

What is the Renaissance?

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Anachronic Renaissance.

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Nagel and Wood have written a book that they clearly intend should reorient the study of Renaissance art and architecture, especially in terms of the way the beleaguered concept of style is approached. For analyzing the work of art they introduce the binary options of *performative* and *substitutional*. The first term corresponds to our accustomed way of regarding Renaissance objects, as the work of a creative author at a fixable moment in time. The second term, *substitutional*, refers to the typological approach to the form of the work, in which it is seen as an instantiation for a lost original, as for example the icon, or an earlier building. Typology is familiar to medievalists who study works that were often valued more for their resemblance to a prototype than for their originality. Renaissance scholars, if they consider typology at all, generally search for a classical antique source, then study the ways the later work creatively departed from it. In the Burckhardtian model of the Renaissance we have inherited, as the time of the birth of the individual, our expectation is that the Renaissance artist will have “assimilated” his source, by which is meant transformed it to make it his own.

The authors have chosen the term *anachronic* rather than *anachronistic* to avoid the derogatory connotation of *anachronism*, which they had used in their article when they first explored the topic (“Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism,” in: *Art Bulletin* 87, 2005, 403-32,

with responses by Michael Cole, Charles Dempsey, and Claire Farago). They intend the concept to privilege something that steps outside its sequence in linear time and thereby points to a metahistorical significance. Chronology, which has directed the way we have studied works of Renaissance art since Vasari – placing the work within the evolution of an artist’s *œuvre* or in relation to prior, coeval, or subsequent works by contemporary artists – they reject as not deserving priority. They intend to replace, evidently, the kind of art history that has dominated for the past generation, the study of the work in its context. There is no mention here of social, economic, political, even historical or religious, events as forces of influence on the work of art, which itself takes charge here.

GOD’S POINT OF VIEW

Equally revolutionary, Panofsky’s iconographical method plays little part in their art history. In the Panofskian model, the content of the work of art is viewed in relationship to a text or texts on which it typically depends, but Nagel and Wood make few reference to texts, unless it is necessary to their typological argument, as in the chapter on the Titulus (sec. xix) or the discussion of the portrait of Christ (sec. xxi), where, in any case, text does not take priority over the image, but works in synch with it as a coequal corroborative component. Panofsky’s approach attracted the attention of scholars in other disciplines because it brought art history into the mainstream of intellectual history and gave verbal formulation priority over the visual. These authors instead turn their attention to the object. Agency is granted to the work of art or, often, the “artifact”, not the patron, not a text, not even the artist: There is no mention here of his *concetto* or *invenzione*. The authors speak of “the anachronic behavior of all the objects” (116) or they say, “the icons achieved” (106), artifacts “hesitate” (7), the work of art “chooses” (343, 364).

The concept of substitution is most clearly shown in icons, as Hans Belting demonstrated (*Bild und Kult: eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, 1990, trans. *Likeness and Presence*, 1994). According to the prototype theory, icons represented the authentic likenesses of Christ and the saints. As Nagel and Wood say, "A legitimate substitution declared identity across apparent difference." (86) The authors point out that, "Such temporalities have something in common with the typological thinking of the biblical exegetes, according to which sacred events, though embedded in history, also contained what theologians called a mystery, figure, or sacrament – a spiritual meaning lifted out of the flow of history. The 'omnitemporal' presupposed by figural thinking was an effort to adopt God's point of view, which grasps history all at once, topologically, rather than in a linear sequence." (32)

In a series of loosely connected case studies, Nagel and Wood explore the working out of typological relationships between Renaissance works and their medieval, and ultimately antique, models that often show a much closer dependency than we normally acknowledge. The authors stress continuity with the Middle Ages, where we have seen discontinuity. They question the absolute usefulness of linear chronology and ask us instead to pay closer attention to anachronic sequences and folds of time. To think "structurally," they tell us, "is to reject linear chronology as the inevitable matrix of experience and cognition." (9) The rational and linear Panofskian Renaissance was not in fact the way people of the Renaissance thought (7). They had no concept of period style: even Vasari attributed the differences between the three *età* primarily to differences in technical know-how (9). Topics in which medieval works are mistaken for ancient and are used as models abound, for example, neo-cosmateque floors (sec. xvii). The authors make clear that the Renaissance builder often mistook medieval buildings for ancient, or simply did not make a distinction. The Florentines knew, for example, that their Baptistry had been

consecrated in 1059, but they also knew that it replaced an earlier building of the fifth century, and they chose to regard the eleventh-century construction as a substitution on the prototype of the ancient original and therefore as an ancient building (13; sec. xiii). "Typological identity thrives on flexibility and approximation" (282).

COMPARING PRINTS

They show us a Renaissance less rational than scholars inspired by Enlightenment and post-War ideals have depicted. The superstitions of the Middle Ages, they show repeatedly, continued alongside humanist rationality, and were supported and encouraged by the Church to promote devotion or raise revenue. Far later than we care to acknowledge dubious legends were being elaborated and endorsed, for example the airlift of the Holy House of the Virgin to Loreto and the Marian shrine at Walsingham in Norfolk, for the sake of encouraging pilgrimage (sec. xviii). One of the early uses of printing in the 1460s and 70s was to lend credence to origin myths of miraculous relics and to publicize them. In the long run, however, it was the publication of treatises and printed images that put an end to the oral elaboration and variation of tales of origin and rationalized the process of substitution.

The authors make clear that the dawn of printing in the 1460s and 70s is a far more significant watershed than is recognized; it can account in many respects for the differences between fifteenth and sixteenth century images and buildings. (The role of printing is treated extensively in Wood's recent book, *Forgery, Replica, Fiction. Temporalities of German Renaissance Art*, 2008). Printing made possible knowledge and understanding of the chronology of styles: "In architecture, multiple antiquities flourished side by side, non-competitively, until the moment that prints and illustrated books created the possibility of direct visual comparison and forced private notions about form out into the public domain." (170) It was woodcuts and engravings that fixed the ancient Roman forms, proportions, and systems of orders, for example, making the substitutionary



Fig. 1 Benedetto da Maiano, Monument to Giotto, S. Maria del Fiore, Florence, 1490

process a matter of certainty rather than imaginative recreation. Printing put an end to the “element of drift in the copy chain.” (281)

The turning point when performance, that is the artist’s invention, began to replace substitution is moved forward to the late fifteenth century and owes a great deal to the inauguration of printing. Around 1500 we begin to see intense analysis of the reliability of visual evidence. “Christian paintings from this point on will increasingly be content to generate fictions out of the tradition and out of the imagination, and so liberate themselves from concerns about referentiality and authenticity.” (239) Thus the difference between the early and the high Renaissance is more distinct and the Quattrocento more closely linked to the Middle Ages than has been the recent norm.

UNFAMILIAR WORKS OF ART

Another byproduct of the shift to a performance-based culture is the appearance of the forgery, which was a historical novelty of the Renaissance. “What is an art forgery if not a substitution cruelly unmasked as a mere performance?” (50) Replication in the ancient and medieval worlds is discussed both as copies (sec. xxii) and pastiches (sec. xxiii). An example of an early Renaissance pastiche is a bronze horse’s head modeled on an antiquity in Florence by Donatello and given by

Lorenzo de’ Medici to Count Diomedes Carafa in Naples (fig. 23.2). When the gift was acknowledged it was not identified as either an antiquity or a modern work and it has confounded modern scholars, most of whom do not accept it as Donatello’s work. “The principle of the relativity of style permits the artwork to assume a transhistorical identity by simulating a historical identity that is not its own.” (292)

Far from discussing the usual monuments, Nagel and Wood adduce an impressive array of significant works that are unfamiliar, sometimes even by artists included in the canon. An example is the monument to Giotto by Benedetto da Maiano that Lorenzo de’ Medici had erected in the Florentine cathedral (fig. 12.1, sec. xii; fig. 1). Other examples to which they return repeatedly are the Roman basilica di Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, and San Domenico, Siena.

Sometimes the argument seems strained, or skewed to make the point, as in the case of Jean Fouquet’s *Construction of Solomon’s Temple*, which is shown as a Gothic cathedral constructed with Gothic building techniques. The authors find anachronistic significance in the use of Gothic forms and techniques. The ambition of verisimilitude of the Renaissance, however, dictated the kind of representation of the past in terms of the present simply because all they knew about the Temple of Jerusalem were some measurements brought back by pilgrims. They didn’t yet have archeology, as the authors point out, to tell them what ancient buildings looked like, so they represented them in terms of what they did know, namely contemporary building and contemporary methods of construction.

SOME DESIDERATA

The book needs more illustrations. Many references to obscure objects are left unillustrated, and there are no cues to websites where they might be viewed. There is no bibliography, which is understandable because it would have been unwieldy, giving equal weight to works mentioned only once and those that served as inspiring points of departure. But the reader’s further investigation

would have been greatly assisted if the authors of notes had been indexed, or at least authors mentioned in the text. A more analytic index, including a wider range of concepts, would have been helpful.

As the authors conceive it, artistic style is not, as we have assumed, something the artist *has*, like the body he is born with, which he may be able to modify, as with diet and exercise, but essentially it stays the same. Rather the model we are offered here is that style is more like a garment the artist puts on: it can be old-fashioned, like a toga, or up to date and fashionable, like a velvet doublet. If what is called for is a performance, the latest fashion will be appropriate, but if his artwork must function as a substitution, an instantiation of an existing model, then the garment he puts on, the style he chooses, must be consonant with that model. We have already become increasingly aware in recent decades that the Renaissance artist fashioned his style to the function of the work he was creating; now we are made aware that its temporal mode may affect its form fundamentally.

The order in which the sections are presented is not chronological. Like the argument the book presents regarding temporal modalities, the sections fold back on one another. Earlier arguments are revisited, works previously presented are reused, but the order of presentation could just as effectively have been shuffled.

Asksed why they wrote this book Alex Nagel replied simply that the basic Panofskian question: “what is the Renaissance?” needs to be addressed again, and still. The language is difficult and off-putting, too often obscuring or concealing intended meaning in the manner of post-modernist discourse. The premise that if the subject is complex then only complex language should be applied to it is a premise many of us would dispute. In fact if the subject is complex then it is all the more incumbent that its explication be lucid. Many potential readers may be discouraged from persevering by the obscurantist language, which is an unnecessary limitation the authors have imposed upon themselves and their important book.

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