

**Cathleen Hoeniger, *The Renovation of Paintings in Tuscany.*
Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995,
186 pp., 100 black-and-white illus., 8 colour plates**

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Book Reviews

Comptes-rendus de livres

CATHLEEN HOENIGER, *The Renovation of Paintings in Tuscany*. Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995, 186 pp., 100 black-and-white illus., 8 colour plates.

By focusing our attention on a group of objects whose cultural value is given testimony in the history of their renovation, Cathleen Hoeniger responds to a challenge that has often been put to art historians by students of social history: to take account of evidence for the consumption of works of art.¹ With no more fanfare than the statement that the objects under investigation in her book “show the physical evidence of having been actively used,” Hoeniger enters the difficult space between the history of material culture and that of the history of art. It bears mention from the outset that the territory is not easy to chart, founded as it is on sometimes conflicting assumptions concerning the relationship between society and culture.² Instead of stepping directly into this quagmire, Hoeniger understandably moves around it, framing her book not as a dialogue between art history and the history of material culture, but rather as a conciliatory exploration of the differences between the aesthetic concerns of modern restorers, museum professionals and connoisseurs, on the one hand, and the contextual concerns of historians, on the other. The introduction treats the reader to a sampling of the traces of history that have been uncovered (often accidentally) as modern restorers have attempted to recover the “original” artwork, while the conclusion gives a fascinating view of the sometimes boggling solutions to the challenge of reaching a compromise between retrieving this so-called original, and preserving the evidence of its later transformations. Hoeniger thus introduces the problem of the original, dwelling especially on the observation that the works of art we know today are often selective creations of the connoisseur’s and/or restorer’s aesthetic judgement. She treads more gingerly on the related problem of recovering what might be called the historical originals. While openly admitting in her conclusion the impossibility of absolutely capturing a moment in an image’s existence, she has, nonetheless, attempted to do just that, finding not one but several original moments in significant meetings between the artistic structures and the specific contexts that gave them new relevance or living form.

The central portion of the book provides a very accessible exploration of the diverse motives for the renovation of paintings in thirteenth-, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy (primarily in Tuscany). The material is arranged according to different types of objects, different types of renovation, different motives for renovation and different contexts. As their headings clearly indicate, the five central

chapters deal sequentially with the selective repainting of two Sieneese *Maestà* panels; the enshrining in new pictures of revered fragments of old images; the revising of two saints’ portraits; the reframing of Gothic polyptychs; and finally, the repainting of the *Maestà* frescoes in the council halls of Siena and San Gimignano.

Hoeniger repeatedly shows that the ostensibly vague notion of changes in taste is inadequate to account for the variety of motives that may have prompted the reworking of paintings. In doing this she goes a long way toward breaking down the isolation of the objects under investigation, by revealing those works as living forms that were very much subject both to the passage of time, and to the conditions of their use. On this level the book establishes itself, as the author obviously hopes it will, as an essential counter-text to the presentation of the same objects as static and finitely framed works of art within the space of modern museums.³

In its focus on renovations that were motivated, in one way or another, by matters of cult, the book also provides a specialized supplement to Hans Belting’s more expansive treatment of some similar issues and objects in several chapters of the recently translated, *Bild und Kult*.⁴ Hoeniger’s chapter on the reframing of Gothic polyptychs, for instance, explores several moments in the complex dialogue that emerged when religious images came into contact with the prestige associated with private ownership. This was a dialogue which, according to Belting’s narrative, irrevocably fragmented the story of the sacred image. Particularly interesting in this latter respect is the case of the Baroncelli altarpiece. As Hoeniger points out, it is hard to know if the fourteenth-century painting was reframed in the fifteenth century – and thereby reclaimed by the Baroncelli family – only as an act of reverence for the old altar panel, or whether the relative renown of its maker, Giotto, may have played some part in the decision to display the old painting as a valuable work of art. Perhaps here we have another example of the ambiguity that Belting describes in his discussion of “the aesthetics of the holy image.” For a fifteenth-century Florentine audience, Giotto’s polyptych was a painting that could have fulfilled both the requirement of sacred authority, by virtue of its antiquity, and the requirement of artistic quality, by virtue its artist’s name.⁵

Through the combination of careful attention to the visual evidence and judicious consideration of context, Hoeniger produces a series of case studies that often speak not only to her own topic but also to more general issues in the history of representation. To give one example, I would cite her explication of the repainting of Margarito d’Arezzo’s *St Francis* panel in the Museo Medievale et

Moderno in Arezzo.⁶ Through this explication she produces a tangible example of a significant species of early portraiture, which had little to do with the emergence of an individual subjective ego, either that of the artist or that of the person represented. Neither the renovated *St Francis* panel nor Thomas of Celano's verbal portrait of the saint constitute anything close to a description of an individual likeness. As explained by Hoeniger, the notion of portraiture embodied in these two examples had much more to do with the collective identification of a local public with a generalized but relatively compliant human likeness. Identity, in this case, emerged not out of an individual but out of a dialogue between an audience and a humanized idea of sanctity represented by St Francis: the authority of the portrait being a by-product of that dialogue.

In addition to what it has to offer on its own terms, Dr Hoeniger's book opens discussion on several important disciplinary issues that it does not self-consciously pursue. For instance, the process of laying bare the aesthetic and methodological biases that have shaped the viewing and interpretation of the images under investigation might be taken one step further to examine the art historian's place in the debate between connoisseurs and social historians. Despite its understated and conciliatory appearance within this work, that position, as exemplified by the author and any number of other art historians, myself included, is not neutral. Especially when it goes unexamined, it is deeply ambivalent.⁷ The ambivalence comes through in one of the sub-theses of the chapter dealing with the reframing of Gothic polyptychs: namely, that the renovation of fourteenth-century paintings in fifteenth-century Tuscany did not represent the wholesale rejection of things Medieval. This thesis is not quite matched by her conclusion that, in some cases, the "Medieval nature" of the works under investigation may have been irrelevant as a motive for their renovation.⁸ The problem is that the "Medieval nature" of the objects under investigation is taken for granted by the author. To suggest, however innocently, that a work of art might have a "Medieval nature" is to betray the roots of our discipline in the historic aestheticism of the nineteenth century, which is to say in a history of art where style is perceived as an essential generating principle.⁹ The association with this manifestation of the history of ideas, however unintentional, cannot serve this project well in the end. At some point it is necessary to ask just how much the assumed "Medieval nature" of the objects under discussion owes to modern aesthetics and those same notions of taste that the author otherwise eschews. Although the problem is certainly not unique to Hoeniger's work, it surfaces here precisely because, even in its most historicizing guises, art

history is still unconsciously bound by its language to the very same aesthetic concerns that gave rise to modern museums and the whole idea of the original artwork that this book both explicitly and implicitly challenges.

Hoeniger cuts very close to the heart of the problem when she takes issue with the familiar hypothesis that the repaintings of Romanesque altarpieces in the first decades of the thirteenth century signal a change in taste, and thereby give evidence of "an acute stylistic awareness" on the part of their patrons.¹⁰ This initial challenge might be followed by a consideration of just how deep a divide exists between the notion of "acute stylistic awareness" that modern art historians have projected onto fourteenth-century patrons and any valuation of style that might have been operative at the time. It would be interesting to ask, for example, how much is lost when the Italian term *uso* – as employed by Neri di Bicci to describe the new criteria that gave rise to reframings like that of the Baroncelli altarpiece – is translated as the modern English term "taste."¹¹ The issue here is not just that taste is an inadequate term to encompass the pre-modern motives for renovating paintings but also, as Hoeniger hints when she points to the secular bias of such accounts, that it is loaded with anachronistic baggage. In its lingering association with modern aesthetics attitudes – or Aesthetics with a capital "A" – the kind of acute stylistic awareness that is both recognized and claimed by connoisseurs, while ostensibly scientific in its pronounced dependence on the rationality of the senses, is profoundly subjective in its roots.¹² Hoeniger's project, which seeks to understand what might be called the pre-Aesthetic motives for the renovation of paintings, ultimately demands a closer examination of the historical moment and the makeup of the shift that gave birth not only to modern notions of Art and Beauty but also to the modern discipline of Art History. It would also be very interesting to see, as a sequel to this book, an investigation of the aesthetics of modern restoration.

Throughout the book Hoeniger diplomatically treads an uneasy line: while attempting to refine our understanding of the various historical motives for renovating paintings, she simultaneously defers the desire to recover the original artwork. This deference is most clearly articulated when she introduces her work with Cesare Brandi's call for a compromise between historical and aesthetic concerns in the recovery of a work of art. The call, which Brandi issued in 1948, is echoed in the conclusion. By that point readers will be left wondering, as Hoeniger also is, in what useful way it is still possible to respond, on either aesthetic or historical grounds.

It is with the issue of historical interpretation that the

book introduces, but does not quite realize, one of its most interesting challenges to the expectations and procedures of art historians as students of contextualized objects. Implicitly challenged is our attachment to the integrity of artistic structures as bearers of meaning, an attachment that blinds us to the possibility of less than integral or less than stable relationships between form and function. The limitations this attachment imposes on interpretation are revealed in Hoeniger's discussion of the *Maestà* frescoes painted by Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi for the council halls of Siena and San Gimignano respectively. By and large the book deals with renovations that either responded to or were driven by matters of cult. These two works are presented as exceptions to this rule, being contextualized, in the first place, and for well-established reasons, as examples of civic imagery. While the author clearly acknowledges the close and interdependent relationship between the city and its cults, and the importance of this relationship to the history of the renovations, her desire to preserve the integrity of the artwork forces a choice between the two contexts. It is a choice that serves to subsume, more or less completely, the question of the cult image under the motive of the city's desire to draw on its power by association. I wonder if it is possible to recognize, in the evidence presented in this chapter, more tension in that relationship.

Another way of looking at the problem of the relationship between the city and its cults is suggested to me by Hoeniger's analysis of the renovations of Simone's *Maestà*. Her observation that the repainting on whiter plaster of selected heads and hands, including those of the Virgin and Child, served to emphasize their communicative presence, raises the interesting possibility that the radical dissolution of sacred personages into an illusionistic *sacra conversazione* was, on some level, unsustainable. The difference between the renovated Siennese *Maestà* and the similar fresco in the council hall of the neighbouring commune of San Gimignano is quite telling on this point. In Lippo's fresco, the heads of the Virgin and Child dissolve into a coherent spatial illusion, whereas in Simone's renovated fresco the repainted heads emerge against the representation of space to establish a presence on the surface of the fresco. Having read the earlier chapters of Hoeniger's book, I am led to wonder if these renovations might be traces of an effort to reclaim the central figures of the Virgin and Child as cult images, by paying their faces and hands – as well as those of some members of their company – the same sort of devotional homage that was paid to the two *Maestà* altarpieces discussed in the second chapter.¹³ Hoeniger's conclusions that the motivating factors behind the renovation were “the concern to enhance the expository message” and “the de-

sire to maintain the impressive appearance of civic decorations” are certainly justifiable. By drawing the question so insistently back into the realm of the fresco's didactic political context, however, these conclusions may also demonstrate the limitations of choosing between the political and cult functions of these images at any given moment in time.

I would not suggest that we reinterpret Simone's *Maestà* primarily or exclusively as a cult image. Whether or not some of its sacred personages retained, or eventually acquired, the status of cult images is another question altogether. It was, after all, an active cult that established and perpetuated the status of a sacred image. Furthermore, although the civic and cult functions of the *Maestà* could well have been simultaneous, they were not necessarily identical. In some very important ways they were incommensurable. In the former context the Virgin's presence was illusory and contingent; in the latter context it would have been real and intermittent. By subsuming one function under the other, we lose sight of the dialogue between the city and its cults, which was part of the much larger and unresolvable dialogue between contingent and universal authority. As Hoeniger demonstrates in her discussion of Lippo Memmi's *Maestà*, the life of these civic images was quite literally sustained by this dialogue.¹⁴ For this reason, I would suggest that it may be less useful to tie such images down to singular definitions, or finite moments of contextual meaning, than it is to consider polyphony.

This brings the question back to the problem of the original and the observation that the original we seek as historians cannot be recovered in the artwork itself. It was only constituted in the living dialogue between the object and its uses. What we gain when we relinquish our commitment to the integrity of the artwork is a view to the interesting possibility of dialogical relationships between artistic structures and their various cultural uses and/or meanings.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, Samuel Cohn's challenge to art historical accounts of the evolution of visual culture in the second half of the Trecento in *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (Baltimore, 1992), 247–48.
- 2 For a succinct account of the differences, see Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy* (Princeton, 1986), ch. 2.

- 3 See Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 4-12.
- 4 Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult – Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich, 1990); translated as *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1994), chs. 17-19.
- 5 Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 432-53.
- 6 Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 75-88.
- 7 For an examination of this problem and its roots, see Willibald Sauerländer, "From Stilus to Style: Reflections on the Fate of a Notion," *Art History*, VI (1983), 253-70.
- 8 Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 120.
- 9 Sauerländer, "From Stilus to Style," 263-70.
- 10 Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 24.
- 11 Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 105-06, 168 n. 13.
- 12 This is a complex question with a great deal of attendant bibliography. For an account of early moments in the shift to a criti-

cism based not only in reason but also in the instinctively moral, and deeply psychological, response of the senses to "forms in and of themselves," see Charles Dempsey, "The Greek Style and the History of Neo-classicism," in *Pietro Testa, 1612-1650: Prints and Drawings*, by Elizabeth Cropper (Philadelphia 1988), xxxvii-lxv. For a discussion of an early attempt to provide an overtly rationalized system for the analysis of style, see Carol Gibson-Wood, "Jonathan Richardson and the Rationalization of Connoisseurship," *Art History*, VII (1984), 38-56. Gibson-Wood points to the Achilles' heel of connoisseurs' claims to rationality when she observes that, when faced with the problem of explaining how theory applies to practice, "Every writer on connoisseurship ... has usually either recommended a specific attributional technique or retreated to the position that the connoisseur 'just knows' an artist's style when he sees it."

- 13 Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 40-41.
- 14 See Hoeniger, *Renovation of Paintings*, 146-47.

LAURIE SCHNEIDER ADAMS, *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction*. New York, Icon Editions, Harper Collins, 1996, 236 pp., 4 colour plates, 73 black-and-white illus., \$20.00 (U.S.), \$28.50 (Cdn) paper.

"Immensely complex, [there is a] convergence of many levels of meaning [...] in a single artistic product" (p. xvi). These opening remarks by the author of *The Methodologies of Art: An Introduction* appear to assert that a work of art is more than an ahistorical aesthetic object and more than an art historical object. Indeed, such words suggest that the author recognizes art's embeddedness in socio-economic structures and epistemologies. Furthermore, in writing a book with the title, *The Methodologies of Art*, the author seems to acknowledge that the act of interpreting a work of art, even of providing an historical basis for an art object, is positioning oneself within a complex network of interweaving and ever-changing cultural languages. And certainly, considering the diverse methods that this author examines (Formalism and Style, Iconography, Marxism, Feminism, Biography and Autobiography, Semiotics, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction, as well as Psychoanalysis), one is readily led to believe that Laurie Schneider Adams, like many art scholars in the last few decades, has crossed strict traditional art historical boundaries.

In light of the ever-expanding discipline of art history, there is no doubt that one would welcome a book that historicizes and effectively elucidates the various traditional and contemporary methodologies. One has, of course, already seen the burgeoning of such studies in text-based disciplines. Terry Eagleton's book, *Literary Theory*,¹ is a good example. Eagleton's concise, lucid and transparent writing

on a broad range of contemporary methodologies (though not comprehensive and not directly related to art) has served even the art history scholar. Anthologies, such as *Critical Theory Since Plato* and *Critical Theory Since 1965*,² have also benefited academics espousing new interdisciplinary approaches.

This is not to say that art historians have failed to produce their own valuable literature. There are numerous anthologies of traditional methods, among them the important *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History*, which contains classic essays by such canonical figures as Frederick Antal, Henri Focillon, E.H. Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky, Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin.³ In his *Art History and its Methods*,⁴ Eric Fernie, the Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London, has compiled a selection of writings from Giorgio Vasari to Griselda Pollock and provides commentaries on the various approaches. While Fernie takes into account the problematics underlying some contemporary theories and methods and negotiates them in light of the critiques of the discipline and the advent of the "new art history," in many ways, his interpretations remain grounded in a traditional art historical perspective.

Other art historians have dealt exclusively with contemporary approaches. James M. Thompson's anthology, *20th Century Theories of Art*, includes the writings of a broad range of contemporary theorists (though only one by a woman) and provides brief but lucid overviews of the various methods, as well as valuable suggestions for further readings.⁵ Recently, one has also seen the emergence of books, such as *Critical Terms for Art History*, which bridge critical theory and art history.⁶ This particular book contains per-