Rustic Renaissance: Vernacular architecture in religious painting from late 15th to early 16th centuries

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Abstract. Although Renaissance art often favoured classical architecture as the setting for sacred events and characters, several works from the period, from different European regions, placed religious narratives within rural landscapes that included vernacular architecture. Far from serving as neutral scenery, these rustic settings conveyed symbolic meaning shaped by theological discourse. Christian humanism and Platonic thought converged, prompting many Renaissance paintings to articulate the harmony between the humble life of the countryside and the divine order inscribed in the natural world. Drawing from contemporary humanist thought, pastoral literature, and the iconographic analysis of five case studies, this article argues that vernacular imagery provided a culturally resonant language for divine presence to be more easily experienced. The artistic choice of vernacular architecture, rather than revealing a rejection of Renaissance classicism, suggests a parallel mode of revival, grounded in classical heritage, just as much as Greco-Roman architecture would. This article explores how such architectural choices impacted the audience's performative construction of sacred meaning, allowing spiritual experience to be mediated through recognisable and symbolically resonant landscapes.
Keywords: humanism, landscape, countryside, symbolism, spirituality.

[Esp.] Renacimiento rústico: arquitectura vernácula en la pintura religiosa desde finales del siglo XV hasta principios del siglo XVI

Resumen. Aunque el arte renacentista solía preferir la arquitectura clásica como escenario para eventos y personajes sagrados, varias obras de la época, procedentes de diferentes regiones europeas, situaban las narrativas religiosas en paisajes rurales que incluían arquitectura vernácula. Lejos de servir como escenario neutral, estos entornos rústicos transmitían un significado simbólico moldeado por el discurso teológico. El humanismo cristiano y el pensamiento platónico convergieron, lo que llevó a muchas pinturas renacentistas a expresar la armonía entre la vida humilde del campo y el orden divino inscrito en el mundo natural. Basándose en el pensamiento humanista contemporáneo, la literatura pastoral y el análisis iconográfico de cinco casos prácticos, este artículo sostiene que las imágenes vernáculas proporcionaban un lenguaje culturalmente resonante que facilitaba la experiencia de la presencia divina. La elección artística de la arquitectura vernácula, en lugar de revelar un rechazo al clasicismo renacentista, sugiere un modo paralelo de Renacimiento, basado en la herencia clásica, al igual que lo haría la arquitectura grecorromana. Este artículo explora cómo tales elecciones arquitectónicas influyeron en la construcción performativa del significado sagrado por parte del público, permitiendo que la experiencia espiritual se mediara a través de paisajes reconocibles y simbólicamente resonantes.
Palabras clave: humanismo, paisaje, campo, simbolismo, espiritualidad.

Summary: 1. Introduction, 2. The vernacular within religious Renaissance painting, 3. The Renaissance symbolic nature of vernacular architecture, 4. The countryside as an alternative Renaissance landscape, 5. The Renaissance spirituality of rustic environments, 6. Final remarks, References

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1. Introduction

Vernacular architecture seems to be present in Renaissance religious painting more consistently from the 1480s to the 1520s. It does not appear isolated, but as part of countryside landscapes relegated to the background of biblical or sacred characters, as part of a rustic environment that sets the mood for the portrayed events. This pattern cannot be understood solely as a reflection of the technical or stylistic developments of the age, such as improvements in engraving or artistic exchanges between Italy and Northern Europe (Vasselin, 2008). Instead, this development requires an investigation into the symbolic meanings assigned to the rustic world in that context.

Studies on Renaissance iconography recognise the importance of scenery and classical architecture as symbolic support for religious themes, especially considering the Greco-Roman revivalism of the time (e.g. King, 2003). Classical architecture, however, did not have exclusivity over the settings of devotional paintings; on the contrary, it coexisted with representations of vernacular architecture. But their persistent presence in these pictorial compositions remains largely unexplored. When there was a desire to break with medieval aesthetics and seek the aesthetic grandeur of classical antiquity, why did Renaissance painters often resort to depicting vernacular buildings, rooted in medieval building traditions and associated with the humility of rustic environments?

This article examines the symbolic role of vernacular architecture within the rustic landscapes portrayed in religious painting, spanning from 1480s to 1520s. It focuses on selected case studies to examine such buildings as an iconographic device within a manageable scope. It does not aim to provide a comprehensive survey of more than a century of painting, but rather to analyse this specific occurrence in order to shed light on its significance. The article argues that vernacular architecture functioned not merely as descriptive setting, but as morally and spiritually charged construct aligned with contemporary theological and humanist discourses. In doing so, it brings into focus a dimension of rural imagery that has received limited sustained attention in art-historical scholarship.

Given the breadth of the period and the geographical diversity, the discussion is necessarily selective. Five paintings are considered from Northern to Southern Europe and the Iberian Peninsula: *Madonna Enthroned with Child and Two Angels*, by Hans Memling; *Nativity*, by Piero della Francesca; *Visitation*, by Grão Vasco; *Madonna and Child with Lamb against a Landscape*, by Quentin Massys; and *The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, by Bernardino Luini. As such, this article approaches different contexts comparatively. But it does not presume a uniform intellectual paradigm. Instead, it concentrates on iconographic convergences that reveal a shared symbolic vocabulary across regions, drawing on primary and secondary sources through a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach. A comprehensive analysis of distinct regional theological and humanist sources would fall beyond the scope of this study.

The iconographic readings proposed do not presuppose direct textual sources for each visual element. Rather, they situate recurring pictorial motifs within a broader intellectual climate. The argument therefore proceeds by contextual convergence rather than by demonstrating specific lines of influence. The focus is on a holistic reading of the presence of the vernacular as a symbol in Renaissance painting. Issues such as schools, influences, or precursors will not be discussed. Instead, this article analyses how the rural landscape, vernacular architecture, and their juxtaposition with the city contributed to representing Christian spirituality in a close, symbolic, and performative way.

2. The vernacular within religious Renaissance painting

In the central panel of the 1480 *Pagagnotti Triptych*, in the Uffizi, Hans Memling depicted the Virgin and Child with two angels. Mary is enthroned between two windows, beyond which we can observe a city, with walls and buildings, and a countryside landscape, with a timber framed watermill, miller and donkey (Fig. 1A, B). The watermill, with Christian iconography, was a popular element (Kirschbaum, 1971; York, 2010), but Helen York (2010) argues that Memling located religious scenes in natural landscapes familiar to the audience, conveying narratives valid across time and space. Painted in 1480-5, Piero della Francesca's *Nativity*, housed in the National Gallery, also juxtaposes an urban landscape to the right of the Holy Family, reportedly Piero's hometown of Sansepolcro (Banker, 2014), with a Tuscan landscape to the left, with a winding river, village and small vernacular house (Fig. 2A, B). Piero presents the story in its most mundane and even humble version. Marilyn Lavin (1995) and Anna Maetzke (1998) have both pointed out that Piero often expressed high theological meaning in a modest and unpretentious form, exalting the simplicity of the themes he portrayed.

In the 1506-11 *Visitation* of the Lamego Cathedral, by Grão Vasco, a whole village is portrayed, with timber framed houses and a watermill, miller and his horse, a man and his boat, people in conversation, domestic animals, a flock of sheep, and an ox cart (Fig. 3A, B). All the buildings exhibit high pointed roofs, typical of Northern Europe, unfamiliar to Lamego's audience. Even so, Dalila Rodrigues (2007) claims that Vasco often activated a dialogue with his audience by means of simple universes, creating the illusion that the representation is or could be an extension of their own reality. Considering Quentin Massys' 1520 *Madonna and Child with Lamb against a Landscape*, in the National Museum of Poznań, a village is also portrait behind the Virgin and Child, including several vernacular houses, with thatched roofing, a woman tending her chickens, and two men pruning trees (Fig. 4A, B). Hippolyte Taine (1869) inscribed the work of Massys in an innovative movement that took place north of the Alps, where a new sense of reality emerged, combining realism with piety, in an almost naive way. The sense of naivety is also pointed out by John Symonds (1961) addressing Bernardino Luini's work. In Luini's 1522-5 *The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, held in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum, the natural components of the landscape, mountain, river, clouds, and tree stand out in a window above the Virgin and Child's heads, as well as a vernacular house between them (Fig. 5A, B). The two human figures, with a boat and dog, painted in shades, are barely distinguishable. Symonds argues in favour of Luini's fresh treatment on conventional religious themes, a naive and artless grace, in times when the feeling for antiquity seems to have lost its initial vigour.


A


B

Fig. 1A, B - Hans Memling, Madonna Enthroned with Child and Two Angels (central panel of the Pagagnotti Triptych), and detail. Public domain in Wikimedia Commons.

Rural opposes urban in the *Pagagnotti Triptych* and Piero's *Nativity*. It could also be said they complete each other. Yet, the angel beneath the urban landscape window in the *Pagagnotti Triptych* is directing the forbidden fruit to the Infant Jesus, while below the rural landscape, an angel is playing the harp in full worship. In the Piero's *Nativity*, the two shepherds and Joseph, all dressed as city dwellers, are distracted from the central scene where Jesus rests, and are positioned at the city's side, on the right. Meanwhile, a choir of five angels approaches the Infant from the rural landscape, on the left. Therefore, it is plausible that in both these paintings the city is associated with the mundane and mortal, if not the sinful. The countryside, with its natural landscape and vernacular buildings is, on the other hand, associated with the worshippers and the heavenly. This association seems to be present as well in Vasco's *Visitation*, as the village represented in the background rests below two flying angels, who echo Mary and Elizabeth's embrace in the foreground. In Massys' *Madonna and Child*, natural landscape and vernacular architecture are once again closer to sacrosanctity, as the holy characters are set in the luminous village, far away from a city, portrayed in an overshadowed background. In Luini's *Mystical Marriage*, the city is completely absent. Vernacular architecture predominates the scenery, above the holy characters, fully integrated in the natural landscape, in which the human figures are technically and in narrative terms secondary. It is as if these buildings were enough to denote human earthly presence within a narrative shaped by the natural world and the divine realm.

Therefore, two probable causes for the use of vernacular architecture in Renaissance religious painting emerge:

1) to better induce recognition of the narrative portrayed, a certain familiarity with the audience's reality was presented;
2) to better associate the heavenly with the simple and humble, modesty was juxtaposed with the grand shapes and mundanity of urban life.

Symonds, however, points to a distinct direction. Antiquity, once the driving impulse and the strongest theme of the Renaissance, might have no longer seduced painters as it did before. The classical architectural legacy could have lost a degree of preponderance, as a thematic setting for religious scenes. Some scholars and audiences might even have seen classicism as a threat to Christianity (Warburg, 1932; Jensen, 1996), thus, viewing classical architecture as an unfit scenery for Christian representations. Jacob Burckhardt (1860) explored the possibility of Netherlandish Renaissance painting adopting a more realistic and simple approach to religious themes, appealing to a more conservative audience. Classical settings, therefore, could have been seen as unrealistic, inappropriate, and perhaps too progressive. Thus, a third hypothesis arises:

3) to better convey sacred Christian meanings, antiquity's architecture as a setting was rejected.

Representing the vernacular would bring the biblical episodes depicted closer to the daily lives of their audience. Through natural landscapes, country scenes, and vernacular architecture, artists brought the sacred past closer to the viewer's present. Salvation and sin were not distant, but manifested in the audience's space and time. How exactly the vernacular, within countryside representations, portrayed and brought sacred meanings closer to the Renaissance artistic audiences is, as such, in need of exploring.

3. The Renaissance symbolic nature of vernacular architecture

Although art in the Renaissance attained a new and carefully calculated attention to the visible world, its engagement with nature was never merely descriptive, but articulated ideas about human conduct and moral order (Goedde, 2013; Talon-Hugon, 2023). A painted skull was not only the remains of a dead person's head; it stood for death and the transient nature of life. Such objects functioned as culturally codified signs rather than neutral depictions. In Renaissance religious painting, artists used such meanings to transform sacred narratives, structuring them through materially legible symbols designed to intensify devotional response (Bukdahl, 2017). Visual stimuli were created to induce specific emotions, but this affective activation depended on recognisable symbolic conventions shared between painter and beholder. Audiences recognised

the meanings of the objects portrayed, converting visual stimuli into intelligible emotional and spiritual reflection (Baxandall, 1972; Graham, 2023). This process relied on a shared visual vocabulary and cultural framework, through which viewers could decode symbols and gestures, allowing for a deeply affective and intellectually resonant experience of the artwork. Paintings, therefore, conveyed narrative fictions through material objects, whether in the form of stories, allegories, or symbolic representations.


A


B

Fig. 2A, B - Piero della Francesca, Nativity, and detail. Public domain in Wikimedia Commons.

Symbols in religious painting aided a particular devotional activity among their audience, not only because artists and the Church alike believed that art could elevate people and drive away their sins (Bukdahl, 2017), but also because images operated within a doctrinal framework that regulated their meaning and reception. This assumption, though, meant religious paintings were produced within the institutional frames of ecclesiastical theory on images, where representation was understood as both didactic and transformative. Therefore, vernacular architecture portrayed in religious painting cannot be regarded as incidental background. It must be understood as a culturally authorised and institutionally legible motif, capable of conveying shared symbolic associations. The audience familiarity with vernacular buildings depicted in religious paintings was not only empirical but interpretative. These and other objects in Renaissance painting had a secondary symbolic nature, that suggested a pictorial narrative through which the spiritual message was deciphered (Panofsky, 1955; Alpatov, 1971). Vernacular architecture could have functioned as a recognisable visual code through which spiritual narratives were mediated.

In a 1492 sermon, the Dominican friar Michele da Carcano explained that art would serve one of three purposes: to provide an example for those who were illiterate; to aid memory, since words were more easily forgotten than images; or to evoke emotions in the audience, as if they were physically inside the painting (*in* Baxandall, 1972). Gordon Graham (2023) claims that three distinctive religious emotions occur: awe, caused by the feeling of vastness; existential anxiety, triggered by the perception of mortality; and guilt, which comes from comparing our lives to the ideal of moral excellence. The symbolic nature of vernacular architecture, therefore, must have been familiar enough to the Renaissance audience, setting an example, aiding their memory, or evoking an emotion (whether awe, anxiety or guilt).

In Renaissance religious painting, vernacular architecture did not serve as a central subject, but rather appeared as part of broader rural landscapes that framed the depiction of sacred figures. Having a fictional, highly selective, and conventional nature, the depiction of landscape in the Renaissance (Goedde, 2013) was a symbolic representation. In symbolic representations, everyday objects act as symbols that appear in the paintings as casual items, concealing a deeper

meaning (Straten, 1994). Erwin Panofsky (1955) called them *artistic motifs*, claiming they would be apprehended by their shapes and colours, but also by certain expressive qualities. Acting as a symbolic object, a vernacular house could have been recognised by the shape of its roof or the colour of its walls, but also as an underprivileged construction and dwelling of humble people. A symbol, such as vernacular architecture, would have encouraged the audience to also think about the abstract concept for which it stood, rather than its simple state (Straten, 1994). An association between the artistic motif and the theme of the painting would lead the audience to perceive a deeper level of the work, that of the principles culturally established and institutionally endowed by its abstract concept (Panofsky, 1955). But within religious paintings, what was the Renaissance spiritual abstract concept entailed by vernacular architecture in countryside landscapes?

4. The countryside as an alternative Renaissance landscape

Renaissance landscape painting was mostly relegated to the background, viewed at a distance and from a high point, setting the scenery for the narrative characters in the foreground. Since landscape was not intended to be enjoyed on its own, and art was to be appreciated for its moral meaning, not for its sensory stimulation (Clark, 1949), this compositional marginality seems to have been intentional. As such, landscape could have operated as a vehicle of meaning rather than as an object of aesthetic contemplation. In fact, some references from the end of the 15th century document the treatment that landscapes paintings had within the artistic world as subsidiary and accessory in nature (Andrews, 1999). Yet such descriptions seem to refer to hierarchical status within composition, not to a lack of interpretative weight. Landscape was not an irrelevant or less significant part of Renaissance painting. On the contrary, landscapes often played a crucial supporting role, enriching the narrative, enhancing the emotional tone, and providing symbolic or theological context to the central religious themes. In fact, the concept of landscape, as well as the words that designate it in both the Romance and Germanic languages, emerged at the turn of the 16th century to refer to a new genre in Northern Europe that incorporated landscape painting (Punter, 1982). The consolidation of this terminology suggests an increasing awareness of landscape as a meaningful pictorial category. Landscape seems to have been a feature significant enough to differentiate a genre under its own name.


A


B

Fig. 3A, B – Grão Vasco, Visitation, and detail. Public domain in Wikimedia Commons.

Throughout the 15th century, landscape acquired an importance similar to that of the characters represented in paintings, signalling a shift in pictorial thinking, rather than a merely

decorative enrichment. It set a space of existence that was both objective and conditioned. The idea that landscape was naturally beautiful, inherited from the ancient Greeks and Romans (Besse, 2003; Pryet-Demeyère, 2015), shaped its perception into a constructed expression, informed by natural and cultural codes. Such classical inheritances did not operate passively. They were reconfigured within new devotional and intellectual contexts. As constructed expressions, artistic depictions of landscapes may have deliberately targeted audiences' reactions. Landscape incorporation into Renaissance painting should therefore be seen, not as a secondary sensorial devise, but a culturally conditioned expression, capable of conveying meanings by itself (Roskill, 1997; York, 2010). Its symbolic agency was thus embedded in the very structure of representation. Landscape gave metaphorical force to the human presence in paintings, as the human presence gave dignity to the landscape (Andrews, 1999). This dialectic relation shaped both landscape painting and its appreciation, to the point that it may have evoked spiritual, political, and identity meanings. It is precisely within this symbolic reciprocity that vernacular architecture acquires interpretative relevance.

Nevertheless, landscape did not solely stand for representations of spaces. In early 16th century, the German *landschaft*, as the French *paysage* in late 15th century and the English *landscape* in early 17th century, concerned more than a perception of nature, also including a geographical area with political limits (Olwig, 1996; Pryet-Demeyère, 2015). In Northern Europe, the territory around the city was clearly referred to by the end of the 15th century as its *landschaft* (Andrews, 1999), suggesting that landscape stood for the rural countryside. The idea of landscape emerged from the artistic development of the Renaissance, alongside a new sense of vastness that the European voyages overseas created (Goedde, 2013), and a growing humanist movement that followed the decline of feudalism. Declining feudalism gave way to an influential class of individual landowners, greatly influenced by the Greco-Roman idea of *res publica*, based on the civic and humanist role of individuals. As land became the property of individuals rather than feudal lineages, the legitimisation of social influence and political power shifted from lineage to the property itself, providing social and commercial autonomy (Pregill & Volkman, 1999; Olwig, 2013). The interest that Renaissance painters took in countryside landscapes, therefore, should be understood within the framework of the new social and cultural role played by the rural world.

To a point, the rural world was equivalent to the concept of landscape itself (Pryet-Demeyère, 2015), as suggested by the French word *paysage*, from the Latin word *pagus*, that applied to a rural canton. The boundaries between the rural world and the natural world were not as rigid as they are today. In the Renaissance, much of the literature that celebrates escape from civilisation does so through characters who regain wisdom and spiritual integrity by immersing themselves in the natural or rural world. A retreat from the city to a contemplative countryside landscape could provide for a virtuous, higher level of spiritual and intellectual existence (Warnke, 1994; Lillie, 2007). These were the conceptual foundations for the so-called *locus amoenus*, an ideal countryside landscape, often present in Renaissance poetry and literature, that stood for peace, beauty, and piety. In many humanist contexts, landscape became part of an intellectual practice that projected moral aspirations onto nature, transforming the act of depiction, in painting and writing alike, into a reflection of human virtue, divine order, and philosophical ideals. Citizens began feeling a deeper cultural division between urban and rural spaces (Andrews, 1999). Thus, the idea of solitude in the countryside to seek a new spirituality, one that reconciled the effects observed in nature with the suggestion of divine grace (Vasselin, 2008), became a powerful attraction for writers and painters alike. The path for understanding the adoption of vernacular architecture by Renaissance painters lies then, at least partially, in this deepening allure of a new spirituality.

5. The Renaissance spirituality of rustic environments

The connection between rustic environments and elevated spiritual ideals was evident in classical antiquity, while the connotation of the rural world with the natural world was culturally well-established long before the Renaissance. This long symbolic genealogy ensured that rural imagery entered Renaissance painting already charged with moral associations. Peasants lived alongside the natural cycles of seasons and were subject to the bounty of the land, so their lives had long been considered closer to nature. With three quarters of the European population living in rural

areas (Gentilcore, 2007), the symbolic valorisation of rustic life in the Renaissance may be related to the social reality of the time, as well as their proximity to the natural world.

Demographic prevalence, however, does not in itself explain symbolic prestige; rather, it provided the experiential substrate upon which moral meanings could be projected. But even in this natural/rural world, land had become a commercial commodity, to be used and traded as part of a new capitalist economy (Pregill & Volkman, 1999). This new status for country estates meant that peasants were also subject to exploitation and domination by urban elites (Williams, 1973). Such tensions complicate any naïve idealisation of rural life, yet they also help explain why its representation in art could function as an ethical counter-image to urban corruption. The countryside and the city played very different roles, both socially and symbolically.


A


B

Fig. 4A, B - Quentin Massys, Madonna and Child with Lamb against a Landscape, and detail. Public domain in Wikimedia Commons.

The country/city dichotomy is one of the most persistent symbolic categories in Renaissance thought, being well rooted in Greek and Roman pastoral poetry. From Theocritus' *Idylls* (3rd century BC) to Virgil's *Eclogues* (1st century BC), the peaceful life in the countryside contrasts with the turmoil of war and political chaos of the cities. Horace popularised the concept through the expression *beatus ille*, blessed he who lived by the natural rhythms of life, away from the corruption of the great urban spheres. During the Renaissance, such ideas, though, were the subject of considerable debate. For instance, the *Disputationes Camaldulenses* of Cristoforo Landino (*c.* 1472) illustrate how contemporaries disagreed on the precise relationship between rustic life, nature, and spiritual virtue. Nevertheless, many humanist and theological authors converged on the notion that the countryside provided a morally and spiritually enriching environment. In his 1511 *The Praise of Folly*, Desiderius Erasmus (2015, p. 48) asserted that should the humble and the simpleton "approach even more closely to the irrationality of dumb animals", they would be free of sin. In his 1547 *Propos Rustiques*, Noël du Fail (1878, pp. 17–18) described how, during "the times of God", his fellow villagers returned from the fields content "with the trade of which they could live honourably". "Indeed", noted Thomas à Kempis (1989, p. 5) in his widely read *c.* 1418-1427 *The Imitation of Christ*, "a humble husbandman, that serves God, is better than a proud philosopher".

By contrast, the city was often associated with the corruption of moral values and, as such, further away from God. The urban environment, marked by artifice, ambition, and the constant search for social prestige, was seen as fertile ground for sins that distanced man from his spiritual essence and the ideal of natural virtue. In his 1498 *Eclogues*, Baptista Mantuanus establishes a dialogue between a countryman and a city dweller. As the city dweller recognises

that cities were places of "whoreish uses (…), adultery, murders, [and] seditions", the countryman stated that "the city is the source and origin of all evils" (*in* Mustard, 1911, p. 94). In his popular philosophical essay *Menosprecio de Corte y Alabanza de Aldea*, from 1539, Antonio de Guevara (1922, p. 80) also considers "the privilege of the village that the men there are more virtuous and less vicious", in contrast to the city, "where there are a thousand who hinder you from doing good and a hundred thousand who incite you to evil". By using the Spanish word *bienaventuranza* (beatitude) to describe those living in the countryside, Guevara (1922, p. 63) speaks directly to the concept of *beatus ille*, made popular in the pastoral poetry of classical antiquity. Such literary and philosophical expressions reflect a broader cultural tendency that seems, at least in part, to have idealized rural life not merely as a geographic alternative, but as a moral and spiritual counterpoint to the perceived decadence of urban society.

A B

Fig. 5A, B - Bernardino Luini, The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine, and detail. Public domain in Wikimedia Commons.

From as early as the mid-14th century, to the time when rural/natural landscapes were being incorporated within religious paintings, poets and intellectuals were combining a Platonic and humanist rustic lifestyle celebration with contemplative and devotional Christian thought. Following the classical idea of a mythical primordial place, where man lived in harmony with nature in an environment where moral values prevailed, rustic environments were endowed with a humanist and Christian spirituality during the Renaissance. In 1346, Francesco Petrarca (1924, p. 111) had claimed that "the retired man (…) on some salubrious hill, (…) breaks joyously with pious lips into the daily praises of the Lord". A rustic retired life in the country would more easily inspire religious sentiments. The harmonious integration of human prayer with the sounds of the natural world, as "devout breath are harmonized with the gentle murmur of the down-rushing stream", works as an idealized relationship between the pious man and the natural landscape. The union between man and nature seems to have been a metaphor for spiritual purity.

Although humanists believed that men would be freed from the primitive laws of nature by the values of their culture (Rüsen, 2006), during the Renaissance, there was a ubiquitous metaphor that regarded nature as a book written by God. It was the so-called Book of Nature, which consisted of the idea that God could be known both through the Scriptures and nature alike. Nature, like the Scriptures, was an important source of religious knowledge and a way to salvation. Engaging with nature thus may have become a devotional act, one that complemented traditional religious practices by encouraging contemplation of the divine order manifested in the natural world. In this view, the study and representation of nature were not merely scientific or

aesthetic pursuits, but also spiritual exercises rooted in the desire for a deeper understanding of God's creation.

Arcadia, a poem by Jacopo Sanazzaro (with numerous editions since 1502), drew on classical traditions, including the pastorals of Virgil, Theocritus, Ovid, and Tibullus. It was not just a geographical place in the mountainous region of central Peloponnese, Greece. As the sacred Book of Nature, *Arcadia* was a "spiritual landscape", a "paradise of happiness", where humble shepherds communed with nature and could, therefore, fill their days praising God (Marnoto, 1996, p. 125). Nature gained theological status: to know and inhabit nature, understanding how it influenced agricultural cycles and all rustic life, was to worship God. This immersion in the rhythms of nature extended beyond agricultural labour to include the very structures that supported rural life. Simple, functional, and built with local materials, vernacular architecture was not merely a backdrop, but an expression of the same harmony with the natural order. It too became part of the sacred landscape, embodying the humility, permanence, and closeness to the divine that both the Bock of Nature concepts and Arcadian ideals celebrated.

6. Final remarks

From Hans Memling's *Pagagnotti Triptych* to the *Eclogues* of Baptista Mantuanus, the confrontation between urban and rural elements in the Renaissance reveals a deliberate symbolic strategy that transcended mere visual representation. This approach may have actively shaped the audience's spiritual and moral perceptions, while audiences themselves read, interpreted, and deciphered rustic landscape representations, confirming Paolo Furia's (2024) assertion of landscape's performativity in art. These patterns suggest that Renaissance artists harnessed the symbolic potential of rustic landscapes not merely to evoke nostalgia or aesthetic pleasure, but to participate in a cultural discourse that equated proximity to nature and simplicity to divine order and inner harmony. In doing so, they reconfigured the act of viewing into a performative encounter that invited reflections on the interdependence of rustic environments, spirituality, and morality.

Building upon the foundational opposition between urban and rural in the visual narrative, paintings collectively embody the Renaissance conviction that understanding Scripture and nature were intertwined processes. The rural landscapes and vernacular architecture may have served as visual catechism, making the divine presence perceptible within the natural world, thus reinforcing the theological premise that nature itself was a sacred text to be read. Meanings in symbolic representations are inherently unstable and contingent on context, shaped by the viewer's subjectivity and the plurality of interpretative frameworks (Eco, 1976; Mitchell, 2005). Symbols never possess a fixed significance; rather, their meanings evolve over time and vary across different cultures. From the Northern European pointed roofs in Vasco's *Visitation* to the Tuscan rural houses in Piero's *Nativity*, the diverse architectural elements demonstrate how iconographic and cultural context influences interpretation, underscoring the open-ended nature of symbolic language in Renaissance art. And yet, the portrayed vernacular architecture, from an inland small town of Lamego to the urban centres of Northern Europe and Tuscany, reflects a shared cultural vocabulary that transcended geographical boundaries.

The fictional nature of these Renaissance rustic landscapes, attested by the idealisation of rural life in both Vasco's *Visitation* and Massys' *Madonna and Child with Lamb*, highlights a constructed stylisation of the countryside, which evokes a spiritualised pastoral ideal rather than documentary realism. In this view, vernacular architecture becomes a potent vehicle for conveying spiritual humility and simplicity. Humble rural dwellings and natural elements symbolise the divine manifested in ordinary life, paralleling the Christian narrative of Christ's incarnation in poverty. Physical and metaphysical harmony were symbolically intertwined with rustic and natural lifestyles. The pastoral scenes functioned as symbolic representations of inner peace and spiritual balance, with vernacular architecture as a visual symbol of the Renaissance Christian ideal that only from true humility could divine grace arise. In *The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, Luini minimises human presence within the natural landscape, allowing a single vernacular dwelling to become the central marker of human interaction with the divine. This quiet integration into the scenery suggests that the humble rustic home alone was enough to symbolise the proximity between modest earthly life and the sacred order of the Book of Nature.

The three hypotheses proposed in the beginning of this study are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary facets of the artistic strategy employed in Renaissance painting. The diverse contexts in which the paintings presented were conceived and displayed seem to substantiate hypothesis 1), that familiarity with everyday reality enhanced narrative recognition. Whether destined for more rural audiences, familiar with vernacular architecture, or intended for urban settings, where audiences were increasingly attuned to the economic and symbolic value of the countryside, the use of vernacular imagery could have provided a shared visual language that transcended rural/urban boundaries. In both environments, rural motifs, natural settings, and modest architectural forms could be read as intelligible signs capable of grounding sacred stories in a relatable world for the viewer. For rural inhabitants, these scenes reflected aspects of their lived experience; for urban viewers, the same motifs resonated through a cultural framework shaped by their financial activities, as well as pastoral literature and humanist ideals. In either case, this deliberate visual strategy may have enabled a more immediate and personal engagement with the religious content, reinforcing the idea that narrative clarity could be enhanced through symbolic familiarity.

The association between the divine and modesty in Renaissance religious imagery, as proposed by hypothesis 2) reflects a broader cultural logic rooted precisely in humanist theology and pastoral ideals. Against the backdrop of increasingly urbanised and materially complex societies, the visual alignment of holiness with rustic simplicity may have functioned as a moral and spiritual counterpoint to the perceived corruption of urban life. Humanist discourse, informed by both Christian teachings and classical pastoral literature, often celebrated the countryside as a space of natural order and spiritual clarity. In this symbolic economy, rural settings, marked by vernacular architecture, agricultural rhythms, and peasant life, may have resonated with contemporary ideas of humility, receptiveness, and moral purity. Artistic representations seem to have absorbed this worldview by deliberately staging sacred scenes within modest, non-monumental contexts, thereby visually opposing the grandeur and artifice of urban environments. This opposition would not have been merely aesthetic, but ideological: it may have reaffirmed the Christian notion that salvation would be found not in worldly splendour, but in spiritual simplicity.

Thus, rustic settings were not merely marginal in Renaissance painting but inscribed within the humanist agenda that elevated the simplicity of rural life, as a reflection of classical poetic ideals. This placed the vernacular not as an opposition to classical architecture but as its complementary counterpart. While the deliberate avoidance of classical architecture in religious settings, as assumed by the hypothesis 3), might initially appear to contradict Renaissance classicism, it in fact reflects a more nuanced engagement with antiquity. Rather than rejecting classical heritage outright, artists seem to have selectively embraced aspects that aligned with Christian values rooted in the Platonic tradition. Thus, the adoption of vernacular architecture within rustic landscapes should not be read as a denial of classicism, but as a revival of its bucolic dimension. These visual choices echoed the humanist synthesis of Platonism and Christianity, which regarded simplicity, inner harmony, and a closeness to nature as pathways to divine understanding. By favouring the modest over the monumental, and the vernacular over the Greco-Roman, Renaissance artists redefined the legacy of antiquity within a Christian framework. Therefore, the presence of vernacular architecture in sacred scenes would not have marked a rupture with the Renaissance ethos, but a realignment of classical revivalism with the spiritual and moral imperatives of the time.

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