

Titian's *Christ with the Coin*: Recovering the Spiritual Currency of Numismatics in Renaissance Ferrara

CHRISTOPHER J. NYGREN, *University of Pittsburgh*

Titian painted Christ with the Coin for Alfonso d'Este around 1516. The painting served as the cover piece for a collection of ancient coins and has been read as a commentary on politics and taxation. Instead, this article reveals how the painting reconfigured Alfonso's interaction with ancient coins, transforming the everyday activity of the collector into an occasion of spiritual reformation. Reading numismatic antiquarianism against the exegetical tradition that accrued around the Gospel pericope (Matthew 22:21) reveals the painting as the nexus of two regimes of virtue — one Christian, one classical — both of which turn upon coins as manifold objects.

INTRODUCTION

IN EARLY 1516, Titian (ca. 1490–1576) arrived at the Este court in Ferrara where he completed a painting of Christ holding a coin (fig. 1). This picture is generally called *The Tribute Money*, but for reasons outlined below this article uses a different title, *Christ with the Coin*.¹ It illustrates a well-known passage

I would like to thank Stephen Campbell, Jason Di Resta, Megan Holmes, Herbert Kessler, Walter Melion, Esther Münzberg, Vernon K. Robbins, Denis Robichaud, Charles Rosenberg, Nancy Struever, Kirk Savage, and Ben Tilghman for discussing this paper at different stages in its development. The anonymous readers at *Renaissance Quarterly* also gave valuable feedback, as did the journal's editors. Enrica Budetta offered assistance with Latin paleography. All translations are my own, except where indicated.

¹Campori; Gronau. Vincenzo Farinella has recently attempted to redate the painting to 1520–21. Farinella's revisionist dating hinges upon a number of interrelated hypotheses that have little support in the documentary record. Farinella understands the painting to be concerned exclusively with the political economy of Italy, a line of interpretation that is challenged in this essay. Once the political interpretation of the painting is neutralized it becomes unsustainable to date the picture to a particular month or year because of political events. Moreover, Farinella's redating requires a wholesale reevaluation of Titian's early production. While such reshufflings are from time to time warranted, in this case the impetus to do so derives from a purported connection between the picture's iconography and external political events, rather than any stylistic or documentary evidence or concern. See Farinella, 465–86.

Renaissance Quarterly 69 (2016): 449–88 © 2016 Renaissance Society of America.

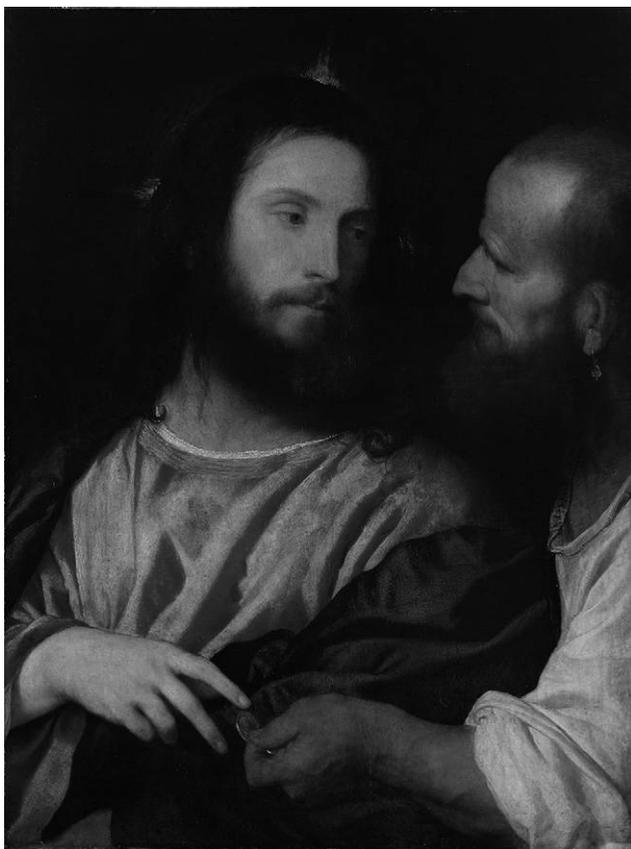


Figure 1. Titian. *Christ with the Coin*, 1516. Oil on panel. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Gemäldegalerie. Art Resource, NY.

from the Gospels in which Christ uttered his famous dictum: “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God, the things that are God’s.”² The Gospel story involves a Roman coin used to pay taxes to the emperor; Caesar’s coin is central to the visual economy of Titian’s painting, as well as to its social life, for the picture served as the cabinet cover for Duke Alfonso I d’Este’s (1476–1534) collection of ancient coins. Many scholars have noted the echoing of the picture’s subject matter in its function. In fact, it is so easy to intuit the connection between the picture and its function as a cover for coins that one scholar has described the affinity between them as “so appropriate . . . as to

²Matthew 22:21. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are taken from the Douay-Rheims translation.

be banal.”³ Scholars are perhaps right to worry that there is something hackneyed in using a painting about coins to protect a collection of the same, and so the literature has coalesced in reading the picture as a statement on the tensions between ecclesiastical and civic jurisdictions, which supposedly preoccupied Duke Alfonso at the time of the picture’s creation.⁴ This article will demonstrate that there is nothing straightforward or banal about the choice to adorn a cabinet containing coins with a biblical illustration. Moreover, it will suggest that scholars’ emphasis on the purported political and propagandistic function of Titian’s picture is deeply (if unconsciously) tinged with post-Reformation hermeneutical practices that were not current in Titian’s cultural milieu. Reading Titian’s picture as jurisdictional propaganda misdirects attention away from the network of spiritual and ethical concerns that were addressed by the painting, its source text, and the objects it concealed.

Among scholars of Renaissance art history there is a seemingly instinctive response to read Matthew 22 as a proclamation on fiscal policy and the division between church and state. By contrast, this article will argue that the painting is underpinned by a deep strain of patristic and humanistic thought that took the Matthean pericope as an invitation to repeated, individualized spiritual reformation that turns upon the numismatic reference embedded in the Gospel story. The premodern exegesis that had accrued around this pericope demonstrates that prior to the Reformation the text was not understood to address something external, but rather something internal: the story spoke of the reader’s soul as a form of currency indelibly marked with God’s image and likeness, and this realization opened up an occasion for the infusion of grace. The premodern mode of reading the Gospel passage veers away from the political and toward the spiritual. Titian’s painting should be read in light of this standard interpretation of the biblical text. This interpretation will be reinforced by an examination of the practices surrounding numismatic collections in the Renaissance. Like the coin in the biblical text, these objects served as points of entry into an internalized economy that transacted virtue. Titian and his audience would have been alert to the nonmonetary valences of coins. Recuperating this mode of thought will reveal how Titian’s painting redeploys the exegetical tradition of Matthew 22 in order to give its beholder a radically new understanding of how he ought to interact with the objects that the painting conceals. Through Titian’s biblical icon, numismatic collecting was reconfigured as a form of spiritual exercise that combined the pursuit of classical virtue with the infusion of Christian grace. The picture points to the nexus of two regimes of the self, both of which turn upon the coin as manifold object. The reading of Titian’s

³Gilbert, 63.

⁴Joannides, 2001, 249; Hope and Jaffe, 156; Humfrey, 90 (cat. no. 49); Biffis; Gentili, 117; Fiorenza, 143.

painting developed here will in turn challenge commonly held beliefs about what constituted a devotional picture in the Renaissance, as well as the nature of the spiritual work that such images supported.

IDENTIFYING THE SCENE: TRIBUTES AND TAXES

The picture is signed “TICIANVS F.” along the collar of the white *camicia* (chemise) worn by the Pharisee, and its autograph status has never been seriously questioned.⁵ The composition is among Titian’s most elegant: Vasari described the head of Christ as “marvelous and stupendous,”⁶ while Crowe and Cavalcaselle suggested that “the form of Christ was never conceived by any of the Venetians of such ideal beauty as this.”⁷ Christ’s beauty is heightened by the contrast of his marble-like complexion with the weathered skin of the Pharisee at his shoulder. The physiognomic features that distinguish Christ seem to be drawn from the tradition that began with the *smeraldo*, an emerald medallion displaying a profile portrait of Christ that had been given to Pope Alexander VI.⁸ This image circulated widely in prints, and Titian undoubtedly knew it (fig. 2).⁹ The resonance between this visual source (a portrait medallion) and the subject of the picture (a portrait on a coin) is certainly not fortuitous.

The extreme compression of the painted scene is calculated to attain maximal physical proximity in the service of psychological engagement. This results in a rather mannered composition, as the Pharisee approaches Christ from behind his left shoulder. This is an odd compositional solution. Together with the extreme closeup format, the interaction of the two figures gives the impression of a truncated composition: the beholder might imagine that Jesus has been speaking to other Pharisees beyond the (viewer’s) left edge of the composition. Upon Jesus asking to see the coin, the bearded man in white at Christ’s back, who had previously been excluded from the conversation, jumps to attention and cunningly thrusts forth a handful of coins. Christ’s shoulders are thus oriented toward the other Pharisees beyond the frame, while his head snaps back to the viewer’s right creating an elegant contrapuntal movement. Christ serves a chiastic function in the composition, filling the gap between the lone Pharisee depicted at Christ’s (proper) left shoulder and the myriad others whose presence is implicit at stage right. The composition, then, serves to distill the instant of engagement between Christ

⁵Wethey, 1:163–64 (cat. no. 147).

⁶Vasari, 7:434–35.

⁷Crowe and Cavalcaselle, 1:120.

⁸Helas, 2000; Wood, 109–84; Nagel and Wood, 251–74; Preimesberger.

⁹Helas, 2006.

Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.¹¹

The simple and laconic style of the synoptic Gospels tends to elide narrative detail, leaving the reader to provide the implicit stage directions. Titian illustrates the moment, left unspoken in all three Gospels, when Christ reaches for the denarius proffered by the Pharisees.

Most previous interpretations have emphasized Christ's clever response, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God, the things that are God's." This article suggests that Titian's image illustrates the moment before, when Christ is on the verge of posing the question: "whose image and inscription are on the coin?" This is not a radical proposal. Already in 1980 Creighton Gilbert had suggested that the moment of the painting "seems to coincide with [Christ's] inquiry."¹² However, the import of this suggestion has been largely overlooked. As opposed to offering a response, the picture poses a question. This causes a subtle shift, sliding the picture from the register of the didactic into the realm of the disputative. The picture cannot function without a beholder who responds to Christ's query. This reading of the narrative moment also reverberates with the picture's original context.

Vasari noted the function of *Christ with the Coin*, describing it as adornment for *un armario* (a cabinet). Importantly, Vasari discussed the painting within his account of the *camerino d'alabastro* (alabaster chamber), the term he used to describe Alfonso's *studiolo*.¹³ A 1543 inventory corroborates Vasari's text and firmly established the location of the *Christ with the Coin*. The document describes the picture as follows: "*camerino adorato*: An image of Jesus by the hand of Titian."¹⁴ This source is curt, though it does vouch for the presence of Titian's painting in the *camerino adorato* (gilded chamber), which was located adjacent to the *camerino d'alabastro*. The gravitational pull of the *Christ with the Coin* toward the paintings of the *camerino d'alabastro* clearly felt in Vasari's text is, therefore, not misplaced, but rather indexes the general physical proximity of the two

¹¹Matthew 22:15–22. The story is also recounted in the Gospels of Mark (12:13–17) and Luke (20:19–25). This article will refer to the text found in the Gospel of Matthew, which is the most thorough account of the story.

¹²Gilbert, 63.

¹³Vasari, 7:434–35.

¹⁴Cittadella, 96.

rooms. It is significant that early documents place the *Christ with the Coin* in a space that is contiguous to Alfonso's *studiolo*, the suite of rooms dedicated to Alfonso I's pursuit of cultivated *otium* (leisure).¹⁵ The ethical-spiritual interpretation of the painting outlined below fits squarely within the ethos of self-moderation and amelioration that motivated the Renaissance *studiolo*.

A letter from Alessandro Fiaschi (1516–85) to Ercole II d'Este (1508–59) dated 29 April 1559 describes more explicitly the function fulfilled by Titian's painting within the *camerino adorato*. In the letter, Fiaschi writes about a set of keys that he had left behind in Ferrara, and he gives instructions on where to find them: "in the study of the medals . . . when you have entered with the chamberlain, have him look above the said cabinet and he will find a key for the door where hangs a portrait of Our Lord, by the hand of Titian. Having removed the said portrait, you will find a number of drawers inside."¹⁶ Although the 1559 letter marks the first reference to the picture's function as a cabinet cover for the collection of *medaglie* (coins and medals), the physical evidence suggests that the picture was conceived from the start to serve this function. Exceptionally for a painting of its size, the *Christ with the Coin* was painted in oil on wood panel. While Titian executed a number of pictures on panel during the second decade of the sixteenth century, pictures of similar size and half-length format were almost always done on canvas.¹⁷ For a variety of practical reasons, however, images incorporated into furniture were typically painted on wood.¹⁸ The unique nature of the painting's support, then, suggests that from the outset Titian's picture was to be inserted into a cabinet.¹⁹

The subject matter of the painting gives further support to this hypothesis. Despite being recounted in each of the synoptic Gospels, this story was nevertheless effectively nonexistent within the tradition of Christian images, save for a few select manuscript illuminations.²⁰ Titian's painting is typically regarded as the first independent painting of the twenty-second chapter of the

¹⁵Campbell, 251–64.

¹⁶The document was published by Hood and Hope, 547n62, and is discussed by Gilbert, 62.

¹⁷Half-length pictures done on canvas include the so-called *Salome* (Rome, Doria Pamphilij), *Madonna of the Cherries*, *Christ and the Adulteress* (both Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), and two versions of *Madonna and Child with Jerome, and Other Saints* (Vienna, KHM, and Paris, Louvre). Pictures on panel from this period, by contrast, are all considerably larger and usually for liturgical contexts: for example, the Treviso *Annunciation*, the Frari *Assunta*, and the Ancona *Madonna and Child with Saints*.

¹⁸On the Renaissance *armario*, see P. Thornton, 221–22. For a thorough description of the organizational principles underwriting the earliest surviving coin cabinets, see Pfisterer, 134–37. On painted panels inserted into furniture, see Dunkerton, Foister, and Penny, 129–35.

¹⁹Hood and Hope, 547.

²⁰The most pertinent is a 1472 miniature by Liberale da Verona: Carli, plate 17.

Gospel of Matthew in Renaissance art.²¹ Indeed, the rarity of the subject matter has resulted in some confusion. Following Vasari's description of the picture, scholarship in Italian has generally described the picture as "the Christ with the coin"; early modern Spanish sources identified a copy of the picture with the Latin title *Numisma Census* (Coin of taxation), thus following the terminology used in the Latin Vulgate text of Matthew 22 (more on which below); in English, however, the title *The Tribute Money* has become calcified in the scholarship.²² This title, though, does not accurately reflect the terminology used in Matthew 22, and use of the term *tribute* creates confusion with another seldom-illustrated passage from the synoptic Gospels.

Matthew 17 recounts the story of the temple tax, another of Jesus's ingenious responses to a deceptive question meant to catch him unawares and elicit a blasphemous response: "When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, 'Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?' He said, 'Yes, he does.' And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute [*tributum*]? From their children or from others?' When Peter said, 'From others,' Jesus said to him, 'Then the children are free. However, so that we do not give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me.'²³ Like Matthew 22, this passage deals with Jesus's response to policies of taxation. However, the nature of the taxes and his response thereto differ drastically. At issue in Matthew 17 is the "temple tax." Among modern exegetes there is some disagreement about whether the "temple tax" referred to ought to be understood as the Jewish tax described in Exodus (30:13–17) or the so-called *fiscus iudaicus*, a tax described by Josephus (37–100 CE) as having been levied upon the province of Judea following the suppression of the Jewish uprising and the end of Second Temple Judaism in 70 CE.²⁴ While of great importance in dating the Gospel pericope, this debate remains beyond the purview of this article.²⁵ Of concern here is redressing the tendency that scholars have to treat these two discrete Gospel narratives as interchangeable,

²¹*Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, s.v. "Zinsgroschen," 4:572. Farinella has recently suggested that Fra Angelico illustrated the "Render" passage in a predella painting. However, consultation of the photograph of this now-lost panel in the photography collection of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence suggests that this panel illustrated Matthew 17, like Masaccio's painting in the Brancacci Chapel. Angelico's picture shows Christ receiving a coin from a tonsured figure, presumably Saint Peter. Farinella, 468.

²²Salort-Pons, 154.

²³Matthew, 17:23–26. This is the *New Revised Standard Version* of the text.

²⁴Josephus, 3:567–69 (8.216–18).

²⁵On this question, see Cassidy; Horbury; W. Carter; E. J. Carter; Tellbe.

which adumbrates the specificity of the message conveyed by these two distinct pericopes.

The pericope of the temple tax appears only in the Gospel of Matthew, the Latin text of which deploys two terms for taxes: *tributum* and *censum*. When the question of taxation arises later in Matthew 22, however, the Latin text uses only the word *censum*. Oddly, the Vulgate's terminology for the "Render unto Caesar" episode is inconsistent: Mark and Luke both utilize the term *tributum* rather than Matthew's *censum*. Erasmus (1466–1536), though, was dissatisfied with this translation of the Greek text, and proposed instead that the Latin texts of Mark and Luke employ the term *censum*, as in Matthew 22.²⁶ Compounding this lexical confusion, both the Douay-Rheims and King James bibles translate the term *censum* in Matthew 22 as "tribute money"; the same term is used to translate *tributum* in Matthew 17. The imprecision of these translations registers the thematic overlap of the two stories, both of which deal with Jesus's submission to tax policies, and this has bled into modern scholarship. Art historians routinely refer to images of both Matthew 17 and Matthew 22 as *The Tribute Money*, and this verbal overlap has resulted in an unwarranted telescoping of both iconographies to fit a single ideologically charged narrative of the relations between church and state.

The most famous illustration of Matthew 17 is undoubtedly the fresco by Masaccio (1401–28) in the Brancacci chapel (fig. 3), which memorably depicts Saint Peter in the background at the viewer's left as he collects from the mouth of a fish the coin that will be used to pay the temple tax. It has become conventional to read the inclusion of this scene — a scene that, like Matthew 22, was quite rare in the tradition of Christian iconography — in terms of the tense relations between church and state regarding tax policy, which was highly contested in the 1420s.²⁷ More recent scholarship on the Brancacci chapel has pivoted away from this concern with taxation to consider how the fresco cycle was invested in asserting the historical authority of the Carmelite order.²⁸ Even so, the ecclesiastical-political reading developed for Masaccio's *The Tribute Money* has, wittingly or not, crept into the scholarship on Titian's *Christ with the Coin*, a painting heretofore described by that same title. Characteristic of this slow but steady creep is the assessment recently presented by Peter Humfrey, who notes that "the subject was also particularly appropriate for Alfonso, who owed allegiance to both the pope and the emperor."²⁹ Most recent scholarship has

²⁶Erasmus, 1969–, 6.5:416.

²⁷See Mohlo; Spike, 102–10; Joannides, 1993, 319; Einem. Attempts have also been made to associate Masaccio's *The Tribute Money* with the Florentine *catasto* (census of the territory) of 1427, which raised the issue of whether or not church properties were taxable by the state. See Meller.

²⁸Holmes.

²⁹Humfrey, 90.



Figure 3. Masaccio. *The Tribute Money*, ca. 1425. Fresco. Florence, Santa Maria del Carmine. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

similarly read Titian's painting as a form of ideological and political posturing, much like Masaccio's fresco.³⁰ As Augusto Gentile would have it, Titian's painting serves as a visible seal of Alfonso's "historical memory and political conscience," reflecting the duke's assertions of independence in the face of papal claims to authority over Ferrara.³¹ Like Masaccio's painting, then, Titian's picture is understood to mediate the patron's competing allegiances to church and state. It is certainly true that Alfonso d'Este occupied a precarious situation in the political economy of the Italian Peninsula. His territory served as the physical buffer between some of the most important political forces in European politics, principally the papacy and the Venetian Republic, and the Este often struggled to balance these competing interests in their foreign policy.³²

In this context, Mattia Biffis has suggested that Titian's picture served to "guarantee" Alfonso's political mandate, buttressing it with biblical authority by illustrating Christ's *dictum* on the separation of powers.³³ However, John Cunnally has challenged this interpretation by questioning whether or not painting was an effective vehicle for Alfonso to pronounce on the balance between church and state.³⁴ Cunnally's skepticism is merited. First, it is difficult to square the propagandistic claims that political readings impute to the painting with the original context in which it was displayed: a private chamber with

³⁰Gilbert, 63. See also Joannides, 2001, 249.

³¹Gentili, 117. See also Biffis.

³²On the Este family's attempts to negotiate between the competing forces of the papacy and the Venetian Republic, see Bestor; Dean.

³³Biffis, 162.

³⁴Cunnally, 2009, 40.

limited access. It is unclear how a picture whose viewership is extremely restricted can guarantee claims to political authority. Second, such readings of Titian's painting disregard that, within the context of Alfonso's *camerino adorato*, the painting served a particular purpose: cover for a collection of ancient coins. This article departs from Cunnally in its account of how the image operated within its original context. Rather than emphasize the social aspect of numismatics, as Cunnally has done, this analysis insists upon the picture as a threshold that at once identifies the "objects of virtue" that it protected while simultaneously pointing the way toward proper engagement with those things.³⁵ The change in title from *The Tribute Money* to *Christ with the Coin*, which is employed throughout this article, helps cleave Titian's picture from the discourse of politics, emphasizing instead the charged symbolism of the coin.

NUMISMATICS PRACTICAL AND MONETARY

Alessandro Fiaschi's letter to Ercole II d'Este locates the cabinet within the "room of the medals," and it is important to consider Fiaschi's use of the term *medaglie*. While in modern Italian the term applies exclusively to medallions of the sort produced by Pisanello (ca. 1395–ca. 1455) and other Renaissance artists, in sixteenth-century Italian the term could be used to apply "in a generic sense, [to] any ancient coin considered chiefly as an archaeological find and as an object of historical research and of collecting."³⁶ Moreover, Fiaschi's description of the cabinet aligns well with what scholars have been able to reconstruct regarding early modern numismatic collections, which were loosely organized on the extractable shelves of a chest or cabinet dedicated to numismatic objects.³⁷ Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) kept his prized possessions in just this sort of cabinet.³⁸ Alfonso's cabinet was similar but more ornate; befitting a Renaissance prince, his collection of coins was adorned with a painting by one of the premier painters of the day.

The Este collection of coins was established by Leonello d'Este (1407–50).³⁹ Subsequent Este rulers continued to expand the collection, and by 1494 it contained over 3,500 coins of gold, silver, and bronze.⁴⁰ The Este collection of

³⁵For a revolutionary study of how Renaissance objects, including ancient coins and modern medallions, defined a category of social virtue, see Syson and Thornton, 12–36.

³⁶*Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, s.v. "medaglia," 9:1004. See also Corradini; Gilbert, 63n125.

³⁷See D. Thornton, 69–75; Cunnally, 1999, 26–33.

³⁸For Bembo's "escritorio" ("cabinet"), see *Pietro Bembo*, 335–36 (cat. no. 5.16).

³⁹Flavio, 159–60.

⁴⁰For the text of the "Estratto dell'inventario di Guardaroba Estense (1494)," see *Raccolta di cataloghi*, 3–34. The relevant section on coins and medals is found on 28–32.

coins remained rather ad hoc in its organization well into the sixteenth century. In the early years of the reign of Duke Ercole II d'Este the collection was placed under the care of the humanist Celio Calcagnini (1479–1541), who helped bring a sense of organization to the collection and pushed to expand it in a systematic manner.⁴¹ After Calcagnini's death in 1541, responsibility for the collection passed to Enea Vico (1523–67), who used his position to develop numismatic scholarship in revolutionary ways.⁴²

The utilitarian function of Titian's painting as a cover piece for Alfonso's numismatic collection bears heavily on how one reads the image. This is not to suggest that the image merely functioned as a piece of furniture. On the contrary, the picture was conceived in such a way as to reconfigure the act of beholding (both the picture and the coins behind it) into a simple but subtly nuanced form of philosophical or ethical exercise. Alfonso's ancient coins were contact relics of another era, a historically remote moment in which the objects circulated as currency.⁴³ Withdrawn from circulation as liquid currency, the value of these coins now lay primarily in their status as repositories of cultural memory, moral exemplification, and social exchange.⁴⁴ The nonmonetary status of ancient coins in Alfonso's collection further argues against reading Titian's picture in terms of sixteenth-century tax policy and debates over ecclesiastical freedom: the coins it protected were not the sort of coins that would be used to pay taxes either to the Holy Roman emperor or to the pope.

However, Titian's picture is connected to liquid currency in another way. Since at least the nineteenth century, scholars have drawn attention to a Ferrarese *doppione* (double ducat) struck early in 1505, just after Alfonso's succession to the Ferrarese throne.⁴⁵ The obverse of the coin shows a portrait of Alfonso and bears an inscription commemorating Alfonso's newly attained status as *dux Ferrariae* (fig. 4). The reverse of the coin portrays the scene from the Matthew 22: the Pharisee is shown giving the coin to Christ with an inscription that cites the biblical source, "QUE.SVNT.DEI. DEO" (fig. 5). Charles Rosenberg calls attention to the fact that the coin cites the second clause of Christ's response, thus leaving implicit the first

⁴¹Cavedoni. See also *Una silloge numismatica*.

⁴²Lemburg-Ruppelt. See also Haskell, 13–25.

⁴³Nagel and Wood, 251–52, discuss how antiquarians, especially Conrad Peutinger, appreciated coins as a new sort of relic. The letters of Pietro Bembo also make clear the affective power of these "signs and images of ancient memory." See Bembo, 777–78 and 810–11 (quotation on 778).

⁴⁴Cunnally, 2009.

⁴⁵The coin is mentioned in a letter from Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti to Isabella d'Este dated 19 June 1505. See Crowe and Cavalcaselle, 1:117. See also Shepherd.



Figure 4. Ferrarese *Doppione*, obverse, 1505. Gold. Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, New York.



Figure 5. Ferrarese *Doppione*, reverse, 1505. Gold. Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society, New York.

part.⁴⁶ The coin speaks only of the faithfuls' debt to God, eliding the citizens' responsibility to pay taxes to their ruler. If the coin's main purpose was to exhort the Ferrarese citizenry to pay taxes, it does so in a circuitous manner.⁴⁷

Alfonso's *doppione* has often been adduced as a source for the iconography of Titian's painting, with the implication that both the coin and Titian's painting emerge from Alfonso's concerns over jurisdictional authority.⁴⁸ However, the coin makes clear that Alfonso did not understand Matthew 22 as being exclusively tethered to the tensions between church and state. By stamping his own likeness onto the double ducat, Alfonso used the coin as a subtle means of presenting his agenda as ruler. Christ asked, "Whose image is on the coin?" While the Pharisee was left to respond, "Caesar's," the sixteenth-century Ferrarese viewer could draw only one logical conclusion: Alfonso I d'Este is the new Caesar. Moreover, differences of medium, audience, and function make it problematic to graft the political agenda behind the golden double ducat onto *Christ with the Coin*. Certainly Alfonso and those members of his court accorded access to the *studio delle medaglie* (the study of coins and medals) were aware that Alfonso had produced a coin iconographically similar to Titian's painting. More than simply serving as an inside joke, however, this realization underlines the tension that existed between Alfonso's coin and Titian's painting: while the former served as liquid currency, the latter demarcated a realm of objects whose cultural and archaeological value was in excess of monetary utility.⁴⁹ Titian's picture is not simply a witty metapictorial conceit, the painted equivalent of a *matryoshka* doll. Rather, Titian's painting conditions the manner in which the beholder engages with the contents of the cabinet. This claim can be supported by the long exegetical tradition behind the "Render unto Caesar" passage.

It is true that from an early date Christians who sought to accommodate their beliefs to the jurisdiction of non-Christian authorities invoked Matthew 22 as evidence of their biblically sanctioned acquiescence. Justin Martyr cited Matthew 22 in this context.⁵⁰ However, as Christianity began to enjoy institutional authority, such reasoning became less common. Similarly, Scholastic theologians concerned with finding biblical approbation for the exercise of political power did occasionally turn to the passage as a proof text.⁵¹

⁴⁶Rosenberg.

⁴⁷Shepherd.

⁴⁸Biffis, 161.

⁴⁹Creighton Gilbert has suggested that the subject of the painting was intended to "cater to [the] duke's amusement" in the manner of an inside joke. Gilbert, 63.

⁵⁰Justin Martyr, 121 (17.1–17.4).

⁵¹See, for example, Aquinas, 1951, 187 (22.2). See also Eschmann; Kantorowicz, 54.

However, when considering how political theorists like Marsilius of Padua (ca. 1275–ca.1342) engage the Matthean pericope, one is left with a sense that he was all too conscious of how his reading forced an issue that previous exegetes did not see as pertinent to the text at hand. Indeed, before proffering his reading of the political significance of Matthew 22, Marsilius explicitly defers to the traditional patristic reading of the text developed by Origen, Tertullian, Augustine, and others, which will be discussed below. In fact, he cites those very sources and their gloss on the passage and acknowledges that obedience to God is at the center of the pericope; even for Marsilius, obedience to temporal authority is of a secondary, subordinate order.⁵²

Reading the dual commandments of obedience found in Matthew 22:21 in a hierarchical manner remained standard practice within the Catholic tradition, with emphasis clearly falling upon the faithfuls' debt to God rather than on their obligation to Caesar.⁵³ However, a subtle shift in emphasis began to occur with Protestant interpretations of the pericope, which emerged out of a context in which the latent tensions between ecclesiastical and political authorities neared a breaking point.⁵⁴ Martin Luther (1483–1546) cited Matthew 22 for its jurisdictional distinction between temporal and eternal authority in his 1523 treatise "Concerning Governmental Authority."⁵⁵ This division was supported by other biblical loci in which Christ makes explicit the division between celestial and terrestrial kingdoms.⁵⁶ From there, the text entered into the confessional debates of the Reformation period, and even Erasmus in his late works seems to give credence to Luther's reading of the passage.⁵⁷ However, as Ulrich Luz observes in his magisterial *Hermeneia Commentary* on the Gospel of Matthew, this Protestant reading of the pericope "rests in a one-sided way on the command to give to Caesar what belongs to him, while the final clause, 'and to God what belongs to God,' was likely to be neglected as 'an afterthought.'"⁵⁸ However, prior to the Reformation, reading Matthew 22 as a reflection on jurisdictional authority was not common, and these readings were found almost exclusively in writings on canon law and political theory rather than in more readily available sources like the *Glossa Ordinaria* or other exegetical tools. For

⁵²Marsilius of Padua, 119. For a contrasting interpretation of Marsilius of Padua's treatise as it regards Titian's painting, see Biffis, 158.

⁵³Luz, 3:65.

⁵⁴See Ozment, 135–39; Tierny, 171.

⁵⁵Luther, 88.

⁵⁶Especially John 18:36.

⁵⁷See, for example, Erasmus's 1533 treatise, "On Mending the Church": Erasmus, 1983, 386–87.

⁵⁸Luz, 3:64.

example, Thomas Aquinas's (1225–74) *Catena Aurea*, one of the most widely distributed collections of biblical commentaries, entirely ignores the question of political and ecclesiastical authority.⁵⁹ Nor was the distinction between church and state a theme in the most widely circulated homilies on the Matthean pericope, which was read during Mass on the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost.⁶⁰

Other biblical passages make clear that Christians were responsible for paying taxes. As Paul says, "Render therefore to all men their dues. Tribute, to whom tribute is due."⁶¹ Paul's language consciously evokes the pericope from Matthew 22, thus reinforcing the idea that taxation enjoyed Jesus's approbation. There was, then, little doubt as to Christ's teaching, and exegetes quickly glossed over the nuts and bolts of fiscal policy to unpack the deeper significance of Matthew 22. Origen's (ca. 185–ca. 255) comments to this effect can be taken as representative: "Some people think that the Savior spoke on a single level when he said, 'Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar' — that is, 'pay the taxes that you owe.' Who among us disagrees about paying taxes to Caesar? So the passage has a mystical and secret meaning."⁶² Origen's preference for "hidden" and "mystical" significance owed much to the "Render unto Caesar" episode's location in the section of the Gospel of Matthew dedicated to Christ's parables. There is a long exegetical tradition of interpreting Christ's parables; indeed, without interpretation they are nonsensical. When understood in their proper, spiritual sense, however, Christ's parables become maxims by which to live, comparable to the allusive lived philosophy put forward in the Pythagorean *symbola* or the memorable sayings of the Stoic philosophers.⁶³ As Erasmus noted, "The parables of the Gospel, if you take them at face value — who would not think that they came from a simple ignorant man? And yet if you crack the nut, you find inside that profound wisdom, truly divine, a touch of something which is clearly like Christ himself."⁶⁴ Titian's picture sets forth for the beholder one of the enigmatic sayings of Christ, and similarly demands to be interpreted. The exegetical tradition underwriting Matthew 22 suggests that rather than being involved in the politics of the day, Titian's picture turns upon a peculiar kind of image-based spiritual reformation. Recovering this line of interpretation grants new flexibility to Titian's painting. No longer understood exclusively through

⁵⁹Aquinas, 2009, 2:748–52.

⁶⁰*Homiliaris*, fols. clxiii^r–clxiii^v.

⁶¹Romans 13:7.

⁶²Origen, 161. Jerome's Latin translation of the homily, which was widely available in the Renaissance, can be found in Jerome, 26:col. 305a–305b.

⁶³The power of such epigrammatic maxims, as opposed to systematic philosophy, is discussed by Hadot, 85. On Pythagorean philosophy in Renaissance culture, see Celenza.

⁶⁴Erasmus, 1992, 76.

the lens of propaganda, it will become clear how this Renaissance icon highlights the unique ability of pictures to comment upon the intersection of theology, philosophy, archaeology, and the impulse to collect things.⁶⁵ The picture took an everyday activity (looking at coins) and injected it with a sense of urgency that served to focus the consciousness of its primary practitioner — Alfonso d'Este.

SPIRITUAL NUMISMATICS: EXEGESIS AND THE EXAMINATION OF COINS IN MATTHEW 22

Christ's approval of Caesar's image-bearing coin was a central conceit in medieval theories of the image and remained so into the sixteenth century, when Cardinal Gabrielle Paleotti (1522–97) used the episode in his influential treatise to justify the existence of Christian images.⁶⁶ Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 220) was perhaps the first exegete to recognize the spiritually generative power embedded in the coin in question in Matthew 22: “Render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's.” What will be ‘the things that are God's?’ Such things as are like Caesar's *denarius* — that is to say, His image and similitude. That, therefore, which he commands to be ‘rendered unto God,’ the Creator, is *man*, who has been stamped with His image, likeness, name, and substance.”⁶⁷ Though he does not state this explicitly, Tertullian's interpretation clearly leans upon Genesis 1:26–27. In that foundational passage of Christian image theory, humankind is described as having been made in the image and likeness of God. With this intertext in mind, Tertullian interprets the episode metaphorically: just as the denarius bears the mark of its proprietor, Caesar, so too does the soul of man bear the indelible imprint of its creator, God the Father.

Origen, whose commentary on the passage was cited above, further elaborated on the metaphor that Tertullian had introduced by using the Pauline Epistles to gloss the “Render” pericope, thus giving even greater authority and force to reading the coin as a metaphor for the human soul: “And he said to them in turn, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.’ Paul also uttered this conclusion and said, ‘As we bear the image of the earthly man, we should also bear the image of the heavenly man’ (1 Corinthians 15:49). When Christ says, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar's,’ he means this: ‘Put off the person of the earthly man, cast off the earthly image, so that you can put

⁶⁵Lorenzo Lotto's *Portrait of Andrea Odoni* offers similar evidence of the “enlivening” exchange between a collector and possessions, of which coins figure prominently: see Campbell, 52; Schmitter, 240–44.

⁶⁶Paleotti, 128 (1.29).

⁶⁷Tertullian, 1868, 339 (book 4, chap. 38). For the Latin text, see Tertullian, 1844, 2:col. 453a–b.

on yourselves the person of the heavenly man and give to God what is God's."⁶⁸ The shift in emphasis from Tertullian to Origen is important to underline. While Tertullian already understood the impressed image on the coin as a metaphor for the soul, Origen overtly connects this to one of the classic rhetorical figures for spiritual reformation: restoration of the image. Gerhart B. Ladner has drawn attention to how prevalent this topos was in premodern Christianity, though his study of the history of the idea of reform has, for whatever reason, been largely absent from the literature on reform movements in the early modern world. Incorporating Ladner's notion of reform subtly inflects how the visual arts are understood to operate within a culture on the cusp of the Reformation. Rather than interrogate images, suspecting them as actors in systematic attempts to impose religious reform (or, alternatively, orthodoxy), Ladner's notion of reform allows the art historian to see images as vehicles or conduits of multiple, prolonged, and repeated efforts at individual spiritual reformation.⁶⁹ As Ladner notes, the governing metaphor of this drive to reformation was restoration of the soul to its original status as a pristine likeness of God.⁷⁰ Religious reform, it turns out, is fundamentally imagistic.

Augustine (354–430) explicitly grafted the notion of restoring one's prelapsarian, divine image likeness onto Christ's exhortation to "Render unto Caesar." Like Tertullian, Augustine's understanding of the act of impressing a coin with a likeness was informed by Genesis 1:26–27. Gerhard Wolf has recently demonstrated how Augustine's understanding of the act of impressing a coin with a likeness stood behind the development of "impressed images" and contact relics like the *Veronica* and the *Mandyllion*, two icons believed to have been produced when Christ pressed his face onto pieces of linen.⁷¹ Just as God's likeness had been impressed upon humanity and Caesar's likeness impressed in the material substrate of his coinage, so too had Christ's visage been signed or impressed upon these holy cloths. Beyond authorizing the production of images, though, Augustine's exegesis of Caesar's coin also served to emphasize the spiritual resonance of coinage. In a sermon on Psalm 94, Augustine used language consciously evoking Matthew 22 in order to invite the faithful to renew (i.e., reform) their mind by "resculpting the coin, that is our soul, in the image of God."⁷² On multiple other occasions Augustine used the story about Caesar's coin to put forward an imagistic notion of reform: by bringing oneself into *conformitas* (conformity) with the image of Christ, the faithful returns to God

⁶⁸Origen, 162. For the Latin text, see Jerome, 26:col. 306a.

⁶⁹Ladner, 32–35.

⁷⁰Ibid, 91.

⁷¹Wolf, 3–42. On the metaphor of imprinting, see also Bedos-Rezak, 186–202; Preimesberger.

⁷²Augustine, 1841–42, 37:col. 1218. See also Ladner, 194.

the Creator that which is rightfully his, namely the pristine divine image imprinted on the human soul.⁷³

This is made clear in Augustine's fortieth *Lecture on the Gospel of John*: "We are God's money: we have wandered away as coin from the treasury. The impression that was stamped upon us has been rubbed out by our wandering. He has come to refashion, for He it was that fashioned us at first; and He is himself asking for His money, as Caesar for his. Therefore He says, 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's': to Caesar his money, to God yourselves. And then shall truth be reproduced in us."⁷⁴ In the wake of Augustine's innovative reading of the text, Matthew 22 became a lodestar in medieval theories of the image; the connection between Caesar's coin and image-based notions of spiritual reform remained topical throughout the Middle Ages.⁷⁵ As Jeffrey Hamburger has noted, "The minting metaphor . . . formed one of the most common ways of expressing the relationship between God and man as the *imago dei*. If the visage on the coin represents God's image impressed on the soul, then God is the matrix and Christ is the ruler whose portrait the coin bears."⁷⁶ Rather than emphasize obedience to Caesar, premodern interpretations of Matthew 22 focused on the surprise ending of the Gospel pericope, which is to give to God what is God's. That is to say, the soul imprinted with his likeness.

Having examined the exegetical tradition that underwrites the "Render" episode, two things should now be clear: first, the episode was not understood as a straightforward or didactic story regarding tax policy and political jurisdictions, but rather was taken as a personal invitation to spiritual reformation; second, Christ's invitation to reform establishes a metaphorical equation between Caesar's coin and the human soul. Examining the coin/soul is to be understood as a form of spiritual exercise that entails scrutinizing the coin/soul with the scope of restoring it to its original condition. Over the centuries this reading of Matthew 22 took root as the standard, officially sanctioned interpretation of the pericope. Augustine's connection between the impression of the imperial portrait on the denarius in Matthew 22 and the impression of the divine likeness on the human soul was repeated in the *Glossa Ordinaria's* commentary on each of the synoptic Gospel's account of the "Render" episode.

⁷³Augustine, 1841–42, 46:col. 927: "As Caesar desires his own image on your coin, so too does God desire His image on your soul. Give to Caesar, he said, the things that are Caesar's. What could Caesar want from you? His image. What could God want from you? His image. But Caesar's image is on the coin, God's image is inside of you." See also *ibid.*, 37:col. 1494; 39:col. 2338; 46:col. 850.

⁷⁴Augustine, 1874, 27 (40.9). See also Hamburger, 140.

⁷⁵See, for example, Fulgentius, 259; Venerable Bede, 92:col. 749a.

⁷⁶Hamburger, 140.

As the *Glossa* states regarding Matthew 22: “Render therefore: just as to Caesar is given the impression of his image, so should be given unto God the soul that has been stamped with the radiance of His light.”⁷⁷ The hermeneutic structure of the *Glossa* follows the patristic sources in emphasizing the dependent clause of Christ’s statement: “Render unto God that which is God’s.” The Creator’s rightful possession, the text makes clear, is the human soul, which has been indelibly signed with the divine countenance.⁷⁸

One of the most important devotional texts of the late medieval period, Ludolph of Saxony’s (ca. 1300–78) *Vita Christi* gives a similar though more expansive interpretation of this episode from the life of Christ, once again using Augustine’s intertextual connection between Genesis, the Psalms, and Matthew 22 as a point of departure.⁷⁹ Ludolph opens his exegesis of the passage conceding that there is nothing “inconvenient or contradictory” preventing the Christian soul from submitting to the political and fiscal jurisdiction of a human ruler within the temporal realm. The literal historical meaning of the text, however, is displaced by the more topical devotional reading, which underlines the ethical and spiritual import of the passage within the context of everyday Christian life. Reading the pericope against Matthew 6:21 (“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”) emphasizes that the image imprinted on the depths of one’s heart reveals the true character of his/her soul.⁸⁰ The faithful is thus enjoined to scrutinize one’s own soul for evidence of the portrait and inscription of its maker: does one owe allegiance to God, the emperor, the world, or Satan? For Ludolph, exegesis of the “Render” episode is indistinguishable from an examination of conscience. Biblical interpretation becomes for Ludolph an act of reformation, an attempt to recover the soul’s prelapsarian divine likeness. The imagistic quality of this spiritual exercise unmistakably draws on the influence of Augustine and Origen by emphasizing God’s impression on the human soul as a mystical corollary to Caesar’s image and inscription on the denarius.

The patristic reading of Matthew 22 exerted great influence over humanists as well. Cardinal Nicholas Cusanus (1401–64) placed the valuation of the coin as the central conceit in the second book of his dialogue *The Game of Spheres* (written in Rome in 1462–63, published in 1488). For Cusanus, the figure of the coin/soul introduced in patristic commentaries on Matthew 22 is central to his understanding of how the economy of salvation operates simultaneously on

⁷⁷ *Bibliorum Sacrorum Glossa Ordinaria*, 5:col. 369. The commentaries on the same passage in the Gospels of Mark and Luke are very similar. See *Bibliorum Sacrorum Glossa Ordinaria*, 5:cols. 607, 958.

⁷⁸ On the use of patristic sources in the *Bibliorum Sacrorum Glossa Ordinaria*, see Matter.

⁷⁹ Ludolph attributes this interpretation of Psalm 4 to Ambrose rather than Augustine. Ludolphus de Saxonia, 3:226–27.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:227.

a level both personal and universal. As each coin struck by Caesar is indelibly marked with his likeness, so too is each human being similarly yet distinctly marked by God's countenance.⁸¹ The influence of patristic authors can similarly be felt in the biblical scholarship of Erasmus, who was well known within the court of Ferrara.⁸² He met Celio Calcagnini, keeper of the Ferrarese collection of coins, in Ferrara in 1508, and remained an occasional correspondent of the Ferrarese humanist.⁸³ Erasmus's writings demonstrate that well into the sixteenth century the dominant interpretative strategy understood the "Render" episode chiefly in terms of its spiritual significance. His paraphrase of Mark is the most succinct. Christ said,

"Show me a denarius, that I may inspect it." A denarius was produced. For they gladly acted in accordance with their cunning plan, having come to ensnare him. Jesus inspected the denarius and said "Whose image and legend is this?" They answered him: "Caesar's." . . . Now hear a reply worthy of Christ; "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's," he said, "and to God what is God's." He did not disapprove of anyone dedicated to God giving to an emperor, however wicked, what was owed him on account of his official function or what he exacted by force, for loss of money does not make men wicked. But he counsels us on this occasion regarding a matter more apposite: to give to God what is owed to him. The filthy coin bears Caesar's legend and image. If you acknowledge that and pay to Caesar what is owed to him, how much more ought you to give to God, whose image every man bears? In baptism the stamp of God is impressed on your soul; why do you surrender it to the devil? You glory in the title "Christian"; why do you not render unto him what you owe him on account of your profession?⁸⁴

Erasmus presents a similar interpretation of the story in his paraphrase of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke as well as in the *Annotations*.⁸⁵

The scope of this digression into biblical hermeneutics is not to suggest that Titian had read Augustine's sermons, Jerome's translations of Origen, or even Erasmus's biblical scholarship.⁸⁶ Rather, it demonstrates the persistence of patristic reading strategies into the sixteenth century. Indeed, the patristic interpretation filtered through sources like the *Glossa Ordinaria* and was further

⁸¹Cusanus, 117–19.

⁸²On Erasmus's engagement with patristic sources, see Rice; Boeft.

⁸³See Erasmus, 1994, 111–15 and 187–200 (letters 1576 and 1586).

⁸⁴Erasmus, 1988, 145–46. For the Latin text, see Erasmus, 1703–06, 7:col. 249e–f.

⁸⁵Erasmus, 1703–06, 7:col. 117a–117d, 440f–441a; Erasmus, 1969–, 6.5:294 (lines 569–80).

⁸⁶On Erasmus's biblical scholarship, see Bentley, 112–93; Shuger, 11–53.

diffused through contemporary homiletics. Renaissance homiliaries present the pericope along the lines discussed above, addressing Caesar's coin as a metaphor for the soul: just as Caesar has produced coins with his image, so too has God impressed mankind with his likeness. As the standard homily states, "Caesar's coins are gold; God's coins are mankind," and the priest then exhorts the faithful to render that currency unto God.⁸⁷

Scholars of Renaissance art history may feel uncomfortable with exegetical readings of images, fearing that this methodology smuggles a logocentric approach into a discipline that ought to remain rooted in the image. However, it must be noted that Titian's *Christ with the Coin* is a unique instance: it is perhaps the first independent painting of the "Render unto Caesar" passage in the Western visual tradition. Biblical reading strategies were thus central to how the story was understood, and this article contends that Titian's picture was informed by the exegetical tradition outlined above. However, it should be made clear that Titian is not to be understood as a passive receptor of this exegetical tradition; rather, his painting gave the tropological reading of Matthew 22:21 newfound urgency by physically overlaying the pericope onto a collection of coins like the ones discussed by Christ in the source text.

In light of the hermeneutic practices outlined here, the emphasis of the story shifts from the modern fixation with Jesus's injunction to "Render unto Caesar," and transfers emphasis onto the interrogation, "Whose image is on the coin?" It was suggested above that Titian's image illustrates precisely this moment of the narrative: Christ is about to take the coin in his hand and is thus on the cusp of posing a question. Read in this light, the picture becomes performative insofar as the beholder is expected to respond to Christ's question. Within the context of the biblical passage, Christ's words are specifically addressed to the Pharisees and, similarly, within Titian's picture Christ's question will be posed directly to the Pharisee at his shoulders. Yet just as premodern biblical hermeneutics demanded that Christ's words be understood in a spiritual sense to address the reader located outside of the historical narrative, so too ought Titian's picture be understood as engaging in a rhetorical act of double address. The picture is an invitation to perform an examination of conscience that will determine whose image is on the coin/soul of the beholder. The picture advocated a kind of spiritual numismatics: it musters Christ's universal command to examine the coin as a source of devotional power by teaching Alfonso to push back against the material allure of his objects, encouraging him to consider the manifold spiritual implications of the coin metaphor rather than simply fetishizing his coins as precious material residue that prefigure his own position as a modern Caesar. The picture thus points to the considerable overlap between the spiritual

⁸⁷ *Homiliarius*, fol. clxiii^v.

reformation demanded by Matthew 22 and the ethical regime of *imitatio* that underwrote the collection of ancient coins.

ETHICAL NUMISMATICS: THE MIRROR OF THE PRINCE AND THE PRACTICE OF *IMITATIO*

To fully appreciate the complex layering of reference enacted by Titian's *Christ with the Coin*, it is necessary to consider how the painting engages the acumen of the numismatic connoisseur. While the picture clearly moves the beholder to consider the flexible theological figure of the coin as central to spiritual reformation, it simultaneously calls attention to the objects contained within the cabinet through the theatrical revealing and concealing of the coin in the Pharisee's hand. The coin is clearly visible to the beholder, and one can even discern the outline of an imperial portrait on it, yet the image has not been painted with enough precision to allow for the identification of the coin (fig. 6). While the beholder knows that Christ was crucified under the reign of Tiberius (42 BCE–37 CE, r. 14–37 CE), the lack of physiognomic detail occludes the possibility of identifying the numismatic portrait.⁸⁸ The alluring power of this visual game challenges the beholder with the impossible task of identifying this coin, thus calling attention to the scope and limits of historically minded numismatism.

Reading the practice of numismatic collecting against the exegetical strategies examined above, the ethical dimension of Titian's picture comes into higher relief. While the biblical episode was read as an invitation to personal reformation through spiritual numismatics and an examination of conscience, numismatic collections similarly provided the physical support and intellectual scaffolding for an intricate practice of ethical amelioration rooted in the performative mimesis of the ancient exemplars they portrayed. The education of the prince depended upon a secular analogue, a type of ethical numismatics. Coinage becomes a form of cultural capital when it is no longer appreciated primarily for the semiprecious metal contained therein but is rather taken as a marker of historical evolution and a receptacle of cultural memory. While there is some limited evidence of an impulse to collect ancient coins during the medieval period, it is only with the advent of Renaissance humanism that coin collecting became one of the identifying cultural practices of the European elite.⁸⁹ As with so many aspects of Renaissance antiquarianism, it seems that Petrarch (1304–74) was one of the first to treat numismatic collecting as a serious endeavor. Petrarch was an active collector of ancient Roman coins, and he wrote about his burgeoning interest in numismatics in a number of his Latin

⁸⁸For a tentative identification of the actual coin at issue in the Matthean pericope, see Hart.

⁸⁹On the history of numismatic collecting, see Weiss, 167–79; Rosati; Pollard, 1983 and 1987; Haskell, 12–36; Cunnally, 1999; Syson and Thornton, 108–25; Bullard; Fontana.



Figure 6. Titian. *Christ with the Coin*, 1516 (detail). Oil on panel. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Gemäldegalerie. Art Resource, NY.

works.⁹⁰ In the wake of Petrarch, this antiquarian impulse spread outward, and fifteenth-century Italy produced numerous (more or less) systematic numismatic collections.

Within Renaissance studies, the formation of cabinets of coins and medals has held a privileged place in the history of collecting. In this paradigm numismatic collections are understood primarily as markers of magnificence, individual wealth, and as an ostentatious display of erudite taste.⁹¹ In opposition to this reading, an increasing body of scholarly literature has emphasized the intellectual significance of numismatic collecting and its centrality to the development of the Renaissance sense of antiquity.⁹² In fact, ancient numismatic collections were quickly recognized as a source of accurate antiquarian knowledge.⁹³ In the 1490s, Bernardo Rucellai (ca. 1450–1514) used ancient coins to verify that the equestrian monument on display in front of the Lateran basilica, now in the Musei Capitolini (fig. 7), did not portray Constantine the Great, as tradition held, but rather was a portrait of the second-century emperor Marcus Aurelius (figs. 8 and 9).⁹⁴ Andrea Fulvio's (ca. 1470–1527) publication of the *Illustriwm Imagines* in 1517 serves as elegant testimony to the evidentiary value that ancient coins offered to those interested in recuperating an accurate vision of ancient culture. Fulvio's book gave the viewer a small-format summa of ancient culture,

⁹⁰See Rosati; Mann; Baader.

⁹¹See, for example, Jardine, 69–71.

⁹²Weiss, 167–79; Haskell, 1–79; Cunnally, 1999, 52–69; Fontana, 357–421.

⁹³On the use of coins and medals for scientific (i.e., historical) inquiry, see Pfisterer, 129–203.

⁹⁴*Codice topografico della città di Roma*, 4:450.



Figure 7. Roman. *Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius*, ca. 176. Bronze. Rome, Musei Capitolini. HIP / Art Resource, NY.

presenting 205 short biographies of antiquity's major characters accompanied by physiognomic likenesses based on ancient coins.⁹⁵ Enea Vico, who was procurator of the Este numismatic collection, published a similar treatise in 1555.⁹⁶ While he was not above fabricating evidence, on the whole Vico used ancient coins to rectify the errors propagated by earlier generations of antiquarians and to emend hypotheses regarding the development of habits and customs in ancient Roman culture.⁹⁷ Similarly, Titian himself used ancient Roman coins as guides to the physiognomy of the twelve Caesars for an important commission undertaken for the Gonzaga.⁹⁸

Yet from its origins with Petrarch, the Renaissance interest in ancient numismatics was also closely allied with the humanist investment in *imitatio*. Ancient coins served as loci of *applicatio*, an imitative strategy that has been studied by Timothy Hampton, among others. Hampton argues "the imitation of an exemplar involves what hermeneutic theory calls *applicatio*, the application of a text to action in the world." Application was a standard

⁹⁵Fulvio. For an analysis of the importance of Fulvio's project, see Cunnally, 1999, 52–69.

⁹⁶Vico. On Vico's treatise, see Lemburg-Ruppelt; Cunnally, 1999, 134–45.

⁹⁷See Vico, 48–49 (1.10, 11).

⁹⁸Roskill, 194.



Figure 8. Roman. *Aureus with Head of Marcus Aurelius*, CE 161. Paris, Jean Vinchon Numismatist. Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY.



Figure 9. Roman. *Silver Sestertius with Bust of Marcus Aurelius*, CE 161–80. Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale. Alinari / Art Resource, NY.

element of Renaissance pedagogy, which emphasized ancient exemplars: “The assumption of application is that past words and deeds embody a value which the modern reader can appropriate to guide practical action.”⁹⁹ As physical relics of ancient worthies, the images impressed on ancient coins were a part of Renaissance strategies of imitation and application. Interest in ancient coins was not merely academic and antiquarian, but also performative, as the collector sought to bring his own life into alignment with the exploits of the ancient worthies he held in his hand. Coins were conduits of ancient virtue.

Petrarch offers important insight into the performative aspect of numismatic viewership. In a 1354 letter, he describes a meeting he had in Mantua with Charles IV (1316–78), where he presented the king with a collection of ancient coins and instructed the monarch how the objects ought to be used for the betterment of himself and his kingdom:

And thus, the time seemed most opportune for me to attempt something I had long considered doing; taking advantage of the occasion offered by his words, I gave him as a gift some gold and silver coins bearing the portraits of our ancient rulers and inscriptions in tiny and ancient lettering, coins that I treasured, and among them was the head of Caesar Augustus, who almost appeared to be breathing. “Here, O Caesar,” I said, “are the men who you have succeeded, here are those whom you must try to imitate and admire, whose ways and character you should emulate: I would have given these coins to no other save yourself. Your prestige has moved me; for although I know their ways and names and deeds, it is up to you not only to know but to follow their example; it was thus fitting that you should have these.” Giving a brief summary of each man’s life, I intermingled my words as much as possible with goads intended to make him imitate their valor and zeal; deeply touched, he appeared to accept my modest gift with the greatest pleasure.¹⁰⁰

Petrarch’s text explains in detail how the *speculum principis* (mirror of princes) operates: Charles IV ought to imitate the virtues that he sees projected back at him through these ancient coins.¹⁰¹ Petrarch’s letter suggests that collapsing the distance between historical inquiry and ethical imitation (what Hampton calls *applicatio*) was intrinsic to the study of coins in early modern Europe. For the Renaissance prince, ethical numismatics were standard practice.

⁹⁹Hampton, 10.

¹⁰⁰Petrarca, 1985, 3:79–80. The Latin text can be found in Petrarca, 1937, 3:315. Hannah Baader offers an insightful gloss of the text and its relation to *imitatio* and *exempla*. See Baader.

¹⁰¹Mann.

Few sources from the period are as explicit as Petrarch about the ethical and didactic function of ancient coins. But, as Ulrich Pfisterer has observed, every collection of ancient portraits was charged with the rhetoric of *imitatio* and *applicatio*.¹⁰² Collections of coins called attention to a lineage of ancient virtue, and carrying forward that lineage was part of the ethical regime of the prince. This performative mirroring was mediated by objects whose signifying capacity exceeded their value as commodities. Indeed, Pfisterer has described ancient coins and Renaissance medals as “ensouled objects” possessing social agency.¹⁰³ Similarly, Cunnally notes that sixteenth-century collectors of coins “looked for the *numen* in the *nummus*, and the *aura* in the *aurum*, and convinced themselves that the spirits of the ancients were somehow preserved and conveyed in these bits of metal.”¹⁰⁴ Like a secular analogue to miraculous images, coins were understood to transmit a vital force; they opened a rift in the fabric of history that allowed for the transference of virtue (rather than grace) from the historical Caesar portrayed on the face of the coin to the Renaissance prince, the new Caesar.¹⁰⁵ Unlike miraculous images, however, whose efficacious powers manifested divine approbation and thus existed independent of the viewer, the numismatic image became efficacious only by virtue of the engaged, meditative participation of the beholder. Like a nonliturgical sacramental, coins function through the merits and efforts of the beholder (*ex opere operantis*) rather than through the mere performance of the sign itself (*ex opere operata*), as is the case with the sacraments.¹⁰⁶ A coin’s agency is contingent upon the participation of the beholder. Yet just as the faithful might adore relics or make the sign of the cross unconsciously as a form of habit, thus denying the spiritual implications of these gestures, so too could the antiquarian fall into the habit of nonchalantly examining his coins, ignoring the object’s powerful claim to bridge the temporal gap between the early modern collector and the world of ancient virtue.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰²Pfisterer, 232.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁰⁴Cunnally, 1999, 145.

¹⁰⁵There is some evidence that coins were believed to possess curative powers. The quasi-talismanic agency of numismatic imagery is manifest in the conspicuous inclusion of coins mounted as jewelry in numerous Renaissance portraits. See Pfisterer, 221–57; Cherry.

¹⁰⁶While the theology of the sacraments was fully formulated following the Council of Trent, the division between sacraments and sacramentals was a part of spiritual practice in the fifteenth century. See *Devotio Moderna*, 115. On the definition of *sacramentals*, see *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “sacramental,” 12:479–81.

¹⁰⁷The proverbial “other side of the coin” can be found in a Renaissance drinking game, played by Monsignore Ciamonte in Milan around 1510. The game resembles bobbing for apples; however, the contestants were forced to extract coins from a vat of wine using nothing but their teeth. This game quickly devolved into serious debauchery involving prostitutes, who were forced to play naked. The game is described in *Lettere storiche*, 206–09. See also Pfisterer, 257n611.

Christ with the Coin seeks to return the theological and philosophical edge to numismatism by establishing a threshold that underlines the ethical dimension of the objects it protects.

Numerous sources from the sixteenth century corroborate the ethically efficacious nature of numismatic study. As John Cunnally observes, “The belief in the capacity of ancient coins to elevate the morals or character of those who owned them, or those who contemplated their images in books, is repeated again and again by the numismatic writers of the sixteenth century, and must be considered an important factor in the development and popularity of the literature.”¹⁰⁸ This point is underlined in Jacopo Mazzocchi’s (ca. 1475–ca.1527) letter to Jacopo Sadoletto (1477–1547), which introduced Andrea Fulvio’s *Illustrivm Imagines*, published in 1517. For Mazzocchi, reflecting upon the silent fragments of ancient exempla preserved in coins stimulates the viewer to replicate their glorious deeds: “For souls, turning to the memory of those [images] not only in thought but also by looking at them, are driven to emulate their glories and thus are also nourished. For this reason it is neither futile to look over these mute pieces and names nor to reckon the inscriptions dedicated to their deeds.”¹⁰⁹ A similar sentiment was expressed by Enea Vico, the keeper of the Este collection of ancient coins: “I have seen some who were so captured by the pleasure of looking at them [i.e., ancient coins], that they turned away from their wicked habits, and gave themselves — as if compelled by a certain stimulus — over to an honorable and noble life.”¹¹⁰ Authors like Petrarch, Mazzocchi, and Vico create a centuries-long context in which Renaissance numismatics cannot be reduced to a form of conspicuous consumption.

There is little explicit evidence in the historical record testifying to how Alfonso d’Este approached his numismatic collection. However, a dialogue composed at the court of Alfonso’s forebear, Leonello d’Este, suggests that the Este collection of coins was structured around merging sets of aesthetic and ethical concerns rooted in these objects.¹¹¹ When combined with the examples presented here relevant to Renaissance numismatic habits, this supports the supposition that Alfonso’s interaction with ancient coins took the form of performative *imitatio* of ancient exemplars. In holding before his gaze the great deeds of the Caesars, Alfonso had examples — both positive and negative — against which he could measure himself and gauge whether or not he was fulfilling his obligation toward that

¹⁰⁸Cunnally, 1999, 36.

¹⁰⁹Fulvio, 3^r. On the Renaissance theory of exemplars, see Lyons.

¹¹⁰Vico, 52. See also Cunnally, 1999, 37.

¹¹¹Baxandall, 324.

virtuous tradition.¹¹² Ancient coins served as a physical support for ethical numismatics, a mode of actualizing the conceptual work of the mirror of the prince.

THE WORK OF THE PAINTING: DRAWING TOGETHER NUMISMATICS AND *IMITATIO CHRISTI*

Titian's picture underscores the nexus between two modes of ethical cultivation: meditation upon Christ's injunction to examine the coin/soul impressed with divine resemblance blurs with the numismatist's examination of ancient exemplars and the likenesses they had stamped on ancient coins. Through the painting, spiritual numismatics and ethical numismatics are revealed to be coterminous. While the former advocates spiritual purity, the latter addresses the cultivation of classical virtues. The picture produces a reflexive disposition in the viewer by holding in tension two ethical regimes, the one classical and the other Christian, both of which hinge upon the overdetermined symbolism of the coin. The picture encourages the beholder to shuttle between these two systems of self-cultivation and imitation. The didacticism of the *speculum principis* is thus displaced as the picture underlines the ambiguities that define the monarch's position within the Christian social order. Alfonso acts as Caesar in that he exacts tribute from his subjects; yet he is also called to be Christlike insofar as he too renders unto God his own soul, which is the currency of spiritual transactions.¹¹³ The picture recontextualizes Alfonso's position within the economy of salvation: his role oscillates from one who impresses currency (his *doppione*) with the inscription "Give to God what is God's," to one whose soul is minted in the image and likeness of God. This complex presentation of interlocking strategies of exemplary imitation elaborated here allows for an appreciation of the picture's utilitarian function without reducing its meaning to mere signage (i.e., "this cabinet contains coins").

Indeed, the painting takes a deeply ambivalent stance toward the objects it protects. Within the visual economy of the painting, the exchange of the coin seems to be subordinated to the intense, interlocked gazes of Christ and the Pharisee. These gazes convey in nuce the antagonism that underwrites their interaction: the Gospel tells that the Pharisees "plotted to entrap" Jesus. In line

¹¹²Not all ancient figures were worthy of direct emulation. Cunnally, 1999, 34–39, has demonstrated that the infamous *spinitriae*, coins most likely used in brothels and hence decorated with all variety of obscene sexual acts, were converted into objects of moral edification through their status as negative exempla. Pfisterer, 232, also discusses the power of coins as negative exempla vis-à-vis the education of the prince.

¹¹³Hampton, 48–62, proposes an analogous reading of Erasmus's *Institutio Principis Christiani* (1516).

with anti-Semitic notions that were prevalent in the sixteenth century, Titian has telegraphed the deceitful intent of the Pharisee by meticulously juxtaposing his swarthy mien with the flawless visage of Jesus, and by underlining their divergent modes of comportment. The penetrating gaze of the Pharisee is conveyed through his furrowed brow and squinting eyes, which cause his skin to contract into crow's feet. He also seems to bite his lips. His mouth and cheeks are puckered while both his upper and lower lips are folded inward, underneath his teeth. The *Book of Proverbs* associated these physical characteristics with evil intent: "Whoever narrows the eyes to think up tricks and purses the lips has already done wrong."¹¹⁴ While the Pharisee's squint betrays maliciousness, Christ's serene gaze conveys innocence and earnestness.

These contrasting stares echo the physical exchange that Titian has staged at the lower boundary of the painting, where Christ and the Pharisee model two ways of engaging ancient coins that are diametrically opposed. While Christ and the Pharisee scrutinize one another, neither of them examines the coin being passed between their hands. Both in their character and disposition, these hands carry forward the juxtaposition between Christ's idealized beauty and the rugged complexion of the Pharisee, which Titian established in their gazes. The Pharisee's hand is dark and bony, punctuated by dirty nails; his protruding veins hint at the intensity with which he grasps the coins in his hand. Christ's hand inverts each of these features. Following the Lentulus letter, a description of Christ that was widely diffused in the Renaissance, Titian renders Christ's hands to encapsulate the grace and beauty befitting the son of God.¹¹⁵ This grace is conveyed through the flawless, marmoreal complexion of Christ's skin and his cleanly manicured nails, which stand in stark contrast to the Pharisee's gnarly mitt. Christ also embodies grace through the nonchalance of his gesture, as his hand opens to accept the coin proffered to him. Like the effortless poise of Michelangelo's Adam in the scene of Creation on the Sistine ceiling, Christ's dispassion serves as an index of divine perfection: this is a figure of total repose, the other extreme of what has been called the *figura sforzata* (forced figure).¹¹⁶ Titian has choreographed these divergent physiognomies to be immediately discernable, and yet once the beholder has been cued into the juxtaposition it becomes apparent that these formal characteristics conceal a deeper message.

While the Pharisee physically holds the coin, he fails to recognize its greater significance. This is emphasized by the presence of other coins tucked into the

¹¹⁴This is the *New Jerusalem Bible* translation of Proverbs 16:30. See also Proverbs 6:12–13.

¹¹⁵The Lentulus letter places an emphasis on the beauty and grace of Christ's hands and arms. One version of the letter translated into Italian and published in Venice around this time describes Christ's hands as "delectevole [d]a vedere" ("delectable to behold"). See *Giardino de oratione fructoso*, fol. 60^v.

¹¹⁶On the history of this term, see Cole.

palm of the Pharisee's hand. While barely visible, these other coins are paramount: they suggest that the Pharisee takes coins to be merely currency, interchangeable conduits of monetary exchange. The individuality of any particular coin is not a concern to the Pharisee, whose physical contact with the coins blinds him to the metaphorical significance of coinage that has been impressed with the likeness of its creator. By contrast, Christ does not touch the coin. Indeed, upon initial scrutiny it is difficult to conceive how Christ's gesture would allow him to handle the denarius. The pincer-like arrangement of his index and middle fingers seems particularly unsuited to the act of grasping. Instead, Christ appears to model for the beholder an ideal mode of engagement: he considers the coin as a quasi-sacred object whose power rests not in its material existence but in the manifold ideas it instantiates. Reinforcing this point, upon closer inspection one can see in the shadows that Christ's thumb is closing in upon the index and middle fingers. Christ's right hand is being drawn into the three-fingered gesture of priestly blessing so familiar from medieval and Renaissance images of benediction. Thus the picture proffers two modes of interacting with coins: while the Pharisee covetously holds onto pieces of gold and silver, he fails to comprehend the profundity of Christ's call to examine the coin, and by extension his own soul; Christ, by contrast, does not make physical contact with the piece of precious metal because he has moved beyond considering the coin as a unit of monetary exchange and jurisdictional authority to contemplating the spiritual resonance of the impressed image. Holding or possessing coins, the painting proposes, must not become a stumbling block to beholding their deeper significance. On the one hand, these coins present the virtues of the ancient Caesars, which Alfonso must imitate, while on the other hand they resonate as metaphors for the human soul that has been impressed with God's image and likeness.

Imitation of the Caesars is thus supplemented with the presentation of Christ, another exemplar who models for Alfonso the ideal mode of interaction with his collection of ancient coins.¹¹⁷ Titian's portrait suggests that Christ too is one of the ancient worthies, and thus ought to be emulated. The picture, then, signals how the imitation of ancient virtue dovetails with the imitation of Christ. The Christocentrism of the image is clear enough, yet the character of this Christological devotion is peculiar. The image insists upon Christ's ministry and teaching — his *dicta* — rather than the inimitable *exemplum* of his sacrifice and death. This choice in narrative moment can be most productively aligned with the *philosophia Christi*, a specifically Christological philosophy/theology of

¹¹⁷The notion of exemplarity and ethical *imitatio* came under heavy scrutiny in the Renaissance, especially in the writings of Lorenzo Valla, who offered a powerful critique of ancient virtue. All virtuous acts, Valla argued, are essentially self-interested; thus the search for the pure *exemplum* is misguided. Valla, 181 and 259.

the Logos, that (re)emerged around 1500.¹¹⁸ This theological and spiritual disposition acknowledges Christ in his multifaceted manifestations as divinity through the Word made flesh — that is, through the entirety of Christ’s life as recounted in the Gospels. This new philosophical and spiritual movement was predicated upon the conviction that Christo-mimesis cannot be limited to the Passion narrative, but instead is a devotional disposition that must encompass the entirety of Christ’s life as collated in the Gospels. Such authors as Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) and Desiderius Erasmus placed an emphasis on Christ’s teachings in an effort to subtly shift Christological devotion from Christ’s Passion to his practical teachings, which can serve as a guide to everyday life. Christ was figured as a book of moral exemplarity. As Ficino wrote, “What else was Christ, if not a book of moral philosophy, in fact a divine book sent down from the heavens along with the same divine Idea of virtue brought forth to human eyes?”¹¹⁹ Similarly, Erasmus instructed his reader, “When you venerate the image of Christ in the paintings and other works of art that portray Him, think how much more you ought to venerate that portrait of His mind that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit has placed in Holy Writ.”¹²⁰ Matthew 22 is a prime example of Christ’s richly layered and enigmatic teachings that were central to this new form of Christo-mimesis.

Rather than focus on Christ’s Passion and death, Titian’s painting presents Christ the philosopher, Christ the sage, and Christ the guide to the virtuous life. In Titian’s painting, Christ poses a question, he enunciates a difficult and witty maxim that offers a new perspective on the issue at hand: Christ pivots from worldly taxation to the spiritual indebtedness of mankind toward the Creator. Christ asked the question that is the fundamental concern of the numismatic collector, thus numismatism offered a moment of prosopopoeia in which Alfonso took on the mask of Christ and spoke *in persona Christi* by posing the question of his own collection: “whose image and inscription are on the coin?” A practice that had traditionally been understood as a sort of *speculum principii* was transformed into a performative instance of *imitatio Christi*. The complex mode of address outlined here as underwriting Titian’s painting demonstrates an important point: in the Renaissance, a picture did not have to represent the Passion in order to operate as a devotional image.¹²¹ Questions, the picture seems to insist, can initiate the work of spiritual reformation.¹²²

¹¹⁸For the historical circumstances motivating Erasmus’s development of the *philosophia Christi*, see Tracy.

¹¹⁹Ficino 1:25. See also Hankins, 1:321–28, 868; Robichaud.

¹²⁰See “The *Enchiridion*” in Erasmus, 1983, 66–67.

¹²¹Mitchell Merback has recently made an analogous argument regarding Northern Renaissance paintings that he calls “Meditationsbild.” See Merback, 104–09.

¹²²Titian’s so-called *Salome* (Rome, Doria Pamphilij) confronts the beholder with similar problems of interpretation. See Nygren.

Titian's *Christ with the Coin* is perhaps the most focused manifestation of image-based reformation produced by the artist, for in collapsing the distinction between Alfonso the collector and Christ the teacher, the image converts beholding into a philosophical and spiritual exercise. Titian's picture allowed the beholding subject to reconstitute and reform himself through the objects it conceals. Titian's picture underlines a simple but profound point: how one relates to these things directly bears upon the salvation of one's soul. The painting has been interpreted as a picture concerned with politics rather than religion and spirituality despite illustrating a Gospel narrative that was almost universally read as an invitation to spiritual reformation. While Titian was aware of the exegetical tradition behind Matthew 22, it has been demonstrated that he was not supine to that tradition. The cunning of Titian's picture is found in the way that he unexpectedly harmonizes the standard exegetical reading of the pericope with the regime of virtuous imitation evoked by the coins the picture contained. The picture points to the merging of spiritual numismatism with ethical numismatism. The novelty of *Christ with the Coin* demonstrates that, just like his forebears from Augustine to Mazzocchi, Titian was firmly convinced that spiritual and ethical reformation begins with an image. The key difference is that, unlike the humanists and exegetes who came before him, Titian could himself produce the very image that initiated the process of reformation, and that image is anything but banal.

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