

Was there an Italian Renaissance?

Whose was it?

In June of 2011, Lady Gaga stepped out of her car with the help of her handlers wearing Venetian style *zoccoli*. She seemed to be re-living an illustration from Cesare Vercellio. This is not the first time Lady Gaga channeled the Italian Renaissance. In the Fall of 2013, she left a London hotel wearing a vintage (1993) Dolce & Gabbana dress imprinted with the image of Botticelli's Venus. Her blond hair flowed forth like Venus herself.

Botticelli's Venus is easily considered one of the great masterpieces of the Renaissance; celebrated, canonized, and commercialized. This is certainly the case in a Reebok sneakers advertisement from 2008, where Zephyr aided by Aura (the gentle breeze) seemed to facilitate the runner with their breath.

Reebok is not alone. In 2009, Lavazza coffee paid Julia Roberts 1.5 million dollars to star in a 45-second commercial in which she played an unsmiling Venus who did not want to cooperate with the frustrated painter Botticelli (played by the Tuscan comic Paolo Ruffini), accompanied by Italy's familiar television host Paolo Bonolis and the singer/comedian Luca Laurenti.

Economists might say that Botticelli's name and his paintings provide commodities with added value. They are associated with great art, a period of rebirth, travel to Italy, and consumption of the pleasures of Italian culture and cuisine – even IF they actually have nothing to do with Italy, as in the case of Reebok.

Such commodities do not simply pimp history or dilute its substance. Rather, they almost always profess allegiance to artisanal practices and good taste (literally in the case of Lavazza). The makers of Botticelli chocolates, an upscale brand from Canada, are typical in claiming that their chocolates “are meticulously crafted, aspiring to the same classical perfection as those of the famous artist – works of art created using traditional methods and ... age old expertise.” Never mind that



Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*,
c. 1482, tempera on canvas,
172×278 cm, Uffizi, Florence
Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY



Reebok sneakers
advertisement, 2008



Istituto Istruzione Superiore
 "Piero della Francesca,"
 Affresco Urbano, Parcheggio
 Pietri, Arezzo, 2011
 Photo: Anna Mascorella

Botticelli himself lived more than a century before cocoa was brought to Italy. In the case of Botticelli chocolates, the Renaissance is being made to stand for something else.

The Venus, as sported by Lady Gaga, is instantly recognized and coveted. Surprisingly, this has not always been the case. In 1864, one art expert (Ralph Nicholson Wornum of London's National Gallery) noted that the Botticelli Venus was not only "coarse," and "without beauty" but ultimately "void of taste."¹

1) Ralph Nicholson Wornum, *The Epochs of Painting. A Biographical and Critical Essay on Painting and Painters of all times and many places*, (London: Chapman and Hall, 1864), 160 and 195.

Indeed, things were quite different in the mid-nineteenth century when Wornum was writing about the Venus. In 1850, when John Frederick Lewis painted a watercolor of the Uffizi's *Tribuna*, he captured some familiar masterpieces including Raphael's portrait of Julius II, Andrea del Sarto's *Madonna of the Harpies*, Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, Veronese's *Holy Family*, and Guercino's *Samian Sibyl* as well as a few statues from antiquity such as the *Dancing Faun*, the *Wrestlers*, and, most acclaimed of all, the *Medici Venus* (which visitors in the nineteenth century could use to obtain ideal body proportions). There were no Botticellis. It was not until the twentieth century that the Venus and three other Botticellis were moved to the Tribune, where, according to the *Baedeker* guide, the "choicest paintings" were hung.²

2) Karl Baedeker, *Handbook for Travellers. Northern Italy*, (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker Publisher, 1880), 388.

So how could the Venus not always have been considered "choice?" After all, "the Venus is so fabulously beautiful" notes a Khan Academy (a non-profit educational organization that provides lessons on YouTube) tutorial.³ And most viewers would agree.

3) www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/early-renaissance1/painting-in-florence/v/botticelli-the-birth-of-venus-1483-85, accessed May 16, 2016.

Although Botticelli's case is extreme, it has parallels. Piero della Francesca was also unknown at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This seems unbelievable as the Piero della Francesca Trail has renewed enthusiasm for small towns of Central Italy where the "great" Resurrection and several more of Piero's paintings are located. But even when Nathaniel Hawthorne went to Arezzo in the mid-nineteenth century, he went to see Petrarch's House and not the Pieros.⁴ Now of course this is all different; the Arezzo Comune has made sure that even the city's new parking garage is properly branded.

4) Sophia Hawthorne, *Notes in England and Italy*, (New York: G. P. Putnam & Son, 1870).

The rediscovery of Botticelli, Piero, and several more "primitives" has never yielded straightforward truths. In other words – their "discovery" says more about the period of

discovery and the person doing the discovering. The “discoveries” of Botticelli, Piero and others are all products of the nineteenth century meant to serve other products of the nineteenth century – namely, public museums, middle-class travel, the art market, and, of course, art history. As a previously overlooked object, Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* was introduced within the narrative of heroic discovery customary in the spheres of nineteenth-century archaeology and exploration. In a way, its discovery was just another colonial enterprise.

In 1881, Walter Pater wrote that he had been two years ahead of John Ruskin in discovering Botticelli.⁵ Never mind that Botticelli’s major paintings were available in Florentine public collections including the Uffizi – so how either man could purport to having “discovered” them is odd. As far as Pater was concerned, the interconnected terrain of history and exploration made Botticelli his intellectual property. And so went the story of much of art history – white men going on colonial adventures south of the Alps making attributions as they went.

Bernard Berenson is one of these interlopers – refusing to give credit to or even acknowledge the work of others. This was particularly the case with women such as Vernon Lee, whom he accused of plagiarism, and Edith Wharton, who all but begged him to confirm her attribution of the Della Robbia workshop at the Tuscan shrine of San Vivaldo.⁶ He dismissed Wharton as an amateur. This should make us wonder to what extent this is all gendered. After all, the early leading voices of Renaissance art history are men – Vasari, Burckhardt, Pater and Berenson. Knowledgeable women of the time – such as Vernon Lee or Janet Ross – have been dismissed as mere travel writers. Berenson openly warred with Lee and pretended to ignore Wharton.

The discipline of art history seems to lend itself to territorial exploration. Let us remember that Katherine Weil Garris Brandt claimed to have found a new Michelangelo statue in 1995 hidden in plain sight within the courtyard of the French Embassy in NYC – purchased by Stanford White from the Florentine dealer Stefano Bardini in 1906 to surmount a fountain in the Payne Whitney house in NYC. It is now on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and featured in the Renaissance Galleries. Weil Garris Brandt’s discovery was the topic of countless news programs and essays. Most recently, two small sculptures of naked men riding ferocious panthers, on display in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, have been identified as being by Michelangelo. But why the

5) In 1881, Walter Pater referred to an essay he had written in 1870 that was the first reference to Botticelli in English. See Lawrence Evans, ed., *Letters of Walter Pater*, (Oxford: London, 1970), 41.

6) D. Medina Lasansky, “Beyond the Guidebook: Edith Wharton’s Rediscovery of San Vivaldo,” in *Edith Wharton and Cosmopolitanism*, edited by Emily Orlando and Meredith Goldsmith (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2016).

rush to attribute? Attributions, names on maps, and monuments in museums all owe their positions to negotiations over value, ownership, and history. We should expect nothing less of colonialism.

The Renaissance itself is ultimately one of these monuments, fashioned from numerous top down appropriations and rulings. Its artificial character is evident in those improbable accounts of a predestined, or at least irreversible, development. It is within this framework that we have all heard about the progression of the arts from Giotto to Michelangelo, the mastery of “nature” coupled with the rebirth of classical antiquity, humanist doctrine and secular triumph. Suffice to say no movement in the arts has ever been credited with such sustained coherence of purpose.

So if we were to un-map this, how would that be done?

Perhaps first by becoming self-aware of how and why we ask the questions that we do.

The primary source for the 300-year epic saga of the Renaissance is of course Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, first published in 1550. In this multi-volume study, Tuscany, if not Florence, emerges at the center of the perfection of the arts. Men overrule women and individual creators take precedence over collaborations, even though we all know that Michelangelo did not work alone.

Within the Vasarian narrative it follows that Rome is a religious center and Venice is the cosmopolitan bastion of trade with the East. But where is Spanish Naples? The Spanish Piedmont? And where is Genova? Somehow it is not in the mix, and yet if we were to read the trade and banking documents, the Renaissance might be all about Genova. Despite the recent surge in Vasari scholarship, Florence remains the center of the Renaissance, and Vasari provides the foundational narrative on authorship. The same questions remain.

In all of this, Renaissance Art is o c u l a r - c e n t r i c . In other words, the experience of space and place is sidetracked. What things smelled like, sounded like, felt like have oddly not been in the purview of the art or even architectural historian. There are of course the exceptions. Years ago, David Freedberg showed us how the Early Modern viewer responded to images. Megan Holmes convinced readers of the miraculous efficacy of images in Renaissance Florence, Geraldine Johnson has underscored the power of touch and Niall Atkinson showed us how noisy the Renaissance is.⁷

There is no doubt that ocular hegemony has been reinforced by the way in which the discipline of art and architectural history

7) David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Megan Holmes, “Miraculous Images in Renaissance Florence,” *Art History*, vol. 34, issue 3 (2011), 432-465; and Niall Atkinson, “The Republic of Sound:

has been shaped. As has been observed, since the time of the Renaissance architectural theorist Leon Battista Alberti, smell, taste, sound, and texture have been screened out of the perspectival grid.⁸ By focusing exclusively on the visual, we suffer – as architect Juhani Pallasmaa has argued – from a kind of architectural autism.⁹ We need to recalibrate our “sensory ratio”, to borrow a term from Marshal McLuhan.¹⁰ In other words, we need to adjust the extent to which certain senses are privileged vis-à-vis others.

What if we were to examine the acoustically shaped spaces, use of architectural chiaroscuro, forced hapticity, architectural effects of weather, the importance of touch and smell, as well as the way in which time is represented? Would we, as scholars, look at different kinds of spaces? Would we challenge the idea of the Renaissance as a period epitomized by non-haptic, one-point perspective, or surveillance (what we might define as looking at something while frozen in space)? And might we then rethink the extent to which the body can function simultaneously as an architectural material, a device of perception, as well as a mode of representation?

The ocular focus of traditional art and architectural history is perplexing at best. Architecture specifically is a fully formed phenomenological space – where the visual experience is important but not exclusively important. Color, smell, sound, and touch have been largely expunged from architectural discourse as we have grown comfortable discussing architecture within the context of a canon of monuments divorced from their experiential matrix. Or to paraphrase art historian James Elkins, the ivory tower is a site of tearlessness.¹¹

There are Renaissance sites that remind us how a site would have been seen, used, heard and felt. The Sacro Monte of Varallo is one such site—showing us how the acts of kneeling, crawling, and crying constitute central design elements. In this case, architecture provides a frame for heightening self-consciousness through the manipulation of the body in space. By foregrounding the senses, architecture can use the body to surface the unseen – to render the invisible palpable.¹²

Listening to Florence at the Threshold of the Renaissance,” *I Tatti Studies in the Renaissance* 16/1-2 (Sept. 2013), 57-84. Also see Geraldine Johnson’s “A taxonomy of touch: tactile encounters in Renaissance Italy,” in *Sculpture and Touch*, ed. Peter Dent, (Farnham, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 91-106; “Touch, Tactility, and the Reception of Sculpture in Early Modern Italy,” in *A Companion to Art Theory*, eds. Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 61-74; and “The Art of Touch in Early Modern Italy,” in *Art & The Senses*, eds. F. Bacci and D. Melcher, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59-84.

8) See David Howes, “To Summon all the Senses,” in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience. A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, ed. David Howes, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 3-21, 5. Samuel Edgerton provides what has remained a formative discussion of Alberti’s optical system in the Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

9) Juhani Pallasmaa, *Eyes of the Skin: architecture and the senses*, (Hoboken, NJ, John Wiley & Sons, 2005 reprint).

10) Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, (Berkeley: Gingko Press, Inc., 2003 edition), 66-67, and 78.

11) James Elkins, “The Ivory Tower of Tearlessness,” in *Pictures and Tears. A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 90-107.

12) Robert Orsi has said something similar about “lived religion.” See *Between Heaven and Earth. The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 64 and 73-74.

13) For discussions of the senses in the Renaissance, see John Shannon Hendrix and Charles Carman, eds., *Renaissance Theories of Vision* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010). For a foundational study of Renaissance vision, see David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). For a discussion of vision, see Robert Nelson, “Introduction: Descartes’s Cow and Other Domestications of the Visual,” in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

14) See for example Nina Ergin, “The Soundscape of Sixteenth-Century Istanbul Mosques: Architecture and Qur’an Recital,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67/4 (Dec. 2008), 204-221.

15) Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 60.

In so doing – visual culture has been placed back into equilibrium with the other senses, and of course, by acknowledging this, we as historians of the built environment can come to our senses, both literally and figuratively.¹³ Interestingly, more work has been done on these aspects for parts of the so-called “non-Western” world. Perhaps, those of us working in the West could learn some things.¹⁴

It is critical to consider how the user experiences a building. What is it like to move through a space? How is a site seen as a viewer/user is moving? How do light, sound, and even heat or the lack thereof, draw attention to certain spaces, certain scenes within those spaces? How do these aspects encourage certain kinds of

movement? How does bodily engagement with the site (through the act of crawling, writing, or touching) accentuate architectural moments? In the case of Varallo, an inherently religious site, it is also pertinent to ascertain the extent to which religious narrative and religious behavior work in tandem with heightened sensory experiences at specific architectural moments. If the user is sleep deprived, fatigued, hungry from fasting, in pain from self-flagellation, and maybe even sick, what sort of hallucinatory revelations are operative? Suffice to say, the questions are numerous. It has been argued that few of the buildings encountered on a daily basis become “transformative conversation partners.”¹⁵ Assuming that this is true, are we asking the wrong questions? Or, not enough questions?

There is no doubt that disciplinary training has reinforced ocular hegemony. From at least the Early Modern period there has been an emphasis on drawings: plans, sections, and elevations as well as the fetishistically addictive models that patrons are often pictured gazing at with loving eyes. These modes of representation not only accentuate the visual rendering of a building, but a static moment in time. Within this framework, buildings are both unmoving and un-experienced. They are something to gaze upon, often from a point of view that is situated above and beyond the structure itself. How might we rethink such representational strategies? Can Renaissance spaces be represented in such a way as to denote that they are experienced and understood in different ways at different moments?



Graffiti, 16th century,
Calvary Chapel,
Sacro Monte of Varallo
Photo: D. Medina Lasansky

Architectural history has long privileged the authority of the designer as well as modes of representation (plan, section, elevation, model), which undermine a history of sensory experience. So, we must ask whether or not intention matters. In order to have a productive discussion of experience, it is of little consequence whether or not a site was conceived and designed to be experienced in a given way. It is how the site was experienced that matters. For example, the palimpsest of graffiti incised on the walls of the Crucifix chapel at the Sacro Monte of Varallo does not appear to have been intended by Gaudenzio Ferrari (the designer), desired by the site custodians, or approved by the Bishop. And yet hundreds and hundreds of men (and a few women) “signed in” telling us who they were, where they came from, when, and with whom. On occasion they even chose to tell us what they did for a living (there was a soldier, a musician, and a priest). Interacting with the scene of Christ’s crucifixion and bearing witness in this way was clearly important. As such, the chapel walls constitute an invaluable primary source.¹⁶

16) On the graffiti see D. Medina Lasansky “Sacred Graffiti” in *The Renaissance. Revised, Expanded, Unexpurgated*, edited by D. Medina Lasansky (Pittsburgh: Periscope, 2014).

17) See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the denigration of vision in 20th-century French thought*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

18) David Howes, “To Summon all the Senses,” in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience. A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, ed. David Howes, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 3-21, 5

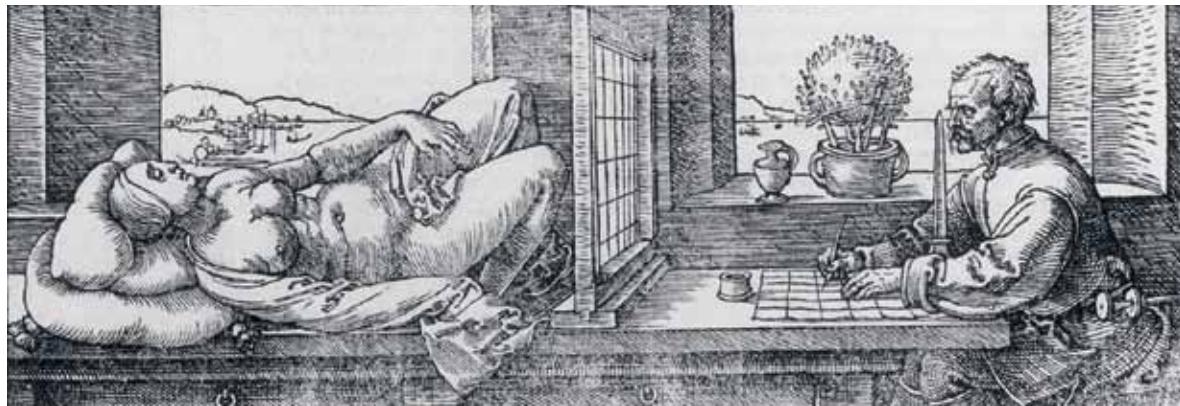
19) Joy Monice Malnar and Frank Vodvarka note something similar in *Sensory Design*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 11.

It is clear that Alberti’s system of one-point perspective privileges visual logic – focusing attention in a kind of monocular and fixed way.¹⁷ Albrecht Dürer’s print of a draftsman sketching a nude woman through a screen of perspectival threads has been dis-

cussed in these terms on numerous occasions. For our purposes, the way in which the Albertian grid screens out smells, tastes, sounds and textures in order to focus on visual mechanics is important. The grid precludes any real engagement between the model and the viewer.¹⁸ There is no doubt that this

accentuated perspectival system has remained the dominant mode of representation in the West. But perhaps more importantly, and more subversively, it has dominated the way in which architectural historians think about space – as a perfected image frozen in time and divorced from sensorial engagement.

Coeval with the rise of the perspectival system was the birth of the printing press.¹⁹ The printed image helped reinforce a kind of visual objectification. The two-dimensional representation of architecture sited on the printed page is inherently mono-dimensional – there being no way to represent sound, touch, smell, or taste in the printed image. Thus, such printed visual objectification



Albrecht Dürer, *Alberti's Veil*,
c. 1527, woodcut, 7.5×21.5 cm
Photo: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY

reinforces a monocular vision.²⁰ It follows that Andrea Palladio's

20) Svetlana Alpers discusses Renaissance space outside of Italy, and the predilection of attention to descriptive detail, fetishized commodities and a greater interest in lighting. See her influential book *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Given this, one must wonder if the Sacro Monte of Varallo drew upon Northern representational traditions and strategies.

Villa Rotonda in Vicenza, one of the most famous buildings of the sixteenth century, was reduced to an elegant façade and plan views on the printed page of the architect's canonical 1570 *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*. There is

no image that even calls attention to the overwhelming feeling of being in the interior Rotonda space, or compressing one's body into the spiral staircases. Sebastiano Serlio's influential sixteenth-century discourse on architecture similarly codifies a visual dictionary of architectural details – doorways, fireplaces, and columns.

The renderings of both architects are removed from the warmth of actual buildings – under the pretense of being more readily copied. Even Alberti, who wrote on a variety of topics ranging from cryptography to family dynamics, is most commonly known for his discussion of the perspectival system as illustrated by Dürer, thereby reducing the complexities of his career to a single visual moment. It should be noted here that Alberti himself never illustrated Dürer's texts. Did he intend *de re aedificatoria* and *della pittura* as manuals for a nameless architect or painter to practice in a more sensory way? Or, did he intend his words to provide a kind of de-sensitized grid? One imagines that it was the latter, and in so doing Alberti laid the groundwork for designers such as Palladio and Serlio to focus attention not only on their visual renderings, but their own singular artistic genius. Inevitably, Alberti also laid the groundwork for architectural historians.

Pallasmaa notes that the Renaissance preference for perspectival focus can be seen in marked contrast to the tactile, inviting illusionary space of the Baroque with its multiple perspectives.²¹ Of course we only need to think of mathemati-

21) Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses* (New York: John Wiley, 2005), 35.

cians and astronomers like Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei who were, during the Early Modern period, challenging the public to rethink how they saw shapes and understood their position

in space. Whether it was drawing attention to eclipses (and the new tools that could draw them), or telescopes which could surface that which had been previously invisible to the naked eye, the Baroque was marked by new ways of seeing and experiencing. To illustrate this point, we can conjure up Pietro da Cortona's mid-seventeenth-century church of Santa Maria della Pace located near the Piazza Navona in Rome, which unfolds as the viewer moves towards, and through it. Or we might think

of Francesco Borromini's interior of the church of San Carlo delle Quattro Fontane (1638-41), also in Rome, where hidden light sources challenge basic understandings of solids and voids.

If Baroque architecture embodies a kind of haptic, kinesthetic experience, then (to borrow the formative categories of foundational Swiss art historian Heinrich Wöfflin, as put forth in his 1915 book *The Principles of Art History*) the Renaissance is marked by design that is closed and linear. Within this world-view, the Renaissance privileges visual perception in a hierarchical and exclusive fashion.²² In other words, the Renaissance "window" is fixed.²³

There is of course a set of historiographic reasons why ocular hegemony seems to prevail in architectural history. These relate to a series of foundational nineteenth-century epistemologies that have essentially forced us to look too much. The academic disciplines of both architecture and architectural history were founded in the nineteenth century. This is when professional courses of study were established, the early scholarly histories were written, the first architectural museums were set up, the medium of photography was developed, cities (most famously Paris, Barcelona, and Florence) were physically reframed through urban renewal, and the industry of mass tourism flourished. Each of these trends has profoundly affected the way in which architecture has been discussed since.²⁴

For most of the nineteenth century, the only place to study architecture was at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. An education at the École established the importance of drawing buildings as static entities. Students were required to visit historic sites (primarily in Italy) and produce exquisite renderings in plan, section, perspective and elevation. By the late nineteenth century, architecture programs were established at American universities (first at MIT, then Cornell).²⁵ These first programs, like many that followed, were heavily reliant upon the École model. As a result, ocular hegemony continued to be reinforced – through the use of visuals (whether through large-format glass plate slides, 35-mm slides, or present-day PowerPoint presentations). Even today, NAAB (the National Architecture Accreditation Board) requirements privilege visual education at the expense of all else. Despite changing technologies, the visual representation of architecture has been the preferred way of teaching architecture, just as the sites of architectural history are known for their inherent visual qualities.

Most historians of architecture learned to teach (even if unselfconsciously) under the influence of early scholars.

22) Ibid., 15.

23) Ibid., 34.

24) See Yannick Portebois and Nicholas Terpstra, eds. *The Renaissance in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2003).

25) On the history of architectural education see Mary Woods, *From Craft to Profession: the practice of architecture in nineteenth-century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

Heinrich Wöfflin's dualism between surfaces that were closed or open, linear or painterly, planar or recessional, enabled decades of reductive stereotypes and expectations.²⁶

26) Heinrich Wöfflin, *Principles of Art History; the problem of the development of style in later art*, (originally published in German in 1915 as *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*).

Wöfflin's intellectual legacy was continued by the German art historian Rudolf Arnheim (author of the 1969 *Visual Thinking*) who more than half a century later observed that, while we might enjoy thinking about smells, we certainly could not write about them.²⁷ Not surprisingly, one sense is privileged over others when it comes to architectural discourse.

27) Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

The first museums exclusively devoted to architecture, such as the Parisian Musée des Monuments français (opened by Alexandre Lenoir in 1795) or the Florentine Museo di Firenze Antica (founded in the late nineteenth century) furthered this visual emphasis. These museums featured architectural fragments; decorative components (altars, column capitals, doorways, inscriptions) that had been removed from the larger built matrix and put on display. How buildings or sites had once been experienced was of no consequence in such museums as the visitor moved from one architectural fragment to another. Not surprisingly, these venues played an important role in how architecture was studied and discussed – not only as a fragment of the whole, but in an ocular-centric fashion.

The advent of photography in turn helped to establish the way in which architecture was seen and understood by the larger public. Since the birth of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, buildings have been a favorite subject of photographers. Their inert presence allowed for the requisite prolonged exposures. While a blurred form in early photographs can identify the occasional moving figure, the emphasis was typically on a staged view of a building or cityscape that carefully expunged potentially messy human activity. Firms, such as the Fratelli Alinari studio based in Florence, canvassed and systematically photographed the Italian peninsula. Their work helped codify a way of looking at buildings, isolated from their urban context, imposing, typically frontal, and exteriorized.²⁸

28) See for example Massimo Ferretti, Alessandro Conti and Ettore Spallerti, "La documentazione dell'arte," in *Gli Alinari: Fotografi a Firenze, 1852-1920*, eds. Wladimiro Settimelli and Filippo Zevi (Florence: Alinari, 1977).

Such images were widely available—illustrating scholarly essays and books, as postcards that could be purchased on site, or as photographs that could be purchased by tourists. Susan Sontag once famously noted that the world was becoming a set of

photographs.²⁹ This was certainly the case during the

29) Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977).

nineteenth century as architectural sites were increasingly canonized through photographic images.

Perhaps we could argue, following the logic of David Levin, that photographs create a frontal, fixated, and focused view of the world. This is what he calls a “frontal ontology.”³⁰ There is perhaps no better example than the Alinari firm, whose photographs of Italy were purchased by universities throughout the United States – providing students with an identical set of images of the same set of monuments. The firm’s late nineteenth-century photograph of the Florence Duomo taken from the bell tower of the Palazzo Signoria underscores the visual logic evidenced in period photography. In this carefully constructed image, one monument frames another. From the camera position, the city’s intervening urban fabric has been strategically expunged. As a result, the city of Florence becomes a set of specific monuments. The gentleman, frozen on the spiral staircase, strategically provides a sense of scale. His precise form, un-blurred by movement, underscores the extent to which this photograph has been carefully choreographed. Such photographs helped to canonize a way of looking at architecture. So much so, that by the turn of the twentieth century, when tourists were increasingly equipped with their own portable Kodak camera boxes, they often took images of buildings that had already been made familiar through professional photography. The faceless man poised on the staircase of the bell tower invites the viewer of the image to take her place – and seek out the view.

Throughout the nineteenth century, urban space in cities such as Florence, Washington D.C., Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Madrid, Berlin, Cairo, Istanbul, Rome, Vienna and most famously Paris was reframed with a similar sense of one-point perspective in mind. The leaders of these cities were obsessed with creating new straight streets, ceremonial esplanades with imposing monuments, public parks, panoramic viewing spots, and public transport that could successfully move people through these newly rationalized spaces. In such urbanization projects, the mechanics of vision were paramount, and urban planners such as Antonio Cedrà and Baron Haussmann emerged as visionary heroes. However, nineteenth-century city planning was not simply about instituting a visual logic, but also about bureaucratizing the senses – making sure that that noisy and smelly activities took place at a remove from city centers or were even submerged underground – relocated in

30) David Michael Levin, “Decline and Fall. Ocularcentrism in Heidegger’s Reading of the History of Metaphysics,” in David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 186-217, 203.



Staircase of the tower of Arnolfo in Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, 1900-1905, Alinari Archive, Florence
Photo: Alinari / Art Resource, NY

the newly laid out subway systems and sewers.³¹ And yet, the principal understanding that has emerged from these urban renewal projects is guided by visual re-narration.

Finally, the practice of mass tourism is central to any discussion of the ways in which architecture has been visually framed. Heavily reliant on guidebooks, professionally produced photographic images and maps, tourists have since the nineteenth century visited buildings that were pre-digested for them – choosing itineraries that were predetermined and reading essays that interpreted monuments and sites. As a result, a potentially haptic and sensual activity was often reduced to visiting a canon of buildings in a manner that was pre-ordained. Tourists moved between buildings that were highlighted in their itineraries and isolated from urban contexts. An array of tourist trinkets helped to further isolate monuments – whether seen as pristine icons on micro-mosaic bracelets (a popular item in the nineteenth century) or ceramics. Even today, one of the most popular tourist guidebooks – (Dorling Kindersley’s *Eye Witness* series) underscores the importance of vision in travel. The unprecedented (and often unachievable) vantage points outlined in such books insidiously underscores the assumption that the tourist can somehow obtain super-ocular abilities. Such guidebooks are inherently different than say, the early guides to the Sacro Monte at the Varallo (the earliest dating to 1514), which encourage the pilgrim to crawl, kneel, and cry (among other things). The fully embodied form of sixteenth-century tourism was successfully replaced by one that reinforces a more ocular-centric mode of discourse.

It is clear that these foundational epistemologies privileged the visual. It is also clear that these epistemologies are inherently Western. Since at least the time of Plato, Western philosophy has understood that there are five senses and that the visual sense is the most intellectual amongst these. In the work of other cultures, periods, as well as even within the philosophies of some Western intellectuals themselves, there are more than five senses; Rudolf Steiner refers to twelve senses, Martin Jay argues that there are 17.³² Given this, it might be wise to suggest that not only is the sensory ratio in flux, but so too is the number and variety of senses.

Let’s also admit that the Renaissance arts are part of a privileged world. Where are the slaves that support this enterprise? And once we find them we have to ask if slaves are really

31) On Haussmanisation, see Matthew Gandy, “The Paris Sewers and the Rationalization of Urban Space”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24/1 (1999), 23-44; David P. Jordan, “Haussmann and Haussmanisation: The Legacy for Paris,” *French Historical Studies* 27/1 (Winter 2004), 87-113; Anthony Sutcliffe, Paris: *An Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and David Van Zanten, *Building Paris* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

32) Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses* (New York: John Wiley, 2005), 9.

a part of the heights of humanism? (Maybe Titian thought so – at least he records one.)

Of course remapping is overwhelming. As the nineteenth-century French writer Stendahl noted during an 1817 visit to Santa Croce – “I was in a sort of ecstasy, from the idea of being in Florence, close to the great men whose tombs I had seen. Absorbed in the contemplation of sublime beauty ... I reached the point where one encounters celestial sensations ... Everything spoke so vividly to my soul.

Ah, if I could only forget. I had palpitations of the heart, what in Berlin they call ‘nerves.’ Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling.”³³ This feeling has lent the

name to the so-called *Stendahl Syndrome* – something the lead character suffers in the 1996 Italian horror film *The Stendahl Syndrome*, directed by

33) Stendahl recorded his feelings in *Rome, Naples et Florence* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1854), 207. On the Stendahl syndrome, see Silvia Ross, *Tuscan Spaces: Literary Constructions of Place* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); and G. Magherini, *La Sindrome di Stendahl*, (Firenze: Ponte Alle Grazie, 1989).

Dario Argento. The lead, played by Asia Argento, has a Stendahl experience in the Uffizi brought on by both Piero and Botticelli’s Venus, the latter being a painting the character actually tries to touch. The syndrome and Asia’s actions make a point. When we go to a museum we are generally not expected, and often not allowed, to touch or lick the items on display. In some cases we cannot even get too close. The alarms should remind us that this is all a nineteenth-century construction.

Another foundational text of Renaissance art history is Jakob Burckhardt’s classic of 1860 in which the city-state emerges as the center of “the civilization of the Renaissance in Italy”. Burckhardt is considered a founder of academic art history, and his concept of culture is taken as a fixture in the field—a fixture carrying the baggage of a particular nineteenth-century cult of culture that continues with all its conservative, elitist assumptions.

There is no doubt that Vasari and Burckhardt have side-lined the likes of Lady Gaga or even Emma de Burgh, who was equally famous in her day for displaying her tattooed body (complete with da Vinci’s *Last Supper* on her back) around the US and promoting the Italian Renaissance in the process.

To cite the late great Stuart Hall, there has been an “astounding global expansion and sophistication of the cultural industries”³⁴ over the past decades. Let’s admit that the

34) Stuart Hall, “Richard Hoggart, the Uses of Literacy and the Cultural Turns”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/1 (Mar. 2007), 39-49, 39.

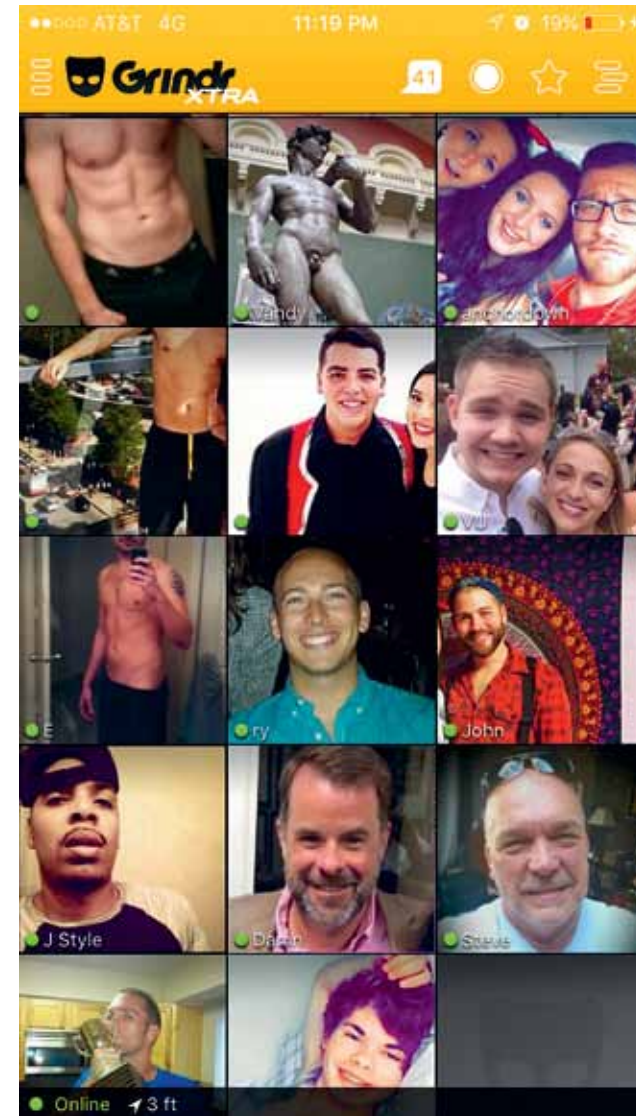
Renaissance as appropriated during the nineteenth century now belongs to this “astounding” expanded culture of the present era. So we must ask how is the Renaissance re-scripted or remapped by a global culture.

There is no doubt that the way Renaissance culture has been taken up and experienced in a global mass culture poses new challenges and opportunities for engaging Botticelli, Michelangelo, and other artists in the Renaissance canon of greats. Why, for example, is Michelangelo's David featured on Grindr? We can only assume that James Saslow is right to address Michelangelo's homosexuality – which many seem to question. Perhaps an analysis of Grindr could tell us something about the group of writhing nude men in Michelangelo's *Battle of the Cascine*.

The debates about high and low culture are over and should no longer even be entertained. Consequently, those Botticelli chocolates have to be analyzed. Indeed, we find that enthusiasm for the Italian Renaissance has never been more widespread. There are Renaissance fairs in every region of the United States. Audiences from Tokyo to London have reveled in two TV series on the Borgia featuring that blond vixen Lucrezia – one in which Jeremy Irons was the Pope. Historical fiction abounds, such as Dan Brown's 2003 best seller *The Da Vinci Code* and films, not the least of which is the classic *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, based on Irving Stone's novel, with Charlton Heston as Michelangelo and Rex Harrison as Pope Julius II.

This popular Renaissance is evidenced by the assassins, men of genius, poetry-writing prostitutes, political and ecclesiastical intrigue, masterpieces and monuments. Beauty and danger, ever intoxicating when combined, are at work in a new cult of the Renaissance. This is most definitely not the Renaissance of Berenson, Burckhardt, Pater and Vasari. But we must recognize that in a global market the endless interflow of history and fiction expands access to the period. The line outside the Accademia underscores this – why is everyone really there? Have some of them seen David on Grindr? What is important to remember is that devotees need no longer study art history or travel to Italy. They can stay at home, go where they will, and see far more than they would if fighting crowds at the Uffizi, as Asia Argento does in the 1996 film of her father.

In 2009, the Renaissance was turned into an epic historical action-adventure in the video game Assassin's Creed II created by Ubisoft. Its players and protagonists escape from the 21st century through a machine that enables them to relive ancestral memories. In one episode, the ancestor is our avatar, an assassin named Ezio Auditore da Firenze. He can scale buildings, clamber over rooftops, and quietly drop several stories to kill two men at once. This is parkour that meets mayhem and bloody violence (a world in which women are occluded I might add). Sometimes Ezio returns to his family villa stocked with



Grindr, Ithaca NY, 2014
Photo: Whitten Overby



Frame enlargement,
Assassin's Creed II,
Ubisoft, 2009

weapons and works of art, or visits the family palazzo in the walled town of Monteriggioni. All the while he is in pursuit of the Borgia pope, Alexander VI. Using pull-down menus, players can obtain interactive commentary on key monuments and figures. Assassin's Creed II, wrote Seth Schiesel in the *New York Times*, has educational value; in fact, it might "interest more young men around the world in visiting Italy than any advertising campaign or entertainment sensation since Sophia Loren."³⁵

35) Seth Schiesel, "On the Scenic Trail of Intrigue: Adventures in 15th-Century Italy," *New York Times*, December 7, 2009, accessed May 23, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2009/12/08/arts/television/08assassin.html.

This is an understatement. The value of Assassin's Creed II can extend far beyond its core audience of young male gamers. This point becomes evident when the video game is considered alongside an important precursor, Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* of 1516 – an immensely popular mock epic set in the time of Charlemagne that has so many digressions, its plot defies easy summary and could well be termed an "open world" – the proto Assassin's Creed. Thus Assassin's Creed II should not be dismissed as irrelevant to serious study of the Renaissance. It yields insight into the dark pessimism of a period usually extolled for its confidence in human abilities. The two works (Assassin's Creed and *Orlando Furioso*) were both international successes – and popular entertainment – lending weight to Hall's supposition that effective culture must work along the "grooves of existing attitudes and inflect them in new directions."³⁶

36) Stuart Hall, "Richard Hoggart, the Uses of Literacy and the Cultural Turns", *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/1 (Mar. 2007), 39-49, 39.

Intimacy is of course part of the appeal of video games. Players often take a first-person perspective as they use their hands and eyes to enter an alternative world, in the case of Assassin's Creed II, late fifteenth-century/early sixteenth-century Italy – flying over the city of Venice, jumping around the rooftops of Florence or even pushing through crowds in Rome. This consumer culture, based in time travel and role-playing helps explain the surge of historical fiction that has left theorists scrambling to catch up.³⁷ Suffice to say, the rise of so-called

37) See for example Douglas Dow, "Historical Veneers: Anachronism, Simulation, and Art History in Assassins Creed II," in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew R. B. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 215-232.

scientific history during the nineteenth century meant that whole genres of historical writing were banned from the academy and relegated to a shadowy existence at the edges of literature – and so too, we

might add, whole topics and ways of mapping the Renaissance.

In other words, is the academic unease with popular culture the greatest legacy of Vasari, Burkhardt and Berenson?

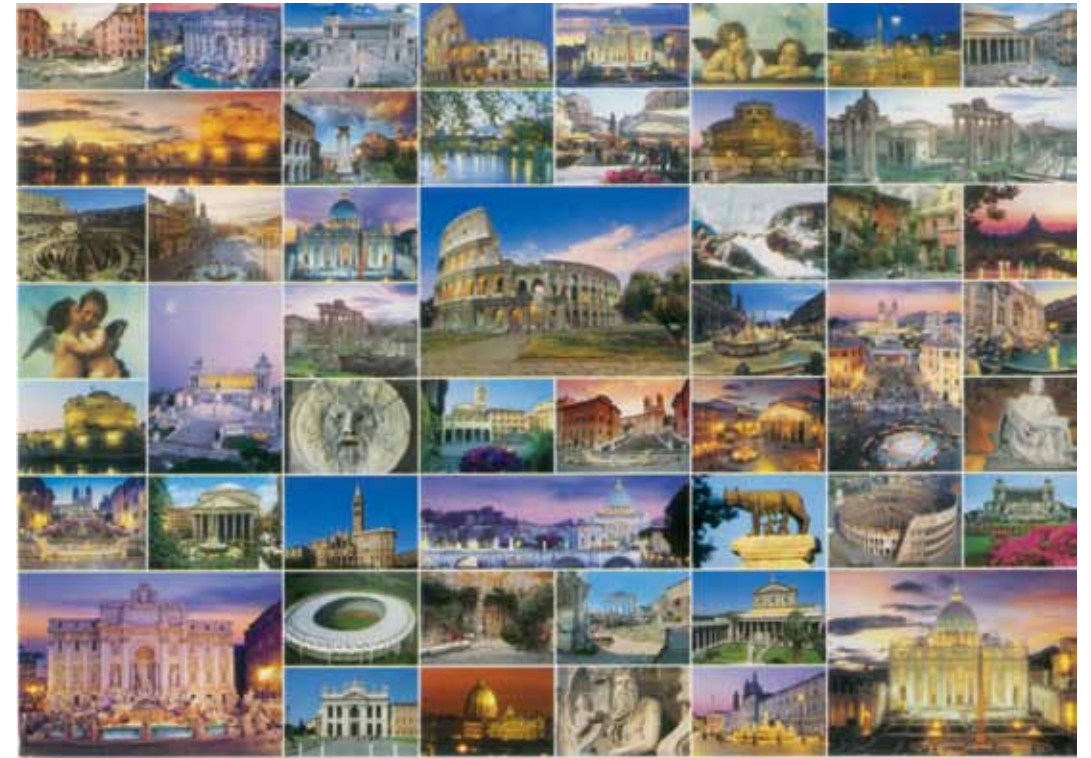
Of course, the claims for scientific history were never airtight. Burckhardt rebelled against them. His book on the Renaissance attempts to restore the freedom to criticize authority and social conditions. And yet, does he really do this himself? Burckhardt ensured that the study of the Renaissance remained a Protestant one – and by that I mean that there is still resistance within the discipline to the study of the Catholic Grotesque – the overly sensorial depictions of, say, the Sacro Monte of Varallo, for example. The preference is for the sweet Madonnas of Raphael – which have and continue to grace everything from mid-nineteenth-century watches produced for a Chinese market, the walls of the famous Hull House in Chicago, and postcards in Rome. The Raphael putti from the Sistine Madonna housed in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden are commonly found on Roman postcards. Why? They are no longer even in Italy, and haven't been since 1754. The point is that the general public assumes that they are.

It is easy to blame Vasari, Burckhardt and Berenson. But we must also blame the great numbers of Anglo-Americans that invaded Italy in the nineteenth century and took it upon themselves to become the de facto curators of the city. There were so many Americans in Italy in the nineteenth century that Henry James purportedly said that he would rather stay home to hear a Boston accent. In the nineteenth century, Florence emerged as a center for Anglo-American life. There were as many as 30,000 Anglos living in Florence – either permanently, like Herbert Horne and John Temple Leader, or for the season, which ran from October to April. Many read the *Florence Gazette*, one of several English newspapers in the city.³⁸

Helen Zimmern – the paper's first editor – made sure her audience knew how comfortable and familiar Florence was. There was butter, cream and ice at Doney's café on the via Tornabuoni, newspaper updates on Queen Victoria, news about Lord Byron, schedules for transportation connections to London, suggested jaunts around town, and announcements for illustrated lectures from the likes of Janet Ross and Vernon Lee. Echoing Burckhardt, Italy became a place of liberation and rebirth, particularly for intellectual women, lesbians such as Vernon Lee, and wealthy Americans seeking to get their money out of a United States ravaged by the Civil War. Some never left town, as the burials in the Protestant Cemetery show.

In many ways, nineteenth-century women had as much if not more to do with constructing the image of the Renaissance than the colonialist white men and were arguably more adventuresome in the process. After all, we know that Edith Wharton

38) On the *Gazette*, see my *The Renaissance Perfected. Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press: 2004).



Postcard, 2016, (collection of the author), note the putti from the Raphael Sistine Madonna (c. 1513-1514)

sought out areas uncharted by her *Baedeker* or the tomes of Morelli, Kugler and Burkhardt.³⁹

We must remember that at various points Italy has tried to reclaim its Renaissance. This is encapsulated by Franco Zeffirelli's 1999 film *Tea with Mussolini* (when the Black Shirts throw the Anglos and their tea out of the Uffizi), the National Renaissance Center located in the Strozzi Palace (launched in response to the foreign-born Kunsthistorisches Institut itself), and Mussolini's support of a plagiarized Italian copy of Edith Wharton's 1904 book on gardens.⁴⁰ This is not to say an Italian-bred revival of the Renaissance is inevitably

39) Edith Wharton, *Italian Backgrounds* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905); and "A Tuscan Shrine," *Scribner's Magazine*, January 1895, 23-32.

40) For a discussion of these projects, see Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected*.

fascist, rather during the ventennio of Fascist rule there was an attempt to reclaim the Renaissance for both Italian scholars and audience. This has largely remained, albeit depoliticized.

For the most part, the colonized history of the Italian Renaissance remains. The Renaissance is always idealized and always historiographic. Why else am I able to write in English for an international publication coming out of German institutions located in Italy? The biases are deceptively dangerous for scholarship.

What is the relevance of the Renaissance today, my students ask? I bring this up as there are still more American Junior Year Abroad Programs in Italy than anywhere except England, and yet students often don't know why they go to Italy.

So perhaps scholars need to take Stuart Hall with them into their methodological suitcase and get to the bottom of the relationship between the Renaissance and popular culture in order to remap a study of the past and figure out the questions we should be asking. Namely, how is the Renaissance deployed, and for whom, and what does that mean? Many would like to think that these two worlds (of the Renaissance and popular culture) are far apart, but they aren't really.

It is an issue that the Renaissance is still white. Pretty blond women with pronounced overbites continue to grace the covers of books – with no discussion of why there is so much blonde hair in a land of brunettes and why they all seem to have the same overbite. (Are they the same woman? Are they forgeries?) So, we have to ask if contemporary art historians continue to use race as a marker for good taste? Is the blond white woman somehow the indication of an enlightened society? And are non-whites somehow a threat?

Now scholars are starting to look into slavery – but there are still a lot of invisibles. The story of slavery in Renaissance Florence is complicated as many slaves were in fact white (bought at the big markets in Damascus and hailing from the Caucuses.)

So it is not enough to say that this is a racial issue – as it is also a religious, ethnic and economic one.⁴¹

41) On slavery, see Salvatore Bono, *Schiavi musulmani nell'Italia moderna: Galeotti, vu' cumpra', domestici* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1999); Jill Burke, "Nakedness and Other Peoples: Rethinking the Italian Renaissance Nude," *Art History* 36/4 (Sep. 2013), 714-739; Robert C. Davis "The Geography of Slaving in the Early Modern Mediterranean, 1500-1800," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37/1 (Winter 2007), 57-74; Sally McKee, "Domestic Slavery in Renaissance Italy" *Slavery and Abolition* 29/3 (Sep. 2008), 305-326; Kevin Mummey and Kathryn Reyerson, "Whose City is This? Hucksters, Domestic Servants, Wet-Nurses, Prostitutes, and Slaves in Late Medieval Western Mediterranean Urban Society" *History Compass* 9/12 (2011), 910-922; Stephanie Nadalo, "Negotiating Slavery in a Tolerant Frontier: Livorno's Turkish Bagno (1547-1747)," *Mediaevalia* 32 (2011), 275-324; Sergio Tognetti, "The Trade in Black Africans in Fifteenth-century Florence" in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, eds. T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 213-224; and Kate Lowe, "Visible Lives: Black Gondoliers and Other Black Africans in Renaissance Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 66/2 (Summer 2013), 412-452.

42) Sarah Benson, "Gidget and the Creature from Venus: Madness, Monsters, and Dangerous Roman Ruins in Film," in *Archi.pop. Mediating Architecture in Popular Culture*, edited by D. Medina Lasansky (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

The Renaissance is still a world that revolves around privilege. Even when Gidget and Moon-doggy went to Rome in the 1963 film *Gidget Goes to Rome* they did not see how the other half lived. Neither did the exotic Venetian who damaged the Coliseum in the 1957 film *20 Million Miles to Earth*.⁴² And yet, in the previous decade, the characters Antonio Ricci (of De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*) and Pina (of Rossellini's *Roma Città Aperta*) struggled with

unemployment and starvation. The geography and itineraries of the Hollywood films are strikingly distinct from the Italian films. While Gidget and her friends remain ensconced in the city center, enjoying posh hotels and admiring the monuments, the Italian characters live in depressing housing complexes in desolate parts of Rome, isolated from public transportation, and often without running water. These two worlds could not be more different.

The Renaissance is still Tuscan. David might be on Grindr, but it is still David on Grindr. Even those who want to retire in neo-Renaissance splendor do so at a Vasari-themed retirement village located within a golfing community in Florida. The promotional material for this community tells us that inspiration came from Giorgio Vasari – but here we are told that one can find a year-round Mediterranean vacation that lasts a lifetime. A top-seller is the Toscana model.

And so, how can we dismantle all this? What might be the lessons from Lady Gaga? Are there more relevant ways to discuss the Renaissance? Should we ask for example if Marten van Heemskerck's portrait in front of the Coliseum is nothing more than a selfie? Is the reworking of the piazza around the Palazzo Farnese (as chronicled in Annibale Caro's 1582 play *Gli Straccioni*) an early example of eminent domain? Is the burning of grandiose homes in Seattle by an anarchist group known as the Earth Liberation Front equivalent to public defamy in Renaissance Florence? And how did Andy Warhol comment on and dialogue with Botticelli's *Venus*?
D. Medina Lasansky