

# Travelling Artists in Medieval and Renaissance Europe: An Introduction

Sandra Cardarelli

This issue of the *Journal of Art Historiography* features a selection of papers that were presented at the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Art Historians held at the Open University in Milton Keynes 29-31 March 2012.<sup>1</sup> More specifically these papers were delivered in the session entitled 'Travelling Artists in Medieval and Renaissance Italy and Europe' that I co-organized and convened with Jill Harrison (The Open University). The main aim of the session was to explore the variety of reasons that compelled artists to travel, and – whenever possible – provide the historic, social and cultural framework within which these artists lived and worked. Although the papers presented covered a period of over four centuries and dealt with artists working across Europe and beyond, the selection that is included here focuses on the neglected but crucial role of the artist, rather than on the art object itself, in the creation of cultural – either individual or collective, local or global – identity. We shall see how the shared sense of excellence between patrons and communities relied on the artists' ability in conveying ideas and traditions and ultimately in fashioning their identity.

Modern art historical scholarship is increasingly focusing on cross-cultural influences in developing cultural identities, and thus the art historical debate has moved away from the confined space of political and geographical boundaries to include traditions, beliefs and ideas from as far afield as the limits of the then known world. In this field, Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton's book *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West* describes well how artists across Europe developed stylistic trends, and shaped cultural and artistic identities through a process of import/export of expertise, ideas, materials, collectable items, and above all, through the artists themselves.<sup>2</sup> More recently, *The Art, Science, and Technology of Medieval Travel*, engaged the reader with travel as an essential component of cultural and political expansion in the middle ages.<sup>3</sup> In the course of the Quattrocento the expansion of banking and trading routes as well as the desire for acquiring luxury goods, blurred geographical boundaries and pushed people to travel. These publications shed light on cross cultural influences and how these contributed to the construction of stylistic trends as catalysts of social and cultural identities, and how

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to the journal editor, Prof. Richard Woodfield, for the opportunity to publish this contribution and for his editorial comments and assistance throughout the preparation process.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to the scholars who contributed to the AAH conference in 2012 and to this publication.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West*, London, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> *The Art, Science and Technology of Medieval Travel*, ed. R. Bork and A. Kann, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.

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various networks interacted amid political or religious conflicts. The four essays in this collection examine how travel in the broader sense impacted the artists' life and the way in which their output was adapted to suit new patrons and their requirements, and delve into the commission and reception of these works from a historiographical perspective. While art historians have traditionally viewed style as central in the creation of personal and collective identities, these papers reassess the prominence of the artist in this process. Michelle O'Malley argued that the formulaic language used in Renaissance contracts did not correspond to a mere wish to replicate works of art, and that even models were expected to be shaped according to the patrons' specific requests.<sup>4</sup> For Julius Schlosser the historical study of the individual history of the artists' creative minds constituted the History of Style.<sup>5</sup> This idea sublimated Benedetto Croce's thinking that there could be no history of art without a history of artists.<sup>6</sup>

In the wake of these considerations the following contributions also look at how good artistic practice was paramount for the dissemination of the visual arts across Italy and Europe.

In the first essay, Katja Fält provides a detailed overview of how Finnish historiography between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century was crucial in the creation of national identity through the neglected study of medieval church mural paintings. The lack of descriptive textual sources and visual comparative material played a substantial role in the early assumption that the 'Primitive' mural paintings disseminated in many medieval churches of Finland pertained to local artists. Finland's past as part of the Swedish kingdom and later of the Russian Empire as an autonomous Grand-Duchy before it finally moved on to become a state, played a part in the effort of scholars in establishing common cultural foundations for the new-born nation.<sup>7</sup> Fält's contribution highlights two distinct moments in Finnish historiography: one pertaining to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the issue of national identity was paramount in establishing the origins of the churches' murals, and a second, comprising the first four decades of the 1900s, where a re-evaluation of the paintings led to hypothetical links to wider European influences. In this context, some important questions on the identity of the artists, their workshops and their presumed mobility remained unanswered. Fält's study offers a platform for a critical evaluation of this earlier scholarship and poses the basis for a contextualised examination of these images, their locations and how these might have responded to mutually recognized values.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle O'Malley, *The Business of Art—Contracts and the Commissioning Process in Renaissance Italy*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2005, 221 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Julius Schlosser, "'History of Style and "History of Language" of Fine Art', *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaft—Philosophisch-historische Abteilung*, vol. 35 (1), 1935. Accessed on 2/10/2013 at: <http://gombricharchive.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/showcom1.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> For a study on Danish medieval murals and how they relate to other northern European cultures see: Søren Kaspersen, 'The Impact of Late Medieval Piety on Danish Murals' in *Images of Cult and Devotion*, ed. S. Kaspersen, University of Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2004, 183-214. For a critical analysis of Scottish historiography in relation to visual imagery and how this contributed to the construction of a national identity see John Morrison, *Painting the Nation: Identity and Nationalism in Scottish Painting, 1800-1920*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.

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My contribution focuses on the activity of two sculptors, the Siense Antonio Ghini and the Florentine Andrea di Francesco Guardi and the development of their careers and styles in minor centres of the Tuscan region working either for local lords or civic institutions, and how these reflected on their outputs. Sidestepped by early historical sources,<sup>8</sup> artists working outside major centres of artistic production were however crucial in contributing to the development of the social and cultural identity of provincial communities and their patrons.<sup>9</sup> Julius Schlosser's pivotal book *Die Kunst des Mittelalters* (1923) introduced the concept of *Kunstsprache*.<sup>10</sup> According to Schlosser, medieval art and architecture developed and were enriched by the contributions of local communities, in the same way as Latin constituted the platform on which local idioms nestled to form romance languages. In this context my article offers a corrective to the impact that artists trained in centres of mainstream artistic production had on local art and how their style was affected in return, by looking at relevant archival material and overlooked published sources. This essay aims to re-evaluate the activity of these two artists and traces the reasons that led them to work predominantly for civic institutions, and in the case of Guardi, for the local nobility. It also touches on issues of broader interest such as the social status and social mobility of artists in the Renaissance.<sup>11</sup>

Michelle Moseley-Christian discusses how the intersecting studies of cartography and costume illustrations can help in providing a new reading of visual descriptions of place, and how cartographical and chorographical conventions contribute to our understanding of issues of identity. Geographic discoveries, new politics of expansion and economic growth propelled further interest for foreign lands and cultures, and artists played a vital role in conveying ideas, styles and outputs that reflected these countries and the way in which they were represented. Moseley-Christian examines the impact of Early modern cartography in the perception of the then known world and its population, and highlights how costume drawing became a consolidated part of cartographic representations.

<sup>8</sup> Vasari's profiles of artists in the two editions of his *Vite* (1550-1568) were notoriously orientated towards the primacy of Florentine artists. Although neither Ghini nor Guardi are acknowledged by Vasari, the second edition of his work deals with the contribution of some provincial painters, such as Liberale da Verona and Fra' Iocondo. According to Anthony Blunt [Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1600*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978 ed., 99] the second edition was kinder towards non-Florentine artists. This is the focus of a recent ad-hoc publication by Monica Molteni and Paola Artoni, *Le vite dei Veronesi di Giorgio Vasari—Un'edizione critica*, Treviso: Zel Edizioni, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Scholarship in recent years has overturned the importance of these artists in the construction of narratives and styles to assert that these went beyond local custom and tradition, and that they were actually engaged in a mutual cultural exchange with the major centres. For an example see Flavio Boggi, 'Lippo di Dalmasio, the Madonna of the Humility and painting in Pistoia in the late Trecento', in *Visible Exports/ Imports: New Research on Medieval and Renaissance Art and Culture*, E.J. Anderson, J. Farquhar and J. Richards, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2012, 61-98.

<sup>10</sup> Julius Schlosser, *L'arte del Medioevo* (original title: *Die Kunst des Mittelalters*) trans. Carlo Sgorlon, Milan: Einaudi, 2004 ed., 64.

<sup>11</sup> On these see also Maximilian P.J. Martens, 'The position of the artist in the 15<sup>th</sup> century: salaries and social mobility', in *Showing Status*, ed. W. Blockmans and A. Jansen, Turnhout: Brepols, 1999, 387-414. See also Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1600*, chapter iv, The social position of the artist, 48-57.

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Recent studies on Early Modern cartography in Venice examine how the study of maps—including portolan charts<sup>12</sup>—sheds light on the different linguistic and devotional communities of the Venetian maritime empire.<sup>13</sup> The bird's eye view of Venice for example, was produced by Jacopo de' Barbari in this context at the dawn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and was highly influential in the creation and perception of the city's identity.<sup>14</sup> Moseley-Christian highlights the vital contribution of the chorographic tradition and how this related to costume study and textual description in this renewed culture of representation of place and space and sheds light on neglected aspects of Dürer's and Hollar's drawings and engravings of costumes and contextualises them within this framework.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Cinzia Sicca discusses the cultural and artistic exchange that occurred between Italy and England in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century through the work of artists—either from Florence or trained in that city—that relocated their workshops and found new opportunities in the service of foreign patrons. While Vasari's renowned Florentine-centric view of excellence in artistic practice might have increased the prestige of artists from this city, archival research reiterate that patrons were eager to employ artists who enjoyed a consolidated reputation both locally and in other cities/ countries.<sup>16</sup>

The author combines elements of Vasari's *Lives* with contemporary archival material to expose complex business, political and diplomatic networks that involved the Florentine banking and merchant class as well as the Medici family, the papacy, and the king of England. The activity of some artists in other countries across Europe is also outlined here and provides an overview of the routes—both in terms of career development and of localities visited—that Florentine artists followed abroad, the patrons who hired them or purchased their works, and their reception.<sup>17</sup> Her timely contribution is a further reminder of the importance of Vasari's work not only in categorizing and defining artists and outputs, styles, and quality of art, but also in providing vivid biographical accounts that shed light on the artists' as well as on the patrons lives and how they reflected the culture of that time.<sup>18</sup> As Caferro recently noted, Vasari's biographies were also instrumental in

<sup>12</sup> These were early cartographic representations of lands, harbours and trading routes that were developed as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Mediterranean countries.

<sup>13</sup> For an example see: Eva Stamoulou, *The Venetian Oltremare: Identity and Visual Culture in the Early Modern Eastern Mediterranean*, PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> On this see Juraj Kittler and Deryck W. Holdsworth, 'Digitizing a complex urban panorama in the Renaissance: The 1500 bird's eye-view of Venice by Jacopo de' Barbari', *New Media & Society*, 1461444813495155, August 2, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> On visual representation of cities and the contribution of chorography see Hilary Ballon and David Friedman, "Portraying the city in Early Modern World" in *The History of Renaissance Cartography: Interpretative Essays*, vol. 3, ed. D. Woodward, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, 680-704.

<sup>16</sup> O'Malley, *The Business of Art*, 110-116; 146-151.

<sup>17</sup> Prof. Roger Crum is currently (2013-2014) pursuing a research project dealing with some of these aspects at the Harvard University Centre for Italian and Renaissance Studies, Villa I Tatti. This is entitled 'The Territorial and International Dimensions of Florentine Renaissance Art'.

<sup>18</sup> See Eric Ernie, *Art History and its methods*, New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995, 22-28. A conference entitled 'The Paradigm of Vasari: Reception, Criticism, Perspectives' will take place at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence in February 14-16 February 2014. This is organized by Alessandro Nova and Fabian Jonietz.

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creating a collective identity and a higher social status for contemporary artists, and Sicca's analysis touches on this important aspect.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, this collection of essays aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between art, artists, patrons and travel in medieval and Renaissance times, through the examination and re-evaluation of art historical, historiographical and archival sources and re-consideration of visual evidence.

**Sandra Cardarelli** holds a PhD in History of Art from the University of Aberdeen funded by the AHRC. She previously completed an MLitt with Distinction in History of Art also from the University of Aberdeen, and her undergraduate degree in Turin, Italy. Her MLitt thesis was shortlisted for the Association of Art Historians dissertation prize 2006. She has contributed papers and published on the artistic output of the diocese of Grosseto, in Southern Tuscany, in the fifteenth century. She recently co-edited a volume entitled *Art and Identity: Visual Culture, Politics and Religion in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Cambridge Scholars 2012). Her major interests are in late Medieval and Renaissance Sieneese visual culture, parish research, and cultural history.

sandracardarelli@aol.com

<sup>19</sup> William Caferro, *Contesting the Renaissance*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, 45.