



1 Reggello, Leccio, Castello
di Sammezzano, doorframe
of the Sala dei Pavoni

INTRODUCTION

CONSTRUCTIONS OF ‘OTHERNESS’ BETWEEN IDEA AND IMAGE IN NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY ITALY

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Delle escursioni fatte, la più interessante fu certo quella nella Villa del marchese Panciatichi Ximenes d’Aragona a Sanmezzano [*sic*]. Sanmezzano, un antico castello, poi villa signorile, è stato dopo 25 anni di lavoro ridotto dall’attuale possessore allo stile orientale, ed ecco la ragione che spinse la commissione di ricevimento a combinare questa escursione. [...] Una descrizione di Sanmezzano è difficile. È qualche cosa che sfugge alla tavolozza del pittore come alla penna del giornalista. C’è là dentro un non so che di fantastico, che non si riproduce, non si descrive. Il ricco proprietario ha colte le sue ispirazioni nei cortili e nelle sale dell’Alhambra e dell’Alcazar, nelle pagode indiane, nei chioschi che si specchiano nel Bosforo, e di tanti ricordi ha formato un insieme originalissimo che somiglia un po’ a tutto, ma

che non riproduce esattamente nessuno degli edifici che furono oggetto di studio.¹

These lines are taken from a description of Sammezzano castle, situated in the province of Florence (Fig. I; see also Fig. I3, p. 79 in this volume).² Published in the popular weekly *L’Illustrazione Italiana* in October 1878, the passage was part of a report on the fourth international congress of orientologists which had gathered in Florence the previous month. While the article remains rather stingy regarding the specialized content of the congress, it deals in some detail with its less papery supporting program, which the delegates, among them international luminaries such as Ernest Renan or Gaston Maspero, had come to en-

¹ Guido Carocci, “Il Congresso degli Orientalisti a Firenze”, in: *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, V (1878), 40, pp. 218f.: 219.

² Sammezzano is known as one of the most striking examples of orientalizing architecture in Italy – yet, due to the limited accessibility of the

site, has only recently begun to attract increasing academic attention; see *Ferdinando Panciatichi Ximenes d’Aragona: Sammezzano e il sogno d’Oriente 1813–2013*, exh. cat. Reggello 2013, ed. by Emanuele Masiello/Ethel Santacroce, Livorno 2014. See also the paper by Olga Bush in this volume, pp. 78f.

joy. Apparently the entire program, tailored by a welcoming committee recruited from the first families of Florence, culminated in a field trip to Sammezzano. As the journalist duly notes, the eclectic – and eccentric – impression of Sammezzano provided a fictional image which stood in stark contrast to the subjects and categories of academic oriental studies.

In fact, the conference itself was mostly a philosophical, linguistic and philological undertaking, with the clear aim to promote Italian orientalist studies both within a larger transnational academia and in the young Italian nation. The Società Italiana per gli Studi Orientali had been founded only a few years earlier by the Sicilian orientalist and historian Michele Amari. Angelo de Gubernatis – the well-connected writer, anarchist and sanscritist and, as such, a truly eclectic citizen of the Romantic age – became the first secretary of the Società.³ With De Gubernatis presiding over the proceedings of the conference of 1878, the resulting voluminous publication demonstrated how his literary interests were very much in tune with the established methods of orientalism as a discipline of words and ideas. The subjects treated by an array of international scholars in the first volume mainly dealt with questions relating to different types of texts and with the academic problems of their editions, translations, and interpretations. Topics ranged from Egyptian Books of the Dead to Berber inscriptions in Libya. Only a few contributions showed a more essayistic approach, and even those mostly circled around matters of language and writing – such as the question raised by

one arabist about whether the prophet Muhammed could read and write.⁴ While this focus on the written word and its tradition and interpretation appears as a typical common ground of oriental studies across different national academic schools in the late nineteenth century, it also has a very specific dimension in the Florentine context. In the preface to the conference proceedings, De Gubernatis very elegantly mentions how the availability of the Tipografia Orientale of the Istituto di Studi Superiori di Firenze facilitated the work of the publishing house when it came to covering different kinds of non-Latin fonts.⁵ He thus roots the entire undertaking carefully and consciously within a larger background of Italian intellectual history. As Filipa Lowndes Vicente has shown, Italy-based oriental studies during those years frequently alluded to the tradition of the Tipografia Medicea Orientale, the printing press which had been founded by cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici in Rome in the late sixteenth century to publish books in Arabic and other oriental languages for both missionary and scholarly purposes.⁶ The reference by nineteenth-century orientalists to a fundamental achievement of late Renaissance Humanism may generally confirm the continuity or parallelism between these two periods that Raymond Schwab has identified within the *longue durée* of a larger Western history of ideas.⁷

Yet, if we reconsider this interrelation embedded in its particular Italian context, it may add to the ongoing differentiated re-assessment of Edward Said's seminal, yet rather monolithic notion of Orientalism.

³ Filipa Lowndes Vicente, *Altri orientalisti: l'India a Firenze 1860–1900*, Florence 2012, p. 48; Marco Di Giulio, "Scholarship, Politics, and Jewish Identity in Italian Post-Unification Academia", in: *History of Universities*, XXIX (2016), pp. 88–111: 110.

⁴ See various contributions in: *Atti del IV Congresso internazionale degli orientalisti tenuto in Firenze nel settembre 1878*, conference proceedings, Florence 1880–1881.

⁵ Angelo de Gubernatis, "Avvertenza", *ibidem*, pp. Vff. V.

⁶ *Le vie delle lettere: la Tipografia Medicea tra Roma e l'Oriente*, exh. cat. Florence 2012/13, ed. by Sara Fani, Florence 2012.

⁷ Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680 to 1880 (The Social Foundations of Aesthetic Forms)*, New York 1984, p. 11. This is placed within the Italian context by Fabrizio De Donno, "Routes to Modernity: Orientalism and Mediterraneanism in Italian Culture, 1810–1910", in: *California Italian Studies*, I (2010), 1, pp. 1–23: 3. For the link between academic and more vernacular Orientalisms particularly in late nineteenth-century Florence, see Maria Giovanna Stasolla, "The 'Orient' in Florence (19th Century): From Oriental Studies to the Collection of Islamic Art, from a Reconstruction of the 'Orient' to the Exotic Dream of the Rising Middle Class", in: *Oriente Moderno*, XCIII (2013), pp. 3–31.

In the definition of his postcolonial structuralist critique, Said does hint at the importance of Italy and other European countries as traditional places of orientalist studies,⁸ but altogether deems these contributions rather secondary to the corpus of Orientalism produced by literature, scholarship and cultural history of the large imperial powers:

Unlike the Americans, the French and the British – less so the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss – have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience.⁹

However, as has often been noted throughout the vast corpus of critical literature written post-Said, this juxtaposition creates its own problematic binaries – most obviously the assumption of a monolithic 'West' that runs the risk of appearing constructed, clichéd or even ahistorical itself, thus reproducing the very categories Said seeks to challenge in his critical deconstruction of Orientalism.¹⁰ This predicament has been productively challenged by in-depth studies that start from a (trans)national perspective, identifying, comparing and interrelating not only the Orientalisms of the great Western empires, but also cases of more indirect or ambivalent nature.¹¹ Further differentiation has been achieved by a continuous extension of the empirical basis and subject matter of critical studies on Orientalism, beyond its initial focus on scholarship regarding litera-

ture, language and philosophy, towards the sometimes more 'raw' or 'messy' data sets of anthropology, material and visual culture, media history, and other fields.¹²

If, as Said noted, the Orient is one of Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the Other",¹³ it thus seems worthwhile to take the notion of the 'image' with its visual implications literally. Looking at the function of such images within the particular national framework of modern Italy sheds light on a complex transnational constellation of the nineteenth century, which is not only the age of nation-building in the West, but also the moment when a new modern world order emerges between the 'global' and the 'local'.¹⁴

In fact, if we go back to the opening quote about Sammezzano in all its journalistic nonchalance, it actually puts a finger on the contingencies of representation that are caught neither by the verbal nor the visual alone: "C'è là dentro un non so che di fantastico, che non si riproduce, non si descrive."¹⁵ Interestingly, a similar diagnosis can be made for another, more academic element of the congress supporting program which, despite all of its philological and linguistic character, was complemented by an exhibition (Figs. 2, 3). Several halls in the Biblioteca Riccardiana were filled with artefacts, manuscripts, objects, and sculptures from the Near and Far East – the setting of this display in a humanistic library, decorated with frescoes by Luca Giordano, provided a perfect backdrop to anchor the event once again within the local framework, providing a teleological narrative that sets 'the Orient' against European categories, now in an

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1979, p. 17.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. I.

¹⁰ The literature on the debate triggered by Said's *Orientalism* is too vast to be quoted in detail here. A useful first reference is *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. by Alexander L. Macfie, Edinburgh 2000.

¹¹ See Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*, Cambridge 2009; with a very concise re-assessment of Said's premise from the point of view of German historiography. See also e.g. David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration*, New Haven 2010; Maarten

Kuitenbrouwer, *Dutch Scholarship in the Age of Empire and Beyond: KITLV – the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, 1851–2011*, ed. by Harry A. Poeze, Leiden 2014.

¹² Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, Oxford 2001.

¹³ Said (note 8), p. I.

¹⁴ For a more encompassing and panoramic perspective on this constellation see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 2009.

¹⁵ Carocci (note I), p. 219.



2 "Congresso degli orientalisti a Firenze - L'Esposizione nella sala di Luca Giordano (Da uno schizzo del sig. Borrani)", from: *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, V (1878), 40, p. 212

aesthetic and visual dimension. We read about Indian sculptures – probably specimens of Gandhara art which stylistically has often been perceived as particularly close to Mediterranean classical antiquity – that were the highlight of the show:

Coteste sculture sono altrettante prove dell'importanza e dell'antichità della civiltà orientale, più antica della europea; ma che non ha come questa seguito la via del progresso.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ See e.g. Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient", in: *Art in America*, LXXI (1983), 5, pp. 119–131, 187–191; Jill Beaulieu/Mary Roberts, *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography*, Durham 2002; Joan DelPlato/Julie F. Codell, *Orientalism, Eroticism and Modern Visuality in Global Cultures*, London/New

York 2016; on Italian Orientalist painting see e.g. *Orientalisti: incanti e scoperte nella pittura dell'Ottocento italiano*, exh. cat. Rome 2012, ed. by Emanuela Angiuli/Anna Villari, Milan 2011; within a larger Mediterranean context see *Verso Oriente e ritorno: l'arte orientalista e gli scambi di modelli decorativi nel bacino del Mediterraneo*, exh. cat. Montelupo Fiorentino 2012, ed. by Marilena Pasquali, Florence 2012.



3 “Congresso degli orientalisti a Firenze - L'Esposizione. La prima sala (Disegno del sig. Borrani)”, from: *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, V (1878), 40, p. 213

and anthropology, most of the critical scholarship which addresses Italian post-enlightenment Orientalism as an intellectual practice has focused on literature, philology and historical writing.¹⁸ This volume understands itself as a first step towards a closure of this gap – it is not only about ‘Orientalism’ or the ‘other’ as an iconographic subject, but rather about the visual components within a complex regime of representation. As Stephanie Moser and Sam Smiles have pointed out in relation to the image practices of archaeology, there is no “innocent

eye”, and art history and visual studies have become increasingly aware of this at least since Ernst Gombrich’s investigation into the “culturally bound nature of representation” – but, nevertheless, there are still many blind spots in the field of critical visual studies.¹⁹ This holds even more true if we look at cross-cultural movements, interrelations and contact zones. They particularly call for a synoptic perspective in order to understand different gazes and trajectories which constitute relations between the self and the ‘other’.²⁰ This volume is to be

¹⁸ See e.g. the important work by Fabrizio De Donno/Neelam Srivastava, “Colonial and Postcolonial Italy”, in: *Interventions*, VIII (2006), pp. 371–379; De Donno (note 7).

¹⁹ This has been shown for the archaeological context by Sam Smiles/Stephanie Moser, “Introduction: The Image in Question”, in: *Envisioning the*

Past: Archaeology and the Image, ed. by *idem*, Malden, Mass., 2005, pp. 1–12: 3.

²⁰ For two different case studies on constructions of alterity through art historical discourse and visual media see Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, “Transcultural Interpretation and the Production of Alterity: Photography, Materiality, and Mediation in the Making of ‘African Art’”, in: *Art*

seen against this background, embedded within a vast discussion on representation and cross-cultural contact. This debate – too large to be revisited here in detail – sharpens our critical awareness of the constructed and variegated character of ‘otherness’, but also the epistemic potential of its constructions. Therefore, our approach is very much indebted to the field of research that has linked fundamental anthropological work on the politics of difference with visual studies.²¹

At the same time, it is not contradictory to this notion of multiple trajectories that our volume zooms in on a particular geographical constellation, and that it remains focused on Italy’s gaze towards variations of ‘otherness’ in late modernity. On the contrary, it takes its cue from the after-lives, but also the deviations and transgressions of the “*modèle italien*”²² as the Italian nation constitutes itself in relation to multiple constellations of increasingly globalizing multiple modernities. As recent scholarship on Italian nation-building suggests, its cultural foundation was altogether very much informed by an awareness of territorial and ethnic diversities. Thus, Italy’s unifying process might be described as a dialectic operation between notions of unity and variety. As this sets, for instance, the Etruscan versus the Roman heritage,²³ it also questions unifying classicist models and leads to a general interest in alternative antiquities.

This is also mirrored in the formation of ancient Near Eastern collections, which Stefano Anastasio and Melania Savino describe in this volume. Yet,

the ambivalent fate of these collections betrays the problematic relation between this notion of diversity and the vectors of linear, teleologically informed hierarchies.

Dana Katz’s contribution on the Sala Araba in the National Museum in Palermo is related to this, but opens up a different historical reference frame. It speaks about a fundamental debate about Italy’s own status as the ‘South’ of Europe,²⁴ about inner frictions between a North and South within Italy. At the same time, it places the debate on Italy’s Arab heritage in the context of political interactions within the larger Mediterranean. This latter issue has been addressed by art historical scholarship mainly on the level of pre-modern circulation and cultural contact.²⁵ Yet, its historiographical dimension is related to modern and contemporary questions that regard Italy as a fulcrum between Europe and the Middle East – almost in the sense of another *convivencia* – a question which emanates from Italian history.²⁶

Olga Bush’s essay looks at a similar question, spelled out in the poetics of domestic space, as she looks at the residence of Enrico Alberto d’Albertis in Genoa: a nineteenth-century interior which intertwines the visual signals of the so-called ‘neo-moorish’ Alhambra style with a very European narrative, thus creating a visual contact zone that goes beyond the usual static tropes of Orientalism. At the same time, the origin of D’Albertis’s collection, gathered during his years as a Mediterranean and Atlantic navigator,

History and Fetisbism Abroad: Global Shiftings in Media and Methods, conference proceedings Duisburg-Essen 2011, ed. by Gabriele Genge/Angela Stercken, Bielefeld 2014, pp. 113–128; Eva-Maria Troelenberg, “The ‘Golden Age’ and the Secession: Approaches to Alterity in Early Twentieth-Century World Art”, in: *In the Shadow of the Golden Age: Art and Identity in Asia from Gandhara to the Modern Age*, ed. by Julia A.B. Hegewald, Berlin 2014, pp. 397–429.

²¹ See e.g. Tim Barringer, “Images of Otherness and the Visual Production of Difference: Race and Labour in Illustrated Texts, 1850–1865”, in: *The Victorians and Race*, ed. by Shearer West, Aldershot 1996, pp. 34–52; and especially *Cultural Encounters: Representing “Otherness”*, ed. by Elizabeth Hallam/Brian V. Street, London 2000.

²² Fernand Braudel, *Le modèle italien*, Paris 1989.

²³ Antonino De Francesco, *The Antiquity of the Italian Nation: The Cultural Origins of a Political Myth in Modern Italy, 1796–1943*, Oxford 2013.

²⁴ *Italy’s “Southern Question”: Orientalism in One Country*, ed. by Jane Schneider, Oxford 1998.

²⁵ See e.g. Francesco Gabrieli/Umberto Scerrato, *Gli Arabi in Italia: cultura, contatti e tradizioni*, Milan 1979; *Islamic Artefacts in the Mediterranean World: Trade, Gift Exchange, and Artistic Transfer*, ed. by Gerhard Wolf/Catarina Schmidt Arangelis, Venice 2010.

²⁶ See e.g. the focus on Italian historiography in Karla Mallette, *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean: Toward a New Philology and a Counter-Orientalism*, Philadelphia/Oxford 2010.

illustrates how the sea remained a space of interaction even within a global modernity that was literally larger than the Mediterranean.²⁷ This example also reminds us that our main focus on ‘visualizing otherness’ with respect to the Mediterranean and the Near East is only one dimension of Italy’s relation to the larger world.²⁸ However, from a long-term perspective, spanning the age of romanticism to the dawn of futurism and possibly beyond, it is the Mediterranean paradigm, oscillating between Orientalist and classicist narratives, that may provide the most continuous line of thought for the emergence of modern Italian identities between constructions of ‘self’ and ‘other’.²⁹

The contributions of Carmen Belmonte and Lucia Piccioni demonstrate exactly this leap between the late romantic and the futurist age. They show how radical ruptures of visual regimes and the technoid acceleration of modernization unfold their self-affirming function in the conflict and contact zones of war and colonialist expansion.

Laurie Kalb’s essay further complicates the in-flux history of alterities, as it looks at not only the genesis, but also the perception and historiography of the Esposizione Universale di Roma (EUR). Kalb’s close reading of this exhibition site not only reveals the fascist era’s dubious notions of ‘otherness’ in its spatial, culturalist, and temporal dimensions, but also puts the finger on the after-lives of a period whose position within the narratives of modern Italian history appears to range between normalization and externalization.³⁰

Altogether, this volume speaks about identity-building on national and even on local grounds, but with a global gaze, in all its potentials and predicaments. As such, it is the product of a particular local constellation that the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut provides with its focus on Italian art history within its European and its global interrelations. I therefore thank Gerhard Wolf and Alessandro Nova, who welcomed *Visualizing Otherness in Modern Italy* as a special issue of the *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, as well as Samuel Vitali and Ortensia Martinez for their careful, patient and cooperative editorial work.

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Stefano Fancelli, *Florence: Fig. 1. – From L’Illustrazione Italiana, V (1878), 40: Figs. 2, 3.*

²⁷ On modern geo-rhetorics between Mediterranean and Oceanic dimensions see Osterhammel (note 14), esp. pp. 157–168.

²⁸ For a more global approach see e.g. *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, ed. by Beverly Allen/Mary Russo, Minneapolis/London 1997.

²⁹ See De Donno (note 7). Norma Bouchard continues this argument into

the late twentieth century. See her analysis of the “Geophilosophies of the Mediterranean” that shaped much of Italian postcolonial and poststructuralist thinking: Norma Bouchard, “Italy’s Geophilosophies of the Mediterranean”, in: *Annali d’Italianistica*, XXIX (2011), pp. 343–362.

³⁰ For a recent example of this ambiguous position see *Anni ’30: arti in Italia oltre il fascismo*, exh. cat., ed. by Antonello Negri, Florence 2012.