ALESSANDRA RUSSO, *A NEW ANTIQUITY. ART AND HUMANITY AS UNIVERSAL, 1400–1600*

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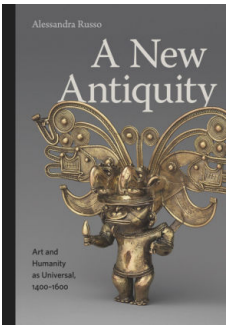

Reviewed by
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Towards the end of *A New Antiquity*, Alessandra Russo observes "it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that a geopolitical underpinning characterizes several 16th century art treatises" (p. 167). Far from being an exaggeration, this might be an understatement. Sixteenth-century art theory from at least Paolo Pino (1548) to Karel Van Mander (1604) is fraught with geopolitical contestation. A series of controversies about Michelangelo, his key works enshrined at the heart of Roman Christendom, are motivated by bids to map the territories of modern art: Michelangelo re-constitutes and surpasses antiquity, therefore his status is universal; Michelangelo is the face of a Tuscan cultural hegemony, and so draws oppositional challenges from proponents of other regional modernities (Venetian, Lombard, Netherlandish); Michelangelo represents a resurgence of idolatrous pagan license, hence an undesirable model for artists dedicated to the propagation of universal Catholic faith.

Two years before Giorgio Vasari published the first edition of his *Lives*, with Michelangelo as the emphatically Tuscan grand climax of the progress of art since Giotto (and even since antiquity), the Portuguese Francisco da Holanda published his *Da pintura*

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antigua (1548). In Book I of this visionary work of artistic geography, Holanda reflects on the universality of ancient painting, less a period descriptor than a category of universal artistic excellence which – according to Holanda – can be found throughout the world, from Europe to "the antipodes" – Morocco, India, the Levant, Asia, and "among the barbarous people of Brazil and Peru, who had been hitherto unknown to us".[1] To be sure, for Holanda the revival of ancient painting in Europe is due to Italian artists, but his canon of moderns is far more geographically pluralist than the Florence-centric roster of masters that Vasari would commemorate in 1550 and more emphatically and influentially in the expanded edition of the *Lives* in 1568. In Book II, purportedly a series of conversations in Rome with Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna, Holanda has Michelangelo set forth an altogether more inclusive notion of what "Roman art" could be in modern times: he praises works by the Paduan Mantegna, the Sienese Beccafumi, the Venetian Titian, the Friulian Giovanni da Udine, Giulio Clovio from Istria, Parmigianino from Parma, and the Ferrarese Dosso Dossi – the latter of whom would be singled out for particular vilification by Vasari, who was at best grudgingly appreciative of most of the others.

The counter-Vasarian potential of Holanda's text is not the basis on which Russo wants to re-position Michelangelo in the geography of art. Where one could read Holanda to deconstruct the Tuscan axis of Vasari and expand an Italian geography of art, Russo's ambition is to look beyond Europe entirely, and to suggest that Holanda is principally concerned with a new world of arts that had not been known to Europe before the age of exploration. More than once, she quotes Holanda's Michelangelo speaking for painting as *metatechne*, since by virtue of his training the painter "can undertake all the other manual trades that are practiced through the entire world" (p. 116). Russo finds echoes of this dictum in repeated attestations by Europeans of the versatility of indigenous artists and their speedy mastery of imported arts. More provocatively, she speculates on Michelangelo's awareness of works of art from the New World: if Michelangelo had seen the Codex Vindobondensis in the 1520s, it might have reminded him of his own Sistine ceiling, "which is reminiscent of an unfolded – and magnified – Mesoamerican codex" (p. 50). When he painted his *Creation of Adam* did Michelangelo think about the "common humanity" increasingly revealed by artifacts from the New World and acclaimed by informants like Pietro Martire d'Anghiera and Bartolomé de Las Casas, who he may have met in Rome (p. 101)? In fact, there is evidence (not discussed here) that such conversations were indeed happening in the Vatican. A 1494 fresco by Pinturicchio in the papal apart-

[1] Francisco de Hollanda, *On Antique Painting*, transl. by Alice Sedgwick Wohl, University Park, PA 2013, 95. Hollanda was not the first to see art beyond Europe in terms of antiquity. In 1516 the Florentine traveler Andrea Corsali deplored the demolition by the Portuguese near Goa of "un tempio antico, detto Pagode, ch'era con maraviglioso artificio fabricato, con figure antiche di certa pietra nera lavorata con grandissime perfettione". Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Navigationi et viaggi*, 3 vols., Venice 1563, vol. 1, 178v.

ments depicts the resurrected Christ soaring over a panoramic landscape: directly beneath his feet appear diminutive near-naked figures adorned with feather artifacts, an artistic first response to early reports of the first voyage of Columbus.

Russo's opening chapter on Holanda and his Portuguese and Roman artistic and intellectual milieux recognizes his radical implications for a more inclusive and globalized understanding of Renaissance art. This is followed by an account on the Dominican Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, whose writing and scholarship bridged the world of Italian humanism and the Spanish and Spanish colonial spheres. In a chapter on Anghiera's fellow Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas, best known for his *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (1542), Russo draws on his posthumously published writings to demonstrate the centrality of art making to his passionate advocacy of indigenous peoples. Two further chapters pursue a more globalizing frame, with case studies in Peru, West Africa, and Japan, and draw on an array of witnesses that include Albrecht Dürer, Bernardo Diaz del Castillo, Felipe de Guevara, and Inca Garcilaso de la Vega.

Russo is attentive to a common sphere of discourse among these Italian and Iberian clerics and humanists, whose reflections on the extraordinary skill of indigenous makers manifest in artifacts from the New World are presented as constituting a new artistic anthropology, a grasp of the centrality of art to the quality of being human. "The evidence of such singular artifacts [...] in a previously unthinkable part of the earth" – Russo argues – prompted a "revolution in thought" – nothing short of a "redefinition of humanity" itself (p. 8).

For Russo, therefore, Renaissance humanism means more than philology and rhetoric, or the practice of *humanae litterae*, or the imitation of the ancients. Far more than the cultivation of the self through literary pursuits, *humanitas* according to her sweeping redefinition is manifest both in the *ingenium* of artistic making and – more implicitly – in the recognition of the humanity of art, wherever it comes from. Such "artifact-based humanism" as Russo calls it is precisely the opposite of the "othering" of indigenous people through the commerce in and spectacle of *exotica*, a practice by European elites often linked with the extraction of raw materials and the brutal exploitation of indigenous labor. Artifacts and monuments are discussed as proofs of a rationality beyond necessity – art making manifests operative reason, or prudence, in action. It is in making the case for empathy, upholding the urgency with which her early modern witnesses linked the recognition of human *ingenium* with the human dignity of New World inhabitants, that Russo's project appears most original and highly necessary. It goes against the grain of scholarship on the early modern globe that prioritizes the adversarial, that sees cultural encounters only in terms of well-documented instances of human exploitation and cultural extermination, that reduces sixteenth-century advocacy for indige-

nous rights to the political-economic machinery of confessionalization and colonization.

Of course, as Russo well knows, her alternative view is assailable. The enterprise is punctuated by moments of ambivalence – her own as well as her sources' – even as the argument is developed and forcefully re-stated. She underscores the frequency with which her sources juxtapose the refinement of indigenous architecture, featherwork, and sculpture with the horror of human sacrifice, and the brutal facts of post-conquest enslavement. A ruthless colonial administrator and enslaver like the historian Gonzalo Fernandes de Oviedo y Valdes can admire goldsmithing, body painting, bird masks and feather costumes (p. 92–94) while decrying the people who made them as barbarians, idolators, and sodomites. Las Casas encounters an enslaved man with artfully wrought physical restraints, and is told by his custodian that the captive made these "artifacts" himself. Are we supposed to notice the collision between the inhumanity of slavery and the very notion of "liberal" arts, or do such seemingly "embarrassing self-contradictions" ultimately disclose what Las Casas might really be seeking to impart: that "something of the Indian world has not been destroyed by the conquest", and that art "signals that humanity persists through domination" (p. 127).

That the affirmation of artists in the Americas by Anghiera and Las Casas is not just humanitarian in a twenty-first-century sense but humanistic in a Renaissance sense, and that it calls for a more expansive understanding of Renaissance humanism, is a powerful idea, and one that deserves further expansion and debate. Russo's claim that "artifact-based humanism" constitutes a paradigm shift with more global implications is also appealing, but more tendentious. The encounter with the artisans of the New World, she claims, profoundly transforms European understanding of what artists do, and leads to a "modern" conception of art. Russo is emphatic that her observers were not merely projecting an "Old World" understanding of civilization upon the New (p. 89). Instead, she suggests, antiquity "was deeply renovated by the antipodes" becoming synonymous with a timeless and universal potential for artistic excellence. But here, problems emerge.

Readers of Anghiera might note that he constantly sought to project Greco-Roman antiquity onto the New World. In his *First Decade*, he compares the warlike men and women of Hispaniola to the Thracians and the Amazons, and reports that the Taino woman Catarina "performed a deed much greater than Roman Cloelia". While it is possible that his conception of antiquity might have been enriched by what he saw, I would argue that his capacity to register contradictions between indigenous civility and cruelty were shaped by a distinctly non-idealizing and hard-primitivist view of the ancient world. That is, Anghiera was filtering these new situations through ancient literary topoi and conceptual categories. Hispaniola with its multiple kings is like Latium when Aeneas arrived,

> yet they [the Taino and other islanders] too [i.e. like the ancients] are tortured by ambition and desire for empire, and in their wars they inflict mutual destruction on one another; we believe that the Golden Age did not live free from that plague.[2]

Anghiera's correspondent cardinal Ascanio Sforza, and very probably Anghiera himself, would have been familiar with the *Libro Architecttonico* (ca. 1464) of Antonio Averlino, known as Filarete, which had been dedicated to Ascanio's father Duke Francesco Sforza. A passage describing Piero de'Medici in his studiolo cycles through several of the formulae of praise drawn on later by Anghiera. Piero is described as taking pleasure in the effigies of emperors and famous men wrought in bronze and precious metals

> first, for the excellence of the image represented, secondly for the noble mastery of those ancient angelic spirits who with their sublime intellects made such ordinary things as bronze, marble, and such materials acquire great price. Valuable things such as gold and silver have become even greater through their mastery, for, as it is noted, there is nothing, from gems on, that is worth more than gold. They have made a worth more than gold by means of their skill.

After all, when we see the works of "Phidias and Praxiteles", they seem to have come from heaven rather than from the hand of man. And Piero enjoys his collection of "vases of gold, silver and other materials made nobly and at great expense and brought from different places [...] praising their dignity and the mastery of their fabricators", along with "other noble things that have come from different parts of the world".[3]

Anghiera's praise of artworks in which craft supersedes the value of the materials, and which call to mind "Phidias and Praxiteles", indicates that he has absorbed the toolbox of early Renaissance humanistic art theory, which contemporary art history has seemingly forgotten.

To be sure, it does not finally matter who said what first. The meaning of a topos depends on its context, not on its putative origin text. Russo's argument that the humanistic celebration of indigenous makers and their works demonstrates the recognition of an essential humanity still stands, is still important, and very compelling. Yet Russo herself – in the tradition of Hans Belting's now rather shopworn account on the shift from "image" to "art" – is heavily invested in firsts, in paradigm shifts on the pathway to

[2] *Ocean Decade*, Book 2, in: *Repertorium Columbianum, Vol. V: Selections from Peter Martyr*, ed. and transl. by Geoffrey Eatough, Turnhout 1998, 55.

[3] Filarete (Antonio Averlino), *Treatise on Architecture*, 2 vols., transl. by John Spencer, New Haven, CT/London 1965, vol. 1, 320.

"modernity". When Bernardo Diaz del Castillo praises "idols made with gold, that even if it was of low value, was elevated by the art", Russo tells us that we are seeing how the category of idol "contributed to generating the modern concept of art" (p. 132). And yet there is nothing new or modern here: the artistry of idols had been acclaimed long before, in the rich descriptions of Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Third Commentary*, where newly excavated works of ancient sculpture attract the admiration of people "intendenti et dotti nell'arte della scultura et orefici et pictori" and the stigma of *ydolatria* from the rest.[4]

A key line of Russo's argument is that such New World "renovation" transformed the humanist discourse on the mechanical arts as liberal arts, calling for a new historiography of the art historical early modern. The reader is invited to see Vasari's use of ekphrasis in the *Lives* as anticipated and possibly even influenced by the European eyewitness response to feather mosaics, masks, goldsmithing, and bone carvings from the Americas. "In the history of art history, the '*Lives*' of Vasari (published in 1550 and 1568) is considered the first text where ekphrasis became a practice to celebrate artistic activity itself: it was no longer a tool to describe what was represented but how" (p. 135). Surely an eyebrow-raising claim: whoever could have considered Vasari to be the first author to celebrate artistic making or activity with poetic description? The citation is to Patricia Rubin's 1995 monograph *Giorgio Vasari. Art and History*, but at the loci cited Rubin says no such thing. Rubin discusses Vasari's "enumerative descriptions [that] emphasize the artist's inventive capacities" but makes no claim about Vasari's originality in that regard; more concerningly, Rubin adds that "to identify [such descriptions] specifically as the exercise known as *ekphrasis* is misleading".[5]

Most early modernists would baulk at the notion that Vasari was the first to employ ekphrasis to convey the effectiveness of artistic performance, but the relevant literature has not been consulted here.[6] In the 1400s, the conventions of Byzantine ekphrasis had been adapted by humanists and artisan-writers in Italy to produce vivid laudatory accounts in poetry and prose of work by artists like Pisanello and Andrea Mantegna. For Cennino Cennini, writing in the early 1400s, painting "combines imagination with skill of hand".[7] Russo, however, wants to make the admiration of artistic

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Lorenzo Ghibertis Denkwürdigkeiten (I commentarii), 2 vols., ed. by Julius von Schlosser, Berlin 1912, vol. 1, 61–64.

5
Patricia Lee Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari. Art and History*, New Haven, CT/London 1995, 279.

6
For instance: Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators. Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition 1350–1450*, Oxford 1971.

7
Cennino Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook (Il libro dell'arte)*, transl. by Daniel V. Thompson, Jr., New Haven, CT/London 1960 [1933], 1.

subtlety by Las Casas, d'Anghiera, and da Hollanda, more than a century after Cennini, the decisive factor in the recognition of an intellectual dimension to artistic making. By the end of the sixteenth century the hand of the artist is "the staple of excellence embedded in an artwork" (p. 139). While earlier references to the hand from the fifteenth century supposedly concern only "autograph rights and duties", by the 1600s, with Guido Reni and Bernini: "hands were definitely considered to be connected to the intellect" (p. 139). An epigram by Conrad Celtis on the *docta manus* of Dürer from 1500 is stated to be an early recognition of the manifestation of intellect in manual skill. Petrarch, then, might as well never have paralleled the painterly hand of Simone Martini (*Simonis digitus*) with the authorial hand of Virgil; it matters little that Mantegna was acclaimed (and more than once) for combining "la mano industriosa et l'alto ingegno", and that Cosmè Tura was praised for his "Daedalian hand".[8] Russo writes

> that the subtlety of the artworks observed and described in the context of the early modern globalization participated in this major shift: manufactured 'idols' proved artistic refinement, and myriad handworks were considered related to and even sources of thought (p. 139).

"Participated in", perhaps – but the rhetorical apparatus of humanist aesthetics that connected hand and mind was available to humanists in Italy in the 1400s, as was the habit of praising the value of craftsmanship in precious metals over the value of the material itself. It was those categories, already employed in the appreciation and critical appraisal of an idolatrous pagan art, that provided the terms in which indigenous artifacts from the Americas and elsewhere could be admired.

Such objections here do not diminish the revisionist force of Russo's intervention, her attempt to change the narrative of the global early modern. It is especially commendable that she draws attention to the troubling contradictions in her primary sources, as well as the risks in her own readings, and thus sets in motion the manifold debates that should emerge from this book. And yet I remain haunted by other questions, other possibilities: could the "humanity" manifest in artifacts ultimately be an affirmation of the commentator's professed humanity, grounded in educated taste and the command of a humanist vocabulary? If European observers recognized that the plundered artifacts circulating in Europe manifested the humanity of people in the Americas, could that be because humanity has been displaced to the artifacts from the labo-

[8] For Petrarch on Simone Martini, see Tim Markey, Servius Illustrated. Latin Texts and Contexts of Simone Martini's Frontispiece Painting to Petrarch's Virgil, in: *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 65, 2016, 1–28. On Mantegna, Stephen J. Campbell, *Andrea Mantegna. Humanist Aesthetics, Faith, and the Force of Images*, Turnhout 2020, 11. On Tura, Stephen J. Campbell, *Cosmè Tura of Ferrara. Style, Politics and the Renaissance City 1450–1495*, New Haven, CT/London 1997, 22.

ring bodies that produced them? An alternative reading might see in such displacement a re-enactment of the severance of people and marketable resources inherent in the colonial process; the investing of the art object with human-like characteristics that calls to mind – however anachronistically – Marx's theorization of the commodity through reification, the personification of things, and the objectification of people. While the book succeeds in demonstrating the emergence of positive universalizing discourses about art, it does not finally dispel the possibility that such discourses might be just another tool of Europe's violent colonialism.