

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Christian, Kathleen Wren. *Empire without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c. 1350–1527*

Sally Hickson

Volume 35, Number 2, Spring 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105840ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i2.19378>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hickson, S. (2012). Review of [Christian, Kathleen Wren. *Empire without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c. 1350–1527*]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 35(2), 152–154.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i2.19378>

The Sciences of Homosexuality is nonetheless an important contribution to the historiography of both early modern science and homosexuality.

ALEXANDRA LOGUE, *University of Toronto*

Christian, Kathleen Wren.

Empire without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c. 1350–1527. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. ix, 440. ISBN 978-0-300-15421-4 (hardcover) n.p.

Art historians studying the history of the collecting of antiquities in Rome have long depended on the detailed research that informed the magisterial work of Roberto Weiss in *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (1969), supplemented by Bober and Rubinstein's *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture* and, more recently, the online *Census of Antique Works of Art and Architecture Known in the Renaissance* (<http://www.census.de/>). Various theoretical approaches to the reasons behind the awakening of the classical past within Renaissance humanism, culture, and commerce have been brilliantly articulated in recent decades by Phillip Jacks, Salvatore Settis, and Leonard Barkan, to name but a few. Kathleen Wren Christian's book adds valuable new insights into, as she states, "the reception of antique figural statues — their engagement with poetry, changes in their reception over time and their eventual elevation by collectors and artists to a privileged aesthetic status" (p. 10). Thus, her interests are in the interplay of the material and the literary, the archaeological and the academic, and the status of figural sculptures as discursive subjects. Such emphases, by her own admission, lead away from more sustained critical inquiry into statues as material objects continuously engaged in changing spatial relationships and dialogues with interiors, exteriors, and the vast panoply of other objects, natural and artificial, that were deployed in those same spaces — the assemblies of which created a Renaissance culture predicated on a fluidly defined "antiquity" measured against an equally unstable and evolving critical evocation of a discoverable sense of the past. Accordingly, her chapters unfold chronologically from the period of Petrarch to the Sack of Rome, allowing her to examine changes in

the very idea of the past and the value of its relics, ideas which continued to change according to the exigencies of political and social realities in the Renaissance present.

In her seven chapters, the author traces a trajectory from private to public. In the quattrocento, figural statues were largely given voice within the discourse of the past through the activities of memorializing sodalities and humanist academies, but by the cinquecento they began to accumulate their own fame and appropriate their own “voices” within cultural inquiry. With the advent of print, the verses of the “speaking statues” of Rome proclaimed their own origins, declared the names of their creators, and praised their owners. The resulting fame that accrued to collectors and collections posed a social problem tied to political, economic, and religious tensions. When the romance with the past came to be popularly viewed as impious (most notably in the Savonarola crisis) statues could be moved, rededicated or recontextualized for public consumption, as a form of “honorable pleasure” (p. 197). Dangerous beauties were subsequently tamed as indexes of social and civic honour, and private collectors became public benefactors. Stones into which poetry had once breathed life were exiled to museums as silent witnesses to the written discourses of history.

Wren Christian tells this story with astonishing clarity and in vivid detail. She tempers the overwhelming breadth of documentary and literary evidence and period anecdote with clear and incisive analyses in order to create a deft narrative that is never weighed down by her sources. The illustrations are beautifully integrated into the text and are richly diverse; they include photos of the statues themselves, fragments, inscriptions, and drawings of Roman sculpture gardens by Renaissance artists, as well as prints, maps, and recent photos of ancient sites comfortably ensconced in modern cities. The result is a luxurious tapestry of visual counterpoints to balance the exuberance and richness of the text.

The most exciting feature of the book, at least for those of us who have been seeking a clearer and more complete picture of Roman collections of antiquities at the height of the Renaissance, is the astonishing “Catalogue of the Collections in Roman Houses and *Vigne* before 1527.” In these 150 pages, the author provides lively accounts of the evolution of the vast Renaissance array of Roman collections and their contents, summarizes the documents pertaining to them, including their description in contemporary literary accounts, and

ends with bibliographic references for each. This catalogue is an extremely rich source for scholars and is an enormously important contribution to the literature.

SALLY HICKSON, *University of Guelph*

Fletcher, Angus.

Evolving Hamlet: Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy and the Ethics of Natural Selection.

Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. Pp. xvi, 192. ISBN 978-0-230-11168-4 (hardback) \$80.

In *Evolving Hamlet* Angus Fletcher adds to the growing body of scholarship on early modern natural philosophy and literature by suggesting that scholars might usefully consider literature as serving a peculiarly scientific function. Like the sciences, literature in Fletcher's view is intelligible as a series of approaches to solving specific puzzles. The puzzle Fletcher confronts here is the development of a system of practical, problem-based ethics. Rejecting ethics based in metaphysics or idealism as fundamentally too speculative, he turns to seventeenth-century tragedy as a source of diverse responses to particular ethical challenges resulting from the collapse of a "universal" ethics following the Reformation and later the Scientific Revolution. While the notion of theatre as an ethical laboratory is by now a familiar one, Fletcher's argument marks itself as distinctive in two ways. First, unlike many contemporary critics who read early modern plays through the lens of existing ethical systems, Fletcher examines these texts as themselves instruments of ethical formation. Early modern tragedy is concerned with responding to practical philosophical problems and is thus in effect its own peculiar form of philosophy. Second, Fletcher offers his literary history as an example of a form of Darwinian evolution, in which tragedy adapts itself over the course of time to confront new ethical problems, and to consider old ones differently. The book then positions itself as a qualified natural history of the seventeenth-century stage, in which the theatre serves as the venue where the intentionality of human artifice meets