

François Quiviger. *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art*.

London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2010. 206 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$27. ISBN: 978-1-86189-657-5.

This small-format but richly illustrated book constructs the groundwork for further study of the representation of sensation in Italian Renaissance art. Responding to recent work in anthropology as well as cultural history, the author explores the relationship between visual perception, imagination, and bodily sensation in the historical experience of images. In the first part of the book, the author outlines the Aristotelian model of cognition, which relied on the formation of multi-sensory images in the mind, and demonstrates how it pervaded a variety of Renaissance image-based practices that, in turn, culminated in an intense exploration of the body's potential to define the experience of pictorial space.

Quiviger is able to show how Renaissance art consistently staged nonvisual sensation as a necessary component of apprehending an increasingly naturalistic pictorial world. In a religious culture that placed increasing emphasis on internalizing graphically violent images of bodily suffering, artists were attentive to the image's role in structuring and provoking a viewer's sensations. Artists, therefore, received extensive training in representing the human form as a sensitive and animate entity but, as the author readily admits, they consistently downplayed the violence enacted upon Christ and the saints, provoking counterreformation criticism of the Renaissance's beautiful bloodless bodies. The author suggests that the represented body had become such a sensitive, corporeal entity that, ironically, lacerating it with wounds would have been a source of intense ocular discomfort, an attack on the very nature of painting itself. What we are left with are images that do not function as effective vehicles of vivid religious sensory experience but actually mitigate the intensity of such "medieval" sensorial images by displacing them to the margins of representation and reanimating them as classical ornament — strange hybrids that blow, bite, pull, and pinch.

The book's second part deals with each of the five senses, showing how the visual conventions of sensory perception served as mediators between viewer and painting, guiding experience rather than shocking it. At the threshold of pictorial space scattered flowers disperse the pleasant scents of Virgin and Venus, of both chastity and sex. The holy humanity of Christ's body is emphasized not by wounds but by the tenderness with which it is touched. Sound, on the other hand, represented as the Psalmist David or attendant angels absorbed in the act of tuning their instruments, linked the concentration of musical preparation with the viewer's mental and moral preparation. Taste, the lowliest of the senses, is surrounded by the most complex order of multi-sensory images. Paintings as autonomous aesthetic entities here cede their primacy to functional objects that create the variety and abundance so crucial to the Renaissance courtly banquet. Decorated ewers and basins competed with glittering silverware, edible sculptural concoctions, digestive music, and perfumed napkins that inundated the senses.

For art historians, our understanding of how the visual semantics of artworks actively stimulated sensation is greatly enriched by Quiviger's analyses. Those interested in the historical phenomenology of perception, meanwhile, have been furnished with a very insightful study of how works of art enact, embed, and redirect the available means by which the senses participated in ritual communicative acts. However, the work would have benefited a great deal by more consistently pursuing the larger context within which images functioned, a dynamic that drives the final chapter on banquets. The chapter on sound is the only one structured primarily around the question of what these pictorial sensory representations want the viewer to do, what mental processes they provoke, and what they offer in return.

The author's consistently concise style, however, does not always make his more profound insights obvious. The sense of sight, which also allows us to anticipate possible textures, smells, and sounds, is seriously downgraded in the apprehension Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, which represents the negation of optical space construction in favor of twisting, embracing, blasting, biting, and wrenching bodies that dramatize space as the creation of "sounds, gazes, and fumes" and "express aerial space without recourse to perspective" (104). However, such a critical assertion requires a more sustained analysis of how this mechanism works. With only a few suggestive sentences it is left to the reader to unravel the constituent parts of sensorial space. Nevertheless, Quiviger's study breathes life and meaning into the margins of Renaissance art, integrating what often seem discordant elements into the sensorial landscape.

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