

Henry Moore and the historiography of early Italian art

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'We may say without exaggeration that the art of sculpture has been dead in England for four centuries; equally without exaggeration I think we may say that it is reborn in the work of Henry Moore'.¹ With these words Herbert Read paid tribute to the young Henry Moore in his review of Moore's solo exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in London in 1931. Read's words unmistakably echo those of the Italian artist and biographer Giorgio Vasari, who almost four hundred years earlier had described in similar terms the artistic achievements of one of the great masters of early Italian art, the Florentine painter Giotto di Bondone (c. 1267-1337). In his *Lives of the Artists* of 1550/1568, Vasari wrote that Giotto had revived the art of painting after it had been buried for many years, and returned it to such a form that it could be called good.²

In portraying Moore as a modern day Giotto who single-handedly had taken Britain out of the sculptural darkness, Read may have merely used an old art-historical cliché to praise the work of his young compatriot. Still, Read's praise alludes to a deeper connection between the British sculptor and the Italian painter. Scholars have acknowledged this connection, as well as Moore's wider fascination with early Italian art, and they have identified moments where this interest can be detected in particular works by Moore. Typically, the more 'human' and more 'natural' forms of Moore's *Shelter Drawings* from the early 1940s are seen as the first manifestations of this interest.³ The drawings mark the end of what art historians

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¹ Herbert Read, 'Henry Moore', *The Listener*, 22 April 1931, 688–689. Repeated and slightly modified in Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 2nd ed., London: Penguin Books, 1949, 177-181.

² Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, eds, vol. 2, Florence: Sansoni, 1967, 95. English translation: Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, translated by George Bull, London: Penguin Books, 1965, 57.

³ Alan G. Wilkinson, *The Drawings of Henry Moore*, London: Tate Gallery 1977, 28-36; Roger Berthoud, *The Life of Henry Moore*, 2nd ed., London: Giles de la Mare, 2003, 191-201; Julian Andrews, *London's War. The Shelter Drawings of Henry Moore*, London: Lund Humphries,

perceive as a rather sustained focus on forms of abstraction informed by non-Western art throughout the 1930s. Early Italian art is also seen as a source of inspiration for a comparable reappearance of human figuration in Moore's sculptures from the 1940s. David Sylvester, for example, observed 'significant resemblances' between Moore's Northampton *Mother and Child* from 1943-44 and Madonnas by Giotto and Masaccio.⁴ Scholars have also tried to identify earlier instances of Italian influence. For instance, Diane Kirkpatrick has suggested that Moore's drawing *Study of Seated Nude* (1928) in the collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Art shows signs of the struggle the young Moore experienced in attempting to combine his fascination with the art of Giotto and Masaccio with his admiration for sculpture from India, Egypt and Pre-Columbian Mexico.⁵ Likewise, in an analysis of Moore's *Half-Figure* (1932) in the Tate collection, Alice Correia identifies Giotto and Piero della Francesca as sources for this sculpture, next to a number of non-Western works.⁶

The objective of this article is not to catalogue more instances where the appeal of early Italian art manifests itself in Moore's work. Instead, the goal is to analyse the art-historical background of this attraction, paying special attention to Moore's writings. Although Moore did not write much on early Italian art, certainly not when compared with his longer accounts of African and Pre-Columbian art, his comments on Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano are of special interest. Not only do they testify to Moore's admiration for these artists and for qualities in their work that fuelled his own ambitions, they also bear witness to art-historical debates about early Italian art at a moment when it was undergoing a particularly formalist construction. While links between Moore's fascination with the work of Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano and early twentieth-century critical ideas on early Italian art have been suggested in the literature, surprisingly little attention has been paid to specific developments in art-historical research that may have informed Moore's observations on these artists.⁷

This article consists of two parts. In the first part, I will outline Moore's views on Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano as they emerge from his writings. In the second part, Moore's ideas will be situated against the background of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century scholarship on early Italian art. Here, I will

2002; Andrew Causey, *The Drawings of Henry Moore*, London: Lund Humphries, 2010, 104-121.

⁴ David Sylvester, *Henry Moore*, London: The Arts Council, 1968, 21-22.

⁵ Diane Kirkpatrick, 'Modern British Sculpture at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, part one', *Bulletin. The University of Michigan Museums of Art and Archaeology*, 3, 1980, 66-67.

⁶ Alice Correia, 'Half-Figure 1932 by Henry Moore OM, CH', catalogue entry, January 2013, in *Henry Moore: Sculptural Process and Public Identity*, Tate Research Publication, 2015, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/henry-moore-om-ch-half-figure-r1146178>, accessed 6 March 2021.

⁷ See most recently Emanuele Greco, '1925: Henry Moore e l'Italia. Viaggio nei taccuini', in Sergio Risaliti, ed., *Henry Moore in Toscana*, Florence: Polistampa, 2021, 78-89.

explore to what extent Moore's observations are comparable to that of contemporary art historians. I will also identify moments where Moore's ideas offer unique and original perspectives on the work of Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano that were not shared by his contemporaries.

Moore on Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano

Moore discusses early Italian art in a number of interviews, letters and other texts ranging from the 1920s to the 1980s.⁸ Even though these observations span more than half a century, Moore's views are remarkably consistent. Moore's first discussion of early Italian art is in a letter dated 12 March 1925. The letter is addressed to William Rothenstein, the principal of the Royal College of Art. It was written in Florence, where Moore was staying after having been awarded a travelling scholarship to Italy from the Royal College upon his graduation in 1924.⁹ In the letter, Moore expresses his fascination with early Italian art, writing: 'the early wall paintings – the work of Giotto, Orcagna, Lorenzetti, Taddeo Gaddi, the paintings leading up to and including Masaccio's are what have so far interested me most'.

Later on in the letter he explicitly singles out Giotto for praise: 'Giotto has made the greatest impression upon me (perhaps partly because he's the most English of the primitives)'. While the term 'primitive' was widely used in the context of early Italian art in the early twentieth century, Moore's reference to Giotto being 'the most English' of the early Italian artists is rather unusual.¹⁰ Here, Moore seems to equate the realism with which Giotto's art had long been associated, with a comparable attention to life-likeness and love of the natural that nineteenth and

⁸ These sources have been published in Alan Wilkinson, ed., *Henry Moore. Writings and Conversations*, Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2002. Research in the Henry Moore Archive in Perry Green did not bring to light new material.

⁹ The letter was first published in John Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters. Volume 2. Lewis to Moore*, London: Macdonald, 1956, 314-315. Reprinted in Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 52-53. On Moore's trip and his relationship with Italy see Berthoud, *Life of Henry Moore*, 66-71; Christa Lichtenstern, *Henry Moore. Work - Theory - Impact*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008, 155-173; Giuseppe Rizzo, 'Il viaggio in Italia di Henry Moore: metamorfosi di un conflitto', *Critica d'Arte*, 33-34, 2008, 129-142.

¹⁰ According to Edward Chaney, William Young Ottley (1771-1836) is credited with the first use of the term 'primitives' in this context. Edward Chaney, 'Introduction', in John Hale, *England and the Italian Renaissance. The Growth of Interest in its History and Art*, 4th ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, xxv. On this see also Maureen McCue, *British Romanticism and the Reception of Italian Old Master Art, 1793-1840*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, 6-7. On the wider concept of primitivism see Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason. Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725- 1907*, University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, and E.H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive. Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art*, London: Phaidon, 2002.

early-twentieth century commentators saw as defining characteristics of English art.¹¹

In the same letter to Rothenstein, Moore also discusses Giotto's painting in relationship to sculpture: 'Of great sculpture I've seen very little – Giotto's painting is the finest sculpture I met in Italy'.¹² Moore returned to this idea of a 'sculptural' Giotto in a letter from the early 1970s. This letter was sent to Luciano Bausi, the mayor of Florence, to thank him for the invitation to exhibit Moore's work at the Forte Belvedere in Florence in 1972. In the letter, Moore reminisces about his earlier trip: 'I have loved Florence since my first visit in 1925, as a young student spending a five months' traveling scholarship to Italy. – It was the most impressionable stage of my development – Out of the full five months, I stayed three months in Florence. At first it was the early Florentines I studied most, especially Giotto, because of the evident sculptural qualities'.¹³

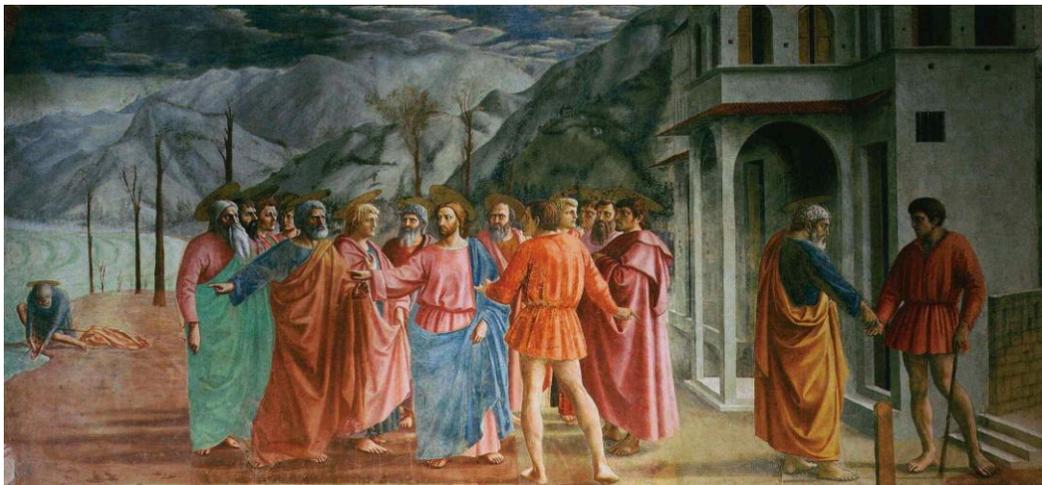


Figure 1 Masaccio, *The Tribute Money*, c. 1425. Fresco, 247 × 597 cm. Florence: Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine. Photo: public domain.

In the letter to Bausi, Moore also describes how later during his stay in 1925 Masaccio became such an obsession that he would start every day with a visit to Masaccio's frescoes in the Brancacci chapel in the Santa Maria del Carmine. Moore repeated this observation in a conversation with Juliet Wilson in 1979. In the same conversation, he discusses Masaccio's frescoes in sculptural terms: 'he was the first artist, the first one really, to get weight, to make sculpture in painting really, to get

¹¹ On this see William Vaughan, 'The Englishness of British Art', *Oxford Art Journal*, 13, 1990, 11-23.

¹² On this see also Giovanni Carandente, 'Interviste: Henry Moore, Buckminster Fuller', *QUI arte contemporanea*, 4, November 1967, 36-38.

¹³ Undated letter to Luciano Bausi. Reproduced in Giovanni Carandente, ed., *Mostra di Henry Moore*, Florence: Il bisonte; Nuovedizioni Vallecchi, 1972, 17. Reprinted in Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 74-75.

the reality that sculpture can have into painting'.¹⁴ In an interview from 1982, Moore explained how this sculptural reality allowed Masaccio to express a deep understanding of human nature.¹⁵ He locates these expressive qualities in individual figures, observing that Masaccio was able to get 'a kind of electric charge in the air' not by strong physical action but by a dramatic tension inside his figures: 'the *Tribute Money* is just twelve people or thirteen, whatever number there are, standing in a row with just something happening between two of them that gives a kind of Greek ominous tragedy' (fig. 1).¹⁶

Moore makes a similar connection between the articulation of sculptural form and the conveying of human emotions in a text on Giovanni Pisano from 1969. In this text, the introduction to Michael Ayrton's monograph on the Italian sculptor, Moore writes that form and expression should not be seen as separate things. In fact, they are closely connected, as is masterfully demonstrated by Giovanni's work: '[Giovanni's] form, his abstraction, his sculptural qualities were integrated. The human and the abstract formal elements are inseparable and that is what I think really great sculpture should be'.¹⁷ Moore describes how he first saw Giovanni's work during a visit to Pisa in 1925, but how he could only see the figures on the façade and on top of the Baptistery from a distance. It was only after the war, when these figures were taken down and put inside the Baptistery, that Moore was struck by their tremendous dramatic force: 'Giovanni Pisano was a great sculptor in every sense, particularly in the sense of understanding and using three-dimensional form to affect people, to portray human feelings and character, to express great truths'.¹⁸ Again Moore focuses on the expressive qualities of individual figures, explicitly separating Giovanni's story-telling abilities from his gift for form. Like Masaccio, Giovanni is praised by for getting drama into his figures when they stand still. On Giovanni's so-called *Dancer*, for instance, Moore writes: 'I don't think it was meant to be a figure that was actually dancing; I think he was giving energy to the figure by articulating from the inside' (fig. 2).¹⁹ By articulating every individual part of the

¹⁴ Reprinted in Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 155.

¹⁵ Interview with Milton Esterow, 'Mr Moore, what use is what you're doing?', *Art News*, October 1982, 110-111. Reprinted in Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 156.

¹⁶ Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 155. See also Henry Moore, 'Introduction' in Michael Ayrton, *Giovanni Pisano. Sculptor*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1969, 7-11. Reprinted in Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 169-173.

¹⁷ Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 172.

¹⁸ Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 169. The visit most likely took place in 1958. On this and drawings by Moore related to this visit see Ann Garrould, ed., *Henry Moore. Complete Drawings, Volume 4, 1950-76*, Much Hadham and Aldershot: Henry Moore Foundation; Lund Humphries, 2003, ii. and 134.

¹⁹ Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 170. The *Dancer* (1280s-1290s) was one of the sculptures Giovanni made for the outside of the Baptistery. It has no head nor attributes to help further identification. The title *Dancer* dates from the nineteenth century. The sculpture is now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo di Pisa. See Marco Bona Castellotti and Antonio Giuliano, eds,

body – and not just the faces as his father Nicola had done – Giovanni gave his sculptures intensity and energy, enabling him to convey a ‘deep philosophical understanding of human nature, human tragedy, and everything else’.²⁰ Because of this, Moore believes that Giovanni should be considered one of the forerunners of the Renaissance. Like Giotto and Masaccio he changed Italian art by using the human figure in a plastic way to express emotions: ‘[Giovanni] was an artist who had done in sculpture things that Giotto and Masaccio would come to do in painting, but it was they who got the credit for being the fathers of the Renaissance.’²¹



Figure 2 Giovanni Pisano, *Dancer*, 1280s-1290s. Marble, lifesize. Pisa: Museo dell’Opera del Duomo. © 2022. Photo Scala, Florence - courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali e del Turismo.

The above highlights the fact that Moore’s ideas on Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano are closely connected. What he values in all three is their successful exploration of the expressive potential of three-dimensional human figures. Not surprisingly, Moore values in their art precisely those elements that he was aiming for in his own work. Moore acknowledges this when he states that Masaccio’s work fits in with his beliefs about and attitudes to sculpture, and that Giovanni’s sculptures have what he was searching for as a young artist.²² This observation finds support in a drawing that Moore made during his stay in Italy in 1925. The drawing, now in the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, is based on a fifteenth-century sketch

Exempla. La rinascita dell’antico nell’arte italiana. Da Federico II ad Andrea Pisano, Ospedaletto (Pisa): Pacini, 2008, 208 (cat.nr. 84).

²⁰ Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 170. Moore made comparable observations in an unpublished note from the late 1950s. Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 173.

²¹ Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 172.

²² Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 155 and 170.



Figure 3 Henry Moore, *Copies of Figures from "The Visitation" of Giotto, 1925*. Graphite, pen and brown ink, black wash on paper, 33.8 x 24.5 cm. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario. Gift of Henry Moore, 1974. Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario. Reproduced by permission of The Henry Moore Foundation.

after a fourteenth-century depiction of the *Visitation* in the Lower Church in Assisi, traditionally attributed to Giotto (fig. 3).²³ In the drawing, Moore discarded the narrative structure and the spatial setting of Giotto's scene, focusing instead on the individual figures. These are lifted out of the story and seem to be randomly distributed over the page, allowing Moore to focus on their expressive and sculptural qualities. Especially one of the outer accompanying women in Giotto's composition is depicted with remarkable intensity in the centre of Moore's drawing. As Christa Lichtenstern observes, figures such as these confirm Moore's own artistic aspirations, firmly rooted as they are in themselves and expressing a deep sense of dignity and emotional restraint.²⁴

That Moore's appreciation of Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano is motivated by his own artistic ambitions becomes even more evident when we read Moore's contribution to the catalogue for the Unit One exhibition of 1934. In this

²³ The fifteenth-century sketch is in the Collection of Prints and Drawings of the Uffizi galleries in Florence. On Moore's drawing see David Ekserdjian, 'The young Henry Moore and Italy: the influence of Mantegna and a trip to Siena', *Apollo*, 488, October 2002, 36-40, and Lichtenstern, *Henry Moore*, 156-158. One other drawing in the Art Gallery of Ontario and a number of studies in Moore's Notebook nr. 3 in the collection of the Henry Moore Foundation (Perry Green) are also related to Moore's stay in Italy in 1925. In the past some of the drawings in the Notebook were described as 'Studies of Giotto'. See for instance Carandente, *Mostra di Henry Moore*, 76 and 311 (nr. 280). However, David Ekserdjian has shown that they are based on works by fourteenth-century Siennese artists in the Pinacoteca in Siena.

²⁴ Lichtenstern, *Henry Moore*, 156 and 171-2.

text, the 36-year old Moore lists qualities that are of fundamental importance to him as a sculptor. In the section 'Vitality and Power of expression', he uses the term 'vitality' to describe the expressive power that he is after in his work. This vitality manifests itself not in outward movement or strong physical action but through an energetic force from inside the figures: 'For me a work must have a vitality of its own. I do not mean a reflection of the vitality of life, of movement, physical action, frisking, dancing figures and so on, but that a work can have in it a pent-up energy, an intense life of its own, independent of the object it may represent'.²⁵

In fact, 'vitality' is a term that Moore uses a lot, not only to describe an ideal that was of great importance to him in his own practice, but also as a defining characteristic of what Moore called 'primitive art'. According to him, 'primitive art' has a vitality which makes it the opposite of calculation and academism, which he associates with the technical sophistication and proficiency of classical and Renaissance art.²⁶ Moore typically used the term 'primitive' in the conventional Anglocentric meaning of the term, referring to art from cultures outside European and great Eastern civilizations, such as sculpture from Africa, Oceania and pre-Columbian Mexico. The letter to William Rothenstein quoted above, but also other texts, show that he also used the term to refer to the work of early Italian painters such as Giotto and Masaccio.²⁷

The discussion of Moore's views on early Italian art might suggest that his understanding of Giotto's, Masaccio's and Giovanni Pisano's figures as 'sculptural', and as having a strong vitality of their own, is largely the result of an unmediated confrontation between Moore and the work of these artists. To a certain extent I think this is true. However, in what follows I explore how Moore's observations are also shaped by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art-historical research on Italian art, especially on Giotto and Masaccio. In analysing this art-historical context, I will not always assume that Moore was familiar with the literature discussed – even though it is known that that Moore was an avid reader of art-historical books ever since his student days in Leeds and London.²⁸ I am more interested in the wider cultural perception of early Italian art – as exemplified by these texts – in early twentieth-century Britain, and the possible influence this perception had on

²⁵ Herbert Read, ed., *Unit One. The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture*, London: Cassell, 1934, 30. Reprinted in Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 192.

²⁶ See for example Henry Moore, 'Primitive Art', *The Listener*, 24 April 1941, 598-599. Reprinted in Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, (102-106), 103. See also the notes and interviews reprinted in Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 116-120.

²⁷ See for example Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 103. This interest in non-Western art led Moore to be quite reluctant to accept the travelling scholarship to Italy, preferring instead to go to Paris or Berlin, where he believed 'primitive art' could best be studied. On this see Berthoud, *Life of Henry Moore*, 66, and James Johnson Sweeney, 'Henry Moore', *Partisan Review*, March-April 1947, 182. Reprinted in Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 54.

²⁸ On this see Berthoud, *Life of Henry Moore*, 37 and 46.

Moore's ideas. Still, where possible, I will indicate the likelihood that Moore did have a more direct knowledge of the texts under discussion.

Moore and art-historical scholarship on early Italian art

Moore's account of Giotto's and Masaccio's paintings as 'sculptural' brings to mind Bernard Berenson's concept of 'tactile values'. Although there is no evidence that Moore ever read any of Berenson's writings, the American scholar's theories were so widely known in early twentieth-century British culture that one may assume that Moore was in one way or another aware of them.²⁹ Berenson introduced the term 'tactile values' in *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896) to describe those qualities in a painting which create the illusion of three-dimensional form, and in doing so stimulate the tactile imagination of the viewer.³⁰ The concept had come to Berenson while observing Masaccio's fresco's in the Brancacci chapel, where one day he became consciously aware 'of bulk, of the third dimension'.³¹ Berenson famously describes how his tactile consciousness is stimulated by Masaccio's frescoes: 'I feel that I could touch every figure, that it would yield a definite resistance to my touch, that I should have to expend thus much effort to displace it, that I could walk around it.'³² Giotto's paintings likewise are described as giving the viewer the illusion of being able to touch the depicted figures: 'We still feel [Giotto's paintings] to be intensely real in the sense that they still powerfully appeal to our tactile imagination, thereby compelling us, as do all things that stimulate our sense of touch while they present themselves to our eyes, to take their existence for granted'³³. According to Berenson, it is only when one can take 'for granted' the existence of painted objects that a work of art is able to give the viewer pleasure that is 'genuinely artistic'.³⁴

Berenson's approach was radically formalistic. Separating the formal qualities of works of art from both the depicted content and all moral and emotional

²⁹ On the reception of Berenson in England see Lynne Walhout Hinojosa, *The Renaissance, English Cultural Nationalism, and Modernism, 1860-1920*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 96-111. For the fact that Moore had at least an awareness of the concept of tactile values see Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 211.

³⁰ Bernard Berenson, *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, New York and London: Putnam, 1896, 4-5. On the origins of the concept of 'tactile values' see Alison Brown 'Bernard Berenson and "Tactile Values" in Florence', in Joseph Connors and Louis A. Waldman, eds, *Bernard Berenson Formation and Heritage*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2014, 101-120.

³¹ Brown, 'Bernard Berenson', 102, with reference to Bernard Berenson, *The Bernard Berenson Treasury: A Selection from the Works, Unpublished Writings, Letters, Diaries, and Journals of the Most Celebrated Humanist and Art Historian of Our Times, 1887-1958*, Hanna Kiel, ed., New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962, 279.

³² Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 29.

³³ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 6-7.

³⁴ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 7.

associations that this content might have for the viewer, he dismissed the idea of art as illustration and cautioned against 'the error of judging a picture by its dramatic presentation of a situation or its rendering of character'.³⁵ Instead, he insisted on form as the principal source of artistic pleasure: 'It was in fact upon form, and form alone, that the great Florentine masters concentrated their efforts, and we are consequently forced to the belief that, in their pictures at least, form is the principal source of our aesthetic enjoyment'.³⁶

That Berenson's formalistic readings of early Italian art had a significant impact in early twentieth-century Britain is evidenced by Roger Fry's two-part article on Giotto from 1900-01.³⁷ With a reference to Berenson's conviction that form is the principal source of aesthetic pleasure, Fry posed the following question: 'It is customary to dismiss all that concerns the dramatic presentation of subject as literature or illustration which is to be sharply distinguished from the qualities of design. But can this clear distinction be drawn in fact?'³⁸ Fry argued that it could not. According to him, what makes Giotto such a great painter is that his explorations of form were not mere exercises in abstract design, but penetrating explorations of human emotions. Fry devotes a large part of his article to formal analyses of a technical nature, writing, for instance, on the Arena Chapel frescoes: 'nearly every one of these is an entirely original discovery of new possibilities in the relation of forms to one another'.³⁹ Still, these formal matters are regarded as equal if not secondary to the painter's insight into the narrative of human emotions. In 1900-01 Fry was clearly ambivalent about separating dramatic expression entirely from the articulation of aesthetic emotions through relations of pure form. However, in reprinting the essay almost twenty years later in his celebrated *Vision and Design*, he moved to a position of uncompromising formalism. In a footnote added to the article, Fry remarked: 'The following ... is perhaps more than any other article here reprinted, at variance with the more recent expressions of my aesthetic ideas ... It now seems to me possible by a more searching analysis of our experience in front of

³⁵ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 8.

³⁶ Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 9.

³⁷ Roger Fry, 'Giotto I. The Church of S. Francesco at Assisi', *Monthly Review*, 1, December 1900, 139-57, and Roger Fry, 'Giotto II', *Monthly Review*, 2, February 1901, 96-121. Reprinted with revision and abbreviation in Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1920, 87-116; here both articles are incorrectly dated 1901.

³⁸ Fry, *Vision and Design*, 110. On the relationship between Fry and Berenson, see Frances Spalding, *Roger Fry. Art and Life*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980, 62-63 and 67-69, and Caroline Elam, 'Roger Fry and Bernard Berenson', in Carl Brandon Strehlke and Machtelt Brügggen Israëls, eds, *The Bernard and Mary Berenson Collection of European Paintings at I Tatti*, Milan: Officina Libraria, 2015, 665-676.

³⁹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, 108.

a work of art to disentangle our reaction to pure form from our reaction to its implied associated ideas.⁴⁰

Fry's formalist turn on early Italian art was not unique. Already in 1914, Fry's fellow Bloomsbury critic Clive Bell argued that the aesthetic emotions of Giotto's and Masaccio's frescoes are stirred by the relations and combinations of lines, colours and forms – what Bell called 'significant form'.⁴¹ Like Berenson and the Fry of *Vision and Design*, Bell felt strongly that art had nothing to do with associations stimulated by dramatic content: 'The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant'.⁴² Bell is at points even critical of Giotto because he felt that the Italian artist did not always succeed in prioritizing form over content: 'Giotto could be intentionally second-rate. He was capable of sacrificing form to drama and anecdote. He never left the essential out, but he sometimes knocked its corners off. He was always more interested in art than in St. Francis, but he did not always remember that St. Francis has nothing whatever to do with art'.⁴³

It is clear that that much of Moore's perspective on early Italian art is rooted in this formalistic tradition associated with Berenson and Bloomsbury. Not only is Moore's insistence on sculptural form in Giotto and Masaccio indebted to Berenson's concept of tactile values, but also his explicit separation of Giovanni Pisano's gift for form from his skills as a story-teller can be connected to the theories of Berenson, Bell and the later Fry. And yet, Moore's position is not as radical as theirs. As Moore himself wrote in his text on Giovanni: 'It's wrong to think that form and expression are separate things'.⁴⁴ Already in 1934, in his contribution to the Unit One catalogue, Moore had written comparable words on his own artistic philosophy: 'Abstract qualities of design are essential to the value of a work, but to me of equal importance is the psychological, human element'.⁴⁵

A comparable synthesis of abstract form and human content can be found in Carlo Carrà's monograph on Giotto from 1924, the English translation of which was published in 1925. Carrà takes issue with a too rigid formalist approach of Giotto's work, writing: 'there are certain critics who exclude all sensitive qualities from

⁴⁰ Fry, *Vision and Design*, 87. On Fry's changing position see Hayden B.J. Maginnis, 'Reflections on Formalism. The Post-Impressionists and the Early Italians', *Art History*, 19, 1996, 195-199; and Michael Fried, 'Roger Fry's Formalism', *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, University of Michigan, 2001, 35-38. Available at https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/resources/documents/a-to-z/f/fried_2001.pdf, accessed 12 October 2021.

⁴¹ Clive Bell, *Art*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1914, 8 and 235.

⁴² Bell, *Art*, 25. On the influence of Berenson on Bell see Paul Barolsky, *Walter Pater's Renaissance*, University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987, 149-150, and Maginnis, 'Reflections on Formalism', 193-195.

⁴³ Bell, *Art*, 146.

⁴⁴ Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 172.

⁴⁵ Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 192. For comparable remarks by Moore see Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 112-114.

bodies, and wish to see in a picture only dead geometry, anatomy and perspective ... Not seeing living form, they see only the exterior corporeal appearances.'⁴⁶ Carrà does not agree with this. According to him, 'Reality, as in a living eye, shines in Giotto's particular form. The Christian abstract idea becomes concrete in the Giotto form, which is an idea of form. Form and idea mutually explain one another. Hence the unique unity of these paintings'.⁴⁷ It is known that Moore owned a copy of the English translation of Carrà's book – it still stands on the book shelves in the living room of his house in Perry Green. Unfortunately it is not known when the book came into Moore's possession or if Moore ever read it; Moore's copy has no inscriptions or annotations to help us.⁴⁸ At the same time, Carrà's ideas are typical for many early twentieth-century scholars on early Italian art, who – even if their approach is considered formalist – like Carrà insist on the unity of abstract form and representational content.⁴⁹ For example, the German art historian Friedrich Rintelen in his *Giotto und die Giotto-Apokryphen* from 1912 argues that the formal organization of Giotto's compositions – which he analyses in great detail – is not an end in itself. Instead this organization is always determined by and serves to illuminate the sacred story.⁵⁰ Moore could thus very well have been familiar with such theories independently of Carrà.

A number of twentieth-century critics of modern art likewise insist on the inseparable unity of form and content in contemporary art. An emphasis on this synthesis can be found in the writings of Herbert Read, for instance. Already in his 1929 essay 'The Meaning of Art', Read sought to reconcile the critical dualism between what he called the 'geometrical' and the 'organic'.⁵¹ For Read the geometrical indicated a tendency toward abstraction, while the organic stood for the opposing tendency toward the representational. Read thought of modern art in terms of a fusion of the abstract and the representational, and according to him Picasso's work, as well as Moore's, represented the ideal middle ground between these opposing tendencies.⁵²

⁴⁶ Carlo Carrà, *Giotto*, London: Zwemmer, 1925, 50.

⁴⁷ Carrà, *Giotto*, 50.

⁴⁸ Written communication Sophie Orpen, Henry Moore archive, Perry Green, 15 January 2020.

⁴⁹ On this see Hayden B.J. Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto. A Historical Reevaluation*, University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, 100-101.

⁵⁰ Friedrich Rintelen, *Giotto und die Giotto-Apokryphen*, Munich and Leipzig: Georg Müller, 1912, 13.

⁵¹ Herbert Read, 'The Meaning of Art: An Introduction for the Plain Man', *The Listener*, 25 September 1929, ii-viii (supplement). Reprinted with alterations in Read, *The Meaning of Art*. On this see James King, *The Last Modern. A Life of Herbert Read*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990, 94. Already in his literary criticism of the 1920s Read sought to reconcile the dualism between what he then called 'classicism' and 'romanticism'. King, *The Last Modern*, 77-91.

⁵² Herbert Read, *Art Now. An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture*, 2nd ed., London: Faber, 1949, 131. On this see David Thistlewood, *Herbert Read, Formlessness and Form. An Introduction to his Aesthetics*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, 80. See also

The last paragraph makes clear that Moore's perception of early Italian art is not only informed by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century views on Italian art, but also by critical ideas about form and content in modern art.⁵³ The influence of contemporary art criticism becomes even clearer if we look at the last, and possibly most interesting element in Moore's views on Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano. As mentioned above, the sculptural qualities that Moore values in these artists' works are connected to the expressive power of individual figures, manifesting itself not in outward movement, but in a dramatic tension inside the figures themselves. At first, Moore's rebuttal of the depiction of strong physical action seems to be in line with long established views on moderation and restraint in Italian art. As early as 1435, when Leon Battista Alberti wrote that the movements of the body reveal the movements of the soul, he insisted that these bodily movements should be restrained and gentle.⁵⁴ Through the centuries, Giotto and Masaccio in particular have been praised for such moderation. For instance, in the mid-nineteenth century John Ruskin contrasts the tranquillity Giotto has given to his figures with the way a modern artist 'accumulates on his canvas whatever is startling in aspect or emotion, and to drain, even to exhaustion, the vulgar sources of the pathetic'.⁵⁵ And as late as 1930, William G. Constable, then assistant director of the National Gallery, lists 'powerful yet restrained dramatic emphasis' as one of the dominant characteristics of Masaccio's art.⁵⁶

While Moore's observations should be understood at least partly against the background of this tradition, his comments seem to go one crucial step further. As we have seen, Moore does not talk so much of a restraint in physical movement, but emphatically of a lack of movement: both Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano are praised for getting drama into their figures even when they stand still. Although the difference is small, I think it is meaningful as it draws attention to a unique element in Moore's views on early Italian art. As mentioned earlier, in his own sculptures Moore was after the same ideal of static figures with a strong inner expression. He used the term 'vitality' for this, which he did not associate with outward movement

Andrew Causey, 'Herbert Read and Contemporary Art', in David Goodway, ed., *Herbert Read Reassessed*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998, 135; and Ben Cranfield, "'A stimulation to greater living": The Importance of Henry Moore's "credible compromise" to Herbert Read's Aesthetics and Politics', in *Henry Moore: Sculptural Process and Public Identity*, Tate Research Publication, 2015, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/henry-moore/ben-cranfield-a-stimulation-to-greater-effort-of-living-the-importance-of-henry-moores-r1151301>, accessed 19 June 2020.

⁵³ On the intersections between the study of early Italian art and modern art criticism, see Maginnis, 'Reflections on Formalism'.

⁵⁴ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, translated by Cecil Grayson, London: Penguin, 2004, 81.

⁵⁵ John Ruskin, *Giotto and His Works in Padua. Being an Explanatory Notice of the Series of Wood-Cuts Executed for the Arundel Society after the Frescoes in the Arena Chapel*, London: Arundel Society, 1854, 26.

⁵⁶ William G. Constable, 'Italian Art and the Italian Exhibition', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 78: 4035, 21 March 1930, 526.

and physical action but with an energetic force from inside the figures.⁵⁷ What is unique in Moore's understanding of early Italian art is that he projects this ideal of inner vitality onto the work of Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano.

No precedent for such an interpretation exists in literature on early Italian painting. However, a precursor – if not an exact source – can be found in the writings of Roger Fry, though not in his article on Giotto.⁵⁸ Fry's *Vision and Design* (1920) contains several articles on archaic and non-Western art. It is known that Moore read Fry's book as a student in Leeds in the early 1920s, and on several occasions during his life Moore stressed its importance. Moore has stated that Fry's articles opened his eyes to sculpture from Africa and pre-Columbian Mexico, and that they inspired him to study the collections of non-Western art in the British Museum that would have such a lasting influence on his own artistic development.⁵⁹ Of special interest here is the article 'Negro Sculpture', originally published as a review of an exhibition of sub-Saharan African sculpture at the Chelsea Book Club in 1920. In the article Fry praises African sculptures for what he calls their 'disconcerting vitality'. According to Fry, this vitality results from the fact that the sculptures are completely free in conception from the predominantly two-dimensional constraints that characterize Greek and subsequent European sculpture: 'far from clinging to two dimensions, as we tend to do, [the African artist] actually underlines, as it were, the three-dimensionality of his forms. It is in some such way, I suspect, that he manages to give to his forms their disconcerting vitality, the suggestion that they make of being not mere echoes of actual figures, but of possessing an inner life of their own'.⁶⁰ Here Fry connects the primitive, the sculptural and concomitant idea of an inner vitality in the same way, and using almost identical language, as Moore would do in his 1934 Unit One contribution and other writings.

Scholars have linked Fry's use of the term 'vitality' to the writings of the French philosopher Henri Bergson. In his *L'Évolution créatrice* from 1907 (English translation: *Creative Evolution*), Bergson introduced the idea of a spiritual life force – an *élan vital* – which shaped evolutionary development. While discredited as a scientific concept soon after its proposal, Bergson's *élan vital* achieved widespread popular acclaim in Britain, and inspired not only Fry and others of the Bloomsbury

⁵⁷ On this see also Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 198.

⁵⁸ Although Fry writes in this article that 'it is impossible to find in [Giotto's] work a case where the gestures of the hands are not explicit indications of a particular emotion', he believes that many of Giotto's works suffer from what he calls an 'unrestrained extravagance of passion'. Only in late works such as *The Death of Saint Francis* in the Bardi chapel in Santa Croce does Fry observe a new mood of placidity and repose. Fry, *Vision and Design*, 100, 110 and 112.

⁵⁹ Wilkinson, *Henry Moore*, 44 and 151. On this see also Berthoud, *Life of Henry Moore*, 42-44.

⁶⁰ Fry, *Vision and Design*, 89.

circle, but also later generations of modernist artists and critics.⁶¹ As late as 1951 Herbert Read labelled himself an 'unregenerate Bergsonian', while Barbara Hepworth, like Moore, aimed in her own work for the same inner vitality that Fry had observed in African sculpture: 'When we say that a great sculpture has vision, power, vitality, scale, poise, form or beauty, we are not speaking of physical attributes. Vitality is not a physical, organic attribute of sculpture – it is a spiritual inner life'.⁶²

The discussion of vitality in Fry's article on African sculpture as well as the references to Bergson, Read and Hepworth are indicative of the wider intellectual world against which we have to situate Moore's views on Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano. Certainly, his perception of these artists is to a large extent conditioned by prevailing critical ideas on early Italian art. In this sense it is typical for its time and not necessarily ground-breaking. However, Moore's emphasis on the dramatic tension inside static figures is ultimately grounded in modernist ideals of vitality in sculptural form. Moore not only aspired for such vitality in his own sculptures, these ideals also came to have a significant impact on the way he regarded the work of Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano. The result is a unique and unprecedented element in his consideration of these Italian artists. As such, it also influences how we – as readers of Moore – might look at their work. Much more than his contemporaries, Moore draws our attention to the expressive qualities of static figures in the paintings of Giotto and Masaccio and the sculptures of Giovanni Pisano. For this reason, the reconsideration of Moore's ideas on early Italian art provided here is important and warrants attention. It will not necessarily result in a rewriting of the art history of the period, but it does invite us to observe in Giotto's, Masaccio's and Giovanni's work the primitive, sculptural and expressive qualities that mirrored Moore's own modernist ambitions and ideals. A more precise understanding of what Giotto, Masaccio and Giovanni Pisano looked like for Moore will thus lead to better and deeper insights into the art of Moore. In turn, we come to know something of the course of modernist sculpture and its links to early Italian art.

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⁶¹ On this see Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996, and Paul Ardoin, S. E. Gontarski and Laci Mattison, eds, *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism*, New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

⁶² Herbert Read, *Art and the Evolution of Man*, London: Freedom Press, 1951, 34. Barbara Hepworth, 'Sculpture', in J.L. Martin, Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo, eds, *Circle. International Survey of Constructive Art*, London: Faber and Faber, 1937, 113.

the Vasarian Paradigm: Carl Friedrich von Rumohr and Early Italian Painting', in *The Paradigm of Vasari. Reception, Criticism, Perspectives*, Fabian Jonietz and Alessandro Nova, eds, Venice: Marsilio, 2016, 93-102, and 'Byzantine Nearness and Renaissance Distance: the Meaning of Byzantining Modes in 14th-Century Italian Painting', in *Byzantium in Dialogue with the Mediterranean. History and Heritage*, Danielle Slootjes and Mariette Verhoeven, eds, Leiden: Brill, 2019, 203-225.

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