The World in Venice: Print, the City, and Early Modern Identity by Bronwen Wilson

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Wilson’s book is an unusual contribution to early modern Venetian art history both in its application of modern theories (particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis) to historical material and its concentration on imagery that has not received much attention in the discipline. This is an art history concerned primarily with visuality, the effects of images, rather than with objects per se, which is not to say that the author does not pay close attention to images — indeed, the book’s main strength is its perceptive visual analysis.

The material subject of the book is late sixteenth-century visual print culture in Venice, particularly maps and city views, images of processions, costume books, and printed portrait books. While these types may seem rather disparate, Wilson identifies their similar “visual strategies” of juxtaposition, “reportage,” and other techniques. There is no question that she has distinguished pictorial conventions that cut across types and are distinctive to the time period. The larger subject of the book, however, is the impact this burgeoning culture of the image — and its concomitant visual strategies — had on how Venetians (or Europeans more broadly?) experienced a sense of identity. (Throughout the book it is unclear to what degree the arguments apply only to Venice or to European society as a whole.) The new diversity and accessibility of printed images shaped the way people saw themselves through imagining how they were seen by others. In this “mirroring” activity, Wilson identifies the birth of the modern subject.

The book ranges over diverse materials, and it takes some work on the part of the reader to link them. The first chapter analyzes the format and visual conventions used in maps and views of Venice, demonstrating how perceptions of the city changed over the course of the century. Making individual views cohere into an
organized whole, Jacopo de Barbaro’s famous map of 1500 is “not only a representation of an ideal republic but a model of how this ideal operates” (48). By contrast, later sixteenth-century images transform the bird’s-eye view into a symbol through its juxtaposition with a variety of legends, texts, perspective views, and images of processions. This causes a “division of space and time” (62), so that “the random mobile eye of the person in the street is no longer accommodated” (65). The argument here seems to be that through such images Venetians came to see their city (and themselves?) from a more disembodied, “other” point of view.

Chapter 2 proposes that costume, not race, was used to classify people(s) in this period, as though they were the equivalent of specimens of flora and fauna. Costume books, it is claimed, contributed to profound changes in identity formation, an argument based on Lacanian theory; the images in costume books are postulated to function in a way similar to the mirror in Lacan’s writing: Venetians (Europeans?), by seeing such images, increasingly came to see themselves from a third-person point of view. Thus, costume books “may have fostered a new kind of subject, as both an object and an ‘I myself’” (132). The chapter seems to assume that sixteenth-century costume books functioned in a manner similar to today’s fashion magazines and advertising images. While one might argue that there is some relationship between them (and it is an argument that would have to be made), it seems to me that the differences are just as important, if not more so, than the similarities.

While printed portrait books, with their emphasis on the particularities of individual appearances, would seem to contrast with the stress on social types in costume books, in chapter 4 Wilson identifies similar pictorial conventions that call for the discernment of difference. Through the acts of comparison involved in looking at portrait books, viewers came to think of themselves as “images,” and faces and bodies were increasing read “as texts composed of signs” (201) — as representations. Wilson argues that the process of dissection and comparison that the portrait books elicited laid the groundwork for the development of racial and ethnic stereotypes based on physical appearance.

In her attempt to apply modern theories to an early modern context, the author has set herself a worthy, if challenging, goal. In her introduction she says that she will “find the gaps between the historical evidence and modern theories, and also the uncanny resemblances” (22). The book’s thesis is ambitious, but the argument, for all the attention to the particulars of images and historical events, is largely speculative, as evidenced by the frequent use of the phrase “may have.” A real dialogue between historical evidence and theory is not always present, for the voices of history are somewhat drowned by theoretical constructions. In the end, one finds oneself neither surprised by the conclusions, nor entirely convinced by the historical and/or visual evidence, in what is nevertheless a thought-provoking, intriguing book.

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