

Anita Fiderer Moskowitz. *Forging Authenticity: Bastianini and the Neo-Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Florence*.

Arte e archeologia: Studi e documenti 32. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2013. xvi + 172 pp. €80. ISBN: 978-88-222-6171-7.

When does a deep-seated reverence for the past cross over from homage to deception? This is one of the central questions posed by Anita Fiderer Moskowitz's *Forging Authenticity*, a meticulous study of the nineteenth-century Florentine artist or forger — depending on whom you ask — Giovanni Bastianini (1830–68). Possibly under the influence of the unscrupulous dealer Giovanni Freppa, Bastianini sculpted busts that many of his contemporaries took to be genuine Renaissance artworks. In 1866, for instance, the Louvre purchased his terracotta bust of the Italian Renaissance poet Giorlamo Benivieni for an impressive sum. When suspicions emerged that the bust did not actually originate from the Renaissance, but was a modern artwork produced by Bastianini and modeled on a tobacco-factory worker, French connoisseurs adamantly refused to believe that it could have been made by a “living artist” (63). Bastianini himself admitted that he had created the piece, but his confession was treated skeptically: art experts allegedly offered him several thousand francs if he could reproduce the bust in their presence; his untimely and mysterious death forestalled such an opportunity. Similarly heated debates about authenticity emerged around Bastianini's bust of Savonarola and a number of his other sculptures that seemed to descend from the hands of Renaissance artists.

Moskowitz's book seeks not only to tell the story of Bastianini and his works, but to place him within a nineteenth-century society so captivated by Renaissance art that it provoked a thriving market for copies, plaster casts, and fakes. Like many art critics, Moskowitz differentiates forgery from copying as entailing the “*intention* of deceiving” (116). The problem, however, is that intentionality can very rarely be detected in the artwork itself, hence the persistent question about whether Bastianini deliberately produced fakes or whether his works were honest tributes to the Italian Renaissance that he never intended to be taken for the real thing but

were interpreted as such. *Forging Authenticity* seeks to rescue Bastianini from the label of “forger” that critics have imposed on him subsequent to his death; in Moskowitz’s words, “once the label ‘forger’ is applied it is difficult to extricate an artist from that reputation” (119). The final chapter undertakes a systematic analysis of the evidence for and against Bastianini, “almost as though the case were being tried in a court of law” (110), and comes to the conclusion that “given the available documentary evidence, and the cultural norms of the period, Bastianini’s activities would seem to fall within the accepted nineteenth-century standards for the production of historicizing works of art” (135).

Ultimately, my sense is that *Forging Authenticity* is less valuable for its ethical assessment of Bastianini himself — about whom very little is known — than for its ability to draw attention to a nineteenth-century artist who captures the period’s complex relationship to the past. Drawing on the alternate definition of *forger* that implies creation rather than deception, Moskowitz writes that Bastianini “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). While I would have appreciated a more expansive discussion of the intersections of reverence, emulation, and fraud that emerged from the period’s Renaissance revival, the book offers a solid foundation from which to explore such questions. In particular, it crafts a vivid portrait of the dynamic relationship between the nineteenth-century art market and the artists, both canonical and marginalized, who operated within it. *Forging Authenticity* also provides an important prototype for considering artists whose craftsmanship has become obscured by labels that draw from a language of authenticity rather than artistic value. Once a work is deemed a fake, or even an honest copy, it tends to be hidden away in the literal and figurative backrooms of museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions. Moskowitz’s inclusion of high-quality photographic plates and her serious discussions of Bastianini’s artworks allow us to consider these historically and aesthetically important objects, and the artist himself, under a new light.

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