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INTRODUCTION

Easel painting in the age of Italian unification

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Media today, by common definition, refers to the mass media, whose technologies of production and dissemination reach audiences of far greater number and kind than do unique and static works of art. The medium of easel painting, therefore, presents a particular problem of study with regard to the aesthetics of reception and the role of the fine arts in fomenting nationalist sentiment during the Risorgimento. As high-end commodity objects made by specialized labor in response to commissions or free market competition, their main patrons and consumers were the aristocracy and urban elites. Though technically portable, easel paintings initially commanded a more restricted public than murals on the walls of churches and civic institutions. Nor could easel painting compete with the public monument, whose durable materials of stone, bronze, or marble allowed for a permanent and prominent commemorative function in town squares. Even opera, in the age before recorded music, by virtue of repeatable performance and oral transmission – an aria that could be sung by anyone anywhere – could reach the hearts and minds of a broader public. Instead, easel painting depended on two forms of extended reach – one institutional, the other technological – beyond the inherent expressive properties of oil on canvas: the public exhibition and the popular print. The growth of these two phenomena in the nineteenth century coincided with the ascent of liberal democracies and the pedagogical project of European nationalism.

Clearly, given its conditions of ownership, viewing and material fragility, easel painting was an increasingly anachronistic medium in the age of mechanical reproduction and collective reception. Yet, it was precisely its anachronistic status that granted its venerated and incomparable standing in the nineteenth-century hierarchy of cultural production. Easel paintings possessed demonstrable ‘aura’ by virtue of being neither ubiquitous nor ephemeral. Traditional aesthetic values of iconic resemblance, uniqueness, originality, and genius bequeathed to painting its reverential appeal, above and beyond the primal feelings aroused by narratives of love, honor and virtue represented within the picture frame. As Carlo Sisi has written, the fine arts in Italy were
considered a privileged vehicle of a ‘never extinguished national dignity’ (Sisi 2008, 47), a repository of pride because of their historical primacy and international influence. Arguably the western tradition of painting reached its spiritual apex in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque; since the Roman Republic, Italian artists had created an abundance of canonical images and styles in the history of art. That this perception may have been an ideological construct (formed within and without Italy over the centuries) did not diminish its effect. The elitism of the medium was indeed its message and garnered its popular esteem.

The prestigious cultural patrimony was not without its burdens, however. As Mazzini (Mazzocca 2008, 27) lamented in his tract on ‘Modern Italian Painters’, published in 1841, ‘three centuries of titans cast their shadows on all that is done today’. How could the works of Hayez, Mazzini’s ideal of a civic painter, compete with the Sistine Chapel? The problem facing contemporary painters, as he saw it, was to equal this past without falling back upon it and to create a new art with civic purpose that expressed the spirit of the epoch. ‘Italian art’ with its connotations of a universal style was, therefore, not the same as a ‘nationalistic’ art, as Mazzini conceived it, although the spirit and protagonists of the former could be harnessed to the proselytizing zeal of the latter. (Images representing the life of great artists such as Titian, for example, formed a staple of Italian nationalist art.) Moreover, those who wished to incorporate the immediately identifiable language of Italian art, namely the classical tradition, did so at the risk of being outmoded, doubly so given the associations of neoclassicism with the Napoleonic regime. Herein was another challenge facing painters involved in constructing the nationalist discourse of the Risorgimento: to remain hostage to forms of the past or to renew painting in line with international, namely French, developments, and hence risk losing its innately Italian qualities.

Recent studies on the how and why of Italian unification analyze the communicative power of canonical texts and images, the definition of canonical having expanded to include both high and popular forms, instruction and entertainment, text and image. Indeed, tradition divisions between high and low fall by the wayside when the universalizing concept of emotional charge becomes the measure of political efficacy (Riall 2009, 406–407; Banti 2009). If the success of the Italian nationalist discourse relied on the inspirational power of wide-reaching cultural artifacts, what was the currency of easel painting in finding and forming new patriotic, Italian-identified audiences? The two essays that follow address that question from different vantage points. The first, by Roberta Olson, is a panoramic view of rhetorical public art directly inspired by the Italian Wars of Independence and supported by the new exhibition systems established on the regional and national levels. The second, by Anna Ottani Cavani, focuses on a specific school of landscape and genre painting that emerged around 1861 – the Macchiaioli. Together they provide a study in contrasting modes of pictorial affect. Olson addresses the didactic function of
iconography in stimulating zealous mindsets among the populace in the decades leading up to unification. In turn, Cavani draws attention to how subtle devices of painterly style and composition gave rise to authentic sentiments of kinship with the new geopolitical reality.

Beginning with the Restoration, historical allegories of national redemption strove to picture and engender grandiose emotions that would rally the populace to the patriotic cause. In his studies on the morphology of Risorgimento narratives, Alberto Banti has documented the imagistic triad of kinship, honor and sacrifice that mobilized Italians of all ages across classes and inclusive of both sexes (Banti 2000). Yet the ‘dynamic idealism’ of such ‘moralizing historicism’ was not exclusive to the Italian Risorgimento: it had earlier infused the neoclassicism of Jacques Louis David’s revolutionary phase to similar pedagogical and militant ends (Rosenblum 1967, 50–106). Hayez’s series of exemplary heroes from the distant past (Pietro Rossi, 1818; Peter the Hermit Preaches the Crusade, 1829) follow the Davidian model of the exemplum virtutis even though they are painted in the softer Troubadour style of the Restoration period. As in late-eighteenth-century French painting, the pictorial epics of the Italian Risorgimento divide along gender lines, with women playing the dichotomous passive role, their bodies soft and swooning. Specific to the Italian examples, however, is the degree to which images of despondent women stoked the fires of insurrection. Exemplary in this regard is Hayez’s Meditation: Italy in 1848 of 1851, an allegory of national martyrdom and outrage in the wake of the failed uprisings of the Cinque Giornata. This is not the bare breasted personification of mother Italy nurturing her citizen children (Mazzocca 2002), but a flesh and blood, sexually violated, wife or sister whose provocatively angry gaze incites vendetta. As Olson convincingly argues, so incendiary was the image – made for a private patron and exhibited in public once – that changes were made in the subsequent engraving, circulated for wider distribution as part of a portfolio of fine art images.

After 1848, narrative painting shifted from tropes of national subjugation set in distant history or foreign lands to images of contemporary heroes (Lyttelton 2012) or scenes of armed conflict. In mid-century, these images of war were not yet rivaled by the reportage of photography; plein air techniques with their ‘on-the-spot’ sensation of immediacy, and the fact that many of the artists were themselves volunteers, lent Risorgimento battle scenes their emotional veracity and marked the transition from romanticism to realism. By the time of unification, moralizing history painting had run its course in the larger arena of European painting, giving way to dispassionate assessments of modern social realities and the plight of the common man, as witnessed in Giovanni Fattori’s decidedly unheroic appraisal of the cost of war, The Italian Camp After the Battle of Magenta, of 1862.

Exhibitions of easel paintings served many functions critical to the nationalist project: they displayed a broad array of artistic creativity promoting the perception of cultural resurgence; inspired patriotic sentiment and a burgeoning
class of bourgeois patrons; provided a means of new economic support to artists; and publicized the new state’s role as patron. The first Esposizione Nazionale Italiana held in 1861, in Florence, the new capital, ‘assumed the value of a second plebiscite’, a vote in favor of the united forces of the arts enabled by unification (Sisi 2008, 47). The temporary exhibition format – a one-time display of images soon to disappear into private collections, artists’ studios, or eventually, in the case of some, a public museum – also underlined the limitations of easel painting as a vehicle of mass communication. Divulgation and pedagogy depended on inter-media exchange. To begin with, painted narratives drew from historical chronicles and literary texts (Lyttelton 2001). Further, audience reception was mediated to a large degree by explanatory and interpretive commentary published in official guides to the exhibition, or in reviews by patriots such as Carlo Tenca and Pietro Selvatico writing for art, literary and scientific journals. Didactic art criticism thus promulgated the messages and deepened the effect of such intentionally affective images.

The most celebrated of paintings also reached larger audiences through black-and-white engravings. Yet these forms of art reproductions, sold through special albums or editions, stood apart from the imagery, cost and mass diffusion of popular lithography and photography. The differences in ‘voice’ between popular prints and easel paintings, and their respective cultural capital, merit further in-depth study, but paintings themselves provide the finest evidence of interdependence and exchange. Numerous genre scenes, such as Domenico Induno’s A Thought for Garibaldi (1862) or Odoardo Borrani’s Seamstresses of the Red Shirts (1863) show everyday Italians engaged in their daily domestic contributions to the public cause. Significantly, these interiors depict pictures within pictures: prints of Italian vedute or gesso figurines, lithographs and photographs of Risorgimento figures, especially Garibaldi. Such mass-produced ‘souvenirs’ fueled the cult of hero worship and, in turn, patriotic ardor. Genre painting could not compete with the accessibility and devotional function of such popular effigies, but nonetheless contributed in subtle ways to the making of Italians: by depicting the circulation of patriotic images in the private sphere, paintings such as these represented the self-reflexive gaze of collective aspiration.

The canvases of the Macchiaioli drew from the conventions of genre painting that embraced the mundane aspects of quotidian existence. Depictions of the emotional life of ordinary people served a crucial political function in the making of future Italians: to create empathy toward the less fortunate or reveal the rewards of familial affections (Sisi 2010, 42). In their depiction of the private sphere, however, they consciously dispensed with melodrama and moralizing in favor of verism, or the nonrhetorical rendering of the truth. Truth to visual sensation was evoked by the optical vibrancy of the luminous, macchia brushwork; the truth of political sovereignty by the realities of class and gender difference, and even land reform, subtly depicted. As Cavani writes, their canvases inspired a sense of national identity paradoxically based on the evocation of a specific region, its landscape and people. The rural subject matter
reflected the still agricultural-based economy of Italy and its peasant laborers, while the domestic scenes exuded either contentment or discomfort with the bourgeois values of diligence and propriety. To create an aesthetic genealogy, the Macchiaioli embedded allusions to Quattrocento painting, which was deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of cultured Europeans, including the educated classes across the peninsula. In turn, the Macchiaioli’s unique synthesis of contemporary French painting — both the \textit{plein air} technique of the Barbizon school and the Realist scrutiny of things — endowed their canvases with novelty and modernity to their canvases, in line with the self-image of the new nation.

In this regard, the painting of the Macchiaioli held up a mirror to the new ruling class, who yearned for the expression of a new modern subjectivity, of fleeting and contingent everyday experiences that wed individual sensation to the sense of collective belonging. The narrower emotional range of Macchiaioli landscape and interiors, populated by figures quietly engaged in work or thought (even those in the fields) was far removed from the instrumental passions of a ‘nationalistic art’. These were ‘deep images’ of another sort — not archetypes or foundational narratives — but ones that prompted a contemplative response of like-minded absorption on the part of the viewer. The Macchiaioli thus fashioned the first modern Italian art, shorn of any visual remnants of foreign occupying powers — namely academicism and romanticism. How the Macchiaioli came to be discursively constructed as the first \textit{national} art of modern Italy through state patronage, museum collections, exhibitions and art historical interpretations, is a historiography that has yet to be written.

\textbf{Note}

1 On the distinctions between a ‘national art’ and ‘French art’, see Genet-Delacroix (2005).

\textbf{References}


