

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Monnas, Lisa. Merchants, Princes and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings, 1300–1550

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If any of the comments above seem critical, it is because the aims of this book are so ambitious that one wishes nothing to get in the author's way. "A literary criticism adequate to how we live in the world must recognize," according to Lawrence, "an obligation beyond that imposed by circulations of social energy. [...] Moving beyond the misanthropy that characterizes much of contemporary criticism requires that we recognize in the gift a violation of, rather than an extension to, the ubiquity of exchange. We must learn not only to accept or repay but, more importantly, to forgive the gift" (193–94). We must also learn to forgive authors their faults, as we would wish to be forgiven. Lawrence has offered us a gift.

TREVOR COOK, *Trent University*

**Monnas, Lisa.**

***Merchants, Princes and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings, 1300–1550.***

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. xi, 408. ISBN 978-0-300-11117-0 (hardcover) n.p.

The relationships between Renaissance paintings and textiles are considerable; even the casual observer of Renaissance art would not fail to note the attentive renderings of complex fabric designs, a characteristic that is sometimes considered with respect to the importance of the early modern textile market. The centrality of fabric in Renaissance art is further revealed in contemporary texts of art theory, where several authors give instructions on the representation of draped fabric. As such, art historians will welcome the illuminating analysis provided in Lisa Monnas's *Merchants, Princes and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Painting 1300–1550*, which presents detailed research on the inter-relationships between the taste for silk textiles and the representations of such fabrics in early modern European art. The book examines the painting techniques used to represent textiles, and contextualizes these images within the Renaissance production and sale of fabrics more broadly.

The introductory chapter comprises a useful overview of the cultural value of silk in early modern Europe, including an account of the history of the

material and descriptions of its production throughout Europe, focusing primarily on centres of production in Italy (technical details regarding production are supplemented with a glossary of terms relating to textiles and more detailed information on weaving techniques in an appendix to the book). Subsequent chapters address a range of issues concerning painting and textiles, including the availability of silks for naturalistic study by artists in chapter 1, and painters who designed textiles in chapter 2; and a range of issues regarding the representation of fabrics in chapters 3, 4, and 6. Throughout the book, Monnas's method is to consider representative case studies that bear on specific issues. This approach is appropriate, since it is difficult to imagine how such a study could have been conducted more systematically, and it allows the author to range over a considerable geographical and historical terrain.

Following treatment of the availability of silks for artists to observe and study in chapter 1, and the artist's knowledge and creation of textile designs in chapter 2, several chapters explore the evolving techniques for representing silk fabrics — as for instance chapter 3, which discusses the process of depicting gold fabrics in early Renaissance Florence and Siena. Monnas provides an account of these techniques, basing her analysis in part on the contemporary instructions of the artist and writer Cennino Cennini, and through examination of works by Simone Martini, Bernardo Daddi, and the Cione brothers. Through close scrutiny of painting technique, and comparisons to extant contemporary fabrics, Monnas illuminates the artistic working method and enriches our understanding of ornament in this period. Indirectly, much of Monnas's study bears on the history of ornament in painting: by unpacking the process depicting gold fabric, for instance, Monnas's material informs larger discussions regarding the shifting fashion for naturalistic representation of ornament versus the literal ornamenting of the painted surface. Similar methods are used in subsequent chapters to examine, for example, the representation of velvet in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Monnas's research offers valuable information on the identification of fabrics in Renaissance art, which will be of use particularly to historians of visual culture who seek to place early modern painting in the larger context of luxury material items.

Later chapters in the book address questions around artistic practice more thematically. Chapter 7 for instance examines textiles in portraiture, mostly of political rulers and their families, to show how clothing plays an important role in creating the identity of the sitter. Although such an idea is not new, the

detailed analysis of fabric clarifies important historical details. Again, the method employed is to take certain case studies and examine the painting process, drawing on contemporary records, analysis of the paintings themselves, as well as comparison to extant fabric samples. Chapter 8, on the “reading” of textiles in painting, will perhaps be the material of most general interest to art historians, as it touches on questions of iconography and the reception of images. For instance, by examining the motif of the pomegranate in textiles, Monnas unpacks the blurred boundaries between secular and religious iconography, showing how iconographic interpretations of fabric must be approached cautiously and with an understanding for the myriad uses of textiles. There is also an interesting discussion of the use of garments that appear Arabic in style in religious scenes, a topic that evokes questions regarding exoticism and historicism, and which may be useful to many historians of sacred art.

The strength of this book is certainly the author’s wide-ranging knowledge of textile production and her detailed analysis and identification of fabrics in Renaissance art, covering a broad range of case studies; this will make the book a useful resource for historians wishing to unpack the cultural meanings of garments and fabrics in Renaissance art. More reflection on the relationships between this research and related discussions in art historical discourse — for example, the discourse regarding ornament — would have been appreciated by this reviewer, but this will not diminish the value of the book. The book is beautifully illustrated, and includes transcriptions of several primary documents in an appendix.

STEVEN STOWELL, *Concordia University*

**Randall, Catharine.**

***Black Robes and Buckskin: A Selection from the Jesuit Relations.***

New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. Pp. ix, 212. ISBN 978-0-8232-3262-8 (hardcover) n.p.

Catharine Randall’s edition of the Jesuit *Relations* is both a fascinating and an odd book. It gives readers a sense of how the Jesuits of New France saw themselves, their mission, and the natives they attempted to convert to Christianity during