

Timothy McCall, Sean E. Roberts, and Giancarlo Fiorenza, eds. *Visual Cultures of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe*.

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Early modern Europe saw a veritable boom of secrecy. Secrets permeated almost every domain of life: the idea of *arcana imperii* dominated the political culture, alchemy enjoyed unprecedented popularity in the knowledge economy, and secret societies emerged all over Europe. This collection of articles joins the recent body of literature interested in the social function rather than the content of secrecy. Instead of telling secrets, it sets out to “elucidate secrecy” and probe the “rhetorics” of concealment and disclosure (7). As the editors note, the volume emerged from a “shared interest in examining how early modern image makers

designated material as secret and how these visual secrets fashioned audiences and responses" (13).

Along these lines, Patricia Simons investigates the visual dynamics of veiling and unveiling in early modern culture. It was not unusual at the time to cover a wide range of art objects with cloth or by panel. Such technologies of veiling were particularly common in the case of artwork depicting erotic scenes, but they were not restricted to this purpose. As Simons argues, the evidence "points to a more nuanced and multivalent, less personalized, privatized, or lewd meaning and function for such covers" (39). Even where the image had an unmistakably erotic aspect — such as in Raphael's portrait of a seminude woman known as *La Fornarina* — the shutters of the painting were "just one stage in a sequential viewing experience" (42). Timothy McCall, in an article addressing the role of secrecy in the production of signiorial space, takes for his subject another technology of concealment: the enigmatic *coretto* of Torrechiara, an eleven-foot-tall wooden edifice constructed in the mid-fifteenth century for placement in the church of Torrechiara castle near Parma. The elaborate artistic execution of the *coretto* — today on display at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan — has long intrigued art historians, while also raising speculation as to whether its patron, Count Pier Maria Rossi, used it for sinister or lascivious purposes. McCall rejects such interpretations, arguing instead that the *coretto* constituted not only a space for private withdrawal, but also a site of "public or conspicuously visible exercise of status, sovereignty, and piety" (98). This is a convincing interpretation, although it could have been further bolstered by a discussion of similar private oratories in Northern Europe, where some rulers even set up temporary prayer tents in churches (such privileged spaces for devotion and privacy are depicted, for instance, in the Hours of Mary of Burgundy, produced only a few years after the *coretto*).

A more comparative approach could also have benefited Allie Terry-Fritsch's study of the Florentine *tamburi*, denunciation boxes erected by the authorities in the heart of the city. While Terry-Fritsch vividly illuminates the use (and abuse) of these boxes in the Florentine context, she only touches on the Venetian *Bocche di Leone*, which fulfilled a similar purpose but were operated in a very different way. Venice comes into the limelight in William Eamon's contribution dealing with the circulation and representation of secrets in early modern popular culture. Using the colorful case of Venetian snake handlers (*sanpaolari*) and their trade in antidotes as a starting point, Eamon asks how the day-to-day business of secrecy operated. He argues that the advent of printing and an increasing "commercialization of culture" — as manifested in the theatrical representations that were part and parcel of the mountebank's trade — helped secrecy mavens such as the *sanpaolari* claim a share in what had previously been the academic "monopoly over the 'secrets of nature'" (59, 72).

Maria Ruvoldt's article revisits the well-known friendship between Michelangelo and the young Roman nobleman Tommaso de' Cavalieri. Some scholars have described this relation in terms of Neoplatonic ideas of friendship, while others have understood it as a thinly disguised homoerotic relationship. At any rate, Michelangelo's infatuation with Cavalieri was, as Ruvoldt demonstrates, an "open

secret” among the artist’s friends and patrons. The exquisite and allusive drawings that Florence-based Michelangelo created for his friend had to be sent through intermediaries to Rome, where they soon attracted considerable attention. Ruvoldt’s article provides insight on the artistic strategies Michelangelo developed to walk the fine line between private and public communication. Other contributions deal with the representation of Hebrew script and hieroglyphs in the devotional paintings of the sixteenth-century artist Ludovico Mazzolino (Giancarlo Fiorenza), the secret spaces of Cardinal Bibbiena in the early sixteenth-century Vatican Palace (Henry Dietrich Fernández), the technical secrets of early engraving and related industrial espionage (Sean Roberts), and the visual representations of the body’s secrets in early modern anatomical flap sheets (Lyle Massey).

As the editors rightly point out, the intersection of secrecy and visual culture has received relatively little attention thus far. The ambitious introduction provides a framework for such inquiry, though at times it promises more than the volume fulfills. Also, while the title of the volume suggests a survey of the entire period on a pan-European scale, the focus of the contributions lies primarily on Italy and the Renaissance. As a result, there is little discussion of how the visual “rhetorics” of secrecy and disclosure were employed in the continuous confessional struggles of the period (Protestant broadsheets come to mind as a prime example). It might also have been fruitful to include a chapter dealing with the boom of emblems, perhaps the most striking example of visual arcanization in early modern visual culture. Overall, however, the volume offers a useful and stimulating exploration of a still underresearched subject.

DANIEL JÜTTE
Harvard University