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Italian art

Artemisia Gentileschi | Correggio's reclining 'Magdalen' rediscovered | Drawings of Titian's lost 'Caesars'
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commonly used in the 1970s, and a term with a complicated and ambiguous history, it refers to the practice of selling works of art from museum collections. The word brings with it tales that can bring shivers to the spine – of controversy, error, betrayal of trust and lost chances. It is to the credit of Martin Gammon that his approach to the subject is not deeply polemical (although he certainly has views he wishes to express), but rather historical and analytical. After outlining his topic in a lengthy introduction, he presents first the British experience and then the American, with several extensive case studies and an appendix covering further notable cases from 1622 to 2014. As a disclaimer, this reviewer works at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and thus has lived with the outcomes of some of the situations Gammon discusses.

The individual narratives are fascinating, albeit sometimes presented with a surfeit of detail, but the more general, conceptual discussions are even more thought provoking. Gammon reminds us that, for decades now, most of us have become accustomed to the violent dislike of deaccessioning on the part of many critics and observers. An example is when James Panero wrote in 2012 about the collections policy in the 1970s of the then Director of the Metropolitan Museum, Thomas Hoving: ‘institutions have justified turning their permanent collections into chattel that can be sold for profit [...] Hoving’s ideas infected museum culture’ (p.xiv). The author encourages us to think of deaccessioning in a less emotional and more balanced way, one that recognises that the practice has been part of museum history for a very long time.

Gammon demonstrates that the growth and evolution of a museum has usually led to pressure to deaccession. Museums grow through extensive private benefaction as well as through acquisition, and the result has been that, over time, as Charles Eastlake argued in 1845, a ‘collection would require to be weeded of duplicates and less perfect examples’ (p.83). He called these works ‘superfluous’ and suggested that they should be redistributed to regional museums. In another complicated situation at the Tate Gallery, London, around the turn of the twentieth century, a critic noted that certain gifts from artists could remain ‘a burden for gallery curators to the end of time’ (p.94). Deaccessioning as a solution to ‘superfluity’ and the concurrent need to find unclaimed space for new avenues of collecting, as well as the desire to sell the

less-than-perfect in order to enhance the collection with something finer, have both continuously been met with headwinds.

Many hold the fundamental view that the museum is a *terminus ad quem* for significant works of art and that these are fundamentally undermined if removed from that setting, which is seen as a public trust. Added to this is the belief that once deaccessioned from the museum, the work will be forever lost to private hands. Gammon has various arguments to rebut, complicate and add nuance to these beliefs. His research has demonstrated that over a third of the deaccessioned works that he could trace made their way back to museum collections. Thus, the loss for a single institution (and the retrospective regret of the professionals involved) does not signify that the work has really been wrested from the public. A good example of this is Valentin de Boulogne’s great *Fortune teller with soldiers*, now in the Toledo Museum of Art, but previously in the collections of the Dukes of Rutland and in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, from 1929. The Fitzwilliam sold the painting in the 1950s, and there is a particular irony in the fact that its founder, Viscount Fitzwilliam, seems to have disapproved of all such sales. The work has certainly not been lost to view and was a star in the most recent exhibition on the artist.¹ At the same time, this incident is an uncomfortable reminder of the perils of error, changes in taste, occasional haste and even more occasional malfeasance that have led institutions to regrettable decisions. Ultimately, Gammon is a strong believer in the market as a positive force in this ecosystem. He sees it as a ‘filtration system’, eventually ‘promoting works of relative quality, rarity, and authenticity and demoting works of relative mediocrity, commonality, and inauthenticity’ (p.27).

One of his most interesting arguments has to do with an institutional tendency to ‘blame the object’, focusing on its purported weaknesses, when justifying an act of deaccessioning. He encourages museum officials instead to design a defensible context for their decisions, one that correlates with the institution’s mission and objectives, while aiming for the improvement of the collection. When this kind of thinking is lacking and if there is not full transparency, the outcome can be disastrous for the institution.² Nevertheless, what Gammon calls the ‘hard truths’ of museum life – one of which is the fragility of the museum financial model itself – make it difficult not to consider

deaccessioning as a possible strategy. As he argues in the opening pages of his book, ‘progress requires reinterpretation’, and an institution and its curators should not be bound in perpetuity to decisions made in the past. This may help reconcile us to the ongoing need for deaccessioning, but should not leave us any less aware of its potential pitfalls.

¹ Reviewed by Arnauld Brejon de Lavergnée in this Magazine, 159 (2017), pp.660–63.

² An example is the deaccessioning in 2014 of four works from the Delaware Art Museum that led to the sanctioning and disaccreditation of the museum; see pp.317–18 in the book under review.

Short reviews

Il Beato Angelico a Roma, 1445–1455: Rinascita delle arti e Umanesimo cristiano nell’Urbe di Niccolò V e Leon Battista Alberti

By Gerardo de Simone. 358 pp. incl. 80 col. + 80 b. & w. ills. (Leo S. Olschki, Florence, 2018), £215. ISBN 978-88-222-6512-8.

by LIVIA LUPI

This beautifully illustrated book is the result of years of work on Fra Angelico’s art, and the author’s knowledge of the material and his mastery of the sources are evident throughout. Although the insights it provides into this rich research topic are mainly based on existing scholarship, the book nonetheless makes an important contribution by offering in a single volume an extensive discussion of the entirety of Angelico’s production in Rome, including extant, lost and hypothetical works.

The first three chapters provide a historical framework for the artist’s activity in Rome. In line with the majority of scholars who have written on the subject (with some notable exceptions)¹ the author argues that Leon Battista Alberti played a major role as Nicholas V’s architectural consultant, and includes as supporting evidence an interesting excursus on the fictive architectural decoration of the *Bibliotheca Graeca* in the Vatican libraries. Although this section builds on ideas already proposed by Toby Yuen,² it benefits from the book’s broader context, which better grounds the *Bibliotheca* within Nicholas V’s patronage.

In chapter 4 the author discusses the known but destroyed works by Fra Angelico in the Vatican, engaging with a broad spectrum

of informative comparative material, from illuminations to frescos and panel painting, and emphasising Angelico's possible relationship with Jean Fouquet. Chapter 5 tackles Fra Angelico's only extant fresco cycle in Rome, the chapel of Nicholas V in the Vatican, which depicts scenes from the lives of Sts Stephen and Lawrence. The discussion of the architectural representations in these frescos, which are much more prominent than in any other of Fra Angelico's work, includes an analysis of the roles played by the settings in the composition, in which numerous parallels within and across the two cycles are identified. The author supports Richard Krautheimer's often reiterated suggestion that Alberti must have advised Angelico on the architectural depictions.³ He also further develops Angela Dressen's intuition that the chapel's floor was designed by Alberti.⁴

The last chapter examines Fra Angelico's activity in S. Maria sopra Minerva, focusing on the lost monochrome frescos for the church's cloister, which were based on Cardinal Juan de Torquemada's *Meditationes*. The author presents an extensive comparison between, on the one hand, several works by Angelico and, on the other, two copies of the work: the illuminations in a manuscript copy (c.1463; Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome; Vat.lat.973) and the engravings in a printed copy (1467; Stadtbibliothek, Nuremberg; Inc.4.2^o). His aim is to demonstrate Angelico's authorship of the cloister frescos. Although some comparisons are more convincing than others, this analysis depends on the assumption that the illuminations in Vat.Lat.973 and the engravings in Inc.4.2^o either directly copy or at least rely heavily on the cloister's frescos.

These discussions, together with a bibliography ranging from early modern sources through to contemporary scholarship and the images make the book an important resource for further studies on Angelico's œuvre and fifteenth-century papal patronage.

¹ These exceptions include M. Tafuri: "Cives non esse licere". Niccolò V e Leon Battista Alberti, in *Ricerca del Rinascimento. Principi, Città, Architetti*, Turin 1992, pp.33–88; R. Tavernor: *On Alberti and the Art of Building*, New Haven and London 1998, pp.19–23; S. Borsi: 'L'Alberti a Roma', in S. Danesi Squarzina, ed.: *Maestri fiorentini nei cantieri romani del Quattrocento*, Rome 1989, pp.43–75; and S. Borsi: *Leon Battista Alberti e Roma*, Florence 2003, pp.111–13.

² T. Yuen: 'The "Bibliotheca Graeca": Castagno, Alberti, and ancient sources', THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE 112 (1970), pp.724–36.

³ R. Krautheimer: 'Fra Angelico and, perhaps, Alberti', in I. Lavin and J. Plummer, eds.: *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Painting in Honor of Millard Meiss*, New York 1977, I, pp.290–96.

⁴ A. Dressen: *Pavimenti decorati del Quattrocento in Italia*, Venice 2008, pp.292–94.



Der Palast von Sans-Souci in Milot, Haiti (ca. 1806–1813): Das vergessene Potsdam im Regenwald / The Palace of Sans-Souci in Milot, Haiti (ca. 1806–1813): The Untold Story of the Potsdam of the Rainforest

By Gauvin Alexander Bailey. 200 pp. incl. 31 col. + b. & w. ills. (Deutscher Kunstverlag, Munich, 2017), £15. ISBN 978-3-422-07466-8.

by LEGRACE BENSON

Gauvin Bailey's bilingual book analyses the architectural history of King Henry Christophe's Palace of Sans-Souci, the largest and most monumental building project in the Americas in the early nineteenth century (Fig.6). Bailey's comprehensive analysis is based on meticulous research into old newspapers, travellers' reports and ships' log books in a variety of archives, as well as a critical review of scholarship to date.

Sans-Souci's builder, Henry Christophe (1767–1820), has a controversial reputation: mocked as a pretentious clown by American writers and castigated as an exploiter by several Haitian historians, he is described by others as an enlightened head of state. Bailey defines him as a complex, exceptionally gifted general and ruler, determined to set Haiti on the international stage and – like European heads of state of that era – keen to present his nation's achievements as comparable to those of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome.

Sans-Souci was begun in 1804. The origin of the palace's name is contested: does it

6. Palace of Sans-Souci, Milot, Haiti, by Henry Christophe, Joseph (?) Faraud, Joseph-Antoine Dardan and others. c.1806–13. (Photograph Gauvin Alexander Bailey).

memorialise Henry's assassination on that site of his rival and enemy, Colonel Jean-Baptiste Sans-Souci? Does it appropriate the name and prestige of Frederick the Great's Sans-Souci Palace in Potsdam? Or was the name chosen simply to designate a care-free retreat? All three are possibly true and reveal Henry's thirst for retribution, his acute awareness of what was happening internationally and his need to recover from the demands of leadership.

The Neoclassical architecture of the palace is often dismissed as grandiosity in the face of the misery of the general population. In contrast, Bailey describes the planning, siting, use of materials and, above all, the sophisticated engineering as a collaborative accomplishment of liberated slaves and free people of colour. Meeting such challenges as creating arched fenestration in concave walls was intended to signal to the international world the competence of a talented new nation and a people to be reckoned with.

Thanks to the depth and detail of Bailey's historical, cultural and architectural analyses and the copious illustrations, the palace has now found its place in scholarship and been set into the context of its time and the people involved, from royalty to architectural engineers and bricklayers. Bailey reveals Sans-Souci to be a treasure worthy of its designation in 1982 as a World Heritage Site.