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Acciarino, Damiano, ed. Paradigms of Renaissance Grotesques

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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Acciarino, Damiano, ed.

Paradigms of Renaissance Grotesques.

Essays and Studies 43. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2019. Pp. 597 + 153 colour ill. ISBN 978-0-7727-2195-2 (paperback) \$49.95.

This volume contains fifteen essays by leading authorities and notable commentators on grotesque ornament. These hybrid forms composed of plant, animal, human, or abstract interlace were ubiquitous in the Renaissance and beyond, despite the controversy they aroused. *Paradigms of Renaissance Grotesques* provides salient views on the reception of the grotesque through the lens of interests including iconoclasm, the *paragone*, temporality, humour, and both sides of the argument on the imitation of nature in art versus “monstrous” inventions associated with pagan sacrificial rites in deep, dark grottoes.

Damiano Acciarino’s excellent introduction situates the grotesque within religious and artistic debates. His erudite discussion explores the reception of grotesques in relation to differing ideological views on the abuse of images versus their appropriate pedagogical uses, and provocative discourses on artistic license.

Seven essays investigate the implications of debates on grotesques from the ancient to modern periods, illustrated with examples. Following these, another seven essays present interpretations based on case studies in literature and the arts. These studies focus on architectural ornament, mural painting, botany, garden design, and poetry.

Most of the examples are in mid- to late sixteenth-century Italy, although as Frances S. Connelly argues, grotesques challenge the boundaries of art historical styles and periods. Two case studies focus on grotesque imagery in Mexico. Barnaby Nygren presents a fascinating iconographical interpretation of grotesque ornament and its relationship with Spanish colonial architecture in Mexico. Patrizia Granziera’s essay also considers the decoration of missionary churches in Mexico and offers an exposition of the subversive potentials in plants and animals that carried symbolic value derived from Indigenous ritual practices.

Many of the essays in this collection take as their starting point two primary factors: first, the re-discovery around 1479 of the Domus Aurea built by Nero after 64 CE; and second, the artistic debates of the Counter-Reformation, in particular the critique of grotesques by Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti written in 1582. Although the Council of Trent relaxed the iconoclastic impulses fueled by reformers like Andreas Karlstadt, grotesques were censured as representative of what is unacceptable in images. Paleotti and similarly inclined interlocutors expressed concerns about grotesques as offensive creations that are antipodal to the function of art in Christian pedagogy. Grotesques were associated with miscegenation, deformity, fragmentation, and the demonic.

At the same time, grotesques were greeted with enthusiasm by important patrons and celebrated artists who based their designs on the decorative program of the Domus Aurea with its grotesque ornaments and fictive architecture. Renaissance artists and their patrons could also gain inspiration from architectural descriptions by ancient and fifteenth-century authors like Suetonius and Alberti. Alessandra Zamperini forwards an understanding of grotesques as a reinterpretation of the antique grounded in the historical and cultural context of the Renaissance. The decoration of the Stufetta and Loggetta in the Vatican palace painted by the workshop of Raphael for Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena, for example, appropriates authoritative antique forms to express the concerns of an educated humanist elite.

While the classicizing decorative program and grotesques decorating the Stufetta and Loggetta are in private apartments, Kathryn Blair Moore and Dorothea Scholl consider the expressive capacities of grotesques in theological contexts. Scholl's investigation of philosophical and literary sources engages with the "sense and nonsense" of grotesques. As hybrid composites of animal, plant, and human forms in visual art or inventive fantasies in literature, grotesques could be characterized as paradoxical and contradictory. By eluding sense-making and frustrating attempts to easily "decode" it, this polysemous art gained favour with sixteenth-century humanists and religious thinkers. The abbot Lomazzo defended grotesques against Counter-Reformation criticism, likening grotesques' inaccessibility to the inaccessibility of God's expressive power in creation, while humanity's limited power produces only what is fragmentary and incomplete.

Philippe Morel agrees with Scholl that the approach to this innovative and complex art is humour. Morel considers the function of grotesque

ornament from the perspectives of the carnivalesque (sexuality, scatology), the macaronic (deviation or deformity of classical vocabularies of ornament), parody, folly, and sophisticated paradox that arouses laughter by astonishing and delighting the intellect. Paradox and the parodic inversion of norms are as central to grotesques as to laughter itself. This laughter, according to Morel, is an exchange between artists and their viewers.

The authors of this collection draw upon a broad lexicon of opposing viewpoints on the grotesque in texts and images. Claire Lapraik Guest considers the fruitful expansions within arguments on Renaissance grotesques in relation to theological and philosophical concerns about falsehood. Paleotti's denunciation of the grotesque as an abuse of painting is rooted in Plato's description of sophistic distortions. The chimeric forms that Plato called painters' "stag goats" are a jumping off point for Guest to explore illusionism, perspectival distortions, and the collapsing of boundaries in architectural and semantic spaces. These effects give the impression of forms that are in transition and transitory.

Maria Fabricius Hansen reflects on the sixteenth-century fascination with perception, illusionism, and temporality. She notes that grotesques are "an imagery of movement and transformation, as figurations of a zone of hybridity or ambivalence between nature or art" (207). Simon Godart refers to the grotesque as an art form "in progress" that is "always in-between" (219), and as parergon. Extending such observations, Frances S. Connelly contributes a lively discussion on the power of the grotesque that engages with the most contentious debates on images and ornament from the ancient to modern eras.

Other contributions in this volume consider grotesques in relation to the preoccupations that excited art collectors in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch; studies of physiognomy by Leonardo da Vinci; and caricatures produced by the Carracci brothers, Annibale and Agostino, and their cousin Ludovico. The varied perspectives on the grotesque employed by the authors of this volume provide important insights and intriguing dimensions that will reward the interests of specialists as well as curious initiates into some key debates on Renaissance art.

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