

Kathleen Wren Christian. *Empire Without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c. 1350–1527*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. ix + 440 pp. index. illus. map. bibl. \$70. ISBN: 978-0-300-15421-4.

This important and long-awaited book is the most significant study of antiquities collecting in Rome to appear in the last several years. It immediately takes its place in the upper rank of what we might call the post-Warburgian trend in Renaissance antiquarian studies, alongside the work of Leonard Barkan, Patricia Fortini Brown, and Ingrid D. Rowland, among others. On every page, Christian displays a stunningly sophisticated level of erudition, sharp critical judgment, and an unerring eye for the telling detail, skills that make her uniquely qualified to tackle this exceptionally challenging subject. Virtually all of the original settings for the display of antiquities during the period under investigation have been lost, but what traces do survive have been tracked down, described and in most cases, illustrated by this admirably industrious scholar. With so little surviving on the ground, and most of the antiquities either lost or scattered among the modern collections in Rome and elsewhere, what the author has to go on are the (not always reliable) antiquarian drawings of Renaissance artists and the (not always clear) descriptions of contemporary authors. Building on the foundations erected by generations of comparably diligent researchers, Christian lays out the facts and describes the *lacunae* in the clearest and most insightful prose.

The clarity of the presentation benefits materially from the two-part organization of the volume. In the first section, divided into seven chapters, Christian concentrates (brilliantly and convincingly) on what she identifies as key stages or trends in the development of antiquities collections in Rome. In so doing, she carefully and thoroughly revises the traditionally unified and progressive model of the discovery of classical antiquity by identifying major themes and concerns that motivated Renaissance collectors in terms specific to the Roman intellectual and social milieu. She begins with an examination of the early humanist origins of antiquities collection in the era of Petrarch and Cola di Rienzo, where the emphasis was frequently political and directed to moralizing theme of the *exemplum virtutis*. A transition of sorts is identified in the following chapter in an original and utterly fascinating discussion of the collection in the garden of Cardinal Prospero Colonna, where an assembly of poets composed verses lauding the patron for his restoration of the edifying monuments of antiquity. In some cases, these verses were inscribed on the bases of his statues, inaugurating a trend that continued throughout the period.

The following chapter uncovers the “ancestral” and genealogical themes in the collections and (often) publicly viewable displays of antiquities by members of Rome’s “new nobility.” These land-owning *bovattieri* (or cattlemen) imitated the baronial nobility (whose power they had to an extent displaced) by staking their claims to *romanitas* on the claim to descend from ancient patricians. This chapter, along with the next, which contrasts the collection strategies of the “Imperial” and acquisitive Pope Paul II (Pietro Barbo) with the more outwardly public and

“civic-minded” Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere), are among the most important contributions in the volume. Taken together, they present a thoroughly convincing challenge and correction, not only to old notions about the uses of antiquity during this period, but to our understanding of the social and cultural history of Rome during this crucial period.

Covering slightly more familiar ground, the next chapters offer fresh observations and new details regarding the Roman Academies, papal and curial collectors, and the period of the Sack. The reader now moves on to the second section of the book, a catalogue of thirty-eight Roman collections established before 1527 that almost matches the previous section in length, and provides a wealth of details, including illustrations, informative summaries of each collection’s location, patronage, contents, and fate, and, perhaps most generously, a selection of relevant descriptions, each of them carefully transcribed in the original Latin or Italian. This material, combined with the original insights in the first section, assures that this will become a standard work of reference for many years to come. The publishers are to be congratulated for giving this important book the beautiful production that it deserves. The illustrations, which include no less than fifty in color, are superbly reproduced and positioned throughout the book. This is only fitting for a work that will be fundamental to the future study of Renaissance art, early modern antiquarianism, and the history of collections.

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