



## Quiviger, François. The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art

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the texts we want students to read and underpins them with explanatory material that is adequate to the circumstance.

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**Quiviger, François.**

*The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art.*

London: Reaktion Books, 2010. Distributed by University of Chicago Press. Pp. 206. ISBN 978-1-86189-657-5 (hardcover) \$27.

Synesthesia, a neurological condition in which two or more senses are connected — leading to hearing in colour or tasting shapes or countless other anomalies of sensation — first entered the medical literature in the early nineteenth century and then virtually disappeared from about 1930 until the 1990s. It has since enjoyed a sustained renaissance, particularly in research related to neuroplasticities, which ground sensory and aesthetic perceptions in neurological responses. The early nineteenth century also gave birth to Stendhal syndrome, a psychosomatic illness brought on by a surfeit of beautiful art, usually, at least at the time, in Florence. The fact that both of these conditions of heightened and overwhelming aesthetic sensory overload became matters of medical concern in the early nineteenth century, before the radical shift to modernisms that vanquished visual “beauty” in favour of expressive “isms,” might well have been a result of sustained sensory excitement that had gripped art since the Renaissance.

Basing his ideas on both modern neurological discoveries (although these are mentioned only as asides and are never intrusive in the text), Quiviger is able to state unequivocally that “representations of sensory experience do stimulate the same region of the brain reacting when the real sensation occurs” (p. 167). In Quiviger’s analysis, Renaissance art — particularly Renaissance paintings and sculptures — deliberately triggered viewers to imagine sensations. The key examples he returns to, with great effect, are nativity scenes (of Christ, the Baptist, the Virgin Mary) in which the foreground is often dominated by the figure of a nurse or midwife who tests the warm temperature of the soapy bathwater, placed directly in our line of vision, while holding the “damp animate body of

the newborn child” (p. 167). The image signals a flood of responsive sensations in the viewer; of touch, smell, warmth, and damp. Audiences “feel” the warmth and humanity of that tiny, sacred figure, just as we “hear” the notes struck by figures who tune instruments in concert scenes, and angels who tune lutes in *sacra conversazione* scenes — we “feel” so that we might sense the humanity of Christ, we “hear” so that we might tune in to the silent message of the holy conversation. In feeling and hearing, as well as in our olfactory responses to signs of “smell” (flowers, fruits and other foods — which also awake our sensations of taste), we more fully enter the world of the image, which we gauge not only visually but through all of our connected sensations. The importance of this, for Quiviger, is that these sensational responses work as effectively as the visual construct of linear perspective to construct and imagine space in the mind of the viewer: “representing sound forces the mind to imagine the space without which sound cannot exist” (p. 151).

The importance of the book is almost lost in its deceptive and stark simplicity; Quiviger’s aim is to explore “the place and function of non-visual sensations in the imagination and art of the Italian Renaissance” (p. 7). To do this he describes the importance of sensation in medieval religion; the functioning and faculty of memory, imagination, and visualization in Renaissance thought; how the multi-sensory imagination forged through these practices influenced artistic practice and the audience reception of visual objects; the relationships between iconography and the sensory imagination found in emblem art; and, finally, the author reads an astonishing variety of Renaissance works to forge an iconography of “non-visual sensory data in Renaissance art” (10). The result, like Stendhal syndrome, is slightly overwhelming but there is much pleasure to be derived from it. One wishes only for a slightly more ample bibliography, particularly with reference to the recent neurological research into aesthetic reception.

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