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WHAT PHOTOGRAPHY AND MUSIC CAN TELL US ABOUT RENAISSANCE INTARSIA

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Renaissance intarsia is the practice of combining small pieces of wood to form an image. Historically, some art historians classified intarsia as a sub-genre of painting. I believe this classification is the result of a misunderstanding of the practice. To show that intarsia is an independent artform, I will argue that intarsia has a complex mode of production that requires production in stages, distinguishing it from painting. I then draw on Dawn M. Wilson's target article to shed light on the close collaboration between the artist, who designs the images, and the intarsiatore, the specialized carpenter who makes the wooden objects. By understanding the extent to which the artist's images are like a film negative or musical score, and the extent to which the final objects are like a photo or a musical performance, we can see how both roles contribute to the making of the images with independent intentional creative acts.

1 Introduction

Intarsia is a technique that builds complex images using small, intricately cut, coloured pieces of wood. The images are set into larger architectural frameworks that furnish Renaissance churches and palaces across Italy. Works of intarsia were often designed by artists (painters who made the preparatory drawing) and then produced by *intarsiatori* (specialized carpenters who made the wooden image and the frame). Seldom mentioned in art historical or philosophical debates, works of intarsia have been ignored for centuries. Where encountered in the literature, they have been dismissed as either (1) a sub-genre of painting or (2) a craft (Vasari 2019, 90; Trevisan 2011, 10). (1) is grounded in the thought that intarsia, like painting, is simply a way of producing an image. According to (2), intarsia is a craft in the same category as furniture-making. What these two views have in common is that they treat intarsia as a single-stage endeavour, either the production of an image (like a painting) or the production of an object (like a piece of furniture).

Let me immediately put aside the possibility that intarsia is a craft. According to R. G. Collingwood (1938), one of the key properties of works of craft is that they are made following a preconceived plan, and they lack the capacity for expression. Although intarsia is produced following a preparatory drawing, this cannot be considered a complete plan that needs to be followed to the letter. For instance, the *intarsiatore* independently determines the final colour and outline of the wooden pieces, as these details are missing from the preparatory drawing. The intentional activity of the *intarsiatore* is also a form of expression. Different *intarsiatori* may create different works, even if based on the same preparatory drawing. These considerations ultimately need to be developed into a full argument that intarsia is not a craft. But, for reasons of space, I do not consider the issue any further here.

In this paper, then, proceeding with the proposal that intarsia is an art of some kind, I ask whether intarsia is a sub-genre of painting or an independent artform. I argue that viewing intarsia as a sub-genre of painting is a misconception, pivoting around the idea that the aim of intarsia, like that of painting, is purely the production of an image. To appreciate works of intarsia means appreciating two things: 1) the relation between the images and their architectural and sculptural frame; and 2) the interdisciplinary elements of production that are quite distinct from those involved in painting. To experience intarsia as a subgenre of painting necessarily neglects this, resulting in a partial appreciation that does not consider the artform's distinctive aesthetic value.

The argument builds on Dawn M. Wilson's discussion in the target article (2024) and proceeds by analogy. I will first argue that intarsia's production resembles that of photography, then extend Wilson's photography-music analogy to include intarsia. The analogy with photography will demonstrate how intarsia is made by two acts of creation where intentional control is applied in stages. The parallel with music buttresses this claim and explores new ways of thinking about intarsia as an art.

Throughout, I will refer to the intarsia cycle in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, Bergamo. Made between 1522 and 1532, the cycle consists of several decorated panels (and decorated covers) in the Basilica's altar and choir. Until the late eighteenth century, the cycle was not known in mainstream art history. Local historians attributed the work solely to the specialized carpenter who made the final object—that is, to the *intarsiatore*—Giovan Francesco Capoferri. However, in 1793, Lorenzo Lotto's name reappeared as a collaborator of Capoferri, having made the original drawings on which the final work is based (Cortesi-Bosco 1987, 81). This example is not distinctive in having an established painter as a collaborator. Indeed, it is now widely accepted that artists such as Sandro Botticelli, Piero della Francesca, and Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo, collaborated with *intarsiatori* to design works of

intarsia (Trevisan 2011, 9, 14; Elkins 1994, 129).

2 Dawn M. Wilson and Ansel Adams on Photography

In the target article, Wilson works with Ansel Adams's account of photography. She explains that Adams's view of photography is connected to the idea that a photographic image is generated when the photo is 'taken' or 'captured' and a photosensitive surface is exposed to light in the camera for a set time.

Adams uses the concept of 'visualization' to support the idea that photography is an art. He defines visualization as an emotional-mental process that allows the photographer to imagine the picture before starting the process so that consequent actions are focused on achieving the desired result. According to him, visualization is linked to the idea that the photographer should be credited with the final photographs, even when they are printed by a different person.

Adams also proposes an evocative analogy between fine art photography and classical music. He believes that visualization is essential for creating fine art photography and that a print from a negative is like a performance from a score:

> ...once it has been set down in a 'score', it can be expressively rendered by different performers, making it possible to create and critically appreciate 'performances' with different qualities. (Wilson 2024, 13)

According to Wilson, Adams endorses a single-stage account of the art. On a single-stage account, the formal features of the object which bear significant artistic value are added through a single act of creation. Wilson interprets Adams this way because he does not distinguish between undeveloped film and developed negative. In fact, he believes that the work is 'fixed' by the initial visualization and captured by the negative.

Wilson argues that such a view does not perfectly fit the proposed anal-

ogy with music. In music, the creativity of the composer and the performer are interdependent. For the analogy to work, the same must be the case between the photographer and whoever develops the negative. Wilson explains:

> For Adams, a fine art photograph is not merely a print from a negative — it is an 'expression' of the photographer's visualization [...] I find it helpful to think of 'expression' as expressive rendering, where 'rendering' gives the print its tangible substance and appearance, thereby contributing properties to the visual image. Comparably, a musical performance could be considered the expressive rendering of a composition. As with musical composition, visualization needs to be understood as one kind of artistic achievement within an extended and interdependent creative process. (Wilson 2024, 24-25)

According to Wilson, to make the analogy work, we need to understand photography as a multi-stage account. That is, we need to see how the making of photography requires two main creative steps:

1. A photographic event where a photographic register is created for a timed interval; there is a causal registration of the light that forms an optical light image.

2. Production of a static visual image using the register from the photographic event. (Wilson 2021, 163)

On Wilson's view, the register is analogous to a musical score, and the production of an image is analogous to a musical performance.

Wilson emphasizes that, with the analogy so understood, we obtain a response to an objection to photography's status as art—the objection that photography is not art because it is mechanical. According to

the objection, the snap of the shutter creates the image, and the rest is simply making the image visible in a print. Wilson thinks that the snap of the shutter, although a creative act, does not create an image but a non-visual 'register'. She holds that the various stages after that enable the kind of intentional intervention necessary for photography to be considered an art. According to Wilson's account, therefore, an image does not exist at the time of exposure. A subsequent production stage is needed before an image can exist. Wilson's multi-stage account reframes the peculiarity of photography and, by showing that it is an intentional multi-staged activity, can say that photographs are not mere mechanical copies of their subjects.

3 Intarsia and Photography

Like photography, intarsia requires a multi-stage account of its making. We have seen how Adams' view of photography is linked to a visualization expressed by the creation of a negative and a printed photograph. Wilson argues that the making of photographs requires three creative steps: 1) the generation of the register; 2) the development of the negative; and 3) printing the photographs. The making of intarsia can seemingly be divided into two steps: 1) the preparatory drawing on paper; and 2) the construction of the wooden object.

Can we understand the making of intarsia as analogous to the making of photography? An analogy of intarsia with Adam's account would suggest that the artist produces something analogous to a visualization, which is the initial drawing, and the *intarsiatore* produces something equivalent to a print, which is the final object. The artist generates the image in the preparatory drawings, which are mechanically copied by an *intarsiatore* in a different medium. If this account is correct, it is legitimate to identify intarsia as a sub-genre of painting.

If, on the other hand, we draw an analogy with Wilson's account, intarsia appears very different. The preparatory drawing is partially analogous to the negative (in that it is visual) and partially analogous to

the register (in that it is the raw material from which additional steps follow to create the work of art). The work of intarsia is analogous to the print in that it is worked up from the preparatory drawings in a process that involves intentional, rather than mechanical, control. As this is a multi-stage process very different from that of painting, it would be a misunderstanding to experience intarsia as a sub-genre of painting.

The second analogy is to be preferred. Even though some works of painting may require preparatory drawings, the passage between the drawing and the painting can be seen as a translation of one image into another. The acts that result in drawings and paintings are just various forms of mark making. In contrast, the creation of intarsia from the drawing is not a simple translation but a transmutation of a drawing into something completely different in nature. The acts necessary to construct a wooden object are not simply another form of mark making. Further, the wooden pieces do not perfectly match the drawing (neither in shape nor in colour), and the *intarsiatore* must do some creative work to transmutate the image into a new medium. This demands a multi-stage view, where the similarity to photography is emphasized by the possibility of accomplishing the two steps by either the same person or two different people. While the painter is seen as a single overriding creator, the fact that two hands are at work in intarsia complicates its attribution to a single author.

Both in photography and intarsia, the two stages determine formal and artistic features of the object that are independent from paintings and drawings. Considered as artistic objects, the negative and the preparatory drawings only make sense when considered as negatives for photographs or as drawings for intarsia. This is because the artist was guided by the fact that he was producing a drawing for a work of intarsia and would have produced a different drawing otherwise. This means that the formal features of the preliminary drawings are independent from simple painting and drawing.

This account generates a puzzle. If I am right, then why has intarsia (a) been classified as a sub-genre of painting and (b) been attributed solely to the *intarsiatore*?

For (a), we could blame Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), who first linked intarsia to painting. He included intarsia in the group of the *arti del disegno* as a variant of painting. Vasari's parallel between painting and intarsia led him to assume that intarsia is just a more complicated way of producing a visual image, which exists once the preliminary drawing is created. His dismissal was abrupt, declaring it a useless complication of painting. According to him, intarsia "has a short life span, because of woodworm and fire, it is therefore a waste of time, despite its majesty and praiseworthiness" Vasari (2019, 90).[1] By considering intarsia in these terms, Vasari demonstrated a misunderstanding of the practice.

This view of intarsia also led to (b), the *intarsiatore* being credited with the work. Looking at the intarsia in Bergamo, Cortesi-Bosco highlights two possible reasons behind Capoferri's sole attribution. Firstly, Capoferri's signature is visible on the panels, while Lotto's contribution lies hidden in the archives. Lotto's participation was in fact only re-discovered in the late eighteenth century when his letters were found. However, Cortesi-Bosco also considers the possibility that Lotto's name was forgotten because his collaboration was not considered as important as the act of making the objects. According to the art historian Massimo Ferretti:

> [...] the merit of the intarsia work belonged exclusively to its author: the collaboration of the painters was considered a purely functional fact, the skill of the work consisting in the technique capable of competing with the brush, identifying the intarsia

1 Italian: "poco durabile per i tarli e per il fuoco, e' tempo buttato invano, ancora che é sia pure lodevole e maestrevole" (my translation).

> with an exquisitely technical variant of painting. (Cortesi-Bosco 1987, 81)[2]

Either way, whether the contribution of the artist was suppressed or forgotten, this type of narrative is linked to the misunderstanding that the making of intarsia requires a single creative process. It is interesting to consider that intarsia represents an exception to normal practice. The expectation would be that the role of technical specialists is omitted in the historical account of a practice, while the contribution of important painters would have normally been recorded.[3]

I am claiming that both (a) and (b) are explained by traditional art historians misunderstanding intarsia. But what justifies this misunderstanding? I suggest that it derives from an incomplete understanding of the close collaboration between the artist and the *intarsiatore* – a collaboration we now better understand through the discovery of Lotto's correspondence with Capoferri. Intarsia aims to combine three major artistic forms— painting, sculpture, and architecture—into one independent artform. Works of intarsia are flat images like paintings, but their pieces are sculpted and then joined. The flat images are then assembled into sculpted frames, and these are fitted into entire rooms of churches and palaces. The images were never meant to be seen individually or separately from the framework around them. If we want to understand the production of intarsia, we should consider how artists and *intarsiatori* shared an idea of the formal features of the final work and contributed with intentional creative acts to realize it.

Here is one example. In one of his letters, Lotto clearly describes his

2 Italian: "il merito dell'opera ad intarsio spettava esclusivamente al suo autore: la collaborazione dei pittori, quando c'era, era ritenuta un fatto puramente funzionale, l'artisticita' dell'opera consistendo soprattutto nella tecnica capace di gareggiare col pennello, identificandosi la tarsia con una variante squisitamente tecnica della pittura" (my translation).

3 Buildings are usually credited to the architect, rather than the builder.

relationship with the *intarsiatore*, implying that, right from the start, it is of close collaboration:

> The explanations would be long on how to adapt the drawings in respect of their dexterity and in respect to what your carpenters can do, since few, or no one, in my opinion, I dare to say, has the same shrewdness of Lorenzo Lotto by nature and his own jealous love for the project [...] I have been repeatedly criticized for too much manual work, due to the importance of the time it requires, but I approach it with ability. (Cortesi-Bosco 1987, 200)[4]

In intarsia, visualization unites the artist and the *intarsiatore* in understanding the composition. The artist is aware of the technical possibilities of the *intarsiatore,* and these have an impact on his work. The preparatory drawing is not simply a trace to be followed, but a text with a specific nature to be interpreted before the making of the wooden object. In the latter, the drawing will find its fulfilment (Cortesi-Bosco 1987, 200).

Considering intarsia as a sub-category of painting presupposes that intarsia's making is a single-stage endeavour. The analogy with Wilson's account of photography permits us to move away from this account and identify intarsia's peculiar two-stage creative process. This means it is possible to consider intarsia as an artform independent from painting.

4 Intarsia and Music

I will further reinforce my account by drawing on an analogy Wilson uses with music. In the case of intarsia, the artist-designer can be compared to the composer, while the *intarsiatore* is compared to the per-

4 Italian: "Lungo saria le narrationi per lo acomodar le istorie rispetto alla gratia de esse etiam quello e quanto possano operar li vostri lignarii, che pochi o nullo altro par mio, ardisco dir, haria tal circuspictioni che ha Lorenzo Lotto per natura, ultra la gelosia della impresa […] El Loco sempre mi ha ripreso de troppo manifatture, per la importancia del tempo che portano et a quallo con dextreza atendo" (my translation).

former.

Cortesi-Bosco described the collaboration between Lotto and Capoferri in these terms:

> Capoferri did not perform a translation, but a transmutation. The light of the paintings 'a guazo' and the chiaroscuro drawings of Lotto's stories have in fact been transmuted into the mobile, changing light of the coloured wood, acquiring a new reality. In the realization of this, the director and interpreter Capoferri, endowed with singular symphony, on the one hand, the work of Lotto, which led him to his deep understanding, on the other the wood, which allowed him to enhance the possibility of bright chromatic rendering as a function of the full implementation of the invention. (Cortesi-Bosco 1987, 200)[5]

Wilson claims that, in music, the creativity of the composer and the performer are interdependent. The same happens in intarsia. Even though Capoferri was appointed director of the project, in his letters, Lotto wrote that it was he who recommended Capoferri as his partner (Cortesi-Bosco 1987, 200). He did so because Lotto understood Capoferri's skills and, like a composer, could visualize how he could realize his ideas; he could already 'hear the music of his performance'. According to Ferretti, Lotto could make this understood by Capoferri because the latter knew that the realization of the intarsia was not simply a mechanical transfer of drawings onto panels. Instead, it was a matter of perceiving the drawings and connecting them with the simplicity of the

5 Italian: "Capoferri non ha operato una traduzione, ma una trasmutazione. La luce dei dipinti 'a guazo' delle storie e dei disegni a chiaroscuro delle 'imprese' di Lotto, s'é infatti trasmutata nella mobile, cangiante luce delle essenze lignee colorate, acquistando nuova realtá. Nella realizzazione di ció, direttore ed interprete fu Capoferri, dotato di singolare sinfonia, da un lato con l'opera di Lotto, che lo portarono alla sua profonda comprensione, dall'altro con il materiale ligneo, che gli consentirono di valorizzare al massimo le possibilita' di resa cromatica luminosa in funzione della piena attuazione dell'invenzione" (my translation).

wooden material (Ibid., 102).

The parallel between music and intarsia allows us to say that the preparatory drawings are like a score, while the panels are like a performance. In music, both composition and performance have distinct artistic qualities. The same can be said of intarsia. Both drawings and panels have artistic value. As Wilson says:

> The art of classical music is not the creation of a written score, plus a performance. It is the creation of a composition, which is manifested in a written score, and in performances from the score where aesthetic qualities of both the performance and the composition can be appreciated. (2024, 24)

By analogy, intarsia is not the simple creation of a drawing and the final wooden object. It is the creation of something like a composition, which manifests in both the drawings and the objects. The aesthetic qualities of each are visible and can be appreciated in the other. It may be possible to appreciate the drawings individually, but for a full experience, they need to be appreciated as realized in an object. In the same way, examining a score will only give an impoverished experience of music. Therefore, the score needs to be realized in a performance.

We might challenge the intarsia-music parallel by claiming that, while in music it is quite common to have different performances of the same composition, intarsia has always produced a single performance. However, this is due to practical rather than theoretical reasons. New performances of old intarsia designs are possible, but, in general, they are neither necessary nor desirable. Intarsia were made to fit into specific spaces. Once each space was filled, there was no need to execute a new performance, even if these were possible in theory. The parallel between music and intarsia allows us to draw philosophical insights to intarsia, by showing how different artisans could express the original drawn designs in different ways.

5 Conclusion

Thanks to Wilson's target article, photography has been disentangled from a philosophical account of the artform that casts doubt on its artistic value. Wilson has been able to show that there are a set of intentional artistic acts involved in the creation of a photograph, arguing that the 'taking' of a photograph is anything but a mechanical act.

Adapting her multi-stage account of photography, I have characterized intarsia as an independent artform. Vasari's superficial dismissal of the practice mistakenly considered it just another way of drawing and painting an image. Although not perfectly matching the case of intarsia, Wilson's paper helps clarify intarsia's production process. By applying a multi-stage account to intarsia, it is possible to understand the complex collaboration between artist and creator as the one between composer and performer. As in classical music, most works of intarsia are made by two artistic contributions, which require a common visualization of the final composition.

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