

An Art Lover's Guide to Florence. Judith Anne Testa.

DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012. viii + 270 pp. \$22.50.

The ivory tower has long looked down on such popular genres as textbooks, anthologies, and guidebooks — i.e., historical writing that is not aimed at a specialized audience, in abstract jargon, and copiously footnoted. When a professor, dean, or editor declares a publication “accessible,” it is damning with faintest praise. Judith Testa’s book issues an implicit rebuke to such attitudes. Informed, up-to-date, and a good read, it delivers just what it promises: an engaging and concise handbook to help the educated general public savor the artistic smorgasbord of Florence.

The appeal of such writing dates back at least to Jacob Burckhardt. Professionals may revere him for his intellectual classic *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, but as Paula Findlen has observed, the book that made him a household word was his mass-market *Cicerone*, subtitled *A Guide to the Enjoyment of Works of Art in Italy*. This phrase, echoed in Testa’s title, speaks to what lay readers seek from professionals: some signposts along the road of their cultural pilgrimage into foreign territory, in a language they understand.

Sometimes we need reminding that the professor’s job description is both the production and transmission of knowledge. These tasks have different audiences and goals: we produce for our professional peers; we transmit to larger but less specialized audiences, in classrooms, museums, and tour buses. The challenge of public transmission is to be lively and informative at an introductory level while staying true to facts and avoiding misleading generalizations; that is, to walk a fine line between too much soap opera and too much *Kunstgeschichte*. Burckhardt’s title *Cicerone* was an eighteenth-century term for one who conducts visitors through cultural sites and explains their features — preferably, as its derivation from the orator Cicero implies, with both erudition and eloquence.

This book is a fine example of a *cicerone*, fulfilling both of the format’s duties. First, it conducts travelers (both physical and armchair) via an introduction providing historical background, followed by seven-to-ten-page units on individual monuments or ensembles. It proceeds building by building, rather than chronologically; organized by space, not time, it serves as an itinerary, not a chronicle. Second, it explains lucidly and perceptively whatever is important, shifting smoothly between motivations of individual patrons or artists and broader sociocultural values, such as the virtue of magnificence or the belief that good works garner heavenly credits. This is not art appreciation: while the book offers some perceptive formal analyses, there is little on artistic vocabulary or stylistic categories. The title words “art lover” suggest it is aimed at readers who already

know the basics, and seek something further. Accordingly, Testa's often-colorful prose concentrates on patronage, politics, and the public role of artworks, paying more attention to context than to text.

To her credit, that attention extends to topics treated more gingerly in scholarly discourse. Her analysis of Donatello's *David*, for example, foregrounds the homoerotic undertones of this pioneering male nude, which, as she notes, are "often ignored and on occasion vehemently denied" (228). Utilizing research on Florentine homosexuality (notorious across Europe) and its cultural expression, she productively lays out the statue's full personal, philosophical, and aesthetic meanings for artist, patron, and society.

When pages are so enjoyable, it's a shame there aren't more of them. One limitation on the book's scope is determined by publishing economics and package tours: the need to choose favorites. Masterworks that didn't make the cut include Santa Croce and Santo Spirito, while chapters on San Lorenzo and Santa Maria Novella detail only one chapel of these large complexes. The chronological limits Testa sets are more self-imposed: her introduction emphasizes the republican Medici, ending with the principate under Cosimo I. Enjoyably opinionated, she makes no secret of her antipathy toward the culture of the grand duchy: she includes almost no art produced beyond the mid-1500s, and snarkily but acutely dismisses Ferdinando I's chapel at San Lorenzo (1602ff.) as "a dingy, overdecorated monument to the excesses of subsequent generations of Medici" (248).

One solution to this temporal cutoff would be a companion volume on Florentine art and society after 1575. Professor Testa is self-declaredly not the one to write it, but she has covered her chosen ground admirably, and set her hypothetical successor a high standard for accuracy, thoughtfulness, and — yes — accessibility.

JAMES M. SASLOW, *CUNY, Queens College and The Graduate Center*