

Toward an Art History of Spanish Italy*

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IN 1550, GIORGIO VASARI published the first edition of his *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Architects, Painters and Sculptors*, the now inescapably influential celebration of the arts Vasari took to have been reborn and perfected in the Tuscan state. Yet imagine what a traveler that year, moving through Italy roughly from south to north, would have encountered. The most impressive Tuscan project anywhere was underway not in Florence but in Messina, where Giovanni Angelo da Montorsoli was supervising work on the Fountain of Orion (fig. 1). This was the first major public fountain erected in any Italian city in over a century and the most spectacular in Europe since antiquity. On its base, four river gods—the African Nile, the Spanish Ebro, the Roman Tiber, and the local Camaro—added up to a map not of Italy but of the western Mediterranean, with Sicily, not Florence, at its center. At its top was Orion, Messina’s mythical founder, looking to the city’s cathedral and beyond that to the east; this is the direction that Boccaccio’s *Genealogy of the Gods* had recorded Orion traveling to defeat the “Thracians,” a term that in Montorsoli’s time had come to be applied to the Ottoman Turks.

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*This essay aims to imagine one possible future for the study of sixteenth-century Italian art, not to represent the state of the literature. It refers to the following publications: Tommaso Mozzi and Antonio Natali, eds., *Norma e capriccio: Spagnoli in Italia agli esordi della “maniera moderna”* (Florence, 2013); Gérard Labrot, *Palazzi napoletani: Storie di nobili e cortigiani, 1520–1750* (Naples, 1993); Diane H. Bodart, *Pouvoirs du portrait sous les Habsbourg d’Espagne* (Paris, 2011); Nicola Suthor, *Bravura: Virtuosität und Mutwilligkeit in der Malerei der Frühen Neuzeit* (Munich, 2010); Alessandra Russo, *The Untranslatable Image: A Mestizo History of the Arts in New Spain, 1500–1600* (Austin, TX, 2013); Giorgio Caravale, “Forbidding Prayer in Italy and Spain: Censorship and Devotional Literature in the Sixteenth Century; Current Issues and Future Research,” in *Reading and Censorship in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Maria José et al. (Barcelona, 2010), 57–78; Carolin Behrmann, “On Form and the Authority of Juridical Objects,” in *Die Herausforderung des Objekts*, ed. G. Ulrich Grossmann and Petra Krutisch (Nuremberg, 2013); and Felipe Pereda, “Sombras y cuadros: Teorías y Culturas de la representación en la Europa de la Reforma Católica,” in “Sacar de la sombra lumbre”: *La teoría de la pintura en el Siglo de Oro, 1560–1724*, ed. José Antonio Riello Velasco (Madrid, 2012), 69–86. Infor-



Figure 1. Giovanni Angelo da Montorsoli, Orion Fountain, Messina, 1547–51 (as reconstructed after the earthquake of 1908). (Photo: author) Color version available as an online enhancement.

Sicily was the largest island in the Mediterranean and a key military outpost for Spain, whose viceroy ruled the territory from his seat in Palermo. The Orion Fountain was a sign of Messina's geopolitical significance, one whose echoes would be felt strongly in the years to follow, when it would be joined by a group of other public sculptures, including Montorsoli's Fountain of Neptune, in which the god originally addressed the city from the sea, and Andrea Calamech's bronze portrait of the naval commander Don Juan of Austria, standing over bronze reliefs of the Spanish fleet. The ensemble would provide a model not only for Palermo, where a series of viceroys launched comparable urban transformations in the decades that followed, but also for Rome, where the popes would soon begin using coordinated basins to link together their own city.

Crossing the Strait of Messina, our traveler would enter the Kingdom of Naples, the largest mass of land anywhere on the peninsula to be controlled by a single ruler, the Spanish viceroy Don Pedro de Toledo. Don Pedro had already spent years renovating his capital, the city of Naples, with the introduction of a sewer system, the building of a new hospital, the modification of the city walls,

mation about the funding for St. Peter's comes from Thomas James Dandeleit, "Paying for the New St. Peter's: Contributions to the Construction of the New Basilica from Spanish Lands, 1506–1620," in *Spain in Italy: Politics, Society, and Religion, 1500–1700*, ed. Thomas Dandeleit and John Marino (Leiden, 2006), 181–95. My attention to Alfonso d'Avalos depends on a series of conversations with Ippolita di Majo, who conceived a most interesting project around this patron some years ago. I owe thanks, finally, to Stephen Campbell and Jonathan Nelson for reading a draft of this essay and for their helpful comments.

and the reconstruction of a looming fortification, the Castel Sant'Elmo; in 1540, he had also begun work on a new viceregal palace. Among the most dramatic recent changes to the city, though, was the construction of the Via Toledo, running north-south along what had been the path of the city's western wall, and the expansion of the city by nearly a third beyond this. Lining the new street were palaces into which Don Pedro hoped the local nobles would move, separating them from the urban seats and rural castles that were the bases of their power. Behind these palaces were the Quartieri Spagnoli, with humbler residences along gridded streets, intended to house Spanish troops.

Passing beyond the Kingdom of Naples, our traveler would enter the Papal States and the city of Rome. Rome had been pillaged and its population decimated during the Sack perpetrated by Spanish troops twenty-three years earlier. Nine years after that, in preparation for a momentous visit by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, the Roman Forum had been cleared of many medieval structures, and new streets had been cut for the procession. Following the imperial entry, Pope Paul III had used the memory of the event to justify the continuation of work on a series of grand projects aimed at restoring the city's glory. A traveler arriving in 1550 could probably have learned that Nanni di Baccio had just been hired by the Society of Jesus—the dynamic new religious order founded by the Spanish immigrant Ignatius Loyola—to provide designs for a new mother church. When complete, it would be the most prominent religious edifice to have gone up in centuries in the heart of the city. Across town, Michelangelo was at work on a marble *Pietà*, a subject that had become a preoccupation for him in the course of his exchanges with Vittoria Colonna, a follower of Juan de Valdés, the Spanish exile who had himself resided briefly in Rome before settling in Naples. In 1550, Michelangelo was also architect of the great Basilica of St. Peter's, where demolitions of what his predecessors had built and the walls of his own new domed structure were underway. Carrying out Michelangelo's project would require a team numbering in the hundreds and massive amounts of materials, supported by funds that came mostly from Spain and its territories.

Proceeding north, our traveler would enter Tuscany, where Emperor Charles V had helped Duke Cosimo de' Medici constitute a new dynastic state. Of particular consequence for the arts in that city was the patronage of Cosimo's wife, Eleonora of Toledo (fig. 2), the daughter of Don Pedro. It was for her that Bronzino had completed the most impressive new chapel in the city five years earlier. The year our traveler arrived, Eleonora purchased the Palazzo Pitti; in the same year, Niccolò Tribolo would begin designing the waterworks for what would become the Boboli Gardens.



Figure 2. Agnolo Bronzino, *Eleonora of Toledo with her Son Giovanni*, ca. 1545, oil on panel, Uffizi, Florence. (Photo: Art Resource) Color version available as an online enhancement.

In Parma, further north yet, the duke was Ottavio Farnese, who was married to Charles V's daughter Margaret of Austria. In Mantua, Guglielmo Gonzaga was enjoying the dynastic state his father Federico had secured in part by fighting as a condottiere on behalf of the emperor. The extensive lands belonging to Milan were run as an imperial fief, with a Spanish governor. In 1550, that governor was another Mantuan condottiere, Ferrante Gonzaga, who had previously



Figure 3. Portrait of Isabel of Valois, now usually attributed to Sofonisba Anguissola, oil on canvas, 1560s, Museo del Prado, Madrid. (Photo: Art Resource) Color version available as an online enhancement.

served as a page at Charles's court in Madrid and then as viceroy of Sicily. The most respected artist in Milan in 1550 was arguably Leone Leoni; one year earlier, Charles had given him a spacious house in the city where he could more comfortably carry out imperial projects. In 1550, Leoni was at work on the astonishing bronze portrait, now in the Prado, of Charles standing triumphant over Furor.

To the west, Genoa had survived as a republic, but only because admiral Andrea Doria had, in 1528, broken his alliance with France in order to join the Spanish; Charles had consequently consented to the territory's continuing independence, although with Doria as "censor." In 1550, Bronzino had begun work on the portrait now in Milan depicting Doria as Neptune. It would have been most unusual in any republic of this period for a member of government to wear the attributes as a god; this was regal, even imperial, iconography. The best local artist at that moment was the young Luca Cambiaso, a virtuoso who, then only twenty-three, had already supplied paintings and frescoes for Doria's villa and for several churches. In his maturity, he would be summoned to the court of Madrid, where he would work until his death.

The most powerful state of all, finally, and the most truly independent, was Venice, yet Venice's most famous and important living artist, Titian, had by 1550 been a salaried employee of the Spanish court for a decade. Among his most ambitious works of the period was his equestrian portrait of Charles at Mühlberg, completed in 1548. In 1550, he was at work on a portrait of Charles's son Philip.

Comparing art history in the Vasarian tradition to the encounters of our traveler, we face an obvious question: Was the place we now call Italy, in the sixteenth century, really Italy at all? Our sense of the country is almost ineluctably shaped by our familiarity with today's nation-state, yet only recently have art historians begun to question the historiographic consequences of the modern organization of Europe. (The great edition of Vasari's *Lives* that many of us still use, that of Gaetano Milanesi, was published just seventeen years after Italian unification; Milanesi had lived in Florence during the six years it served as Italy's capital.) In the very near future, I expect, the redefinition of our Renaissance geography will only accelerate. Institutions are pushing this: Florence's Kunsthistorisches Institute has led the way in establishing "the Mediterranean" as a Renaissance art historical field. American universities these days are as likely to run searches for specialists in "southern Europe" as in "Italian Renaissance." I Tatti itself recently changed the language of its own call for applications and introduced a new Mellon fellowship targeting scholars "who teach, or plan to teach, in Asia, Islamic countries, Latin America, and the Mediterranean basin."

What will come of this, or what could?

Certainly we can hope to learn more about the south—the Spanish vice-royalties of Naples and Sicily—regions that, with a few notable exceptions, have received little attention in the mainstream Renaissance art historical literature. Studying these places presents difficulties to which those who work on places like Florence or Venice are unaccustomed: earthquakes have almost completely destroyed the Renaissance monuments in a stunning number of cities (a very incomplete list would include Noto and Catania in 1693, Melfi in 1694, L’Aquila in 1703 and again in 2009, Teggiano in 1857, Messina and Reggio Calabria in 1908, Avezzano in 1915); World War II artillery and bombs, many of them American, erased significant monuments and archives in many others. The relative poverty of the south has limited possibilities for presenting and studying what does remain: on a long 2011 trip, I found the main museums in Catania, Messina, Reggio Calabria, and Capua all closed; Cefalù’s Mandralisca Museum is under threat as well. Those who work in these centers do not have easy access to good libraries with extended hours. The most important research tends to be carried out by local scholars, whose work is not always well disseminated.

Rethinking the geography of Renaissance Italy, however, must involve not only an expansion or change in the territory we study but also a reconception of familiar places. Thinking of Milan as a Spanish center, for example, helps explain why so many Lombard artists spent time in Madrid. Conversely, exhibitions like the one that recently closed at the Uffizi can challenge us to recognize the Spanish presence in numerous Italian cities and workshops. The movement not just of artists but also of patrons established networks that still remain to be properly defined. The most impressive surviving building in Atri was constructed for Margaret of Austria, the wife of Ottavio Farnese, ruler of Parma: she provides an architectural link between two cities we seldom consider together but also one between Spanish Italy and the Spanish Netherlands, which she had governed for eight years. One patron of Titian but also of Giulio Romano, Filippo Negroli, and other artists was Alfonso d’Avalos, who came from the Spanish-controlled island of Ischia (off the coast of Naples), led Spanish forces in Tunis, and served both as marquis of the Adriatic town of Vasto and as governor of Milan. Many of the most striking renovations to Palermo were undertaken during the reign of Marcantonio Colonna, a Roman aristocrat who had represented the Spanish in suppressing the rebellion of Siena in 1553 and the pope at Lepanto in 1572; before becoming Viceroy of Sicily, he had resided in Avezzano, then part of the Kingdom of Naples, where he was responsible for a number of architectural commissions. Examples like these show that an art history of “Spanish Italy” has to be more than a collection of local histories and has to be more than a history of the south.

We do have models for such a study. Gérard Labrot's remarkable *Palazzi napoletani* compares urban changes in Genoa and Naples, illuminating the different political dynamics in the two cities and how these reflected their different relationships with Spain. Diane Bodart's recent book on Hapsburg portraiture studies the emperor's construction of a model image—one that local rulers in northern Italy, no less than later kings of Spain, would imitate. Looking at an artist like Bronzino with Bodart's book in mind, he begins to look less quintessentially Florentine: the portrait formats his sitters had him employ were as much in dialogue with Spanish norms as the clothes they wear. Portraiture is not the only genre that looks different if we adjust our geography: mythological subject matter is another. Surely it is no coincidence that Andrea Doria in Genoa and Federigo Gonzaga in Mantua were both having members of Raphael's workshop paint large frescoes of the Fall of the Giants in the same years, in both cases with the expectation that Charles V would see them. Jupiter, the protagonist of the scene, is also the main actor in the series of mythologies that Correggio painted, as well as in Titian's treatments of the Danae theme. It is tempting to see the increasing presence of the king of the gods in Italian painting as a measure of the increasing presence of Spain on the peninsula and the eagles in these paintings as recurrences of a Hapsburg heraldic device. Similarly, we might note the way that the public Neptune statue, which first appears in the port cities of Genoa and Messina, spreads inland, evidence for the idea that even landlocked centers like Florence and Bologna came to be oriented to the Mediterranean. The same could be said of the various sites (Messina, Florence, Bologna) that began drawing on the Ulysses story. Mythological imagery had the appeal of being universal, a derivation from a shared ancient past not subject to the divisions that wracked the sixteenth-century church. But it also had the attraction of being abstract and thus flexible: any local ruler could pretend to be Neptune or could flatteringly suggest that he was ultimately subordinate to the Spanish God of the Sea.

An art history of Spanish networks would have to draw on but also push beyond the studies of collecting, individual identity, and diplomatic gift exchange that have been the strengths of the recent literature. And ultimately, it would have to find a way to attend directly to the idea of art as such. Nicola Suthor has recently written a marvelous book on *bravura* painting, and I would now like to read a study of its opposite, the *diligenza* that Sofonisba Anguissola and Leone Leoni both cultivated when working for the Spanish court, a manner that likens their art to Bronzino as well (fig. 3). Beyond painting, one might ask why, if the culture grew increasingly interconnected, favored media remained so distinct: Why is it that polychromed sculpture was so much more popular on

the Iberian than on the Italian peninsula and that the reverse was true for single-leaf prints?

Renaissance scholars could follow the lead of the Latin Americanist Alessandra Russo and examine the place of Italian writings within an emergent Iberian art literature, whose new terms and categories change our sense of the sources as much as the translations. We might remember that Michelangelo addressed his single most famous statement on sculpture, the sonnet “Non ha l’ottima artista alcun concetto,” to Vittoria Colonna, the daughter and wife, respectively, of two Neapolitan rulers. The first of Michelangelo’s writings ever to be published, that sonnet owed its initial fame to the fact that Benedetto Varchi delivered a lengthy exposition of its conceit; Varchi, who has just recently come to be regarded as one of the most interesting writers of the mid-sixteenth century, dedicated his publication to Don Luigi di Toledo, son of the reigning viceroy of Naples, and in the years that followed, the poem would become a touchstone of Spanish art theory. But poetry is just one among many genres of literature that help define the larger Spanish world: commentaries, travelogs, religious texts, letters, inventories, and accounts of civic and religious ceremonies can all be read comparatively for their ideas of art and not just as historical records.

Similarly, we can attend to the new pressures that painting, sculpture, and other media faced in an age of Spanish dominion. Historians, especially in Italy, have reinvigorated the study of the Inquisition in Italy and Spain (where its actions were quite different) but have not yet given us any comparative accounts of the accusations directed against artists or against owners of banned images; art historians, for their part, are only now just beginning to investigate the role images played in the juridical processes themselves. Felipe Pereda has underscored that the function of the image, the idea of what one was worshipping and what happened with one’s prayers, was significantly different in Italy and Spain, despite the common Catholic faith and the regular travel of artists and patrons and the movement of art.

A central question for religious art in the age of the Reformation was that of idolatry. And while idolatry was undeniably a topic of some concern even in the 1490s and before, it became a preoccupation of the art literature only after 1550. Might this not be connected to the fact that this was when church writers and others became most sharply aware of the use of images in other parts of the globe? Catholic practices involving images had to be defined and defended against their Protestant challengers, but among the most prominent objects that were referred to as idols in Italy were those that had been imported from exotic places, often by way of Spain. Spanish descriptions of image worship in the

Americas and elsewhere must have affected the way writers envisioned pagan practices.

Finally, a study of Spanish dominion in Italy should include a rethinking of the sixteenth-century city. For all the interest in recent years in ephemeral decorations and festival culture, we have no substantial comparative account of the way that cities both inside and outside Italy were transformed in preparation for Spanish imperial entries or of how these differed from local festivals. More broadly, we need to rethink the relationship between local and international politics and their respective impact on individual cities and neighborhoods. Architectural historians have looked at the development of the massive fortifications that arose in many cities from the perspective of defensive effectiveness in the age of artillery, but there is no history of the resistance to these military installations, which were broadly despised. After a group of local nobles conspired to assassinate Duke Pier Luigi Farnese in 1547, they testified that it was the building of his citadel in Piacenza that had motivated them. When the Sienese rose up against the Spanish ambassador Diego Hurtado de Mendoza in 1552, the citadel the Spanish had built in that city was likewise the target of their anger.

Simply substituting “Spain” for “Italy” will not advance the cause of a post-nationalist history of Renaissance art. Nor is the point of this essay to deny the exemplary power of Italian norms elsewhere in Europe. But allowing that late Renaissance Italy was a kind of Spanish colony, an analogue to the Spanish Netherlands or to sixteenth-century Mexico, offers one response to those who question the continuing interest of the field within a “global” art history. And recognizing that these circumstances bear not only on the south but also on regions that have long been the focus of Italian studies challenges us to build on, rather than abandon, the deep historiography that makes our field so rich.