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Forging Authenticity, Bastianini and the Neo-Renaissance in Nineteenth-century Florence, *Arte e Archeologia Studi e Documenti* 32 by Anita Fiderer Moskowitz

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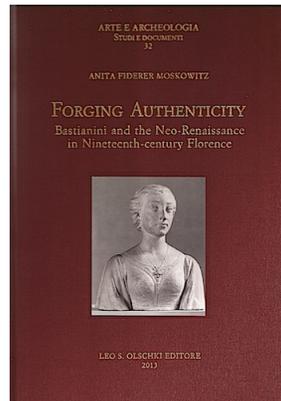
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Forging Authenticity: Bastianini and the Neo-Renaissance in Nineteenth-century Florence offers art historians a welcome analysis of the constellation of issues surrounding nineteenth-century forgery as well as a scrupulously scholarly presentation of this often complicated subject. As author Anita Fiderer Moskowitz notes in the preface of the book, her career has been focused on late medieval and early Renaissance Italian sculpture, a field of study that has “required considerable connoisseurship skills in order to recognize distinctions between authentic original works, imitations and forgeries” (IX). The presence of nineteenth-century forgeries, copies, and stylistic imitations of Renaissance sculpture can pose a challenge for even the most sophisticated of connoisseurs. Moskowitz’s work on a thirteenth-century ciborium attributed to Arnolfo de Cambio, and on a fifteenth-century reliquary portrait bust attributed to Donatello, led her to investigate the world of nineteenth-century Italian forgeries and copies, and ultimately to the work of Giovanni Bastianini (1830–1868), whose reputation as an alleged forger has long been the subject of speculation. In *Forging Authenticity, Bastianini and the Neo-Renaissance in Nineteenth-century Florence*, Moskowitz examines the case of Bastianini in detail and by doing so, reveals not only the particulars of his situation, but also the complex and often confusing networks of greed, pride, and dishonesty that underpin the desire to own a genuine Renaissance sculpture—a veritable treasure trove of the seven deadly sins to use a quattrocento metaphor.

Before delving into the content of the book, a word on the production quality of this publication is in order. Unlike the vast majority of contemporary art historical publications, this book was produced in a classic art historical format using high quality cream-colored paper, elegant understated end papers, and a gold-embossed title on the front cover. The

text is accompanied by footnotes rather than endnotes, and the black-and-white plates are located in a separate section at the back of the book. This format, once a typical structure for art historical publications, began to disappear in the 1960s and was ultimately ousted by the availability of inexpensive digital printing software in the 1990s. Although this is not the forum for a discussion of book design, it was a refreshing surprise to find that the publishers, Leo S. Olschki Editore, are maintaining the Florentine traditions in book design and production—and equally gratifying to realize that this book will not fall apart with repeated readings.

The book opens with an introduction to the nineteenth-century Neo-Renaissance in Italy, and the seemingly endless demand for Renaissance style artifacts ranging from ceramics à la Della Robbia to sculpture that evoked the work of Donatello (1386–1466), Desiderio da Settignano (1428–1464) or Benedetto da Maiano (1442–1497), among others. Moskowitz points out that this phenomenon was fueled by several factors: “Paving the way for this interest in Renaissance art were the new editions of Vasari’s *Lives* published during the previous century and more recently during the 1830s, the popularity and impact of the Grand Tour during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and finally the appearance of Leopoldo Cicognara’s *Storia della sculture* in 1813–1818, all of which contributed to a cultural climate that would stimulate the avid acquisition of Renaissance and Renaissance-like works of art” (XIII). Simultaneously, some of those Grand Tour visitors began to purchase property in Tuscany, restoring old villas or building new ones in the Renaissance style. If they could also purchase genuine Renaissance artifacts from impoverished Italian aristocrats to furnish the villas, that was of benefit to both parties; if not, then a piece of sculpture or majolica in the style of the Renaissance was an acceptable alternative. As the tourist traffic in Florence expanded over the course of the nineteenth century, the market for “Renaissance style” goods only increased.[\[1\]](#)

Moskowitz also introduces the reader to Giovanni Bastianini, describing him as “arguably the most infamous and gifted nineteenth-century imitator of Italian Renaissance sculpture” (XIII–XIV). She establishes the outline of the controversy surrounding Bastianini’s work, and poses the questions that have emerged as art historical knowledge has deepened over the decades: “When I began this project, I fully accepted the received wisdom that Bastianini was a forger, but nevertheless set out [. . .] to take him seriously as an artist and assess his total oeuvre. However, the evidence of his complicity in fraud seemed increasingly open to doubt” (XV). The following chapters explore this issue in depth and present a clear picture of what is, by any measure, a very confusing and complicated historical situation.

Chapter One, “The ‘Renaissance’ of the Renaissance”, sets the stage for the revival of interest in Italian Renaissance culture. Although the focus of the book is on Florence, this Neo-Renaissance trend is found throughout Europe and, somewhat later, in the United States as well. It can be seen as a logical development of the neoclassical movement that emerged as a counterpoint to rococo culture, but in Italy the attraction of the Renaissance also had specifically nationalistic overtones in the context of the Risorgimento. This movement for Italian unity began in 1815 after the fall of Napoleon, and eventually resulted in the establishment of Italy as a nation in 1861; the emphasis on uniquely Italian art, rather than on ancient Greek and Roman culture, thus became an important political and nationalistic statement. Images from Renaissance painting and sculpture were re-interpreted

by nineteenth-century artists, in part as a way to assert Italian identity. The fact that these images also often were based on stories from Italian literature or history further strengthened their appeal as part of the Risorgimento agenda, and undoubtedly bolstered their marketability as well.

In this chapter, Moskowitz also addresses the role of museums in creating a market for Renaissance art, noting that “the growing interest in Renaissance masters was both spurred and *abetted* (italics mine) by the establishment of national museums in a number of European countries” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (10). Although painting was initially of primary interest to museum collectors, renaissance sculpture too was enthusiastically collected by the middle of the century. John Charles Robinson, curator at the South Kensington Museum of Ornamental Art (renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899), particularly encouraged the development of a sculpture collection with an emphasis on Italian Renaissance work, writing in 1862 that the “reverence for classical antiquity . . . invested, indeed, every fragment of ancient sculpture, even the most trivial, with a sentimental importance, and thus an overstrained and unreasoning reverence for the antique, as the *only* sculpture worthy of serious consideration . . .” (12).^[2] Moskowitz further suggests that the South Kensington Museum may have “propelled the idea of opening a national museum in Florence” because of close ties between Robinson and the Florence-based English art dealer, William Blundell Spence. Regardless of whether or not the London museum provided inspiration, the plans for a museum of Tuscan history and culture were officially announced in 1858 by the Grand Duke Leopoldo, and the transformation of the former Palazzo Pretorio into the Bargello began. By the time it opened in 1865, Italy had become a nation and the mission of the Bargello had been redefined as a museum of *national* culture and history. Over the next decade, the museum focused increasingly on sculpture and the decorative arts, and the acquisition committee, which included Bastianini, encouraged donations of early modern sculpture. There was clearly a sense of urgency about these collecting efforts as the “availability of original works of art had become limited” (14). The previous Austrian rulers of Florence had been all too eager to sell (or loot) the cultural patrimony of their subjects, but once Italy became a unified nation, this would change dramatically.^[3]

Similarly, private collectors as well as more bourgeois travelers to Italy were faced with a decreasing market in genuine Renaissance art works. For those who were primarily interested in re-creating a Tuscan Renaissance environment in their homes, the purchase of replicas and copies of quattrocento works was a congenial substitute for the originals; for others, the scarcity of authentic pieces led directly to the production of forgeries. Moskowitz wraps up this chapter with a discussion of the business environment in Florence as the scarcity of genuine Renaissance artworks fostered the growth of a murky Neo-Renaissance style that might—or might not—be mistaken for the real thing. She comments that “the value of a work of art at this historical moment, then, did not derive exclusively from its authenticity but rather from its capacity to speak to the spirit, and for this purpose a reproduction could serve equally well” (19).

Chapter Two continues this theme with a discussion of the historical context surrounding forgeries and copies in the nineteenth century. Entitled “The Delight of Deception and the Forging of Italian Renaissance Sculpture”, Moskowitz begins by pointing out that the practice

of creating 'antique' sculpture has a long history, and has often been seen as a clever ruse rather than a serious crime. She cites the well-known example of the young Michelangelo carving a sleeping cupid that was so persuasively 'antique' that it was sent to Rome, buried in a vineyard and then 'discovered' as a genuine ancient sculpture. It was sold as such to Cardinal Raffaele Riario for 200 gold ducats (23). Michelangelo was paid 30 ducats for his work—a cautionary tale perhaps for such clever young artists. In relating this story, Moskowitz cites seven different sources, both primary and secondary, to historically anchor the validity of the tale and acknowledge its later interpretations by other scholars. This type of scrupulous documentation, seen throughout the book, not only provides ample support for the author's arguments, but also offers an important example of what makes art historical scholarship credible.

This chapter further explores the ill-defined continuum from outright forgery with the intent to deceive to the honest reproduction of an artwork that is sold for strictly decorative purposes, and the shifting attitudes toward these practices characteristic of different eras. When Giovanni Battista Piranesi added on to a genuine antique fragment, was he restoring it or creating a fake? When Josiah Wedgwood purchased pottery from elsewhere but put his own decoration on it, was it a genuine 'Wedgwood' or only partially deserving of that label? And when Lorenzo Bartolini finished sculpture that was started by a less experienced carver, and then signed it, who deserves the credit—or the profit? And, one might add, is this significantly different than the studio practices of many successful painters who had legions of assistants working on the canvases that they signed. Through these and other examples, Moskowitz demonstrates clearly that attitudes about what is, or is not, a forgery have changed considerably over the centuries.

Complicating the issue further is the practice of copying from the antique or old masters. The training of young artists throughout most of the western world encouraged the habit of copying from earlier masters, and in fact, incorporated this approach into the heart of classical art education. It is no surprise then that sculptors would respond favorably when patrons asked for a copy of a sculpture from an earlier era. In addition, sculptors occasionally made multiple copies of their own works, thus giving rise to another layer of potential confusion for collectors in later decades. Understanding the possibilities for misunderstanding and uncertainty in evaluating any piece of sculpture from an earlier time period, however, is exactly what a genuine forger relies on to create his illusion.

Turning to the specific case of Giovanni Bastianini in chapter three, Moskowitz introduces him in more detail and lays out the context in which he studied and practiced his art. Briefly, he was born in Fiesole in 1830 and worked as a child in a nearby stone quarry. At age twelve, he came to the attention of an archaeologist specializing in Etruscan culture named Francesco Inghirami (1772–1846) who hired him to work in his book production shop in Florence. There, Bastianini probably first learned to read and write as well as draw, perhaps under Inghirami's guidance (35). He also seems to have tried his hand at sculpture during this period, and from 1844–45, he worked in the studio of the sculptor Pio Fedi (1816–1892). From 1845–48, he served as an apprentice to Giralamo Torrini (1795–1853) but in 1848, at age eighteen, Bastianini was approached by the antiquarian dealer, Giovanni Freppa who offered him a much better salary as well as room and board. The relationship with Freppa would prove both beneficial and disastrous. Bastianini now had the opportunity

to read and study art history and history, and to focus his attention on his own sculpture; but Freppa would also prove to be less than honest in his dealings and Bastianini would be drawn into the morass of accusations of forgery.

Before investigating in the forgery allegations, however, Moskowitz provides readers with a discussion of the historical context in which Bastianini would have worked. For many nineteenth century specialists, this section of the book presents a much appreciated introduction to the typically under-studied aesthetic issues of mid-century Florence. Her explanations of Italian romanticism, and the offshoot known as Purism, are contrasted with Realism and examined in the context of the Risorgimento, which was a consistent backdrop for nineteenth-century Italian culture. Although Bastianini himself does not seem to have been an active participant in the informal political gatherings in local cafes, Moskowitz posits that he must have been familiar with the issues that were preoccupying his friends and colleagues.

Bastianini's work is the subject of chapters four and five. In chapter four, the author presents pieces that are securely attributed to the sculptor and begins to set forth the allegations of forgery that were leveled against Bastianini during his lifetime. The most infamous of the allegations related to a bust of Girolamo Benivieni (1453–1542), a poet who was associated with Medici circle and a close friend of both Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. In short, his position as one of Florence's eminent humanists embodying the spirit of the high Renaissance made him an ideal candidate for a historicizing bust. Freppa, who was still Bastianini's patron, commissioned the bust in 1864, counting on the sculptor's talent as well as his naiveté about the business of art. In preparing his composition, Bastianini turned first to a 1776 engraving of the poet, and then to an elderly tobacco worker who the sculptor must have seen in passing and invited to serve as a model. For his work, Bastianini was paid 300 francs by Freppa.

Under normal circumstances, that would have been the end of the story. However, when the collector Alessandro Foresi offered to pay Freppa 500 francs for the work, the dealer refused. Instead, he sold it for 700 francs to Vicomte Louis-Félix De Nolvos with the caveat that Freppa was entitled to share in any profit De Nolvos might make if he sold the bust to another purchaser in the future (62–63). The following year, the bust was exhibited in Paris along with another of Bastianini's pieces, *Chanteuse Florentine*, and received positive critical acclaim. Mysteriously, both of these sculptures were described as Renaissance masterpieces in Paris. When De Nolvos auctioned pieces of his collection in 1866, the Benivieni bust was purchased for the Louvre by Count de Nieuwerkerke, chief administrator of the imperial museums, for the sum of 13,600 francs; the count believed it to be a quattrocento work of art. The profit for De Nolvos was enormous, although Freppa's final share was only 1000 francs under the terms of their agreement.

Naturally, the reaction to the news of Bastianini's 'Renaissance masterpiece' provoked a sensational reaction in Florence. Foresi, who had tried to purchase the bust for 500 francs, "took special delight in debunking the French authorities" while Bastianini's friends "were at first delighted in the realization that the work of one of their compatriots could fool the French" (63). The sculptor, though, was less than overjoyed as he recognized that he had been taken advantage of by a trusted colleague. Meanwhile, the news of the 'fake' Benivieni

bust reached Paris and provoked yet another level of outrage as art critics and Count de Nieuwerkerke himself proclaimed that it was impossible that he had purchased a nineteenth century sculpture. Bastianini attempted to refute the accusations in a letter, but *Le Patrie*, the newspaper that had published one of the most insulting commentaries, refused to print it. It was not until several weeks later that *Le Patrie* was effectively embarrassed into publishing Bastianini's letter by the editor of a Florentine newspaper, *La Gazzetta di Firenze*. With that, one might have hoped that Bastianini's name would be cleared, but the taint of forgery continued to plague his reputation long after his death at age thirty-seven in 1868.

Moskowitz's detailed exegesis of this development provides art historians with some critical admonishments about methodology and precision. As she explains, the charge of forgery against Bastianini was largely dismissed in the immediate aftermath of the Benivieni bust incident because it was clear that he had no part in the presentation of his own work as a quattrocento sculpture. By 1884, the tone begins to change when Paul Eudel suggested—without presenting any evidence whatsoever—that Bastianini must have known that Freppa was dishonest, and even implies that it was Bastianini who conceived the scheme in the first place (112–13). Even though Eudel does not support his allegations with any documentation, his accusations were repeated two years later by Nina Barstow in "The Romance of Art. The Forgeries of Bastianini," an article written for *Magazine of Art*. According to Barstow, she had a conversation with the sculptor's considerably younger brother, Serafino, who apparently had no compunction about dishonoring his dead brother's reputation (113). As Moskowitz points out though, Barstow's overly romanticized story deserves a great deal more investigation before it can be taken seriously. Nonetheless, the unexamined received wisdom of earlier generations was accepted as fact by 1952 when the curator's object file on Bastianini at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, referred to the sculptor as a "known forger" (115). This questionable information was repeated and underscored by John Pope-Hennessy in his well-respected 1964 *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum* as well as his April 1974 article, "The Forging of Italian Renaissance Sculpture" in *Apollo Magazine* (115). Ironically, it was only a year earlier, in the 1973 exhibition catalogue for *Fakes and Forgeries* at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, that Katherine C. Johnson had written that Bastianini was "a genuine artist whose works were rendered forgeries through lack of discernment by specialists" (119). Indeed.

Moskowitz continues her detailed analysis in her substantial concluding chapter. Here, she divides the argument about Bastianini as a forger into six succinct subsections: 1. Media Commentary: From Simple Artisan to Master Forger; 2. Confusions and Errors of Fact; 3. Guilt by Association; 4. Alessandro Foresi: Accomplice or Honest Broker?; 5. Bastianini's Defenders; and 6. Masterpiece or Master Fraud. These subsections allow the author to summarize the main elements of the argument about Bastianini's role as an alleged forger, and to analyze the relative merits of these positions. Her final conclusion reads as follows: "Considering all the available evidence to date, one must conclude that our sculptor, viewed in the context of his own day, with its demands for an accessible if evocative aesthetic, answered to the desire of his contemporaries with great skill and deep empathy if also with a naive practicality that ended up getting him into great trouble. This is admittedly less than a fully satisfying finale to this long and arduous investigative project; a more gratifying one would surely have been a verdict asserting unequivocally that Bastianini was a forger. . . . Instead, we are forced to accept that in his sculpture he fashioned, framed, constructed,

devised, and invented . . . the material and even immaterial qualities that the nineteenth century selectively imposed upon their vision of the Renaissance” (136).

Forging Authenticity: Bastianini and the Neo-Renaissance in Nineteenth-century Florence is a remarkable book. The scholarship is impeccable in its thoroughness, detail, and documentation. Anyone reading it and wishing for more information would have no trouble finding additional resources; this review barely skims the detailed history that Moskowitz invites readers to absorb. Further, the book is clearly organized and logically reasoned. My only quibble—and it is a minor one—is that ordering of the plates does not follow an understandable sequence in relation to the text; in a book that is otherwise so flawlessly organized, this seems oddly inconsistent. Moskowitz has significantly expanded our knowledge of nineteenth-century Florentine cultural production and also reminded us of the potential hazards that can befall art historians if we assume too much or forget to verify our sources. Ultimately, this is a book written for an art historical audience and it requires a commitment to reading and looking, and yes, even translating, that is rarely expected. But it is guaranteed to make the reader appreciate just how impressive genuine scholarship can be.

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Notes

[1] There were also a number of foreign sculptors working in Florence in the nineteenth century whose work was largely based on the late Gothic and early Renaissance models. For example, see Marjan Sterckx’s review of the Musée d’Orsay exhibition, *Félicie de Fauveau. L’amazone de la sculpture (1801–1886)*, in *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, Fall 2013 <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring14/sterckx-reviews-felicie-de-fauveau>. In the United States, the presence of American sculptors in Florence was deemed notable enough in 1860 for the *New York Times* to publish a report on the work of Horatio Greenough, Thomas Crawford, and Edward Sheffield Bartholomew as well as their followers. See “Art Matters in Florence: The American Sculptors, Greenough, Crawford, and Bartholomew, and their Successors Works now in Progress,” *The New York Times*, November 7, 1860 at <http://www.nytimes.com/1860/11/07/news/art-matters-florence-american-sculptors-greenough-crawford-bartholomew-their.html>

[2] This comment was originally published in John Charles Robinson’s catalogue, *South Kensington Museum: Italian Sculpture of the Middle Ages and Period of the Revival of Art* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1862).

[3] Florence was under the control of the Austrian Hapsburg dynasty from 1737 until 1859 (with a brief break during the Napoleonic wars). During that time, the ruling powers were more interested in exporting Florentine culture to Austria than in protecting it for Tuscan posterity.