

Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion, and Collecting in England and France*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980. 234 pp., 255 illus., \$14.95 (paper)

Raymond L. Wilson

Volume 8, Number 2, 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075009ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075009ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Wilson, R. L. (1981). Review of [Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion, and Collecting in England and France*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980. 234 pp., 255 illus., \$14.95 (paper)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 8(2), 166–167.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1075009ar>

thread of the story at times; also, the accumulation of data tends to impede the making of interpretative assessments. The author, whose careful analysis is exemplary, was reluctant to commit himself to opinions not buttressed by overwhelming evidence. He mentions the doubts about the authorship of the Villa Le Volte near Siena, but does not take a stand on the attribution from a stylistic viewpoint. In the section on Classical Antiquity in Renaissance Dress I looked in vain for some unequivocal statement about the influence of classical writings upon Renaissance villa layouts. Coffin handles this question more convincingly in his own 1967 *Art Bulletin* article on the Villa Madama. Why in his book did he not reiterate the importance of the word 'dieta' written on Battista da Sangallo's Villa Madama plan (Uffizi 273 A), the same word that appears in Pliny's Latin letters describing his villas? A small detail such as this gives a fascinating, if somewhat inconclusive, insight into the 'iconography' of the architecture at this period. The excitement of such associations of ideas is missing. As for the symbolism of gardens or interior decoration, Coffin often discusses it in a surprisingly perfunctory way, as though he were quoting an inventory.

For the non-specialist reader, *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome* can serve as a stimulating visual introduction to the beauties of villadom. In general the illustrations are quite satisfactory though one could have wished, even in these times of restraint, that a few color plates might have been included to evoke the massed greenery of the *bosco*, or the glint of the sun on spray from a fountain. Among the photos, the specially commissioned ones of the Barco at Bagni di Tivoli are to be commended for clarity and for documenting a virtually unknown architect-designed farmhouse. But the captions describing these same photos are inconsistent and somewhat less informative than they might be. Why are the views of the barn near the Barco properly oriented to north and south whereas the illustrations of the Barco itself are not? This kind of editorial oversight applies also to several of the period maps included (e.g. figs. 116, 121, 134). Even though strongly convinced of the

importance and aesthetic worth of Renaissance maps, I found them difficult to use in conjunction with the text for two reasons. Firstly, the cardinal points were not referred to consistently, often leaving one more or less adrift. Secondly, entire maps were reproduced, whereas 'blow ups' of details could have helped to focus the reader's attention on pertinent areas. In several cases, a numbering system is laid over with an identifying key at the bottom. The numerals, however, being of the same color as the maps, tend to lose themselves in the ground. Without a magnifying glass and a copy of Frutaz's *Le Piante di Roma* close by, I might have gone astray in an intricate Renaissance maze, and become lost – pleurably so I might add – among some of the finest scenes art and nature have ever produced.

PIERRE DE LA RUFFINIÈRE DU PREY
Queen's University, Kingston

FRANCIS HASKELL *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion, and Collecting in England and France*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980. 234 pp., 255 illus., \$14.95 (paper).

With two important books in the subject already to his credit – *Patrons and Painters: A Study of the Relations Between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* and *Rediscoveries in Art* – and with another just out – *Taste and the Antique* (with Nicholas Penny) – Francis Haskell must surely be the uncrowned king of taste. The topic of taste and changing artistic values is an engrossing and revealing one, and one to which Professor Haskell brings a great deal of learning and insight, indeed almost more than we could wish.

In this, the second edition of *Rediscoveries in Art*, now issued in paperback by Cornell, he addresses what he calls the phenomenal reversal of artistic values with regard to the Old Masters which occurred in England and France between about 1790 and 1870. This reversal, the author declares, was 'the most vociferous which we know' (p. 5). He has restricted his examples to painting, but nevertheless approaches the problem from a variety of angles. Taste, he states, was shaped variously by 'the availa-

bility or otherwise to the collector or connoisseur of recognized masterpieces; the impact of contemporary art; the religious or political loyalties that may condition certain aesthetic standpoints; the effects of public and private collections, (and) the impression made by new techniques of reproduction and language in spreading fresh beliefs about art and artists' (p. 7).

Haskell begins by citing two examples, one French and one English, separated in time by about a quarter of a century, which serve to illustrate changing tastes with respect to painters. In 1841 Paul Delaroche, a contemporary of Delacroix and then the most popular French painter of his day, completed a semicircular fresco on the apse wall of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. In it were shown all of whom were thought to be the greatest artists of the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Shown standing alongside Rembrandt, for instance, was Van der Helst, and next to Leonardo was shown Andrea Orcagna. But of all of the painters of this time, the greatest prominence was given to the delicate and reportedly sweet-tempered Fra Angelico.

In George Gilbert Scott's memorial to Albert, the Prince Consort, begun in 1864, a portion of the base of the monument was set aside to honour in a similar way the greatest painters of all time. Omitted on this occasion, however, were Van Dyck, Perugino, Andrea del Sarto, and all of the Dutch painters save Rembrandt. How to account for this virtual revolution in taste, epitomized by these two examples, is the subject of the remainder of the book.

As any visitor to a great museum knows, what is to be seen depends partly on what is available and partly on what is deemed worth showing by the art world – by critics, connoisseurs, historians, and collectors. One of the first great shifts in taste during the period in question took place, says Haskell, at the outset of the French Revolution when the Duke of Orleans put his fabulous collection of Old French and Italian Masters up for sale. Much of his collection was shown in London where nothing like it had been seen for over a century. The result was the beginning of a decided preference for Old Italian



Sir George Gilbert Scott, Albert Memorial, London, 1863-72. From Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1963, p. 90.

Masters among English collectors, especially for Titian and for Giovanni Bellini. Enthusiasm for the Italian masters was further fired by the high-class plunder which had begun flowing into Paris from Italy. Following in the wake of Napoleon's armies, agents for the great central museum in Paris carefully made their selections and packed them off. The result was a 'rediscovery' of early Italian art among Frenchmen.

Pursuing the phenomenon of changing tastes from another angle, Haskell points out that in England following the Revolutionary Wars there was a revival of interest in the Italian painters of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, especially for Giotto and Cimabue. Yet in the space of a few years a 180° turnabout took place with Giotto, Cimabue, and their followers now berated as 'primitives,' ignorant of even the fundamentals of drawing.

This change in attitude was due, Haskell believes, in part to the increasing numbers of forgeries of Old Masters. Because of this, collectors were being warned away from adding the painters of this age to their holdings. Also contributing to this change in attitude was the feeling that modern art, specifically the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, needed to be protected and insulated from the degrading and

retardataire tendencies of a Giotto or a Cimabue. It was, as Haskell notes, 'a desperate attempt, made in the interests of modern art, to preserve traditional and absolute standards of "beauty" from barbarian contamination' (p. 102).

Besides the influence of leading art dealers, critics and historians, another important factor in the shaping of tastes was the art exhibition. One of the largest and most influential of these was held in Manchester in 1857. Called the Art Treasures Exhibition, Old Masters from every period and school were shown. But because so many of the established collectors had refused to lend their works to this 'provincial' exhibition, many heretofore 'minor' masters were shown like Hans Memling and Andrea Mantegna. Most popular of all, it was generally agreed, was Annibale Caracci's *Three Maries*.

Implicit in this study, which incidentally throws much new light on a period which saw the growth of an art industry parallel with the industrial revolution, is the conclusion that artistic values are relative to an age or point of view. This conclusion holds that artistic values are the product of a web of social, economic and cultural factors. Moreover, the implication is clear that our own artistic and art-historical values are similarly determined and subject to similar changes.

The opposite point of view – that there are artistic values or measures of quality as timeless and as enduring as art itself – is not so often or so ably represented in our times. Kenneth Clark, nevertheless, has for years acted the loyal opposition. In his recent book, *What is a Masterpiece?*, he argues for the existence and utility of such canons of quality as originality, the ability to synthesize the spirit of a time, and the insight that allows one to make one's own personal experiences universal. It must be conceded, though, that Lord Clark's vision is loftier and more abstract than that of the average collector or museum curator whose motives are more usually conditioned by prevailing trends and fashions.

In fact, *Rediscoveries in Art* might have been subtitled: *The Taste of Collectors and Curators in England and France with Respect to the Old Masters*. Conceived of in this way, the topic contributes to our in-

creased understanding of that era which saw, for instance, the debate over the purchase of the Elgin marbles for the British Museum, the organization of England's National Gallery, and the rapid growth of the Louvre as a treasure house of European culture. In a sense, *Rediscoveries* has more to do with how we think about the history of art and it should cause more historians to think harder about the central facts of art history, namely the art itself.

RAYMOND L. WILSON
California State College at Stanislaus

IRVING LAVIN and JOHN PLUMMER, ed. *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Paintings in Honor of Millard Meiss*. New York, New York University Press, 1977. Volume 1: text, 463 + xx pp.; Volume 2: plates, 164 pp., \$75.

WENDY STEDMAN SHEARD and JOHN T. PAOLETTI, ed. *Collaboration in Italian Renaissance Art*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1978. 268 + xxi pp., illus. \$20.

The essays under review here honour two art historians, Millard Meiss and Charles Seymour, Jr., who have made highly significant contributions to the development of art history in the United States – and thus, by extension, in Canada – and who represent two of the most important establishment training grounds for scholars in the discipline: Princeton and Yale. These two universities were among the first in North America to make art history a respected component of the undergraduate curriculum, and in the 1930s – as foreign scholars began coming to America – were developing graduate departments equipped with superb libraries and excellent associated art collections. It is only very recently, in fact, that the character given to art history in North America by that small group of predominantly Eastern schools, with Princeton and Yale in the forefront, has begun to be seriously questioned. Taken as a whole, the essays may be said to function as a tribute to Establishment art history as practiced in the New World.

The work of both scholars focused on the Italian Renaissance in its early phases, an area that has traditionally attracted many of the