



## **Telling Time**

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# TELLING TIME: REPRESENTATIONS OF RUINS IN GROTESQUES

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MARIA FABRICIUS HANSEN

Prospects of ruins feature frequently within grotesques or, in general, ornamental frescoes of sixteenth-century Italy.<sup>1</sup> This study addresses how the exploration of transformation, which is fundamental to the representation of ruins in grotesques, is manifested in subject matter, composition, and space; and how all three are aspects of the telling of time. It suggests that the prevalence of ruins in grotesques is a key example of the preoccupation with temporality in the visual culture of the period.

A fascination with temporality seems to be a common denominator in the visual culture of the sixteenth century. The concept of time was dealt with and turned into images in many different ways, and, as shown in particular by Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood in their *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010), a plurality of temporalities often coexisted in one single work of art.<sup>2</sup> Here, we shall concentrate on temporality in the sense of representations of motifs showing signs of the passing of time, of transformation from one state of being to another, and from art and architecture to nature or vice versa.

One example of this is the representation of ruins. Defined as architecture in gradual decay, ruins are a sign of the passing of time and thus correspond to a historical consciousness, a consciousness of times past, and of a distance, measured in time, between the present of the viewer and the remote past in which the building was erected and stood intact. As a man-made structure, a building is produced from natural blocks of stone given form, perfected, and delimited by the stonemason, but as a ruin these blocks are partly reclaimed by nature in an implicitly long span of time, transforming the structure into something undefined or unlimited. Thus, a building in a state of decay is also a figure of temporality through the dynamic interaction it entails between art and nature.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was published in *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 8 (2016): 1–11.

<sup>2</sup> Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*.

It is well known that landscape prospects with ruins were highly appreciated as an autonomous subject for painting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, already in the marginal art of grotesques, so immensely popular in the sixteenth century, prospects with ruins appear, featuring as autonomous landscapes without human figures (fig. 6.1). Such images of temporality, corresponding to a historical consciousness we usually associate with modernity, are, indeed, remarkably prominent within the framework of sixteenth-century grotesques.

Our point of departure is the basic but significant observation that representations of ruins, defined as architecture in gradual decay and thus as a sign of the passing of time, exist neither in ancient nor medieval art. As W.S. Heckscher showed in his important work of the 1930s, fragmented, undefined and thus implicitly infinite structures were not visualized in art.<sup>3</sup> In line with his master Erwin Panofsky's early study of *The Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927), Heckscher observed that the reluctance to represent the limitless or infinite in art corresponded with a general aversion, characteristic of the aesthetics of ancient and medieval art, to the concept of infinity. When iconographic circumstances unavoidably demanded the inclusion of a ruin, the artists chose to represent only the actual falling or tumbling down of the building. Yet the parts of the building were shown as intact entities (fig. 6.2).

Only very gradually, in the fourteenth century, did representations of dilapidated architecture begin to appear, with Maso di Banco's fresco in Santa Croce, Florence, as a singular, monumental example of its time (fig. 6.3). The painting not only features buildings without roofs, but also fragmented walls, and even weeds growing in the cracks, thus emphasizing the old age of the structures. The inclusion of ruins was triggered by specific iconographical circumstances: the setting of the scene at the Roman Forum. Among the remnants from pagan Rome, Pope Sylvester renders a dragon harmless by sealing its mouth, while Emperor Constantine watches at the right. The poisonous breath of the dragon makes the figures in Sylvester's entourage hold their noses. Two men have fainted due to the bad air, but are subsequently resurrected by Sylvester. The representation corresponds with observations in written sources of the time that ruinous areas such as the Roman Forum were associated with a bad, unhealthy atmosphere, in accordance with their

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<sup>3</sup> Heckscher, "Relics of Pagan Antiquity," 204–220.

pagan origin.<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly, in descriptions of architecture, ruins were metaphorically associated with decaying, corrupted bodies.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the frail, monochrome, shell-like walls of earlier images of ruins such as Maso di Banco's, the care and significance bestowed by Andrea Mantegna on his architectural backgrounds may serve to illustrate a further step towards representing the passage of time. In several of his works of the second half of the fifteenth century, Mantegna included built structures represented as composed, repaired, or rebuilt in different phases, thus turning time into a theme through the corporeality and physical, "secular" presence of buildings (fig. 6.4).<sup>6</sup> The Latin expression *relinquere saeculum*, used to designate people leaving the secular world in order to join a monastic order, illuminates the direct link between worldliness and time. The secular world is equal to the temporal world. The gradual development towards secularism in society and art went hand in hand with a development towards involvement in temporality.

In this context it is worth noting that the study of ruins and the representation of the materiality or corporeality of architecture in sections and plans (e.g. those of Giuliano da Sangallo) began to manifest themselves in drawings simultaneously with studies of anatomy and dissection in the last decades of the fifteenth century. The investigation into the structure of architecture coincided with endeavours to move beyond the surface of the skin of the human body, in a profound desire for naturalism. Leonardo da Vinci's investigations in drawing, within both the fields of innovative modes of architectural drawing (prospects, plans) and of dissection or study of the human skeleton, constitute a remarkable stage in this process. This interest in worldliness in terms of corporeal condition is an important aspect of the engagement with temporality.

In the sixteenth century, ruins still appeared in painting when iconographical circumstances called for them. Typically, the birth of Christ was set in an evidently ancient building, with the New Law superseding the Old, sometimes even emphasized by the roof of the humble stable built into the ruins. However, only within the context of decorative, ornamental painting, typically within the parergonal imagery of grotesques, were ruins developed as an autonomous subject for art.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hansen, "Representing the Past," 101.

<sup>5</sup> Hansen, "Representing the Past," 100–101.

<sup>6</sup> Esch, "Mauern bei Mantegna," 293–319.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 15–147.

To understand why, it is necessary to re-evaluate this kind of ornamental painting within the art-historical hierarchy. Judging from the lack of interest in this field in conventional art-historical surveys, grotesques may also seem to be marginal in the sense of artistic, creative, and imaginative importance. Within the discipline of art history, the common, albeit unintended, projection of our modern concept of art onto the past has often resulted in an emphasis on great masters and on autonomous works of art that fit the white cubes of the modern institution of the museum. As a field between decorative art and art in the modern concept of the word, grotesques have been rather overlooked. In reproductions of *in situ* frescoes, art-historical books (with few exceptions) still tend to isolate the central, figurative, monumental compositions, and exclude the marginal framework and overall spatial context surrounding them. However, from around 1500 onwards, villas and palaces abounded with such frescoes.<sup>8</sup> The sheer quantity of grotesques produced indicates the tremendous popularity of this art form within the visual culture of the time. If we consult sixteenth-century writings on art theory, it becomes obvious that the art of grotesques was recognized as highly demanding, with claims by Giorgio Vasari and others that only the most imaginative artists were capable of producing good grotesques.<sup>9</sup>

Grotesques were understood as a kind of artistic self-representation, based on the inventive strength of the ornament with its eclectic monstrosity, the movement and transformation that it embodied, and, fundamentally, the handling of the line, the handwriting, or *style* of the artist.<sup>10</sup> Grotesques were, indeed, a field rich in artistic invention where innovations not yet possible or acceptable in monumental art were pursued and where such innovations could be developed more radically and with greater consequence than elsewhere due to their marginal position.

If we look at the compositions of grotesques, the decorative schemes applied clearly vary from artist to artist and through the century. But in general, they consist of sequences of figurative motifs, often including architectural

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<sup>8</sup> For a general overview, see Dacos, *La Découverte*; Chastel, *La Grottesque*; Morel, *Les grotesques*; Zamperini, *Le grottesche*; Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture*.

<sup>9</sup> Barocchi, *Scritti d'arte del Cinquecento*, 1:584, 3:2621–2698; in this work the opinions on grotesques by Anton Francesco Doni, Sebastiano Serlio, Giorgio Vasari, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, and others are noted.

<sup>10</sup> Willibald Sauerländer, "From Stilus to Style," 253–270; Summers, "Contrapposto," 336–361.



elements, perhaps *aediculae*, combined with humans, animals, and plants in hybrid constellations. The combination of such disparate figures, in itself a form of monstrosity, went along with a playfulness when it came to natural laws (fig. 6.5). Often, figures of different scale were juxtaposed — such as fruit and human figures — and supplemented with a playful approach to gravity, with heavy loads hanging, seemingly weightless, in delicate ribbons and garlands. A delight in visual paradoxes is a common denominator.<sup>11</sup> Another manifestation of this was the combination of perfectly naturalistic portraits of specific flowers or animals with hybrid, monstrous inventions created in the imagination of the artist (fig. 6.6).

Moreover, the compositions appear to be dynamic, in that they turn art into nature or nature into art. Grotesques consist of sequences of figures evolving or developing into something else, with both hybridity and metamorphosis as essential qualities. This dynamic representation of a sequential process or development is in itself a representation of temporality in terms of its absorption with transformation and change. Therefore, what is at stake in representations of ruins seems to be at stake on a more general level in grotesques intended as a compositional device: the visualization of passages between a form and the formless, or between culture and nature, with change and movement as key concepts. In this sense, the frequent prospects with ruins are in perfect alignment with the conditions of image-making governing grotesques in general.

The ruin, understood as an open, dynamic structure in an ambivalent state between nature and art, corresponds with Mikhail Bakhtin's milestone work within analyses of grotesque, first published in 1965. In his eloquent characterization, the grotesque is constituted by an interaction between the body and its surroundings, by undefined limits and by the emphasis on the openings of the body as zones of passage between interior and exterior, with ambivalence as a general theme and with a special engagement with masks.<sup>12</sup> As the opposite of the grotesque, and implicitly of the ruin, Bakhtin defined the *classic* images of the body as clearly delimited and thus timeless.<sup>13</sup> The transformational, temporal qualities of the imagery of ruins and the imagery of grotesques are two aspects of the same representational endeavour. In the sixteenth century, innovative pictorial strategies were developed to engage

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<sup>11</sup> Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica*.

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 24–27.

<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 25.

with the ambivalence that Bakhtin equates with the grotesque. These strategies were related to the representation of temporal conditions such as weather and time of day, sunsets and atmosphere in general.<sup>14</sup> As keenly observed by Giorgio Vasari, *sfumato* was a key quality of the *terza maniera* of his art-historical development, also emphasized in his biographies of, for example, Leonardo, Giorgione, and Andrea del Sarto.<sup>15</sup> Dependent on the technological innovation of oil painting, *sfumato* was a means of representing temporality in terms of movement, atmosphere, temper, and ambivalence, and a way of making a figure appear to be alive and capable of moving, by blurring it, by turning it into something undefined.<sup>16</sup> As a pictorial strategy, the technical innovation of *sfumato* is similar to the ruin, understood as a structure transformed into something undefined by time (fig. 6.7).

We have been looking at the representation of time in terms of dynamic interaction in subject matter, such as ruinous architecture in a state of transition between art and nature. Moreover, we have observed how temporality was inherent in the compositional dynamics of grotesques, where processes, developments, hybridity and metamorphosis became a theme. Let us finally look at the theme of dynamic interaction in terms of space. For there was a noticeable preference for grotesques in certain room types in the palaces and villas of the time (fig. 6.8). This imagery was favoured on the walls of galleries, loggias, staircases, and corridors — in general, room types that received considerable attention in the architecture of the period.<sup>17</sup> What these spaces have in common is their function as passages between different rooms and levels, as well as between interior and exterior. The loggias, favoured in the façades towards the courtyards or gardens, represent intermediary stages, opening with arcades to the nature (i.e., the garden) outside and delimiting or framing the man-made architectural environment inside. Developed as a new room type in this period, the gallery corresponded with a general predilection for long, axial courses, bringing about dramatic effects in perspective, both in time and space (fig. 6.9). Such elongated axes, bringing infinity into play as an aesthetic principle, were adopted both in the interiors of the palaces and

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<sup>14</sup> Wamberg, *Landscape as World Picture*, 2:173–203.

<sup>15</sup> Vasari, *Lives of the Painters*, 1:620–621, 630, 640, 641, 830, 855; Nagel, “Leonardo and *sfumato*,” 7–20.

<sup>16</sup> See Daniele Barbaro in Barocchi, *Scritti d’arte del Cinquecento*, 3:2636.

<sup>17</sup> Hager, “Zur Raumstruktur,” 112–140.

in the layout of exterior spaces such as gardens, as well as in urban planning.<sup>18</sup> These room types emphasize the movement or passage of people through them and physically correspond to the grotesques as an imagery of movement and transformation, as figurations of a zone of hybridity or ambivalence between nature and art.

The often-quoted passage by Michel de Montaigne (who, incidentally, also described his own literary work as grotesques) from his *Essais* (1580) may serve as an accompaniment to the grotesques and the ruins in their spatial surroundings of architectural passages, as testimony to this consciousness of and absorption with instability and transformation (“On Repenting,” 3:3, 2, 23):

Our world is nothing but a perpetual swing. Everything within is in endless swinging [...] I cannot pin my subject down. He goes along, drunk by nature, blurred and wavering. [...] I do not paint his being, I am painting his passage — a passage not from one age to another or, as the people say, every seven years, but from day to day, minute to minute. My story must be suited to the hour. In a little while not only my fortune but my intent may change.<sup>19</sup>

The absorption with the flux of the world, so beautifully phrased by Montaigne in the observation “I do not paint his being, I am painting his passage,” corresponds to the fascination with hybridity, movement and change in the thinking on art and nature in the period.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the cultivation of ambiguity and transformation, found in both the imagery of ruins and grotesques, points to questions of the power and problems of perception as an underlying condition determining the visual culture of the period. Although fundamental to pictorial art of all times, the preoccupation with investigating and questioning illusionism is arguably particularly strong in the sixteenth century, as a historical epoch constituting the border between an ancient and medieval concept of nature on the one hand, and the modern one on the other.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hager, “Zur Raumstruktur,” 112–140.

<sup>19</sup> Montaigne, *Selected Essays*, 186.

<sup>20</sup> Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, 100–112; Hauser, *Der Manierismus*, 44–45; Wamberg, *Landscape*, 2:345–363; Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*; Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, “Demons, Natural Magic,” 223–245.

One of the undoubtedly countless historical factors contributing to the new outlook in the understanding and representation of time in the period would be the growing urban culture, involving changes in how nature and technology were viewed. The invention of the printing press is one major example in which seriality and mechanical repetition developed along with a new systematicism, a consciousness of historical difference, and a focus on style. The development of both the city and the villa went hand in hand with the development of a new objectifying distance from nature. The absorption with transformation and hybridity may point back to older notions of nature as constantly pregnant with images, as expressed in ancient and medieval sources on nature as full of potential figurations.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as an imagery of temporality the ruins challenged the limits of visual representation in the medieval and early Renaissance periods. In their compositional, spatial context within grotesques they imply a consciousness of historical distance and reveal a remarkable objectivity in the representation of signs of temporality corresponding to a new technological, scientific approach to the world. In their cultivation of paradoxes and of figurative genesis they constitute a pronounced and highly creative response to the ongoing, living tradition of pictorial representation rooted in the ancient and medieval period.

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<sup>22</sup> Janson, *The 'Image Made by Chance'*, 103–143.

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Figure 6.1. Attributed to Federico Zuccari, Antonio Tempesta and Raffaellino da Reggio, Detail of the frescoes with ruins, Cardinal Gambara's casino at the Villa Lante (attributed to Vignola), Bagnaia, c. 1578. (Photo: Pernille Klemp. Courtesy of Polo museale del Lazio — Bagnaia. Villa Lante).



Figure 6.2. The Fall of Babel, from the Bamberger Apocalypse, Msc. Bibl. 140, fol. 45r, Staatsbibliothek Bamberg, c. 1000. (Photo: Gerald Raab).





Figure 6.3. Maso di Banco, *St. Sylvester and the Dragon*, Bardi di Vernio Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence, c. 1340. (Photo: © 2019, Scala, Florence/ Fondo Edifici di Culto — Ministero dell'Interno).



Figure 6.4. Andrea Mantegna, *St. Sebastian*, detail of the background architecture, Louvre, Paris, c. 1480s. (Photo: © RMN-Grand Palais, Musée du Louvre).



Figure 6.5. Cesare Baglione, Juggler's Hall, Castello di Torrechiara 1586–1592. (Photo: Pernille Klemp. Courtesy of Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo — Polo Museale dell'Emilia-Romagna).



Figure 6.6. Marco da Faenza (workshop of Giorgio Vasari), Detail of frescoes with grotesques and ruins, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, 1555–1565. (Photo: Pernille Klemp. Courtesy of Musei Civici di Firenze).



Figure 6.7. Detail of frescoes with grotesques and ruins against a sunset, Castello di Torrechiara, 1574–1588. (Photo: Pernille Klemp. Courtesy of Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo — Polo Museale dell'Emilia-Romagna).



Figure 6.8. Antonio Tempesta's workshop, Grotesques surrounding Jacopo da Barozzi da Vignola's spiral staircase, Scala Regia, Villa Farnese, Caprarola, 1580–1583. (Photo: Pernille Klemp. Courtesy of Polo museale del Lazio — Caprarola, Palazzo Farnese).



Figure 6.9. Antonio Tempesta, Alessandro Allori and others, Ceiling with grotesques, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1579–1581. (Photo: Pernille Klemp. Courtesy of Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo).