In his treatise *De pictura* of 1435, Leon Battista Alberti not only describes the fundamentals and procedures of painting, but also discusses what a picture is. In the first of his three books, Alberti offers what is perhaps the most widely known definition of the early modern concept of a picture: «First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the *historia* is seen.»

Alberti's rather casual description is generally regarded as the origin of the metaphorical comparison of the window and picture which has significantly shaped modern thinking about images. As the window comparison influenced the discourse about images over time, the postulated relationship between a window and picture increasingly became a matter of fact. Yet what are the characteristics that make a window appear comparable to a picture? And when Alberti spoke of an open window, did he «picture» the same object we imagine when we read his treatise today?

Although Alberti’s comparison might seem straightforward at first glance, it actually poses more questions than it answers. His words seem to suggest a new potential of a picture that opens a transparent view of a depicted scene so that the viewer forgets the medium itself and its conditions. However, this interpretation of Alberti’s brief description is based on a concept of the window which was certainly not obvious in the quattrocento. Gérard Wajcman and Anne Friedberg, for example, have pointed out that the forms and types of windows, with which Alberti was familiar in his practical and theoretical study of architecture, were neither transparent nor rectangular as described in his treatise *De pictura*.

In the quattrocento, windows were not made of large, transparent glass panes, nor were they generally constructed in a rectangular form. In addition to these historical details, comparing a picture to a window results in a number of other problems. If a picture were regarded as an open window, we would have to clarify its relationship to architecture, or more specifically, to a wall on which it hangs or is standing against. What status of reality can the depicted scenes in a picture attain if viewing it is comparable to looking out of a window?

Earlier in his treatise, Alberti compares the surface of a picture with the cross-section of a visual pyramid, and then likens this cross-section with a transparent glass surface. Therefore, it a transparent view of a depicted scene so that the viewer forgets the medium itself and its conditions. However, this interpretation of Alberti’s window-picture comparison should be distinguished from technical devices such as the velo or the perspective window; see James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective*, Ithaca 1994, 46–52.


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1 Alberti, *De pictura* I, 19; Cecil Grayson (ed.), *Leon Battista Alberti. On Painting and Sculpture. The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua Edited with Translations, Introduction and Notes*, London 1972, 55; the translation has been slightly modified.


would seem the window metaphor emphasizes the almost perfect transparency of a picture. However, Alberti seems to have overlooked an important dimension of meaning behind the window–picture relationship, because a window is inconceivable without an architectural context, in particular, without an enclosing wall. Therefore, the intentional, carefully considered use of the window–picture concept does not necessarily imply that the picture is an ideal medium of transparent representation. Rather, it equally refers to the wall which is assumed by the existence of the window. The picture could then be viewed as a two-dimensional, opaque object. From the start, Alberti’s window–picture comparison is characterized by potential ambiguity which is not considered in the treatise De pictura itself.

The picture as an open window is a concept Alberti tied to the new possibilities of representation using his prescribed central perspective. If we look at the paintings of the quattrocento, it appears that the central perspective was mainly used for pictures with a divine, religious subject. Many of these pictures depict saints or scenes of salvific history whose appearance and reality status were made to be clearly distinguishable from the viewer’s here and now. Yet how could Alberti’s window–picture be used to represent divine or otherworldly subjects? How could one differentiate the categorically different levels of reality and various modes of seeing by means of Alberti’s pictorial concept?

To find answers to these questions, it is imperative to assess the viewer’s distance from that which is portrayed. Alberti’s concept of the window–picture assumes a certain distance which the recipient is not supposed to consciously realize. In order to create the illusion of looking through a window, the picture has to ensure that it won’t be touched by the viewer. Although the viewer is not permitted to cross the distance to the picture and the image therein, it is a distance that is perfectly quantifiable. For Alberti, the picture presents the scene as being potentially reachable, yet has to protect itself from the realization of this virtual accessibility. This certainly does not imply that every picture is an illusionistic representation which gives the impression that the pictorial space and real space merge. The window–picture comparison, however, suggests that the structure of the space in front of the picture and the space portrayed by the picture are based on the same principles. Alberti also postulated that »both the viewers and the objects in the painting will seem to be on the same plane«, which he stressed as one of the main effects of the central-perspective construction. In line with the geometrically constructed perspective as the basic arrangement of representation, Alberti’s picture contains no incommensurability, no spaces or zones that elude a comprehensive measurability. Within this pictorial concept, the viewer’s distance from the picture is precisely determined by the perspective construction, the
result being that the portrayed scenes appear to be reachable, graspable or really happening.

But what if it is inappropriate to create this accessibility and reachability to the portrayed scene? Is Alberti’s pictorial concept applicable to other subjects that are (as a matter of principle) inaccessible to the viewer and are not based on the usual logic of space and time? In other words, how can insurmountable distances be represented which have no corresponding measurable length? Although Alberti praises painting for being able to «make the absent present» and allowing even to represent «the dead to the living many centuries later»,9 surmounting one’s bonds to the here and now says nothing about how one can reflect on the distinction between the worldly and otherworldly in a picture. While Alberti emphasizes the effect of »presence« in images, there are a large number of Christian subjects whose depictions are clearly inaccessible. In a religious context, an image is characterized – using Walter Benjamin’s words – by a »unique appearance of distance regardless of how close it may be.«10 Alberti’s concept strengthens the accessibility to the picture as it lets the viewer forget its medias conditions, the connection to the material, the surface, to a wall or table. His window–picture comparison not only stands at odds with the concept of the cultic image, but also competes with the established notions of the window. In addition to the architectural concept of a window, the function of which, according to Alberti’s De re aedificatoria, is to provide light and aid,11 the window was a Christian allegorical figura that could symbolize the threshold to the absolute Other, to God. Mary for the most part, but also Christ, were often described as fenestra coeli in hymns and allegorical writings based on biblical texts, such as the Song of Songs.12 Therefore, Alberti’s window-picture could be regarded as a basic challenge to cases in which the picture was meant to represent the absolute Other and the window was mainly considered an allegorical figure.

Giovanni Bellini: The mise en abyme of the window–picture comparison

Giovanni Bellini’s altarpiece he made for the church of San Francesco in Pesaro (fig. 1)13 appears to have several aspects in common with Alberti’s considerations. The altar is dominated by a large, rectangular central panel painting, a quadrangulum, using Alberti’s term, accompanied by a predella, small panels on the pilasters and, probably, a mounted picture on top.14 Classical architectural forms do not only play a prominent role in the structure of the altarpiece, but also in the central painting itself. The ground with its rich, varied pattern allows the viewer to fathom the central perspective and provides the pictorial space a measurable depth. The lavish throne, also characterized by classical architecture, dominates the picture. The artist also in-
cluded a view of a fortress in the background. Despite how well-constructed the pictorial space is and how realistically portrayed the figures are, the viewer cannot help noticing certain pictorial elements, e.g., the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove and the heads of the cherubim in the clouds, which weaken the reality status of the picture. The central motif of the picture, Mary’s coronation and the company of saints with whom she has formed a sacra conversazione, is clearly a reference to a heavenly occurrence. The question the viewer is confronted with is, in what way was Bellini able to depict this event with pictorial techniques as described in Alberti’s treatise? Art historians who have studied Bellini’s Pesaro Altarpiece are familiar with the problems that arise from this form of representation. Norbert Huse, for instance, noted that Bellini »moved the coronation from heaven to earth«. Only the fact that the picture’s architecture is »unlike any real building« prevents »profanation«.

A key to understanding the picture lies in the conspicuous design of the throne. Despite all the slight deviations in detail, the back of the throne unmistakably mirrors the structure of the altarpiece, so that any interpretation of the throne corresponds to that of the entire pala. However, the fact that just one element of the picture resembles the picture in its entirety creates a problem for the receptive process. The frame-like design of the back of the throne with the fortress in its center is not merely a reflexive reference to the picture itself, but also calls into question what seems to be a clear hierarchical arrangement consisting of a dominant altarpiece architecture, panel paintings and individual levels within the middle panel. In its similarity to the frame of the altar painting, the back of the throne functions like a mise en abyme within the picture. A characteristic feature of the entire painting, the frame, appears as a part of the represented scene. Thus, the hierarchy between the entire representation and represented parts, which should be established by means of the frame, is subverted. The effect of the mise en abyme, therefore, inevitably disrupts the stringency and economy of the representation.

Bellini’s inclusion of the back of the throne does not only establish a mise en abyme. The structural analogy between the back of the throne and the altarpiece gives us reason to conclude that the reality status of the fortress framed by the throne is comparable to the reality status of the painting on the whole. Yet, in what way is the viewer shown the fortress? Scholars have suggested several possible ways to interpret its appearance. The idea that it could be a reflection in a mirror was rejected because Christ and Mary are not reflected in it. Most of the interpretations suggest that the back of the throne is an opening in a stone frame. Of course, many have considered the possibility that there is a picture in the middle of the throne. Even at closer inspection, there seems to be no conclusive answer to this question. The mountains surrounding the fortress are also hinted at outside the frame which would suggest there is, in fact, an alternative definition was recently proposed by Paisley Livingston, Nested Art, in: The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 61/3, 2003, 233–245, esp. 240.

1. Giovanni Bellini, *Coronation of the Virgin* (Pala di Pesaro), oil and tempera on wood, c. 1475, 262 × 240 cm (central panel). Pesaro, Museo Civico
a window-like opening in the back of the throne. It is strange, however, that the fortress is very calculated, yes, almost picture-perfectly situated within the frame and that the unusual, thin-streaked clouds in the sky do not continue outside it. If we conclude from these observations that we can suddenly perceive as a picture what previously seemed to be a window, the lack of depth of the innermost frame strengthens this impression. Such a combination of furniture and picture may remind the viewer of spalliera paintings which were designed as integral parts of a lettuccio or cassone. In this case, however, we notice that the backrest is lacking the supporting wall against which it usually leans. Where we might expect a wall, we actually see the continuing silhouette of the mountains. In the end, the viewer has to accept the fact that there is no irrefutable interpretation regarding the appearance of the fortress – be it a window or picture. Bellini obviously wanted to achieve this ambiguous visual effect. Eugenio Battisti and Deborah Howard were right to emphasize that Bellini consciously utilized the ambiguity of the window and picture to produce a feeling of uncertainty in the viewer. And even as long ago as 1899, Roger Fry pointed out that the effect Bellini produced is reminiscent of perplexing mirror effects that astonish the beholder: »For here the landscape has by virtue of the carved frame which encloses it, something of the unfamiliarity and impressiveness of a landscape seen unexpectedly in a mirror.«

But what could be the purpose of such confusion in a picture which otherwise appears so perfectly constructed and well arranged? The resulting oscillation between these poles when viewing the picture not only affects the interpretation of the fortress, which various art historians have identified (though not completely convincingly) as the Gradara Fortress near Pesaro. The viewers are confronted with the question of whether they are looking at a real fortress through an opening or merely looking at a picture of one. More importantly, the beholder questions the reality status of the entire picture because of the throne’s function as the mise en abyme of the picture. If the architectural framing and the central perspective of the pictorial space initially suggest that the altar painting is completely comparable to a window and the depicted scenery adheres to the spatial logic with which we are familiar, then the analogy between the back of the throne and the entire altarpiece would call this impression into question. The large panel painting would then no longer appear only as an open window in Alberti’s sense. Because of the uncertain status of the depicted fortress, our view of the entire altar painting alternates between a transparent window and opaque painted surface. Through his unique design of the throne, Bellini combines two aesthetic strategies – the mise en abyme with its reflexive reference to the entire painting and the oscillation between the window view and picture. In this way, the viewer discovers that the suggested window view is actually the result of a two-dimensional opaque picture, while at the same time, recognizes that the depiction does not comply with the familiar logic of the here and now.

The other panels of the altarpiece also demonstrate similar forms of oscillation between optical illusions and two-dimensional painting. Especially the eight smaller pictures on the pilasters have an illusory effect in that they are all subjected to the same lighting and perspective. Some of the saints’ attributes even go beyond the borders of the niches, creating what appears to be a continu-

20 See Eugenio Battisti, Ricostruendo la complessità, in: Valazzi (as note 14), 6–14, esp. 8; Howard (as note 16), 150; and Blum (as note 11), 114–117. Blum shows that the design of the frame gives further evidence of the ambiguity between picture and window. The large rectangular frame not only corresponds to Alberti’s concept of the picture, but also shows striking parallels to window frames of the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino (giardino pensile) and of the Palazzo Sforza (Palazzo Prefettizio) in Pesaro.
um between the pictorial space and the space of the viewer (fig. 2). The fact that the portrayed figures significantly differ in size compared to those in the main panel, and that the pictures are applied to two pilasters reveal that they are two-dimensional paintings. Both in the main panel and the altarpiece’s entire arrangement, Bellini worked hard to create effects of ‘presence’ while at the same time, attempted to counteract the effect of forced pictorial transparency in key positions in the picture. What is especially significant, however, is that he does not permanently destroy the illusory effect with any single act of disillusionment. The parts of the picture which could appear two-dimensional and opaque, as the example of the back of the throne demonstrates, can also be related to the logic of the pictorial illusion.

The closer analysis of the Pala di Pesaro shows that Bellini’s work is not completely consistent with Alberti’s window-picture concept. Nonetheless, the placement of the fortress in the back of the throne inevitably calls to mind Alberti’s description of the picture as an open window. It is practically impossible to verify whether Giovanni Bellini was familiar with Alberti’s De pictura. Yet it is probable Bellini had heard about Alberti’s treatise, as there is evidence that his father Jacopo and brother-in-law Andrea Mantegna were familiar with Alberti’s ideas, and, perhaps, were even acquainted with him personally.

Jacopo Bellini’s two sketchbooks, located in Paris and London today, contain drawings with several characteristics that have led scholars to believe they may have been influenced by Alberti’s treatise. Despite minor deviations in detail, one can recognize Alberti’s major concepts in the almost demonstrative (though not always accurate) perspective construction of the pictorial space, in the conspicuous variation of the figures’

22 The ongoing discussion on the identification of the fortress is summarized by Wilson (as note 13), 161–209; Patrizia Castelli, ‘Imago potestatis’. Potere civile e religioso nella Pala Pesarese del Giambellino, in: Valazzi (as note 14), 13–28, esp. 18; and Anchise Tempestini, Giovanni Bellini, Milan 2002, 63.
Alberti himself had maintained close contacts with the Este court around 1440. Furthermore, there is scattered evidence indicating the Ferrarese were familiar with his painting treatise.

It is difficult to determine how well Jacopo Bellini remembered Alberti’s concept of the picture as an open window and to what extent he made it a theme of his own reflections. The reference to this concept in Filarete’s architectural treatise (book XXIII) is evidence, however, that Alberti’s window–picture comparison was taken up by some of his contemporaries. Perhaps the window–picture analogy had already become widely established. Yet if this were truly the case, it would not have been necessary to study Alberti’s treatise in order to become acquainted with this comparison.

The claim that Jacopo Bellini was somehow familiar with considerations regarding the window-picture is supported by several significant features in his sketchbooks, in particular his marked interest in depicting views through and out of openings and his examination of the frame-picture relationship. He worked on pictorial elements which had to be of crucial importance if he was indeed trying to bring the concepts of the picture and window closer together or separate them from one another. For instance, in a drawing depicting the Lamentation of Christ (fig. 3), he experiments with the receptive-aesthetic effect of a classically framed, rectangular panel. Jacopo Bellini also experimented with window-like effects in several drawings, emphasizing background occurrences by framing them with an arched structure in the foreground.

Facial expressions, gestures and postures, and in experiments with various forms of pictorial narration. In 1441, Jacopo Bellini resided in Ferrara to participate in an artists’ competition with Pisanello. There, Giovanni Bellini’s father could have heard about Alberti’s painting treatise as well as Alberti’s ideas on perspective.

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3. Jacopo Bellini, Lamentation of Christ, silverpoint, brown ink, c. 1455, 42.5 x 28.8 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre

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25 There are traces of a reception of De pictura in De politia litterarum by the Ferrarese humanist Angelo Decembrino, see Michael Baxandall, A Dialogue on...


28 Eisler (as note 23), 403 and 414; Degenhart/Schmitt (as note 27), 313–316.

29 See Joost-Gaugier (as note 23), 299.
Formerly: Padua, Chiesa degli Eremitani, Ovetari Chapel
ple, in his fresco in the Mantuan Ovetari Chapel depicting St. Jacob on his way to his execution (fig. 5), Mantegna painted several depth contours on the magnificent triumphal arch that are so perfectly vertical they give no impression of pictorial depth. As these contours run parallel to the outside borders of the picture, they actually emphasize its two-dimensionality.  

If Mantegna had known about Alberti’s treatise this early in his artistic career, this would mean he had followed Alberti’s recommendations concerning the use of central perspective in order to create an effect that contradicted Alberti’s intention.

Although there are no remaining records of the reception of Alberti’s painting treatise in Venice, it is likely that Giovanni Bellini had become acquainted with its basic ideas through his father Jacopo, or at the latest, through Andrea Mantegna. Moreover, a discussion of the window–picture comparison did not necessarily depend on the reception of Alberti’s treatise. Either Jacopo Bellini or Mantegna could have sparked a critical debate about the concept of the image that was implied by the analogy between the picture and window. In particular, Jacopo Bellini’s sketches indicate that his reflections on the window–picture comparison led him in a new direction continued by his son Giovanni Bellini in the Pesaro Altarpiece. In the same way Jacopo Bellini used the window–picture parallel to create ambiguity with the arch motif in his sketch of the sermon of John the Baptist, Giovanni Bellini consciously created an ambiguous vacillation between window opening and picture in the middle panel of the Pesaro Altarpiece. In both cases, the model of representation that Alberti suggested to help clarify the relationship between the viewer and the picture is used to set a practically inconclusive process of reception in motion. At the same time, this strategy calls into question the measurable, depicted distance separating the viewer from the painted image.

Giovanni Bellini must have believed this receptive-aesthetic subversion of the window–picture comparison was essential for the subject of his picture. Although the setting of Mary’s coronation may seem earth-bound and worldly, Bellini must have felt it necessary to portray the fundamentally different reality status. This divine event, which is presented from what seems to be the objective perspective of a knowledgeable observer, turns out at closer inspection to be far from perfectly understandable. The central image of the fortress – at one moment, a view through a window, at the next, a picture within a picture – is deprived of an unambiguous visibility. The result is a moment of confusion, which the operation of the *mise en abyme* transfers to the entire picture. What appears completely transparent at first is blurred by this indistinguishability. The oscillation between the picture and window opening caused by the fortress inevitably influences the interpretation of the entire middle panel because of the structural parallels between the back of the throne and the altarpiece construction. Obviously, what the viewer sees is not presented in the same way one would look out of a window. This creates a break in logic between the coronation of Mary and the viewer’s here and now.

In this sense, the ambivalent appearance of the back of the throne – oscillating between a picture and a window – points to a common allegory of Mary. As the verse in the gospel of St. Luke »Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum« 32 was associated with the Virgin and with God’s in-

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32 Lk 10, 38.
that resembles Jacopo Bellini’s drawing of the sermon of John the Baptist. The architectural arrangements depicted within Bellini’s large Venetian altarpiece paintings, including the Pala di San Zaccaria completed about the same time, almost exactly correspond to the forms of the sculptural frame, suggesting a practically uninterrupted continuum between the painting, the frame and the viewer’s space. Cima da Conegliano built on a large range of architectural motifs which Giovanni Bellini had previously developed in several variations, yet he changed the foreground–background relationship in an important way. Although one can only see a small portion of the landscape in the background – blocked by the three figures in the foreground –, the architectural opening with its broad view of the sky takes on an unusual degree of significance. At first glance, it seems Jesus, Thomas and St. Magnus are standing in a loggia with a view to the outside. However, there are several details here that lead the viewer to doubt that the structure is a normal loggia. Barely visible at the margins, there are narrow strips of marble next to the pillars topped by the Corinthian capitals, indicating a continuing wall that encloses the room in the foreground. Therefore, this is apparently not a traditional arcade with several openings to the outside – a fact that makes the background view behind the three figures somewhat doubtful. On closer examination, one can notice that the flagstone floor in the foreground, though extremely flush, is not closed off at the

Cima da Conegliano: »Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed!«

Giovanni Bellini’s Pesaro Altarpiece was not the only work of quattrocento Venetian art to use interchangeable window–picture backgrounds. Two paintings by Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano and Bartolomeo Montagna demonstrate that certain problematic subjects required reflection on the status of the image. In his depiction of Doubting Thomas (fig. 6), completed around 1505 for the chapel of the Venetian Scuola dei Muratori, Cima da Conegliano adopted the basic structure of Giovanni Bellini’s classical sacre conversazioni in order to modify it in a way

33 See Wilson (as note 13), 192–200; and Bätschmann (as note 13), 156. Evidence for the wide diffusion of the comparison between Mary and the impregnable fortress is given by Anselm Salzer, Die Sinnbilder und Beiworte Mariens in der deutschen Literatur und lateinischen Hymnenposie des Mittelalters, Darmstadt 1967, 12 and 284–291. Salzer not only cites hymns but also refers to theological literature. See, for example, the chapter De assumptione Sanctae Mariae in Honorius Augustodunensis, Speculwm ecclesiae, Paris 1844–65, vol. 172, col. 991–994.
35 See, e.g., Peter Humfrey, The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice, New Haven 1993, 146–147; and Shearman (as note 6), 97–98.
36 See Humfrey (as note 35). In his recent article on Giorgione’s Pala di Castelfranco, Salvatore Settis presented an impressive overview of the wealth of variation in architectural inventions in the Venetian sacre conversazioni around 1500; see Salvatore Settis, Giorgione in Sicilia. Sulla data e la composizione della Pala di Castelfranco, in: Giovanna Nepi Scirè and Sandra Rossi (eds.), Giorgione. «Le maraviglie dell’arte», Venice 2003, 33–65.
The intrados of the arch seems conspicuously narrow. Furthermore, the strong light and shadows in the foreground do not appear to correspond to the landscape lighting. If we disregard the fact that two arches extend over the pilasters toward us, then the architecture is reminiscent of the stone or wooden frames of the large Venetian pale. This analogy also supports the theory that the area behind the arch can be regarded as a picture. Like Bellini's Pesaro Altarpiece, Cima da Conegliano’s depiction of doubting Thomas confronts the viewer with the dilemma of deciding whether the pictorial background is a view through an architectural opening or a picture within a picture.

We can guess how well Cima da Conegliano considered this solution if we take a look at the London picture which depicts the same subject and was most likely completed shortly beforehand (fig. 7). For the first version, he drafted a clearly constructed space, in which the scene takes place according to the biblical story. In contrast to his later Venetian version, his first draft features all eleven apostles in what is clearly a secluded, closed room – despite the conspicuous window openings. In the second version of this subject, Cima da Conegliano moves away from the biblical source with which he was well acquainted. Not only are ten apostles missing, but the addition of St. Magnus breaks the narrative stringency of the depiction. More importantly, the viewer no longer sees the closed room into which the frightened apostles retreated, but rather an architecture that seems to open up to a landscape. Comparing the two works, there is no doubt that the use of the arch motif was a conscious deviation from the central element of traditional iconography. Cima da Conegliano purposely chose this strategy to create the effect of uncertainty in the beholder as described above. As in Bellini’s Pesaro Altarpiece, the reality status of the entire picture begins to vacillate if

back by a recognizable threshold. Consequently, there is no transition between the architecturally designed room and the landscape; there are neither stones nor pebbles nor overhanging plants which indicate that nature begins where the flagstone floor ends. Though clearly marked, the missing architectural transition between the flagstones and the landscape should make us question whether the opening behind the figures truly reveals a view to the outside, or whether the scene is actually taking place in front of a landscape depiction. If we examine the architectural supports more closely, we notice they do not appear to be fully three-dimensional pillars, but rather decorative pilasters, and the shaded

37 See Coletti (as note 34), 85; Menegazzi (as note 34), 117–118; Humfrey (as note 34), 110–111; Glenn W. Most, Doubting Thomas, Cambridge (Mass.) 2005, 180–187.
38 See David Rosand, Painting in Cinquecento Venice.
the viewer ascertains that the landscape in the background can be a view through an architectural opening as well as a picture. The viewers will either regard the entire painting as a continuation of the real space, or as an opaque, painted surface depending on whether they see the background as a view or picture.

Cima da Conegliano did not only attempt to make the receptive process more complex. He also reflected on various degrees and qualities of perception in the interaction of the pictorial figures. Thomas’ gesture of placing his finger into Christ's wound is combined with the act of looking, evident in their intensive and mutual gaze. The emphasized immediacy of this look is contrasted by St. Magnus’ rather contemplative pose as he watches this personal moment. To a certain extent, he takes on the role of a second-order observer. As he watches Christ and Thomas looking at each other, his own gaze gains a reflexive capacity. Not only does St. Magnus witness the exchange of looks, but he also hears Christ’s words at the moment Thomas touches his wound: »Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed!«

Perhaps while working on his first London version of Doubting Thomas, Cima da Conegliano noticed the problems which arise when portraying Christ’s words through the medium of an altarpiece. Because the portrayals of this scene inevitably evoked this bible verse in the minds of contemporary viewers, they called into question the relationship between the viewer and the altarpiece itself. The viewer was confronted with the question whether he or she would be able to believe without having seen. Cima da Conegliano’s picture highlights this biblical criticism of falsely trusting one’s sense of vision as the oscillating background instills a feeling of uncertainty in the viewer. The problematic suggestion of potential accessibility inherent in the window–picture comparison is critically examined on three separate levels: By focusing on the exchange of looks and on Thomas touching Christ’s wound, Cima calls to mind the biblical story and the blessing of those who have not seen, yet believe. In addition to this direct reference to sight in the bible verse, the artist also reflects on the concept of seeing at the pictorial level by including St. Magnus in the role of a second-order observer. The uncertainty the viewer feels when looking at the picture – caused by the vague status of the landscape in the background – is the third and performative level of this critical examination of sight. Cima counters the desire to use all of one’s senses to verify one’s faith with contemplative observation, represented by St. Magnus.

Cima’s response to the challenge of critically examining the act of viewing was taken up by Marco Basaiti a short time later (c. 1516). In his altarpiece for the church of San Giobbe (fig. 8), not far from Giovanni Bellini’s famous Pala di S. Giobbe, Basaiti places the four saints in the foreground (St. Louis of Toulouse, St. Francis, St. Dominic and St. Mark) against a background depicting Christ praying in the garden – an arrangement similar to that of Cima’s painting. Again, the transition between the foreground architecture and the background landscape is depicted in such a way that it is impossible to ascertain whether one is looking through an architectural opening at the scene on the Mount of Olives, or at a picture within a picture.

Bartolomeo Montagna:
Touching Christ without bodily contact

Bartolomeo Montagna was confronted with a similar challenge – probably in the 1490s – when he was working on an altar painting that depicted the resurrected Christ with Mary Magdalene (fig. 9). Even more so than the depiction of attitude toward seeing in his picture could have been prompted by the biblical text. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, the failure of the three apostles, who are overpowered by sleep, is explained by their »heavy eyes« (»oculi gravati«, Mt 26,43).
Venice, Gallerie dell’Accademia
Doubting Thomas, this *Noli me tangere* scene, named after Christ’s words, examines the deceptive nature of sight and the problematic desire to touch. When Mary Magdalene encounters Christ at the tomb, her eyes are deceived for she doesn’t immediately recognize him as Christ, but

42 See Lionello Puppi, *Bartolomeo Montagna*, Venice 1962, 50 and 98; Kai-Uwe Nielsen, *Bartolomeo Montagna und die venezianische Malerei des späten Quattrocento*, München 1995, 110–112. The exact date of the painting is unknown, but the suggestions range from 1484 to the beginning of the sixteenth century. Nielsen compares the integration of the biblical scene into the painting to Bellini’s Pesaro Altarpiece as a «picture within a picture» (111), without drawing any conclusions about the interpretation of the picture.

rather thinks he is the gardener. It only takes one word – his salutation »Mary!« – to reveal his true identity as the resurrected Christ. Only after Christ reveals himself in conversation, can Mary Magdalene report back to the apostles »I have seen the Lord!«

The way Mary Magdalene has »seen the Lord«, however, no longer corresponds to the way she saw the man whom she first took to be the gardener. In revealing himself, Christ also forbids her to touch him: Noli me tangere. Yet, in the Gospel according to Matthew, the two women at the tomb report that they were not hindered from touching Christ’s feet, which confronted exegetic and homiletic literature with the problem of deciphering what Christ meant by Noli me tangere. Both Augustine and Gregory the Great attempted to explain Christ’s words by suggesting that Mary Magdalene would have only been able to touch and feel Christ in his human form. By distancing himself from her, Christ emphasizes his aequalitas, his equality in nature, to God the Father. In a sermon, Augustine imagined how Christ himself would have explained his words: »What did he mean then, when he said: ›Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father‹? The way you see me is the way you think I am – ›I have not yet ascended to the Father‹. You see me as a human being, and you regard me as a human being. Of course, I am human, but do not place your faith in that. Do not touch me in such a way that you think I am merely human. ›For I have not yet ascended to the Father‹. I shall ascend to my Father, and you shall touch me, that is, go forth, see me as equal to the Father, then touch me and you will be redeemed.«

Christ’s aequalitas to God, upon which Augustine bases his considerations, is no longer perceptible through the usual senses of sight and touch. It even exceeds the imago, the image, as Augustine remarks in another context. Therefore, it makes sense that Mary Magdalene’s vita in the Legenda aurea not only reports how she was able to heal the blind, but also repeatedly describes her as being an iconoclast of heathen images. But, pictorial depictions of Mary Magdalene’s and Christ’s encounter also ran the risk of misjudging the divine nature of Christ, as Augustine believed Maria Magdalene had. The image also had to distance itself from the viewer. It required an inherent distinction that would force the viewer to no longer rely on the sense of sight. An encounter with the resurrected Christ had to be as untouchable for the viewer as Christ was for Mary Magdalene.

With his altarpiece for the church of San Lorenzo in Vicenza, Bartolomeo Montagna attempted to portray the theological gist of the scene by involving the viewer in a process of reception in which seeing is not necessarily believing. Although the picture is clearly structured in two layers – the foreground with John the Baptist and St. Jerome, and the landscape back-
presence and absence appear inextricably interwoven. Bartolomeo Montagna also seems to have applied the window–picture concept to create a unique form of ambiguity.

In Augustine’s opinion, when Christ asked Mary Magdalene not to touch him, it was not meant to be a rude repudiation, but rather an invitation to touch him in a different way – in a more figurative sense, not limited to his physical human form. Bartolomeo Montagna’s picture superbly demonstrates this paradoxical form of touching without bodily contact. With Christ depicted further away than Mary Magdalene in the pictorial space and with a slightly evasive posture, Montagna ensured that his depiction did not suggest a violation of Christ’s wish. Though they come close to touching each other with their hands, there is still an adequate distance separating them. If the viewer regards the scene, however, as a picture within a picture, she or he will notice that both figures are actually touching at two significant points. At the two-dimensional level, Christ’s right hand comes in contact with Mary Magdalene’s head, while her hand touches the foot of the resurrected Christ. Within the illusionistically depicted pictorial space, and thus, at the representational level of the biblical story, Christ does not permit Mary Magdalene any physical contact. Yet, Montagna makes this contact possible if the viewers decide they are no longer looking through a window, but at an opaque surface. By interweaving spatial illusion and pictorial surface, the window–picture and the opaque painting, Bartolomeo Montagna is able to portray that fragile simultaneity of closeness and withdrawal that characterizes the encounter between Mary Magdalene and Christ.

Giovanni Bellini, Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano, Marco Basaiti and Bartolomeo Montagna put a fundamentally different twist onto the window–picture comparison as it was

ground depicting the biblical event – the relationship between these layers is dubious at closer examination. Because the landscape seems to lie directly behind the architectural supports in the foreground, viewers get the initial impression that they are looking through openings. But like in the paintings of Giovanni Bellini, Cima da Conegliano and Marco Basaiti, the pictorial foreground and background belong to completely different levels of reality. There are no shadows in the landscape from the pillars or pilasters in the foreground, and there is not a plant, nor pebble that penetrates the narrow proscenium. The two pilasters that frame the scene with Christ and Mary Magdalene are particularly odd. One has to wonder why there are no massive pillars or columns supporting the protruding consoles and arches. In contrast to three-dimensional pillars, pilasters are usually placed against a supporting wall which provides stability. Once the viewers have noticed these pilasters, they suddenly realize they may no longer be looking at the biblical scene through an architectural opening; the background now appears as a flat, painted surface – a picture within a picture. The reality status of the central image in Bartolomeo Montagna’s altarpiece also exhibits a disturbing oscillation, as the continuity of the landscape behind the pilasters gives the beholder the feeling of looking through openings.

By considering whether it would be possible to pass through the depicted architecture to the background or whether the spaces between the pilasters and columns are merely flat, painted surfaces, the viewer is encouraged to reflect on the relationship between seeing and touching. For the viewer, the scene in which Mary Magdalene encounters Christ appears close enough to touch, but at the same moment, the scene is removed, because it is revealed as potentially illusory. Once again, proximity and withdrawal, presence and absence appear inextricably interwoven. Bartolomeo Montagna also seems to have applied the window–picture concept to create a unique form of ambiguity.

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sis of sixteenth-century depictions of the scene Noli me tangere; see Arasse (as note 43), 105.
52 Nielsen (as note 42), 111, regards the kneeling Mary Magdalene at Christ’s feet as a parallel to the biblical scene in which she washes the feet of Christ with her
tears, after which she dries them with her hair and anoints them with oil. However, there is no anointing jar visible in the picture, nor any sign of Mary Magdalene crying.
conceived by Alberti. It is possible that the Venetian artists were motivated to subversion by Jacopo Bellini’s modifications to Alberti’s concept in some of his drawings. Instead of clarifying the reality status of the images within, the artists preferred to use the analogy of the window and picture to create confusion and unsolvable ambiguity. The forms of image layering and the functions of the framing constellations used by the Venetians did not clearly differentiate the levels of reality (or more precisely, »levels of unreality«),53 which one can often identify in the wall murals of the quattrocento.

The basic characteristic of the pictorial strategies used in the artworks analyzed above is not the differentiation of such levels of representation, but rather their oscillation. Centrally located within the pictures, we encounter an uncontrollable fluctuation between interpretations – at one moment, a view out of an opening and simultaneously, a picture within a picture – which indicates the evocation of nearness and accessibility, on one hand, and its revocation, on the other. What the viewers learn from this experience is that the images they see are not wholly accessible and that they cannot completely grasp the picture simply by looking at it. For the picture itself, this strategy implies that the ultimate goal is not to achieve transparent visibility, but to keep something in »reserve«. If what the viewer initially thinks is an opening with a view turns out to be a two-dimensional picture, the revocation of transparency would make the viewer revert to the basic conditions of pictorial representation.54 The fact that the picture discloses the conditions of possibility through which it is depicted (its two-dimensionality, peripheral limitations, bond with materials, etc.) does not necessarily lessen its suggestive force. Rather, the viewer is able to experience first-hand how a picture can evoke nearness and presence despite its fundamental limitations. This effect is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that the pictorial depiction is accompanied by an imminent vagueness or withdrawal. »Reframing« the concept of the window-picture has resulted in the creation of images which combine the suggestion of presence and the experience of withdrawal and absence in an extremely unique way. They are pictures »en partance«.55

55 Nancy (as note 43), esp. 83–84; see also Jean-Luc Nancy, Au fond des images, Paris 2003, 11–33 (L’image – le distinct).