



Introduction: Renaissance Italy and the Digital Humanities

Amanda Madden

Volume 45, Number 2, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094822ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39765>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Madden, A. (2022). Introduction: Renaissance Italy and the Digital Humanities. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(2), 255–258.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39765>



Digital Resource Reviews / Comptes rendus sur les ressources numériques

Introduction: Renaissance Italy and the Digital Humanities

AMANDA MADDEN

George Mason University

Digital humanities has reinvigorated the study of Renaissance Italy in the past decade. An exponential growth in projects highlighting the enormous output of cultural, artistic, and intellectual work has made available for the first time civic sculpture, decorative maps, scores for courtly musical performances, breviaries, and letters from ambassadors full of political news, gossip, and sometimes snark. Recent projects have given us access to the lives of common criminals, female artisans, and guild members. We can now read the entirety of Dante's *Divine Comedy* complete with textual apparatus, commentary, images, and sounds; locate where butchers lived in sixteenth-century Florence; read the digitized will of a Sienese noblewoman to uncover whom she left her furniture to; as well as peruse Isabella d'Este's advice to her sister-in-law. Thanks to a highly collaborative community of scholars to which all the contributors of this issue belong, material has been made accessible that prior to these projects would have required an expensive if lovely trip to Florence and, in some cases, the labour of years in an archive. Just how important this work is to students and scholars has been highlighted over the past two years, when due to the COVID-19 pandemic, very few of us went anywhere much less to the Biblioteca Estense in Modena, formerly one of the largest manuscript libraries in Europe, or to Florence's Duomo to see the relief sculptures.

This special issue highlights some of these projects that have made available the cultural, intellectual, and material heritage of Renaissance Italy. It consists of reviews of eight digital projects focused on various aspects of Renaissance and early modern Italy. These projects explore the subjects traditionally associated with the study of Renaissance Italy such as humanism, art, and music, as well as those artifacts outside the canon of Leonardo, Dante, and Machiavelli—the lives of common criminals, the poetry of lesser-known

female writers, and the dispatches of Medici ambassadors that discuss matters from political marriages, to local gossip, to the weather. In form, they span the gamut from critical digital editions, to textual corpora, to online exhibits, to geospatial applications.

One suspects that polymath Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) would have been pleased by the advent of computer-aided scholarship and the digital humanities. In this issue, Abigail Upshaw reviews a digital humanities project that at least gives us insight into areas of Leonardo's thought—Leonardo da Vinci and His *Treatise on Painting*. After his death, Leonardo's student and heir, Francesco Melzi, compiled materials that included Leonardo's notes to finish a treatise on painting that Leonardo had been working on, and much of this material has now been digitized by Project Director Francesca Fiorani and her team. Project users can use this digital archive to look at various printed editions of the text and compare them, thereby giving coherence to a text that was a pastiche of materials. Users can also examine an impressive number of manuscript copies, as well as Leonardo's notes, and gain some insight into the mind of this great thinker.

Indeed, digital editions can provide valuable material for a scholar. Andrew Vidali reviews another digital edition for this issue—an edition of Benedetto Varchi's *Storia fiorentina*. The VaSto project, or VArchI, STOrIa fiorentina edizione digitale, makes available an important manuscript that is critical to understanding the intellectual milieu of Renaissance Florence. In addition to the XML-enabled edition based on the open-source tool, the website contains a scholarly apparatus consisting of maps, timelines, and multimedia. This digital edition enables readers to peruse both the digitized edition and the digital critical edition. Similarly, Barry Torch's review highlights another digital edition that makes available one of the foremost texts of Renaissance humanism, the *Oration on the Dignity of Man* by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94). The Progetto Pico Project, a collaboration between Brown University and the University of Bologna, includes an annotated edition of the *Oration* in parallel texts of Latin and Italian as well as Latin and English. It also makes available digitized editions of incunabula, including a first edition of the *Oration* and the *Apologia*, Pico's defence of the *Oration*.

Looking at an entirely different type of digital edition, in this issue, Dori Coblenz reviews the Tasso in Music Project (TiMP), which makes available for the first time the work of 200 composers who set Tasso's poetry

to music between 1575 and 1640. This project provides access to how Tasso was performed and experienced. Indeed, a great deal of poetry was meant to be performed or set to music. For this issue, I review Italian Women Writers, a project of the University of Chicago Libraries that has made the electronic editions of the work of women writers who composed some of this poetry accessible for the first time; prior to this project, the works of Tarquinia Molza, Aurelia Petrucci, Gaspara Stampa, and a plethora of other women authors were incredibly difficult to find.

Moving from textual study to experience, Stefano Dall'Aglio reviews Hidden Florence, a smartphone app that makes accessible the experience of Renaissance Florence. This app allows the user to tour Renaissance Florence accompanied by a character of the time, from the more famous Cosimo de' Medici to the less famous woolworker named Giovanni, the weaver Marietta, the widow Niccolosa, and the policeman Ercole. The tour spans over a century from 1459 and Cosimo's time to the era of the Grand Duchy, thereby giving a perspective on an important period of change in Renaissance Florence.

Colin Rose reviews a project that presents another view entirely of Florence—the Medici Archive Project (MAP), which several years ago began the immense undertaking of digitizing a portion of the millions of square cubic feet of letters from the Grand Ducal archive. This project has spun off multiple research clusters and developed several platforms that allow users to search, annotate, transcribe, and collaborate on research projects. These archival platforms provide open access to digitized records—including *avvisi*—that would otherwise require a trip to Florence and time spent in the Archivio di Stato, a trip that is not always easy to do, particularly with the travel restrictions the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced. Crowdsourced transcription and collaborative research like that enabled by the MAP platforms has been a boon to the field. Laura Ingallinella looks at a particularly novel example—Laura Moreale and Benjamin Albritton's the Transcription Challenge Framework (TCF). Like the Medici Archive Project's MIA (Medici Interactive Archives), the TCF's goal is to facilitate collaborative transcriptions, establish best practices, and develop a common workflow. During the pandemic, Moreale and Albritton developed La Sfera Challenge based on this framework, which called upon teams of volunteer editors to transcribe Goro Dati's fifteenth-century geographic treatise *La Sfera*, a fascinating yet understudied work of cosmology and philosophy.

The projects in this special issue represent only a fraction of the collaborative output and investment in the field of Renaissance Italy in digital humanities, yet they embody the spirit of technological innovation and intellectual collaboration presented during the period in question. As we reflect on two years of a pandemic, limited archival travel, and constraints on scholarship, it is encouraging to account for the ways in which digital humanities has made other paths to scholarship possible. Leonardo surely would be proud.

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39765>