

In fact, as Benjamin Keen first showed in *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (1971), Europeans had been making the Aztecs familiar for centuries, often to justify conquest and proselytisation. In the book under review, Davide Domenici demonstrates how Italians saw Aztec works of art as proof of biblical prophesies and harbingers of salvation and that they valued Amerindians' intellectual abilities only insofar as it made them ripe for conversion. Similarly, although Maria Matilde Benzoni valiantly aims to demonstrate that Cardinal Federico Borromeo 'offered new intellectual horizons' (p.105) for European scholarship on the Americas, this reviewer finds Borromeo's use of 'New World' imagery to be unremarkably bigoted – despite a mild ethnographic interest that extended to Nahua featherwork mitres.

Benzoni's chapter is not the only one in which twenty-first century optimism runs up against early modern intransigence. European indifference about America interferes with the volume's more ambitious goal to show that the Italian Renaissance was a product as much of the discoveries in the 'New World' as it was of the rediscovery of the Classical tradition. It is true that American objects intrigued collectors, its indigenous peoples were painted on the walls of the Uffizi and missionary conquests were celebrated in paternalistic publications. Nonetheless the Columbian exchange was in no way equal to the revival of ancient literature in the making of the Renaissance. Europeans simply did not care enough about America.

Some essays demonstrate how certain Italian institutions or literary works inspired the Iberian enterprise: Spanish and Portuguese trading factories in the Americas (and Portuguese ones in Africa and Asia) modelled themselves on the merchant communities of their Venetian, Pisan and Genoese competitors in the Mediterranean, and Columbus was obsessed with Marco Polo, his heavily annotated copy of the Venetian's travelogue helping him mistake the Caribbean for Asia. This reviewer is less convinced that Italian explorers were inspired significantly by Dante, as Mary Watt argues, and even less that Dante 'fundamentally informed the Age of Encounters' (p.11).

A major theme of the book is dissemination. Italy was a clearinghouse for information about the Americas even if it was usually second-hand. Venice alone produced more maps and printed books about the 'New World' than any other nation and depictions of American flora by the likes of

the Medici court painter Jacopo Ligozzi made ripples throughout Europe. But Venetian publishers were not necessarily enlightened: as Ann Rosalind Jones demonstrates, their depictions of Floridian Amerindians in costume books represented them as 'strange people manageably spaced and ordered like the rare, curious and beautiful objects in a *Wunderkammer*' (p.268).

One of the most intriguing chapters is David Gentilcore's essay on corn, tomatoes and potatoes. Most people assume that they were already Italian staples in this period but initially they were considered to be exotic and depicted in fresco paintings such as Giovanni da Udine's image of the plant at the Villa Farnesina (1517–19) or Jacopo Zucchi's representation from the 1580s in the garden room of the Villa Medici (Fig.3), both in Rome. Potatoes and tomatoes, considered alien and even poisonous, were avoided until the nineteenth century. Only corn was adopted quickly because it closely resembled grains already used in Italian cuisine. Italians were also uninterested in how Amerindians prepared these new foods – in the case of polenta they might have done well to pay more attention as Amerindian cooking methods preserved nutrients that protected against a fatal disease called pellagra caused by an amino acid deficiency.

Karen Lloyd's chapter on the Virgin of Copacabana reveals a little-known if short-lived Italian enthusiasm for one of South America's most important cult statues (now in Bolivia), which was promoted by special-interest groups seeking closer links with Spain or, like the Augustinian Recollects, celebrating their American spiritual victories. However, like Vivaldi's Tenochtitlan, the holy image could not gain purchase in Italy until it had been 'neutralised' (p.140) by being transformed into something familiar: in this case from a sculpture (associated with Amerindian idolatry) to a two-dimensional silhouette, which would have been hardly recognisable to a Peruvian and which looked like a Virgin of Candlemas anyway. Like so many American imports, the cult soon faded away.

The reader is left wondering how the Italian response to the Americas was different from those of other regions with indirect contact, notably the Germanic states, where princely cabinets of curiosities and gardens included American specimens, Augsburg bankers funded explorations, printmakers made some of the earliest depictions of Amerindians and the artist and explorer Maria Sibylla Merian travelled to Suriname to

paint flora and fauna that were considerably more 'al vivo' (p.225) than Aldrovandi's and Cesare Vecellio's second-hand renderings.

### Renaissance Splendor: Catherine de' Medici's Valois Tapestries

By Elizabeth Cleland and Marjorie E. Wieseman. 96 pp. incl. 131 col. + 6 b. & w. ills. (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2018), £30. ISBN 978-0-300-23706-1.

by KETTY GOTTARDO

The catalogue under review accompanied an exhibition on the recently restored Valois Tapestries at the Cleveland Museum of Art (closed 21st January 2019), where six of a set of eight wall hangings from the Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, were displayed. Lavishly illustrated with generous details, the catalogue brings these extraordinary yet still rather mysterious tapestries to life. The publication celebrates the restoration campaign, made possible by the generosity of the Friends of the Uffizi and one major benefactor, Veronica Atkins. To put the tapestries into context, the exhibition and its catalogue included five of the six drawings (cat. nos.7–11) by the French Renaissance artist Antoine Caron (1521–99), which are thought to be the preliminary designs for the pageant scenes of the tapestries (nos.1–6).<sup>1</sup> Portraits, both painted and drawn, illustrated the members of the Valois court who are depicted in the tapestries (nos.12–27). Enamels, cameos and carved stone objects (nos.28–40), some formerly in the collection of Catherine de' Medici, offered a broader picture of her patronage and collecting interests.

The city mark BB for Brabant-Brussels is woven into the borders of the tapestries, suggesting they were made in Brussels, where tapestry weaving flourished during the Renaissance. They illustrate the Valois *Magnificences*, spectacles and diplomatic ceremonies organised at the court of the last Valois kings of France at a time when Catherine de' Medici was Regent and later Queen Mother. These events ranged from exercises of chivalry and valour to entertainments and included mock battles, music-making and water festivals. The imposing figure of Catherine de' Medici is depicted together with her family and entourage on most of the tapestries; one of them, representing a tournament, shows her dominating the left foreground, dressed in a black widow's dress. Probably woven for Catherine after 1575, the tapestries are

first mentioned in a Florentine inventory of 1589, which lists the property Catherine's granddaughter, Christine of Lorraine, brought to the Medici court when she married Ferdinand I, Grand Duke of Tuscany. Catherine must have offered the tapestries to Christine, perhaps in order to ensure they would be displayed in her native city of Florence. Moreover, aware of the declining power of the Valois dynasty – the death of her son Henri III just a few months later brought the reign of the Valois to an end – Catherine may have intended to preserve the set of tapestries, and the powerful image of the family it conveyed, from potential destruction.

In the catalogue essays, Marjorie E. Wieseman discusses Catherine de' Medici as patron and collector and Francesca De Luca summarises the conservation history of the Valois Tapestries since their arrival at the Medici court in 1589. On the whole, they are extraordinarily well conserved, but De Luca lists some of the events that damaged the warp and contributed to the loss of the once vibrant colours, including poor safekeeping, prolonged exposure to direct light and the flood that afflicted Florence in 1966. The original colour scheme is visible on the better-preserved backs. Costanza Perrone Da Zara and Claudia Beyer offer a detailed illustrated account of the recent conservation treatment given to three of the eight hangings and Alessandra Griffio surveys the Florentine tapestry collection from the Medici to the present day.

Elizabeth Cleland adds new evidence in support of Catherine as the main patron behind the set of tapestries, a notion on which recent scholarship has come to agree.<sup>2</sup> Based on her informed knowledge of the field, Cleland estimates that four weavers working simultaneously at four looms could have completed the set in less than a year. Her main contribution is the suggestion that three distinct artists were responsible for transferring the preliminary and smaller designs by Caron to the now lost, large-scale preparatory cartoons used by the weavers. In her view, although all three artists were responsible for introducing to the foreground the life-size figures, which are absent from the Caron drawings, one artist was more skilled than the other two. Interestingly, during cleaning, Perrone Da Zara and Beyer were able to ascertain that the less able weavers were using richer metal-wrapped thread.

Although this set of tapestries has attracted scholarly attention since the beginning of the twentieth century, surprisingly, the exhibition on which the

catalogue is based was the first exclusively dedicated to the subject. A number of publications have examined the scenes represented in the background of the tapestries and attempted to associate them with real events that occurred at the court of the last Valois. Frances Yates's *The Valois Tapestries* (1959) was the first monographic work in which the tapestries were fully assessed and assigned the individual titles by which they are commonly known today. Nonetheless, several points remain obscure. For instance, the exact identity of the Flemish weaving workshops has yet to be firmly identified. Some of the larger figures in the foreground remain nameless and some of the events depicted in the background still lack satisfying identification. As yet no documentary evidence has been found to confirm that Catherine de' Medici commissioned the set, nor do we know of its original location before it reached Florence. Is this group unique or was there a second woven set, as Cleland, and before her Yates, suggests? As symbols of power, status and the strength and legacy of the Valois family, these dazzling tapestries continue to fascinate. This exemplary catalogue will bring renewed attention to them and hopefully spur new research that will pursue the achievements of the book's authors.

1 The six drawings were brought together for the first time in 2018 for an exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery, London; see K. Gottardo, ed.: exh. cat. *Antoine Caron. Drawing for Catherine de' Medici*, London (Courtauld Gallery) 2017; it was reviewed by Erin Griffey in this Magazine, 160 (2018), pp.985–86.  
2 To this reviewer's knowledge, the suggestion was first made by P.-F. Bertrand: 'A new method of interpreting the Valois Tapestries, through a history of Catherine de Médicis', *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 14 (2006), p.40.

### **Il disegno veneziano 1580–1650: Ricostruzioni storico-artistiche**

By Bert W. Meijer. 596 pp. incl. 42 col. + 715 b. & w. ill. (Leo S. Olschki, Florence, 2017), £115. ISBN 978-88-222-6503-6.

by CATHERINE WHISTLER

'*Ci vuol coraggio*' ('it takes courage'), as Giambattista Tiepolo remarked when facing a demanding fresco commission for the King of Spain,<sup>1</sup> and Bert Meijer may well have felt the same in setting himself the challenge of presenting a corpus of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Venetian drawings. Underpinning this new volume is Carlo Ridolfi's pioneering publication on the lives of Venetian artists, *Le Maraviglie dell'Arte ovvero le*

*Vite degli illustri Pittori Veneti e dello Stato* (1648). Meijer's ambitious aim is to investigate the draughtsmanship of the later generations of artists presented by Ridolfi together with those Ridolfi did not examine, who were still alive at the time. Meijer provides updated biographies and in many cases a detailed catalogue of the artist's drawings.

In mapping out this complex area in his introductory essay, Meijer is frank about the aims and limitations of his task. On the one hand, as Marco Boschini explained in *Le ricche Minere della pittura veneziana* (1674), the seven leading artists of the period (he cites Leonardo Corona, Palma Giovane, Sante Peranda, Antonio Aliense, Pietro Malombra and Girolamo Pilotti) were so similar in the way they based their work closely on that of their great predecessors Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese that even connoisseurs had problems in telling their styles apart, something that remains challenging today. On the other hand, the problem of the survival of drawings is acute, and there are few securely identifiable sheets by most of these artists, with the exception of Palma Giovane.

Ridolfi had much to say about Venetian artists' talents and interests in *disegno*, and there is extensive documentary and visual evidence that testifies to the flourishing of Venetian drawing in this period, including the sociable and pedagogical practices seen in informal *accademie* or life classes (*scuole del nudo*), as well as to the appreciation and collecting of drawings in Venice. Nonetheless, the essential connoisseurial work of scrutinising and attributing drawings is difficult since scholarly foundations are constantly shifting with new attributions being made and new archival documents emerging. Therefore, few drawings can be linked to specific paintings; even where there are clear connections, the attributions and dates of the relevant paintings may often be contested.

Meijer provides an extensive and informative introductory essay with detailed references that dig deeply into the secondary literature. In looking across the period 1580–1650, he considers artists' education and training, often making comparisons between Venice and Florence, and noting practices of drawing from life or from sculptural models in workshop-based training. The foundation of the Accademia delle Arte del Disegno in Florence – of which Titian and Tintoretto were elected members in 1566 – was a phenomenon distinct from the many academies embracing literary and scientific interests that appeared in major centres, including Venice, where