

Paolo Coen, *Il recupero del Rinascimento. Arte, politica e mercato nei primi decenni di Roma capitale (1870-1911)*, Silvana Editoriale, 2020, pp. 591.

Paolo Coen's hefty *Il recupero del Rinascimento* (555 pages set in small print, seven chapters, and 401 archival transcripts) is the brainchild of a scholar who has devoted most of his career to the history of the art market in Rome in the 18th and 19th centuries. It aims to cast light on the nexus between art, politics, and the market in the four decades between 1870 (when Rome became the capital of the Kingdom of Italy) and 1911 (the fiftieth anniversary of the Kingdom). But, rather than a critically cogent art historical narrative, it reads more like a collection of six discrete accounts, bracketed within a chronological span and tenuously stitched together by references to a few events in common

and recurring names. The comprehensive introduction and conclusion, setting forth the theoretical frame, its positioning within the state of the art and its contribution to the field, reinforce the impression of a collection of inquiries pursued in an effort to organize a body of information amassed over several years of archival and scholarly research. Coen himself states that his book originates from the flow of export licenses issued in Rome for works of art between 1888-1904 that he discovered in 2005 in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato of Rome. His impressive archival work, carried out in Rome and in the United States, commands respect. The scrupulousness of his archival digging determines the enumerative structure of the book, its deadpan, encyclopedia-entry-like style, its overabundant unfurling of information. This, along with Coen's indulgence in digressions and preambles – often dictated by an enthusiasm for anecdote – betrays the need for what ought to have been more incisive editorial intervention in order to highlight the heuristic hypothesis and persuasively account both for the selection of texts and the omissions.

Chapter 1 covers the period from the mid-19th century (the papacy of Pius IX) to the proclamation of Rome as the national capital. It features two politically liberal but aesthetically antimodernist figures, Michelangelo Caetani and Augusto Castellani. Caetani, a patron of the arts, collector, and (from 1870) member of parliament, influenced the archeological-style jewelry and neo-medieval/neo-Renaissance furniture and decorative objects produced by Castellani's firm. Coen also provides information on the activity of Castellani as an international dealer of antiques and contemporary works, his marketing strategies, the archeological campaigns he sponsored and his local patrimony (he tried to prevent the sale of the Campana collection in 1861).

Chapter 2 discusses the efforts to reconcile art and industry in two case studies. The first concerns the construction of the Episcopalian church of Saint Paul's within the Walls, a neo-gothic edifice designed by Edmund Street and decorated with mosaics by Edward Burne-Jones the cartoons for which were shipped from England. This is followed

by a multifaceted profile of Baldassarre Odescalchi, antipapist prince, connoisseur, collector, politician, real-estate speculator, country gentleman, and self-styled Renaissance seigneur of the family castle in Bracciano. The chapter elucidates the breadth of Odescalchi's endeavors and his commitment to the technical improvement and marketing of decorative arts through the short-lived Museo Artistico Industriale, a museum-school whose mission was to collect medieval and Renaissance objects as didactic specimens serving to inspire modern workshops.

Chapters 3 and 5 narrate the planning and construction of the National Monument to Victor Emmanuel II, the founder of the Kingdom of Italy. Chapter 3 examines the symbolic logic inspiring the first competition for the memorial (1882) in the light of the turbulent political arena following the king's death in 1878, charged with regional and party factionalism and stirred by political maneuvers within the so-called Historical Left. Chapter 5 picks up the account from 1882 to explore how the prospective memorial became invested with imperialistic symbolism, as Italy sought to enter the ranks of the colonial powers by joining the Triple Alliance (1882). The chapter focuses on Camillo Boito's role both in the decision to situate the monument on the slope of the Capitoline Hill as a symbolic marker of the "Third Rome," and as a champion of a national style harking back to the Renaissance, and to Donato Bramante especially. It also tells us about Giuseppe Sacconi, the architect who won the second competition, and about the stylistic evolution of the building over the years, as the statues complementing Sacconi's original project gave way to works by more heterogeneous and stylistically contemporary sculptors from 1900 until the monument's inauguration in 1911.

Chapter 4 – based on the records (1888-1904) of the ministerial office that issued the licenses for the shipping of artworks (ancient or contemporary) or archeological items from Rome to Italian cities or abroad – is a monument to archival fetishism and self-indulgent philology. After an 11-page account of Alessandro Nelli's foundry, which in the 1870s and 1880s did bronze castings of works by Italian

and foreign sculptors, the remaining 46 pages mostly consist of an inventory of data extrapolated from the export licenses merely recast in discursive prose, supplemented by biographical digressions. The interminable list of artists, inspectors, contents of crates, estimates of prices, measures, typologies, carriers, addressees, cities or countries of destination, etc., may be of interest for quantitative or typological studies of art as commodities, with no, or negligible, aesthetic or cultural impact.

Chapter 6 serves up a professional biography of Giuseppe Sangiorgi, the leading art dealer and broker in Rome (in terms of the quantity, quality, and international reputation) for both antiques and contemporary art, and a report on his gallery, clientele, marketing strategies, etc., described in minute detail. Chapter 7 is a miscellany of everything concerning the lure of Rome for the history of American architecture and art collecting. The chapter starts out as a bookish summary of the cultural interactions between Rome and the United States (mostly through American expatriate artists and writers), the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia (among other things, a showcase for art shipped from Italy), to land on the works of the architect Charles Follen McKim, of the firm McKim, Mead & White that designed the Italianate mansions of the Gilded Age. McKim is also a stepping stone to a detailed account of the founding of the American Academy in Rome in 1897 and the construction of its building (1909-14). The chapter then goes on to a summary of American collectors harvesting in Rome, and to a profile of Henry Walters, Italophile, art collector and philanthropist (he founded the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore).

Coen's book is a treasure trove for historians of connoisseurship and provenance. Its countless facts, names, and dates enrich our knowledge of the microsocial networks of art production and marketing in Rome. The volume awaits prospective scholars and art historians as a reference book for philological validations. Overall, it reads like a factual historical catalog; it adds case studies to known trends in cultural history (the

medieval revival, the American Renaissance, etc.), and recapitulates previous scholarship (for instance, on the Monument to Victor Emmanuel). As to critical interpretation, let alone revision, Coen's book adds comparatively little that is new, and its intellectual contribution to the notion of Renaissance – supposedly its theoretical core – is harder to appreciate. Surprisingly, this very concept is taken as a given, and yet it remains elusive, marginal, if not confuted. Only a few episodes illuminate the stylistic and ideological link to the age of the Renaissance (e.g., Boito's and Sacconi's praise for Bramante, the aesthetics of McKim, Mead & White, the didactics of the American Academy), while others appear to contradict it (the neo-gothic church of Saint Paul's within the Walls, the diversity of contemporary painting, etc.), or just seem irrelevant (the export licenses). Moreover, while the book overflows with details and digressions, some omissions are conspicuous. In a book that discusses the construction of via Nazionale, Gaetano Koch's blatantly neo-Cinquecento Bank of Italy building cannot go unmentioned. And as for the myth of the Renaissance in the United States, the special focus on Henry Walters over fellow magnates such as J.P. Morgan, engaged in comparable endeavors (including the American Academy), makes the chapter unbalanced. The necessity of focusing on the axis between Rome and America, neglecting to treat other countries, remains unexplained.

In sum, Coen's overambitious work reads like a conflation of at least three book projects, for which the umbrella title, *The Revival of the Renaissance*, is a Procrustean bed. This is more a book about failures (the cultural-entrepreneurial projects of Castellani and Caetani and of Odescalchi) than about advanced visions. It illuminates a transitional period when anxiety about modernization, nostalgia, and cultural nationalism barred the transformation of Rome into a modern capital. Even the revival of the Renaissance shone only intermittently and often competed with eclecticism, medieval revival, even orientalism. And if the rhetoric of the Renaissance can be seen as a successful strategy at all, it was hardly a progressive one. It was a swan song in

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the face of modernity, and its marketing set a banquet table for voracious foreign collectors.

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