VISUAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE, 1300-1700

Andrew H. Chen

Flagellant Confraternities and Italian Art, 1260-1610

Ritual and Experience

Amsterdam
University
Press

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Andrew H. Chen

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For Henri

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Abbreviations

DBI	*Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960–).
DBMI	*Dizionario biografico dei miniatori italiani, secoli IX–XVI*, ed. by Milvia Bollati (Milan: Sylvestre Bonnard, 2004).
LCI	*Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. by Engelbert Kirschbaum, 8 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1968–76).
PL	*Patrologia latina: Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina*, ed. by J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1841–64).

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I dedicate this book to my teacher and friend, Henri Zerner.

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Introduction

What does it mean to engage with an artwork, and what did it mean in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance? Immanuel Kant believed that engagement happens in the mind, that pleasure in the beautiful is the result of a 'free play' of the cognitive faculties upon assimilation of forms. Alois Riegl's and Heinrich Wölfflin's conceptions of experience were neo-Kantian to the extent that both treated interactions of forms, eyes, and mind as isolable. Riegl held that ancient artworks were made to be viewed in particular ways; ancient Egyptian art, for example, invites a close-up kind of looking that is almost tactile.[1] Late Roman art willed audiences to purely apprehend forms presented with rhythmic intervals of space in between. This strategy of presentation Riegl saw as commensurate with the philosophic worldview of early Christianity. Wölfflin, who acknowledges Riegl in the preface to his *Principles of Art History* of 1915, suggested that aesthetic properties like clarity and unclarity have different effects on the mind: 'Anything set up for perfect clarity arouses the suspicion that it might lack vitality',[2] whereas a lack of clarity can be satisfying. It is evident that Wölfflin believed in the potential for stylistic data to be used in the writing of histories of taste and perception.

A *locus classicus* for aesthetics of reception in anglophone art history is E.H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, a book in which innovations in art are analysed in terms of the way they invite processing in the mind; art making is inscribed within a psychological framework of art viewing. The masters of illusionistic painting tinkered with the representational conventions they knew with a view to making their pictures ever more convincing. Gombrich called the range of expectations audiences brought to bear on experiences of art, and of other forms of cultural communication, their 'mental set'. These ideas were to leave a deep impression on Michael Baxandall, who had joined the Warburg Institute shortly before Gombrich's 1956 Mellon Lectures were published in 1960. Baxandall wrote about perception in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* as a person's 'cognitive style', which is historically contingent.

David Freedberg, until recently Director of the Warburg Institute, has been on a campaign to convince people that engagement with pictures happens fundamentally, and universally, at a pre-cognitive level. For Freedberg it is grounded in neuronal activity and involves a full-body response. An impulse to imitate the lifeless image leads to inhibition, which leads to self-awareness, or so the story goes.[3] This idea is not new. Whitney Davis has drawn attention to the interest of Victorian writer Vernon Lee (Violet Paget) and her partner Clementina Anstruther-Thomson in the ideas of empathy theorist Karl Groos, who posited (over a century before Freedberg) that aesthetic perception involves 'inner imitation'.[4] Also evident are Freedberg's debts to Robert Vischer and Wilhelm Worringer.[5]

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[1] Riegl, *Die spätrömische Kunst-Industrie*, p. 20.

[2] Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, p. 276.

[3] Here I have summarized, in the briefest fashion, remarks made by Freedberg while he was Slade Professor at the University of Cambridge in 2016–17. Readers will be familiar with his book *The Power of Images*; essays which convey his more recent ideas include 'Empathy, Motion and Emotion', 'Movement, Embodiment, Emotion', and the co-authored paper 'Motion, Emotion, and Empathy'.

One can imagine how Freedberg would lecture on or write about Rosso Fiorentino's *Deposition from the Cross*, produced for a flagellant confraternity in Volterra in 1521 (Plate 1). He would probably say that, now as in the sixteenth century, the viewer feels compelled to copy the gestures of the gigantesque John or the open-mouthed, gesturing man on the ladder – that audiences imitate these figures internally if not outwardly. This painting has also received its fair share of Kantian/formalist celebrations of its aesthetic qualities; a memorably eloquent example is found in Sydney Freedberg's *Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence*.[6]

One problem with Kantian and empathy theory approaches is that – regardless of whether this is intended – they give the impression that engagement with art has always been a free and isolated sort of experience. We know, however, that in the Middle Ages and Renaissance this was not how things worked. Corporeal response and inner experience were subject to the strictures of ritual. Analysing the ritual meaning and function of art has long been a preferred approach of medievalists,[7] and these are incidentally topics that receive significant attention in David Freedberg's earlier book, *The Power of Images*.

Recent decades have witnessed a considerable increase in interest among medieval art historians in extra-visual domains of experience, in particular the aural and the tactile.[8] Italian Renaissance specialists, too, have begun to devote greater attention to non-visual engagement with art, though the most influential of these works are not, at least not principally, concerned with rituals of a religious kind.[9]

There is a lot to be gained from studying the art of the Italian Renaissance through the lens of ritual experience. The confraternity that met in the oratory where Rosso's altarpiece was displayed responded to the picture with gestures that were conventional, codified in the fourteenth century. Whatever instinctual responses members of this confraternity had necessarily operated within the parameters of the ritual construct. Early modern encounters with the *Deposition* were far from liberated and spontaneous – indeed, what characterized most confraternity rituals was the *lack* of room for improvisation – although we shall see that these rituals did provide opportunities for imaginative engagement with images.

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[4] Davis, *Queer Beauty*, pp. 175–85; Groos, *Play of Man*, pp. 300–33; Lee and Anstruther-Thomson, *Beauty and Ugliness*, esp. pp. 44–79.

[5] See Vischer, *Über das optische Formgefühl*; Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*.

[6] S. Freedberg, *Painting of the High Renaissance*, I, pp. 554–57.

[7] Sinding-Larsen, *Iconography and Ritual*; van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces*; Kempers, *Painting, Power, and Patronage*, pp. 36–70; Belting, *The Image and its Public*; Baschet, *L'iconographie médiévale*; Pentcheva, *Sensual Icon*; Jung, *Gothic Screen*; Palazzo, *L'invention chrétienne des cinq sens*; and Cannon, *Religious Poverty*.

[8] To give just a few examples: Nelson, 'To Say and to See'; Mills, *Suspended Animation*; Hamburger, 'Overkill'; Jung, 'Tactile and the Visionary'; Pentcheva, *Sensual Icon*; Cannon, 'Kissing the Virgin's Foot'; Pentcheva, 'Hagia Sophia'; *Resounding Images*; and *Feast for the Senses*; a book not by an art historian that I have found particularly inspiring is Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire*.

[9] Shearman, *Only Connect*; Quiviger, *Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art*; Johnson, 'Art of Touch' and other articles; Randolph, *Touching Objects*; Atkinson, *Noisy Renaissance*.

This book is concerned with the art patronage and ritual practices of flagellant confraternities in Italy from the later thirteenth century to the early seventeenth century. It is about the contexts in which people contemplated God, the lives of saints, sin, and salvation, and how their envisionings of figures and events were structured and informed by paintings, sculptures, and manuscript illuminations. Confraternities conducted their rituals in front of crucifixes and other Passion-themed images (the Flagellation, Crucifixion, Deposition, Man of Sorrows, the Instruments of the Passion, and so on); other iconographies they favoured included the martyrdoms of the saints, the feats of the early Christian hermits, and the Virgin of Mercy.

Flagellant confraternities formed in the wake of a large-scale flagellant movement originating in Perugia in 1260. Moved to penitence by a man named Raniero Fasani, the people of Perugia took to the streets, stripped to the waist, and began beating themselves with whips. The movement spread like wildfire and reached Venice by the end of the year. The first Venetian flagellant confraternity, the Scuola di Santa Maria della Carità, was formed in December. Much of the energy and vigour of the 1260 movement was lost when flagellation was brought indoors and given ritualized form, but confraternities kept the memory of Raniero and his deeds alive by commissioning copies of a legend recording the miraculous events of 1260.

The traditions and aims of flagellant confraternities receive thoughtful analysis in Niklaus Largier's monumental book *In Praise of the Whip* (*Lob der Peitsche*). Largier's main purpose is to situate their practices within the long and multifarious history of premodern, early modern, and modern flagellation practices – what he calls 'a cultural history of arousal'. Well before the Marquis de Sade, Largier argues, flagellation is already about theatricality, performance, and voyeurism. 'What is practiced upon the body, what stirs the senses, the emotions, and the imagination, finds its basis and its full significance in the actuality of the performance and the gaze of the spectator – and nowhere else', he writes.[10] According to Largier, this is true even in situations where the flagellant is alone. 'The voyeur, then, is already on the scene, even when he or she never openly appears', we are told.[11] 'A gaze that views the tormented body and the whipper is fundamentally inscribed within the scenario of whipping. […] This is true even when the agent, patient, and spectator are all the same person: for example, when the hermit in his cell or his desert refuge maltreats himself, seeking to be cleansed of sinful fantasies. Peter Damian, of whom we will have much to say, imagines God as the spectator in such cases, with the gaze of God determining the gestures and establishing the attitude of the body'.[12]

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[10] Largier, *In Praise of the Whip*, p. 14.

[11] Ibid., p. 23.

In Praise of the Whip is wide-ranging and full of good insights. What it does not do – understandably, given the nature of Largier's interests – is adequately convey how various and fascinating were the ways in which artworks, in interaction with other confraternity-specific and setting-dependent factors, structured experience. My book advances the claim that the full significance of confraternities' flagellation practices is revealed only when these acts are considered in relation to a spectrum of visual experiences. Artworks played a number of different roles in the performances members of confraternities carried out before God, each other, and, in the case of public processions, the community. Images could mean different things to different people, and meaning also varied according to occasion and use.

Confraternities' ritual performances, which involved hymns, prayers, movement, and inward action, happened at specific times on the same days of the week, month, or year. During the climactic moments of flagellation, confraternity members absorbed themselves in meditations on the sufferings of Christ. As individuals blocked out everything else, they drew upon the images that stood or moved in their surroundings to make their imaginings vivid. The way an artwork or a derivative mental image was processed in the mind depended on a host of local factors: conditions of light and visibility, accompanying verbal cues, induced emotions, disposition of the head and body as governed by ceremonial norms, the materiality of the artwork, and, importantly, the arguments artworks themselves made about, and the prescriptions they made for, experience. In flagellation contexts, physical sensation was a stimulus to imagination. Flagellants disciplined themselves into states of absorption; blows from the whip projected them, bodies and all, into imaginary worlds. When things worked as they were supposed to, mind and body were brought into alignment by this co-involvement of ritual gesture and curated imagination, the ends of which were sympathy with and remembrance of Christ. However, as I argue later on in this book, both artworks and rituals could also hinder flagellants from achieving their spiritual goals.

Art and religion, art and history

Some of the pioneering scholars of medieval art – Émile Mâle, Erwin Panofsky, André Grabar, Otto von Simson – chose to focus their studies on what they saw as happy episodes in the long relationship between art and theology. New iconographies and aesthetics were extrusions of theological argument into the visual domain; the Gothic cathedral (with its decoration) was the theology of the day given visible form.

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[12] Ibid., p. 24.

This strand of art history has facilitated the survival of certain preconceptions about medieval art, despite repeated calls to challenge them:[13] that artists were subservient to theologians, that images merely illustrate texts and document the most pressing religious issues of their day, that Christian art always served, obligingly, the ends of religious persuasion and edification. A parallel strand of medieval art history exemplified by Meyer Schapiro's essay on aesthetic attitudes in Romanesque art resists these tendencies by focusing on the expressive spirit that people associate with the Renaissance and, indeed, modern art.

If perhaps a little creativity is required to make documents from the Middle Ages speak about the freedom of artists, it is certainly less of a strain to marshal such evidence for the period around 1500. Leonardo in his treatise on painting explicitly directs painters to invent incessantly while studying nature and letting the mind make its discoveries, and Isabella d'Este was warned not to hinder the *fantasia* of the painter Bellini.[14] The visual evidence of contemporary altarpieces lends support to the idea that, in religious works as in other pictures, artists are focusing quite a lot of attention on aspects of the artwork that have little to do, at least in any straightforward sense, with core Christian ideas or their religious function. Many of the most striking aspects of Renaissance religious artworks cannot be very well explained with reference to Christian dogma. These same aspects are usually better explained with reference to visual sources, or to texts on art, poetry, and rhetoric.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, immoderate displays of artfulness in religious art frustrated theologians north and south of the Alps – Antoninus of Florence, Savonarola, Emser, Gilio, Paleotti – and they made their views known. These figures of diverse backgrounds and opinion shared the belief that the excesses of art were estranging it from its devotional functions. This was not a new sentiment: Bernard of Clairvaux's eloquent denunciation a few centuries earlier of cloister chimeras in his *Apologia* was motivated, at least partly, by a feeling that these artworks were concerned with their own visual interest above any religious purpose.

Recently Alexander Nagel has argued in his book *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* that, in the early sixteenth century, some Italian artworks were engaging with and responding to criticisms of art, and others were, in the spirit of such critiques, pursuing various anti-aesthetics – in his own words, 'iconoclastic impulses [...] were strenuously, even conscientiously, redirected back into the art'.[15] And so he takes recourse to the old Hegelian paradigm according to which one thing (in this case, art) should be expected to have some deep symmetry with another thing (anti-art opinion) just because they are from the same period. In my view it is not obvious that some of the intriguing and seemingly purpose-driven approaches to representation discussed by Nagel had much to do with debates about the propriety and function of Christian images at all. Invoking the remarks of Savonarola and Erasmus on problems of referentiality in religious images in a discussion of the changes made to Giorgione's *Three Philosophers* is more misleading than helpful.[16] Marcantonio Michiel writes in his notes that the painting was begun by Giorgione and finished by Sebastiano del Piombo;[17] the reliability of this description may be debated, but it stands nonetheless as evidence that what we see is probably not a single painter's visual essay on referentiality. The cadaverous or demonic figures in some of Rosso Fiorentino's works may reasonably be said to embody an aesthetic of reaction or negativity,[18] but excessive comparison with the negativity of non-artists causes one to miss the spirit and edge of Rosso's witty artistic irreverence; and it is more than a little fanciful to describe what he is doing in the Ripoi altarpiece as excavating to reveal the 'underside' of the Christian image.[19] Sometimes it seems more productive to stress distinctions than alignments between the concerns of artists and those of audiences. The written objections of theologians point us, in fact, in that direction.

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[13] See, notably, Jeffrey Hamburger's introduction to *The Mind's Eye*, ed. by Hamburger and Bouché.

[14] See below, at Chapter 7, note 53.

[15] Nagel, *Controversy of Renaissance Art*, p. 10.

Naturally the point is not that we should stop thinking about the connectedness of things; it is instead that histories of art in context can be more than histories of mysterious unities. Hegel himself was no plain Hegelian. He believed that spirit is often at odds with itself; indeed, for him this 'hard and obstinate struggle' is what drives historical change.[20] And Hegel's history of art was receptive to the idea of rupture. In his lectures on aesthetics he proclaimed that in the era of what he called romantic art the unity of form and Idea present in classical art was abolished.[21] Then, after Protestantism, art could no longer provide the spiritual satisfactions it had previously afforded, and art achieved independence from religion.[22]

A way of avoiding the problem described above is to anchor iconological analysis of a work of art as much as possible in material produced in its immediate context, for example by patrons; and, rather than demand that it reveal everything about why an artwork *was made to look as it does*, appreciate that meaning is generated as much in reception as in production; in reception by audiences of mixed composition, and not only at the moment of creation, but also later. Allowing for the possibility that the artwork may not have done what its audience expected it to adds an element of flexibility to the approach and arguably greater realism. This study focuses on confraternal ritual as a locus of meaning production; I also suggest ways in which meaning was inflected by factors like the interaction of artworks, the intellectual culture of a confraternity, its social composition, local cults, civic custom, and so on.

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16 See ibid., pp. 57–61.

17 Michiel, *Notizia d'opere di Disegno*, pp. 164–65.

18 Campbell, '*Fare una Cosa Morta Parer Viva*'.

19 Nagel, *Controversy of Renaissance Art*, pp. 52–54.

20 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, p. 127.

21 See Hegel, *Aesthetics*, pp. 76–81.

22 Ibid., p. 11.

Scholarship on confraternities

The modern tradition of scholarship on confraternities began with Gennaro Maria Monti's *Le confraternite medievali dell'alta e media Italia* of 1927. One thing about confraternities that appealed to Monti is that they brought people from different classes into contact;[23] this continues to motivate research on the topic. The proceedings of a 1960 conference marking the seventh centenary of the 1260 movement remain a fundamental resource, as do the papers of a second conference of 1969.[24] Gilles Gerard Meersseman's massive volumes on Dominican confraternities, published in 1977, exemplify an encyclopedic mode of scholarship on confraternities which this book does not seek to emulate. The first major book by an anglophone historian was Brian Pullan's *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice* of 1971. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a stream of important books in English by Richard Trexler, Ronald Weissman, James Banker, Cyrilla Barr, Christopher Black, Blake Wilson, John Henderson, and Nicholas Terpstra. The most influential book focusing on confraternities by an art historian in these decades was Patricia Fortini Brown's *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio* of 1988. The edited volume has also been a platform for significant contributions.[25] Lay confraternities now get their fair share of attention in publications on sacred art in Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, two recent examples being *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence* by Megan Holmes and Joanna Cannon's book on Dominican church art. The observant reader will notice that in this book I avail myself of many of the transcriptions and translations published by Monti, Meersseman, Barr, and Henderson; I also present new sources.

Structure of the book

This book has two principal parts. The first provides an overview of flagellant confraternity art and ritual from 1260 to about 1450. These five chapters make plain just how many different forms flagellant engagement with images could take. Chapter 1 surveys flagellation's many settings. It introduces the various typologies of art that confraternities commissioned: altarpieces, fresco decoration, crucifixes, banners, painted necrologies known as *tavole de' morti*, and illuminated books. In this chapter I present newly discovered documentary evidence that women in a mixed confraternity in Verona participated in flagellation. Chapter 2 discusses the experience of wall paintings and other artworks located at the entrances and exits of confraternity premises. At the core of this chapter is an essay on the fictive environment a confraternity in Siena created to frame its acts of withdrawal from the city. Chapter 3 is a study of visual and experiential contexts of Mass in Siena, Venice, and Bologna. Contained in this chapter is a proposal for the provenance of a lavishly illuminated missal at the Biblioteca del Museo Correr in Venice. Chapter 4 describes the use of small painted panels and illustrated books in the comforting of people condemned to death. This chapter argues that these confraternities employed strategies analogous to the ones they used in their own rituals to absorb prisoners in the contemplation of *exempla*. Chapter 5 concerns banners and flagellation in public. Here it is shown that even during the most showy and spectacular of confraternal rituals, members of confraternities were meant to use their techniques of withdrawal and spiritual vision.

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[23] Monti, *Le confraternite medievali*, I, p. ix.

[24] *Il movimento dei Disciplinati*; *Risultati e prospettive*.

[25] *Crossing the Boundaries*; *Confraternite, chiesa e società*; *Politics of Ritual Kinship*; *Early Modern Confraternities*; *Studi confraternali*; *Faith's Boundaries*; and in art history, *Confraternities and the Visual Arts*; and *Space, Place, and Motion*.

In Part II the focus shifts onto issues of transformation in visual apparatuses and in ritual practices through the centuries. Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to developments preceding the Council of Trent. Chapter 6 offers a ritual history of a confraternity in Pavia that gave up the practice of flagellation sometime before the middle of the fifteenth century, and it shows how, without knowledge of that history, one would be inclined to misunderstand the meaning of the company's late fifteenth-century altarpiece. Chapter 7 shows how new art by Luca Signorelli and Rosso Fiorentino could disrupt the immersiveness of rituals in Sansepolcro; in the same chapter I discuss how, by contrast, Rosso's *Deposition* for the confraternity in Volterra responded well to aspects of the site and was ultimately more functional. Chapter 8 is concerned with reform activities and new church art in Florence and Milan. The outer limit of the period in Italian art covered in this book, 1610, is the year of the canonization of Carlo Borromeo. Many will not be familiar with his interventions in the affairs of Milanese confraternities: Borromeo stood behind the creation of a new general rule for flagellant confraternities, and he was personally involved in the renewal of the Confraternity of the Gonfalone.

An epilogue follows the peregrinations of flagellant confraternal traditions from Italy via Spain to the New World. Some aspects of dress and ritual proved strikingly durable, finding their way into the customs of the Penitentes of New Mexico.

Norms and experience, art and absorption

Statutes, liturgical documents, and manuals are normative texts. Images of confraternal life, too, picture ideals. We will never know whether in practice the flagellants' rituals worked like they were supposed to. Chapter 6 presents evidence that sometimes they did not. In any case, a ritual's efficacy is not the only thing that matters.[26]

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[26] See Quack, 'Bell, Bourdieu and Wittgenstein on Ritual Sense'.

Participation alone sufficed to give confraternity members the satisfaction of belonging to a group and the chance to demonstrate piety. In my book, normative images and texts provide a starting point for a historical study of experience which acknowledges, even celebrates, the repetitiveness and constrainedness of the actions that accompanied visual and imaginative experiences in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance.

In a famous essay on the Man of Sorrows, Erwin Panofsky uses the term *kontemplative Versenkung*, contemplative immersion, to characterize the ideal mode of interacting with these Passion-themed images.[27] For Panofsky, when immersion happens, the souls of subject and object are fused. By immersing him/herself the spectator repudiates the notional distance between picture and viewer that one normally associates with Alberti.[28] The following chapters describe the various techniques confraternities used to achieve a compassionate kind of immersion. We shall see how the early flagellants brought mind, body, and spirit close to the Christ they saw in their Passion images. The second half of the book asks to what degree sixteenth-century pictures, and developments in ritual culture, troubled these traditional modes of engagement.

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[27] Panofsky, 'Imago Pietatis'.

[28] As Panofsky notes, however, Alberti writes in Book 2 about how pictures can elicit emotional identification; for this passage, see Chapter 7, at note 45.