

## *Rethinking the Renaissance*

The art of fifteenth-century Europe tends to be studied in parochial terms, with greatest attention paid to individual masters, regional developments, and local patronage. Europe, however, was then, as now, highly cosmopolitan, its diverse countries and polities linked into larger communities through intricate webs of political, economic, religious, and social ties. The period, moreover, is steadfastly associated with the revival of ancient Greco-Roman art and literature at the hands of Italian artists and humanists, Florentines in particular, and with the aesthetic and intellectual innovations they inspired. Yet such interpretations are only partially accurate and to a large extent retrospective. They are grounded in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550/1568) and the widespread adoption of Italian classicism in the sixteenth century and thereafter. For most of the fifteenth century a renewed awareness of ancient monuments and texts mingled with other, equally pressing concerns – chivalry among them – and the Italian cultural exports with which we have come to identify the Renaissance mixed with those from Germany and France, Byzantium, and the Islamic world.

This book explores the particular prestige of arts emanating from the Burgundian Netherlands, why they were coveted and adopted by rulers throughout Europe as eloquent expressions of power, and how they were acquired by patrons of lesser means to enhance their status and display their taste. The technical mastery and aesthetic refinement of Netherlandish tapestries, metalwork, manuscripts, music, sculpture, and painting earned them far-ranging esteem; associations with the Burgundian dukes, the most illustrious princes of the time, and provenance from their domains enhanced the desirability and accelerated the distribution of these artworks. The following study of creations hailing from the ducal lands and produced elsewhere in emulation of them, viewed

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in a pan-European context, seeks not only to restore them to the forefront of contemporary culture, but also to offer a model for inquiry into the internationalism and pluralism of the fifteenth century. It is but one alternative to the Italo-centric perception of the era.

The book engages diverse disciplines and methodologies. It poses historiographical questions, scrutinizing biases and assumptions that have dominated Renaissance studies, in order to clear the ground for new interpretations; it revisits fifteenth-century inventories and chronicles, travel accounts and literary treatises, patterns of acquisition and the works of art themselves to reevaluate contemporary perceptions and values; and it addresses the political and economic contexts within which patrons, artists, and artworks operated. Case studies are used to elucidate larger phenomena, for a comprehensive cataloguing approach would render this volume unmanageable.

2 • The popularity of Netherlandish painting abroad is well-known. Yet few scholars have attempted to analyze the causes of its widespread appeal or to view it within larger artistic and social settings. Painting is examined here in conjunction with other media – tapestry, embroidery, goldwork, and armor – that are often dismissed as “decorative” or “minor.” At the time of their creation, however, they were considered preeminent and an investigation of their reception across Europe reveals significant patterns unrecognized by traditional inquiries which have, for the most part, been limited to painting and/or Italo-Netherlandish relations. Renaissance patrons pursued their ideological objectives through a complex aesthetic language and with keen awareness of international developments: I hope to reflect something of the breadth of their mental and material worlds.

A historiographical reappraisal is a necessary preamble to this investigation. The fifteenth century has been studied largely through the prism of Italy, as the result of political, literary, and artistic accretions beginning in the sixteenth century. The demise of the Burgundian court – the paragon of princely magnificence in its day – following the disastrous military engagements of its last duke, Charles the Bold (d. 1477), led to a gradual decline of the prestige of Burgundian visual culture. Meanwhile, Vasari's *Lives* valorized Italian, and especially Tuscan, artistic traditions, codifying the terms of subsequent art-historical discourse. The founding of art academies in which Italian masters dominated, as well as the writings of such luminaries as Voltaire, Winckelmann, and Hegel, further canonized Italian art. Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) and Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919), which portrayed Italy as the quintessence of spiritual and creative triumph and Northern Europe as a society in decline, have polarized and prejudiced the discussion of these two cultural traditions with remarkable tenacity. Of similarly lasting impact has been

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the work of connoisseurs such as Berenson, Friedländer, and Post, who established the oeuvres of Italian, Netherlandish, and Spanish painters, respectively, reinforcing notions of regional distinctions and the perception of painting and its practitioners as key indicators of cultural development. By scrutinizing the evolution of assumptions concerning “the Renaissance,” I seek to prepare the ground for a reevaluation of the period.

“The Renaissance” is such a loaded term that it calls for a qualification at the outset. The “Renaissance” is generally considered to be “the great revival of art and letters, under the influence of classical models, which began in Italy in the 14th century and continued during the 15th and 16th.”<sup>1</sup> This definition exposes commonly held presuppositions: that the period was primarily concerned with and inspired by antiquity and that Italy was the cultural leader of all of Europe. As Anthony Hughes notes,

To write about the Renaissance is inevitably to accept as given a particular model of the movement of western culture, to see significant divisions between medieval and “humanist” world-views, however blurred the transitions seem to have become. In addition, the Renaissance has always been characterized as a movement primarily associated with the urban man of letters and the innovative visual artist in and around Florence and there has always been a difficulty in matching social to cultural change in an unassailable way.<sup>2</sup>

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Chapter 1 will outline the process by which this epoch came to be so characterized. Subsequent chapters will use the term “fifteenth-century” instead of “the Renaissance” because its neutrality accommodates a multiplicity of cultural currents and manifestations. By sidestepping the label, and the traditional definitions of “the Renaissance,” the book will highlight some of the many faces of the fifteenth century, and explore why the period was by no means dominated by Italy, as is commonly asserted and assumed. The issue of continuity or disruption of “medieval” culture, which has preoccupied many scholars, will not figure in this discussion. Rather, informed by contemporary documentary evidence, the book will focus on the political and social motivations that underlay the pursuit of particular forms of behavior and visual currencies. As Burckhardt acknowledged in the passage from his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* that serves as the epigram to this volume, the Renaissance is a formulation of the scholarly and popular imagination.

It is my contention that fifteenth-century Europeans perceived the Burgundian dukes and the arts emanating from their domains as cultural leaders of the day. Contemporary accounts of travelers, diplomats, and chroniclers indicate that the dukes were viewed as majestic and paradigmatic. Legitimate, but

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recent lords of a rich and politically consequential territory that they inherited and augmented through a series of diplomatic and military maneuvers, the dukes employed a vast array of artworks to project and justify their multifaceted ambitions to subjects, allies, and foes alike. The brilliance and ingenuity of ducal displays – splendid attire in peace and war, sumptuous adornment of palaces and festivities, lavish banquets and tournaments – prompted admiration in their beholders. The dukes' financial means far exceeded those of other rulers of the time: An astonished Bohemian diplomat reported that their treasury surpassed even the legendary riches of Venice. Their rise also coincided with the weakening of other major contenders for European dominance, such as the kings of France and the Holy Roman Emperors. Through astute positioning within European politics and creative self-promotion, the Burgundian dukes succeeded in rivaling the stature of kings and fashioning a mode of ascendance that came to be emulated by the Tudors, the Catholic Monarchs of Spain, numerous Italian princes, and other peers abroad for the potency of its sovereign aura.

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The dazzling splendor of the Burgundian court has been contrasted to the putative intellectual superiority of Italians, for the chivalric ethos of the North, which Huizinga pronounced antiquated and empty has been juxtaposed with a presumed enlightened humanistic spirit of the South extolled by Burckhardt. Yet chivalry remained vital to political and military organization throughout Europe. The presence of countless chivalric romances in courtly libraries, the subject matter of tapestries and fresco cycles decorating European palaces, and the tournaments staged at numerous courts, including Italian ones, make clear that classical humanism was not the exclusive preoccupation or priority of aristocratic circles. The Burgundian dukes and their nobility, furthermore, were trained in classical history and literature, albeit largely in French, and although they may not have studied ancient texts with the philological rigor of some of their Italian counterparts, they avidly read ancient writings and cultivated the inheritance of antiquity. Their intellectual concerns and pursuits corresponded to prevalent norms; their court attracted adulation, as well as scions of foreign princely families, as a locus of creative generation and princely education.

The Burgundian dukes and their brilliant court provided a model and an impetus for emulation across Europe. The artifacts they employed to manifest their ideologies were sought after by their rivals and imitators, and they shed light on the values current in the fifteenth century. Today Art History as a discipline centers on the Academic triad of painting, sculpture, and architecture. In the fifteenth century, however, intrinsically costly and finely wrought gold-work, tapestry, armor, and manuscripts, not to mention court pageants that combined all the arts, were exalted not merely for their material worth, but

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also for their social and spiritual significance. An attempt to restore to their rightful place the sumptuous arts that since then have been devalued as “decorative” or “minor” constitutes yet another theme of this study. The deployment of such media, and well as of music, by the Burgundian dukes was witnessed with awe by contemporary observers and eagerly coopted by other potentates for the promise of ascendance they offered. I term the aesthetic face of Burgundian ducal propaganda the “Burgundian mode” not because it was original to the dukes – in fact it drew upon French courtly and Netherlandish civic traditions, among others – but because the way the dukes used ensembles of particular artifacts found such resonance and engendered such wide imitation in their day. In speaking of the “Burgundian court culture,” I refer to the combination of objects and practices associated with the dukes, even though its individual components were cosmopolitan.

Indeed, European courts (as well as urban centers) were closely bound into an international community of shared diplomatic, economic, and cultural concerns, and rulers vigilantly observed and competed with each other in expressions of magnificence, deploying those arts that best accomplished their aims. The Burgundian court served as a potent model of princely display, and the arts associated with it were employed by other rulers as visual metaphors of their own power and attainment. The present investigation focuses on how the kings of England and Spain and the princes of Italy used artists and artifacts from the Burgundian Netherlands, but this analysis can be extended to other parts of Europe, likewise linked to the Burgundian court and territories through channels of politics, commerce, and religion.

Social diffusion of Netherlandish arts – their adoption on a more modest scale by the ambitious and rising urban bourgeoisie – followed similar pathways. The geographic location of the Burgundian lands at the intersection of major trade routes, both seaborne and overland, assured a constant stream of goods, traders, and customers passing through the region. Numerous wares were mass-produced specifically for export, and shipped not only to England, Italy, and Spain, but also to France, Germany, and the cities of the Hanseatic League farther north to serve the aspirations of middle-class clientele. The prestige and marketability of artworks emanating from the Burgundian Netherlands, moreover, expanded economic opportunities not only for local artisans, but also for foreigners. Many immigrated there to learn the styles and techniques that would significantly enhance their professional success, or to take advantage of the steady flow of cosmopolitan customers. Countless Netherlanders, meanwhile, worked temporarily or moved permanently abroad, to the many locales with which the Low Countries maintained close mercantile and diplomatic ties. They established local tapestry industries, led or performed in

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musical choirs, or founded sculpture or masonry workshops. Finally, English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and other craftsmen adopted the artistic styles of the Burgundian Netherlands because they were desired and thus economically viable across Europe.

The prevalent perception of the fifteenth century emphasizes humanistic antiquarianism and Italy, regional artistic developments, and painting. The pan-European appeal of the arts hailing from the Burgundian milieu provides one of many alternative lenses through which the period can be viewed. The intent of this volume is not to promote the aesthetic merits of Netherlandish creations over those of any other region. Rather, in studying the arts of the period across boundaries of media and geography, I hope to do greater justice to the diverse activities of artists, the varied interests and ambitions of patrons, and the multidimensional links between diverse cultures.

## CHAPTER ONE

*The Legacy of Vasari*

Confined at first to a rebirth of art or of classical culture, the notion of the Renaissance was broadened as scholars of each successive generation added to it what they regarded as the essence of modern, as opposed to medieval civilization.

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W. K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*<sup>1</sup>

On 5 January 1477 Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, perished in battle at Nancy. It took two days for his followers to recover his wolf-eaten body from the desolate field that was strewn with the dismembered remains of his soldiers. The corpses had been stripped naked and looted of armor and weapons by the victors. The duke's face was disfigured beyond recognition, but he was identified by his Portuguese physician by his earlier scars, long nails, missing teeth, and a fistula on the groin.

The inglorious demise of the once-exalted duke immediately provided his enemies with the opportunity to tarnish his image and belittle his achievements. In the early sixteenth century new superpowers – a series of highly ambitious popes, Charles V Habsburg, Francis I Valois, and Henry VIII Tudor – rose to prominence and prestige. Vying for control over Europe, they soon changed the political and aesthetic landscape, obscuring the renown of the Burgundian court.

Meanwhile in Florence, Georgio Vasari published *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori* (1568) and helped to found the Florentine Accademia del Disegno both of which valorized Italian, and especially Tuscan, cultural and artistic traditions and codified the terms of subsequent art-historical discourse. The constellation of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael, their service under a number of illustrious princes of church and state, and their exaltation by

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Vasari and his epigoni endowed Italian art with unprecedented and lasting recognition. Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) and Johan Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919) have indelibly polarized and prejudiced discussions of southern and northern European history and art by portraying Italy as the quintessence of intellectual and creative triumph and the Burgundian Netherlands as decadent and declining. By retracing the evolution of assumptions concerning cultural developments in fifteenth-century Europe, I seek to return to a perception of the period more consistent with the outlook of its contemporaries.

*Early Conceptions of the "Renaissance"*

8 • The formulation of the Renaissance as an age of rebirth after centuries of darkness and decline originated in the writings of Italian humanists. The credit rests particularly with Petrarch, whose admiration for ancient Roman literature, the city of Rome, and the ideal of republican virtue prompted him to draw a line between antiquity and the dark barbaric era that followed.<sup>2</sup> The notion of "rebirth" implied a distance between classical antiquity and the present, and it was in relation to the intervening "dark" or the "middle" ages that the new epoch came to be viewed. The idea of a dark age was itself not new: "Christian writers had long thought of the period of pagan antiquity before the dawn of Christianity as an age of darkness," writes W. K. Ferguson. "By shifting the metaphor from the sphere of religion to that of culture and its application from pagan antiquity to the Christian Middle Ages, Petrarch set the tone for the humanists' secular interpretation of history."<sup>3</sup>

The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century discussions of cultural regeneration – exemplified by writings of Guarino da Verona, Leonardo Bruni, Flavio Biondo, Matteo Palmieri, Leon Battista Alberti, and Lorenzo Valla, among others – centered largely on the recovery of classical texts and visual arts.<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio's *Vita di Dante* (1363) offered a crucial identification of the moment at which the darkness began to recede in the sphere of letters: He proclaimed Dante as the first poet to open the way for the Muses, heretofore banished from Italy, and to reawaken the dead poetry.<sup>5</sup> In the *Decameron* (ca. 1350–2) Boccaccio praised Giotto for reviving "that art of painting which had been buried for many centuries under the errors of various artists."<sup>6</sup> Filippo Villani developed these arguments further in his *Liber de civitatis Florentiae famosis civibus* (ca. 1395), and by accentuating Florentine literature and art sharpened the perception of the Renaissance as a Florentine phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> Villani assigned to Cimabue the pioneering role in the revival of the nearly extinct art of painting by recalling it to natural similitude; Giotto followed Cimabue and



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Villani praised him formulaically as not only comparable but superior to the illustrious painters of antiquity.

The notion of “rebirth” was closely tied to civic pride; indeed Renaissance art history began as civic history. The story of the revival of ancient glory through the mediation of Florentine luminaries became a standard part of patriotic eulogies. Lorenzo Ghiberti repeated it in his *I commentari* (ca. 1455) and extended his account to his own time; although he noted the contributions of Sieneese painters and Pisan sculptors, his focus remained Florentine.<sup>8</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, in the dedicatory preface to his *Della Pittura* (1436), asserted Florentine artistic superiority over the ancients. These forebears, he argued, had many precedents to learn from and to imitate and thus had less difficulty mastering “those noble arts which for us today prove arduous; but it follows that our fame [he particularly credited Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti, della Robbia, and Masaccio] should be all the greater if without preceptors and without any model to imitate we discover arts and sciences hitherto unheard of and unseen.”<sup>9</sup> In discussing contemporary developments in arts and letters, early Italian humanists did not yet use the term “rebirth,” although they conveyed this idea through equivalent expressions and sentiments. More importantly, their observations pertained to specific branches of Italian culture and not to the historical period in its entirety. The definition of the whole Italian history of that era in terms of the “Renaissance” occurred later.<sup>10</sup>

Italian humanists looked to antiquity not only for literary and visual models, but also for political precedents: They interpreted the history of ancient Rome as the first stage in the political development of the Italian people (although in this they were not unique, as claims to ancient heritage permeated political discourse in many regions of Europe). While Petrarch was interested in antiquity more than in his still-barbarous present, his followers viewed more recent history in a favorable light: as a period in which modern Italian states arose and began to flourish. Local patriotism served as a vital motive in the creation of their narratives, such as Giovanni Villani’s early fourteenth-century *Chroniche fiorentine*.<sup>11</sup> Leonardo Bruni, the chancellor of the Florentine republic and the author of *Historiarum Florentinarum populi libri xii* (1444) – a semi-official, source-based history that served as a model for subsequent accounts – regarded the dissolution of the Roman Empire as a necessary prelude to the rise of the free Italian communes in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, which he viewed, in turn, as crucial to the evolution of modern Italy. He thus offered an early historical justification of the Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup>

Numerous scholars have traced the course of history-writing in fifteenth-century Italy and the contributions of Italian humanists to the establishment of periodization: that is, the compartmentalization of history into the “golden

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age” of antiquity, the “Middle Ages” that served as a precursor to the “rebirth” in the conceptual and chronological sense, and the modern period in which they lived. It is important to acknowledge, however, that similar enterprises were conducted elsewhere in Europe. One may cite the *Chroniques* of Jean Froissart and of George Chastellain, or *Les Grandes chroniques de France* as significant eulogies and state accounts outside Italy.<sup>13</sup> While differing in tone, scope, and degree of reliance on ancient models, such chronicles shared ideological and patriotic motivations of Italian histories. Although they were not concerned with the issue of classical revival *per se* and did not emulate ancient linguistic and rhetorical tropes, as did many quattrocento Italian writings, this in no way diminished their importance to contemporary audiences.

*Vasari's Formative Role*

- 10 • Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* constitutes the formative text for the Italo-centric perception of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century history in general, and the history of art of that period in particular.<sup>14</sup> From the fragmentary and concise accounts of cultural revival provided by the aforementioned humanists, as well as a rich store of other sources, Vasari created a conception of Italian art as an organic whole that developed by clearly marked stages from the early attempts at renewal to the perfected style of his own day. Vasari gave the name of rebirth, *la rinascita*, to the new age of art, although he applied the term more specifically to its beginnings.<sup>15</sup>

Vasari divided the evolution of Italian art into three phases. The imitation of nature formed the dominant motive in the first two periods, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In his view, the exact reproduction of nature comprised at once the glory and the deficiency of the second age. In the third age, the early sixteenth century, artists learned to attain ideal beauty by improving upon the shortcomings of natural models (as did the ancient masters). In addition, having absorbed the lessons of antiquity, they gained freedom to exercise imaginary license beyond the constraints of their models. Vasari, keen on his own success, described the perfection of the third era – his own time – so compellingly as to immortalize the notion that early sixteenth-century art was the pinnacle of European accomplishment. Less vested both artistically and rhetorically in the previous two eras, Vasari outlined them in less florid terms. In the “Life of Gaddo Gaddi,” for example, he condensed his account of the master's work because “the styles of those masters were still so hard in the difficulties of art that it is not necessary to have much curiosity about them, and because the majority of those who have been most useful to artists and to the art will be described by us with refinement and ingenuity in accordance with