

Paula Nuttall. *From Flanders to Florence: The Impact of Netherlandish Painting, 1400–1500*.

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There has long been a need for a book tracing the various circuits of artistic exchange between the Netherlands and Italy in the Quattrocento. Focusing on Florence as the main point of arrival, Paula Nuttall has risen to the challenge. As copious in its details as the painted marvels illustrated within, *From Flanders to Florence* presents a panoramic picture, charting new paths that extend from the transalpine excursions of Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky, Millard Meiss, E. H. Gombrich, and, in nearer times, Lorne Campbell, Francis Ames-Lewis, and Michael Rohlmann. While some of the material should already be familiar to specialists, Nuttall provides the most comprehensive narrative to date. Despite the relative scarcity of documentary evidence, Nuttall offers up a treasury of information, reinforcing the extant sources with her own visual and technical observations.

The book is divided into four main sections, the first tracing the earliest stirrings of Netherlandish *ars nova* in Florentine art between 1420 and 1450. The critical vocabulary of early Italian writers responding to incoming paintings from the Low Countries, ranging from Ciriaco d'Ancona to Pietro Summonte, was limited but not impoverished. A survey of their comments consistently bears witness to an insatiable attraction to these foreign objects' ultra-refined oil technique, descriptive naturalism, chromatic intonations, and sensory immediacy. At once exotic and insistently real, a "deft blend of inner spirituality and outer truth" (Warburg), the visions of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden appealed greatly in their poignant *devoto* quality to the intensely pietistic Florentine imagination.

The reader is next initiated into the Florentine mercantile colony inhabiting the commercial hub of Bruges, its parish of St. James a temporary but comfortable home to prosperous Italian financiers with established reputations for enlightened art patronage. The colony's fortunes began to sour around 1473 with the downfall of the Medici banker Tommaso Portinari, undone by hubris and circumstance. Seven years later, the Medici banking branch was bankrupt. By this point, however, the channels of supply had been opened, as expatriate purveyors of art began to transport portraits and altarpieces back to Italian soil as coveted objects of display. In contrast, the Northerners who settled in Florence around this time were mostly lower-class immigrants by trade. The exceptions in these southern pilgrimages occurred in the local cloth industry, with tapestry weavers Livino di Gilio of Bruges and Coppino di Giovanni of Malines among the most sought-after arrivals.

Shifting exclusively to Florence, Nuttall proceeds to address themes of ownership and display. Unsurprisingly, the Medici and their allies provide the richest case studies. Among the freshest of Nuttall's reflections here relate to the special meanings, aesthetic and commercial, assigned to the relative novelty of paintings on cloth and tapestries, the latter well-documented examples closely associated

with the luxury of Burgundian court culture. Nuttall's discussion of the more modest inventories of the Magistrato dei Pupilli, the Florentine magistrates of orphaned wards, proves especially insightful.

In her final section, Nuttall investigates the actual mechanics of artistic translation in the context of specific Florentine paintings that best embodied the new brand of verisimilitude *alla fiamminga*. Particularly commendable is the author's sustained interest in the medium-specific techniques and working practices of artists, encouraging the reader to work back from the finished paintings to the realities of their physical manufacture. Passages on *tempera grassa* and the Pollaiuolo brothers' bold manipulations of oil paint are especially memorable in their attentiveness.

If there are misgivings, they are minor and largely relate to occasional over-determined or over-precise interpretations of formal similarities with respect to generalized morphology that may be accounted for by personal invention rather than direct imitation. The issue of influence is a vexed one, not least due to problems of access. Proposed borrowings by ingenious problem-solvers like Leonardo, even in his early years, also often tend to extend beyond what the visual evidence allows. Nowhere is this more problematic than in the cited quotations of figural and landscape motifs in van Eyck's *Stigmatization of St. Francis* in Turin. Conversely, Nuttall stops short of addressing the possible reasons behind van Eyck's development of the bird's-eye-view landscape type, granting supernatural sight. What catalyst(s) could have triggered the pronounced changes visible in the painted distances of the Ghent Altarpiece and the Rolin Madonna?

The book's regional and chronological focus results in some regrettable exclusions. While masters like Masolino, Fra Angelico, and Domenico Ghirlandaio garner much attention, those engaging with Northern models outside Florence's orbit — Piero della Francesca, Pisanello, and Antonello da Messina chief among them — are neglected by comparison. The same can be said of painters falling just outside Nuttall's timeframe. Although her study ends with Raphael's mature examples, little is said of the artifice displayed by Filippino Lippi, Leonardo, and, looking ahead, Pontormo, all of whom embraced distinctly restless, highly individualized artistic strategies. Tantalizing questions also remain regarding the appeal of Netherlandish imagery for Italian artists and collectors interested in an alternative kind of *varietas*, one born not of beauty but deformation, license, and bizarre syntax — a thrilling perversion of naturalism spawning monstrous hybrids and fantastic landscapes. The imaginings of Bosch, Patinir, and Metsys spring to mind.

These reservations should not hide the enormous value of this meticulously researched text, its contributions as well-timed as they will be lasting. Invaluable as both a mine of primary material and as a springboard for further research, it can only be hoped that this publication will encourage others to continue studying the consequences of the North-South exchange in Florence and beyond.

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