

The Italian Renaissance in the nineteenth century: revision, revival and return

Review of:

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This book, entitled *The Italian Renaissance in the Nineteenth Century* and edited by Lina Bolzoni and Alina Payne, is part of a broader project for a series that aims to reframe the impact of the Italian Renaissance on different disciplines, promoted by the Villa I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance. This first volume collects twenty-two essays based on reports presented in 2013 at a conference organised by the Villa I Tatti in Florence. The research aims to look at how the Italian Renaissance was repurposed in the nineteenth century 'not so much as a revival, but as a pan-European phenomenon of critique, commentary and re-shaping', and to analyse the Renaissance as 'lived' in that century.

The method pursued, carefully defined by the editors, focuses on an opening of perspectives that impinge on several fields: from literature to visual arts, and ornament, interior design, architecture and urban planning, with politics and economics underpinning it all. The volume also proposes an opening out at the territorial level, since the resumption of the Italian Renaissance in the nineteenth century is considered as a phenomenon which had influence well beyond Italy's national borders.

Bolzoni and Payne's project proposes a highly critical approach to the statement of Jacob Burckhardt who, in 1858-59, defined the Italian Renaissance as the 'mother and homeland of modern man', in thought as well as in the construction of forms. The editors' desired approach also develops the perspective opened by Jules Michelet in 1855, when he defined the Renaissance as a complex totality, and considered its rediscovery as an almost prophetic openness towards the future, a future that concerned not only the individual but 'the people'; this was also the approach followed by Karl Marx in the first volume of *Capital*, where he considered the Italian Renaissance from the point of view of economic history. The proposed interconnections are amplified by the involvement of scholars from different backgrounds and countries, in a planned exchange between Renaissance specialists and scholars of the Renaissance reception in the nineteenth century. The historian is thus entrusted with the role of mediator in the dialogue between the two epochs, without which, as Michelet states, 'past and present would have no sense'. In the nineteenth century, the negative, or in any case contradictory, view of the period emerged together with an image of the Italian Renaissance as a golden age and a

model for the present. These connections and contradictions are a consistent presence in the essays of the volume.

Lina Bolzoni deals with the topic of 'Renaissance Heroines between Romance and Melodrama', studying Renaissance women like Luisa Strozzi, Beatrice Cenci, Lucrezia Borgia and Caterina Cornaro, who are seen as an expression of 'ideas, fears, stereotypes, hopes that greatly influenced public opinion' of the period. The focus is on the reception of the Renaissance by a new mass of people, extending beyond the scope of the intellectual and economic élite. The melodramas and the historical novels on which the study concentrates were, in fact, widely accepted in a context, like the Italian one, devoid of a popular national literary tradition and they fulfilled their purpose admirably. Bolzoni's essay opens the fourth section of the book titled 'Passion and Politics: Women in the Renaissance' which includes the studies of Candida Syndikus ('Images of Renaissance Heroines in Nineteenth-Century Painting: Caterina Cornaro, Bianca Cappello, Lucrezia Borgia'), Jane Tylus ('Rescuing the Renaissance: Women Writers, Courtesans, and Salza's Press') and Veronica Andreani ('"Italian Sappho." The literary fortune of Gaspara Stampa in the nineteenth century'). From these essays emerge the literary and iconographic fortunes of Renaissance female heroines, to whom is attributed a symbolic and exemplary value, often tragically dramatic.

Openness to the twentieth century characterises the essay by Alina Payne, 'Between Renaissance Aesthetics and Medieval Craft: The Vexed Genesis of Modernist Architecture', which is included in the sixth and final section of the book appropriately titled 'The Aftermath'. Payne investigates how the memory of Italian Renaissance architecture was experienced in the twentieth century. First, she recalls the positive relationship that architects reestablished with the study of proportion, perspective and of the golden section as a design tool. Payne deepens the comparison between Renaissance and Gothic that took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that was expressed through an exchange of positive or negative evaluations, based on different ideological affiliations and in fields that extended from the applied arts to architecture and city planning. The organisation of medieval confraternities, characterised by the collective and anonymous elaboration of different artistic media, without a hierarchy between architecture, decoration and furniture (or rather, sometimes, with a primacy given to decoration) revived in the Bauhaus. This synergy, however, also informed the Renaissance workshop, characterised by collaboration between the creative genius of the designer, the client and the craftsman. On the level of the recovery of forms, Payne cites as an exemplary case Peter Behrens' Hagen crematorium, dated 1906-08, which recalls the articulation of the Florentine churches' façades by Leon Battista Alberti. Finally, 'the aesthetics of surfaces' is assumed as a privileged field in which to observe the relationship between Italian Renaissance and nineteenth-century architecture. The luminous surfaces of the inlaid marble and the *sgraffito* exteriors, that Heinrich von Ferstel repurposed in the façade of the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna, as well as the sober modulations of the walls that characterize the Tosco-Roman-Renaissance, came to life in the imagination of Otto Wagner and Peter Behrens or, more explicitly, in the works of the Italian twentieth-century architect Pietro Portaluppi, creating a trend in which Mies van der Rohe also participates.

The book unfolds in a succession of parts. The first, entitled 'The creation of the Myth', includes essays by Stephen Bann, Maurizio Ghelardi, Francesca Borgo and Emma Giammatei. Ghelardi deepens our understanding of the evolution of Burckhardt's thought and his tenacious attempt to reflect on what he believed to be the political and cultural destiny of his time. Ghelardi notes in Burckhardt's studies the passage from a vision of the Renaissance as a global 'historical-cultural formation' to its consideration as a pre-eminently artistic phenomenon. On the side of a positive outcome to the nineteenth-century reading of the Renaissance, we have the study by Francesca Borgo of the battle paintings proposed as a way to initiate and progress a modern culture. From a different perspective, Emma Giammatei takes as her starting point the problematic vision of Francesco De Sanctis who noted the contrast between the rebirth of the arts and the loss of religious, political, moral ideals in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

This alternation of appraisals is the thread that connects the essays of Part II: 'The Myth, Institutions and Patrons'. Eva Maria Troelenberg identifies new motivations for the architectural and artistic productions of the nineteenth century in the presentation of the collection of the Bode Museum in Berlin in 1880. Likewise, Cara Rachele explains that the exhibition of Renaissance drawings in the Uffizi was a source of revival. David Sadighian shows how the Renaissance style became a model suitable to express the modernity of the Rothschilds' financial power in their residences in rue Lafitte in Paris, in Ferrière en Brie and Mentmore. In contrast, the study of the sculptural effigies of illustrious Renaissance men conveys a contradictory message, as Maria Loth affirms in 'The future belongs to Ghosts: Renaissance Shadows in Ottocento Italy'. Marc Gotlieb, in 'The Dueling Angels and Other Tales from the Scene of Instruction', analyses the literary genre of artistic biography (in particular biographical writings on Giotto) in nineteenth-century France, and how the formation of the painter was understood to oscillate between inspiration from nature and the teachings of the workshop.

Part III of the Book, 'Paradigms: Donatello, Michelangelo, Ariosto, Tasso' is reserved for those poets and sculptors who were exalted in the nineteenth century. Outside Italy, the works of Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso are seen as a determining element in the origin of modern poetry and the romantic and melancholic image of the poet incarnated in Tasso (Christian Rivoletti; Giuseppe Gerbino). Cordula Grewe's essay is dedicated to the reception of the *Orlando Furioso* in painting, in particular by the Nazarenes, who decorated the Casino Massimo in Rome. The manipulation of the art of the great Italian luminaries from Giotto to Michelangelo is described by Daniel M. Zolli and Ida Campeggiani.

The contradiction in attitudes towards the Italian Renaissance also emerges from the studies in the field of architecture presented in Part IV: 'Building the Backdrop: The Nineteenth Century City'. Neil Levine in 'The Unexpected Fate of the Italian Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century French Architecture' dispels the idea of a definitive influence of the Italian Renaissance in nineteenth-century French architecture, especially after 1830. The reference to the forms of a Florentine palace that we observe in the hotel de Pourtalés in Paris by Felix Duban (1837-39) is due to the particular circumstance that it was the home of a collector of old masters. The choices made by Duban in the completion of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris (1832-40) underline how the Italian Renaissance was not an exclusive model. In fact,

the fragments of the Gaillon and Anet castles (parts of the former collections of the Musée des Monuments Français), that partially overlap the front of the École towards rue Bonaparte, suggest different Renaissance tendencies juxtaposed as in a patchwork. This attitude is even more evident in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève by Henri Labrouste (1852). The intimation of the arcades of the side prospect of the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini, which characterises the upper part of the library façade, fades into an interior iron structure articulated according to the logic of French Gothic architecture and with an explicit reference to the refectory of the convent of Saint-Martin des Champs. Even the presence of a large copy of Raphael's *School of Athens* on the main staircase of the library turns out to be completely casual and not the result of a planned choice to celebrate the Italian Renaissance. On the basis of a careful examination of the subjects in Labrouste's corpus of drawings, Levine reiterates his thesis that the Italian Renaissance did not play an important role in the architecture of modern Paris, while reference to ancient Rome was continuous and authoritative as the privileged object in architects' studies at the French Academy in Rome.

Another important theme addressed in the book is that of Italy's post-unification architecture and attitudes towards the need to make visible, in urban spaces, the new reality of a united country and culture. Here too, the responses were extraordinarily varied. In the study by Nadia Aksamija of the activity of Alfonso Rubbiani in Bologna, it is noted that this took place by signalling an enhancement and continuity of the forms put into place in both medieval Bologna and the Renaissance period. Rubbiani stands in contrast to the attitude of Camillo Boito who set himself the goal of identifying a unique national style, and found it, above all, in the medieval architecture of the municipal cities, seen as an expression of freedom, in contrast to the Renaissance style, considered a symbol of enslavement to the Church or of subjugation to the foreigner. Claudia Conforti investigates another aspect of the relationship between the Renaissance and the architecture of Italy's post-unification towns in the essay dedicated to 'Florence Capital (1865-1870): What Renaissance for the city of Dante?' From her study emerges a vivid insight into the situation of Florence, the first capital of unified Italy. It is quite surprising that in that town, considered the cradle of the Renaissance, the construction of the Piazza della Repubblica, a symbol of the new urban reality, abandoned references to the local architectural tradition and adopted the language of the Roman Renaissance because the latter was considered more suitable to express national identity.

In conclusion, from these historically well-founded studies emerges an image of a memory of the Renaissance that has been selective, creative, manipulative, and expressed in a varied constellation of divergent attitudes and interpretations which highlight salient aspects of a problematic relationship. I would, therefore, like to propose a final reflection. In the introduction to the volume we read that the comparison between the approaches of Renaissance scholars and scholars of the nineteenth century is also proposed "in the hope of bringing out further patterns of *longue durée*". Thinking about the concept of the *longue durée* as formulated by Fernand Braudel, we recall how the first conception of the characteristics of the Italian Renaissance proposed by this scholar focused mainly on positive features, on how far the western civilization of the Renaissance created modernity, including the conception of the State, the arts, humanistic philosophy,

and literature. This concept of the Renaissance tends to be seen in contrast to the 'Middle Ages'. The Renaissance of Braudel, inserted in the *longue durée* of history, focuses on cities, trades and merchants, and the culture of the humanists, all in a positive continuity that, in the name of the search for civilisation, reaches the eighteenth century. The Risorgimento, as well as the twentieth century, represent variants of a 'long Renaissance' that contrasts with the 'short time' of wars, state crisis and economic declines, elements in which are absorbed all negative aspects, that have less weight in the historiographical outline of the *longue durée*. The 'resistance forces' (for example. inquisitions, censorships, tyrannies) sometimes hinder the path of civilisation; but the modern world continues its journey forward. It is a fact that societies and cultures continue their dialogue with the Renaissance, elaborating, for example, a concept like the intellectual as a new humanist *artifex* or proposing a poetics based on imagination as the sediment of memories, like *lieux de mémoire*; similarly, architectural theorists evoke ideas of local tradition as an instrument to overcome the separation of the building from the life of those who use it. It seems that the research included in this volume, precisely in the contradictory nature of the conclusions that are proposed, suggests a Renaissance that is different from the essentially positive one to which the historiographical concept of the *longue durée* has referred. It is a concept of the Renaissance and its reception that makes it still dramatically current today.

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