

## New light on sweetness: a brief review of Joseph Imorde's book on Carlo Dolci

Review of Joseph Imorde, *Carlo Dolci: A Refreshment*, Studies in Iconology 8, Leuven-Paris-Bristol, CT: Peeters 2017. Pbk, 107 pages, 16 colour illustrations. ISBN 978-90-429-3456-6. 36€

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This book is short, but its argument is elegant and persuasive. With 21 pages of text, 31 pages of footnotes and 27 pages of bibliography it is generously documented and beautifully illustrated. Its text amplifies the argument of an article originally published in the Getty Research Journal.[\[i\]](#)

The author opens (*Carlo the Sweet*) with a review of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century assessments of an artist 'beneath contempt': 'His works were called "sweetly insipid" and appeared "to an uncorrupted religious sense" as appealing "as the lid of a decorated candy-box".' (4) He ends by quoting Gombrich's description of the childish delight in sweets and toffees and one is left wondering how sophisticated seventeenth-century adults could have delighted in his work, as Dolci was one of the most popular artists of his day.

The next chapter (*Dulcedo Dei*) reviews religious thought to explain why the 'explicit ... devaluation of "sweetness" was quite alien to seventeenth-century thought.' (19) François Quiviger told us that taste ranked low in the hierarchy of the senses and that 'taste is only stimulated in the context of nutrition, an activity more often evoked than represented'.[\[ii\]](#) Imorde points out that it had a central place in religious contemplation from as early as St Augustine through Richard of Saint Victor, Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventura to Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits. For Augustine, the 'palate of the heart' differentiates believer from infidel and for Loyola '(t)ears, contemplation, and prayer ... were closely connected with the sense of taste and the emotional metaphor of sweetness'. His follower Louis Lallement stated that 'it was the taste of God's sweetness that made the soul believe more persistently'. The idea of *Dulcedo Dei* was found 'in such different contexts as Catholic Rome, Anglican London, Lutheran Lübeck, and Pietistic Halle.' (22-3) This particular chapter of aesthetic history should act as a corrective to current, and longstanding, platitudes about the Renaissance pursuit of beauty.

*Pictor Christianus* examines whether Dolci could be found guilty of Rudolph Wittkower's accusation of a "false and even repulsive note of piety". (4) Not according to his friend Filippo Baldinucci, who described him as an exemplary Christian artist who followed in the footsteps of Fra Angelico: 'similar to his famous forerunner he understood and modeled his artistic practice as religious devotion.' (33) Imorde explains, with ample examples, how that devotion was made manifest in his paintings.

*Royal Cavities* connects the religious taste for sweetness to the elite consumption of sugar. It could only be bought by the wealthy, who regarded the consequent halitosis and black teeth as 'God's punishment for Adam's bite into the apple'. (55[\[iii\]](#)) The decline of the taste for sweetness was ultimately down to the industrial production of sugar from beet in the nineteenth-century. Once sugar could be consumed by the masses, the taste for sweetness

fell out of favour with their cosmopolitan peers. Art history survey books, also produced for mass consumption, condemned the cloying effect of Dolci's imagery.

All of this is very enlightening and makes for an extremely enjoyable read, but it is the *Colophon* that I find most intriguing. The author was motivated to study Dolci by artists such as Pierre & Gilles' embrace of sweetness, 'a visual realm that had formerly been championed or stigmatized by worn-out ideological bases'. (71) We need to re-visit Dolci's *Portrait of Sir Thomas Baines* (1668) as an early instance of gay iconography. We also need to re-visit the Renaissance preoccupation with beauty. We also need to think again about 'sweetness'.

[i] Joseph Imorde, 'Carlo Dolci and the Aesthetics of Sweetness', *Getty Research Journal*, no. 6, 2014, 1–12. Available through JSTOR.

[ii] François Quiviger, *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art*, London: Reaktion Books 2010, 153-4.

[iii] Quoting Abraham a Santa Clara (1644-1709).



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