to an imaginary depth that approaches the monumentality of Brunelleschi's own architectural order at San Lorenzo.²⁰ The half-length God the Father in the lunette, when taken as an overdoor, is neither indecorously diminished nor fully reduced to sculpture as his limbs escape the semi-circular frame. Christ's body in the reserved Host is present behind the door and invisible, imminent and immeasurably distant. Given that the tabernacle was originally designed to double as an altarpiece it is worth remembering that the Host would periodically have appeared before the tabernacle at the moment of its Elevation.²¹ The presentation of the wafer for the adoration of the faithful would have fulfilled the promise of revelation left undelivered by the illusionistic depths of the central relief field.

Desiderio excited or tantalised the devotee by quite different means in the triumphal lunette above, where the victorious sacramental Christ Child appears miraculously above the chalice (fig.5) adored by putti and seraphim. Whereas the Host behind the door is pulled back, the vision of the child is projected forward and upwards as a life-size body fully realised in space and casting shadow. The effect is deliberately revelatory and re-enacts those visions, more or less widespread since the late Middle Ages, in which doubting or needy communicants saw the eucharist appear as rejuvenated flesh.²² The vision of the Child is a representation which reveals the invisible truth of the Host.²³ The cult appeal of Desiderio's anachronistic baby, who 'takes flesh' as he triumphs over his own death, is unprecedented in Florence. A limited parallel exists in the fresco in Cosimo de' Medici's cell at the convent of San Marco, where the eldest Magus's devotion is indicated by his kissing the foot of the Christ child at the Nativity. Here too, a eucharistic message was underlined by the Man of Sorrows below, painted in a sacramental niche beneath the Adoration. Whether or not Cosimo proposed it, the blessing Child gave Desiderio the chance to take on a sculptural form to which his skills were especially sympathetic and he was able to draw for its dramatic crowning effect on the animated children on the lunette of Donatello's *Cavalcanti Annunciation* relief.²⁴

Reserved for the lowest register is a third relief option that is neither simply low nor 'mezzo tondo' but, revealingly, somewhere in between. The three-figure image falls iconographically between a three-quarter length Man of Sorrows and an intimate Lamentation over the Dead Christ (fig. 6).²⁵ Unlike some eucharistic works that use the Man of Sorrows to intimate the place of reservation as a kind of tomb, Desiderio surely intended this sepulchral relief to be more appropriately positioned lower down, as an altar frontal. The same scene appears c. 1490 in this position on the marble sacrament altarpiece of the Corbinelli chapel at S. Spirito

by Andrea Sansovino. Reminding the viewer of the timeless efficacy of Christ's sacrificial death 'once, for all', Desiderio depicts Christ's slumped body on the very edge of interment. But none of the figures are fully of this world, being represented under life size (Christ is especially small in relation to his mourners) and using a peculiar mode of partially flattened relief that means that, despite the work's physical position as a type of historiated predella, thus showing a past event, its effect is to retain the iconic quality of the Man of Sorrows. In this respect it represents a more logical departure from the revelatory yet problematically skied scene of entombment in pure *schacciato* relief devised by Donatello for the Vatican sacrament tabernacle, probably after 1443, or the higher relief used by Luca della Robbia on the great tabernacle from S. Maria Nuova, Florence (1441-3).²⁶

Desiderio gives his group both actual and metaphorical relief by selectively carving up the facial features and fingers and undercutting its contours, decisively detaching the figures from the ground plane with a deep band of shadow that falls around the chief contours and beneath Christ's extended arms. At one level this detachment, which is far more marked here than in the lunette reliefs on his Marsuppini monument, adapts the kind of figure isolation that Donatello introduced in stone reliefs where he employed a ground of a contrasting colour or material. Perhaps the most obvious precedent is the mosaic-ground relief of 'flattened' *putti* on the Prato pulpit (1428-1438), a work that itself drew strongly on late antique friezes and, very probably Byzantine ivories.²⁷ A more salient relief, using undercutting to detach the figures from the ground, had also been adopted in the Donatellesque roundels based on ancient gems of the Medici palace courtyard and it is possible Desiderio invited comparison with authoritative 'ancient' works of this kind.²⁸ Desiderio's undercutting, while making the scene more legible, also stages the fact that the tomb relief has no depth, with the dimensional play limited to the compressed foreground, defined by an internal frame. Thus the devotee is presented with a confined, entombed space that is almost claustrophobically close, even as the tomb proper recedes in pictorial perspective. Christ's upper body is decorously removed from too close a fictive proximity and has little physical substance or projection resting, as it were, in Limbo.²⁹ Though pitched at high emotional volume by the expressive mourners, the relief mode itself is reticent, marking a liminal space appropriate to a place between death and resurrection. The treatment is reminiscent of Pater's own eerily expressive reading of the *rilievo schacciato* of Florentine sculptors 'giving even to their monumental effigies something of its depressions of surface, getting into them by this means a pathetic suggestion of the wasting and etherealisation of death.'³⁰ Another way of reading this is to see Desiderio as wanting to benefit from the physical restraint of painting - the medium of those Byzantine Passion icons of the Man of Sorrows and their later Medieval variants have been compared.³¹ While the image's lack of physical projection obviously had practical benefits in an altar frontal, it also inhibited the devotee from fully realising what Christ's body felt, or feels, like; the wounds in his hands and side, uncoloured and hardly carved, are played down to the point of invisibility. Instead the image aims to stimulate emotions of fellow feeling or compassion. Whereas John's outward turn has the choric and rhetorical character of donatellesque Entombments, the three-quarter position of Christ's body, his falling hand and his intertwining with surrounding mourners, bring to mind northern European paintings of the early fifteenth century that may have been known to Desiderio. Examples such as Jean Malouel's gold ground *Trinity* with the mourning Virgin and St. John, appear themselves to have drawn on imported Byzantine icons (fig. 7) of the kind already familiar in Italy.³² In order to contain this emotive *Imago pietatis* within a liturgical and iconic mode, Desiderio invented a space that is effectively between painting and sculpture, a tailor-made space that encourages meditation on the image and not, as in the Christ Child above, the present body.

The very specific set of circumstances that make sense of this mode of undercut low relief were not easily reproduced. There exists a close variant of Desiderio's relief produced by one of the da Maiano brothers, presumably Giovanni, in the relief below the Madonna del Ulivo, jointly signed and dated 1480, now in Prato cathedral.³³ This apparently votive work

directly emulates Desiderio's but introduces a green Prato stone ground to provide a stronger foil for the figures and, tellingly, making the body of Christ more prominent both in the composition and in relief. Apart from this local work, the closest surviving relief parallels are to be found in other penitential works centred on Christ's body by Donatello's Paduan followers and collaborators.³⁴ Yet it is telling that when Bartolommeo Bellano, who must have known Desiderio's works at San Lorenzo, adopted a similar approach for the ~~far more~~ dramatic *Lamentation* altarpiece in Padua (probably of the 1470s), the effect is one of claustrophobia and confusion (fig. 8).³⁵ Perhaps we should not be surprised that these experiments were exceptional.

The effect of the Man of Sorrows and its meaning are strongly conditioned by its juxtaposition with the contrasting spatial conception of the central relief, and with the substance of the body of Christ in the form of the blessing Christ Child. This Christ (fig. 5), who once held his own crown of thorns, represents Real Presence and is a pliable, adorable body that responds to the devotee with a blessing. Desiderio describes the flesh so appealingly in its delicate pliancy as directly to invite touch, yet the child remains defiantly out of the devotee's reach. Such inaccessibility to touch was wholly appropriate to a vision whose substance was understood to be the transubstantiated Host itself. Nonetheless, we know that the charm and, surely, the free-standing accessibility of the Child actually stimulated an after-life of handling in its own right.³⁶ Severed from his chalice sometime in the 1490s, the *bambino Cristo* became an independent statuette, stored quite separately from the sacrament and, according to the sacristan Francesco Albertini, was placed on the high altar for the feast of the Nativity.³⁷ Another documented highlight of this solo career was the Medici pope Leo X's devotion. It was presumably on the occasion of his visit to his natal city in 1515 that, as later recorded, he held the sacramental Christ Child and wept over it.³⁸ This act entailed a claim to both priestly and dynastic privilege. Ultimately it also imitated St. Francis' devotion at the crib of Greccio and perhaps, too, that of the 'eldest Magus' Cosimo de' Medici, who was Giovanni's revered great grandfather.³⁹ But the *bambino's* removal also represents a compulsive overriding of the figure's ordained role in the set of controlled relations that the tabernacle once structured. Just as mid-fifteenth-century Church Councils tended to stress that the cult of the Host was best served not by blood miracles but by infrequent, controlled viewing, the Child was placed on the tabernacle to oversee and be seen, but not to be touched.⁴⁰

The tactility and softness of the San Lorenzo Christ child is a distinctive quality of Desiderio's treatment of marble in all modes, lending stone the quality of a fragile membrane or skin. This potential was often realised in a way that encourages an imaginative haptic engagement with his figures, not least his sculpted busts of children, some of which may also have represented the child Christ.⁴¹ The Vienna laughing boy, whose shoulders emerge from the embrace of his swaddling, gives us a clear sense of how a sympathetic viewer was to be captivated not just by the infectious animation of the face but by the carved and polished perfection of the flesh.⁴² Crucially, touch is also thematized directly in Desiderio's depictions of tender human interaction between holy figures. In the much-copied motifs of the Turin *Virgin and Child* (marble, 61 x 36cm. fig. 9), attention is drawn to the Virgin's hands wrapping round the child's body and sinking into its pliant flesh; the Christ Child responds by clutching into his mother's veil, and drawing their heads together - a tender allusion to his 'taking flesh' through the mediation of the Virgin.⁴³ Other sculptors aspired to similar mimetic effects and immediate presentations, but what is distinctive to Desiderio's sculptural intelligence is his production of a characteristically marginal space for this intimate display of affection. A swag of spiny foliage is hooked to the ground, so that, falling behind the haloes, the adornment insists on the marble as a surface and not a pictorial depth. Against this surface, the Virgin and Child are pressed close to us, as real presences that the beholder cannot fail to be caught by. As in earlier examples by Donatello, the pair turns inward on one another, clinging together with averted gazes. The direct engagement with the viewer more characteristic of the 'Virgin as Tender Mother' icon type to which the image belongs is

withheld.⁴⁴ We may see and be 'touched', as it were, but not touch. Even in the much more outwardly-directed *Foult Madonna* (marble, 59 x 45 cm, fig. 10) - with its curiously blank yet acknowledging eyes - the invitingly softened, almost melting surfaces of flesh and veil, skin and swaddling, that progressively spill out over the lower edge are appropriately removed to a height by an internally inscribed viewpoint slightly from below.⁴⁵ The Virgin's finger, placed right next to the frame is suggestively woven in with Christ's right foot, but also with the emergent clouds, clouds that remind us that this is not, after all, an accessible domestic scene but, as in Donatello, a heavenly vision that can be withdrawn.⁴⁶

Similar checks and balances are brought into play in the apparently intimate tondo Arconati Visconti (marble, 51 cm diameter, Musée du Louvre, fig 11).⁴⁷ While touch takes place in dramatic close-up and in deliberately intimate relation to the frame, the encounter does not offer eye contact. Moreover, despite the moving *aria* of speech and breezy air that animates the relief, its material is visibly stony. Like most *tondi* and busts, we can assume that the roundel was originally hung much too high to allow viewers to fulfil the desire for physical contact with the holy represented in, and implicitly raised by, the representation.⁴⁸ The ground is streaked with clouds, again suggesting the figures' removal to a heavenly space.

In terms of the gender stereotypes of the period, Desiderio's distinctive touch as a sculptor played well with his depiction of either very young or feminine subjects, subjects whose appeal might be described in terms of touchability as much as the 'higher' intellection that Aristotelian and Neo-platonic philosophy ascribed to sight. But such a distinction is problematic. There is, after all, a strong element of material and social decorum at play in his work. The immaculate or untouched Virgin of the Foult or Turin reliefs is not painted up, as their popular copies were, but chastely white through and through.⁴⁹ While truth to materials was hardly a concern of fifteenth-century art as it was for Stokes, the unadulterated stone makes its own visual argument for the alert devotee, namely that the virtuous whiteness seen on the surface is perfectly of a piece with the inside. Moreover, like the Florentine girl of good family who might be supposed as her ideal viewer, the Virgin is never too boldly present. The appeal to touch that is proffered through the description of veiled bodies is ultimately sublimated to the sense of sight. Moreover in the Virgin's own averted gaze we read modesty and, for an educated audience familiar with petrarchan poetry - or indeed the theory of vision by which rays emitted from the eye 'grasp' the objects of vision - this could be understood as the avoidance of the Virgin's touching us too nearly with her gaze.⁵⁰ Most importantly perhaps, Desiderio further rendered the sacred out of reach through the reticence of the unpainted, low relief mode that also inscribed a lowly viewpoint.

In discussing fourteenth-century unpainted reliefs of the *Imago pietatis*, Peter Dent has drawn attention to a similar phenomenon of 'self-effacement'.⁵¹ He argues that the unemphatic, unpainted relief aimed to move the devout, eucharistically-conscious viewer beyond themselves, and the work itself, to a vision of the Divine. Moreover Geraldine Johnson has aptly argued of domestic Marian sculptures that the unpainted low relief mode could have been read as more closely approaching the devotional ideal of a purely contemplative, imageless piety.⁵² Possession of such an object would, to extend this argument, presuppose a kind of devotional as well as aesthetic accomplishment on the part of the owner. While the works of Desiderio appeal to, rather than sublimate, the sensual, his work shows how the instantiation of devotional images in sculpted objects could be hierarchically nuanced in terms of the more or less 'present'. Moreover the production or withdrawal of presence depended less on the counterposing of sight and touch than on their interdependence. As such, Desiderio's reliefs seem to acknowledge the operation of haptic impulses triggered by sight and defy the prescription of Petrarch's cold *Reason* who argued 'Statues approach nature more closely than pictures; the latter can only be seen, the other can be touched. They also have substance, complete and solid, as well as great durability.'⁵³ Instead the very solidity of marble is brought into question. When Desiderio, following Donatello, reduced the depth of his relief sculpture to a few millimetres he set himself a

formidable technical challenge and defied the preconception of sculpture as having substance. If sculpture was 'true to nature' it was not simply by its direct access to the third dimension.

Such an investigation on the edge of the medium belongs to a much more widespread phenomenon in mid-late Quattrocento representation, and in devotional imagery in particular, of which I shall cite only one example in which painting exploits the devotional potential of sculpture. In the Prado *Deposition* panel (later 1430s fig 12), Rogier van der Weyden alluded directly to the compressed field of carved altarpieces by squeezing his protagonists into a liminal space like a gilded niche, appropriate both to the agony and the timeless message, of the event enshrined. While such a pictorial strategy of evocation or imitation often served to re-assert the superior 'vividness' of painting, the potentially idolatrous capacity of sculpture to make the sacred present is acknowledged and instrumentalised. It is commonplace that in Quattrocento Florence it was more often relief sculpture that initially looked to steal a march on painting. The work of great narrative sculptors like Ghiberti or Donatello looked strikingly 'pictorial' in their application of perspective features and effects. Desiderio, on the other hand, rarely attempted to situate his protagonists in or against deep, fictive space. Instead, like Rogier van der Weyden, his figures are set in a provocative border zone somewhere between artefact and image. Desiderio's are principally visions or images of touch rather than objects of touch.

The driving forces for such a development are not confined to the discourse of sculptors and seem to be interwoven with a range of contemporary practices, not least that of an 'ideal', immaterial, devotional contemplation referred to above. From the aesthetic point of view, his relief approach opened for the viewer poetic, imaginative forms of engagement with the tactile and the transient of the kind already displayed in the work of Florentine religious painters, above all Fra Filippo Lippi, whose evocation of atmospheric and mystic settings and sense of emotional drama Desiderio clearly emulated. Lippi's layered and saturated colour were themselves partially dependent on Netherlandish works, specifically the *ars nuova* of Van Eyck and Campin, examples of whose devotional paintings, as well as cheaper Netherlandish 'panni dipinti', seem to have begun to enter Italy already by the late 1430s.⁵⁴ We cannot be sure which works Desiderio may have known - and the coincidence may be rather one of devotional function than of derivation - yet it remains striking that Desiderio, like Campin or his pupil Rogier van der Weyden, compressed the field of action in 'iconic' works designed to arouse intimate sympathy in the beholder.⁵⁵

Literary models may also have played a role. Petrarchan lyric poetry famously played on the idea of the longed-for beloved destined to remain beyond reach. It is striking, too, how reticent Florentine lyric is on the subject of touch; whether in Boccaccio's highly erotic *Ameto* or later at Angelo Poliziano's refined *Stanze per la giostra*, the poverty of tactile vocabulary is striking in comparison to the infinitely rich resources for describing and interpreting visual experience. Noble youths are excited by the power of sight alone to *imagine* the body of the beloved beneath her diaphanous clothing.⁵⁶ Clearly there was a strong privileging of sight in this poetic medium, mirroring the frustration of desire enacted in Petrarch's *rime sparse* and *Canzoniere*. By contrast the repression of touch is far less uniformly imposed in popular devotional literature, which may have more directly conditioned the everyday experience of religious imagery. Many commentators have noted the strongly haptic character of the imaginative encounter with Christ and the saints envisaged in instructional texts such as the late Medieval Franciscan *Meditations on the Life of Christ*.⁵⁷ In sympathy with the protagonists of the Nativity for example, the devotee is encouraged to touch the feet of Christ in the manger or even entreat the Virgin to allow her to hold the child.⁵⁸ Both the pious ends of meditation and the sacred character of the protagonists sanctioned this kind of explicitness, in which the quality of the meditative act might even be measured in terms of its high relief, polychrome vividness.⁵⁹ But even such physically explicit mystic writers as Margery Kemp could, like the Magdalen with whom she identifies, also find herself

frustrated, excluded from touching the vividly imagined Body of Christ after his death.⁶⁰ The training of the 'ghostly sight' or inner eye to activate emotions of penitence and love is what counts in devotional terms.

What Desiderio brings to the work of sacred image-making is an approach that, rather than simply asserting the need to transcend the visible in contemplation of the divine, seems rather to make the artefact itself into the ultimate vision. By definition this is a 'revealed' image that can be grasped only in the imagination.⁶¹ Like the clouds through and before which they appear, Desiderio's Virgins and saints are corporeally vivid and visible but cannot be taken hold of. Instead, by giving visual expression to the fragile and moving transitions of the very beginning and the very end of human life his marble bodies offer, like poetry, the potential for pathos, movement and transcendence. For the devout viewer, his figures' stylistic *grazia* (praised by the contemporary humanist Cristoforo Landino) seems to visualise the unbidden, and miraculous movement of divine grace. Sacred truth is always transcendent and, as with any revelation that stands at the border with the everyday, it is poised to be withdrawn.⁶² Transcendence is rendered ideal by becoming internal to the image: it is at once a characteristic of the miraculous manifestation depicted and operative in the suppressed character of the object itself. Thus for a viewer both educated and devout, the sculptor could be held to enact a kind of transubstantiation of marble through art, moving from material object to vision.

In this respect the short-lived Desiderio da Settignano, may himself be characterised as an 'in between' figure. Verrocchio, his ostensible pupil in marble carving, adopted his figures' remarkable animation and to some extent his pictorial and poetic evocation of transience, but he also reasserted a far more concrete concern with projection and the drama of bodily presence, effectively rejecting the marginal reticence of his predecessor. This seems to have to do with the impossibility of competing with the superior resources of later Quattrocento oil painting, as Niehaus argues, than with the appreciation of more robustly celebratory and unambiguous effects, effects appropriate to larger public monuments seen from a distance like the *Christ and St. Thomas*, or domestic objects designed to impress their intercessory powers on the inhabitants of palace *camere*. As Nicholas Penny has noted, the special lighting conditions required to appreciate Desiderio's low reliefs were, under normal circumstances, something of a handicap.⁶³

If we compare Verrocchio's high relief and painted terracotta Virgin and Child in the Bargello (fig. 13) with Desiderio's Turin Madonna (Fig. 9,) the later work seems literally to hold nothing back, unapologetically breaking through into the space of the viewer to offer up the fully present, naked body of the Christ child.⁶⁴ Tellingly, that child is closely modelled on the *bambino* of the San Lorenzo tabernacle, a tangible body that Desiderio, with great logic, and greater decorum, had skied.

The persuasive and confident address adopted by Verrocchio was likewise explored by sculptors such as Benedetto da Maiano and, in the next generation, by Michelangelo, the greatest devotee of carved relief who rejected any positive construction of 'pictorial' effects in sculpture.⁶⁵ Even in elaborately reasoned, composite relief works closer in type to the San Lorenzo tabernacle, like Benedetto's S. Fina altarpiece where bas-relief is reserved for biographical scenes while angels are either emergent or fully present, the effects seem prosaic, as though the more subtle art of Desiderio proved inimitable. Yet this was surely not a failure of skill, but of will. In the shifting social climate of later fifteenth-century Florence - a city in which patriotic confidence cohabited with powerful forces of political and religious dissent - the immediate appeal of positive presence might have seemed to offer more than Desiderio's elusive, visionary promise.

¹ Even within the field of Tuscan art of the late Medieval and early Renaissance the field of relief sculpture is a vast one extending across architectural sculpture (including studies of relief on facades, portals, doors and pulpits) to relief works within the oeuvre of specific artists. Any singling out of particular studies is likely to appear arbitrary. The primacy of Ghiberti and Donatello is underlined in John Pope-Hennessy's collected essays (*The Study and Criticism of Italian Sculpture*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press 1980) of which the second chapter is dominated by Ghiberti's two sets of Baptistery doors and directly followed by another topic of perennial appeal 'The Madonna Reliefs of Donatello'.

² Usually translated as 'pictorial relief'. A. Von Hildebrand, *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst*, Strassburg, J.H.Ed. Heitz, 1893, esp. Parts IV and V (for the value of relief in primarily optical terms); A. Schmarsow, *Zur Frage nach dem Malerischen. Seine Grundbegriffe un seine Entwicklung*, Leipzig, 1896; A. Schmarsow, *Plastik, Malerei und Reliefkunst in ihrem gegenseitigen Verhältnis*, Leipzig, 1899; S. Fechheimer, *Donatello und die Reliefkunst: eine kunstwissenschaftliche Studie*, Strasbourg, J.H.E. Heitz, 1904; W. R. Biehl, *Das toskanische Relief in 12., 13., und 14. Jahrhundert*, Borna –Leipzig, Robert Noske, 1910; R. Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1956; A. Niehaus, *Florentine Reliefkunst von Brunelleschi bis Michelangelo*, Munich, Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1998, see also pp. 17-45 for the various meanings given to the term 'rilievo' in Renaissance sources from Cennini to Vasari; U. Pfisterer, *Donatello und die Entdeckung der Stile 1430-1445*, Munich, Himer, 2002, Part IV.

³ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 4th ed. Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent, G. Allen, 1886, vol.I, Chap. XX esp. at section 18 and II, Chap. IV (St. Mark's) sections 36-46; Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980, pp. 49-56. For a recent study of the multiple significance of relief in the writing of Walter Pater especially in relation to the Renaissance *paragone*, see Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture*, Farnham and Burlington VT, Ashgate, 2011, pp. 16-45, 73-79, 99-105.

⁴ Adrian Stokes, *The Quattrocento and the Stones of Rimini*, reprinted by University Park, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, see also the discussion of stone in 'Florence and Verona' in *The Quattrocento* (ed. cit., pp. 71-74) and comments on relief effects in the work of Florentine sculptors (pp. 129-152).

⁵ Stokes, as at note 4, p. 15. For a similar claim applied to carving as an art of sensual touching and polishing, this time by the carver, pp. 112-114.

⁶ The trope is above all indebted to Petrarch (examples are in *Canzoniere*, nos. 51, 135, 171, 197, 265 and Sonnet 60).

⁷ For the relation of touch to truthfulness as articulated in Renaissance *paragone* debates on the relative nobility of painting or sculpture see: L. Mendelsohn, *Paragoni, Benedetto Varchi's Due Lezioni and Cinquecento Art Criticism*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1982; C. Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone: A Critical Interpretation with a New Edition of the Text in the Codex Urbinas*, Leiden, New York, E.J. Brill, 1992; G.A. Johnson, 'Touch, Tactility, and the Reception of Sculpture in Early Modern Italy', in P. Smith and C. Wilde eds., *A Companion to Art Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002, pp. 61-74; and for discussion extending to later philosophical debates; H. Körner, 'Der fünfte Bruder. Zur Tastwahrnehmung plastischer Bildwerke von der Renaissance bis zum frühen 19. Jahrhundert', *Artibus et Historiae*, 21, no. 42, 2000, pp. 165-196; J. Hall, *The World as Sculpture: The Changing Status of Sculpture from the Renaissance to the Present Day*, London, 2000, chap. 4 'Sight versus Touch' and for the epistemological implications of touch in relation to sculpture in Diderot see J. Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot: An Essay on the Relations between Painting and Sculpture in the Modern Age*, transl. C. Miller, Los Angeles CA, Getty Publications, 2008 (originally *La tache aveugle. Essai sur les relations de la peinture et de la sculpture à l'âge moderne*, Paris, 2003) Chapter 2, 'The Artist-Painter and the Philosopher-Sculptor'.

⁸ *Depth of Field: relief sculpture in the age of Donatello*, The Henry Moore Foundation, Leeds, 2007; *Desiderio da Settignano: Sculptor of Renaissance Florence*, exhib. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2007 catalogue edited by M. Bormand, B. Paolozzi Strozzi and N. Penny, eds. also in French and Italian; *The Gates of Paradise. Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance Masterpiece*, High Museum, Atlanta, Georgia, April-July 2007, Art Institute of Chicago and Metropolitan Museum of Art New York), exh. cat. by G. M. Radke and A. Butterfield eds., New Haven and London, 2007.

⁹ A. Lillie, 'Sculpting the Air: Donatello's Narratives of the Environment', in D. Cooper and M. Leino, *Depth of Field: Relief Sculpture in Renaissance Italy*, Oxford et al, Peter Lang, 2006, pp. 97-124 esp. pp. 109 and 113-4.

¹⁰ The distortion produced on low relief by incorrect lighting is tendered as its major disadvantage by Leonardo when comparing sculpture unfavourably to painting, see C.J Farago, *Leonardo da Vinci's Paragone. A critical Interpretation with a New Edition of the Text in the Codex Urbinas*, Leiden, New York, Copenhagen, Cologne, Brill, 1992, pp. 264 and 265.

¹¹ 'For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face: now I know in part, but then I shall know even as also I am known'. (Corinthians I, Chap. 13, v.12, Kings James Bible).

¹² N. Rubinstein, *The Palazzo Vecchio 1298-1532: Government, Architecture and Imagery in the Civic Palace of the Florentine Republic*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 51-52; A. Butterfield, *The Sculptures of Andrea del Verrocchio*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997, pp. 61-62 and E.C. Southard, *The Frescoes in Siena Palazzo Pubblico, 1289-1539*, PhD diss. Garland ed. New York, 1989, pp. 100-1 and p. 460 for other Tuscan judicial images of the doubting of Thomas.

¹³ Franco Sacchetti, *Il libro delle Rime*, ed. F. Brambilla Ageno, Florence, Olschi and Perth, University of Western Australia, 1990, p. 374, 'Toccate il vero com'io, e crederete/ nella somma lustizia in tre persone, / che sempre essalta ognun chef a ragione'. The second verse reads 'La mano al vero e gli occhi al sommo cielo/ la lingua intera, ed ogni vostro effetto / riguardi al ben comune senza difetto'.

¹⁴ For a sensitive reading of what might be called the devotional effects of changing light conditions on the two figures against the niche see Butterfield, *Verrocchio*, pp. 73-5.

¹⁵ Thomas wished to place his whole hand in Christ's side but this is very rarely represented (see A. Murray, *Doubting Thomas in Medieval Exegesis and Art*, Rome, Unione internazionale degli istituti di archeologia, storia e storia dell'Arte in Roma, 2006). My thanks to the Reader of this article for drawing this study to my attention.

¹⁶ John 20, v. 29. QUIA VIDISTI ME THOMA CREDISTI BEATI QUI NON VIDERUNT ET CREDIDERUNT. The inscription on Thomas's hem reads DOMINUS MEUS ET DEUS MEUS ET SALVATOR GENTIUM. For both see Butterfield, *Verrocchio*, pp. 67-8 and p. 209. See Murray, *Doubting Thomas*, pp. 48-59 for Gregory the Great's positive conception of St. Thomas' action as confirming faith, the act's eucharistic interpretation and its relation to Franciscan affective devotion in the later Middle Ages.

¹⁷ The Greek verb *haptain* used in John's gospel, 20 v. 17 ('Mè mou haptou') translated as touch in the vulgate and King James Bible is also translated as to hold on to (for example the New International Bible).

¹⁸ J.-L. Nancy, *Noli me tangere: Essai sur la levée du corps*, Paris, Bayard, 2003, .p. 28. The acknowledgement of this body as departing is, for Nancy, the essential reality of the Resurrection.

¹⁹ For the current dimensions of the monument, its peregrinations, physical history and the widely divergent critical opinions on it to 1962 see I. Cardellini, *Desiderio da Settignano*, Milan, Edizioni di Comunità, 1962, pp. 217-223 (rejecting the record that it once stood above an altar). For expansion and analysis of the documentary evidence on the tabernacle and the reservation of the sacrament at San Lorenzo see A. Butterfield and C. Elam with a contribution by V. Coonin, 'Desiderio da

Settignano's Tabernacle of the Sacrament', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorisches Institutes in Florenz*, 43, 1999, pp. 333-357. See also Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny eds, *Desiderio*, pp. 21-23, 76-77 and esp. pp. 228-235 (catalogue entry by Tommaso Mozzati).

²⁰ Cardellini (*Desiderio*, p. 217) gives the depth of the central field as 20cm but this includes the depth of frame around the empty aperture

²¹ Butterfield and Elam, 'Desiderio', p. 35 for the evidence for the tabernacle as standing directly above the altar; for sacrament altars in Italy see H. Caspary, *Das Sakramentstabernakel in Italien bis zum Konzil von Trient: Gestalt, Ikonographie und Symbolik, kultische Funktion*, Trier (Dissertation) 1964, pp. 68-88 and especially F. Caglioti, 'Altari eucaristici scolpiti del primo Rinascimento: qualche caso maggiore', in J. Stabenow, *Lo spazio e il culto. Relazioni tra edificio ecclesiale e uso liturgico dal XV al XVI secolo*, Marseille and Venice, 2006, pp. 53-89.

²² Nicholas Penny ('Desiderio and Low Relief' in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny eds, *Desiderio*, at p. 76) notes that the whole of the pediment is made to open on to the sky (within its narrow frame, flying putto heads appear against clouds).

²³ See C.W. Bynum, 'Seeing and Seeing Beyond: The Mass of St. Gregory in the Fifteenth Century', in eds. J.F. Hamburger and A.-M. Bouché, *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press, 2006, at pp. 213-214 for the theological insistence by Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa that visions of Christ's Body in the eucharist were not actual encounters, given that the body of Christ was already present, but invisible, in the substance of the sacrament.

²⁴ Probably dating to the late 1430s see D.F. Zervas and B. Preyer, 'Donatello's 'Nunziata del Sasso': the Cavalcanti Chapel at S. Croce and its Patrons', *Burlington Magazine*, 150, 2008, pp. 152-165 at p. 159.

²⁵ The open-armed gesture of Christ is close to the Man of Sorrows on the pinnacle of the Porta della Mandorla of Florence cathedral attributed to Donatello (see A.P. Darr and G. Bonsanti, *Donatello e i suoi: scultura fiorentina del primo rinascimento*, exhib. cat. Detroit, Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Arts and Florence, La Casa Usher, 1986, cat. no. 14, pp. 121-122) or Fra Angelico's central figure from the predella of the San Marco high altarpiece and Fiesole *Coronation*.

²⁶ For the Roman tabernacle's original location see F. Caglioti, 'Donatello (c. 1386–1466) and assistants. Eucharistic tabernacle (1432–1433)', in A. Pinelli ed., *The Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican, Notes*, Modena, Franco Cosimo Panini, 2000, pp. 919-923; for the dating Caglioti, 'Altari eucaristici scolpiti' pp. 53-89. For the correct original location of Luca's tabernacle see Anna Padoa Rizzo, 'Luca della Robbia e Verrocchio. Un nuovo documento e una nuova interpretazione iconografica del Tabernacolo di Peretola', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 38, 1994, pp. 49-68.

²⁷ As argued by H. W. Janson, 'Donatello and the Antique', in *Donatello e il suo tempo*, Atti del convegno internazionale di studi sul Rinascimento, Florence-Padua 1966, Florence, Istituto nazionale di studi sul Rinascimento, 1968, pp. 77-96 at pp. 81 and 83-4, also citing, unspecifically, Ernst Gombrich for this view.

²⁸ Nicholas Penny has connected the development of very low relief carving in general with the collection of cameos by the élite ('Desiderio and Low Relief' in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny eds, *Desiderio*, at p. 64).

³⁰ Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 50.

³¹ For the Man of Sorrows in the Middle Ages see especially Hans Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter: Form und Funktion früher Bildtafeln der Passion*, Berlin, Mann, 1981. For its transformations in the Renaissance see S. Ringbom, *Icon to narrative: the rise of the dramatic close-up in fifteenth-century devotional painting*, Abo, Abo Akademi, 1965, Chaps. II and III and recently A. Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 'Man of Sorrows and Entombment' at pp. 49-82, emphasizing the image's eucharist significance. For sculpted

works in Tuscany see G. Kreytenberg, 'Ein doppelseitiges Triptychon in Marmor von Tino di Camaino aus der Zeit um 1334' in *Medien der Macht: Kunst zur Zeit des Anjous in Italien*, ed. T. Michalsky, Berlin, 2001, pp. 261-74; M. Seidel, 'Das 'gemeißelte Bild' im Trecento: Ein neu entdecktes Meisterwerk von Tino di Camaino', *Pantheon*, XLVII, 1989, pp. 4-12 and most recently Peter Dent, 'Contemplative Relief: Meditation on Christ through Sculptural Form in Early Trecento Italy', in eds Cooper and Leino, *Depth of Field*, pp. 41-69, at p. 46, fn. 17 with fuller bibliography on the Man of Sorrows at p. 52, fn. 23.

³² See O. Pächt, 'The 'Avignon Diptych' and its Eastern Ancestry', in M. Meiss ed., *De Artibus Opuscula XL, Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961, pp. 402-21; A. Nagel and C. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York, 2010, pp. 103-105. For the Malouel image as a private work for the court representing a scene that 'takes place neither in heaven nor on earth' see Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago and London, University Of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 422, (transl. by E. Jephcott of *Bild und Kult – Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich, 1990).

³³ The relief is referred to by Doris Carl, *Benedetto da Maiano: Ein Florentiner Bildhauer an der Schwelle zur Hochrenaissance*, Regensburg, Schnell & Scheiner, 2006, I, at p. 113 and p. 326 note 110, where she notes the similarity to Desiderio's precedent.

³⁴ Maria Grazia Vaccari (in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny, *Desiderio*, p. 177-178) draws attention to the donatellesque limestone relief of the *Blood of the Redeemer* now in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua, rightly contrasting the relief system used there with that of the graduated relief used in the Victoria and Albert Museum *Dead Christ tended by Angels* attributed to Donatello with which Niehaus (*Florentine Reliefkunst*, pp. 118-119) compares the San Lorenzo relief.

³⁵ J. Pope-Hennessy assisted by R. Lightbown, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, 3 vols. London, H.M.S.O., 1964, I, p. 336; V. Krahn, *Bartolomeo Bellano: Studien zur Paduaner Plastik des Quattrocento*, Munich, Scaneg, 1988, pp. 89-97 and *Depth of Field*, exhib. cat. no. 7, p. 75.

³⁶ Butterfield and Elam, p. 349 and note 73 and for see below note 32. The wider success of Desiderio's baby is easily measured through the many surviving Florentine variants of the blessing Christ child grasping the crown of thorns produced for independent display. For the iconography of the Christ child in the context of sacrament miracles see esp. Caspary, *Sakramentstabernakel*, pp. 106-8.

³⁷ F. Albertini, *Memoriale di molte statue et picture sono nella inclyta Cipta di Florentia*, Florence 1510, p. 11 and see also G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori di Cimabue in qua*, ed. G. Milanesi, vol. III, Florence, 1906, at p. 108. For the use of child effigies as devotional tools and substitutes for babies in the period see C. Klapisch-Zuber, 'Holy dolls: Play and Piety in Florence in the Quattrocento', 1983, reprinted in *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, transl. L.G. Cochrane, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985, pp. 310-329, esp. pp. 313-316 for the late fifteenth-century placing of the infant Christ on the altar and Desiderio's example. See also O. Kurz, 'A Group of Florentine Drawings for an Altar', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 18, 1955, pp. 35-53; M. Bormand in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny eds, *Desiderio*, pp. 236-250 and J.-R. Gaborit, 'Desiderio da Settignano, Baccio da Montelupo et le Bambino de San Lorenzo' in *Hommage à Hubert Landai. Art, objets d'art, collections: Études sur l'art du Moyen-Âge et de la Renaissance, sur l'histoire du goût et des collections*, Paris, Blanchard 1987, pp. 97-103; for earlier examples see G. Previtali, 'Il Bambino Gesù come imagine devozionale nella scultura italiana del Trecento', *Paragone*, 21, 1970, pp. 31-40.

³⁸ Butterfield and Elam, 'Desiderio', p. 345 and 349 referring to the testimony of the Florentine ducal secretary Pier Francesco Riccio in 1546 (Doc. 9, p. 356).

³⁹ For the legend of St. Francis in which the wooden Christ Child in the manger came to life in response to his intense prayer, and for cribs as aids to devotion see H. van Os, *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe 1300-1500*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1995, pp. 99-102.

⁴⁰ For the Eucharistic directives of the Councils of Mainz (1450) and Cologne (1451) see Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 292 and see also for ecclesiastical concern about the potential for abuse of sacrament miracles, Bynum, 'Seeing and Seeing Beyond', pp. 214-215. Also P. Barocchi, *Scritti d'arte del Cinquecento*, Turin, R. Ricciardi, ed. 1978-9, p. 1202.

⁴¹ For a general consideration of Desiderio's favouring of young and adolescent subjects see M. Bormand, 'Desiderio: Style aspiring to Grace' in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny, *Desiderio*, at pp. 51-53.

⁴² Luchs in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny, eds. *Desiderio*, cat. no. 9, pp. 164-167 referring to the reformer Giovanni Dominici's injunction to present the young Christ as a model to infants who 'si diletta come simile e dal simile rapito'.

⁴³ Galleria Sabauda, Turin, inv. No. 7. Mozzati in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny eds. *Desiderio*, cat. no. 16, pp. 200-202, including critical reception. For Christ's flesh as the veil, opened at his Crucifixion see St. Paul's letter to the Hebrews 10, 19-20.

⁴⁴ Not all icons of the Virgin Eleousa type show her looking towards the viewer. The fourteenth-century micro-mosaic now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, shows the Virgin returning Christ's gaze. For this work's Renaissance interpretation as a fourth-century icon see Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic*, pp. 97-8 (fig. 10.3).

⁴⁵ Philadelphia Museum of Art, no. W30-1-2. See Mozzati in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny eds., *Desiderio*, cat no. 19, p. 210

⁴⁶ For the touching and presentation of Christ's foot see R. Corrie, 'Coppo di Marcovaldo's Madonna del Bordone and the Meaning of the Bare-Legged Christ Child in Siena and the East', *Gesta*, 35, 1996, pp. 43-65 at p. 51; J. Cannon, 'Kissing the Virgin's Foot: *adoratio* before the Madonna and Child Enacted, Depicted, Imagined', *Studies in Iconography*, 31, 2010, pp. 1-50 esp. pp. 23-28 and F. Quiviger. *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art*, London, Reaktion, 2010, pp. 111-115.

⁴⁷ The work is discussed by Penny in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny, *Desiderio*, cat. no. 12, pp. 180-182 and Alison Luchs in a forthcoming paper given on the occasion of the exhibition.

⁴⁸ For visual and documentary evidence for the elevated installation of tondi in domestic interiors see R. J. M. Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 79-80.

⁴⁹ For coloured versions of Desiderio's Madonna reliefs see G. Gentilini in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny eds, *Desiderio*, at pp. 36-38.

⁵⁰ For the Petrarchan power of the female gaze and the desirability of its modest withdrawal see especially P. Simons, 'Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture', *History Workshop*, 25, Spring 1988, pp. 4-30 at p. 12 and 20-23. For the theory of species in medieval optics see D.C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1976, esp. pp. 98, 100-101 and 113 for species in medieval extramission theories.

⁵¹ Dent, 'Contemplative Relief', esp. pp. 54-55 and 67-69.

⁵² G.A. Johnson, 'Art or Artefact? Madonna and Child reliefs in the Early Renaissance', in eds. S. Currie and P. Motture, *The Sculpted Object 1400-1700*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1997, pp. 1-24 at p. 6 and see also Johnson, 'In the Eye of the Beholder: Donatello's Sculpture in the Life of Renaissance Italy', Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 1994, pp. 27-333.

⁵³ Petrarch, *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, I, 41.

⁵⁴ P. Nuttall, *From Flanders to Florence: The Impact of Netherlandish Painting, 1400-1500*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 20-23

⁵⁵ Nuttall (*Flanders to Florence*, pp. 26-29), recognising similarity of expressive aims as a possible reason for similarities between works by Rogier van der Weyden and those of Fra Angelico, also countenances the possibility that the 'abstraction' of the San Marco frescoes betrays knowledge of a work by Rogier.

⁵⁶ Francois Quiviger ('Relief is in the Mind: Observations on Renaissance Low Relief Sculpture' in Cooper and Leino eds., *Depth of Field*, pp. 169-189 at pp. 75-176) notes the role of 'rilievo' in Ameto's scrutiny of the body of the nymph Lia.

⁵⁷ For recent reference to 'tactile imagination' as aroused in these texts see F. Quiviger, *ibid.* and *The Sensory World*, pp. 47-51. The Meditations are traditionally dated to c. 1300 but a later date c. 1350 has been argued by Sarah McNamer ('Further Evidence for the Date of the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*', *Franciscan Studies*, 50, 1990, pp. 236-261 and S. McNamer, 'The Origins of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*', *Speculum*, 84, 4 (2009), pp. 905-55).

⁵⁸ *Meditationes vitae domini nostri Jesu Christi*, ed. Arras, 1884, p. 60, referred to, among others, by Klapisch-Zuber, 'Holy Dolls' in *Women, Family and Ritual*, p. 323.

⁵⁹ Fascinating in this context is the *Trattato della perfezione della mentale azione* of Ugo Panciera: 'When the mind first begins...to think about Christ, he appears to the mind and the imagination in written form. He next appears as an outline. In the third stage he appears as an outline with shading; in the fourth stage tinted with colours and flesh tones; and in the fifth stage he appears in the flesh and fully rounded', (quoted in C. Frugoni, 'Female Mystics, Vision and Iconography', 1983, reprinted in D. Bornstein and R. Rusconi eds., *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1996, at p. 130.

⁶⁰ L. Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Kalamazoo, Michigan, Medieval Institute Publications, 1996, Book I, Pt. II, chap. 81 'That was whan sche wolde a kissyd hys feet, and he seyde, "Towche me not." The creatur had so gret swem and hevynes in that worde that evyr whan sche herd it in any sermown [...] sche wept, sorwyd, and cryid as sche schulde a deyde for lofe and desir that sche had to ben wyth owr Lord.'

⁶¹ Cf. here the argument of K. Krüger, 'Authenticity and Fiction: on the Pictorial Construction of Inner Presence in Early Modern Italy' (in R.L. Falkenburg, W.S. Melion and T.M. Richardson, eds, *Image and Imagination of the Religious Self in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2007, pp. 37-69, esp. p. 42) for the devotional painting as a 'medium of vision' that oscillates between offering a perception of similarity and one of difference.

⁶² See Landino's 1481 commentary to Dante's *Divine Comedy* (transl. in C.E. Gilbert, *Italian Art 1400-1500: Sources and Documents*, Evanston Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1992, at p. 192).

⁶³ Penny, 'Desiderio and Low Relief' in Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi and Penny eds, *Desiderio*, at p. 82.

⁶⁴ For the Verrocchio see P. Adorno, *Il Verrocchio. Nuove proposte nella civiltà artistica del tempo di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, Florence, Casa Editrice Edam, 1991, pp. 125-6; Butterfield, *Sculptures*, cat. no. 13, pp. 215-216.

⁶⁵ For the sense of 'rilievo' in Michelangelo's letter to Benedetto Varchi that 'relief is to be considered bad the closer it approaches paintings' see Mendelsohn, Paragoni, p. 158.