Giorgio Vasari and the Birth of the Museum ed. by Maia Wellington Gahtan (review)

Rebecca Lush

Parergon, Volume 32, Number 1, 2015, pp. 236-238 (Review)

Published by Australian and New Zealand Association of Medieval and Early Modern Studies (Inc.)

DOI: 10.1353/pgn.2015.0004

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pgn/summary/v032/32.1.lush.html
deception of another. The final section, ‘Sinning, Sex and Saintliness’, deals with moral issues and reveals a society’s anxieties about human behaviour and Christian salvation.

Overall, this is a very welcome book and a valuable source to students who are not proficient in Old French but who have a scholarly interest in the genre. I agree with Bloch that the translations are erudite and capture much of the vitality that the fabliaux embody; I do, however, have a few comments to make regarding the target audience. Bloch states that this book was written for the general reader, yet Dubin states that he has supplied explanatory notes for the general reader and to ‘assist students with difficult … passages in the Old French’ (p. xxxi). To my mind, I question the usefulness of the original text for a general readership or the provision of a list of extant fabliaux manuscripts. Conversely, those items are certainly useful for an academic audience; but an academic audience also requires so much more: more extensive notes on translation; a more comprehensive introduction to each section, arguably each tale; and a more recent bibliography (there are only three texts cited that have been published this century yet there is a wealth of contemporary critical studies available).

I appreciate that translating so many texts and to a very high standard is time consuming; however, I wonder if this book would have benefitted from a shared authorship, such as the DuVal and Eichmann combination of translator and commentator, as well as being multi-volumed. Notwithstanding, this is a very welcome text and will serve as an invaluable reference for many scholars embarking on a study of the fabliaux, and will be of great interest to the general reader.

KATHRYN L. SMITHIES, The University of Melbourne


According to editor, Maia Wellington Gahtan, this collection of cross-disciplinary essays provides the first comprehensive account of Giorgio Vasari, the man argued to have significantly shaped the modern museum. In Gahtan’s Introduction, Vasari is described as a ‘writer, collective, procession and festival impresario, exhibitor and architect of the Medici court’ (p. 11). Vasari wrote many influential texts throughout his career including Vite, a collection of captioned paintings.

In order to unpack Vasari’s significance, the collection is divided into four relatively equal parts. Part I, ‘Vasari’s Collections’, explores the remnants of Vasari’s life that all form part of his overall remaining collection. The section begins with an overview of how the homes of Vasari can be viewed as museums in themselves and is followed by two chapters on his other known collections.
Vasari’s *Libro de’ disegni*, his collection of Old Master drawings, was ‘the most noted and documented collection of graphic art as well as the most varied and organic until beyond the sixteenth century’ (p. 41). The final chapter in this section focuses on the epitaphs collected by Vasari in his biographies. All three chapters successfully argue that the nature of Vasari’s collecting habits, and his conservation and display of artwork altered throughout his life. The three authors also argue that these collections set precedents for future modern collecting endeavours, creating criteria that could be applied to any collection.

Part II, ‘Illustrium Imagines’, comprises three chapters that all explore the importance of the portrait, delving into the religious, social, and cultural contexts behind Vasari’s acquisitions. Artist Paolo Giovio is at the centre of the first chapter and appears in the second as an inspiration to Vasari, imagining the first museums as centres of preservation and notoriety. This context is very important in this work establishing why images and portraits became so valuable during Vasari’s time. Rick Scorza’s contribution discusses the lengths Vasari went to in order to gain the most authentic image of the pope. Authenticity meant memory preservation: Vasari himself wrote that his text on the images would be ‘brief… because their portraits… will better illustrate the appearance of these men than any description could ever do’ (p. 104). What this section adds to the book is that it really contextualises the importance of the portrait and how a rising respect for portrait painters allowed the development of museums and culminated with Vasari’s *Vite* as a tool of memory preservation.

Logically, the next section of the book, Part III, ‘Vasari’s Exhibitions’, delves further into the art exhibitions themselves. Much attention is given to Vasari’s work for the Medici family. It is through the examples given here that a sense of his contribution to modern museums really begins to form. The creation of inventory lists, the planning of display areas, and the creation of themes and stories related to the artwork all link Vasari to modern day practices. This was especially apparent with the Palazzo Vecchio Ragionamenti, which drew visitors into a story told by the artwork. What is most enjoyable about this section is its reference to historiography and the debates about Vasari in other works. Claudia Conforti’s chapter on the Uffizi draws on these debates adding a new layer of depth to the article. By communicating the information in this way, it becomes clear how Vasari’s legacy has continued to perplex historians, architects, and others.

Finally, Part IV, ‘Vasari’s Museological Concepts and Their Afterlife’, brings Vasari’s legacy to life, through articles on the establishment of art schools and how his museum practices continued to influence others even after his death.
Overall, Gahtan has edited this work with much care and precision. Readers are led through logical, interesting, and strongly source-focused articles written by Vasari specialists. The constant use of Vasari’s *Vite* and an individual adherence to the main themes of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting tie this collection together and provide well-articulated and researched chapters. This work is a clear example of how cross-disciplinary studies can truly be beneficial in exploring the source material available to a greater extent through different lenses.

Rebecca Lush, The University of Queensland


With *Partners in Spirit*, the latest volume in the ‘Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts’ series, the editors, Fiona J. Griffiths and Julie Hotchin, have provided an important study for the relationship between men and women in medieval religious life. The twelve contributions that make up the volume deal with a diverse range of gender issues in Germany between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries, including the *cura monialium*, negotiation about spiritual and institutional authority, and networks of spiritual friendship between men and women. Many of the chapters also address largely understudied or under-examined historical phenomena, such as double monasteries of men and women, the institutions peculiar to medieval Germany known as the Frauenstifte, and lay and female religious networks attached to the monastic, canonical, and mendicant orders.

As Griffiths and Hotchin explain in their Introduction, the collection places particular emphasis on instances of religious and spiritual co-operation between men and women. The purpose in doing so is to broaden the current historiography in the field of medieval men and women’s religiositas and disperse myths about male reluctance to engage in the spiritual oversight of women during the Middle Ages. The chapters which the editors have collected meet this challenge admirably. Although there is no denying that in the late medieval period male-dominated religious orders were increasingly concerned about their responsibilities towards women, each chapter relativises this concern by paying attention to what is representative, rather than exceptional, about their particular case studies.

Many of the studies collected in this volume provide a unique and detailed investigation of literature largely unknown in English language scholarship. One important example is the final essay of the volume by Sabine Klapp which examines the role played by male canons in the Frauenstift attached