

Susan M. Dixon, ed., *Italian Baroque Art*, Blackwell
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Italian Baroque Art, edited by Susan M. Dixon, is part of the series Blackwell Anthologies in Art History under the direction of Dana Arnold. The goals of the series are ambitious: to present the “key writings” of a field of a study; to offer a fresh perspective that challenges the canonical and provides alternative interpretations;¹ and to pay “careful attention” to “the most beneficial way to teach art history in today’s classroom setting.”² This is a tall order for the individual volume editors, who must combine classic essays with new and provocative texts, meanwhile designing the selection to meet the complex and varied needs of instructors across the English-speaking world.

How does Dixon’s volume measure up? On the whole the text is a welcome addition to the field. The essays represent a good balance between classic writings and new work, providing at least some of “the best that has been taught and written on a given subject or theme.”³ The pedagogical apparatus of the volume, including introduction, individual section overviews, and bibliographies, is helpful and serves to orient the student reader to the historiography and some of the burning questions of the field. However, despite the many strengths of the book, ultimately, its capacity to challenge the canonical and to operate as a teaching tool is limited.

Dixon designed the volume to be used in the classroom in tandem with Rudolf Wittkower’s pioneering text *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600–1750*. Wittkower’s sweeping synthesis of the period was revised by Joseph Connors and Jennifer Montagu and re-issued in 1999 by Yale University Press, complete with stunning colour-plates. The pairing with Wittkower’s classic text provides the rationale for the chronological span of Dixon’s volume, which extends well into the eighteenth century. It also explains the primary—although not exclusive—focus of the essays on painting, sculpture, and architecture, as well as the decision to limit the illustrations. A key contribution of the book is its ability to extend Wittkower’s text along a number of trajectories.

The field of art history has changed tremendously since Wittkower’s survey was first published more than fifty years ago (it appeared in 1958), and Dixon’s volume serves to bring the reader up to date on many new developments in the field. The essays are organized under four thematic headings: “Appearances”; “Artistic Practice, Production and Consumption”; “Meaning: Conceived and Received”; and “Critique of the Past and the New Science.” These categories are designed to update Wittkower in light of recent preoccupations with visibility, gender, the social production of space, the art market, the “beholder’s share,” the slippery and shifting nature of meaning, the

relationship of Baroque art to the past, and art as science. The arrangement of the essays into thematic categories operates as a useful heuristic tool to bring together past and present work in the field in fruitful ways, allowing the student (and teacher) to see the unifying preoccupations of scholars of the period as well as how the work of recent scholars is deepening and extending inquiry. The introductory essays for each thematic section are excellent. They provide the historiography and introduce students to the major questions and passions of scholars in the field. Above all, they serve to open up avenues for new research and show the field to be dynamic and expanding, with lots of opportunities for new work. As a student I always felt a sense of disappointment after reading Wittkower’s magisterial survey. Not because it wasn’t inspiring and insightful, but because his synthesis was so effective; to a student at least, it felt like the period was all sewn up, and given the teleology of the historical narrative, it seemed that artists in the eighteenth century in particular, the “late Baroque,” were doomed to be viewed through the lens of decline.

One of the many strengths of the book is the inclusion of essays that demonstrate the new modes of visual communication that emerge during the eighteenth century, as well as the deep engagement of eighteenth-century art with contemporaneous developments in science and philosophy. For example, an excerpt from Michael Baxandall and Svetlana Alpers’s book on Giambattista Tiepolo, *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (New Haven and London, 1994), examines what they call “the mobile play of perception” (p. 79) to argue that the Venetian artist’s works offer an “alternative to narrative” (p. 79). Opening the door to future avenues of interpretation, Baxandall and Alpers suggest that we locate Tiepolo’s approach to composition within non-Euro-derived traditions of art-making. Another chapter on Tiepolo, by Drew Armstrong, counters scholarship that characterizes eighteenth-century Venetian society as essentially frivolous and that views Tiepolo’s art as evidence of the decline of the Venetian nobility. Through his close analysis of the patronage and iconography of Tiepolo’s *Allegory of the Power of Eloquence*, created for the Sandi, Armstrong reveals that the fresco operates as a sophisticated realization of the argument posed by the pre-eminent eighteenth-century philosopher Giovanni Battista Vico that “the mind can know the essence of things that it has made” (p. 246). Dixon’s own chapter, on the Venetian etcher and archaeologist Giovanni Battista Piranesi, places his work within the context of the emerging science of archaeology to show that the *capricci* (pastiche of ancient ruins, sculptures, and artifacts) had an epistemological purpose for the artist.

Envisioning its use in the classroom, I like how the text allows the instructor to disrupt the march-step quality of Wittkower’s survey along paths that students always find fascinating by including “on the street” voices of artists and clients, as well

as actual artistic practices and dilemmas, money, and career issues. It raises questions like: How did Artemisia actually have a career? What about the “other architects”—the ones we never hear about? Who did the real work on sculpture in Rome? What did people of the time have to say about art? How did artists actually learn their craft? The inclusion of primary texts by contemporary critics such as Giovan Pietro Bellori affords another opportunity to reflect on historiographical narratives. No doubt the desire for the text to be used within the parameters of a course dictated the number of essays, but it would have been useful to include more primary writings, especially those that disagree with Bellori’s vision of art history.

While the volume works admirably as a supplement to Wittkower, this pairing ultimately limits the text’s effectiveness both as a wedge to open up the field (which both Dixon and Arnold claim is one of the goals of the series) and as a state-of-the-art tool for teaching specific courses. To begin with the latter problem, although the selected texts all have much to offer, I have difficulty imagining just how I might use this text in my classroom. I submit that few schools could ask their students to buy both texts, i.e., the three volumes of Wittkower’s *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600–1750*, plus Dixon’s text. In the first instance, most students would balk at the expense for a single course (the three volumes of Wittkower and Dixon’s book currently retail for \$108 and \$59, respectively). Moreover, most courses on the period are taught in a single semester, making it challenging for students to read, discuss, and critique a three-volume, dense survey and twenty-six essays within ten to twelve weeks. Dixon’s text is aimed at upper-level students, yet most courses at that level are not surveys, which is the intended audience for Wittkower’s text. Perhaps a graduate-level seminar on Italian Baroque historiography could assign both, but in my experience this is not a typical offering in most graduate programs. I suspect that most of us will mine Dixon’s volume for its gems—of which there are many—and assign individual essays as readings rather than make the volume a required course textbook.

But the problem of just how to use this text in a course also raises a larger issue: by conceiving her text as a *supplement* to Wittkower, Dixon has missed an opportunity to offer a textbook that really strikes out for change in the field. There is a desperate need for a new textbook for Italian Baroque art that interrogates canonical writings and objects on the model of the exemplary textbooks designed by the Open University, such as *The Changing Status of the Artist*, edited by Emma Barker, Nick Webb, and Kim Woods (New Haven, 1999), or Mariet Westermann’s text on seventeenth-century Dutch art, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585–1718* (New Haven, 2005). While Dixon’s volume does demonstrate the evolution of scholarship in the field, for this reader at least it does not quite go far

enough. As demonstrated by the recent example of the exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *Baroque 1620–1800: Style in the Age of Magnificence* (London, 2009)—which occurred after Dixon’s text was published—to really transform the field it is necessary to locate Baroque art within a global framework. Dixon’s text scarcely acknowledges the impact of the world outside Italy on cultural production. To redress the Eurocentric bias of her approach, Dixon could include an essay or two from the scholarship on cross-cultural encounters and international exchange networks to reframe the Baroque from a global perspective, following the model of Claire Farago’s ground-breaking book *Reframing the Renaissance: Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450–1650* (New Haven, 1995), which radically shifted our vision of artistic production in early modern Europe. Moreover, many would argue that it is impossible to critique the canon without also studying textiles, jewelry, ceramics, clothing, “popular” prints, theatre design, gardens, fireworks and other ephemera. Although Dixon includes Patricia Waddy’s work on furniture in Roman palaces, perhaps some of the present essays that focus on painting, sculpture, and architecture could be replaced with studies of other media, such as an excerpt from Rose Marie San Juan’s book on print culture (as distinct from high-art prints, which are included in the volume), *Rome: A City Out of Print* (Minneapolis, 2001).

Dana Arnold claims that the Blackwell Anthologies in Art History will challenge the canonical status of key writings in the given field; however, in the final analysis it is questionable whether Dixon’s text challenges the canonical status of Wittkower’s text or reinscribes it. Individual readers will decide for themselves whether this book sides with the “ancients” or the “moderns”; but it is surely a sign of the vitality of the field that the text already feels outdated. Dixon’s volume ultimately seems to signal the desire to continue to work within the dictates of Wittkower’s liberal-humanist, Eurocentric legacy, whereas the interdisciplinary and world-minded approach of the V & A exhibition demonstrates the paradigm shift that is transforming the field.

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Notes

- 1 Dana Arnold, “Series Editor’s Preface,” in *Sixteenth-Century Italian Art*, Blackwell Anthologies in Art History, ed. Michael Cole (Malden, MA, and Oxford, 2006), xi.
- 2 Dana Arnold, “Blackwell Anthologies in Art History,” in *Italian Baroque Art*, Blackwell Anthologies in Art History, ed. Susan M. Dixon (Malden, MA, and Oxford, 2008), ii.
- 3 Arnold, “Blackwell Anthologies in Art History,” ii.