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AFTER THE PLAGUE: THE STATE OF RENAISSANCE ART HISTORY

By *Maria H. Loh*

August 3, 2021 2:43pm



Ambrogio Lorenzetti: *Allegories and Effects of Good and Bad Government*, 1337–39, fresco, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena.

COURTESY FONDAZIONE MUSEI SENESI, SIENA

When the executive director of the ACLU, Anthony D. Romero, delivered a cautionary TED Talk titled “This Is What Democracy Looks Like” in early 2017, his presentation was, in essence, an [art history](https://www.artnews.com/t/art-history/) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/art-history/>) lecture on Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s frescoes known as the *Allegories and Effects of Good and Bad Government*, painted between 1337 and 1339 for the town hall in the Republic of Siena. Projected on the screen behind Romero was an image of the effects of Bad Government, where we see

a devastated landscape haunted by spectral armies. A cityscape is marred by empty shops and crumbling infrastructure. Men and women are being violated and murdered, while the rich flee the city through the main gates. At court, the personification of Tyranny rules with Greed, Pride, Treason, Fraud, and Division, among other sinister creatures. By contrast, in the scenes of Good Government on the adjacent and opposite walls, the spectator finds an army of virtues, including Justice, Harmony, Hope, and Peace, that accompany the group of citizens approaching the towering personification of *Ben Comune* (the Common Good). The countryside is bursting with life, activity, and abundance, allowing citizens inside the city to thrive. Lorenzetti's cycle is a highlight of early or proto-**Renaissance art** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/renaissance-art/>). It was completed in the golden age of Siena's independent commune shortly before the Black Death (1347–53) disrupted and transformed the political and artistic development of the disparate Italian republics and princely territories.

Rising from the ashes of the pandemic, though, would be a generation of artists from Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378–1455) and Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) to Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), whom the nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt would canonize as the *uomo universale* or the multitalented “Renaissance man.” In the spring and summer of 2020, as the first wave of Covid-19 deaths began to ebb, this uplifting narrative of *rinascità* and *renaissance* (from the Italian and French terms, respectively, for “rebirth”) provided pundits with a reassuring model for visualizing the future. Rebirth, however, is rarely an easy affair. Alberti, for example, was the illegitimate son of an exiled Florentine banker. As a student, he suffered from extreme social awkwardness and emotional anxiety. Yet he and his contemporaries—artists born into the new century, such as Masaccio (1401–1428), Filippo Lippi (1406–1469), and Piero della Francesca (ca. 1412–1492)—would source, curate, and up-cycle the fragments and ruins of both the distant times of Antiquity and the more recent pre-pandemic past. Together, these bright young things

would construct the heroic Renaissance that is still taught in college survey courses.

While the triumphalist rhetoric of this version of the myth has been rightly challenged and critiqued by feminist scholars, historians of science, social historians, and medievalists, among others, the humanist program of the Renaissance—one based on a sense of dignity attained through education and achievement rather than through blood and privilege—is worth revisiting in light of the inequitable world in which we now dwell. This might seem to be a retrograde approach upon first glance, but the possibility of reconstructing a better future from the salvaged remains of the past is perhaps the greatest artistic, philosophical, and ethical lesson that the Renaissance has given us—a lesson in resilience that matters now more than ever before.

<https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/michelangelo.jpg>

Michelangelo Buonarroti: *Studies for the Libyan Sibyl*, ca. 1510–11, chalk on paper, 11 3/8 by 8 1/2 inches.

COURTESY METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

The field today is surprisingly robust. Granted, a common lament from colleagues teaching Renaissance art, architecture, and visual culture has been that students, seduced by the swagger, glamour, globalism, and lucre of contemporary art, have abandoned earlier fields; that the pre-modern has lost its ability to speak to them about their lives and ambitions. But the situation on the ground among students and the general public is not as dire as some fear. In 2018

“Michelangelo: Divine Draughtsman and Designer,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, was the second most visited exhibition in the world (with 702,516 visitors), just behind the same institution’s “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination” (with 1,659,647), which brought together the novel alliance of fashion, Catholicism, and old master paintings. *Salvator Mundi* (ca. 1500), attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, remains to this day the most expensive painting ever to be sold at auction. And while the College Art Association’s annual list of PhD dissertations in progress indicates the continued predominance of twentieth-century subjects, the sixteenth century remains competitive, with twenty-six dissertations in progress compared to the twenty listed for twenty-first-century topics. Finally, if three semesters of remote instruction during a global pandemic have demonstrated anything, it is that the young, when taught on a factually grounded yet empathetic basis, can become fully invested in the wisdom afforded to them by the past. Lorenzetti’s allegories of good and bad government struck a chord with my undergraduates on both sides of the political spectrum during the elections last autumn; they saw too that Giovanni Boccaccio’s preface to the *Decameron* (1353) divides the plague populace into the rich who decamped from the cities, the wealthy who hoarded goods and locked their doors, the defiant who refused to quarantine, and those who were left behind to fend for themselves. These object lessons helped put human folly into historical perspective and explain the appeal of sacred art in a world without virologists and vaccines. After years of unapologetic racial, gender, and class violence, today’s activist youths, many of them drawing lessons directly from previous eras, are rebuilding and uplifting the *Ben Comune*. Change is in the air.

Among specialists, I can report, there is a great deal of variety—and *varietas*, according to Alberti, is one of the most important qualities for engaging the public, with art as with other things. “Just as with food and music,” he wrote in *On Painting* (1435), “novel and extraordinary things delight us for various reasons but especially

because they are different from the old ones we are used to, so with everything the mind takes pleasure in variety and abundance.” There is no satisfactory way to survey such a rich field. I will highlight, therefore, a few recent publications that not only exemplify the “variety and abundance” in Renaissance art history but also speak to the urgent concerns of today.

Fabrizio Nevola’s *Street Life in Renaissance Italy* (<https://www.artnews.com/t/italy/>) (Yale, 2020) opens with a discussion of Lorenzetti’s *Good Government* and seeks to reframe Renaissance cities as “complex urban ecosystems” full of movement, noise, dirt, stench, and all forms of essential human activity. In opposition to the old and cold classicism of the “Ideal City” that privileged geometric harmony over social interaction (and that dominated Renaissance art history for decades), Nevola guides us instead through the mean streets of Renaissance Italy, examining “nodal locations” such as street corners, city squares, taverns, apothecaries, and bathhouses, where mixed populations assembled, conspired, partied, embraced, and often fought and killed each other, leading to increased surveillance, policing, and regulation. Like Niall Atkinson’s earlier *The Noisy Renaissance: Sound, Architecture, and Florentine Urban Life* (Penn State, 2016), Nevola’s depiction of the multisensory everyday environment of Renaissance cities should be of interest to both the Italophile tourist and the urban activist. When he points out that streets have long been a “privileged site for the performance of collective and individual acts and rituals of violence and justice,” one cannot help but think of how such historical lessons might provide perspective on contemporary political protest and urban renewal as the world emerges from isolation.

If social justice is a primary concern today, so too is ecology. Two books published in 2019 feature “green worlds” in their titles, a term that literary critic Northrop Frye used to describe the therapeutic

dreamscapes in Shakespeare's comedies. Jodi Cranston's *Green Worlds of Renaissance Venice* (Penn State) surveys paintings, prints, and sculptures in which these sites of psychic renewal are visualized. Her focus is on the pastoral genre, which appealed to world-weary urban dwellers seeking imaginative solace in idyllic landscapes where saints and pagan gods sometimes appear to instill the profane with the sacred. The immersive aesthetic experience of such artworks, Cranston argues, becomes in and of itself a restorative "green world." This thesis resonates in *Green Worlds in Early Modern Italy: Art and the Verdant Earth* (Amsterdam University Press), a volume of essays edited by Karen Hope Goodchild, April Oettinger, and Leopoldine Prosperetti. For brevity's sake, I will single out Rebekah Compton's excellent article on the use of green pigments in devotional paintings by Sandro Botticelli and Filippo Lippi as "sensorial medicine," enhancing fertility, improving eyesight, and even revitalizing the spirit. Green, it should be noted, represents youth, hope, and rebirth in Renaissance color symbolism, and both of these studies provide historically grounded instances in which art (both secular and religious) helped assuage the fears and anxieties of Renaissance men and women dwelling in a world of plague, famine, war, extreme weather, and everyday uncertainty.

<https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/botticelli.jpg>

Sandro Botticelli: *Primavera*, ca. 1481, tempera on panel, 80 by 123½ inches.

COURTESY UFFIZI GALLERY, FLORENCE

While, as Cranston and Compton suggest, art can serve as a form of therapy, it can also be a tentative site where newly discovered natural phenomena (things, places, and even peoples) are worked out and defined through artistic imagination before they can be articulated in concrete, objective terms. For scholars and students in the interrelated fields of history, art history, literature, and philosophy of the Renaissance, along with modern and contemporary art and climate history, Christopher P. Heuer's thought-provoking book *Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the Image* (Zone Books, 2019) is a must-read. Unlike traditional narratives of arrival and conquest in the Americas, the age of polar navigation, as Heuer demonstrates, coincided with the austere whitewashed aesthetics of Protestant iconoclasm. The objects of study here include illustrations of coastlines, navigational maps, idols carved out of driftwood, and other abstractions of the natural world. On the surface, *Into the White* is about the representation of the baffling emptiness that blinded unprepared European explorers. At a deeper level, it is a philosophical inquiry into confrontations with the unknown and the unfathomable.

Without haranguing its reader, it touches almost effortlessly on some of the most urgent concerns we have today about global warming, identity politics, and the political ramifications of conflating science and fiction.

Jennifer Nelson picks up similar threads about the limits of scientific ratiocination and the attendant license of artistic representation in her *Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein's Ambassadors* (Penn State, 2019). Much as Neil MacGregor was able to narrate a "History of the World in 100 Objects" on the BBC, Nelson successfully offers us here an astounding history of the Renaissance in one object. *Ambassadors* becomes at once a portrait of two French diplomats in their early twenties, a dizzying inventory of early modern objects, a philosophical meditation on contingency, a witness to Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn's ill-fated union (and the European crisis it set in motion), an off-kilter crucifixion scene, and a disquisition on the relationship between disharmony and freedom. Drawing from Micha Cárdenas's notion of transreal aesthetics in contemporary art and visual culture (a view that foregrounds simultaneous realities), Nelson demonstrates how Holbein's complex image reveals through its multiple constituent parts the plurality, inconsistency, and discrepancy of lived experience in the first half of the sixteenth century, offering what she refers to as a "microcosm of humanity's self-dissimilar world." Her book could stand as a veritable master class for scholars, students, and the general public in how to look at and think with images in moments of rapid historical change. The urgency of the Renaissance today lies in its ability to envision a brighter tomorrow built upon the ruins of yesterday. While Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* (ca. 1481) remains one of the most beloved paintings of the Renaissance, we do well to remember that, beyond a pretty picture of gods and goddesses, it is an image about violence, death, and regeneration. As Mercury clears out the *mal aria* (bad air) of winter, stirring the clouds above on the left, his actions call forth the icy blue wind god Zephyr who seizes the terrified nymph Chloris on the other side of the composition. Unable to escape her destruction

at the hands of this higher power, she is reborn as Flora, who, in turn, steps forth in her resplendent gown in springtime, casting the seeds that will revitalize a devastated world watched over by Venus, Cupid, and the Three Graces.

The verdant field of Renaissance art history, like the carpet of flowers that burst forth in the foreground of Botticelli's painting, is anything but dead. In the Age of Post-Colonialism, therefore, let those of us in this "green world" no longer speak of a crisis of the Renaissance but of a renaissance of the Renaissance. Moreover, as the imperative to decolonize art history is mounted, historians and students in the field find themselves in a unique position, rife with revelations and debate.¹ While broad histories of colonialism and slavery can be traced back to ancient civilizations in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, the specific Transatlantic reconfiguration of these practices between 1492 and 1619 places scholars and students of the Renaissance at the front lines. As the preeminent fact-checkers of this period, we are tasked with the great responsibility to ensure that in the urgent push to *decolonize art history*, the discipline does not unwittingly *dehistoricize colonialism*. Viewing the challenges of today against the larger picture of the thorny structures and legacies of the past makes for a better informed and thus more revolutionary future. In place of the old universalism predicated on the privileged authority of a Eurocentric canon, let us embrace a more volatile, ever-shifting, and always-evolving universalism inspired by the *varietas* inclusive of all that is found in this fragile, shared universe in which we must coexist.

<https://www.artnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/corie-mattie.jpg>

Corie Mattie in front of her piece *After the Plague Came the Renaissance*, 2020, acrylic paint and spray paint on plywood.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

The key concern, as Charlene Villaseñor Black and Mari-Tere Álvarez explain in the introduction to their edited volume *Renaissance Futurities: Science, Art, Invention* (University of California, 2020), lies in “how knowledge of the past can help us in the contemporary moment, by providing strategies to combat challenges to come.” This, too, is why an investment in the humanities, which finds its spirit in the intellectual dreams of the Renaissance, remains critical today. The term “contemporary,” after all, is largely occupied by the word “temporary,” and acute presentism causes its own malaise. To be with that which is in one’s own time is to risk not being able to distinguish the things that will survive beyond the moment from those that will become part of a more enduring history. The true “contemporary,” the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben argued in *What Is an Apparatus?* (2006, English trans. 2009), is the one who, “dividing and interpolating time, is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times. He is able to read history in unforeseen ways, to ‘cite it’ according to a necessity that does not arise in any way

from his will, but from an exigency to which he cannot not respond.” In the spring of 2020, on a boarded-up California storefront appropriately named Wasteland, the young street artist Corie Mattie (a self-described “Hope Dealer”) painted the outline of the arm of Michelangelo’s God from the Sistine Chapel ceiling, reaching across the void to touch and thus enliven the newly created Adam. Emblazoned across the top of the bright yellow mural, discussed by Hilarie M. Sheets in the *New York Times* on May 1, 2020, is the declaration: “After the Plague Came the Renaissance.” Indeed, in the After Times (as in Alberti’s day), the young who have studied closely the lessons of the past will be the salutary agents of change and rebirth.

¹ Two notable studies from recent years have sought to decenter the Renaissance by investigating connected histories: Cécile Fromont, *The Art of Conversion: Christian Visual Culture in the Kingdom of Kongo*, University of North Carolina Press, 2014, which examines the movement of ideas and peoples between cosmopolitan precolonial Kongo, Europe, and Latin America from the sixteenth century onward; and Lia Markey, *Imagining the Americas in Medici Florence*, Penn State University Press, 2016, which traces the Medici investment in the Americas from the early missives of Amerigo Vespucci to the “Florentine Codex,” a bilingual Spanish/Nahuatl manuscript about New Spain, to Ferdinando de’ Medici’s late sixteenth-century attempt to collect the world in the form of paintings and drawings, featherworks, and specimens of flora and fauna in his galleries in Florence.

This article appears under the title “After the Plague Came the Renaissance” in the July/August 2021 issue, pp. 62–65.