

The 19th-century construction of the Renaissance

Review of:

Katherine Wheeler, *Victorian Perceptions of Renaissance Architecture*, Farnham England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2014, 194 pp, 19 b. & w. illus., £60.00/\$104.95 hdbk, ISBN 978-1472418821

D. Medina Lasansky

By now we all know that the study of history says as much about the present as it does about the past. The study of the past is always culturally and politically imbedded thus complicating any understanding. And yet it seems that the historians of the Italian Renaissance are the last to catch on. Renaissance heroes and masterpieces are often accepted wholesale as if their study and celebration has nothing to do with the period in which they are revered. Because of this, books that deal with the historiography of the Renaissance are always welcome additions to the field. Katherine Wheeler's *Victorian Perceptions of Renaissance Architecture* is no exception.

The nineteenth century bore a particular obsession for the Italian Renaissance (with the period of 1860-1910 marking, according to Wheeler as the 'high tide' of this obsession). There was plenty of historical fiction, an abundance of amateur history, emerging serious scholarship, organized tours, detailed guidebooks, and a population of Anglo-Americans that settled in cities such as Venice, Florence and Rome so as to have the Renaissance close at hand. For these communities cafes, restaurants and newspapers catered to the living while cemeteries served the dead.

The presence of the Anglo-American community in Italy is important to the discussion at hand as Wheeler's book tracks the perception of Renaissance architecture in Great Britain between 1850 and 1914. The increasing professionalism and education of the architect coupled with the history of Italian Renaissance architecture were intertwined and ultimately influential on the community living in Italy.

This book is at once a study of the architecture profession and the history of Renaissance architecture in 19th-century England. It is a good introduction for readers interested in either topic. As Wheeler notes 'The gradual establishment of the canon of Renaissance architectural history was an outgrowth of the core importance of history to both the rise of architectural professionalism and the advent of formalized education.' The image of the Renaissance architect was inextricably linked to the creation of university programs for architectural education. So, not only did the study of the Renaissance influence design in

England on all scales – from furniture to urbanism – but it also influenced the design of the architect himself (and yes, this was a male world).

This volume has particular relevance today as the Italian Renaissance continues to influence young architects many of whom spend a semester studying a canon of masterworks in Italy. The paradigms that guide their study are largely 19th century in making. The self-conscious analysis of why Italy has remained important to the profession begins in this book.

As Wheeler notes, the Renaissance is fluid—both in terms of definition and time period. This certainly lasts to the end of World War II at least (long beyond the time outlined by Wheeler) and depends on the media being defined as well as the national perspective from which the definition is being made. The Renaissance in Spain for example is later than that in Italy, in Italian painting before that of Italian literature and so forth. It is helpful to remember that the Renaissance does not mean one thing, but depends more on who is using the term, when, and where. Perhaps most importantly, the Renaissance was not a term that was ever used in the Renaissance itself. Giorgio Vasari referred to the period as Early Modern in the title of his famous book chronicling the lives of the artists. Given this, any scholar or student of the Renaissance should really be interested in when the period was constructed – and herein lies the importance of Wheeler’s volume.

It becomes eminently clear in this volume is that the meaning of Renaissance architecture is mediated. While mediation by photography, journals and even lectures is not the subject of this study, books certainly are. Wheeler examines six texts that were important to reframing the discussion of the Renaissance in Victorian England: John Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* (1851), Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), John Addington Symonds’s *Renaissance in Italy* (1875), William J Anderson’s *The Architecture of the Renaissance in Italy* (1896), Reginald Blomfield’s *A History of Renaissance Architecture in England* (1897), and Geoffrey Scott’s *The Architecture of Humanism* (1914) – the latter being required reading for architects until the 1960s. Each of these texts captures distinct phases in the architectural understanding of the Renaissance in England. Together they chart changing attitudes towards the period – from disdain to extreme valorisation.

We all know about Ruskin’s romantic longings for the medieval artisan-architect whose work was grounded in craftsmanship. In his mind Renaissance architecture was corrupt, decadent and foreign. This, Wheeler argues, demonstrates (p. 28) the discomfort with the increasing professionalization of the field. And certainly the immense popularity of contemporaneous buildings such as the Crystal Palace built efficiently out of prefabricated parts was tremendously disturbing. Indeed, writing at the height of industrialization, Ruskin would have witnessed a great deal of changes to the built environment including massive building. But it seems that there might be more to this story. Ruskin’s celebration of the Middle Ages had good company. He wrote during a period of intense national fervour—when tales of King Arthur’s round table were being promoted, Sir Walter Scott wrote *Ivanhoe* (1820), the Pre-Raphaelites were busy, and London Bridge was built

to look medieval (1831). Simultaneous with this medieval fervour was intense anti-Catholic sentiment. So we must wonder whether Ruskin's profound anti-Renaissance rhetoric was grounded in something more than anxiety about the emerging modern world.

As Wheeler points out, both Pater and Symonds sought to refute Ruskin. And as Pater and Symonds began to see the Renaissance as aesthetically important and foundational to modern life the profession followed suit. A system of examination and registration was instituted. How these writers were read is unclear. It appears that Pater and Symonds were more popular outside the profession – where they were heartily reviewed. And Symonds, as Wheeler tells us, was an influential lecturer – drawing crowds of over 1000. Yet surprisingly they were not required reading for RIBA (the Royal Institute of British Architects) architects.

William Anderson's *Architecture of the Renaissance in Italy* was the first history of the period that was written as a textbook for architects (it began as a series of lectures at the Glasgow School of Art) and became quite important for young RIBA architects. For this reason alone, it is of supreme importance. As both an architect and a teacher Anderson's work was pivotal in the acceptance of Italian Renaissance architecture within the profession. Anderson was of course writing at a time when the Italian Renaissance was increasingly a popular topic. There were numerous lectures on the topic that took place in London. And there was Vernon Lee (or Violet Paget) who wrote *Renaissance Studies and Fancies* (1895). She wrote in English but lived in Florence. And during the time she was writing she was busy raising awareness amongst the British public of the Italian desire to modernize and ultimately destroy parts of Renaissance Florence. Vernon Lee and her committee for the Defence of Old Florence ultimately saved a huge swath of the Renaissance city. Of course none of this would have been possible if there was not a positive interest in the period.

As Wheeler argues, the next stage in the acceptance of and interest in the Italian Renaissance was Reginald Blomfield's 1897 narrative of the English Renaissance style. Nationalizing the foreign style was the inevitable next step. The fact that the public even contemplated the existence of an English Renaissance style – whether practiced by Inigo Jones or Christopher Wren – was progressive.

Finally, Geoffrey Scott redefined the Renaissance as the basis of modern design. In so doing, he successfully refuted the arguments of earlier authors such as Ruskin. One cannot help but wonder how his rhetorical reframing of the Renaissance is tied to his physical reworking of the period. While he was busy writing his influential *Architecture of Humanism*, he and his design partner Cecil Pinsent were busy reshaping the Tuscan landscape (designing villas, gardens and entire farms) into an ideal Renaissance vision.

While the choices of books seem predictable – after all we recognize them as important texts – questions remain. For example how many copies of these volumes were printed and how accessible they were – how much did they cost? Given that

these six books were so important for shaping the field, we are told remarkably little about their physical nature. Were they small enough to carry on a trip to Italy? Were they illustrated? And if so, with what? This latter question seems particularly relevant, as it is odd to discuss the canonization of Renaissance architecture without discussing how this was accomplished in visual terms.

It is unclear what texts Wheeler chose NOT to include. How many others were there? A list of these publications would have been helpful – so that passing references to the work of T. Roger Smith, J Tavernor Perry and others could be understood in context. And how popular were they? Did any of these texts constitute required reading at universities? And if so, how were they read? While such questions might not be within Wheeler's purview they do get at some basic issues of relevance. It is clear that this is not an archival project. If it were perhaps some of these questions might be addressed.

Sadly, Ashgate does not produce attractive books. The uninspired cover and 19 black and white interior illustrations of this volume are deadly. It is unclear why some of the illustrations are included at all. The £60.00 price tag is a killer and makes assigning it to students a challenge. In the age of increasingly easy design and printing, it is a mystery why some presses continue to produce unattractive books – particularly when they deal with design. Be that as it may, serious students of the Renaissance and or history of the profession will undoubtedly find Wheeler's study of interest.

D. Medina Lasansky teaches architectural history at Cornell University. Her research focuses on the intersection of architecture, politics & popular culture. She is the author of *the Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle & Tourism in Fascist Italy* (Penn State Press, 2004) and editor of *The Renaissance. Revised, Expanded, Unexpurgated* (Periscope, 2014).

lasansky@aol.com