Parrhasios and the Stage Curtain: Theatre, Metapainting and the Idea of Representation in the Seventeenth Century

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A fresco by Abraham Bosse representing a *Comédie donnée au château de Grosbois en 1644* (*plate 1*) and preserved *in situ*, is framed by two, apparently symmetrical, curtains. In reality, they are not on the same plane: the one on the right is a stage curtain, red throughout, while the one on the left is richly ornamented and ornamented with embroidery that recalls the wall covering of the principal room. The two curtains frame two levels of representation, to which two types of characters correspond: at ground level, gentlemen in Louis XIII dress, and, on the stage, actors wearing a richer version of the same costume with gilt decorations,[1] and a 'king of comedy' wearing an artificial crown. The painter has emphasized the mirror effect and continuity between the two spaces, which are both equally illuminated by the candlelight. Thus, between the representation on the stage and the representation in the room, there is a difference only of degree: the same compositional element, the curtain, is duplicated on the two levels in order to signify the fact of representation. Confronted with this duplicated image, the spectator adopts the same point of view towards the pictorial representation as the internal spectators do towards the theatrical representation; and the fresco reproduces the reflexive device of a theatre within a theatre, a device at its height in France in the 1640s. The way the representations have been combined completes this reflexive dimension, while emphasizing the parallelism between theatre and painting in the realization of the idea of representation, of which the curtain is one of the most emphatic signs.

This series of connections has a long lineage: the first presentation of a metapicture, the curtain of Parrhasios, certainly took place in a theatre, which is easy to forget because the translations of the anecdote nearly always obscure the fact that the competition between the artists took place in a theatre, a place of public competition, or that Parrhasios had painted a theatre curtain.[2]

[Parrhasius] entered into a competition with Zeuxis: the latter presented grapes so well described that the birds came fluttering close to them on the stage (*in scaenam*); but the former presented a curtain (*linteum*) painted with such perfection (*ita veritate repraesentata*) that Zeuxis, all swollen with pride because of the judgement of the birds, asked for the curtain to be lifted in order to show the painting beneath, and then, having understood his error, he gave in to his rival with sincere modesty, for, although he had tricked the birds, he said, Parrhasius, had tricked him, an artist.[3]

I Abraham Bosse, *Une comédie au château de Grosbois,* **1644. Fresco. Boissy-Saint-Léger: Château de Grosbois. Photo: Hubert Josse.**

The anecdote can be read on two levels: on the first, it is inserted in a series of illusionist anecdotes, and the deceiving of Parrhasios only differs in degree from that of the deception of Zeuxis' raisins (and it is in these terms that it has been understood throughout Western art theory): one tricks animals, stupid birds, the other tricks an *artifex*, an expert in the construction of fictions. Following the pattern of the biter bit, a trope in classical farce, Parrhasios takes Zeuxis for a ride. In fact, as a critic recently suggested,[4] the anecdote of Parrhasios is meta-illusionist: the curtain indicates the absence of representation, in the way in which Balzac's *Chef d'oeuvre inconnu* (published in 1831 with substantial revisions in 1837 and 1845) reveals an empty canvas as the apogee of painting. According to Paolo Pino (1548), Parrhasios could have painted a white canvas, which would make it a sort of Malevitzian *White square on white background*, a true predecessor of postmodernism.[5] The curtain has nothing to reveal other than representation itself, it is a marker of representation, and not simply of theatricality. In passing from the grapes to the painted curtain, we pass from mimesis to metamimesis, from the subject of representation to representation as a subject, so that the paradigms of the theatre and of painting seem to pursue each other indefinitely. The curtain used on the first level of the paintings (as in the fresco by Bosse) indicates theatricality; and *a contrario* the stage curtain contributes to the transformation of the stage scene into a painting. Is this nothing more than an artistic version of the chicken and the egg? Fortunately not: when one tries to determine the order of the exchanges between the two arts, one can discern very clearly, behind the perfect reciprocity of the two paradigms on the theoretical level, a sequence of historical mobility. At least, this seems to be the case when we try to reassemble the pieces of the puzzle, and when we consult the numerous testimonies, textual and figural, of the early modern period.[6]

The motif of the curtain appears in art as early as 354, inspired by the court ceremony of the Roman emperors. It was Christianized in the iconography of the evangelists and then of the Virgin, under the influence of the biblical theme of the veil that covers the entrance of the sanctuary in the Old Testament, and that is opposed to the thematics of revelation in the New Testament. From the fifth to the fifteenth centuries the curtain was used in liturgy, notably to cover the altars, a fact which explains its acceptance in sacred iconography, but also its use in the *tableaux vivants* presented during royal entries, and the practice of deploying little curtains to hiding an interior scene in street and college theatre of the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Finally, in the seventeenth century, this liturgical curtain became secularized

and passed from the churches to collections of painting. At the same time, the metacurtain represented on the first plane in the painting no longer serves to reveal divinity but to stage the desire of the spectator, as, in the same period the curtains used in plays employing theatrical machinery are meant to do. In this sequence of coming and going, the curtain is constantly in movement, not only between the theatre and painting, but also between political space (imperial ceremonies, royal entries) and sacred space (the liturgy, religious theatre), and between public (the theatre, the church, the street) and private space (private devotion, painting collections). However, there is a general tendency towards individualization and secularization of representation, in which the idea of unveiling attached to the curtain since its origin no longer leads to transcendence, but has resolved itself into the intimate pleasure of the spectator.

Painting in the Theatre

If the curtain of Parrhasios can be interpreted as a stage curtain, it is because the use of such curtains has been attested since the second century BCE. These curtains were struck at the beginning of the play, marking the beginning of the representation (*auleum mittitur*), and were raised at the end (*auleum tollitur*), a technique widely used until the seventeenth century, as we will shortly see.[7] Admittedly, Pliny does not use the term *auleum* specifically, but the word *linteum* (linen canvas), which is not restricted to either painting or the theatre but which can refer to both. Both arts are intimately linked not only in theatrical practice but also in the very concept of illusionism since Plato. His criticism of *skiagraphia*, the art of perspectives painted in *trompe-l'œil*, was aimed directly at stage sets, so much so that the tradition has assimilated *skiagraphia* and *scaenographia*.[8] According to Vitruvius the use of these painted perspectives on the scene goes back to Agatharcos (468 BCE), but Pliny records examples on the Roman stage closer to his own time, as an anecdote very similar to that of Parrhasius and Zeuxis confirms:

> There was also a stage set at the games offered by Claudius Pulcher [99 BCE], the paintings of which aroused great admiration: in particular, the crows, tricked by the illusions, tried to alight on the well-copied tiles.[9]

In Antiquity, painting and theatre are two equivalent paradigms of mimesis because both arts work to create illusion. In fact, theatre uses painting to achieve scenic illusions because not only has the decor been painted, but the curtain as well.

The practice of using painted curtains in Antiquity is documented in classical texts, and was well known to early modern scholars. In 1682, Ménestrier described the impact of the raising of a curtain at the end of a performance, gradually revealing the painted personages.

> [Virgil] tells us that the tapestries were folded at the lower edge, and that in raising them gently by pulling on the ropes attached to them, the characters represented on the tapestries seemed to raise themselves. Ovid says it more clearly: 'Thus, when in the theatre, on the rising curtain, the painted characters stand up, showing first their face, then little by little the rest and, unfolding suddenly with a slow and continuous movement, they appear completely and take their place at the edge of the stage.'[10]

Ovid compares this sudden appearance to that of the warriors born from dragon teeth who emerge out of the earth in front of Cadmos' eyes. This emphasizes the surprise and terror that such an appearance was bound to provoke. The surprise was accompanied by the bewilderment of seeing actors of flesh and blood replaced by their illusionary doubles as a result of a gradual shift in the level of representation.

It is precisely this confusion the 'decorators' of the Renaissance wished to provoke. The only surviving visible trace of this is the *bozzetto* carried out by Francesco Zuccari for the curtain of the *Cofanaria* of Francesco d'Ambra, performed in Florence in 1565, which is in the theatre created in Vasari's Uffizi. This marked the peak of illusionist theatre. The stage decor showed a perspective of streets, starting from piazza Santa Trinità, while the curtain represented a hunting scene with an idealized view of the surroundings of Florence.

> A large canvas representing different animals, hunted and captured in different ways, and supported by a large frame, hid the perspective behind it.[11]

> And, to prevent us from seeing it, the space in which the perspective of the play was placed was kept covered during several days by a canvas of 23 *braccio* long and 15 high [about 15 × 10m], on which a hunting scene had been painted, with numerous characters, both on horse back and on foot, with dogs and birds, hunting in a very large and very beautiful landscape.[12]

In the first years of the seventeenth century, under Italy's influence France adopted the painted curtain for the first, mainly ballet, performances to use stage sets and machinery adapted from Italian scenography. The curtains typically represented a city or landscape, or the interior of a sumptuous palace.[13] Just as in the Italian records, the accounts continually stressed the importance of hiding the scene decor in order to create the effect of surprise and to maintain the spectators 'in an impatient desire to see'.

> A large canvas on which Vaucluse was painted, and its fountain in the distance, stretched over the front from the cornice to the ground, for fear the spectators should see anything until the time decreed.[14]

> Because the things that surprise us touch our senses most powerfully, one has to be aware that to hide the façade of the theatre in such a way that one cannot see the scene before the beginning of the ballet from the parterre, nor from the amphitheatre, nor even from the galleries. To this end, there will be a large canvas stretched out in front, and, extending from the top of the floor to the ground, it will keep all the spectators in a state of impatient desire to see what it hides. Once the time has come to bring it down, it will disappear at once and unveil a quite comical scene.[15]

But the curtain could also represent an scene of action with characters, thus taking over the role of the stage to represent scenes that could not be staged. In this way, the ballet of *Tancrède en la forêt enchantée* (1619), inspired by Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, used an interlude to show the Siege of Jerusalem painted on a curtain.[16] In a more unusual case for city theatre, a play of 1662 written by the actor Rosidor, a canvas fell at the end of the fourth act showing 'a battling army is represented crossing a bridge', reminiscent of the *Battle of the Amazones* by Rubens of 1616.[17]

Yet, the painted curtain is best documented in Germany, both in texts and in surviving curtains which for the most part date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[18] Their introduction was due to Joseph Furttenbach (1591–1667), who visited Italy and its theatres and who built an ideal theatre in Ulm in 1641. Like the Italians and the Ancients, the architect installed a trapdoor between the playhouse and the stage to receive the curtain. In his *Architectura recreationis* (1640), Furttenbach proposed four types of painted curtains, adapted to different types of plot lines,[19] which the spectators would see immediately they entered the theatre.

> When the spectators enter the theatre and take their places, they simply notice the presence of the curtain, but do not know what is behind it and have to content themselves with imagining this marvel and being patient for a moment. This makes them even keener to keep their eyes fixed on it, especially when, in the interval, Mezzetino and Scapino, unseen, run after one another, their words and screams are heard, even sometimes a *canzonetta*, then the sound of the lute and the bass. Finally, there is a lot of movement and a lot of noise, as if all this wants to crash down on the spectator, quite apart from the kettledrums and trumpets, and precisely in the middle of this turmoil, the curtain suddenly falls and presents the heroic construction of the *scena di comedia*.[20]

The purpose of the painting was thus to keep the spectator frustrated and to sharpen his desire to see the representation. The play in fact starts behind the curtain, and the powerless public can do nothing but stare dispairingly at the image, while the sounds become more and more evident: dialogue, shouts, songs, trumpets, and, finally, a roar announcing the falling of the curtain that forms a first climax of the performance, even before its proper commencement. In presenting a substitute, splendid but inert and mimed, the director also created a gradation in his magnificent effects. Furttenbach's system spread over the German and Austrian courts, to Dresden, Munich, Innsbruck, Vienna. In each place, directors made use of the speed with which the painted image could reveal another, animated, image.[21]

The curtain of the *auleum* type, used in Italy since the beginning of the sixteenth century and in France since 1610,[22] transported the spectators into the fictive space in one single movement. It coexisted with another type of curtain that appeared around 1620 and was wound up on a cylinder situated in the stage frame. In his *Trattato per fabricar scene* (1628), which reviewed the inventions of the illusionist stage, Nicolo Sabbatini envisaged both techniques. He didn't conceal his preference for the second because it was able to avoid 'break[ing] the wonder that the unexpected and uniform fall of the curtain produces'.[23] In fact, a curtain managed by two persons risks not falling uniformly, or crashing down on the spectators, provoking confusion in the stalls – at least in the absence of a trapdoor sufficiently large to accommodate it, or when the spectators are seated on the stage as was the case in France.[24]

The curtain completes the assimilation of the stage into a painting. In closing the box of illusions it functions as a fourth wall, defined before Diderot by Leone de'Sommi of Ferrara around the middle of the sixteenth century.[25] While it forms a screen between the performance and the spectator, it is a provisory and unstable screen, a temporary separation rather than a breach. It is a curtain that exists to be raised, a curtain whose purpose is unveiling; it veils only to unveil, appears only to disappear, as the treatises and accounts of feasts show abundantly was the case in Italy as in France or Germany. In Italy and in France, the curtain does not serve to

mask the scene changes, which are produced 'in view' for the greater pleasure of the spectator: a curtain was used for the first time to mark the entr'acte at the Paris Opera in 1829. The lowering of the curtain is one of the prodigious effects of the Baroque theatre, which were incessantly praised. When Corneille's *Andromède* (1650) was staged by Torelli with six successive decorative schemes, as the second grand production employing stage machinery after that of *Mirame* of 1641, the gazetteer Théophraste Renaudot admired the speed with which it was done. The stage used the cylinder system recommended by Sabattini to instantly unveil the stage set:

> You will not find here the same artifice that Parrhasios used on his curtain to dupe his competitor in painting; for the curtain that presents itself first to the eyes of the spectators ought not to limit the view. That is why it is raised to mark the opening of the theatre, but so swiftly that, no matter how closely it watches, the subtlest eye cannot follow the speed with which it disappears, so well suited to its size are the counter-weights that raise it.[26]

Invoking the Greeks and the Romans and full of allusions to the canon of artistic theory, Renaudot's account made Torelli, Zeuxis, the victorious rival of Parrhasios and an *artifex* who made the greatest artifices. In fact, if Parrhasios produced the illusion of an absent curtain, Torelli contrives the illusion that the curtain, although present, does not exist. In the alchemy of representation that constantly covers over the tracks of being and non-being, the Moderns prevail over the Ancients.

The curtain placed in front of the stage characterized with its magnificent effects the illusionist theatre *à l'italienne*. In France, it was reserved for ballets and plays using machinery during a large part of the seventeenth century. On the other hand, the same effect of sudden unveiling was produced, though more modestly, by the 'small curtain' that covered the compartments of the stage in one of the two theatres in Paris.[27] The theatre of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, directed by the Confrères de la Passion from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, continued in fact to use the compartments derived from mediaeval *mansions*, similar to those shown in the frontispieces to the comedies of Terence produced for the humanist stage. In the Trechsel edition, published in Lyon in 1493 for instance, every character has a house in the form of a bath room covered by a curtain hanging from a small rail which could open when necessary. However, in the Hôtel de Bourgogne these compartments represented not houses, but a certain number of topical places (forest, prison, room, palace). They were disposed on the stage in a symmetrical manner, three, five or seven of them, and covered with a 'tapestry' until the moment when they were brought into the action.

The curtain could have a purely functional role in revealing a new place, but, for preferrence, it was opened onto a spectacular scene. In the *Illusion comique*, the final raising of the curtain coincided with the *coup de théâtre*, since Pridamant notices that his son is not 'really' dead and he has been playacting – revealing a third level of fiction: 'One draws a curtain and one sees all the actors who share their fee'.[28]

The curtain also often reveals a miraculous or bloody scene. In *Martyre de sainte Catherine* by Puget de la Serre (1643), the emperor hears a noise of thunder and then sees Catherine appear in a celestial apotheosis. The whole scene plays with the ambiguity of the vocabulary of the 'marvellous' and 'belief', indicating the prodigies both of the supernatural and of the theatrical machinery.

My eyes have to see it as well, I can hardly believe it: *the curtain is drawn*. What a strange spectacle, she leaves in triumph in the middle of the torments, as if her body were made of stone or bronze.

Yet, everything leads us to believe that the small curtain, hampered by its reduced dimensions and the poor visibility of the stage, produced a limited effect. To reduce its arbitrariness, the dramaturges made it similar to a curtain around a bed, following the D'Aubignac's proposition all elements of the representation should have a precise motivation in the play's action, a position characterizing 'absolute mimesis' *à la française*. Several plays make use of this conceit of a bed equipped with opening curtains that permit the concealment and reappearance of a character, or even the representation of the moment of death.[29] The bed provides the pretext for the curtain, justifying its appearance in both the exterior and the interior of the representation; while existing in reality only for the spectator, it pretends that it exists for the characters of the fiction.

The use of the small curtain leads us to the heart of the exchanges between the theatre and painting. In fact, it comes directly from royal entries, where a partial curtain could unveil a painted canvas or a *tableau vivant*. In both cases, this unveiling was dramatized: entrusted to an actor, it was accompanied by music and commented on by a reciter. In this manner, street theatre imitated the custom of unveiling altars, paintings and relics in churches, to the accompaniment of music. It is a matter of the transposition of a sacred practice into the secular, like the Baroque vocabulary of the scenic 'miracle' directly derived from religious vocabulary. Thus, when the *Lamb of God* was performed in Ghent in 1458 in the form of a *tableau vivant*, the stage (which measured 38 × 50 *pieds*, approximately 30 centimetres) was covered by a black curtain, drawn to the side to reveal the picture exactly as the altarpiece was revealed by opening the shutters. The iconography of the royal entries, especially in the Low Countries, shows the size of the triumphal arches, the niches of which contained statues, paintings, and actors, as well as high galleries for the musicians, all successively intervening in the action according to an impeccable choreography. To give only one example, during the entry of James I into London in 1603, the arch of Flemish merchants showed the painting of a king on a throne as the king approached; then, at the sound of trumpets, a curtain in the central arch revealed a *tableau vivant* of seventeen young girls in Roman costumes, representing the seventeen provinces of the Low Countries. Behind them tapestries appeared, and on every side of this interior stage, niches with painted figures, both biblical and historical. After the young girls had saluted the king, a scholar read a compliment in Latin verse.

The importance of these interior scenes, whether they be theatres or paintings, is connected to the double images, which originated in the mid-sixteenth century in the atelier of Pieter Aertsen and marked the official advent of 'metapainting'[30] at the time when the 'metatheatre', or theatre within theatre, first saw the light on the Elizabethan stage. An engraving by Jacob Matham after Aertsen for instance represents a kitchen with a woman preparing fish. In the background, the scene of *Christ at Emmaüs* appears in a compartment, a small scenic box similar in detail to those street theatres that could be opened by drawing a curtain. This image shows the process of secularization of the interior image: the sacred image is relegated to the background and given a secular context. Although its unveiling recalls that of altar paintings, and its presence in the middle of the kitchen is supposed to project onto daily life the light of the beyond, the profane and the daily nonetheless invade the stage, and its symbolic connotations, such as the Christian symbolism of the fish, become less and less readily

2 Adrian van der Spelt, *Still Life of Flowers*, 1658. Oil on panel, 46.5 × 63.9 cm. Chicago: Art Institute (Wirt D. Walker Fund, 1949.585). Photo: Art Institute of Chicago.

perceived by the audience. Moreover, the device of the double representation no longer serves to show the advent of the supernatural, but functions as a mere apology for the representation. The compartment with curtains, a device both liturgical and theatrical, is included in the painting as a mirror, a way to reflect its tools and its specific effects.

The Theatre in Painting

In describing the presentation of *Andromède*, Renaudot linked the story of Parrhasius to the theatre, and, at the same time, to the whole vocabulary of the illusion, of the *inganno*, common to both arts. In 1625, Piero Accolti gave the title *L'Inganno degli occhi* to a treatise, recapitulating all the findings on pictorial and theatrical perspective since Serlio and Barbaro, while proposing original solutions, not only to match the stage paintings in *trompe-l'œil* with the inclined surface of the stage (chapter 31), but also to represent a painting in a painting – as Peter Aertsen did (chapter 34).[31] In the rewritings of the story of Parrhasios, the word *inganno* often reoccurs to translate the word '*error*' in Pliny:[32] but the latter referred to the intellectual error of Zeuxis, whereas the term *inganno* refers to the creation of an illusion and has both an objective and a subjective meaning: the illusion contrived by the decor, and the illusion suffered by the spectator. In their translation and reading of Pliny, the theorists naturally inclined the text towards an illusionist meaning in accordance with dominant ideas of representation in the sixteenth century. Moralizing comments describing the deceit created by the 'as if' of representation multiply: 'as if it were a canvas covering the

painting' (Borghini[33]); the curtain was 'so similar to the natural' (Dolce); 'so natural' (Lomazzo); 'painted with such a relief' (Bocchi), that it provoked the *inganno*.

All these terms converge in a pean to illusionism, the lesson common to antique anecdotes and the old refrain of the art treatises, as Lomazzo suggested in a weary way:

> And everybody knows the story of Zeuxis, who painted the green grapes so naturally that birds flew onto the stage of the theatre in order to peck them; and he himself was then tricked by the veil that Parrhasios had painted over the grapes.[34]

Lomazzo understood that Parrhasios completed the painting of Zeuxis, and *really* painted his curtain *on top of* the grapes of his rival, but (and there the magic ends), unlike a real curtain, one could not raise it to reveal an image underneath.[35] The hypothesis is seductive, if one imagines that the curtain covered only half the grapes and let the viewer guess at what was beneath, so that the final image amounted to a *trompe-l'œil* painted by four hands. The success of the *trompe-l'œil* would therefore be due as much to Zeuxis as to Parrhasios, and would represent the curtain in the act of unveiling the fruits. It is precisely in this way that painters understood the anecdote, and it is with this double painting that they wanted to compete. In fact, if Cornelis Gijsbrechts perhaps painted the back of a painting (Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst), not a single *trompe-l'œil* represents a *closed* curtain, but always a curtain *opening*. In the *Still life with flowers* by Adrian van der Spelt (1658, Art Institute of Chicago, *plate* 2), the curtain of blue brocade opens on an opulent still life of flowers: flowers and curtain are both equally sensually painted and full of texture, just as the curtain of Parrhasios was as well painted as the grapes of Zeuxis.

This *trompe-l'œil* curtain, hung on a fine brass rail and apparently covering the painting, corresponds to a fashion disseminated in Holland by Rembrandt and the Delft painters for a short period in the mid-seventeenth century. The first, and the most famous, example is the *Holy Family* by Rembrandt (Kassel, 1646, *plate* 3), where a red curtain unveils a family in a stable, represented in such a simple fashion that one is surprised to recognize the holy family in it – once again, the duplication of the representation is in step with the secularization of the imagery.[36]

In *The spy* by Nicolas Maes (1656, London, private collection)[37] an even more subtle device has been used, since, contrary to common use, the curtain is not drawn to the right side of the painting, but covers an intermediary zone, precisely where the characters observed by the spy are located,

3 Rembrandt, *Holy Family with Curtain*, 1646. Oil on panel, 45 × 67 cm. Kassel : Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie. Photo: Staatliche Museen Kassel.

thus robbing the spectator of the principal scene and allowing him only the *parerga*, the indicators of the representation, in the feigned frame, curtain, and internal spectator.

It might seem that these curtains could easily be explained by the growing habit of collectors, on the recommendation of Giulio Mancini, of covering their paintings to protect them from the dust and light, as many Dutch paintings show.[38] But this sociological explanation will not suffice, for if those curtains reproduce in *trompe-l'œil* a conservation practice developed in the seventeenth century, how is it that it can be found already in the *Saint Augustine* by Botticelli (*c.* 1495, Uffizi), in the *Nativity* by Hugo van der Goes (*c.* 1470–80, Berlin; for an image see *plate 1* in the essay by Stijn Bussels in this issue), in the *Annonciation* by Grünewald (Retable of Issenheim, Colmar, *c.* 1512–16), or also in the *Sixtine Madonna* by Raphaël (1513–14, Vatican)? In these works with a purely sacred purpose, revelation coexists with the *mise en abyme* of the representation, without the emphasis that this places on its autonomy harming the epiphany of the divine.[39] The curtain, suspended from a narrow rail, remains faithful to the one that can be observed on miniatures and bas-reliefs from late Antiquity and which became a *topos* of representations of Mary, and was determined as well by the liturgical practice associated with altar curtains. The curtain in *trompe-l'œil* of the seventeenth-century Dutch is therefore inspired by this liturgical use of altar curtains (which, as we have seen, had also inspired the scenography of royal entries), and also imitates a practice of collectors, itself transposed from the public and sacred space to the private and secular. Exhibition curtains appear at the very moment that liturgical curtains disappear.[40] Between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the in *trompe-l'œil* curtain gradually loses its sacred connotation, retaining only that of metapictoriality.

However, there is at least one exception to this rule. In the era of the complete secularization of the motif, a French painter of Flemish origin gave it back its original sacred connotation in an image that arouses confusion and ambiguity. In the *Sainte Face* by Philippe de Champaigne, the curtain opens on another paradigm of illusionism, the miraculous image of the real portrait of Christ, which is to Christian apologetics what the grapes of Zeuxis are to the artistic literature of Antiquity. The big difference is that the reality of representation (*ita veritate representata*, said Pliny) is guaranteed by the Reality of the Incarnation: this reality has a transcendent sense that redeems the painter's artifice. This is the argument invoked by Philippe de Champaigne for instigating a hyper-illusionism in the context of the aesthetics of Port-Royal, which were so hostile to images. The *artifex* has the power to unveil the invisible, and the illusionist artifice reveals the highest truth, according to a common dialectic in the religious theatre of the period, as we have seen in *Le Martyre de Sainte Catherine*.[41] Champaigne played with this ambiguity and seized on a fashionable motif to give it theological depth.

If the iconography of this *Holy Face* is exceptional, since it is the only one to connect the veil of Véronique with the artifice of the curtain, everything suggests that the religious connotation had not entirely disappeared. Paul Fréart de Chantelou provides a striking testimony of this. When he showed Bernini his collection of paintings in 1655, so he tells us, the display of the *Sept Sacrements* by Poussin was the object of a particular ritual. Chantelou arranged for the paintings to be uncovered one by one, while Bernini approached and knelt to observe them, comparing them finally to 'a beautiful sermon'.[42] The contamination of the respective registers of the visit and a devotional practice continued when Bernini went to visit the merchant Paul Serisier on leaving the church of Saint-Laurent. Theatrically unveiling the *Esther* by Poussin, the merchant affirmed in the tone of a revelation: 'It is by signor Poussin'.[43] Revealed truth

has been replaced by the authenticity of the work, and the sacredness of art is about to replace the sacred character of its subject.

Poussin himself approved of this habit of covering paintings with a curtain, which was also adopted by another of his devout clients, Séraphin de Mauroy.[44] He wrote to Chantelou on 22 June 1648:

> The intention of covering your paintings is excellent, and to make them visible one by one will mean we don't grow tired, for seeing them all at the same time fills the senses too much at once.

Just as the scenographers used a painted curtain to present their first spectacle to the audience and to emphasize the surprise of its unveiling, the collector transformed the decor of his gallery into a spectacle, not static anymore but dynamic, so that every raising of the curtain became a dramatic turn of events.

So, the exposition curtain had the same function as the theatre curtain: to unveil. Champaigne and Van der Spelt represented with hallucinatory effect the whole apparatus of hanging, with its rings of shiny brass, well designed to catch the spectator's gaze and to invite him or her to become aware of the representation. In including this system of hanging in their *trompe-l'œil*, the painters shift the limits of the image to the spectator's side and include a supplementary fragment of his reality. They thus blur the borders of representation, for, most often, the curtain is painted at the threshold of the picture, ambiguously in the exterior or the interior, insofar as it is possible to integrate it into the represented space at all. In this way the curtain in *trompe-l'œil* refers to two distinct realities, respectively extrinsic and intrinsic to the representation, and these two realities serve as a provocation for the metapainting and underline the representation.

Without a doubt the curtain is, even more than the frame, a motif that illustrates the importance of these concrete exchanges between theatre and painting, as I have tried to show by reconstructing a history of the successive migrations of the motif. In fact, the curtain is not a simple technique borrowed from the theatre, as a stage set, an emphatic gesture or a mask could all be borrowed. And we know how dangerous and futile it can be to label a painting with the term 'theatricality', either both arts derive from a common cultural background (for example the expression of the passions), or the painter voluntarily employs a theatrical technique to parody it, in which case the conclusion fails. Because of its reflexive dimension and its absolutely unique capacity to either unveil the representation, or, on the contrary, to hide it from the spectator's view, the curtain takes painting and the theatre back to their essence as representation. Since Plato, Aristotle and Pliny, both arts have constituted reciprocal paradigms of mimesis, which is defined as the art of deceiving the consenting spectator, and, by doing so, provoking his or her greatest pleasure. This is why, rather than speaking of 'pictorial theatricality', it seems to me better to talk of the reciprocity of two models, as one did not exist before the other and as this reciprocity stems from antique aesthetics. However, these two paradigms are not abstract, but are embodied in societies characterized by the wide presence of 'theatricality' in its broadest sense, early modern societies being societies of spectacle *avant la lettre*. Processions, *tableaux vivants*, royal entries, court ceremonies are all cultural realities that constantly influence and enrich the concrete practices of painting and the theatre. A mental immersion in this ancient culture is a first, indispensable, step for anyone who wants to understand its artistic expressions: the second step is to incessantly compare the sources, textual and visual, historical and practical, to allow the emergence of multiple connections

that will permit us to establish the relationships between painting and theatre. Such an approach, both historical and theoretical, presupposes the effort to rid ourselves of our modern and postmodern assumptions in order to perceive the strength and character of early modern aesthetics.

(Translated by Sigrid de Jong)

Notes

1 See A. Verdier, *Histoire et poétique de l'habit de théâtre en France au XVIIᵉ siècle*, Paris, 2006.

2 With the notable exception of Lomazzo, *Trattato*, III, 1, cited below; the text is resumed as it is by F. Bisagno, *Trattato di pittura*, Venice, 1642, p. 227.

3 Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXV, 65.

4 See Stephen Bann, *The True Vine: On Visual Representation and the Western Tradition*, Cambridge, 1989; and Helen Morales, 'The torturer's apprentice: Parrhasius and the limits of art', in J. Eslner, *Art and Text in Roman Culture*, Cambridge, 1996, 182–209. Morales gives two possible interpretations: either a stage curtain, or a curtain covering a painting in the way of collectors.

5 The *White square on white background* by Malevitch dates from 1918. See P. Pino, *Dialogo di pittura* (1548), in P. Barocchi, ed., *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, vol. I, Bari, 1960, 112.

6 For the history of the theatre curtain: G. Kernodle, *From Art to Theatre*, Chicago, 1944; G. Védier, *Origine et évolution de la dramaturgie néoclassique française*, Paris, 1955; and K. Bachler, *Gemalte Theatervorhänge in Deutschland und Österreich*, Munich, 1972. For the history of the curtain in painting: J-K. Eberlein, *Apparitio regis- revelatio veritatis. Studien zur Darstellung des Vorhangs in der bildenden Kunst von der Spätantike bis zum Ende des Mittelalters*, Wiesbaden, 1982; and for a typology of pictorial curtains: G. Banu, *Le Rideau ou la fêlure du monde*, Paris, 1997 (more interesting for the iconography than for the interpretation, that suffers from anachronism).

7 See Cicero, *Pro M. Caelio*, 65; Horace, *Epistles*, II.i, 189; *Phèdre*, V.7, 23.

8 See A. Rouveret, *Histoire et imaginaire de la peinture antique*, Rome, 1986.

9 Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXV, 23.

10 Ménestrier, *Des ballets*, 1682, 216. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III, 112.

11 G.-B. Cini, *Descritione dell'apparato fatto in Firenze per le nozze dell'Illustrissimo ed Eccellentissimo Don Francesco de' Medici*, in Vasari, *Opere*, Florence, 1906, vol. VIII, 572.

12 D. Mellini, *Descrizione de gl'interdmedii rappresentati con la commedia nelle nozze dell'Illustruissimo ed Eccellentissimo Signor Principe di Firenze*, Florence, 1593.

13 *Ballet de la prospérité des armes de la France*, danced 7 February 1641 in the Cardinal's Palace, in P. Lacroix, *Ballets et mascarades de cour de Henri III à Louis XIV (1581–1652)*, Genève, 1898, vol. VI, 34: 'La grande toile qui cache le théâtre, représentant un beau palais, s'ouvre peu à peu, et découvre tout le théâtre.'

14 'Une grande toile où Vaucluse était peinte, et sa fontaine dans un éloignement, s'étendait sur le devant depuis la corniche jusqu'à terre, de peur que les spectateurs ne vissent rien jusqu'au temps ordonné.' *Ballet des divers entretiens de la Fontaine de Vaucluse*, danced in 1649 in Avignon, in the grand theatre of Roure, Lacroix, vol. VI, 195.

15 'D'autant que les choses qui surprennent touchent plus puissamment les sens, on s'est avisé de cacher la face du théâtre de telle façon, que ni du parterre, ni de l'amphithéâtre, ni même des galeries, on ne pourra voir la scène devant que de commencer le ballet. À cet effet, il y aura une grande toile qui s'étendra au-devant, et prenant depuis le haut du plancher jusques à terre, tiendra tous les assistants dans un impatient désir de voir ce qu'elle cachera. L'heure étant venue de l'abattre, elle disparaîtra incontinent et découvrira une scène tout à fait comique.' *Grand Ballet des effets de la Nature*, 1632, danced on 27 December 1632 in jeu de Paume du Petit Louvre, Lacroix, vol. IV, 194.

16 *Grand Ballet du roi sur l'aventure de Tancrède en la forêt enchantée*, danced in the Louvre on 12 February 1619, Lacroix, vol. II, 168c: A large canvas was extended in the front, that measured from the stage until the ground a length of five *toises*, and that had been painted with the siege of Jerusalem, and a forest on the side. As the canvas breaks down, a grand and thick forest in flat painting appears in the background and to the sides.

17 'On fait tomber une toile, où est représentée une armée en bataille qui passe sur un pont.' Rosidor (Jean Guillemay du Chesnay), *La mort du grand Cyrus*, Paris, 1662. The Rubens was painted for Philip IV in 1616, and is now in the Alte Pinacothek in Munich.

18 See K. Bachler, *Gemalte Theatervorhänge*.

19 They respectively represent a street perspective with simple houses, another one with noble houses, following the example of the comic and tragic scenes of Serlio; a garden and the Palio square in Sienna.

20 Furttenbach, *Architectura recreationis*, Augsbourg, 1640, 60.

21 See Georg Philipp Harsdörffers, *Frawen-Zimmer Gespräch-Spiel*, 1649.

22 The first curtain of the forestage was designed for the ballet of the duke of Vendôme in the Louvre, in 1610; see Lacroix, vol. I, 241: 'There was a great silence everywhere, when the curtain that covered the forest fell to the ground, and this forest became visible.'

23 'Rompre l'émerveillement que produit, en un tel instant, la chute inattendue et uniforme du rideau.' Sabattini, *Pratica per fabricar scene ne'teatri*, Ravenna, 1638; trans. L. Jouvet, Paris, 1947, ch. 37. 'Comment et de quelles façons enlever le rideau qui cache la scène' (59).

24 Sabattini, *Pratica per fabricar scene ne'teatri*, 60: 'The second way, if it necessitates more costs and work, would on the other hand be better. It would create its effect with a greater velocity and not rouse any confusion, which is the case when the curtain falls partly on the spectator causing noise and disorder.'

25 For this issue, I refer to my book, *Ut pictura theatrum*, Genève, 2003.

26 'Vous ne trouverez pas ici même artifice que Parrhaze employa dans son rideau pour tromper son compétiteur dans la peinture; car celui qui se présente le premier aux yeux des spectateurs ne doit pas borner la vue. C'est pourquoi il se lève pour faire l'ouverture du théâtre, mais avec une telle vitesse que l'œil le plus subtil, quelque attachement qu'il y apporte, ne peut suivre la promptitude avec laquelle il disparaît, tant les contre-poids qui l'élèvent sont industrieusement proportionnés à sa grande étendue.' *La Gazette*, 18 février 1650, in Corneille, *Andromède* (1650), ed. C. Delmas, Paris, 1974, 158.

27 The date of the appearance of the forestage curtain is a source of debate; in the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the documents only give prove of its use from 1647 onwards, and before that its use is rather exceptional.

28 'On tire un rideau et on voit tous les comédiens qui partagent leur argent.' Corneille, *L' Illusion comique*, 1635, last scene.

29 For example *Agésilan de Colchos, Crisante et Les deux pucelles et L'Heureux naufrage* de Rotrou, *Les Galanteries du duc d'Ossonne* de Mairet. See M. Vuillermoz, *Le Système des objets dans le théâtre français des années 1625–1650*, Genève, 2000, 259.

30 See V. Stoichita, *L'Instauration du tableau. Métapeinture à l'aube des temps modernes*, Genève, 1999.

31 Pietro Accolti, *Lo inganno degli occhi, prospettiva prattica*, Florence, 1625.

32 The word 'inganno' is notably found in Lomazzo, Bisagno (*loc. cit.*) and Borghini (*Il Riposo*, 1584, 270); and the participle 'ingannato' at Dolce, *Dialogo di pittura*, in P. Barocchi, *Trattati*, vol. I, 182–3, Bocchi (*Eccellenza del San Giorgio, ibid.*, vol. III, 163–4).

33 (Or, according to Dolce, 'a part of a canvas that seemed to hide a painting', (*pareva che occultasse una pittura*).

34 Lomazzo, *Trattato dell'arte della pittura*, Milan, 1585, III, 1: 'Et è istoria nota a ciascuno di Zeusi che dipinse verti grappi d'uva tanto naturali, che nella piazza del teatro vi volarono gli uccelli per beccargli; è ch'egli medesimo restò poi ingannato del velo, che sopra que' grappi havea dipinto Parrhasio.'

35 The same G.-B. Adriani imagines that Parrhasios has placed a veil painted on a canvas on top of the painting of Zeusis. (Letter to Vasari, 8 September 1567, in Vasari, *Vite* (1568), Florence, 1906, vol. I, 27.)

36 On the painting, see W. Kemp, *La Sainte Famille de Rembrandt ou l'art de lever un rideau* (1986), Paris, 1989.

37 Painting studied by V. Stoichita, *L'Instauration du tableau*.

38 G. Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (v. 1620), ed. A. Marucchi, Rome, 1956, volume I, 143: 'Without a doubt, the curtains help to keep the works in good condition. The ideal would be to have a curtain that we can raise and lower, instead of open it to the side, which harms a good exhibition of the painting.' The learned collector advises a green or red taffeta (in fact, the colours we find in the painting). This protective curtain is seen in the cabinets of Flemish amateurs, notably the ones of W. Van der Haecht, *La collection de Cornelius van der Geest*, 1628, Anvers, Maison de Rubens; or Adriaen van Stalbemt, *Cabinet d'amateur*, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, but also in the scenes of the Dutch genre such as the *Lady reading a letter* by Metsu (about 1664, Dublin).

39 As D. Arasse has shown in *Les Visions de Raphaël*, Paris, 2003, in regard to the Sistine Madonna, following J.-K. Eberlein, 'The Curtain in Raphael's Sistine *Madonna*', *Art Bulletin*, 1983, 61–77.

40 See J. Braun, *Der Christliche Altar*, Munich, 1924.

41 We can name an example resembling the sacred remotivation of the curtain, although that one covers a crucifix and not a painting: in the *Saint Bonaventure* de Zurbarán (1629, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie), the Franciscan saint opens a curtain covering a crucifix placed in a niche in his library, to show it to the Dominican monks.

42 P. Fréart de Chantelou, *Journal de voyage du cavalier Bernin en France*, 1655, ed. M. Stanic, 88.

43 Chantelou, *Journal de voyage du cavalier Bernin en France*, 112.

44 See R. Beresford, 'Séraphin de Mauroy. Un commanditaire dévot', *Nicolas Poussin* colloque, 1996, vol. II, 721–45. The three paintings by Poussin, with a religious topic, were covered by a curtain of red taffeta, mentioned in the inventory: 'Item un tableau de la Nativité de Poussin avec sa bordure de bois doré un rideau de taffetas rouge' (736).