

Ornament and Illusion: Carlo Crivelli and Contemporary Realism

by Gail Leggio

A widely accepted art-historical narrative characterizes the Renaissance, with its revival of classicism, in terms of a sharp break with the Middle Ages, substituting perspective depth for flatness and human curiosity for religious devotion. Qualifications immediately spring to mind: the classical “Renaissances,” to use Erwin Panofsky’s term,¹ of the Carolingian court and the twelfth century; the persistence of Christian iconography through the Renaissance and beyond. But more interesting complexities arise when we look at Carlo Crivelli (1430–95), the subject of “Ornament and Illusion: Carlo Crivelli of Venice,”



Carlo Crivelli
*The Annunciation
with Saint Emidius*
1486

THE NATIONAL
GALLERY, LONDON,
ENGLAND

Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned with a Donor*, 1470
NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART,
WASHINGTON, D.C.

a recent exhibition at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston (October 22, 2015–January 25, 2016).

At the Gardner, two dozen gorgeous, thought-provoking works comprised this first American show for the artist, who has usually been critically sidelined. Highly successful in his own time, Crivelli did not seem progressive enough for later tastemakers. Giorgio Vasari, in *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1550), omits him altogether. Even twentieth-century standard texts, such as James Beck's *Italian Renaissance Painting* (1981), go no further than a mention.² Yet Crivelli's personal style—which combines so-called conservative and progressive strains of Quattrocento art-making—is convincing and stimulating.

To get a sense of how complex early Renaissance art was (and how puzzling it must be to reductivist timeline-fashioners), consider the dates of a few major players: Giotto (1266/67–1337), Fra Angelico (1395–1455) and the antiquity-obsessed Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506), an associate and near-contemporary of Crivelli. “Ornament and Illusion” was an apt title for the exhibition, acknowledging the sumptuousness of Crivelli's surfaces and the ingenuity of his formal experiments. (Those terms also suggest areas of exploration for contemporary realists, a subject considered later in this essay.) Another exhibition, “A Renaissance Original: Carlo Crivelli,” at the Walters



Art Museum (February 28–May 22, 2016), offers a separate opportunity to explore the artist.

In his masterpiece *The Annunciation with Saint Emidius* (1486), Crivelli employs several visual conventions considered typically Renaissance. This work was created to celebrate a grant of self-government for the town of Ascoli Piceno. The town's patron saint (an early Christian martyr credited with protecting the citizens from earthquake) kneels beside the angel Gabriel, in contemporary ecclesiastical robes and holding a model of the town that celebrates civic pride. Gabriel and Emidius occupy an alleyway outside the Virgin's house. (In a cutaway view, we see her kneeling in her handsomely appointed chamber.) The alley, sandwiched between steeply angled palazzi, is tiled in a way that produces a grid, like a textbook illustration of one-point perspective. The buildings are decorated with classical motifs, leading back to a triumphal arch-style bridge adorned with a medallion of a Roman emperor's head.

Yet Crivelli seems to question the rationality of this spatial construct even as he demonstrates his mastery of it. He adds to the second story of the Virgin's palazzo a little architectural aperture—the size and dimensions of a cartoon mouse hole—to accommodate the miraculous beam of light traditional in Annunciation iconography. In this work, the beam, shooting out of a UFO-like cloud in the sky, obligingly uses the little door to enter the Virgin's chamber. Crivelli also challenges the notion of rational space with exaggerated foreshortening and by cramming the scene with detail—townspeople, Oriental rugs thrown over balconies, flowerpots and peacocks. A trompe l'oeil ledge, on which “Libertas” and “Ecclesiastica” are inscribed in blue and gold, occupies the threshold between viewer and pictorial space.

Crivelli draws particular attention to what Leo Steinberg calls “internal safeguards against illusion.” Steinberg finds this sophisticated understanding of representation typical of the old masters, “who took pains to neutralize the effect of reality, presenting their make-believe worlds, as it were, between quotation marks.” The understanding is shared by the viewer, who has the “ability to register two things in concert, to receive both the illusion and the means of illusion at once.”³

This conceptual aspect of old master art, Steinberg notes, was particularly salient in multipanel altarpieces—now, sadly, too often dismembered—with their framing devices and shifts in scale.⁴ Exhibitions can bring together separated panels and help us grasp the original dynamic. At the Gardner, Crivelli's Porto San Giorgio altarpiece (1470) was partially reassembled, with a digital reconstruction filling in the gaps. Side panels include gold-ground portraits of various saints, alone or in pairs, carrying their attributes. Three of the panels deserve close attention. (The reconstruction is available on the exhibition's excellent website, <http://crivelli.gardnERMuseum.org>.)

The central place is reserved for *The Virgin and Child Enthroned with a Donor*. The sumptuously dressed but rather melancholy Virgin sits on a curious

throne: the pilasters and dolphin/cornucopia motifs derive from antiquity, but the style is hardly classical. A garland of fruit and leaves—Crivelli's signature motif—is draped behind the Virgin's haloed head, and the toddler Christ Child clutches an outsized apple. At the Virgin's feet kneels a Lilliputian donor. Her garment spills over onto the trompe l'oeil ledge that marks the threshold of the sacred space. The jeweled crown on the ledge is built up into relief by *pastiglia*, a technique involving gesso and embossing.

Another devotional image, in the lunette at the top of the altarpiece, presents the Virgin, Mary Magdalene, St. John, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus supporting the dead Christ. The parapet from which they present this sorrowful sight has Renaissance decoration, but the flat gold ground and embossed haloes suggest a late medieval sensibility.

While most of the panels in the altarpiece could be classified as devotional and atemporal, *Saint George Slaying the Dragon* drops the viewer into a scene of violence. This picture, newly restored, was the first Crivelli to enter an American collection, purchased by Isabella Stewart Gardner in 1897, at the urging of Bernard Berenson. Crivelli's mastery of equine anatomy gives the pale, rearing horse dynamic energy, as the young hero raises his sword to dispatch the dragon, already pierced though the throat with a lance. The narrow format of the side panel forces the snarling dragon, frightened horse and determined hero into a corkscrew vortex of action. Yet the gold sky, toy medieval hill town and tiny princess in the background remind us we are in the realm of legend. In contrast, another *Saint George* (1472), from the San Domenico altarpiece, presents the hero as a curly-haired fashion plate in gorgeous armor, with lion-head epaulets and stomacher. The dragon lies at his feet, still snarling but reduced to the status of a prop. The embossed gold extends from his halo to cover the entire backdrop.

In the nineteenth century, Crivelli, whose reputation had languished for centuries, became popular again, specifically among certain English artists. Edward Burne-Jones relished the decorative surfaces of Quattrocento art and wrote of his own work: "I love my pictures as a goldsmith does his jewels. I should like every inch of surface to be so fine that if all but a scrap from one of them were burned or lost, the man who found it might say whatever this may have represented it is a work of art, beautiful in surface and quality of color."⁵ The self-proclaimed Pre-Raphaelites sought inspiration in earlier artists' dynamic of flatness juxtaposed with illusion. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in two versions of *Regina Cordium* (1860 and 1866), poses his model between a flat, patterned backdrop and a fictive architectural ledge. The landscapist Samuel Palmer, in an 1835 letter, declared himself "a pure, quaint, crinkle-crinkle goth."⁶ The fashion for this aesthetic was satirized in W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's operetta *Patience* (1881), in a lyric that runs "By hook and crook you try to look both angular and flat."



Fred Wessel, *Delphinus*, 2014
COURTESY ARDEN GALLERY,
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

The strangeness—an awkwardness I find much more stimulating than the suaveness of Raphael—that appealed to some nineteenth-century artists is abundantly apparent in two other works by Crivelli, a *Lamentation* and a *Madonna and Child*.

In *The Dead Christ with the Virgin, Saints John and Mary Magdalene* (1485, cover), Crivelli gives the figures convincing weight and

emphasizes their emotional distress: the unusually elderly Virgin fingers the wound in her ashen son's side, and John throws back his head and wails. But the artist sandwiches the illusionistically three-dimensional figures between contradictory kinds of space—the flat, punched gold decorative backdrop and the trompe l'oeil parapet that separates the viewer from the scene. Adding to the complexity are Christ's leg and John's foot, protruding into our space, and the heavy swag of fruits and vegetables suspended overhead.

Crivelli's signature oversized garland also features prominently in *The Virgin and Child* (c. 1480). The apples can be justified iconographically, but the cucumber—while sometimes interpreted as symbolizing purity—is a bizarre addition. Here, it is approximately the size of the pretty Virgin's head. The heavy pendulousness and prominence of the fruit suggests an erotic subtext, perhaps associated with natural bounty. (The garlands in the early sixteenth-century Loggia of Cupid and Psyche, at the Villa Farnesina in Rome, have a similar function.)

Crivelli showcases a full range of visual conceits in *The Virgin and Child*. Haloes are studded with sharply delineated gems, and the Virgin's blue and gold robe is exquisitely decorative. The Child, seated on a plump pillow on

Fred Wessel,
Melancholia, 2005
COURTESY OF THE
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the parapet that establishes the threshold of pictorial space, looks askance at a trompe l'oeil fly that has landed there and is casting a shadow. That fly is proportionally out of scale for the foreground figures and monstrous in relation to the miniscule figures roaming the woodland scenes of the backdrop—landscapes, neatly inserted on either side of the Virgin's Cloth of Honor, that seem to belong to a different order of time and space. So deftly does Crivelli manage this juxtaposition of disparate elements that the picture is completely harmonious.

In the Steinberg essay cited here, written in 1953, he challenges the “modern critic who belittles all representational concerns because he sees them only as solved problems,” who “underrates their power to inflame the artist's mind....In realistic art, then, it is the ever-novel influx of visual experience that incites the artist's synthesizing will.” For some realists today, the work of Quattrocento artists such as Crivelli, who negotiated the ever-relevant boundaries between surface and illusion, looks remarkably fresh.

Fred Wessel (b. 1946) and Koo Schadler (b. 1962) are two contemporary



Albrecht Dürer,
Melencolia I, 1514
PHOTO COURTESY
WIKIMEDIA.ORG

realists openly inspired by Quattrocento art, as they explore the paradoxes of pictorial space in the twenty-first century. Both work in egg tempera (Crivelli's medium), and both are presenting new work at Arden Gallery in Boston during 2016. Both have established reputations as teachers of technique, composition and visual thinking, carrying forward another Renaissance tradition.

Wessel discovered Crivelli on his first trip to Italy in 1984 and particularly admired the "decorative opulence" of the Quattrocento master's work, along with his "elegant, expressive hand gestures."⁸ (Among his other favorite artists are Fra Angelico, Simone Martini and, leaping forward a few centuries, Gustave Klimt.) Wessel enriches his surfaces with gold, silver and platinum leaf, builds up patterns with *pastiglia* and insets "gemstones." For his Constellation series, he draws star maps in the flat gold backdrop, and plays matte gold against burnished gold. In *Delphinus* (2014), he paints realistic pearls on the model's dress, then sets cultured pearls into the backdrop. Other elements in the composition include a realistic spray of white flowers and a stylized fish that could be lifted from a Japanese print. The sense of luxury—in craftsmanship as well

as materials—is palpable. Wessel considers himself a “totally secular artist” (unlike Crivelli, whose subjects were exclusively religious), yet acknowledges that beauty has a “spiritual presence” in itself.

Underlying Wessel’s undeniably attractive work, however, is some tough conceptual/visual thinking. He likes to play with realism, “tweaking the abstract, compositional nature of every good piece of representational art.” He challenges the notion of a painting as a window into a simulacrum of three-dimensional space in a number of ways, placing his convincingly “real” model (his flesh tones are particularly luminous) in the context of different sorts of representation. The round-arch shape of the picture space adds an art-historical dimension, enhanced by the frame he often uses, a black, Renaissance-style architectural surround. The gold star maps have a mathematical sparseness and abruptly close off the illusion of spatial recession; he cites Vermeer’s use of large maps in the background of some paintings as an influence. Moreover, the addition of another register of representation—the fish in *Delphinus*, for example—is another way of celebrating the artifice of image-making.

Such elements come together harmoniously in *Melancholia* (2005). The title calls to mind the medieval humor, an allegorical construct most lavishly articulated in Albrecht Dürer’s 1514 engraving *Melencolia I*. Wessel ignores the iconography and gives us a modern young woman (albeit dressed in Renaissance-style luxury) in a pensive mood. The figure has a convincing presence. The warm pallor of her skin and wavy strands of red-gold hair falling over her face are remarkably life-like. He captures the richness of her pearl-trimmed, gold brocade costume with equal finesse. The backdrop is gold but, though it stops the eye, it is anything but flat. Reddish underpainting is visible

Koo Schadler,
Sweet Flowers
Diptych, 2011
COURTESY ARDEN
GALLERY, BOSTON,
MASSACHUSETTS



through the gold, and an embossed frame, studded with pearls and blue stones, surrounds the panel. Yet the figure is not contained by the frame. Seated in a simple wooden chair, she is positioned so that the top of her head, a lacy sleeve and part of the voluminous skirt all overlap the trompe l'oeil frame. This is sophisticated picture-making.

Crivelli could draw on an established worldview. Perhaps the richly orchestrated complex of symbols and narratives made the expression of personal quirks easier, to some extent. For a contemporary artist such as Wessel, the wholeness of that worldview is not an option. Wessel's subjects—still lifes and portraits of attractive young women—are somewhat conventional, but he is finding his way into some interesting areas by studying an important aspect of Crivelli's work, juxtaposing flat and dimensional space. In another of the Constellations, *Libra* (2013), a young woman holds a delicate scale with graceful hands. The foreground is filled with botanically lush purple flowers and green leaves. The flat gold backdrop is taken from the *Atlas Coelestis* (1729). Filling out the corners of the round-arched picture is a blue night sky, with stars and a crescent moon. If contemporary artists cannot recover the mentalities of the past, they can still learn vital lessons from its formal vocabulary.

Koo Schadler, too, finds inspiration in early Renaissance art. As her cooler palette suggests, however, her favorite painters are Flemish, especially Hans Memling (1430–94). Memling's figures, she observes, “contain vestiges of archetypal form and character and radiate a heightened spirituality,” while his light effects are more-or-less naturalistic, creating volumetric forms: “the result is both a perfectly real and unreal world.”⁹

Schadler articulates the rationale for her aesthetic choices. She finds abstract art, while often “visually rich,” ultimately unsatisfactory: “Omitting the material world not only neglects a deeply relevant fact of life but also misses out on the compelling visual paradox of abstraction versus realism.” By the same token, she finds some contemporary representational artists “too faithful (even servile, at times) to the material world.” Schadler's art draws on a repertoire of early Renaissance visual tropes, not as a sourcebook for nostalgic pastiche, but as a still-vital body of thought on fundamental issues of art-making and problems of design.

Framing is one way to exploit the fruitful tension between flatness and illusion. Schadler borrows from the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance both the manuscript page and polyptych formats. In *Vocatus* (2012), the central subject is a remarkably appealing black-and-white rabbit; Schadler shows real tenderness and a naturalist's eye for the soft fur and bright eyes of this creature. The rabbit has the greatest level of reality in the painting, but any sense of recession in the animal's inset picture-within-a-picture is halted by a dark red backdrop, very faintly imprinted in gold lettering with John Keats's line “a thing of beauty is a joy forever” (*Endymion*). The lavish parchment-colored border for this vignette is decorated with a flat, stylized berry-and-leaf motif.

More realistic, almost trompe l'oeil life-forms seem to have landed on the page—a couple of flowers, a snail and five very detailed butterflies. Schadler is not interested in the symbolism of her creatures, but she clearly has an intuitive reverence for natural beauty, particularly on an intimate scale.

Another text, in old-fashioned lettering, appears under the rabbit vignette. It reads “Vocatus atque non-vocatus deus aderit” (called and not called, God will be present), a quotation from the Renaissance scholar Desiderius Erasmus (later picked up and popularized by Carl Jung). Schadler does not expect or want her viewer to focus on the meaning of the text. She likes to paint letters, which she finds “architectural and organized, yet decorative,” but does not want to dictate a response: “My solution is to paint quotes I find meaningful but make the wording somewhat difficult to decipher so the message doesn’t overwhelm the image.”

The possibilities for the manuscript format are exciting. In *Illuminated Self-Portrait III* (2007), the woman wears a straw hat and contemporary casual clothes, but the bust-length profile pose (clearly derived from Renaissance models) against a grey backdrop looks flat. Meanwhile the border is alive with illusionistic objects, all casting shadows in the shallow, trompe l'oeil space: acorns hang from strings, a caterpillar and a butterfly perch on the portrait’s blue border, a bird—wings still fluttering—lands on a paintbrush balanced on a smooth stone. In another *Illuminated Self-Portrait*, the woman is more formally dressed, but again seems more stylized than the creatures that inhabit the margins.

The multipanel works of the early Renaissance offer Schadler another compositional template for her work. Compartmentalization, as Steinberg noted, offers the artist an intelligible way to juxtapose spatially and/or temporally disparate elements. In a fifteenth-century religious triptych, for example, the central panel might focus on a key event (the Resurrection) or devotional image (Madonna and Child), while side panels would feature saints and donors. Schadler uses this format for her own subject matter.

A Perfect Round (Snow Hare and Landscape Triptych), 2015, is a superb example. Within a dark frame we see three gold-rimmed panels. In the center, a white hare lopes across the horizontal space. A dark red brocade Cloth of Honor (seen in earlier art as a backdrop for the Virgin Enthroned) further divides the space, creating flanking windows to a blue-tinged, early Netherlandish-style landscape. Schadler honors Memling by continuing the same landscape—with a medieval city atop a hill, boats on the river and billowing clouds—across all three panels. Memling often employed this scheme, as in his *Jan Crabbe Triptych* (c. 1465–70), although this only becomes apparent when the central panel (Museo Civico, Vincenza) and the side panels (Morgan Library & Museum, New York City) are reunited. Schadler underlines the visual trope by running a stone ledge across all three panels as well. And she exploits the implicit tension in scale between background and foreground: the miniaturized forms of

the dreamy landscape are somehow integrated successfully with the outsized still-life objects in the side panels—a ripe red apple on the stem at left; a round clear vase of daisies at right.

Schadler's *Sweet Flowers Diptych* (2011) nests the two images in a series of frames: within an ornate hinged devotional presentation, complete with clasp, bands of silver frame the panels, which are surmounted by trompe l'oeil stone arches of Gothic tracery. The left panel depicts a fluttering bird and three acorns; the right one a clear vase with wildflowers and a butterfly. As Memling often did, Schadler unites the two with continuous space: an out-of-scale chamber with a tiled floor and, beyond that, a picturesque landscape. We accept it all. Logic tells us the bird would have to be enormous, yet her pictorial legerdemain lets us accept the scene as pure grace.

Most contemporary realists emphasize the importance of tradition, but tradition is hardly monolithic. Koo Schadler and Fred Wessel choose to explore a particular old master period; they are finding—through deep study of tropes such as pictures-within-pictures and gold-ground backdrops—fresh ways of approaching the perennial dynamic of abstraction and illusion.

Recent work by Wessel (April 5–30, 2016) and Schadler (December 6–30, 2016) can be seen at Arden Gallery, 29 Newbury Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02116. Telephone (617) 247-0610. ardengallery.com. “A Renaissance Original: Carlo Crivelli” is on view February 28–May 22, 2016, at the Walters Art Museum, 600 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21201. (410) 547-9000. thewalters.org

NOTES

1. Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
2. See Ronald Lightbown, *Carlo Crivelli* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), for an academic study.
3. Leo Steinberg, “The Eye Is a Part of the Mind,” *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 71, 74.
4. *Ibid.*, 71.
5. Martin Harrison and Bill Waters, *Burne-Jones* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), 153.
6. Cited in Alice Spawls, “Corners of Paradise,” review of William Vaughan, *Samuel Palmer: Shadows on the Wall*, *Times Literary Supplement* (January 1, 2016), 2–5.
7. Steinberg, 295.
8. All Wessel quotes, email exchanges with the author, January 2016.
9. All Schadler quotes, email exchanges with the author, January 2016.