JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF IDEAS

2026

Volume 15 Issue 29
Item 4

– Section 1: Articles –

Control and Contingency

Representing the Rich in Early Modern Art

by
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JIHI 2026

Volume 15 Issue 29

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Control and Contingency
Representing the Rich in Early Modern Art

Tom Nichols *

In his As Gods Among Men, *Guido Alfani argues that the rich were newly accepted during the early modern period (1400–1800), winning an unprecedented measure of approval in many European societies. This article tests Alfani's idea of wealth consolidation in early modernity from the perspective of the visual arts, paying initial attention to the rise of portraiture as a vehicle through which the rich presented themselves more openly as the worthy leaders of society, appearing to consolidate their position of privilege. Even within this apparently supportive image type, however, indications of monetary* ricchezza *were often downplayed. Two further sections explore these tendencies towards the semi-concealment and the mediation of monetary wealth in a wider range of image types and media. Taking as my case studies works produced in Italy, Great Britain, the Dutch Republic, France, Spain and Germany, I argue that motives of visual deflection and ambiguation regarding the condition of material wealth were more characteristic of early modernity that its open display. My discussion of these works will suggest that they do not straightforwardly reflect the consolidation of the European rich as leading social and cultural players. Much of this imagery suggests instead a developing proto-modern sense that all material advantage and associated high social position is highly contingent and fragile, and always potentially reversible.*

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Journal of Interdisciplinary History of Ideas 15(2026), 29, p. 4:1–4:45. Peer-reviewed.

In his stimulating book *As Gods Among Men*, Guido Alfani argues that the rich were newly accepted during the early modern period (1400-1800), winning an unprecedented measure of approval in many European societies. Moral and legal strictures regarding the accumulation of monetary wealth were increasingly laid aside, as the rich finally entered the cultural mainstream and entrenched themselves as undisputed leaders.[1] At the same time, we hear, narrower social hierarchies were established later in the period after 1650: not only in the sluggish non-growth aristocratic economies of conservative Southern Europe, but also in the newly-minted and democratically-orientated Dutch Republic.[2] There is good evidence in visual art to support Alfani's idea of the consolidation of the rich, especially when the rapidly expanding genre of portraiture is considered. In this increasingly popular image type, the rich frequently appear as the deserving totems of wealth and of related high social position. But Alfani's thesis also raises questions, given that lavish displays of wealth were often avoided in early modern art, and that the rich were also joined by the poor in the visual domain, as if a more extended representation of the privileged economic state required or necessitated that of its dark 'other'.

This article will test Alfani's idea of wealth consolidation in early modernity from the perspective of the visual arts, paying initial attention to the rise of portraiture as a vehicle through which the rich presented themselves more openly as the worthy leaders of society, appearing to strengthen their position. Even within this apparently supportive image type, however, indications of monetary *ricchezza* were often downplayed. In two further sections I will further explore these tendencies towards the semi-concealment and mediation of monetary wealth in a wider range of image types and media. Taking as my case studies works produced in Italy, Great Britain, the Dutch Republic, France, Spain and Germany over the course of these centuries, I will argue that motives of visual deflection and ambiguation regarding the condition of material wealth were more characteristic than its open display. This might reflect continuing social anxieties among the rich about the morality of their wealth possession, as also more pragmatic concerns about the advisability of parading it before the

[1] Guido Alfani, *As Gods Among Men: A History of the Rich in the West* (Princeton University Press, 2023), 41, 43, 115, 234.
[2] Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 115.

non-rich that were not dissimilar to those evident in the preceding medieval centuries. My discussion of these works will suggest that they do not straightforwardly reflect the arrival of the European rich as leading social and cultural players. Many of them highlight instead an increasing sense that their material advantage was fragile and vulnerable, contingent and potentially reversible. The state of *ricchezza* was perhaps increasingly defined in close relation to its opposite, as is evident from the emergence of a powerful imagery of poverty in the same centuries. The growing early modern penchant for role swapping between contrasting economic and social states suggests again their underlying overlap or interconnection with one another. This might suggest that early modern notions of wealth, at least as these were expressed in art, became increasingly relativized. The evidence of visual art suggests that rather than simply being accepted as a social group, the rich were increasingly opened to the potentially non-accepting or at least questioning gaze of the non-rich populations who encircled them.

1. The Role of the Rich and the Role of the Artist

A degree of economic affluence was—and still is—a core underlying condition for art patronage and enjoyment. To this extent 'the rich'—broadly conceived to include the merely better off as well as the super wealthy—both commissioned and 'consumed' most visual art in the early modern centuries, even if they did not themselves (typically) produce it.[1] To this extent the interests, values and perspectives of this privileged economic group determined and delimited the social and cultural purview offered by art. Despite the normative naturalistic

[1] For some useful economic considerations of what 'wealth' is and who can be considered as 'rich' in the West see Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 17-35.

aesthetic prevalent between 1400 and 1800, based on Aristotle's idea of *imitatio*, the objectivity of this 'purview' cannot be taken at face value. When the rich had themselves or their environments or material culture depicted in art they did not typically need to obey any rule of accuracy, but rather fashioned themselves and their world as they wished it to be seen, typically in ways that served their own interests. On the other hand, 'the rich' in early modernity cannot be understood as a unified or coherent social or class grouping, or even as sharing a consistent ideology. The social position of the merchants and financiers of the towns and cities that was first accumulated in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries during what Alfani describes as 'the commercial revolution', undoubtedly became ever more significant force within society.[1] But these middle classes did not simply replace the feudal or landowning nobilities, who remined vigorous enough, and often successfully extended their mercantile interests. Meanwhile, the urban rich quickly developed landed and agricultural interests in the countryside, while seeking to adopt the lifestyles, manners and appearances of the older echelons of the social elites in that context.

Most artworks made in early modern Europe reflect, to a greater or lesser extent, the cultural perspectives of 'the rich' rather than those of the non-rich surrounding populations, thus fostering a version of the world that served their needs rather than those of the latter. But this visual material is nonetheless revealing in ways that those who commissioned it might not have intended or been able to fully acknowledge or articulate. Some early modern imagery might reflect social or cultural strategies adopted by the rich, particularly when this involved the conspicuous display of material wealth or *magnificentia*.[2] But if many visual images indicate (as Alfani argues) that the rich successfully positioned themselves within the mainstream of society in the early modern centuries, and often used visual imagery in the process, it must also be noted that this necessarily involved compromise. In order for the early modern rich to find

[1] Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 160.

[2] The idea that the rich should make a public display of their wealth was much discussed in the early modern centuries, and seems to add weight to Alfani's idea that richness was then being consolidated as a social virtue. Alfani quotes the Neapolitan humanist Giovanni Pontano (*Trattato delle Virtù Sociali*, 1492-99) who lauded the 'ancient magnificence' of Cosimo de' Medici in his architectural commissions in Florence, justifying such lavish public expenditure as part of the Renaissance revival of classical Roman values: see Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 221.

acceptance within wider non-rich societies as justified or bona fide social actors they had often to acknowledge that their privileged position was contingent rather than absolute: that it was based on the accidents of the present social order, rather than the fixed, natural one beyond, and that it was often uncomfortably connected to the impoverishment of the wider population. Alongside works expressing their wealth and power in overt and unidirectional ways, the rich also developed imagery that sought to mitigate or downplay their social and economic advantages.

A further point needs to be addressed here regarding who, exactly, was 'responsible' for early modern artworks. Even if a degree of affluence above the (very low) economic norm in society was a pre-condition for much art patronage and appreciation in the period, it does not follow that the rich wholly controlled or were responsible for the art that they commissioned. Pierre Bourdieu noted an equivalence in the fields of artistic production and consumption—a 'structural homology'—as characteristic of the modern (twentieth century) sociology of art.[1] But in the early modern period this kind of homology was not yet in place, given that most artists were of much lower social rank or economic position than those that commissioned them. At one point in his book, Alfani casually cancels out the potentially formative role of the relatively lowly and typically non-rich artists in the production of artworks, asking his reader to acknowledge that the rich alone were responsible for the splendid cities and artworks that we now enjoy.[2] But this is to assume that affluent patrons necessarily (and completely) controlled the works that they commissioned: that these clients could foresee how an artwork would appear in every detail, and that they would not allow the artist to innovate or create beyond their own ideas or horizons.

The history of art in early modernity tells a different story, with typically wealthy patrons increasingly ready to allow the artists they employed to invent: to put into play their increasingly highly-valued artistic and creative *fantasia*

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 232-3.

[2] "The fact remains that (…) whoever has the fortune to live in, or visit, places like Florence or Venice or their counterparts in the Low Countries and in other parts of Europe continues to enjoy exceptional urban beauty, which would never have appeared without the super-rich of the Renaissance": Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 222.

when fulfilling commissions.[1] Acknowledging as much does not entail returning to romantic myths about the free artist of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, but it does mean allowing for a less unidirectional account than the one that Alfani offers when granting the rich all the credit for the works they paid for.[2] As the anthropologist Alfred Gell demonstrated through his idea of the 'art nexus', the agencies governing the generation of an artwork were rarely fixed or singular, and were liable to constant fluctuation, whether the determining emphasis fell on the medium, the relation to natural appearances, the patron, or the artist.[3] In many cases, the rich were not closely or directly engaged in work on the buildings, sculptures, paintings and other works that they paid for, largely lacking the requisite artisanal skills given that they had not been trained in workshops. In many cases, they could have had only a fairly general or limited idea of what might be possible when they commissioned art: one typically based on earlier works of a similar kind made by the same artists or earlier ones. This sets a limit on the idea that when viewing early modern art we are viewing a mirror image of the values and ideas of the rich themselves. The acts of building, picturing or representing are also necessarily acts of making, intervention and artistic *fantasia*, and to this extent should be understood as actively 'working' the given ruling class ideology, even if they do not always—or typically—defy it.[4]

The entry of the wealthy into the field of visual representation was, as all this suggests, by no means a straightforward process, remaining hedged about with mitigations and conditions that tacitly acknowledge the existence and also the demands of the surrounding non-rich populations. In many of the works that they commissioned, the rich themselves sought to downplay or offset their economic position, preferring to lay emphasis on their other qualities. In part, this reticence must reflect the intensification of religious feeling and commitment

[1] See Martin Kemp, "From Mimesis to Fantasia: The Quattrocento Vocabulary of Creation, Inspiration and Genius in the Visual Arts", *Viator* 8, no. 1 (1977): 347-98.

[2] The questioning of the worker against the assumptions of the great man theory of history featured in Bertolt Brecht's *Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters* (1935) is relevant here: "Who built the seven gates of Thebes? | In the books you find the names of kings. | Did the kings haul up the blocks of stones?"

[3] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Clarendon Press, 1998), 1-50.

[4] T. J. Clark, "The Conditions of Artistic Creation", *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May, 1974, 561-2.

in the period. The majority of the artworks commissioned continued to have a religious subject-matter, despite the rapid development and spread of new secular and empirical image types. In those religious works that engage directly with the question of worldly riches or *ricchezza* ('richness'), it is perhaps no surprise to find that a more critical, or at least reflective, approach is taken. Even in non-religious works patronized by wealthy individuals or groups, the imagery often suggests an awareness of the conditionality of their riches. At the very least, the early modern rich seem to have become increasingly aware of their economic status as a relative condition.

Such findings also raise certain questions about Alfani's attempt to distinguish a new 'early modern' cultural attitude of wealth acceptance across Europe from a supposedly more intolerant one prevalent in the preceding 'medieval' centuries. He quotes the criticisms of the rich in the writings of Thomas Aquinas: but how impactful *were* such commentaries on the social acceptance of wealth in this earlier period?[1] After all, such strictures did little to curb the creation and enjoyment of the many medieval artworks that lay particular emphasis on qualities of material and visual sumptuousness. Many examples were exquisitely wrought out of the most expensive materials then available and were conspicuously displayed at the great royal and princely courts, as well as in wealthy monastic houses, cathedrals and churches across Europe. Abbot Suger's famous celebrations of the use of golden vessels, precious stones, crystal balls and gilded bronze at the Abbey church of St-Denis in Paris in the late 1120s demonstrate that one prominent medieval churchman, at least, understood the creation and display of such luscious objects in a wholly positive light: as physical evidence of God's existence, and as providing the pious viewer with a wholly appropriate means of approaching the unseen spiritual world beyond.[2] Despite the anti-worldly narratives of Aquinas, Bernard of Clairvaux and the Franciscan movement, it is at least arguable that it was only in the early modern centuries that doubts about the use of rich and expensive materials set in among artists themselves and their immediate supporters. In a famous book of art theory published in Florence in 1435, Leon Battista Alberti carefully advised painters to

[1] Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 214.

[2] See Erwin Panofsky's classic account, "Abbot Suger of St-Denis", in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Peregrine Books, 1970), 139-80.

avoid using expensive gold leaf in their works, arguing that this would extend the opportunity to show off their imitative skill while also allowing viewers to engage more deeply with the narrative meanings of their works.[1]

Moreover, doubts about the ethical status of the rich did not disappear in the early modern centuries. In the still-dominant sphere of religious art, for example, iconographies that moralized against the greed and avarice of rich men, such as that showing Christ's parable of Dives and Lazarus, gathered renewed strength, indicating that the old theological suspicions and strictures had not died out. Even in the often sensuous and worldly context of Venetian oil painting repeated depictions of this subject were painted from ca. 1540 onwards. In one such work by Bonifacio de' Pitati (c. 1535-38, Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia) the greedy rich man is shown as a contemporary Venetian patrician feasting on his country estate while his steward unjustly drives away a worthy beggar from his gate.[2] Bonifacio's painting may or may not reflect the coming of religious reform to northeast Italy, but objections to material wealth were in any case reinvigorated and deepened when religious tensions and polemics flared between Protestants and Catholics in this period. It is telling in this regard that both sides of the new divide sought to gain rhetorical primacy precisely by refuting worldly riches and claiming a special attachment to the poor and to the high spiritual value of poverty. The condemnations of the supposed greed and extravagance of the rich issued by the combatants often revisited the strictures of Aquinas, St Bernard and other theologians made centuries earlier.[3] The old problems of attempted periodization reemerge in Alfani's

[1] "There are some who make excessive use of gold, because they think it lends a certain majesty to painting. I would not praise them at all. Even if I wanted to paint Virgil's Dido with her quiver of gold, here hair tied up in gold, her gown fastened with a gold clasp … and everything else resplendent with gold, I would try to represent with colours [gold-coloured pigment] rather than with gold this wealth of rays of gold": Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua* , trans. Cecil Grayson (Phaidon, 1972), 93. A locus classicus for modern critical discussion of this passage is Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, 1972), 16. For a more recent discussion of the role of gold in Florentine painting of the Quattrocento see Saskia C. Quené, *Gold Ground and Perspective: Fra Angelico in the Splendor of the Quattrocento* (Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2023)

[2] `https://www.gallerieaccademia.it/en/parable-rich-man-dives-and-lazarus`. Philip Cottrell and Peter Humfrey, *Bonifacio De' Pitati* (ZeL Edizioni, 2021), 364-5, cat. no. 96.

[3] See, for example, John Calvin's severe words in his *Commentary on Genesis,* 13:1 of 1554: "We

distinction between two clearly contrasting consecutive phases of European cultural development. As has been recognized now for more than a century, at least since Johan Huizinga's groundbreaking *Waning of the Middle Ages* of 1924, many cultural features supposedly specific to the centuries between 1400 and 1800 were already apparent in the preceding ones, while the later period continued to draw heavily on ideas and practices established hundreds of years earlier.[1] Rather than imagining that the rich simply took off their social shackles and partied in the early modern centuries, parading their wealth before a newly pacified and admiring non-rich majority, we might look instead for evidence of continuing tension points in and around the whole vexed question of *ricchezza* within societies that were—probably increasingly—characterized by massive economic disparities between the haves and have-nots.

The depiction of the rich in early modern Europe could hardly become exclusive, given that the visual field, taken as a whole, expanded rapidly in the period. Under the impact of the 'Renaissance' aesthetic credo of *imitatio*, visual art might justifiably treat any subject to be found in nature, implying that a certain allowance of relativity was now a precondition. Depictions of the rich would now have to take their place alongside those featuring many other social types or economic conditions, including the abject poor. But if this suggests that early modern artists had free range to depict what they wanted, this was certainly not the case, at least in most instances. Visual art fell into certain well-defined categories or types, certain of which precluded—or at least delimited—the possibility of an exclusive focus on the contemporary rich. Works devoted to historical themes, often presented on a large-scale and involving complex compositions of many figures, were widely (and increasingly) regarded as the most important and prestigious, especially in the learned academies of art that appeared in Italy, France and elsewhere from the sixteenth century onwards.[2]

know how greatly even a moderate share of wealth, hinders many from raising their heads towards heaven; while they who really possess abundance, not only lie torpid in indolence, but are entirely buried in the earth". See `https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/cal/genesis-13.html`.

[1] See Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas* (Polity, 2010) for a perceptive treatment of the rise of the concept of the 'early modern period itself', which only really emerged as a widely-used term of periodization in the 1970s.

[2] For the primacy of "historical and legendary subjects" in the academic hierarchy of artistic genres see the extract from André Félibien des Avaux, "Conférence de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et

But given the focus of such idealistic *istorie* on events that had happened in the typically distant or mythical past, the type provided relatively few opportunities for the depiction of the contemporary rich. It is true that in certain Franco-Burgundian tapestries the presiding dukes had themselves, their families and their court followers shown as the main actors in historical narratives. In a tapestry featuring *Hercules Initiating the Olympic Games* (c. 1450-75, Glasgow, Burrell Collection), the ancient hero is shown with the features of the current duke, Philip the Good, while his son and successor, Charles the Bold, appears to the left.[1] And this boldly flattering elision of past and present, history and portrait, occasionally appears in monumentally-scaled oil paintings, such as Paolo Veronese's *Family of Darius before Alexander* (c. 1565-7, London, National Gallery) in which the Venetian patron Francesco Pisani and (possibly) his family play an active role in the historical narrative.[2] But in the majority of such large-scale narrative works the emphasis was on the heroic story itself and its ethical meaning, with such anachronisms of historical time, place and personnel studiously avoided.[3]

The continuing predominance of religious works between 1400 and 1800—usually considered as a subsect of works devoted to history—also had a limiting effect in this regard. The rich, who often commissioned such works for their family chapels either at home or in monastic and parish churches, did not typically appear in them other than as diminutive kneeling figures towards the picture edges although, as we will see, there were attempts to extend this kind of donor imagery. In the increasingly popular and widespread secular and empirically-derived image types, such as landscape and genre painting, there was more opportunity for powerful people—who were typically also rich, even if the two categories remain analytically distinct—to have themselves depicted. In works of this kind, the landscape could function as a vehicle for the portrayal of a leading court ruler, as in a Franco-Netherlandish tapestry of the earlier sixteenth century known as the *Flight of the Heron* (Glasgow, Burrell Collection) but prob-

de Sculpture (1669)", in *Art and its Histories*, ed. Steve Edwards (Yale University Press, 1999), 34-6.

[1] https://www.csgimages.org.uk/collections/Tapestries.html?f=198&vf=1.

[2] https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/paolo-veronese-the-family-of-darius-before-alexander.

[3] Contemporary portraits are markedly absent in the scrupulously 'correct' *istorie* painted by Nicolas Poussin, the modern artist most revered by the French academicians of the period.

ably featuring king Francis I of France as the main huntsman. This imagery of rulers enjoying themselves in the countryside, found a typically smaller-scale bourgeois alternative in the scenes of wealthy people dancing, eating and drinking, both outdoors and indoors, produced in the Dutch Republic from around 1600 onwards.[1] These so-called 'high life' or 'merry company' genre scenes, pioneered by Esaias van der Velde, Willem Buytewech and others, did not typically include portraits of known individuals, and could have an underlying moralizing message against excessive pleasure-taking. But they nonetheless gave the rich in a newly wealthy society scope to have their increasingly lavish contemporary lifestyles represented. And in these works of the early phase of the Republic there is as yet no real sign of the 'embarrassment of riches' that later set in as the merchants' piling up of enormous worldly wealth clashed with their puritan moral values.[2] In the equivalently affluent society of the French court in the eighteenth century it also became fashionable to depict parties of young contemporary-looking rich people lounging in park-like landscapes in so-called *fête galante* imagery: a pictorial type to which we will have cause to return. And in Britian in the 1700s, a landscape view was often conjoined with portraits of wealthy estate owners, as in Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (c. 1750, London, National Gallery).[3] But despite these counter-examples, most early modern landscapes highlighted natural features or panoramic views, and did not afford too many opportunities to depict the rich themselves. And despite the examples given above, many genre scenes were devoted to the antics of the lower classes.

[1] See Peter C. Sutton, "Masters of Dutch Genre Painting", in *Masters of Seventeenth Century Dutch Genre Painting* ed. Peter Sutton, exh. cat. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Royal Academy of Arts, London (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1984), xxix–xxx.

[2] See Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Fontana, 1987).

[3] `https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/catalogues/egerton-2000/mr-and-mrs-andrews`.

2. Portraiture

Alfani's argument that the rich successfully consolidated their social position in the period finds its best support in art history from the extraordinary and unprecedented spread of portraiture across Europe between 1400 and 1800. We need to be careful about assuming that portraiture was an artistic invention of the early modern centuries: there are many penetrating medieval examples of works of this kind and Jacob Burckhardt's idea that 'man was conscious of himself only as of a race, people, party, family or corporation' in these earlier centuries is very questionable. The rise of portraiture in the early modern centuries does not necessarily mark the arrival in the West of the 'free personality' or 'the individual', as Burckhardt imagined in 1860. But the gathering ubiquity of works of this type is nonetheless a significant cultural marker in the period.[1] Portraits were now featured in many contexts, and were commissioned in an increasingly wide range of visual media, sizes and locations: from small-scale medals, cameos and miniatures through to monumental tombs and equestrian statues. Such works were displayed in private homes, both relatively humble and palatial, as too in royal palaces, state buildings and churches; they were made to be held in the hand, or worn on the body, or adored from afar on the facades of public buildings in town and city streets and squares. But if this image type thus found a new measure of cultural authority in the centuries after 1400, then (against Burckhardt's assumption) it continued to carry strong supra-personal and class-based dimensions.[2]

Who, exactly, was featured in this imagery varied widely from country to country, place to place, society to society. The new bourgeois social elites of the ever larger and more powerful cities and towns certainly commissioned works of this type in order to consolidate their newfound economic position and associated social prominence.[3] But the rise of urban bourgeois portraiture did not

[1] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Phaidon, 1981), 81-103.

[2] For a telling study of the formative role of social context in Italian Renaissance portraiture see Gottfried Boehm, *Bildnis und Individuum: über den Ursprung der Porträt-malerei in der italienischen Renaissance* (Prestel-Verlag, 1985). For the special dominance of portraiture at the courts see Martin Warnke, *The Court Artist: On the Ancestry of the Modern Artist*, trans. David McLintock (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 212-24.

[3] Among the earlier examples are the portraits of Jan van Eyck of Bruges. Although van Eyck was

bring to an end the longer-standing association of this picture type with the medieval courtly or feudal aristocracies. In many countries or regions, especially in the countryside, these older elites remained firmly in place, and continued to commission portraits of themselves. Many amongst the urban rich sought to emulate or adopt an aristocratic style in their portraits, preferring to be shown in the dignifying manner of the nobles rather than as middling traders.[1] Alfani roundly dismisses the Marxist tradition of interpretation at one point in his book, but at others uses terms such as 'bourgeois' and 'class' that broadly derive from it.[2] And while his skepticism about the usefulness of historical materialism to his discussion might in some ways be justified, the light that such an approach has shone on the process of 'refeudalization' of the middle classes from the sixteenth century onwards, as they accumulated capital and identified themselves with the values and culture of the older aristocratic elite, remains valuable enough.[3]

The vast majority of early modern portraits feature the better off or affluent—and therefore also the more powerful or influential—members of society. The spread of such works across Europe in societies that were in other ways very different from one another lends support to Alfani's argument. The rise of portraiture may be taken as evidence that wealthy people, whatever their social origins, now sought to establish their role as fixtures within, guardians of, and models for, wider society. Portraiture, we may take it, provided the rich with a useful platform from which to proclaim their preeminence, granting them the opportunity to present themselves in a more or less sympathetic or flattering light. It was to some extent also a visual type that encouraged wish-fulfillment

closely associated with the Burgundian court and its aristocratic values, certain of the portraits he made, such as that of the Bruges goldsmith *Jan de Leeuw* (1436, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), indicate the gathering prominence of a mercantile urban social elite. His example in such works was to be much imitated by later Flemish and Dutch painters.

[1] In sixteenth-century Venice, painters such as Paolo Veronese re-modelled the image of the ruling caste of merchant-patricians in the guise of the mainland Italian aristocracies: see John Garton, *Grace and Grandeur: The Portraiture of Paolo Veronese* (Harvey Miller Publishers, 2008).

[2] Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 3-4. 160, 225.

[3] See, for example, Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society*, (Princeton University Press, 2014), 234-40, who follows earlier Italian Marxists such as Ruggiero Romano and Rosario Villari when he argues that the Italian economy was effectively 'refeudalized' in the late sixteenth century.

or self-fictionalization.[1] Pictured in this flexible fictive domain, the rich could appear as they wanted to see themselves: as men and women of substance who were here to stay, their imagery reconfirming their importance not only in the present day but for all eternity.[2] But this might not mean that they wholly succeeded in doing so. In his conclusion, Alfani describes the position of the rich in the West as 'intrinsically fragile'.[3] And there is often—perhaps even typically—an aspirational quality in early modern portraiture that might hint at this underlying cultural and economic insecurity.

The imagery featured in some of these portraits often downplayed or only obliquely indicated the material wealth of the sitters. Portraiture may in this way have followed a wider tendency in visual art of the period to mask, deflect or ambiguate the explicit display of wealth. This cultural reticence may not ultimately have been determined by the kind of Albertian or Renaissance aesthetic principles mentioned above, or by the limitations enforced by the period dispersal of pictorial genres or types. It owed more to the wealthy's awareness of always potentially threatening surrounding populations or communities of the non-rich, ever ready to attack overweening displays of material *ricchezza*. Downplaying this economic advantage in favour of other qualities more widely shared with the non-rich served as a kind of social insurance policy, helping to integrate the wealthy into society as a whole. The often very marked individuation of sitters' faces, with expressive intimations of their inward understanding and emotions, may ultimately have served this purpose, and in any case provided an alluring visual alternative to open displays of wealth that could easily

[1] Harry Berger, "Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture", *Representations* 46 (1994), 87-120.
[2] Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, 61, clearly had portraiture in mind when he commented on the "divine power" of painting which "not only makes the absent present (…) but also represents the dead to the living many centuries later, so that they are recognized by spectators with pleasure".
[3] Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 317.

appear as vulgar and arrogant. Rather than presenting their sitters as defined by their privileged economic position, portraitists emphasized their qualities as complex, rounded individuals, and in so doing found ways to avoid explicitly identifying their sitters *as rich*.

Portrait sitters often had themselves presented as patriotic soldiers whose role was to protect the state, court, empire or principality; or as culturally sophisticated persons who could stand as exempla of good manners and taste. Taking up such positive 'poses' required a certain distancing from the bald facts of their monetary status, or even a wider dissimulation of their high social position. From the earlier sixteenth century onwards, a vernacular etiquette literature spread across Europe that offered careful instruction on the correct manners and behaviors to be adopted in polite company at court.[1] These widely-read publications, whose very existence indicates a more contingent notion of nobility as something that could be learned rather than merely inherited, advised the partial concealment of outward displays of wealth or rank. Books such as Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528) had a discernable influence on European portraiture. Raphael's famously informal depiction of its nobleman-author (1515-6, Paris, Musée du Louve) whom he pictured as a friendly social equal rather than a haughty aristocrat, set a new standard for the dissimulation of wealth and rank, its emphasis on the sitter's nonchalance or sprezzatura either anticipating or reflecting the key social values advanced in Castiglione's book.[2] Castiglione himself had drawn on fashions and related values at the leading European court of the Habsburgs in Spain, especially when advising the courtier to wear self-suppressing black rather than brightly-coloured or ornately patterned or striped clothing, which a little later—around 1600—became associated with lower-class and untrustworthy street types, such as swaggering soldiers, *bravi*, gypsies and sex workers.[3] In the repeated portraits of the Habsburg rulers

[1] For the emergence of an overlapping culture of politeness in early modern England see Keith Thomas, *In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilization in Early Modern England* (Yale University Press, 2018).

[2] `https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010066418`. Raphael's portrait anticipated the publication of Castiglione's book in Venice in 1528 by more than a decade, but the painter, who had met the author in Rome, may already have read a version of the unpublished manuscript, given that Castiglione had started writing it as early as 1508.

[3] "Black is more pleasing in clothing than any other colour": Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of*

Charles V and Philip II that Titian completed from the early 1530s onwards, a Castiglionesque downplaying of extravagance in the royal sitters' dress is evident, at least in the majority of examples.[1] And this tendency was extended into the following century at the Spanish court, where self-suppressing dress codes were preferred to lavish colouristic displays. In many portraits of king Philip IV by Velázquez, the carefully chosen palette of matt creams, browns, grays and blacks serve to downplay the royal sitter's absolute power or authority, avoiding any outward show of royal magnificence (*magnificentia*).[2]

A similar avoidance of lavish sartorial display was favoured in the new Dutch Republic, where the mercantile burgher elite typically wore black, their avoidance of bright colours serving to suggest their work ethic, their probity in business, and their reformed Calvinist piety. A self-restricting dress code had long been in place in the much older republican society of Venice, where restraint and uniformity was demanded of the closed social caste of patrician merchants who governed the city, who usually wore full-length red or black togas that downplayed their individuality. But in both these early modern Republics the authorities felt it necessary to pass sumptuary laws that attempted to control—among other 'extravagances' such as undue feasting—the dress and jewelry that could be worn.[3] If it was not only the rich who wore lavish clothing and jewelry in the period, then they must nonetheless have been the main targets of such legislation. The fact that this legislation had to repeated so often indicates that

the Courtier [1528], trans. Charles Singleton (Garden City Doubleday, 1959), 122. For the bright and even lavish clothing of low-life types in Rome around 1600 see Elizabeth Currie, *Street Style: Art and Dress in the Time of Caravaggio* (Reaktion Books, 2025), esp. 45-60.

[1] Titian's awareness of Spanish taste and of Castiglione's prescriptions is already evident in his portraits for the north Italian courts of Ferrara and Mantua of the 1520s featuring shadowed sitters in dark dress, and was to some extent continued in his subsequent works of this type for the Habsburgs, although admittedly in certain of these later works a more openly imperial tone is struck. See Peter Humfrey, *Titian: The Complete Paintings* (Ludion, 2007), cat. nos. 70, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 83, 85, 96, 165, 166, 168, 183, 199.

[2] It has often been noted that Velázquez when much further again, deploying an uncompromising *imitatio* that exposed the all-powerful monarch's physical weakness and mental frailty. See José López-Rey, *Velázquez: The Complete Works* (Taschen, 1997), cat. nos. 28, 29, 36, 37, 52, 61, 63, 100, 120.

[3] See the sumptuary legislation included in *Venice: A Documentary History 1450-1630*, ed. David Chambers and Brian Pullan (University of Toronto Press, 2001), 177-82. Very similar laws were passed in the Dutch Republic in the following century: see Schama, *Embarrassment of Riches*, 186-7.

the affluent were in the habit of openly flaunted their wealth before the eyes of the non-rich population, and were loath to stop doing so despite the warnings from the authorities that this might cause trouble. While outwardly conforming to the self-suppressing demands of the authorities, many Dutch burghers of the seventeenth century 'golden age' had their dark garments fashioned out of shiny textured satin, with black-on-black acanthus or other patterning inlaid. As the portraits of leading painters such as Frans Hals and Rembrandt tell us, these blacks were often offset by intricately-fashioned ruffs and cuffs, with fine lace-embroidered finishings. Extravagant felt hats with coloured sashes and pale kid gloves further heightened the visual effect. The grand composition of Hals' *Willem van Heythuysen* (c. 1625, Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen), for example, owes more to older traditions of high aristocratic portraiture than to the puritan ethic, with the sitter—a Haarlem-based textile merchant—presented in full-length and particularly lavishly dressed.[1]

Painters sometimes further exaggerated these showy costumes in order to flatter their sitters, given that visual art was not susceptible to sumptuary legislation, and offered the rich a domain in which the flaunting of their wealth could not be sanctioned. In mid-sixteenth century Venice, Veronese lent his merchant-patrician sitters a courtly appearance that reflected their wider social aspiration to join the European aristocracies of mainland Europe.[2] In his *Lady in a Blue Dress* ('La Bella Nani', c. 1555-60, Paris, Musée du Louvre), the sitter's blue silk and satin dress threatens to become the star of the exuberant pictorial show, its original material *ricchezza* in all likelihood further enhanced by the painter.[3] The resplendent garment is offset by elaborate and outsized golden jewellery and cameos that the woman might not actually have been able to wear, with precious stones highlighted in her rings, necklace and even liberally laced through her elaborate coiffure. Her head becomes relatively small in comparison, undermining the usual dominance of the face in portraiture.

In the donor portraits sometimes included in sacred works there is a parallel move away from the limited depictions of leading families to be found in

[1] https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artwork/ZnxwPdvLXg.

[2] For these aspirations see Ugo Tucci, "The Psychology of the Venetian Merchant in the Sixteenth Century", in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. John Hale (Rowman and Littlefield, 1973), 346-78.

[3] https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010065927. Garton, *Grace and Grandeur*, 62-8.

medieval works of this kind. Wealthy donors had traditionally been portrayed on a much smaller scale than the sacred actors, shown in closed profile views as they kneel in prayer in a supplementary space towards the foreground margins of the image. From the fifteenth century onwards there are examples of works in which rich donors or their supporters are depicted in more extended ways. Those actually paying for the painting could, on occasion, substitute a commemorative portrait of a rich and powerful predecessor or thinly disguised portraits of those that they supported, for the more usual donor type. In Filippo Lippi's altarpiece known as the *Madonna del Ceppo* (1452-3, Prato, Palazzo Pretorio), the fabulously rich Prato merchant Francesco Datini, a famous hero of the town who had died some forty years earlier, is shown kneeling to the lower left.[1] Datini's figure is certainly distinguished from the four so-called 'Buonomini' ('goodmen') nearby by his greater size and by his action in presenting them—co-founders of the charitable institution of the Casa del Ceppo—to the Virgin and Child. But Lippi's depiction of Datini's figure nonetheless plays by the rules insofar as it retains the limited traditional kneeling profile view expected in donor imagery, his body and individual features made difficult to see by his concealing heavy cloak, hood and hat. In a later altarpiece showing the *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1475, Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi) painted in Florence by Sandro Botticelli, things were taken much further. The work was commissioned by the Medici acolyte Gaspare del Lama to hang in his family chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella.[2] Gaspare had himself shown to the right as the donor, but he also required Botticelli to model the heads of the key figures in the sacred narrative on those of powerful members of the Medici family: the three kings appear as the three generations of covert rulers in the city, Cosimo, Piero and Lorenzo.[3] In del Lama's picture, the age-old visual, temporal

[1] https://www.palazzopretorio.prato.it/en/explore-the-museum/artworks/1311-madonna-ceppo/. Datini was, of course, the subject of a now classic biographical study of an enormously rich Italian trader of the late fourteenth century: Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato: Francesco di Marco Datini* (Jonathan Cape, 1957).

[2] https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/boticelli-adoration-lami.

[3] The idea of showing these wealthy bankers as the kings featured in the Bible was encouraged by the ruling family's special association with the Magi. They had already had already themselves shown either as the kings themselves, or their close followers, in the frescos for their family chapel in the Palazzo Medici painted by Benozzo Gozzoli in 1459: see Franco Cardini, *The Chapel of the Magi in Palazzo Medici* (Mandragora, 2006).

and moral distinctions between sacred actors and secular contemporaries was laid aside as the figures of three present day 'kings' of society were elided with well-known biblical prototypes of worldly wealth.

In Venice too, a broadly equivalent breakout by rich patrons from the conventional visual and conceptual restrictions on their depiction is evident in certain examples of donor portraiture. In Titian's *Virgin and Child with Saints and Donors* (Ca' Pesaro altarpiece, 1519-26, Venice, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari), the once scrupulously depersonalized space of the church altarpiece becomes the domain of the commissioning patrician family.[1] Although the patron, Jacopo Pesaro, still kneels in apparent subservience to the holy figures at the lower left, these latter are displaced from the centre of the image, the entire composition swivelling towards the donor, the only distraction being the Christ child's turn towards the answering portraits of Pesaro's four brothers and nephew to the lower right, who also seem to be worshipping their kinsman rather than the holy figures.[2] In Veronese's religious works made for private palaces, this extension of the imagery of the wealthy commissioning family into the traditionally hieratic space of the sacred image was taken still further. In his *Supper at Emmaus* (c. 1555-60, Paris, Musée du Louvre), a work probably made for the *portego* (main room) of a private palace, Veronese includes a populous contemporary family (whose identity is now unknown) along with their children and pets: they crowd in around the biblical figures so that it becomes difficult to tell whether the work is a sacred historical image or a secular group portrait.[3]

Such 'improvements' broadly align with those evident in the field of independent secular portraiture in the same period, and can certainly be taken as providing further ballast to Alfani's idea that the rich found new ways to widen and strengthen their social profile, becoming ever more confident in their self-display. At one point, Alfani argues that the rich increasingly preferred to have themselves appear as 'munificent' rather than 'magnificent' in the early modern centuries.[4] But the example of donor portraiture, and indeed of independent

[1] https://www.savevenice.org/project/madonna-of-ca-pesaro.
[2] See Tom Nichols, *Titian and the End of the Venetian Renaissance* (Reaktion Books, 2013), 69-72.
[3] https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010067589.
[4] Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 226.

portraiture per se, does not suggest a consistent movement away from open displays of wealth towards ones of charitable or social giving. These two societal postures were, in any case, not mutually exclusive: even if one seemed to get the upper hand, the other remained waiting in the wings, always ready to be appealed to or reinstituted. An almost schizophrenic switching between alternative modes is, for example, evident enough when the political and social history of Florence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is considered. The public-orientated 'republican' show of art patronage of the so-called 'Pater Patriae' Cosimo de' Medici in the mid-fifteenth century was soon replaced by the more privatized and princely approach of his grandson Lorenzo, only to be violently overthrown by Savonarola's radically anti-courtly 'bonfire of the vanities', before the family finally returned to establish a court principality from the 1530s onwards, supported once again by ever-more inflated visual iconographies of self-glorification.[1]

Florence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries might be an extreme case, but an oscillation between publicly-orientated projects that mediated the display of wealth and power and those that furnished its overt display was nonetheless characteristic in the early modern centuries. The deflections or ambiguations adopted by the rich in *some* of their artistic commissions do not mean that this can be taken as an irreversible or indisputable norm. Phases of munificence towards the wider public often followed those of extravagant self-display, although this more self-suppressing posture was itself always susceptible to being overturned once more in the future. There is also some visual evidence to support Alfani's suggestion that the cultural impulse towards munificence or giving back to society among the rich gradually declined in favour of ever more overt and unchallenged displays of magnificence.[2] In Florence, at least, the last word seems to have been had by the aggressively appropriative creation of an

[1] Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 241, usefully notes that the self-conscious revival of the ideal of princely *magnificentia* (Plato's *megaloprépeia*) by the new mercantile rich from the fifteenth century onwards, served to legitimate their rise to power by connecting them to the world of classical antiquity. See fn. 2, page 4 for Giovanni Pontano's exaltation of Cosimo de' Medici's 'magnificence' in his Florentine art patronage.

[2] Alfani, *As Gods Among Men,* 246: "as the social position of the rich became more assured, their participation in the ruling elite unchallenged (or almost), and their presence in the community unquestioned, they also felt less and less obliged to give part of their wealth back to society".

exaggerated hagiography of the ruling family. In 1565, the second Cosimo de' Medici—soon to be anointed as Grand Duke of Tuscany but then identified as Duke of Florence—had himself shown being crowned in heaven in a ceiling painting by Giorgio Vasari prominently placed on the ceiling of the main room in the Palazzo Vecchio that had once been the seat of the communal elected government of the Republic.[1] Vasari's painting, which brazenly hijacks older sacred iconographies such as that of the Ascension of Christ to envision Cosimo's executive power, is the first (but not the last) work of the period to portray a still-living ruler as a quasi-sacred figure, already taking his place amongst the angels in heaven.

The deployment of visual imagery to deflect or downplay material wealth only went so far, and perhaps gave way to ever more extravagant displays of power and magnificence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially on occasions such as royal visitations as European countries such as Spain and France fell under the sway of ever more autocratic aristocratic rulers.[2] At the absolutist court of Louis XIV—the so-called Roi Soleil—in France, artists presenting visual arguments for the executive royal power dispensed with the deflecting sprezzatura of polite courtly manners favoured in the previous century, developing a visual language that more overtly expressed the king's authority as supra-cultural or even supra-human.[3] In works such as the marble bust of Louis that the visiting Roman sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini made on his visit to the court (1665, Palace of Versailles, Versailles), the personal identity of the king is not sacrificed. Yet the elaborate waves of drapery that provide a horizontal bed across the lower part of the sculpture separate the king off from the world of the viewer below, perhaps doubling as cloud banks to suggest his identity as a god—probably Apollo—who already enjoys an exalted position in

[1] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giorgio_vasari_e_aiuti,_apoteosi_di_cosimo_I_tra_gli_stemmi_della_citt%C3%A0_di_firenze,_1563-65,_01.jpg.

[2] For the uses of visual imagery (predominantly portraiture) in these ways at the English and Neapolitan courts see, respectively, David Howarth, *Images of Rule: Art and Politics in the English Renaissance, 1485-1649* (Red Globe Press, 1997); Gabriel Guarino, *Representing the King's Splendour: Communication and Reception of Symbolic Forms of Power in Viceregal Naples* (Manchester University Press, 2010).

[3] See Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (Yale University Press, 1994); Georgia J. Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

the high Empyrean beyond the mere earthly domain.[1] Hyacinthe Rigaud's later painted portrait (1701, Paris, Musée du Louvre), returns Louis to worldly materiality, concentrated on the stacking up of expensive and exquisitely wrought fine materials that encircle the royal sitter and effectively isolate him from the relatively prosaic and impoverished world beyond the frame.[2] No part of the painted surface remains unadorned or un-patterned, with saturated reds, ultramarine blue and gold predominating. The king's lavish robe is shown illogically turning back on itself in order to reveal the pale ermine of its inner side, the movement serving to vastly extend or inflate the extent of the royal body, while also flattening it and masking its contours to suggest its more than natural or human status.

Such lavish effects were not, however, the preserve of the absolutist royal courts alone. They were emulated even in surviving city-republics such as that of Venice: a society which had become increasingly fixed and static, given the control of a narrow coterie of super-rich patricians of the so-called *case vecchie* over the state. In Ludovico Gallina's portrait of *Paolo Renier* (1779, Padua, Museo Civico), the penultimate doge of Venice is presented in a haughty full-length standing format that owes much to Rigaud's example, constantly suggesting that the sitter is an aristocratic duke or court ruler rather than the elected city official that he really was.[3] Like Rigaud's Louis, Renier is shown surrounding by expensively and elaborately gilded objects and patterned fabrics, and although he continues to sport the traditional *corno ducale* and ornamental buttons—the so-called *campanoni d'oro* ('golden bells')—comparison with earlier depictions of Venetian doges reveals just how far the older republican restraints on outward display have been abandoned in favour of an effect of exaggerated—though static—*ricchezza*.

[1] https://collections.chateauversailles.fr/?lng=gb&_gl=1*vgjm32*_gcl_au*MjAxOTg0MDgwLjE3NjU3MTQ0Njc.#/query/c0208f7d-52b9-4ba5-8372-ecddb0338d16. There were visual precedents for Bernini's approach in earlier court portraits such Vasari's *Apotheosis of Cosimo I de' Medici* mentioned earlier. It could also be adopted to imagery of courtiers as for example, in an oil sketch by Peter Paul Rubens showing the *Apotheosis of the Duke of Buckingham* (before 1625, London, National Gallery), a study for a destroyed ceiling painting that once hung on the duke's London palace.

[2] https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010066115.

[3] https://padovamusei.it/it/musei/museo-arte-medievale-moderna/collezioni/dipinti/ritratto-doge-paolo-renier.

Despite the evidence these examples seem to provide of the consolidated social power and authority of the rich in early modernity, portraits did not always or necessarily show such affluent types, and even when they did the emphasis was not always directly on the sitter's material wealth. In many cases the precise economic status or net worth of a given portrait sitter remains unknown. When considering 'new rich' portraits we need to remember too that a given merchant's financial situation was often a radically fluid and uncertain one, at least insofar as it was dependent on the fluctuations of the market.[1] Even an inherited position as a high-ranking nobleman was no guarantee of consistent material wealth, as is indicated by the European-wide phenomenon of the so-called 'shamefaced poor'. In sixteenth century Venice, for example, bankrupted members of the ruling patrician caste wrapped their entire bodies and faces—apart from the eyes—in pale cloth in order to avoid being recognized by the social inferiors from whom they were now constrained to beg for alms in the streets.[2] The concealed faces of these *poveri vergognosi* were the flip side of the ever extending display of boldly-defined and individualized visages in many contemporary portraits of the wealthy and powerful.

In centuries that were characterized by new opportunities for social mobility and self-fashioning, portraiture proved a useful vehicle for a parade of the new faces of those 'on the up'.[3] The appearance of non-nobles in the once more narrowly aristocratic domain of portraiture reflects this new fluidity or mutability of cultural identities. Especially after 1600, portraits—or at least 'portrait-like'—images of people who were neither high-ranking nor wealthy also began to appear in a picture type that proved to be more democratizing than exclusive. It would not be an exaggeration to talk of a 'portraiture of the poor' when the trenchantly realistic depiction of excluded street people in the works of Caravaggist painters across Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

[1] Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 90, notes, by contrast, feudalism's stabilizing effect on the economy.
[2] See the woodcut illustration in Cesare Vecellio, *Degli habiti antichi et moderni di diverse parti del mondo* (Damiano Zenaro, 1590), 176.
[3] For a now classic account of identity manipulation in the period see Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 1980). See also Loren Campbell, Miguel Falomir, Luke Syson and Jennifer Fletcher, *Renaissance Faces: Van Eyck to Titian* (Yale University Press, 2008).

is considered.[1] At the Spanish court of Philip IV, Diego Velázquez made studiously non-judgmental portraits of the king's jesters, fools and dwarves, while in Paris in the early 1640s the Le Nain brothers painted a series of striking genre works featuring desperately impoverished peasants, granting the lowly 'sitters' a monumental presence that equaled the individualizing manner of many contemporary portraits of leading noblemen or merchants.[2] This development provides us with an example of how an image type ostensibly fashioned to serve those towards the top of society, who were almost by definition also the rich, ineluctably drew into its domain the very persons that it was originally intended to exclude.

3. Rich and Poor

As the rich were depicted more frequently and more prominently in early modern art, finding ever greater opportunities to promote and reveal themselves, especially in the domain of portraiture, so this representational 'arrival' was paralleled by the development of an alternative or mirror imagery of the have-nots: a newly extensive 'art of poverty' devoted to the abject poor emerged as a dark shadow to set off the lustre of flamboyant displays of *ricchezza*.[3] The very terms 'rich' and 'poor' were to some extent interdependent—like many binaries operative within early modern culture—defined with reference to one

[1] For the spread of these 'portrait-like' paintings of low-life types in Italian art see *Da Caravaggio a Ceruti: La scena di genere e l'immagine dei* pitocchi *nella pittura italiana*, ed. Francesco Porzio (Skira Editore, 1998); *Giacomo Ceruti: A Compassionate Eye*, ed. Davide Gasparotto (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2023).

[2] For Velázquez's pictures of court 'low life' figures see López-Rey, *Velázquez*, cat. nos. 39, 65, 82, 83, 84, 99, 102, 103, 104. For the Le Nain peasants see *Le frères Le Nain*, ed. Jacques Thuillier (Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationeux, 1978), especially cat. nos. 21-30; *The Brothers Le Nain: Painters of Seventeenth Century France*, ed. C. D. Dickerson III and Esther Bell (Yale University Press and Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2016), cat. nos. 37-53.

[3] See Tom Nichols, *The Art of Poverty: Irony and Ideal in Sixteenth-Century Beggar Imagery* (Manchester University Press, 2007) and "Motives of Control/Motifs of Creativity: The Visual Imagery of Poverty in Early Modern Europe", in *The Routledge History of Poverty, c. 1450-1800*, ed. David Hitchcock and Julia McClure (Routledge, 2021), 138-63; Livio Pestelli, *Picturing the Lame in Italian Art from Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Abingdon and New York, 2017); Lorenzo Coccoli, "The Plural Poor: The Universe of Poverties in Early Modern Europe", in *Giacomo Ceruti*, 47-63; Currie, *Street Style*, 139-66.

another, rather than understood as stand alone, absolute or fixed qualities. In social reality, the rich man was identified as such by his employment or train of less rich followers, servants or slaves, while the poor one understood his situation in terms of the wealth of others that he lacked or had been denied. In a penetrating earlier study, Alfani drew attention to the relational aspects of poverty in early modern Europe; and 'richness' seems to have been understood in a similar light.[1]

In visual art the viewing presence of the rich can be implied, even when they are not actually represented. This is the case, for example, in the shadow imagery of poverty mentioned just now, as too in newly popular images of the vast social majority in the early modern centuries: the peasants of the countryside. In the manuscript illuminations of the Labours of the Months included in the so-called *Très Riches Heures*, ca. 1412-16 (Musée Condé, Chantilly) of the Duc du Berry, brother of the French king Charles V, illuminating by the three De Limbourg brothers in ca. 1412-16, the presence of the royal patron is implied by the inclusion of castles that are at least half-identifiable with those that he and his family owned: buildings that loom imposingly over tiny stick-like figures of the peasants, perhaps also owned by the patron, who work ceaselessly in the fields beyond.[2] The castles served as a visual surrogate for the duke himself as he looked through the book: even when he or his court followers do not appear, his ever-watchful eye is implied by the high viewpoint, as he overlooks the labours of his peasants. A similar suggestion of the overseeing presence of a

[1] Guido Alfani, "The Economic History of Poverty c. 1450-1800", in *The Routledge History of Poverty*, 29-36.

[2] `https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/images-of-liberty-and-power-book-of-hours-duc-de-berry`. In the case of 'July' for example, the miniature repressents the Palais de Poitiers with a viewpoint from the right bank of the nearby river Clain: see *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, intro and legends by Jean Longnon and Raymond Cazelles (Thames and Hudson, 1977), 177.

'high' viewer who looks down—both literally and metaphorically—on 'low' subjects was subsequently adopted in the many images of rural people that became popular, particularly in German and Netherlandish art, from the late fifteenth century onwards.[1]

The main purchasers and audiences for these genre works were no longer the high aristocracy of the countryside, but rather the new rich of merchants and burghers in the towns and cities, who had brought about the 'medieval Commercial Revolution' across Europe in previous centuries.[2] Like the portraits that they now often commissioned, these genre works supported the further self-definition of these wealthy townspeople as a bona fide social class in the early modern period. Such works typically catalogued the supposed bad or laughable behaviours of peasants, showing them carousing at leisure, and thus allowed their urban patrons or owners to imagine themselves in inverse terms: as attentively committed to hard work and moral values.[3] The bourgeois town or city dweller's very ownership of such pictures further defined his superiority, given that it presumed his possession of enough disposable income to purchase the work, as also that he had the requisite leisure time to look at it and the sophistication to understand its typically satirical and didactic meanings.[4] The high viewer/low subject arrangement illustrates the way in which ideas about the wealthy were defined in inverse or relational terms, often appearing through the representation of opposing qualities of social and moral abjection.

Portraits of the rich did not typically work in the same way insofar as they did not typically assume or require the viewing presence of a poor man in order to secure their effect. Many such works projected spectators who were so-

[1] Hans-Joachim Raupp, *Bauersatiren: Entstehung und Entwicklung des bäuerlichen Genres in der deutschen und niederländischen Kunst ca. 1470-1570* (Lukassen Verlag, 1986).

[2] Alfani, *As Gods Among Men*, 160.

[3] *Beeld van de andere, vertoog over het zelf: over wilden en narren. Boeren en bedelaars*, ed. Paul Vandenbroeck, (Antwerpen Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 1987); Paul Vandenbroeck, "Le Paysan Monumental. Histoire et Fonction d'un Genre Artistique", in *Paysage, paysans. L'art et la terre en Europe du Moyen Âge au XXe siècle*, ed. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994), 103-8.

[4] For the rapid growth of an open market for such peasant imagery in Antwerp, one of the leading commercial centres of Europe in the sixteenth century, see Larry Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes: The Rise of Pictorial genres in the Antwerp Art Market* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

cially homologous or even superior in terms of social rank, for example in those works offered as diplomatic gifts by less prestigious and wealthy court rulers or courtiers to more affluent ones.[1] The high viewer/low subject relationship seems to have been unidirectional in its cultural operation, again for economic reasons. Poor households simply could not afford to buy depictions of the rich for the walls of their homes, even should they have wanted to display them there (the mass dissemination of cheap reproductions of leading royal, court or military members of high society was largely a phenomenon of the centuries beyond 1800). For the rich, on the other hand, images of the socially disadvantaged quickly came to have a persistent attraction, whether this imagery merely served to reconfirm, by way of contrast, their high status; or had deeper apotropaic functions, the threat of 'the other' nullified by its inclusion in even the most intimate and elevated domestic settings. Depictions of the abject poor and disabled could find a home in the fine dining rooms of the rich, for example on the painted surfaces of Italian maiolica earthenware.[2] Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted peasants and other lowly social types on wooden dessert trenchers (*teljoors*) used at a dinner party held by the wealthy officers of the Antwerp mint (quite literally the moneymakers) around 1560, where they served to illustrate popular proverbs.[3] But the idea of inviting the impoverished to the dinner-parties of the wealthy—if only in representational form—was not new, given that Albrecht Dürer had designed an ornate candlestick or table fountain featuring a one-legged beggar in the early sixteenth century.[4] The liking of the rich for fancy tableware that made a striking contrast between the preciousness of the materials used and the economically desperate person represented continued into the eighteenth century, when a French jewel artist working in Berlin fashioned an image of a one-eyed and one-legged beggar out of a baroque pearl,

[1] For a classic study of the role of gifts in early modern France see Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

[2] See, for example, the dish from Urbino of the 1540s made in the workshop of Guido di Merlino showing *Saints Peter and John Healing the Disabled Man* (London, V and A Museum) based on an engraving by Parmigianino after one of Raphael's tapestry cartoons: `https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O162050/dish-workshop-of-guido/`.

[3] Pieter Bruegel, *Twelve Proverbs* (1558, Antwerp, Museum Mayer van der Burgh): `https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/bruegel-twelve-proverbs/`. See Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Pieter Bruegel and the Idea of Human Nature* (Reaktion Books, 2019), 7-12.

[4] See W. L. Strauss, *The Complete Drawings of Albrecht Dürer* (Abaris Books, 1975) vol, 3, 1, 588-9.

and further enhanced its material *ricchezza* by decorated it with gold, enamel, diamonds and ivory.[1]

Something of this visual/conceptual intimacy is evident too in artworks that more explicitly elide differences, suggesting that apparently contrary or opposing states of wealth and poverty are intimately connected: two sides of the same coin in a world ever more subject to sudden economic switches, reversals and upheavals, and that seemed to be governed less by a fixed social cadre of the rich than by the fickle (and ungovernable) goddess Fortuna. This doubleness could still be presented as socially taboo, as it is in a didactic tract of 1566 detailing the notorious case of a London trickster who sometimes posed as a wealthy 'upright man' called Nicolas Blunt, and sometimes as a street beggar called Nicolas Genynges.[2] In a woodcut illustration appended to a later edition of 1571, the man appears in his two alternative disguises, holding a single stick—both gentleman's cane *and* beggar's staff—between them to indicate the fraud. His true identity remains unknown, but in an anonymous woodcut from ca. 1600 the idea of the interchangeability and reversibility of *ricchezza* and *povertà* is allowed a potentially more sympathetic—or at least existentially accurate— reality or truth. In this image, the two conditions inhabit the same body simultaneously, without any implication of criminality, as if they were essentially conjoined in nature.[3] The man's body is half-dressed in the lavish thick robes of the rich and half in the rags of a beggar, although there is no indication of which of the two conditions might ultimately triumph, or which should be considered superior in moral terms.

In Christian imagery, too, that question could remain open: in works such as Bonfacio's showing Christ's parable of Dives and Lazarus mentioned earlier, it is the rich man who superficially appears to be hell bound: less likely to enter the kingdom of heaven than a camel is to travel through the eye of a needle (Mt 19: 24). Even in this iconography, however, it is not Dives' wealth itself that endangers his soul, but only his greedy refusal to give alms. Indeed, the pos-

[1] Jean Louis Girardet, *One-Eyed Beggar with a Wooden Foot* (before 1725, Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Inv-no. VI 94): `https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/118002`.

[2] Thomas Harman, *A Caveat of Warening for Common Cursitors Vulgarley Called Vagabones* (William Griffith, 1566).

[3] For a reproduction see `http://www.alarmy.com` 2HAB4YA.

session of riches is itself morally advantageous, given that it provides a special opportunity to the rich to save their souls by giving alms to the poor. The rich man's alliance with the poor man is in this way understood as both necessary and positive, providing him with an essential means to enter heaven after his death.[1] In the depictions of Christian almsgiving that remained widespread and numerous through the early modern centuries (especially but not exclusively in countries now identifying as Catholic), those with disposable income were pictured in close physical or spatial proximity to those with nothing. In many such works, however, the contemporary rich did *not* appear, given that the almsgiver was pictured as a sacred/historical figure, most typically as a saint. When this kind of visual abstention was not made the imagery of almsgiving could become contentious, incurring the wrath of the non-rich. In the Dutch town of Alkmaar in the early 1580s local Protestant iconoclasts, inflamed against their Catholic and Spanish-supporting overlords among the town's wealthy ruling elite, attacked a panel from a pre-Reformation altarpiece depiction the *Clothing of the Naked* in a nearby church. But they took care to target their desecration. The rebels gouged out the eyes of a portrait of an affluent merchant of the town, shown giving away his clothes at the door of his house, but they left the nearby crowd of beggars—with an image of Christ himself among them—untouched.[2] The selective nature of the reformers' image destruction illustrates again the risks inherent in a display of charity by the wealthy that was too open or self-promoting. Had the almsgiver in this altarpiece been shown as a revered saint rather than a contemporary rich man then it is likely that the violence against his image would have been avoided. In this example, at least, it is clear that the anger of the protestors (mostly from lower economic ranks) was turned on the wealthy of their immediate locality: on those in a position to give alms rather than on those who received them.

There are other examples of depictions of secular and contemporary almsgiving in the sixteenth century: typically enacted by elected state officials (both

[1] See Bonifacio's painting mentioned earlier and Philip Cottrell, "Vice, vagrancy and villa culture: Bonifacio de' Pitati's *Dives and Lazarus* in its Venetian context", *Artibus et Historiae*, XXVI, no. 51 (2005): 131-50.

[2] C. J. de Bruyn Kops, "De Zeven Werken van Barmhartigheid van der Meester van Alkmaar gerestaureerd", *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 23 (1975): 203-6: https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/object/The-Seven-Works-of-Mercy--90bdff3e2f1b2ddaf651c7195509e1fd.

Catholic and Protestant) that did not cause or get caught up in a riot. In a painting from the circle of Christoph Amberger (1537, Augsburg, Städtische Kunstsammlungen) erected in the Town Hall of the recently (though temporarily) reformed city of Augsburg, contemporary officials or almoners give charity from the common chest; while in Catholic Venice in 1540, the patrician Girolamo Cornaro had a medal struck with his portrait on one side and a scene showing him seated on a raised dais above a group of poor to whom he gives alms on the other.[1] Cornaro had become renowned for his help to the starving peasants in the Padua area (Padavano), although—perhaps vitally—his charitable actions were undertaken in the course of his duties as an elected official—a *capitano*—of the Republic, and could therefore be seen as patriotic and as symbolizing the beneficence of the state.

Insofar as Cornaro's medal also celebrated an individual, contemporary almsgiver then it is also atypical, given that in most imagery of this kind such personalized identifications are carefully avoided. However, this does not mean that the rich were wholly absented from the operation of this iconography. As with the peasant images noted above, the image of almsgiving typically anticipates the receptive gaze of a wealthy onlooker, his absence in the image nonetheless projecting his presence before it. The imagery of almsgiving is in this way 'aimed' at an affluent viewer who is encouraged to identify with the holy or sacred figure—typically a saint—who becomes, in effect, his sacred surrogate within the visual field. It is the underlying purpose of many such works, placed over altars in religious buildings, to encourage such wealthy spectators to give alms in close imitation of the sacred figure's actions. The arrangement of the composition itself typically serves to encourage this close identification. If the sacred almsgiver is pictured as a brightly-lit, finely dressed and gracefully proportioned figure at the centre of the image, then the recipient of his charity is less carefully or fully defined. The figure of the poor, disabled or sick man must certainly be there in order to provide the focus for the almsgiver's action, but is nonetheless often reduced to a darkened, crouching, and/or physically twisted

[1] For the Augsburg painting see *Welt im Umbruch: Augsburg zwischen Renaissance und Barok*, ed. Bruno Bushart et. al. (Augsburger Druck-und Verlagshaus, 1980), vol. 1, 204-5, no. 134. For Cornaro's medal: Piero Voltolina, *La Storia di Venezia attraverso le medaglie* (Edizione Voltolina, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 366-7, no. 318: `https://www.nga.gov/artworks/45021-cornaro-distributing-alms-reverse`.

figure barely glimpsed at the lower picture edges, his marginal position seeming to mirror his passivity or relative insignificance in the schema of charitable exchange.[1]

This admittedly changed under the impact of religious reform from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, when many Protestant churches cast doubt on the efficacy or moral desirability of almsgiving per se. Even in those now Catholic areas where almsgiving continued to be promoted in visual imagery, the bodies of the impoverished were notably 'improved' in sacred art, often in accordance with high classical or *all' antica* models, while those of the benefactors became less dominating, magisterial or beautiful.[2] But such visual/ethical adjustments did not ultimately change the unequal terms of the engagement. In Catholic countries especially, the ever increasing multitudes of poor and sick across Europe continued to be shown as passively dependent on handouts from the sacred surrogates of the rich, rather than as capable of action or of making any change to their desperate economic condition. The very idea that the imagery of almsgiving could stand as a perfected locus of resolution—both spiritual and material—between the haves and have-nots was a conservative one in social and political terms, fostering the perception that such economic divisions were inevitable or natural. Images of almsgiving tend to uphold the given social order and its religious institutions, always implying that these had the capacity to answer or resolve the vast and growing inequalities of wealth within society. Even though the rich themselves were rarely depicted giving alms, images of charitable exchange implicitly legitimated their position in society, suggesting that they could win God's favour by giving a certain (small) proportion of their wealth back to the poor, whose economic needs would, in turn, be wholly answered by their actions.

In reformed Protestant societies, the terms of engagement with the have-nots certainly changed, with a growing suspicion of 'good works', at least insofar as these were organized directly through the church, with new emphasis laid on secular projects such as almshouses and hospitals for poor relief, and on private giving. But in visual art, the old iconography did not wholly disappear,

[1] For some examples of this visual weighting in favour of the almsgiver in Italian painting see Nichols, *The Art of Poverty*, 136-83.

[2] See Nichols, *Art of Poverty*, 158-74.

and the idea that the rich ought to give back some of their wealth to the poor remained strong enough, even if—in social reality—the plight of the latter worsened again.[1] While the Reformation certainly checked the further spread of depictions of saintly almsgiving, images of charitable giving to the poor did not die away, even if the terms of exchange were altered. Almsgiving scenes continued to be popular in the art of the Calvinist Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, for example, even if these were typically depicted as secularized and private exchanges between street beggars and wealthy citizens at the doors of their homes. In Rembrandt's etching of *Beggars Receiving Alms at the Door of a House* of 1648, for example, a comforting image of exchange between rich and poor is presented in a manner that does not depart too far from the older Catholic idea of a resolution of the economic disparities between rich and poor through almsgiving. We are in no doubt that the rich citizen does his duty, or that the impoverished family to whom he gives are 'deserving': and this despite the non-institutional context of the exchange, and the fact that Rembrandt had often depicted beggars in a much less comfortable or positive light in his other etchings.[2]

4. Role Swapping

If the peaceable resolution of the contrary states of *ricchezza* and *povertà* envisaged in the imagery of almsgiving might ultimately have served a socially conservative function, suggesting that the rich needed only to give a limited amount of their wealth to the poor in order to justify their privileged economic position, then in other visual imagery something less hierarchical or fixing is apparent, for example when the rich play at being poor and vice versa. It is admittedly harder to find examples of this potentially equalizing social inversion among the latter group, who typically had less leisure for such fictive adoptions

[1] Alfani *As Gods Among Men*, 225, notes that the Protestant attack on almsgiving might have intensified poverty in reformed Germany by comparison with Catholic Europe.

[2] For this work see Adam Bartsch, *Catalogue raisonné de toutes le estampes qui forment l'oeuvre de Rembrandt etc* (Blumauer, 1797), no. 176: `https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O151823/beggars-receiving-alms-at-the-print-rembrandt-van-rijn/`. For Rembrandt's more satirical approach in another etching see, ibid., no. 121.

of an opposing identity, and were, in the normal run of things, more tightly controlled by the rich leaders of society. And of course we must remember, too, the perhaps ultimately controlling viewing presence of the economically advantaged patron/viewer when considering this imagery of social exchange or reversibility. But the still vibrant, irreverent and ancient culture of Carnival provided certain opportunities for this kind of mockery of social betters, however mediated and distanced the reverberation of such motifs of social inversion necessarily were in artworks made primarily for the consumption of those towards the top of society.[1]

The publication of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-64), might have encouraged Pieter Bruegel the Elder's creation of the *Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (1559, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), a work which contains certain subversive motifs that suggest his villagers' penchant to put on mocking social performances.[2] A porky peasant acts as the very image of Carnival in the lower foreground, mounting a barrel rather than a horse, and grasping a spit rather than a lance, as he rides mock-heroically into battle with the miserable and emaciated figure of Lent.[3] Adopting the appearances of an armed and noble knight at a courtly joust, he surely also satirizes the pompous high culture of his social betters. Many have doubted where exactly Bruegel's sympathies lie, give the ludicrousness of his figure and the apparent loading up of mockery against him rather than the high culture figure he imitates or enacts. Yet the humour cuts both ways. This intensely ugly, fat and squat 'low' figure, probably the village butcher, appears with two cooked birds, two sausages and a pig's head skewered on his weapon, the head pointedly facing back towards him as if to serve as an outward symbol of his inward swinish appetites and gluttony. To this extent, Bruegel seems to follow the established tradition of satire against supposedly sinful peasant subjects noted earlier. But we cannot ignore the possibility that the joke might still ultimately be the butcher's, given that he is playing a the-

[1] For a now classic study of the battle between a low 'carnivalesque' tradition of 'popular realism' and the restrictions of an elite *all'antica* culture of high classicism, primarily argued through the example of literature, see Mikhail Bakhtin *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Héléne Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 2009).

[2] `https://www.khm.at/en/artworks/the-fight-between-carnival-and-lent-320-1`.

[3] For a penetrating discussion of this work along these lines see Joseph Leo Koerner, *Bosch and Bruegel: From Enemy Painting to Everyday Life* Princeton University Press, 2016), 309-18.

atrical role for the comic entertainment of his own rustic audience within the picture and is, to this extent, resisting the values of the higher-ranking person looking on from an overseeing high viewpoint above. He makes this viewer beyond the frame laugh, in spite of himself, at the posturing of the chivalric culture of the rich which he might normally have identified with, in the true spirit of irreverent Carnival and the world temporarily turned upside down. Towards the background left of the painting, things get more complicated again, as we glimpse another theatrical performance in which one actor is dressed up as a Wildman of the woods, as if to mock by his playacting an imaginary type often identified with peasants by those from the upper social echelons.[1]

Bruegel's imagery thus does not simply satirize the socially low from the position of a privileged or rich overlooking viewer, but also reverses things, lampooning the 'high' while validating (or at least accepting) the alternative cultural viewpoint of the 'low'. The kind of dressing up and performing that his peasants indulge in during their village festivals undoubtedly draws on age-old popular customs of dramatic performance, but is nonetheless indicative of a wider and growing propensity for social role-swapping in the early modern centuries: one much enjoyed and even encouraged by the rich themselves. At the court of Philip IV, for example, the low-born jester known as 'Don Juan of Austria', depicted in a penetrating Velázquez portrait (1632, Madrid, Museo del Prado), apparently entertained the court by playacting—and presumably lampooning—a famous ancestor of the royal family from the previous century who had been a heroic victor at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571.[2] It is likely that the other buffoons and dwarves kept at the Habsburg court—and depicted by Velázquez—were employed to 'play themselves' for the entertainment of their masters.

Examples of 'dressing down' among the leisured and wealthy ruling elites are still easier to find in early modern art. For example, under the impact of the *all'antica* revival of Virgilian pastoral poetry, especially apparent from the turn of the fifteenth century onwards, the rich became enamored with the supposedly carefree and 'simple' lives of lowly country swains and their lovers in

[1] Koerner, *Bosch and Bruegel*, 318-19.

[2] https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-buffoon-juan-de-austria/66016ebf-0468-4a0a-8a3f-30c6d4b42c42.

the countryside, and often sought to reenact their Arcadian lifestyles in lavish parties held in the grounds of their country estates. In Venetian painting of the early sixteenth century, an idealized secular genre of 'pastoral' art with strong erotic overtones quickly emerged to parallel these social role-swaps or enactments, typically featuring attractive young shepherds and shepherdesses whose simple rustic dress provides an only very flimsy cover for their refined aristocratic features, delicate poses and fine emotions.[1] Variations quickly emerged in this Venetian pastoral imagery between the sensuous and leisured mode of Virgil's *Eclogues* and the more agricultural or practical one of his *Georgics* –'hard pastoral' as David Rosand described it—that admitted the realities of agricultural labour and even poverty into the Arcadian country idyll.[2] If this imagery had begun by featuring figures who were thinly disguised wealthy patricians from the city, then in the later sixteenth century the painter Jacopo Bassano reversed the equation, picturing rural scenes in which impecunious local country people tending their animals are lent an elevating association with the high literary world of *all' antica* pastoral poetry in the cities.[3]

In the art of northern Europe, the pastoral tradition also became popular, but typically followed a more realistic, comedic, and satirical mode, mingling poetic associations with a more raucous imagery that referenced current peasant life in the countryside. In the popular tapestry sets produced in Flanders and France from around 1590 onwards showing scenes from the life of a peasant couple known as *Les Amours de Gombault et Macée*, Virgilian motifs are interlaced with crude erotic vignettes, for example when Gombault is shown spanking his fiancé's naked bottom, while a third peasant looks interestedly on.[4] The

[1] Key works of this type are Giorgione, *Adoration of the Shepherds* (c. 1505-6, Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art); Titian, *Concert Champêtre* (c. 1510, Paris, Musée du Louvre) and Girolamo Savoldo, *Shepherd with a Flute* (c. 1535, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum).

[2] David Rosand, "Giorgione, Venice and the Pastoral Vision", in *Places of Delight: the Pastoral Landscape*, ed. Robert C. Cafritz (Philips Collection, 1998), 20-81. For the Renaissance literary trope of the nobleman shepherd see Patricia Emison, *Low and High in Italian Renaissance Art* (Yale University Press, 1997), 37-89.

[3] Tom Nichols, "Local and Non-local in Jacopo Bassano's Depiction of Peasants", *Artibus et Historiae* 87, XLIV (2023): 75-101

[4] A complete set from Bruges is now in Saint-Lō, Musée des Beaux-Arts. See Guy Delmarcel, *La tapisserie flamande: Du XV^e^ au XVIII^e^ siècle* (Imprimerie nationale, 1999), 199-203; Jules Guiffrey, "A pastoral idyll. The tapestry of Gombault and Macée", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 15 (1991), 352-368.

very wealthy—possibly bourgeois—patrons who hung such expensive works in their homes would presumably have enjoyed these rustic sexual antics, without feeling at all compromised by their enjoyment. By the turn of the eighteenth century, however, there were more determined attempts to 'clean up' pastoral by excluding such 'low-life' and their behaviors from its purview.[1] The potential of pastoral to function as an open or two-way imaginative conduit between rich and poor gave way to a more unidirectional imagery in which the wealthy were simply substituted for their impoverished rural counterparts. Images of this type perhaps suggest (in accordance with Alfani's thesis) that the rich had by this point consolidated their position as the leaders of society. Pastoral actors were now better mannered, avoiding open displays of sensuality or excess, while taking up elegant or refined postures and sporting the fashionable and expensive dress of the court, their delicate faces and pale skin giving the lie to their supposedly rusticity.[2] The *fête galante* type now favoured at the French court of the *ancien régime* reverted to the original aristocratic mode of pastoral painting first developed in early sixteenth-century Venice and was openly influenced by this earlier visual type in artistic terms. The Aracdian idyll became once more a socially exclusive domain inhabited by the super-rich who are shown engaging in intimate conversations as they lounge in gently softened wooded landscapes.[3] These settings are now more carefully distinguished from the realities of the contemporary countryside featured in earlier pastoral imagery, recalling instead the country parks surrounding the chateaux of the nobility: the attendant *all'antica* sculptures are typical of the garden ornaments favoured at the time, and stand as semi-concealed signs of fashion and exclusivity among the contemporary rich.[4]

The aristocratization of pastoral from ca. 1700 onwards was paralleled in the field of portraiture. Court beauties frequently had themselves depicted as charm-

[1] See, for example, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontanelle, *Poésies pastorale avec un traité sur la nature de l'églogue e une digression sur le Anciens et les Modernes* (Pierre Mortier, 1701), 108.

[2] See, for example, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Summer: The Musical Contest*, c. 1749-52 (London, Wallace Collection).

[3] Mary Vidal *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art, Literature and Talk in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-century France* (Yale University Press, 1992).

[4] See *Watteau et la fête galante*, ed. Martin Edelberg (Réunion des Musées Nationaux; Valenciennes Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2004).

ing shepherdesses, a fashion that also originated at the Bourbon court in France but quickly spread to the arch-aristocratic court societies of northern Italy.[1] This imagery was probably an offshoot of the already well-established activities of the so-called 'diary queens'—dating back as far as the reign of Catherine de' Medici of France between 1547-59—who had glorified milking sheds built in their palace grounds, and enjoyed dressing up as care-free milkmaids.[2] The last queen of France, Marie Antoinette, took things further still when she commissioned her favourite, Richard Mique, to design the faux-rustic village—the 'Hameau de la Reine' that including a dairy parlour made out of expensive white marble—in the grounds of the royal palace of Versailles in 1783, just six years before the revolution.[3] In commissions of this kind the terms of the role exchange were entirely set by the queen herself: seen in the broader perspective, the adoption of such 'low' imagery is another expression of the move towards spiraling social exclusivity and an attendant fantasy culture that was increasingly removed from reality. And yet why *did* this ultra-aristocratic queen, otherwise committed to the promotion of the most lavish and luxurious styles of fashion and art available, desire so desperately to playact the lives of the poor at the opposite end of the social spectrum?[4]

5. Conclusion

Flirtations with the identities of the socially low might be taken as a further sign of the growing confidence and security of the rich in early modernity: as a reflection of their newly consolidated place in society, as per Alfani's argument. But such role-playing might just as easily suggest something different: that this economically privileged social elite had begun to see their current monetary

[1] François-Hubert Drouias (1727-75), a court painter to Louis XV, often painted portraits of aristocratic ladies and children dressed as peasant gardeners and Savoyards, and noblewomen feature as lowly rustic types in several works by Giacomo Ceruti (1698-1767), who worked mostly in Milan, Brescia, and Venice.

[2] Meridith Martin, *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de' Medici to Marie Antoinette* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

[3] `https://www.chateauversailles.fr/grands-formats/hameau-de-la-reine#la-maison-de-la-reine-et-le-rechauffoir`.

[4] See *Marie Antoinette Style*, ed. Sarah Grant (V and A Publishing, 2025).

advantage in relative terms: as in an inevitable, intimate and inter-penetrating relationship with the very different conditions under which the majority of the population lived (or at least survived). It might indicate that the early modern rich were increasingly beset by a haunting sense of immanent change and potential social and economic reversibility, and thus became aware of the fragility of their position. It seems likely that the gradual development of a more socially exclusive version of *all' antica* pastoral noted above—its increasing avoidance of the kind of social doubling or class inversion that was still a possibility in earlier centuries—reflects the stiffening of hierarchies from 1700 onwards that Alfani lays emphasis on. But does that defensive social fixing indicate consolidation or control? Or does it reflect instead a growing fear of social change among the rich, and relatedly of the possibility of their own replacement or obliteration?

The attempts to close the more complex pandora's box of visual culture that had been opened up in earlier centuries in the arch-aristocratic regimes that emerged in Spain, France and Italy after 1600 could not, in the long run, win out or succeed. Such motives were inherently reactive and defensive in kind and ultimately failed to hold back a rising tide of cultural and economic diversity: one that insisted that the most wealthy acknowledge the existences of less privileged others beyond the age-old idea of social and spiritual restitution through almsgiving; and that had already established communication and interaction between different sections of society of widely different economic status as something of a cultural and moral necessity. It was arguably this gathering sense of social interdependence between classes—and of the interchangeability between related status of *ricchezza* and *povertà*—that was most characteristic of the early modern centuries. And it is these extended social interpenetrations that appear as intimations of the modern democratizing world to come after 1800. The histrionic fantasy imagery of the absolutist courts seems, from this perspective, to speak less of the new confidence and consolidation of the rich per se than of a desperate attempt by certain leading aristocratic houses to assert their superiority and stand-alone quality against the emergent modernity of Western culture. Their absolutist imagery is exceptional rather than representative of wider early modern depictions of the rich. Most of the images adduced in this article intimate instead a growing propensity among the most economically privileged to imagine contrary states; or, putting things conversely, these works intimate a growing inability to imagine just one presiding mode of exis-

tence, as if this were God-given, timeless, unchallengeable and self-contained, making no reference to inevitable 'others'.

As the later sections of this article have shown, the early modern visual imagery of the rich characteristically insists on, or invites in, its alternative, as if this was now necessary in order to conceive of *ricchezza* itself. And this might even be the case with the later role-swapping imaginations of the arch-aristocratic court cultures. Queen Marie Antoinette, whom Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously accused of proclaiming that the poor should eat cake if they had no bread, was nonetheless beset by an already very familiar fantasy of a simple world of happy rural poverty in which money was not important, casting this in alternative terms to her own prescribed—and eventually fatal—condition of extreme wealth and privilege.[1] Her projection of a social alternative to current wealth followed a very well-established culture convention among the rich, one that was not always so 'innocent' or positive in its effects. At the Spanish court of Philip IV in the previous century, such imaginations of otherness might have fostered unwanted perceptions of entrapment, disillusionment or *deseñgano*.[2] And earlier in Marie Antoinette's own country and culture, a sense of cultural foreboding or unease among the super-privileged classes of the *ancien régime* might explain the often melancholic, amorously-defeated or half-alienated actors in Antoine Watteau's *fêtes*. His always idle aristocratic actors, however privileged and removed from the cares of the everyday world, are also beset by a debilitating social ennui that seems to intimate their coming social defeat rather than their consolidated worldly power.

Could it be that this new admission of wealth contingency is more significant in historical terms than some supposed acceptance of the rich by the non-rich in early modernity? Even the most exclusive among the rich sometimes yearned for a life free from the cares and responsibilities that came with their money and associated power, imaging this as—in principle at least—an alternative world granted by the many advantages of *not being rich*. But as Watteau showed, this Arcadian sunlit domain of sensual pleasure was tainted or com-

[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. Angela Scholar (Oxford University Press, 2002), 262. In the original French: "Enfin je me rappelai le pis-aller d'une grande princesse à qui l'on disait que les paysans n'avaient pas de pain, et qui répondit: Qu'ils mangent de la brioche".

[2] See T. J. Clark, "Velázquez's Slave Language", in *Those Passions: On Art and Politics* (Thames and Hudson, 2025), 56.

promised and did not finally guarantee psychological escape from the burden of wealth. All this might not finally invalidate Alfani's perception that the rich became newly central within wider society in the West in the early modern centuries. His argument is certainly supported by the ways in which they became more widely visible in the field of art (especially in portraiture). And yet the non-rich (including the abject poor) were also offered extended visualization in the early modern centuries, meaning that the spread of images of the monetary elites cannot be taken as evidence for their increasing acceptance. Despite their new measure of visibility, the rich did not quite become 'gods among men' between 1400 and 1800. Instead, they found themselves newly hemmed in by the potentially threatening surrounding populations upon whom they so closely depended for survival, and whose apparently very different worlds they now perceived as only superficially divided off from their own.

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