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Edited by Stephen J. Campbell and Stephen J. Milner

Excerpt

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 INTRODUCTION 

Art, Identity, and Cultural Translation in Renaissance Italy

Stephen J. Campbell and Stephen J. Milner

THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED TO ENLIVEN THE SCHOLARSHIP AND TEACHING OF Italian Renaissance art and culture by offering a range of methodological perspectives, a re-examination and critique of some of art history's key analytical terms, and a sense of the variety of artistic practice by exploring the dynamics of interaction and resistance in the urban cultures of the Italian peninsula in the period 1400–1550. In subject and method, the essays collected here aim to take stock of what often appears to be a highly specialized and hence disunified field. They also, in different ways, address the very historical principle which has made the isolated case study more typical than the synthetic overview in recent scholarship on the Italian Renaissance: the impulse towards competitive differentiation and individualization among Italian states and social groups.

The essays commissioned for this volume are all variously concerned with ideas of 'cultural translation' in the artistic and intellectual life of Italian cities. Rather than subscribing to the notion of discrete urban cultures and organic regional identities, we are interested in how these interpenetrate and inform each other. In this sense the volume seeks to extend the notion of the Renaissance itself as a product of cultural translation, or as a dialogue with an alien classical past, by examining the processes of cultural exchange between places or groups, and the consequent changes of meaning inherent within such transactions.¹ Such a process is necessarily one of interpretation, which is itself a form of translation; the Latin terms *interpretes* and *interpretatio* refer both to an intermediary or go-between as well as to the rendering of a text or object.²

Over the past decade, the concept of 'cultural translation' has informed a range of work in history, anthropology, religious studies, musicology, and comparative literature and has principally been used to define the ways in which a self-consciously

distinct group (this may be a population, an elite, a profession, an ethnic, or religious enclave) articulates itself in relation to another in an act of self-definition which may involve an assimilation and refashioning of an 'other'.³ The assimilative dimension to the encounter may be appropriative or imperialistic, but it is not always necessarily so. Jan Assmann, for instance, has examined the elaborate strategies among the civilizations of the ancient Near East to find equivalent names and functions for the gods of neighboring peoples, concluding that 'since the conviction that these foreign peoples worshiped the same gods is far from trivial and self-evident,' the insight, along with the intercultural contact it facilitated "must be reckoned among the major cultural achievements of the ancient world."⁴ The work of Assmann and others on the 'translatability of cultures' takes as its starting point the perception of alterity – ethnic, religious, linguistic – between the partners in a cultural exchange. Translation occurs in the laying claim to cultural homologies, or in what Anthony Pagden has fittingly termed the 'misrecognition' of a 'principle of attachment' – which may be visual, ritual, or institutional.⁵ In a parallel sense, following the work of Pagden, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Stuart Hall, cultural exchange in the history of art and literature is now frequently discussed within a global and post-colonial perspective, usually between unequal partners and when the perceived exotic or foreign qualities of the other are especially at issue.⁶ Such an approach characterizes the important collection recently edited by Clare Farago titled *Reframing the Renaissance*, which locates Italian Renaissance culture in terms of its encounter with the New World, and – as with the collection of essays that we present here – is aimed at a revision of Burckhardtian historiography based on 'the investigation of cultural exchange rather than the taxonomy of national culture.'⁷

Our critique of a national or homogenous Renaissance culture proceeds in a somewhat different direction. In crucial ways the relation of Europe to its 'new worlds' manifestly does not resemble the experience of local differences between Italians in the era of city-states and courts. Although Burckhardt's idea of an emerging 'national consciousness' is an untenable (and possibly ironic) anachronism, 'Italy' was more than a geographical expression to figures such as Brunetto Latini, Dante, Petrarch, Pius II, and Castiglione.⁸ By the 1600s 'Italy' was a homogeneous concept in the eyes of the rest of Europe, a perception especially apparent in French, English, and Dutch perceptions, which advocated resistance to the contaminating fashions of the Italians.⁹ Italian style in the visual arts became an important signifier of Italian identity among other Europeans; like the Italian language, it was testimony to the existence of what we would now call a culture.¹⁰ Most Italian cities were linked by elements of a common historical memory, a common language (notwithstanding pronounced regional variations), and a common religion (the sense of community was stabilized by, among other things, the migration of the cults of local saints). Yet it is nonetheless the case that by 1400 the Italian peninsula was a conglomerate

of diverse political forms which included the kingdom of Naples in the south, the signorial courts of the north, the Papal States of central Italy, and the mercantile republics of Florence, Venice, and Genoa. The new humanist historiography of the fifteenth century was in many respects a genealogy of difference, stressing a diversity of ancient origins and foundational myths.¹¹ Indeed, the relative tardiness in the evolution of a distinct Italian national identity was in part a consequence of the durability of these regional identities and the variety of cultural milieus they generated. Part of Castiglione's reason for writing *The Book of the Courtier* lay in the imperative to define a series of norms for Italian aristocratic behaviour and customs in the face of pronounced local heterogeneity, because such regional differences could be perceived as a disastrous fragmentation – both cause and symptom of domination by foreign powers: “I do not know by what fate it happens that Italy does not have, as it used to, a distinctively Italian costume: for although the new fashions in use may make earlier ways of dressing appear uncouth, still these were perhaps a sign of our freedom, as the former have proved to be an augury of servitude, in my opinion now clearly fulfilled.”¹²

Even while a shared language and geographical proximity generated unprecedented cultural exchange between these centers – one largely facilitated by the itinerant class of humanists and artists who migrated between these centers in the search for patronage – the very intensity of economic and political interdependency precipitated a concern with the *generation* of difference, as Luke Syson and others suggest in this volume. Syson describes the emergence of the court artist as a defining institution of princely states and the special constraints operating in nominally Republican Florence when Bertoldo plays this role for Lorenzo de' Medici. The geographical expansion of many of these centers resulted in the formation of distinct territorial states in which jurisdictional domination and local resistance were not only political but also *cultural*. It is even arguable that the attention to regional difference in language, dress, political organization, and art corresponds to the notion of ‘culture’ in the modern sense. Like cultures generally, these cultures of Renaissance Italy were unstable and permeable entities. As styles and fashions spread or were imitated from one center to another, they were counterbalanced by assertions or performances of difference; even a common festive and ceremonial mode like chivalry could serve to generate such differences, as Georgia Clarke shows in her essay in this volume. Giovanni della Casa's *Galateo*, written in the 1550s, differs from Castiglione in arguing for regional variation through the principal of decorum:

the lordly and pompous manners of Naples transferred to Florence would be as oversized and superfluous as the clothes of a large man placed on a midget; and equally the manners of the Florentines would appear meager and inadequate to the noble minds and temperament

of the Neapolitans. And just because the gentlemen of Venice use an inordinate number of compliments amongst themselves on account of the positions they hold and the votes they cast, it would not be fitting for the magistrates of Rovigo, or the citizens of Asolo to maintain, for no reason at all, that same degree of solemnity in greeting each other.¹³

We might turn here once more to Jan Assmann, who borrows the term ‘pseudo-speciation’ from biology (where it defines “the formation of artificial subgroups within the same biological species”) to describe a movement that counterbalances that of cultural translation because “the formation of cultural specificity and identity necessarily produces difference and otherness vis-à-vis other groups. This can result in the elaboration of absolute strangeness, isolation, avoidance, and even abomination”.¹⁴

Long-standing revisionist tendencies in Renaissance cultural history have emphasized conservatism and normativity in opposition to a Burckhardtian emphasis on novelty and innovation, so the relevance of ‘strangeness, isolation, avoidance, and abomination’ to our investigation may initially be met with scepticism. Yet it may provide a fitting perspective with which to think about some extreme manifestations of ‘cultural specificity’ in fifteenth-century Italy, including some which have been explained away as accidental phenomena, such as the personal idiosyncracies of a ruler: consider Sigismondo Malatesta’s use of pagan imagery in his refurbishment of S. Francesco in Rimini or his association with neo-pagans such as Gemisthos Plethon, whose bones he interred at S. Francesco in an act of anti-Christian *translatio*; his violent resistance to feudal and papal authority or moral conventions were certainly regarded as abominations by Pius II and the humanist George Trebizond.¹⁵ Yet Sigismondo was engaged in a lifelong struggle to maintain an illegitimate state and to resist the encroachments of the papacy as well as local rivals; his patronage and self-fashioning are extreme manifestations of resistance in the cultural sphere. His deliberately heterodox approach to the adaptation or translation of the pagan past, his production of *romanitas*, is the polar opposite of the Christianized revival of antiquity promoted by his political rivals and adversaries Nicholas V and Pius II.

Considered in these terms, therefore, ‘cultural translation’ defines not only the process of cultural exchange both between and within centers through an examination of the impact of different sociopolitical contexts on specific artistic practices, but also the role of culture in securing or resisting hegemony. Stephen Milner thus examines the employment of Florentine artists on civic projects in Pistoia in terms of the extremely fraught relations not only between Pistoia and Florence, but also among major corporate groups within Pistoia itself, whilst Deborah Krohn examines

the durability and significance of specific cults in San Gimignano as a process whereby subject communities sought to articulate their specificity in the face of centralizing authority.

In a pioneering essay on the politics of artistic exchange in the peninsula from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, Carlo Ginzburg and Enrico Castelnuovo have studied the deployment of art in the dynamics of ‘symbolic domination’.¹⁶ Communes such as Massa Maritima, annexed by Siena in the trecento, received a monumental work of art from a Siennese workshop, which referred in its design, subject matter, and style to a work which had come to embody symbolically the divinely ordained, corporate authority of the Siennese state: the *Maesta* of Duccio. Perhaps nowhere more vividly than in Siena does art operate as a powerful form of cultural self-definition; in fact, long after the heyday of its territorial expansion we find Siennese art operating as an ongoing assertion of autonomy, cultural hegemony, and resistance, reaching its apogee when Siennese artists produced the altarpieces for the cathedral of Pienza, the utopian papal city created by Pius II.¹⁷ The notion of *peripheralization* is employed by Castelnuovo and Ginzburg to define the value of remaining outside the ‘cultural center’ and to point to minor centers such as fifteenth-century Massa as sites for the production of alternatives, as a resistance to the center.¹⁸ The Siennese painters of the quattrocento looked to the trecento origins of their tradition rather than the ‘new’ art of Florence not because the conservatism of their patrons constrained them to be provincial, as is so often stated, but because of a resolve to maintain an alternative to the artistic language of Florence. The migrant careers of Vecchietta, Angelo Maccagnino, Francesco di Giorgio, Sodoma, and Beccafumi show the ongoing resilience of the tradition, the successful degree to which this alternative to Florence was maintained. When Giovanni di Paolo painted his version of Gentile da Fabriano’s *Adoration of the Magi*, one of the most famous and influential altarpieces to be seen in Florence (albeit properly speaking not by a Florentine artist), he was not ‘failing’ to produce an accurate copy, but re-rendering the invention of Gentile in terms of the distinctive formal treatments of Siennese art (Figs. 1 and 2). It may be only metaphoric to use the term ‘language’ or ‘translation’ here, but it seems more apt to what is taking place than the term ‘copy’ or ‘imitation,’ for the graphic elements of Giovanni’s adaptation, his ‘style,’ work to recast in a local idiom a ‘foreign’ original whose semantic units of meaning are preserved along with their paradigmatic structural order.

Such processes are particularly suggested by the term “translation”, for in its widest etymological sense it seems to describe aptly a situation in which, although fifteenth-century Italians conceived identity in bounded terms, that identity was finally actualized, as Ronald Weissmann has suggested, through negotiation across borders, through a projection of the self into the sphere of the other so that difference could be more fully thrown into relief.¹⁹ Florentines such as Petrarch and

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1. Gentile da Fabriano, *The Adoration of the Magi*. On panel. Florence, Uffizi. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

Michelangelo were never more Florentine than when in exile; the latter moreover tended to act the part of the courtier or noble to differentiate himself from the normal run of artisans and acted in disdainful solidarity with the role of artisan in his negotiations with courtly and aristocratic patrons.²⁰ Similarly, the patrician elite of Republican Florence sought to distinguish itself from its social inferiors through the assumption of chivalric practices and rituals associated with the aristocratic court culture of Naples – a practice which, as Bruce Edelstein shows, continues into the sixteenth century with the creation of a Medici court culture. In this sense, the construction of both individual and collective identities drew on a multiplicity of sources of self-invention, the choice of salient element, in keeping with the notion of decorum, being conditioned by the site of performance. For Italy was a place where borders were conceived to exist between urban cultures, yet also within them, and where by the later fifteenth century there was an increasing preoccupation with formal manifestations of difference between and within urban communities.²¹ Vellio's book of regional costumes, the emergence of the Venetian *cittadino* as a class that created a distinct social identity through the forms of its artistic patronage, the proliferation of reactions to Vasari in the form of regional collections of artistic biographies, and the controversies regarding the supposed ascendancy of the Tuscan

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2. Giovanni di Paolo, *The Adoration of the Magi*. On panel. Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Delia E. Holden and L. E. Holden Funds, 1942.536. Photo: The Cleveland Museum of Art.

dialect (the *questione della lingua*) are all well-known later manifestations of this tendency, the signs of which are already fully apparent in the quattrocento and even before.²²

The term ‘translation’ should finally perhaps be taken as more than a metaphor – its Latin cognate of *translatio* extends beyond the linguistic sphere and defines acts of political and cultural displacement and relocation such as the *translatio imperii* – the transfer of Imperial power which preoccupied medieval political theorists, and *translatio studii*, through which medieval authors represented their relation to the ancient past.²³ The analogy of linguistic translation with cultural enterprise was a palpable one for Renaissance Italians, just as linguistic variation became a symptom or marker of broader cultural differences.²⁴ In its fullest sense, ‘translation’ provides a comprehensive and conceptually rich basis for a reconception of what is normally called *influence* in art, *imitation* in literature, *orthodoxy* in religion, and *clientage* in sociopolitical relations. The term ‘intertextuality’, which appears in the textual criticism of Renaissance humanists to define an allusive intertwining of a literary work with earlier texts,²⁵ has something of the same range of reference, even more so in its more recent critical elaborations by Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes.²⁶

We have chosen *translation* as opposed to intertextuality because of its implication of specific and local paradigms of historical identity centered on place, on language or dialect, on political institutions and social customs – all of these ways in which fifteenth-century Italians included and excluded themselves from collectivities (or were invited to join or were stigmatized by them).

‘Translation’, then, is used in the following essays to define a series of relationships across a range of cultural practices. It can define the actual appropriation of a cultural other, such as the papacy’s deployment of Egyptian antiquity surveyed by Brian Curran or the experimental and heterodox tendencies of humanism before the Counter-Reformation (some of them fully redolent of ‘strangeness, isolation and abomination’), examined here by Christopher Celenza. Because Egypt was increasingly regarded as the origin of all cultures, it could even be perceived as ‘untranslatable’ – its monuments and hieroglyphs were mystical symbols, the decipherment of which was the revelation of divine essence itself. It therefore provided a prestigious origin within which other cultural meanings could be grounded: papal primacy, primitive Italian culture, the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, the invention of art and of magic. The appropriation of Egypt thus necessitated a translation of the present into the terms of this imaginary other.

The work of Christian culture in defining alterity through its encounter with and surveillance of marginal and minority identities has elsewhere separately engaged the editors of this volume.²⁷ In the present collection, it is Morten Steen Hansen who deals with such a situation, where issues of cultural translation were especially urgent: the attempt by immigrant communities to mediate ethnic difference, expressing difference and conformity through the stylistic and iconographic norms of Counter-Reformation religious art. The wealthy Armenian residents of Ancona studied by Hansen use the figures of saints common to Armenian and Roman devotion to mitigate perceptions of their own difference as ‘otherness’ and to effect their assimilation into Italian mercantile society.

Other essays take up the theme of the self and its translation into authoritative models, whether these are an artistic exemplar, a ritual or religious norm, a canonical literary text, or an imaginary or idealized past. The notion of the cultural norm still exercises a pervasive force in Renaissance studies, above all in the ongoing centrality of Florence as a touchstone – if not as ultimate fount and origin – for a wide range of developments in the culture of the peninsula, especially innovations in politics, scholarly method, art, and technology. The scholarship in this book, although methodologically diverse, seeks a different approach to the transmission of cultural norms, Florentine and otherwise, and is united in the understanding of the *difference* in repetition, where reproductions, imitations, or ‘borrowings’, by virtue of a transposed market, readership, or scene of beholding, are more productively seen as transformations. This could even operate, as Michelle O’Malley shows,

in the negotiations of artists and patrons with regard to the subject matter of works of art; rather than being an attempt to bind legally and delimit an artist's sphere of operation, contracts could sometimes serve merely as a point of departure for ongoing mutations of subject matter. Other authors examine cases in which the implication of a model might be less a reproduction than an alteration or displacement of it, an *appropriation* in accordance with the needs and aspirations of other audiences, patrons, or social elites. For instance, in identifying new strategies for copying works of art in later fifteenth-century Florence, Megan Holmes shows that the works that resulted were far more than reproductions of an original – they were a completely different kind of devotional object, shaped in accordance with the needs of beholders who were far removed from the sphere of the Medici elite. The same could be said of the role of Florentine models for the Roman curial patrons of funerary sculpture; as Shelly Zuraw shows, Florentine sculptural types were transformed in a system of production in which the notion of 'artist' and 'workshop' operate very differently. Similarly, while Florentine types and models circulate widely beyond Florence, they are often adapted by craftsmen and patrons who were invested in a resistance to Florentine cultural hegemony, as Stephen Campbell shows with regard to Ferrara.

A consequence of assuming this perspective is to configure the Renaissance in a 'de-centered' fashion, as "a movement which coexisted and interacted with other movements and indeed with other cultures in a process of permanent cultural exchange across geographical, social and chronological boundaries."²⁸ Such an approach would ideally address the dynamic cultural dialogue during the Renaissance among Gothic, aristocratic, and popular cultures; between Byzantine scholarly traditions and scholasticism; and between classical and Christian culture, in an extension of Edgar Wind's concept of 'cultural hybridization'.²⁹ These questions are not dealt with here, nor is the work on translation by scholars in fields such as musicology, but it is hoped that this collection will act as a stimulus to such investigations. We offer instead a methodologically diverse body of work, drawing on intellectual history, political theory, material culture studies, archival scholarship, and the investigation of style. It is our hope that such work will enable the multiple byways of Renaissance scholarship to develop points of translation with each other, resulting in paths of inquiry which are properly situated among disciplines rather than in isolated fields.

NOTES

1. See Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), xxiv–xxv. A concern with the reuse and transformation of symbols between times and cultures also stands at the heart of Aby Warburg's

analysis of Renaissance culture. See Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, trans. D. Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999). Warburg's fluid conceptualization of cultural transmission was apparent in his well-known antipathy towards what he termed intellectual 'frontier control'. See Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1987), 33.

2. See S. Mailloux, 'Interpretation,' in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 121–2.

3. See James Clifford, 'The Translation of Cultures: Maurice Leenhardt's Evangelism, New Caledonia 1902–1926,' in *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. R. Con Davis and R. Schleifer (New York: Longman 1994); S. Budick and W. Iser, eds., *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); *The Translatability of Cultures. Proceedings of the Fifth Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies*, ed. H. Ziegler (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 1998).

4. Assmann, 'Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability,' in *Translatability of Cultures*, ed. Budick and Iser, 25–37.

5. Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World. From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 48.

6. Pagden, *European Encounters*; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge 1994); Stuart Hall, 'The Spectacle of the "Other,"' in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Books, 1997), 223–79; and Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage Books, 1996).

7. Clare Farago, ed., *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America 1450–1650* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995); see especially the editor's introduction, 1–20.

8. For a critique of Burckhardt's understanding of these authors as manifesting a national consciousness, see Farago, "'Vision Itself Has Its History": "Race," Nation and Renaissance Art History,' in *Reframing the Renaissance*, ed. Farago; and Farago, 'The Status of the "State as a Work of Art": Re-Viewing Burckhardt's Renaissance from the Borderlines,' in *Cultural Exchange between European Nations during the Renaissance. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia* 86, ed. Gunnar Sorelius and Michael Strigley (Uppsala: 1994), 17–33. For some general remarks on the 'discrepancy between nation and dynastic realm' that are in some respects applicable to Italy, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 103. Farago's perspective could be said to neglect the dimension of self-conscious irony in Burckhardt's analogies between Italy and the modern nation state, which were born out of his own anti-modernism and anti-statism and are generally given a strongly dystopian cast. On this dimension see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 230–65.

9. On Italian self-consciousness, defined in relation to a cultural 'other' in the late Middle Ages, see Kevin Brownlee, 'The Practice of Cultural Authority: Italian Responses to French Cultural Dominance in *Il Tesoretto*, *Il Fiore*, and the *Commedia*,' *Forum for Modern Language Studies* xxxiii no. 3 (1997): 258–69. The field of musicology has generated a considerable body of scholarship on Italian reactions to and translations of French musical forms during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; see the Introduction by Nino Pirrotta in *Il codice Squarcialupi*, ed. F. A. Gallo et al. (Florence: Giunti Barbèra, 1992), 195–211. See also F. A. Gallo, 'Bilinguismo poetico e