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Henry, Chiscinda. Playful Pictures: Art, Leisure, and Entertainment in the Venetian Renaissance Home

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[See table of contents](#)

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Henry, Chriscinda.

Playful Pictures: Art, Leisure, and Entertainment in the Venetian Renaissance Home.

University Park: Penn State University Press, 2021. Pp. 280 + 41 b/w, 39 col. ill. ISBN 978-0-271-08911-9 (hardcover) US\$104.95.

This valuable book takes on a group of images art historians frequently term problematic: Venetian secular pictures of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Emblematized by pastoral paintings like Titian's *Pastoral Concert*, Henry's "playful pictures" also include depictions of rustics, nobles, musicians, jesters, and beauties in artfully constructed settings. These ambiguous, seemingly open-ended works have attracted what Henry rightly calls "rarefied" (4) interpretations, particularly allegorical ones; instead, she grounds them firmly in the context of—and recognizes them as analogous to—contemporary entertainments, including vernacular literature, dialect comedy, and practices of festivity and sociability. This method is enhanced by an anthropological and cultural-historical approach on the unique character of play-worlds informed by, among others, Clifford Geertz and Johan Huizinga. At its best, *Playful Pictures* draws us into several overlapping, playful spheres: not only the painted worlds of pastoral idylls and theatrical trysts but also the imagined worlds evoked by theatrical and musical performance and the physical worlds of the private study, *portego* (a distinctive Venetian reception hall), and rural villa.

The book comprises four chapters, on Vittore Carpaccio's *studiolo* door (a unique surviving example of a genre of secular domestic painting in Venice); pastoral imagery and the *Compagnie delle calza* (groups of young Venetian nobles who organized elite entertainments); theatrical painting; and "ludic" art and entertainment in the *portego*. Henry parallels the emergence of playful pictures with that of a wealthy class in a city with an ambivalent, but increasingly positive, relationship to its own reputation for leisure. She draws connections between paintings and contemporary entertainments, including secular literature like Boccaccio's *Decameron* (released in a luxurious illustrated edition in Venice in the 1490s), dialect and classical comedies, and private carnival revelries. Henry is careful in describing the links among these and her chosen paintings; they "resonate conceptually" (34), or "formally and thematically engage" (106). Above simply fleshing out the contexts in which these pictures were produced, Henry convincingly argues that these media

shared similar aims and functioned in analogous ways to pictures, whether offering the pleasurable challenge of a puzzle or game, providing therapeutic value, or encouraging role play.

Chapters 2 and 3, "Pastoral Fellowship and the Performance of Virtuosity" and "Theatrical Painting from *Alla bulesca* to *Commedia dell'arte*," are particularly strong. "Pastoral Fellowship" examines the pastoral mode that provided a culturally sanctioned escape for young nobles to fashion themselves as shepherds, musicians, or lovesick poets. Notable here is how Henry demonstrates that such pastoral self-fashioning cut across social class, with artists joining their wealthy patrons in adopting various pastoral masks: Huizinga's "play-ground" as common ground. "Theatrical Painting" considers a group of works from circa 1515 to 1545 that Henry relates to Venetian-dialect comedies, stories, and satiric songs from the same period. Especially useful is her clear identification and explication of the cast of characters depicted: the ill-matched couple, *bravo* or hired heavy, *virgo* or young marriageable woman, and any number of women of ill repute, including the *putana*, *cortigiana*, and *ruffiana*. Sometimes the viewer joins this cast: Henry reads what is traditionally called a "group portrait" by Bernardino Licinio as a love triangle staffed by stock characters wherein the armed protagonist and his *bravo* shield a lady love from us, the "potential romantic rival" (99).

The first chapter, "Boredom and Relief on Carpaccio's *Studiolo* Door," is an outlier, both because it focuses on a single work and because that work's most famous figures, two slouching, well-dressed women on the balcony of a suburban Venetian palace, are seemingly having a terrible time. Long treated as a visual puzzle by art historians, Vittore Carpaccio's painted door has been partially reconstructed from two surviving panels, the bottom half of which depicts the two women, the top half of which depicts men hunting and fishing on the lagoon, with a *trompe l'oeil* letter rack on its reverse. The many contrasts of this ensemble—male versus female, *otium* versus *negotium*, narrative versus still-life painting—align with its dual-sided function facing two distinct areas of a wealthy Venetian home, a *camera* and a private study. Henry's challenge, perhaps appropriately, is also dual-sided: while there is much specialist secondary scholarship to contend with in order to make her contribution to the discourse clear, there are also very few surviving historical objects or texts with which to help situate it. Ultimately, Henry provides her own compelling reading of the painting as a "pictorial comedy of manners" (53) in which the truth of married

women's monotonous existence is reflected back to them in a humorous and therapeutic way. While this is an insightful conclusion, the chapter feels overburdened by its attempts to fill in missing context with excursions on authors like Alberti, Filarete, and Paleotti, who by virtue of geography or chronology have limited value for discussions of late fifteenth-century Venice.

Overall, *Playful Pictures* is a study in copiousness, skillfully bringing together a large number of sources, including original archival research, and describing a matrix of intertwined cultural phenomena. It makes important contributions to established areas—private art collecting in Venice, the rise of secular painting—as well as in lesser-known areas like the visual culture of leisure, a topic better-known to art historians from the centuries after the Industrial Revolution. Its content and its elegant interdisciplinary approach utilizing thick description will make it of interest to specialists and non-specialists alike.

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