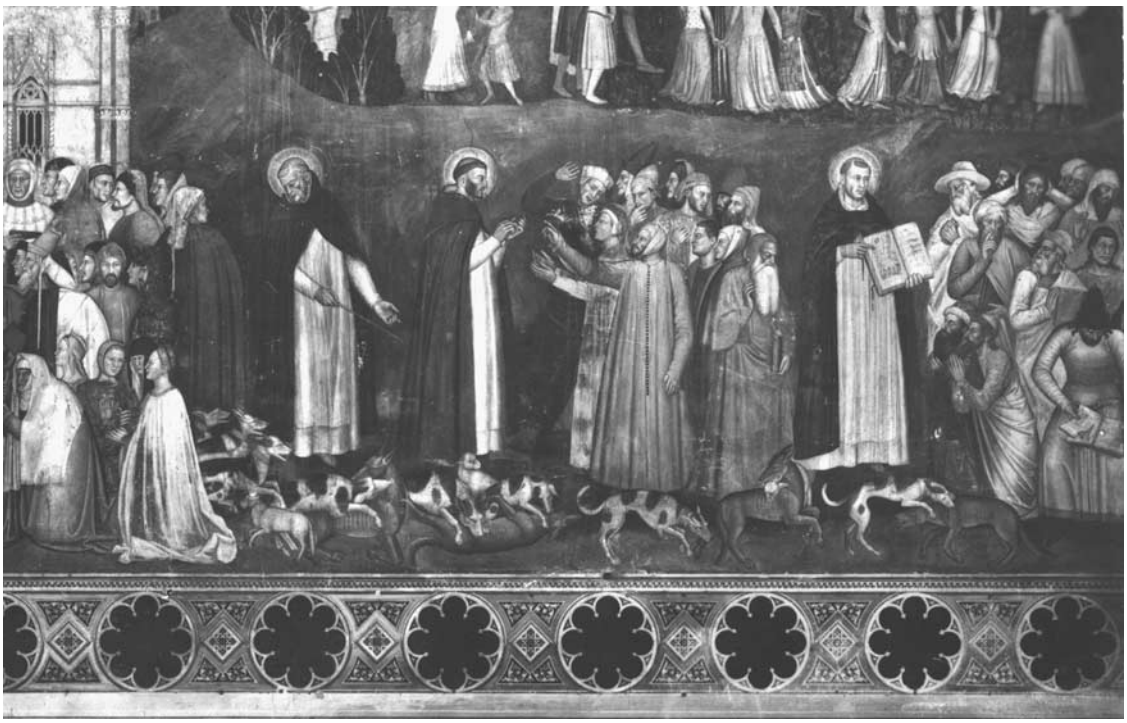
INTRODUCTION:
RHETORIC AND VISUALITY

Andrea Buonaiuto di Firenze's large fresco of the militant and triumphant church in the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, painted from 1365–67, includes a scene in which two Dominican preachers address the crowd (Fig. 1). On the left Saint Thomas confronts the heretics with argument, which he counts on the fingers of his right hand. The listeners express their reactions through gestures and the expressions of their faces: rejection, rebuttal, skepticism and derision. On the right, the word of God, held up by Saint Peter the Martyr, embodies the ultimate in persuasive power: while he silently points to the text, his audience starts to ponder these words, some among them falling to their knees with hands folded in prayer. To contemporary viewers these gestures appeared not chosen at random from the personal repertoire of the artist and his sitters for their expressive force. They recognized them as part of a generally used, codified repertoire of gesture and expressions that had been in use since classical antiquity. Many of them were described in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, an outline of the ideal education every orator ought to receive. Supporting a series of arguments by counting them on your fingers for instance was advised to visualize the structure of a speech.

Andrea Buonaiuto's fresco is probably one of the most straightforward cases of a rhetorical practice adopted by a painter, but it nonetheless raises many questions. The fresco shows rhetoric in action, but had to speak to its viewers too. In the painting the saints use argument and gesture to persuade, but what are the means of visual persuasion the painter can use? Is it really possible to transpose the advice Quintilian gave to young orators onto the canvas or a wall and retain the efficacy of speech? Is the depiction of a gesture as effective as looking at a real person using such a gesture? Classical rhetoric offered many techniques and strategies to influence the audience: from simple tricks such as the avoidance of unfamiliar words or looking the audience in the eye, to technical virtuosity in the use of metaphor, pathos or wit, and sophisticated strategies in the selection and highlighting of arguments or the projection of the right kind of image.



1 Andrea di Firenze, *Church Militant and Triumphant*. Florence, Santa Maria Novella, Spanish Chapel *c.* 1365–67 (photo: Centre for Art-Historical Documentation, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen).

But can the persuasive strategies developed originally for persuasive speech be used in the arts?[1]

This book examines the role of rhetoric in the visual arts and architecture of early modern Europe. But to understand how architects, painters, patrons and viewers used rhetoric, we need to look first at visual persuasion in classical rhetoric. A good place to begin is gesture.

When Cicero was killed in 43 BC, his murderer, Marc Anthony, ordered that not only his head, but also his hands be nailed to the *rostrum* or speakers' platform in the Forum, to demonstrate that he could no longer speak, nor use the much more powerful language of gesture.[2] Cicero was not only the acknowledged master of telling gesture; he had also argued, associating gesture, acting, colour and painting in a way that would inspire many Renaissance artists, that the orator's use of gesture should not copy everyday gestures, but should highlight, clarify and intensify them:

> For nature has assigned to every emotion a particular look and tone of voice and bearing of its own; and the whole of a person's frame and

> every look on his face and utterance of his voice are like the strings of a harp, and sound according as they are struck by each successive emotion. For the tones of the voice are keyed up like the strings of an instrument [and all can be] regulated by the control of art; they are the colours available to the actor, as for the painter, to secure variety.[3]

Quintilian too has left a very detailed discussion of the use of the eyes and the glance, attitudes of the body, in particular of the head, and the meaning and effect of gesturing with the hands:

> For other portions of the body merely help the speaker, whereas the hands may almost be said to speak. Do we not use them to demand, promise, summon, dismiss, threaten, supplicate, express aversion or fear, question or deny? Do we not employ them to indicate joy, sorrow, hesitation, confession, penitence, measure, quantity, number and time? Have they not the power to excite and prohibit, to express approval, wonder or shame? Do they not take the place of adverbs and pronouns when we point at places and things? In fact, though the peoples and nations of the earth speak a multitude of tongues, they share in common the universal language of the hands.[4]

Gesture gave visual expression to what went on in the mind of the speaker and could thereby excite emotions in the audience. Orators also made use of their surroundings to visualize what went on in a speech. By pointing at significant buildings and sites, they created a stage set for their speech and activated the emotions associated with them. Gaius Gracchus, the Roman aristocrat who, together with his brother, defended the cause of the people as *tribuni plebis* in the second century BC, demonstrated his unhappy situation in one speech by asking again and again: 'Where can I turn?' After each repetition of that question he mentioned a place that might have offered refuge, such as the Capitol or his home, and then told the audience why he could not go there. Each time he acted out his plea by stretching his arm to the place he had mentioned.[5] The silent urban scene could become part of the emotional choreography. Public spaces, temples and statues of the gods could also be used to stage a speech, and as a silent, suggestive commentary to what was spoken aloud. In his first speech against the conspirator Catilina Cicero addressed the senate in the Temple of Jupiter Stator, which commemorated the salvation of Rome from an enemy, thus silently magnifying the danger from which Rome had been saved. In his speech *Pro Lege Manilia* he appealed to the gods from the *rostrum* in the Forum Romanum, 'and in particular [to] those who watch over this sacred site'. Sometimes he even changed the site, as in the third speech against Catilina, which he delivered in the Forum, but next to a conspicuous new statue

of Jupiter he had put there. In the speech he asked his audience how they could stand there under the very eyes of Jupiter, the upholder of the state and of justice, and not take action.[6] The theatrical character of delivering, or rather performing, such speeches was acknowledged by Cicero, when he compared addressing the public assembly of Roman citizens with appearing on a stage where emotions could be manipulated.[7]

Settings were not the only visual elements employed to persuade. Orators could also introduce objects and even persons. Quintilian mentions 'swords encrusted with blood, bits of bone taken from wounds, and the bloodstained clothing of the victim'.[8] The introduction of Julius Caesar's bloodied garments and a wax effigy of his body covered in wounds, strengthened the effect of Marc Anthony's eloquence, causing a riot culminating in the spontaneous cremation of his body.[9] When the future emperor Galba, while governor of Spain, heard rumours that Nero was planning to murder him, he decided to have himself proclaimed emperor instead. He presided over the tribunal as usual, but instead of hearing cases he gave a speech deploring the condition of the empire under Nero. To support his words he had filled the tribunal as if it were a stage with as many portraits and statues of Nero's victims as could be found.[10]

Orators could also speak by silent means: simply by looking or pointing at significant objects. The impoverished grandson of the famous Republican orator Hortensius remained silent in front of the Senate, but glanced at the portraits of his ancestor and that of Augustus, who had once given him a million sesterces to restore his family's fortune.[11] For Quintilian, the power of the eyes was second only to that of the hands in silent persuasion.[12]

All these examples show that ancient orators were very much aware of the persuasive powers of the visual. Gesture was thought to allow all people to identify with what was put before their eyes. Nowadays the meaning of gesture is considered to be conventional and a cultural construction: an apotropaic gesture in one country can be an obscenity in another. But within the closed communities of classical Antiquity and early modern Europe gesture was considered to be a language that everybody acquired while growing up. According to Lucretius, gesture preceded spoken language as the means by which primitive humanity communicated.[13] Therefore gesture was felt to be closer to the emotions, less prone to misunderstanding than words, and hence more powerful in swaying the emotions. As Cicero observed, it is the task of the orator to 'play' his own body to appeal to the emotions of the public; persuasion is achieved not through sophisticated philosophical argument, but 'to sway [the emotions] is victory; for among all things it is the single most important in winning verdicts'.[14]

Gesture, the eyes and the expressions of the face externalize thought, emotion or memory.[15] It was an essential part of *actio* or action, the last of the five stages in which classical rhetoricians divided the process of writing and delivering a speech: invention, disposition, elocution, memory and action.[16]

After finding his material, ordering it, giving it the most fitting and eloquent formulation, and memorizing the speech, the orator had to deliver his speech, using not just words, but his entire body. Oratory, like opera or ballet, was not a static result, but a process of preparation leading to a performance drawing on various arts, taking place in public, in an organized and sometimes ritualized setting in front of an audience that was just as aware of the conventions governing public speech as the speaker himself. As Shakespeare put it in *Coriolanus*: 'Action is eloquence, and the eyes of th'ignorant/More learnèd than the ears'.[17]

Gesture was not simply a silent accompaniment, illustration or counterpoint to what the orator said. It was not merely an addition to a speech to enhance its persuasive power. Gesture and speech were also connected in a more profound way. In Book II of the *Institutio Oratoria* Quintilian urges the orator to observe decorum, but at the same time advises him to avoid traditional order when expedient. To illustrate this, he introduced a statue (Fig. 2). The curves and torsions of Myron's *Discobolus* suggest movement and life, whereas earlier statues, with their bold upright position and arms hanging by the side, cannot hold the attention of the viewer. The same interest, Quintilian argued, as that

2 Myron, *Discobolus*. Rome: Museo Nazionale Romano (Museo delle Terme), *c.* 450 BC (photo: Centre for Art-Historical Documentation, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen).

exercised by the daring, novelty and variety of the *Discobolus* is achieved by the use of figures of speech in oratory. They too 'involve a certain departure from the straight line and have the merit of variation from the ordinary usage, whether they be figures of thought or figures of speech'.[18] To define the complex and elusive topic of the figures of style, Quintilian drew on the visual arts. Playing on the original meaning of the Greek term 'tropes' – to turn away – for departures from the normal use and meaning of words Quintilian used the visual arts to illuminate the nature and role of figural speech.[19] The connection between the arts and figures of style goes further than providing examples. All rhetorical attempts to define them draw on a system of visual metaphors, all playing on the original meaning of the Latin *figura*, which etymologically is related to the verb *fingo*, to form or shape.[20] *Figura* can refer normal usage but also to deviations from it. In a general way it is used for any form or shape (*forma*) in which thought is expressed, just as *figura* can be used to refer to any shape or attitude of the body. The use of visual and spatial metaphor when trying to describe the process by which thought is expressed has become so widespread and ingrained that it has almost petrified into a dead metaphor. But it is nonetheless a metaphor, and actually forms the bridge to the second, more restricted way in which *figura* is used. It then means 'a [. . .] change in meaning or language from the ordinary and simple form, that is to say, a change analogous to that involved by sitting, lying down on something or looking back', and more specifically poetical and rhetorical changes. The changes in a body's aspect caused by motion are here used to illustrate modifications of normal use and meaning. Hence *figura* can refer to what we would now call figurative language, to expressions that have 'received a new aspect'.[21]

Figures of style are thus first connected to the gestures of the human body; but next they are defined in terms of visuality: as shapes and aspects. But Quintilian did not stop there. Figurative language is among the strongest means of persuasion an orator has at his disposal, particularly to arouse the emotions. Its force surpasses that of gesture and the expressive use of the face or eyes, because, as he put it, the 'vultus orationis', that is the face of speech seen as a whole surpasses the power of its parts. The 'face of speech' serves in particular to establish a bond with the public. Most translations normalize this metaphor, translating 'vultus' as aspect, which can be used to refer to dead matter and living beings alike. But 'vultus' was used almost exclusively of the human face, its countenance or features.[22] Cicero called it the 'image of the soul' and the 'silent language of the mind'.[23] Just as the gestures of the hands can give visible form to the emotions, the expressive movements of the face offer a visual statement of what goes on in the mind. In the same line of thought the figures of style can be called 'the face of speech': through their movement away from ordinary usage they highlight and thereby give visible shape to the emotions of the speaker.

The brilliance – another visual metaphor, caught by Cicero when he called striking arrangements of words 'quasi lumina', almost lights or even eyes – lent to speech by figurative language ultimately results in an illusion of life.[24] In the visual metaphors used by Quintilian and Cicero speech becomes alive: it has hands that gesture, eyes that see and a face that expresses emotion. Without figurative language speech is lifeless and without force; but if rightly used it endows a speech with life and the power to act on the public. One stylistic strategy that was considered particularly effective to achieve this was *enargeia* or *illustratio*, description that is so vivid and lifelike that the audience believe they are seeing what is described, not listening to somebody speaking. It can be achieved both by the use of figures of speech, in particular metaphor, and by what we would now call narrative techniques, such as detailed description constructed with telling details, the introduction of an eye witness or a sudden address to the public. If successful, speech seemed to dissolve into what it described.

Enargeia (vividness) and its Latin equivalents *evidentia* or *illustratio*, and *energeia* (actuality), were considered to be among the most important, if not the main instruments of persuasion.[25] The Greek *enargeia*, derived from *argès*, shining light, meant clearness, distinctness or vividness; and by extension putting something before the audience's eyes by highlighting it. In Aristotle's *Rhetorica* the latter stylistic strategy is defined together with the etymologically unrelated term *energeia* in his discussion of particularly persuasive stylistic techniques: a vivid representation (*enargeia*) puts what is discussed before the eyes of the audience by using words that signify motion or actuality (*energeia*).[26] A particularly effective strategy to achieve this effect is to use metaphors that animate the inanimate. Quintilian argued that 'oratory fails of its full effect [. . .] if its appeal is merely to the hearing [. . .] and not displayed in [its] living truth to the eyes of the mind'.[27] The orator should act on the eyes, not the ears, of the public, and should excite vivid images before their mind's eyes. '*Enargeia*', as Quintilian put it, 'makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence'. As we have seen, Quintilian literally called figurative language the gestures and face of oratory and 'the lights or as it were the eyes of eloquence'. Eloquence itself comes alive.[28]

All this suggests that the belief in the persuasive power of vividness and living presence was rooted in the conviction, shared by speakers and public alike, that among all visual representation, the living human form was considered most significant; but also that the ability to see is the most important sign of life. By creating a strong suggestion of life, the orator could blur the boundaries between gods and men, in the sense that the capacity to make dead matter seem alive or the absent present was a capacity generally attributed to the gods. The result was not persuasion by force of rational argument, but fascination exploiting ancient fears and ambitions.[29] Cicero and Quintilian were not unique in this.

Longinus for instance, developed the experience of the sublime in terms of a sensation of extreme vividness.[30]

Quintilian also compared gesture to the silent, but powerful, eloquence of painting:

> For we can indicate our will not merely by a gesture of the hand, but also with a nod from the head: signs take the place of language in the dumb, and the movements of the hands are frequently full of meaning, and appeal to the emotions without any aid from words. The temper of the mind can be inferred from the glance and gait [. . .]. Nor is it wonderful that gesture which depends on various forms of movement should have such power, when pictures, which are silent and motionless, penetrate into our innermost feelings with such power that at times they seem more eloquent than language itself.[31]

Quintilian here used words usually reserved for human beings ('tacens': not using articulate speech, and 'habitus': the attitudes or bearing acquired through education) to describe the power of the silent languages of painting and gesture to animate the inanimate. About 1,300 years later Leonardo da Vinci would follow the same stylistic strategy in his observations of idolatry:

> Men will speak to men who will not hear, who will have their eyes open without seeing. They will speak to them but receive no response, ask favors of those with ears who hear not. They will light candles for the blind.[32]

Considered superficially, Leonardo ridiculed those who treat inanimate images as living beings, but actually he used the language reserved for the living to designate these objects.

Rhetorical thought and practice of persuasion centres on the visual, both in the way it defines main instruments of persuasion such as gesture or figurative language, and in the way it presents some of the effects of oratory. The aims of oratory are to delight, instruct and move, but some of the most powerful means of persuasion are visual: speech literally acts on the public, establishes an affective bond through the use of the speaker's eyes and gesture, or through its creation of the effect of lifelikeness. In such experiences of vivid lifelikeness, *evidentia* or *enargeia*, representations appeared to dissolve into what they represent. Speech and, as we shall see in this book, images or buildings, are transformed into agents. Visual persuasion therefore is not a matter of speeches presented in stone or paint, putting across a message that could have been put as well, or better, in words.

In the chapters that follow we will encounter many instances of visual persuasion in the arts and architecture of early modern Europe that were shaped and influenced by classical rhetoric. This book argues that a major key to understanding them lies in the view held by rhetoricians such as Aristotle, Quintilian or Longinus that persuasion is achieved through what we might call figuration: giving an outward, visible shape to emotions, thoughts or memories that creates the illusion of human life and agency. This includes gesture or facial expression, but also the use of figurative language, in particular metaphor, or the use of *enargeia*. Considered in these terms it becomes possible to articulate visual persuasion: to show, for instance, that one of its main instruments was the creation of a common ground between works of art and their viewers, which served as the basis for a sense of shared identity. The ultimate instance of this is the viewer's experience of living presence, which transforms the boundaries between the spectator and inanimate paint into a sense of shared humanity, or even of divine presence. In architecture, which is mainly non-figurative and therefore less fit for suggesting illusions of human presence, the common ground would often be achieved by creating a sense of a shared past or cultural memory. We could call this the paradox of visual persuasion: art, in order to be of the highest quality and at its most persuasive, must cease to look like art. Through this powerful illusion of living presence, it was thought by classical rhetoricians and their early modern followers, art acts on the viewer, exciting emotions and inciting to belief or action. As I hope to show in this book, such visual persuasion was not exclusively the domain of the figurative arts in early modern Europe; architectural persuasion can also be understood in such terms.

This book looks at the roles rhetoric played in visual persuasion through works of art and buildings in early modern Europe. It takes as its starting point that classical rhetoric, though originally developed for persuasive speech, always attached great importance to visual means of persuasion. In the following pages the uses early modern artists and viewers made of rhetorical visuality and visual rhetoric will be examined. Part I looks at the use of rhetoric in artistic theory, as a provider of terms, concepts and methods to deal with visual persuasion. In Chapter One, one of the clearest and most straightforward uses of rhetoric in painting is discussed: the employment of gesture to appeal to the viewer and express emotions. In *De Pictura* Alberti explicitly advised the painter to include a figure who looks out from the painting at the viewer, and the liminal character of such pictorial strategies serves as an introduction to what is the conceptual basis of the use of rhetoric in the arts: an awareness of the representational character of art. Or, put in rhetorical terms, a distinction can be made between *res* and *verba*, between what to say and how to say it. Alberti's use of rhetorical concepts such as *compositio* or *perspicuitas* is based on that distinction. His new reading of the Narcissus myth, in which he credits him with the invention of painting, also

shows Alberti to be the first early modern theorist of art who considered painting not in terms of the activity or product, but in terms of representation. In Chapter Two the attempts to provide architectural theory with a basis that is both scientific and rhetorical are studied. Daniel Barbaro, Gherardo Spini and Vincenzo Scamozzi were all strongly influenced by an Aristotelian view of architecture as a *scienza*, that is, a rational activity based on knowledge of general principles. This Aristotelian theory accorded rhetoric a double role. In presenting his designs the architect becomes an orator, the advocate who can use all the persuasive strategies rhetoric has to offer to present his work. But rhetoric is also used to articulate the design process. Like the orator, the architect has to go through the five stages of preparing and delivering a speech, and can use various manners of building just as the speaker has several ways of speaking at his disposal.

Part II examines various strategies rhetoric offered for persuasive design. Chapter Three identifies what early modern artists and viewers considered to be the *sine qua non* of visual persuasion in the arts: the creation of a common ground which allowed the viewer to identify with what a painting or statue shows. Paintings by Giovanni Bellini, Titian and Caravaggio display various compositional strategies to achieve this, including the use of linear perspective, the blurring of the boundaries between the pictorial world and that of the viewers, and the suggestion of the living, acting presence of what is represented. Chapter Four argues that architectural persuasion is not a matter of speeches in stone, of direct projections of verbal communication onto architecture, but a more subtle process in which buildings serve to create memories and identities. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English architects used buildings to excite memories, trigger associations, and more generally direct the way viewers experienced their work. This chapter examines a series of strategies through which their buildings acted on the mind. In his notes for a reconstruction of Stonehenge and his masque designs, Inigo Jones attempted to create a new, classical past for the recently formed kingdom of Great Britain. His designs and reconstructions acted as the visual embodiment of a cultural memory, and by offering a classical example incited to virtuous action. Picturesque landscape design aimed to create or activate cultural memory. It sought to move the viewer by playing on a sense of shared identity; it suggested and exploited a common ground between landscapes, buildings and viewers. In Sir John Soane's houses, fragments of buildings that were to trigger emotions and associations were to direct the viewer's experience; but ultimately Soane staged the visits to his houses, expecting the visitor to approach them in the same frame of mind as a person who goes to watch a tragedy.

Part III is devoted to interpretations of the arts and architecture informed by rhetoric. It looks at the concepts and competences viewers brought to the analysis of arts but more in particular at their understanding of visual persuasion. In Antiquity rhetoric was not only considered as the theory and practice of