

Painting with Demons: The Art of Gerolamo Savoldo. Michael Fried.
London: Reaktion Books, 2020. 196 pp. £40.

In his 1548 *Dialogo di pittura*, Paolo Pino writes that “nature imitates herself. . . by painting on her own, in marble and tree trunks, a diversity of figurable forms . . . with that same delight one experiences in seeing one’s effigy in the mirror” (148). When Pino describes the landscapes of his teacher, Gerolamo Savoldo (ca. 1480–ca. 1548), he mentions the painter’s use of mirrors, thus comparing Savoldo’s powers of artistic creation to nature itself. For Michael Fried, also, the metaphor of the mirror lies at the core of Savoldo’s artistic production; in his *Painting with Demons: The Art of Gerolamo Savoldo*, a much-needed critical reevaluation of the sixteenth-century Northern Italian painter’s work, Fried posits that Savoldo’s paintings are “to an uncanny degree, mirrors . . . in which both world and artist paint themselves.” Through key insights such as this, Fried convincingly demonstrates that Savoldo was “one of the most original and profound . . . painters of the Italian Renaissance” (10).

As Fried rightly points out, the previous literature on Savoldo has been predominantly focused on matters of stylistic categorization. Art historians such as Roberto Longhi, Sydney Freedberg, and Creighton Gilbert have revealed how Savoldo prefigured Caravaggio; his relationship to the Lombard tradition; and the ways he was influenced by or departed from the style of Leonardo da Vinci, Giorgione, and Titian. Fried notes that art historians have failed to apply newer methodologies to Savoldo’s body of work, which has often limited the painter’s artistic stature and critical reputation. Throughout the book, Fried takes a fresh, close look at Savoldo’s paintings, bringing into focus elements of the works that have previously been ignored, and provides creative new interpretations of these masterful “paintings of night and fire,” as Giorgio Vasari described them (10).

Painting with Demons is organized into two parts. The first includes two chapters that provide close readings of individual paintings and three that examine certain preoccupations of Savoldo’s: the centrality of hands, the appearance of mysterious faces or other masklike forms in various details of the paintings, and the use of gestures that evoke the idea of magical conjuring. In the second part, Fried weaves these various threads together to better understand Savoldo’s radical contributions to the history of Italian painting and how he shaped and was shaped by the times in which he lived.

Fried successfully argues that Savoldo’s extraordinary achievement finds its source in the way his paintings cause the viewer to engage closely with his work. Savoldo’s use of hands as the primary conveyers of meaning, as well as his depiction of reflective surfaces, reinventions of traditional iconography, and inclusion of masks that are sometimes visible in the drapery and landscapes all require that the viewer become intimately involved in the paintings. Fried focuses many of his observations on the mask like apparitions, effectively maintaining through a comparison with Albrecht’s Dürer’s drawing of *Six Pillows* that these phantasmagoric forms demonstrate Savoldo’s engagement with

Northern art. In addition, Fried successfully argues that these often grimacing faces give expression to “a Catholic universe not just teeming with, but interpenetrated by demonic agents” (154). As Fried himself admits, it is possible that not every reader will positively identify the faces that the author describes; however, it is convincingly argued that these suggestions of facelike forms are indeed “puzzling provocations” (135) that further entangle the viewer by demanding a response to the painting’s cues, prompting a close engagement with Savoldo’s glimmering swirling masses of fabric and rocky outcrops.

Fried ends his book with the line, “But this is speculation” (169), again acknowledging that some readers may not agree with what he calls “a highly personal attempt” (6) to grapple with the unusual features of Savoldo’s art. Although some may quibble with the details, ultimately Fried’s conclusions prompt reconsideration of an under appreciated artist and contend with “what was artistically possible in the imaginative universe of early sixteenth-century Venice and its environs” (133).

Rachel Miller, *California State University, Sacramento*
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Paintings on Stone: Science and the Sacred 1530–1800. Judith W. Mann, ed.
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Works of art, architecture, and objects of visual culture made by painting with, in, and on stone have been the focus of recent publications and exhibitions covering art and architecture from the ancient, medieval, and early modern periods. Although modest in number, these contributions pave the way for new inquiries into art practices, theories, and discourses that reveal art—and art history—as continuously generative.

Making an invaluable addition to this recent trend in the scholarship and the history of early modern art, *Paintings on Stone: Science and the Sacred 1530–1800*, published for the occasion of a novel exhibition organized at the Saint Louis Museum of Art (SLAM), is the most accessible and comprehensive work to have been published on the topic of paintings on stone. Pan-European in its scope, the publication surveys notable artists, artworks, theorists, and contexts that shed light on the history of this medium. A stunning catalogue of images adorning the back is reason enough to pick up a copy, with its thoughtfully compiled list of over a hundred artworks, studiously annotated and with bibliographic sources, including some of the most fascinating and dexterous images this reader has encountered.

In 2005, motivated by a recent acquisition of a small late sixteenth-century mythological work painted on lapis lazuli by Giuseppe Casari, Judith W. Mann, the curator of early modern European art at SLAM, envisioned a pioneering exhibition that showcased the ocular experience offered by the extraordinary tacility and artistry of this and other