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Sommario

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Maja-Lisa Müller

The paradigm of inlaying. Brunelleschi and intarsia

Inlaying is one of the oldest decorative practices in history and can be found in ancient Egyptian objects embedded with pieces of metal, bone, or mother of pearl as early as 2000 BC. In the 15th and 16th centuries, this practice experienced a revival in northern Italy under the name of tarsia or intarsia, this time almost exclusively in the medium of wood. An explanation for the resurgence of this relatively old technique could be found in the concurrent emergence of central perspective as a visual regime, whose tenets achieved such a longstanding authority that they constitute the criteria for any 'realistic' depiction to this day. Technically, central perspective is the application or "projection", as Erwin Panofsky ([1927] 1980, 99) famously writes, of Euclidian geometry onto pictorial spaces and therefore, a mathematization and geometrization of images. In what follows, I approach central perspective as a cultural technique, an expression derived from the so-called German media theory of the 1980s. Cultural techniques emphasize that practices and operations actively produce and shape cultural phenomena and distinctions in the first place. In its radicality, this means a striving away from any essentialism, as media theorist Bernhard Siegert puts it:

> Humans as such do not exist independently of cultural techniques of hominization, time as such does not exist independently of cultural techniques of time measurement, and space as such does not exist independently of cultural techniques of spatial control (Siegert 2015, 9).

These techniques are made visible and can be historicized by the media that explicate them. So for example, the cultural techniques of time measurement entail different relations of human and non-human actors,

space and sound, individual and collective and so on if respectively a sundial, a church tower or a watch exemplifies them. While this may de-essentialize certain constructs such as 'time', it does not de-ontologize them: "This does not mean that the theory of cultural techniques is anti-ontological; rather, it moves ontology into the domain of ontic operations" (Siegert 2015, 9). These ontic operations can be carried out by human and non-human actors alike and therefore share a common ground with the actor-network-theory (ANT), most prominently represented by sociologist Bruno Latour. ANT imagines social interactions, phenomena, objects, and agents as networks that are in a constant state of emergence and disintegration, and consequently call for a continuous reinstating of themselves. Thinking with ANT and cultural techniques implies the change of questions from how certain phenomena are to how they come into being. Applied to central perspective this would imply rejecting an understanding of it as a mimetic depiction of the world, and rather interrogating the visual, mathematical and social operations it enables.

As a technique, central perspective was first used by Filippo Brunelleschi in the 1420s in his pictorial experiments and then described methodically by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435. Brunelleschi worked closely with the *intarsiatori* of his time. We know this, inter alia, from Giorgio Vasari's *Vita di Filippo Brunelleschi*:

> Nor did he refrain from teaching it [drawing with central perspective] even to those who worked in tarsia, which is the art of inlaying coloured woods; and he stimulated them so greatly that he was the source of a good style and of many useful changes that were made in that craft, and of many excellent works wrought both then and afterwards, which have brought fame and profit to Florence for many years (Vasari [1568] 1912, 198).

For Vasari the trajectory of the influence seems to be clear: in this narrative, Brunelleschi influences the intarsiatori and not the other way around. But there is a different way of seeing this exchange. French art historian Hubert Damisch interprets Vasari's comments as follows:

> Judging by this text, the definition of perspective, in the modern sense of the term and the new technique of marquetry appear to be logically contemporary and strictly complementary; and that complementarity and

contemporaneity in their turn point to an important historical interaction (Damisch [1972] 2002, 122-123).

For Damisch this interaction is not so much monocausal as convergent, a historical intersection or junction that opens up the possibility of travel in many different directions. To quote Latour and Michel Serres, this junction can be grasped as a "hybrid" or a "quasi-object". I will come back to this concept and its implications later. First, it is important to understand how operations of intarsia and central perspective can be productively read together. Therefore, I turn to German art historian Friedrich Teja Bach and his article *Filippo Brunelleschi and the Fat Woodcarver* in which he interprets Brunelleschi's famous pictorial experiments by complementing them with an anecdote about a prank Brunelleschi pulled that shares a connection with the operation of inlaying which is so fundamental to intarsia. His experiments are well known and widely discussed in the literature on central perspective, so I will only briefly mention them.

The first experiment, despite – or maybe exactly because of – its more complicated construction, is debated more prominently. With the help of his geometric method, Brunelleschi painted a picture of the Baptistery of San Giovanni on a tavola, which the viewers held in front of their faces, the painted side pointing away from their faces. In the other outstretched hand they held a mirror. Through a little hole drilled in the tavola, they saw the reflection of the painting in the mirror. If one now positioned oneself at a certain point in front of the Baptistery, the accuracy of the drawing compared to the depicted building could be verified by alternately holding and removing the mirror. This 'realistic' effect was reinforced by silver foil, placed in the image at the position where the sky would be depicted, so that the real sky above the Baptistery, including the movement of clouds, could be mirrored in the painting. Paradoxically, the reflection of the reflection - a twice mediated image – creates the effect of being even closer to reality. The otherwise sharply drawn borders between reality and its depiction are blurred for a moment (see Grave 2015, 29). This goes hand in hand with media theorist Marshall McLuhan's claim that when one "opens" a medium, one will only find another medium, as there is no "reality" that can be unpacked (McLuhan [1964] 1994, 9).

In Brunelleschi's case, this media-interweaving would be the mirror, which then shows the silver foil, which then shows the clouds and so on. In making itself invisible, the medium has become most successful. Reality as such reveals itself to be mediated. Brunelleschi's second experiment is much simpler and works without the mirroring, doubling structure: a panel, which showed the Palazzo della Signoria (today Palazzo Vecchio), was to be held at the height of the building. The panel in this case was not rectangular but cut at the top to match the outline of the Palazzo. The (admittedly modern) rectangular paradigm of a painting was sacrificed in order to achieve the blurring effect between the painting and its surroundings.

Teja Bach draws a connection between the way these experiments work and inlaying, one of the operations of intarsia. He further brings a different story about Brunelleschi into the equation, which is passed on in the *Novella del Grasso Legnaiuolo* by Antonio Manetti. Brunelleschi and his friends were upset about the intarsiatore Manetto Ammanatini, who had not attended a dinner he was invited to, so they decided to play a rather gruesome prank on him. They kidnapped him in his sleep, threw him into jail and then instructed everyone to make him believe that he was not the woodworker Manetto Ammanatini anymore, but a rather sleazy character named Matteo Mannini. When Manetto came out of jail, he found his house and workshop locked and everyone on the street calling him Matteo Mannini. Manetto had no choice but to believe everyone around him, especially since the only person who could have confirmed his identity, his mother, was absent at the time. After a couple of confusing days, the group surrounding Brunelleschi decided to end the prank and put Matteo – again in his sleep – back in his own home and pretend that nothing had happened. Teja Bach offers a reading of Brunelleschi's pictorial experiments by referring to this cruel prank:

> The unsuspecting persons in the *Novella*, similar to the silver coating and the line of the cut in the perspectival panels, mark the limits of artistry, the critical border zone where actual and simulated reality meet. Structurally, the prank is a mixture of initiated and uninitiated involuntary performers, of constructed and natural elements. The success of the game is decided at its margins. The clouds reflected in the silver and the visible surroundings of

the Baptistery next to the mirror image are, as it were, reinforcements of
reality for the purpose of authentication (Teja Bach 2007, 162).

What makes Brunelleschi's experiments and the prank so successful is
their seamless transition between the zones of "virtuality" and "actuality"
as Teja Bach calls them. Instead of being two realms that operate as
opposites, they present themselves as interchangeable as well as
constituting one another. Teja Bach even goes so far as to say that
Brunelleschi and with him central perspective images introduce an entire
new paradigm of pictoriality itself, one that is closely connected to intarsia
and operates as an inlay itself. He contrasts this paradigm sharply to
Alberti's concept of the image as an *aperta finestra* (Alberti [1435] 2011,
19, 224) which "has as its counterpart a wall, or at least a frame, which
categorically sets it apart from its surroundings" (Teja Bach, 2007, 166).
As we will see later, Teja Bach's understanding of the image as an open
window is closely connected to an aesthetic paradigm of difference and
separation between images and their environments. The pictorial
paradigm he proposes instead interlinks and embeds virtuality and
actuality rather than opposing them. Images are as embedded into their
surroundings as the woodcarver is embedded into the prank and the
pieces of intarsia are embedded into each other. Manetto, who was known
for his beautiful woodwork, turns into a piece of art: "he himself, the
intarsia specialist, becomes intarsia" (Teja Bach 2007, 162). The necessary
seamlessness of this paradigm can be exemplified by the figure of the
border itself: the picture frame. The following part will offer a brief
historical account of the paradigm of the picture frame and its respective
implications.

Framing the discourse. Artworks and their borders
Brunelleschi's *tavolae* are pictures without frames, which allows them to
merge with their surroundings and make their own virtuality invisible. At
first glance, the pictures' framelessness seems to be necessary in order to
make their hybrid status possible. Following this assumption means
obeying the distinctions made by the aesthetic theory from the 18th
century onward. In their writings, theoreticians have construed the picture
frame as a metaphorical and material figure of separation in order to
establish a distinct zone, an autonomy and general otherness of art and
aesthetics. Often theories about the frame include theories about the

artwork it surrounds. From Immanuel Kant and Karl Philipp Moritz at the end of the 18th century to Georg Simmel and José Ortega y Gasset in the beginning of the 20th century, there is unity in the opinion that a clear division between an artwork and its surroundings exists. The aesthetic zone is clearly separated and therefore distinguished from the spheres of 'reality' and 'nature'. The frame has to affirm this division, exhibit and double it. Its mission is to highlight the artwork, that is to say mostly paintings, and thus not to be too prominent itself. For Kant ornaments or frames, *Zieraten* or *parerga* as he calls them, are ways of decorating an object and therefore only supporting it "externally as complements" (Kant [1793] 2018, 76). As a supplement, the frame can only fulfill its duty when it is not too prominent itself. This claim gets tremendous support from sociologist Georg Simmel a mere one hundred years later. For him the roles of the frame are those of "assisting and giv[ing] meaning to the inner unity of the picture" (Simmel [1902] 1994, 12). He even attributes a centripetal character to the picture and the frame, which is emphasized when the outer border of the frame rises above the inner borders, guiding the view inward and establishing an outward barrier. From this point of view, other forms of the frame, such as higher inner borders or transitions from the painting onto the frame, are "completely reprehensible" (Simmel [1902] 1994, 12). The biggest transgression is therefore the transgression itself:

> That is why the frame, through its configuration, must never offer a gap or a bridge through which, as it were, the world could get in or from which the picture could get out – as occurs, for instance, when the picture's content extends to the frame, a fortunately rare mistake, which completely negates the work of art's autonomous being and thereby the significance of the frame (Simmel [1902] 1994, 12-13).

The frame works for Simmel as a mediator between the artwork and surrounding nature. Simmel's condition is again reflected in the influential media theory: a successful medium makes itself invisible and only becomes visible as a disorder or interference.

This strict separation into different, disparate realms of being between artwork, frame and environment cannot be maintained, on the contrary, it has never been that rigid. Examples of the transgression of the image

object into the frame or the frame being a structural and constitutive part of the artwork are manifold, especially in early modern times. Consequently, the separation of frame and artwork on a theoretical and very much material level exposes itself as a phenomenon of modernity. From the second half of the 20th century onwards the intellectual schools of poststructuralism and deconstructivism made a rethinking of the role of the frame possible. Philosopher Jacques Derrida famously re-reads Kant in his treatise *The Truth in Painting* and reexamines the frame in a typically deconstructivist manner: the painting or artwork and its surrounding frame constitute each other, *ergon* and *parergon* are not two opposites that mutually exclude each other. Instead, the *ergon* draws its inner stability from the differentiation to the *parergon* and vice versa. The frame is not just decoration or "Zierat" as Kant wanted it to be, but according to Derrida it "labours indeed" (Derrida [1978] 1987, 75) and actively produces and shapes the artwork.

For philosopher and art historian Louis Marin the frame becomes the condition for the possibility of representation itself. It is not a physical object anymore, but rather an operation, an action, a technique:

> In its pure operation, the frame displays; it is a deictic, an iconic 'demonstrative': 'this'. The figures ornamenting the edges 'insist' on pointing out, they amplify the gesture of pointing: deixis becomes epideixis, monstration becomes de-monstration (Marin [1988] 2002, 357-358).

The frame is not an object of material qualities anymore but a signifier of the signified. German art historian Vera Beyer comments on this as follows:

> By replacing the term of art with the term of fiction, later theories of the frame showed that not only picture frames mark the place and status of art, but frames in a broader and more abstract way can function as markers of fictional modi of representation (Beyer 2011, 365).

A frame of reference can therefore actively shape the way we look at things. For example, Damisch looks at clouds from a completely different perspective than a meteorologist. While their objects of analysis might be the same, their frames of reference are not.

Understanding the frame as a marker of representation and signifier of the signified gives the frame more agency, but it also positions it in the sphere of the symbolic and therefore neglects the frame as an actual material object. We see the oscillation of the meaning in the many double entendres that surround texts about the frame. With the recent 'material turn' in the humanities, this neglect has to be confronted. Especially art history has profited tremendously from incorporating analyses of the material qualities of artworks. The frame becomes the ideal object to exemplify how an analysis of an object as a material thing as well as a linguistic metaphor or symbolic signifier can be made productive. In the following section, I will focus on the analysis of the frame by drawing on the concept of quasi-object put forth by Serres and further addressed by Latour.

Hybrid theory. The frame in intarsia
In his famous essay *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour claims that we are living in a time of hybrids. Commenting on the issues featured in a daily newspaper from the 1990s in the incipit of his essay, he traces objects and themes that have long transcended borders of scientific, political and life-worldly territories, and disciplines. In a rollercoaster ride between Monsanto, AIDS, whales and chlorofluorocarbons the mix of political, religious, scientific, and economic spheres manifests itself clearly. Instead of following the 'modern' urge to neatly divide all these spheres and treat them as mutually exclusive, he asks for a retying of the Gordian knot, and an understanding of the interweaving of those spheres. In this undertaking he builds on the concept of "quasi-objects", first coined by Serres in his book *The Parasite*. Serres calls objects that organize collectives and subjects "quasi-objects", as they undermine the dichotomy of subjects and objects and give agency to the object. Consequently, they could also be called "quasi-subjects". A well-known example would be the ball in a football game: the player who has the ball is the one that structures the game while the rest of the players become the collective around them. What is of importance is the flexibility of this system: the ontological categories of object and subject are not intrinsic but become dynamic and therefore instable. A network of exchanges is established, that means a system of attaching to and detaching from a certain status. Hybrid objects are likewise objects that are inherently divided among themselves, or as Siegert defines:

> Hybrid Objects are assemblages – i.e. they are linkings themselves – which have a specific agency due to the nature of the structure and the operations made possible by it (Siegert 2017, 102).

Hybrid objects refer to the operations that make them possible in the first place. In reference to the frame, this reads very similarly to Marin but emphasizes the material qualities of the object as well. The frame firstly exhibits the operations through which the artwork shows itself, secondly the operations of dividing between the spheres of artwork and frame and thirdly the transgressions of these spheres. This becomes clear in the moment when the division between frame and artwork cannot be upheld.

Intarsia becomes the perfect medium to discuss the frame in all its multiplicities. On the one hand, one could argue that intarsia is frameless in a way Brunelleschi's tavolae were frameless. It needs to be frameless in order to accomplish the dissimulation of virtuality and actuality as Teja Bach described. This dissimulation is also a prerequisite for the excess of trompe-l'œils exhibited here such as the protruding benches, the opened lattice doors and the hanging scrolls of parchment. But if we take a closer look, we find that inlaid furniture is in fact full of frames, a circumstance that paradoxically leads to its frameless impression. Alison Wright also recognizes the different framing operators for the Urbino Studiolo:

> The furniture of the lower zone offers a summa of contemporary palatial frames: 'niches' for allegorical or portrait figures, 'opened' cupboard doors vouchsafing precious private collections and, apparently, architectural apertures on to exterior views (Wright 2019, 20).

So while inlaid furniture does not need a frame (in the post-Kantian sense) for it does not need to be excluded, its excess of framing devices in a broader sense is undeniable. I argue that this excess stems from the operations of inlaying that are mirrored in the operations of framing. Inlaying and framing share some similarities on a material and operational level: both showcase the operations of encompassing and embedding and both prioritize wood as material. Often, inlaid image areas are surrounded by borders of regular geometric patterns, made as *tarsia a toppo* [Fig. 1].
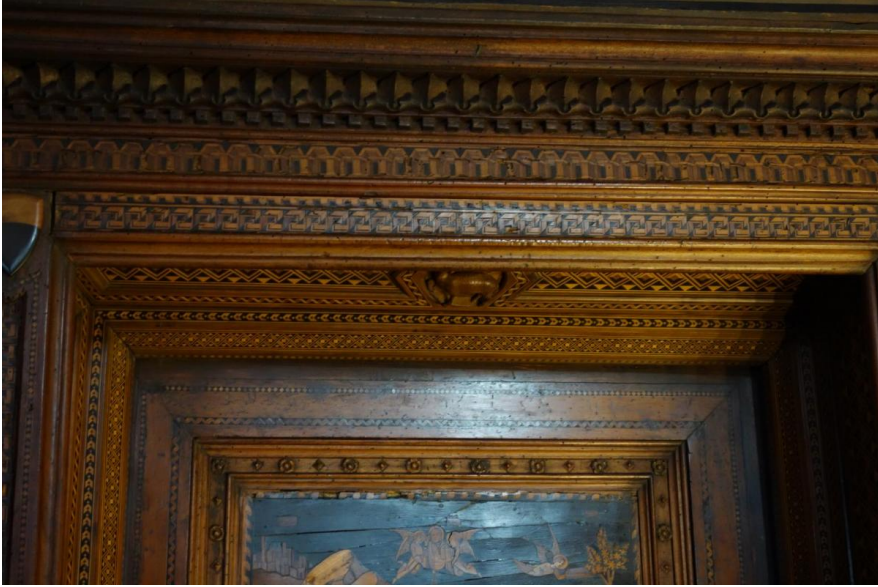
1 | Domenico de Niccoló, choir stalls, wood inlay, Palazzo Pubblico Siena, 1415-1428.

Differently colored pieces of wood are glued together as a block to show a pattern at the cross section. Thin slices or veneers of this cross section are cut off and placed next to each other as a line. This manufacturing method is economical, easy and rather effective and leads to a mass production of certain patterns, which sometimes showcase small trompe-l'œil-effects in the form of overlapping ornamental bands on their own. We find this exemplified in Domenico de Niccoló's choir stalls in Siena. Two- and three-dimensional frames form a stair-like entrance to the main image field which shows biblical scenes. The framing of the frame as an unimportant parergon does not seem to apply here. The frames of the dorsals take up a lot more space than the main image itself and are visually more intriguing. Various ornaments show a whirring effect. Since the material of the 'real' frames and the ones of the depicted frames are the same, by looking directly at them one cannot distinguish whether they are three-dimensional or two-dimensional. This ambiguity is mirrored in the frames, which oscillate between being an ornament and a three-dimensional body.

2 | Fra Giovanni da Verona, choir stalls, wood inlay, abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, ca. 1500. With courtesy from Ruth Hauer-Buchholz.

In another typical intarsia example – the still life-like depiction of objects on the border between inside and outside – we see another portrayal of frames as cultural techniques. Fra Giovanni da Verona's choir stalls in his home monastery in Monte Oliveto Maggiore [Fig. 2] show alternately views from the inside of an architecture onto a landscape and views into the niches of cupboards or other furniture. Both views exhibit their own transgressions, establish different zones of fore-, middle- and background only to step over the clearly distinguished borders. These transgressions of the borders or frames manifest themselves most evidently in the trompe-l'œil-figures such as hanging scrolls, opened books and opened cupboard doors. Patrick Mauriés even argues that trompe-l'œils need a border, a third space to overstep in order to achieve their optical illusion and protruding effect (Mauriés [1996] 1998, 12).

The illusionistic effect of Fra Giovanni's trompe-l'œil execution of opened doors is only possible through the frame-zone around the opening of the cupboard. Depicted as a two-dimensional frame, whose ornamental decoration is visually very close to the three-dimensional carved pillars, which separate each dorsal, this frame-zone simultaneously narrows the

image field to enable a seeming expansion of the objects into the third dimension. The trompe-l'œils coincide with the cultural techniques of the frame, that is, operations of separating, linking and transgressing. The inlaid frames can be described as the ultimate trompe-l'œil, a material interweaving of depicting image and depicted object. They establish "zones of indiscernibility" (Deleuze, Guattari [1980] 2005, passim) or hybrid zones. As exemplified in adjacent disciplines to art history, such as history and media studies, a recent paradigm shift can be seen. The investigation of entanglements or hybridities as well as practices and operations opens up new ways to speak and think about complex phenomena with respect to the entirety of their implications.

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English abstract

This article deals with the topic of the picture frame in the intarsia medium and its operations of inlaying, presenting, and transgressing. The discursive history of the picture frame, first theorized within the field of aesthetics, establishes the frame either as an inferior divisor to the picture it encompasses or a mediator between the artwork and its surroundings. Both ideas differentiate between the sphere of art and the sphere of reality or 'nature'. By employing concepts taken from actor-network-theory and media theory, the idea of a given or im-mediate reality will be rejected in favor of the notion of hybrid zones, that is, complicated interweavings of virtuality and actuality. The frame and with it the motif of the trompe-l'œil, another figure of transgression, will be analyzed as examples of the notion of hybrid objects, objects that have the agency to link the spheres of the symbolic and the real.

keywords | intarsia; cultural techniques; framing.

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