Besides encouraging artists to seek out the virtue of holy people in religious paintings, writings on art also bear witness to the closely related problem of how to imagine sacred history, that is, how to picture moments from the life of Christ or other holy people. By moving now from a study of bodies and faces to a study of the depiction of sacred history, Alberti’s method of painting is being followed, in that “parts of the historia are the bodies,”¹ and, “composition is that reason of painting whereby the parts are composed together in a picture.”² But the historia was more than simply a composition with bodies; it was a moment in time. Gabriele Paleotti, one of the authors who will be the focus of this chapter, distinguishes all images according to two categories: they are either “things or they are operations.”³ To clarify, Paleotti explains that “a painter can paint things or persons, such as the blessed Virgin, the sacred cross . . . or operations such as the Baptism of the Lord, the Annunciation of the Madonna.”⁴ Accordingly, this chapter explores the problems related to depicting the actions and operations of sacred narrative.

The revolution in image-making techniques, out of which Renaissance naturalism and the interest in figuring “operations” from Scriptural narrative emerged, has often been interpreted in light of spiritual history. Some widely discussed theories suggest that artists’ renderings of sacred history were shaped by developments in prayer and meditation: rising devotion to the Passion and the Virgin at the end of the Middle Ages by making use of what have become known as “affective meditation” strategies whereby Christians dwelled upon visualizations of sacred narrative, is believed to have contributed

³ “dicendo che tutto quello che cade sotto l’arte del formare imagini o sono cose, o sono operazioni.” Paleotti, Discorso, 2: 268.
⁴ “Si che potessimo dire che può il pittore dipingere persone e cose, come la benedetta Vergine, la sacra Croce, il Volto Santo e simili; overo operazioni, come il Battesimo del Signore, la Nunziazione della Madonna, con altre somiglianti.” Ibid., 2: 269.
to the naturalistic turn in European art. Mendicant preaching as well, which in many ways promulgated affective meditation and interior devotion more broadly, has been posited as a determining factor: whilst encouraging listeners to identify with Christ's sufferings, preachers stimulated a process of visualization that is reflected in visual art. It is therefore surprising that attitudes toward narrative art made evident in Renaissance writings on art traditionally have not been examined in light of this prayer practice, the techniques of Christian rhetoric, or spiritual literature more broadly, except in the case of some religious writers whose writings must be considered part of the Counter-Reformation movement. Previous studies of pictorial invention have typically studied invention as a poetic process, indebted also to the classical art of rhetoric, or have examined the cognitive faculties engaged in invention. As will become evident below, I do not disregard the validity of these points of view, but rather aim to reveal how art theory writings, those by both secular and ecclesiastical authors, may be usefully studied bearing these contemplative traditions in mind.

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5 The rise of affective meditation is outlined by Richard William Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) in chapter 5, positing the importance of St. Anselm and St. Bernard. The phenomenon is more comprehensively examined by Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*, who looks for the historical causes of rising devotion to Christ's humanity in the Middle Ages. Historical causes for affective meditation are also discussed by McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, who notes the importance of female piety. Aspects of interior visual contemplation are also examined by Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*. The interaction between visual contemplation and art are broadly discussed in the essays in Hamburger and Bouché, *The Mind's Eye*.

6 As noted in chapter 1, note 65, the relationship pivots around the relationship between the mendicant movement and penitential preaching. The mendicant movement and art was originally discussed by Thode, *Saint François d'Assise et les origines de l'art* and re-examined by Bourdua, “13th–14th Century Italian Mendicant Orders and Art.” Also see Anne Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy*. The relationship between art and preaching has also been recently examined by Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby, *The Renaissance Pulpit: Art and Preaching in Tuscany, 1400–1550* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), see especially the introductory chapter for a bibliography on sermon studies and visual art. Also see Lina Bolzoni, *The Web of Images: Vernacular Preaching from its Origins to St. Bernardino of Siena* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).