

Letterati, artisti, mecenati del Seicento e del Settecento. Identità culturali tra Antico e Moderno. Ed. Michela di Macco. (Quaderni sull'Età e la Cultura del Barocco, 3) Florence: Olschki. 2020. Xiv+220 pp. with 67 figg. €35. ISBN 978-8-822267-35-1

Where does the baroque end and the neoclassical begin? This is the question at the heart of this collection of essays on the relationship between the 'antique' and the 'modern'. The authors challenge simple narratives which portray the neoclassical as a shift towards antique purity, unpicking the multifaceted relationship between classical sources and classicising art.

The five essays published here are the fruit of scholarships awarded by the Fondazione 1563 in Turin, as part of the same programme of research that produced the Fondazione's exhibition 'Sfida al Barocco: Roma Torino Parigi 1680-1750' ('Challenge to the Baroque: Rome Turin Paris 1680–1750') in 2020. The period 1680–1750 too often falls between the boundaries of periodisation, not easily categorised as either baroque or neoclassical, yet viewed as central to the emergence of the 'modern'. By placing this transitional period centre stage, the exhibition offered a chance to take a detailed look at the process of stylistic and intellectual change, mapping its variety and complexity. Unfortunately, having been held mid-pandemic, this substantial re-examination of an important period will not have reached the wide audience it deserved.

It is thus good news that this volume reiterates and traces the empirical underpinnings of the exhibition's central claims. The contributors share a commitment to expanding histories focussed on Rome and Paris to encompass developments rooted in other places too, including Genoa, Venice, and the cities of Northern Europe. They also tell the story of an accidental revolution: a taming of baroque excess that was not a conscious rejection of what had come before, but rather an inadvertent by-product of artists responding to old models in new contexts.

Giacomo Montanari opens with a reconsideration of the career of Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (Il Grechetto). Moving beyond the obvious story of formative Roman influences, Montanari offers evidence that Castiglione's art was also shaped by his early years in Genoa. In an imaginative move, Montanari turns to the library of Castiglione's master, Giovan Battista Paggi, suggesting that the influence of these books – including a selection of alchemical treatises – can be found in Castiglione's artistic works, and that they provide a hitherto overlooked key to Castiglione's broader artistic philosophy.

Valeria Di Giuseppe Di Paolo explores the importance of classical models for the artists of the later seventeenth-century French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Ironically, at the very moment that the French aimed to develop a distinctive national style, they turned to Italian depictions of the classical world as the foundation of an artistic education, making painstaking copies of works by Raphael and others. But in the realm of sculpture, there was more opportunity – even a need – for experimentation, as incomplete ancient models were adapted to create new works true to modern life.

By deploying a prosopographical approach to the early eighteenth-century French 'generation of 1700', Alessia Rizzo achieves a delicate balance between collective trends and individual idiosyncrasy. Careful attention to social networks is also a theme of Sara Piselli's piece on the court of Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni. Transcending boundaries between different artistic forms, Piselli emphasises the close relationship between developments in painting and sculpture. Meanwhile, Claudia Tarallo turns to literature, tackling the puzzle of why late seventeenth-century Italy did not produce epic poetry with a reputation to match that of

Tasso or Ariosto, despite having such dramatic events as the Ottoman War with which to work.

By breaking down artificial divisions between different spheres of early modern intellectual and artistic culture, these essays offer a wealth of suggestions for future research. The collection would have achieved greater historiographical coherence and heft if the authors or editor had attempted a fuller synthesis of the findings of these diverse case studies in the introduction or a conclusion. But if the volume succeeds in demonstrating the scope for the publication of other more systematic accounts (written, perhaps, by some of its contributors), it will have rendered a valuable service.

646 words

Eloise Davies
Pembroke College, Oxford

Address:
Pembroke College
St Aldates
Oxford
OX1 1DW

Email: eloise.davies@pmb.ox.ac.uk

Publisher email: pressoffice@olschki.it