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3. For example, see the Frontispiece of the Ode and Bucol. Villa d’Este, Tivoli. For a general history of the motif, see Peter Demetz, ‘The Elm and the Vine: Notes toward the History of a Marmott Tipol’, MLA, vol. 75, no. 3, December 1994, pp. 821-32. Note that in the fourteenth century, the tops of elm and vine were connected with that of ivy and tree, which suggested a non-canalised sexual relationship.


14. See Jones & Stallybrass, pp. 89.

15. For a comparable case from Spain, see Isabel Burdilh and Ennio Allia, Elie, Gender, Sexualities, and ‘Boze’ in the Mirror of Natural History in Sixteenth-Century Spain, in Sabrina Pevida Ramet (ed.), Gender Relativism and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives, Routledge, London, 1996, pp. 105-122.


20. Ibid., p. 129.

21. For Palladio’s use of the word ‘monstrous’, see ibid., p. 135.


REFRAMING THE RENAISSANCE PROBLEM TODAY
Developing a Pluralistic Historical Vision

Claire Farago, University of Colorado, Boulder

The ‘Renaissance problem’, as it is called, is a significant aspect of the conceptualization of this chapter primarily in its concern with periodization, that is, with notions of historical continuity and discontinuity. It was in fact Jacob Burckhardt’s concept of the Italian Renaissance, not Panofsky’s, that became the Renaissance problem in historiography. Indeed, it was argued, on the basis of humanism writers who used metaphors of revival and rebirth to define their historical position as separate from the past, that the concept of periodization was historically justified. Burckhardt had a much broader and richer understanding of Renaissance culture than Panofsky as did Panofsky’s immediate predecessors and contemporaries such as Alois Riegli and Aly Warburg, to name just two of the most famous theoreticians of the Renaissance problem.

Ignoring Warburg completely and glossing over Riegli’s critical objections to a model of culture that grants priority to Greek antiquity and its modern revival, Panofsky relocated Italian Renaissance humanism values at the centre of the discipline. To state the case briefly, Panofsky construed his positivist ‘science’ of iconology as leaving no room for doubt: if a work of art is unrecognised, he wrote, it must be due to the incompetence or malice of the artist. Objects that appear to defy stable classification and determination readings interested Panofsky primarily for the challenge they offer in locating what he called ‘the intrinsic meanings or content’ of works of art. Moreover, Panofsky assumed that the ‘specific themes and concepts’ of objects and events, while they vary according to historical conditions, express ‘the general and essential tendencies of the human mind’. As WJT Mitchell once put it, Modernism becomes intelligible precisely as a resistance to Panofsky’s iconology. In fact, I cannot imagine an art historian less in tune with a pluralistic historical vision. We are far from being compelled to follow Panofsky in
than aesthetic considerations grounded in Western styles of representation, and we are also required to interrogate what are meant by 'cultural boundaries' themselves. We need strategies for studying the contributions of fluctuating sixteenth-century senses of 'art' to later ideas about cultural identity and aesthetic sensibility—strategies that underpin anachronistic categories that interfere with our ability to see the complexity of artistic and cultural interactions during the early modern period. The fundamental responsibility for historians today is to recognize the undigested projections of past generations in our present-day theoretical extensions of existing scholarship. My approach will chart the peripatetic histories of several strategically chosen categories of objects along the entire trajectory of cultural exchange.

The visual sign does not necessarily 'reveal' its meaning—the visual hides as much as it shows. Open with a series of questions:

What happens when the pastoral systems of unrelated cultures are conflated?

Neither the artist nor the artist's audience necessarily attaches the same meaning to an appropriated motif or convention that it had for its previous audience in a different context. Nor can it be assumed that all viewers attach the same meaning to a motif, especially when it is inserted into a new representational system. How do artistic images convey culturally shared meanings to a heterogeneous audience? And what can be recovered from the surviving record in which diverse artistic traditions have interacted for generations and even centuries?

Whether the term 'hybridity' itself, or others like it, will endure matters less than our understanding of the conditions that 'cultural hybridity' attempts to describe. In societies in which the authority of texts and other forms of artistic representation are destabilised by multiple viewing perspectives, 'identity' itself is always dynamic, incomplete.

How do we deal with cultural productions that we do not fully understand, and cannot understand, because their cultural significance is beyond our grasp?

The kind of art historical practice I would like to see in Renaissance studies goes all over the world, and deals with all kinds of practices, representational systems and cultural conditions, not only at the level of social history, but at deeper, economic and ideological levels. What happens when the readability of the art changes because of contact, when people's ability to live changes because of their altered material culture?

Who owns the past?

One of our most deeply rooted forms of art historical thought is the assumption, based in neo-Aristotelian, Christian theories of images, that an artwork has a radical unity that reconciles harmonies, synthesises any surface contradiction. This radical unity purportedly stems from the conscious or unconscious intention of the author, who is imagined to be singular and unified, and in turn accounts for the work's power to communicate to audiences. The conditions of production and use of art in heterogeneous societies, or societies viewed in transnational terms, call into question the assumed connections between artistic intention, unified meaning and communicative power. Pace Panofsky, there appears to be no way to resolve the meaning of certain works of art into a single, stable reading, more than there appears to be a resolution to the complex agencies involved in their production and use.

What is our responsibility to society as intellectuals?

This question deserves to be driving our research agendas. Our work can seem apolitical when we produce it, but at the same time it excludes other work from taking place or relegates that work to the margins. Left with a magnificent but incomplete treasury of inherited objects, art historians who do not stray from their inherited categories are consequently unlikely to articulate complex questions of self-other relationships that produced these storehouses in the first place. Nor are they likely to develop an interest in the marginal position of the culturally dispossessed and the politically disempowered, who leave no provenances of ownership or even their names in the historical record.

The evolving definition of art in early modern European thought is only one thread in a complex weave of changing attitudes towards human knowledge, but perhaps a concrete example can suggest what a sixteenth-century understanding of art meant for non-European cultures (see figure 1). A humanist collector would have appreciated this extraordinary object very differently from the Sapi artists commissioned by Portuguese slave traders. For the inhabitants of Sierra Leone, as Suzanne Blier has shown, the severed heads and the main figure's seated position can be connected specifically with Sapi burial traditions. By contrast the same scene is likely to have encouraged European fantasies of appropriating and cannibalising among 'savages'. The lack of documentation, which is characteristic of the entire class of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century African-Portuguese ivories, further suggests that
utilised by missionaries to produce objects with Christian imagery. Both pre-Columbian and colonial featherwork objects straightaway became highly prized in Europe.

A Latin epigraph dates this remarkably well preserved feather mosaics (tarantos) to 1539, making it the earliest dated work of art surviving from New Spain. The inscription states that the object was made in Mexico City under the supervision of Pedro de Gante (1486–1572), the Franciscan lay brother who in 1524 established the famous mission school of San José de los Llanos, at which the mechanical and liberal arts were taught to Native Americans. According to the inscription, Don Diego de Avalcarado Huanzant, Aztec royalty and the ranking native government official in the Republic of Indians, offered this extraordinary gift to Pope III, the pope who had recently published a series of declarations protecting the rights of Native Americans. Only two years earlier, on 9 June 1537, Pope Paul III had issued the bull Sublimis Deus, against enslaving the Native Americans and setting their property, pronouncing Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians to be endowed with the ‘nature and faculties’ necessary to receive the Christian faith solely by ‘preaching of the word of God and by the example of good and holy living.’

It is within this political, ideologically fraught frame of reference that the significance of this particular Mass of Saint Gregory must be sought. In 1953, an assimilated, Christianized government official of noble Aztec descent like Don Diego might have felt optimistic about the future, and deeply grateful to a pope who recognised the intelligence of the Native American peoples. The imagery on this featherwork painting was directly derived from a European print similar to an engraving by Isidore van Heemskerck, c. 1488–1555. A Latin inscription below the image in the engraving indicates that the sheet was intended as an indulgence granted to whoever recites the requisite prayers to the instruments of Christ’s Passion. Saint Gregory the Great, a sixth-century pope, famously defended the religious use of images because they functioned as a ‘Bible for the illiterate.’ There are significant differences, however, between an expensive broadsheet issued to pilgrims and a unique gift of state crafted in precious, exotic materials, intended for the chief representative of Christ on earth. Given the precious nature of the gift, the choice of subject suggests that Pope Paul III was to be praised as a latter-day Saint Gregory, no doubt for his strong defence of the Native Americans’ fully human capacities. Viewed in this context, this

featherwork painting is a magnanimous gesture, demonstrating a mental well established in pre-Columbian times as a form of tribute, that both the Native Americans and their European conquerors considered the most elevated form of Mexican art.

The choice of subject was strategic on several levels. Firstly, the imagery used visualizes images extensively during the early years of the conquest, when language was an extreme barrier to communication, as is known from numerous sources including the 1579 Italian publication in Latin of an important pedagogical text, De rhetorica. The woodcut and illustrators Diego de Valadés, De Gante’s pupil. Valadés introduced a sort of pictographic syllabary involving signs in the shape of sacred hearts, a symbol with connotations on both sides of the cultural and linguistic divide.

Some of Valadés’s heart signs include recognizable elements from Nahua pictograms. Although their exact meaning has never been deciphered, the manner in which they function in his text makes the important point that they are a culturally hybrid means of communication. The mnemonic devices in both Valadés’s book and the featherwork mosaic attest to the mental capacity of users to ‘recollect’, that is to remember the central mysteries of the Christian faith by contemplating the mnemonic signs that refer to them. In the feather mosaic, the conventional setting of the church altar has been eliminated in favour of an unadorned blue background that might indicate the outdoor settings used in church altars in Mexico. The blue aik the bedrock perceptually, by isolating each sign against a brilliantly coloured ground, making it easier to remember the images, as European reminiscences devoted to memory training recommended. The mental capacity to draw a series of inferences, as Aristotle and his commentators defined the human faculty of memory as distinct from the retentive memory of animals, was both directly cited and indirectly implied throughout sixteenth-century discussions of Native Americans’ mental capacities. Don Diego’s erudite gift was offered by a bicultural colonial subject in the language of the conqueror, in a medium prized by the coloniser, as evidence of his own humanness. It is not overstated to claim that, by 1539, the terms on which the Native Americans’ mental capacities were judged were part of an international, transcultural discourse in which the culturally depossessed also participated—at least to the limited extent of a few assimilated members of the Native American elite.

My final example takes a diachronic view of the Renaissance. Many of the stylistic conventions associated with the Italianate classicizing style we call ‘Renaissance art’ continued to be used for centuries, in Europe and throughout the colonial world. Conventional histories of art relegate these artistic productions to the periphery, if they are considered at all, with dismissive labels such as ‘belated’, ‘provincial’, ‘marginal’ or ‘regional variants’. The standard of judgment is taken as the standard of judgement. Part of the challenge currently facing art historians is to devise less ethnocratic ways to think about cultural production. Alternatively, to draw an example from my own research, the distinctive qualities that identify locally produced New Mexican religious imagery as products of the region can be described in terms of elaborating framing devices, including geometric patterns and other motifs derived from both Indigenous artistic traditions and imported materials, prominent landscape settings and bold graphic compositions often with exuberant drawing also found in Pueblo pottery by artists largely untrained in European academic methods (see figure 3).

How do we account for the culturally determined predispositions of different spectators in front of the same objects and images without falling back on discredited assumptions of cultural coherence or individual free will? Ultimately, all three case studies involve ‘style’ in questions of what it means to be human. In addressing the Renaissance problem in an expanded field, one possible course of action would be to consider how the metaphor of rebirth developed historically in a religious context. John O’Malley, who studied over 160 sacred and secular orations dealing with the theme of renascere mundi composed at the papal court, emphasises that this genre of oratory is intimately tied to the humanist revival of classical rhetoric. One of the recurring themes of the sermons is the need to wage a successful war against the Turks, this being a precondition for constituting the world as ‘one flock’ under one universal pastor. Another is the conversion of Gentiles, Jews and Greek Christians. Reconsidering the metaphor of rebirth in its historically concrete political, religious and intellectual context would shift the idioms of ‘Renaissance’ radically different from any yet developed. Have we even comprehended the blinding that the association of metaphors of rebirth with hierarchical, religious binaries implicit in disciplinary formations such as Italian Renaissance, Islamic and Islamic ‘Western’ and ‘elites’ lies at the heart in both the Mediterranean world and in the global network of trade that succeeded it—impose on our historical vision?
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2 Panofsky, p. 16. In citing Erwin Caeser’s understanding of cultural values, Panofsky considered what is probably the least trivial aspect of his methodology today. When Panofsky dealt with regional differences in representation he argued that a correct (iconographical) analysis is always possible, presupposing a “correct identification of the motifs” (p. 10).

3 WLT Mitchell, Technoogy, Ideology, and Cultural Encounter: Panofsky, Althusser, and the Scene of Recognition,” in Claire Fargue (ed.), Retracing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America 1539-1650, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, CT, 1995, pp. 96-97. Mitchell’s arguments regarding the value of iconology to the study of cultural interaction are far more nuanced than his arguments here, and so he is able to suggest. Ultimately, however, the problem with recuperating iconology remains, as Mitchell, p. 94, also emphasizes, because the very name of this “science of image” bears the scars of an ancient division and a fundamental paradox that cannot be erased from its workings.

4 The first example is drawn from Fargue, Retracing the Renaissance, pp. 94-95, in which the argument is developed further with full documentation.


6 The inscription, in roman capitals, bordering the image reads:

BASILIO DE PEREZ PINTOR
EN MEXICO FIRMADO EL VERDE MEXICO
GORDAS DEISIO HECTOR DIEGO CUBILES
Y DE LA CORTES DE SEGOVIA
NOLE DE LA COLECCION MUSEO AD 3019

7 Ibid, p. 117.


9 Diego Valadés, Doctrina cristiana, Peru, 1576. His description and illustrating the basic services of medical psychology, Valadés focused on the role played by the art of memory in teaching sacred doctrine to Native Americans at San José de los Nahuates, where images were placed in strategic locations along (hierarchically organized) processions (see p. 100).

10 Space constraints prevent the further summarizing the argument presented at the CHA, but see Claire Fargue & Donna Marie, Transforming Images: New Mexican Santos in eighteenth-century Continental Art, State University Press, University Park, PA, 2006, pp. 194-212.


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Do We Still Need a Renaissance?

Keith Moxey, Barnard College, Columbia University, New York

Do we still need a Renaissance? When first asked, the question seems nonsensical, even absurd. The idea of the Renaissance is the foundational idea, the shining light, around which the history of Western art until recently revolved. The concept is so deeply naturalized that it is impossible to conceive of our discipline without it. But let us imagine, for a moment, that it is possible to see around the edges of this idea, to analyze critically the work performed by this seemingly indispensable notion.

As a historical field, the Renaissance has been the subject of debate for many decades. First of all, it is associated with a philosophy of history that has been largely rejected, even though it continues to maintain a critical role in our disciplinary unconscious. Scholars who insist that their work addresses works of art directly are sometimes unwilling to acknowledge that their contributions make sense only within the context of a broader conceptual structure. As many historians have pointed out, the Renaissance, as an identifiable moment in history, arose in the wake of Hegel’s transcendental philosophy, according to which the movement of the spirit through time reached a crucial stage when it shed the superstitious beliefs of the Middle Ages and looked at man and nature with secular eyes.

The creation of the Renaissance, in the work of such compelling historians as Jacob Burckhardt and Jules Michelet, became instrumental to the project of carving up time into distinct but sequentially related units. It was a grand scheme that attributed meaning to the past by suggesting that it had a historical movement—that it was going somewhere.

We do not need to rehearse the criticisms that have shaken this philosophy of history. Michel Foucault, for example, argued for a vision of the past marked by rupture and discontinuity, rather than continuity and progress, insisting that the epistemological basis for understanding the world is as uncertain as the chaos of events it seeks to order. Historiographers such as Michel de Certeau and Hayden White emphasized the role of language in historical writing, arguing that the events of the past itself should not be confused with their interpretation in the present. The works of Burckhardt and Michelet, for example, reveal that they shared the conviction that the Renaissance anticipated their own time. Their exaltation and vilification of Renaissance figures depended on their belief that the period inaugurated both the glories and the miseries of the modern age. Students of these "founding fathers" of the Renaissance, such as Felix Gilbert and Lionel Gossman, continue to reveal the extent to which their writings manifest the concerns of the sixteenth century in the course of their analyses of sixteenth-century affairs. And, most recently, the idea of the Renaissance has been criticized from a variety of postcolonial perspectives on the grounds of its Eurocentricism. Indian historians such as those of Purshi Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty have pointed out that many of the world’s cultures have managed to do very well and exist for thousands of years without having a teleological concept of history, let alone a pivotal moment such as the Renaissance. Others have articulated how Western historical narratives fail to capture the nature of the past in different parts of the globe. Writing about the Americas, for example, Anthony Pagden and Walter Magnoli stress the incommensurability of different cultures and the impossibility of finding grounds for translating the experiences of one into another. The relevance of many of the basic ideas for the discipline of art history has been articulated by Claire Fargue in her book Retracing the Renaissance.

One conclusion to be drawn from this panoply of criticism is that place is that place does not matter as much as it appears possible now to see around the edges of the grand Hegelian trajectory, which has for so long structured the activities of the art historical discipline, so as to reflect upon what is gained and