

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 12 (2015)

Transferts culturels et traduction (XVIIIe-XXe siècles)



Alkis Charalampidis, Η ιταλική Αναγέννηση. Αρχιτεκτονική – Γλυπτική – Ζωγραφική [The Italian Renaissance: Architecture – Sculpture – Painting]

Eugenia Drakopoulou

doi: [10.12681/hr.8810](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.8810)

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To cite this article:

Drakopoulou, E. (2015). Alkis Charalampidis, Η ιταλική Αναγέννηση. Αρχιτεκτονική – Γλυπτική – Ζωγραφική [The Italian Renaissance: Architecture – Sculpture – Painting]. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 12, 257–259. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.8810>

Alkis Charalampidis,
Η ΙΤΑΛΙΚΗ ΑΝΑΓΕΝΝΗΣΗ. ΑΡΧΙΤΕΚΤΟΝΙΚΗ – ΓΛΥΠΤΙΚΗ – ΖΩΓΡΑΦΙΚΗ
[The Italian Renaissance: Architecture – Sculpture – Painting],
Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 2014, 220 pages, 228 illustrations.

The last book on Italian Renaissance fine arts written in Greek was published in 2004.¹ Until then, only two books by Professor Chrysanthos Christou² existed, which were, however, hardly accessible to the non-specialized public, being mostly addressed to art history students. In the Greek publishing environment, which favours, not always successfully, translations, Alkis Charalampidis' book on the Italian Renaissance, written in Greek, constitutes an excellent contribution to the contemporary academic bibliography, not only for the solutions it proposes for the rendition of foreign terminology, but mainly also for "recording" a contemporary, live, scientific Greek language at a time when English absorbs more and more space in publications on the humanities. It is worth mentioning that the book's appearance in the Greek academic and research domain nearly coincides with the launch of the first journal

by Greek historians of European and Modern Greek art.³ The first issue of this journal, with Greek as its primary language, emerged only in 2013, despite the fact that the history of European art has been taught since 1884 at the Athens School of Arts (later known as the School of Fine Arts) and was then established in the curricula at the Universities of Athens, Thessaloniki and Crete, as well as at the Greek Open University.

A major advantage of Charalampidis' book is that, although it offers comprehensive and specialized knowledge on the era and the art of Renaissance Italy, as well as full scientific documentation, it can easily be read by an educated general audience interested in Renaissance art and not only by experts or students. The 228 high-quality illustrations included in its 220 pages make it attractive and allow for an immediate understanding of the analysis and interpretation of each artwork presented. Considering that in Greek secondary education, archaeology and the history of art were and continue

¹ Marina Lambraki-Plaka, *Ιταλική Αναγέννηση. Τέχνη και κοινωνία – Τέχνη και αρχαιότητα* [Italian Renaissance: Art and society – Art and antiquity], Athens 2004.

² C. Christou, *Η ιταλική ζωγραφική κατά τον δέκατο έκτο αιώνα* [Italian painting in the sixteenth century], Thessaloniki 1971, and *id.*, *Ιταλική ζωγραφική του XIV και XV αιώνα* [Italian painting of the fourteenth and fifteenth century], Athens 1996.

³ *Ιστορία της Τέχνης. Περιοδική έκδοση για την ιστορία και τη θεωρία της Τέχνης* [History of art: Journal for the history and theory of art], editorial director Nikos Daskalothanas. A review of Alkis Charalampidis' book by Ianthi Asimakopoulou is included in the 4th issue (summer 2015), pp. 158-164.

to be mostly orientated towards Greek and Roman antiquity, along with the arts of the Byzantine Empire, European art, especially Italian Renaissance art, remains an area with which the wider Greek audience is singularly acquainted; Greek viewers do identify and admire Renaissance works of art in the museums, cathedrals and palazzi of Italy, yet in a manner detached from the reality within which they were created and based on their close association with the “familiar” examples of the ancient and Byzantine eras.

Charalampidis has a long presence in the Greek and international art history community, has been for many years a lecturer at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and has deep knowledge of the Greek and Orthodox art world, as well as of European, medieval and Renaissance art. Based on this scientific legacy, he chooses here to introduce the Greek reader to one of the brightest periods of European culture by comparing a plain and austere painting of a Madonna from Siena, motionless in a “metaphysical” space and with obvious Byzantine influences, to a Madonna who resembles a Florentine maiden, rendered in an atmosphere of naturalness and intimacy, a genuine expression of the Quattrocento. Already in the introduction, two of the book’s great advantages are revealed: the clear, comprehensible and apposite descriptions of the works of art; and their interpretation in relation to the political, economic and social context of the era. The first “confrontation” of the historical background of Siena and Florence reveals this second quality of the book, the placement of artworks within the historical context at the time of their creation. The lethal clashes between the two Tuscan cities, which despite their

differences had “reconciled” on the level of art by summoning artists already from the thirteenth century, the economic and social crisis of both during the fourteenth century, the emergence of the Black Death, rural depopulation and the gradual flight of people towards big cities, especially towards Florence, all explain the new requirements of art patrons and the novel trends of the artists in the city that excelled at *renovatio*. Thus, in the book the Renaissance emerges as a historic and cultural entity that is not related only to the history of art.

Charalampidis discusses architecture, sculpture and painting in three separate chapters. The emphasis of the book is the chapter on painting, which is approximately four times the length of the other two sections. Although the artistic production of cities such as Siena, Mantua, Padua, Venice and, of course, Rome is adequately discussed, the presentation of the artists and artworks of Florence, as well as the analysis of the ideological milieu of the city of the Medici, is dominant. The narration follows a chronological order, allowing the reader to become acquainted with Italian Renaissance art from start to finish. Although the continuous flow of the text contributes to understanding the unity and evolution of Italian artistic production, it possibly deprives the reader of the opportunity of a direct distinction between the various trends among the Italian cities and even perhaps within Florence itself.

A large number of monographs enrich the bibliography, and interpretative quotes of well-known writers are felicitously included in the artwork analysis. For example, the author cites Andrew Graham-Dixon’s

investigative analysis of the status and appearance of the most weak, irrational and audacious prophet, Jonah, who, mainly because of his mistakes (he refused to teach the Word of God to the inhabitants of Nineveh, was punished by being placed in the belly of a whale and then conceded and returned to save the sinful city), earned God's mercy and, apparently, Michelangelo's liking, so much so as to depict him prominently on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Discrete humour – for example, in describing the transition from the angelic Fra Angelico to the dark personality of the other monk, Filippo Lippi, condemned for seduction and embezzlement – and crucial remarks – such as those on the correlation of the Parnassus mural by Raphael with the view of Vatican Hill, dedicated to Apollo, from the window of the Vatican's Stanza della Segnatura – make this book a pleasure to read, despite its strictly academic nature.

The author's conviction that a work of art is a physical entity which cannot be simply viewed but must also be comprehended in context is adequately supported in this book by the repeated highlighting of the social and economic conditions. In this way, for example, the high value of sculpture compared to painting in Renaissance Italy becomes evident, when it is stated that Ghiberti earned 22,000 florins for one of the gates of the Florence Baptistery, while Michelangelo received just 3000 florins for the Sistine Chapel. The remark that in the fifteenth century the *Arti* were powerful guilds and that the word *arte* meant

technical aptitude reminds us emphatically that society gives birth to civilization. The degree to which the elements of collective life and artistic creation determine each other and interweave is revealed, for example, in the analysis of two legendary fresco cycles, those of the Scrovegni Chapel (1303-1306) by Giotto and the Brancacci Chapel (1424-1428) by Masaccio. The first, with sacred figures depicted for the first time in European art the same way as in antiquity, focusing on the knowledge of people, constitutes a kind of active repentance by its donor, Enrico Scrovegni. He was the richest citizen of Padua, a member of a family of money-lenders, and was placed by Dante in the seventh circle of Hell. The Brancacci Chapel, representing the most progressive trends of Italian Quattrocento painting, was a dedication of penitence from an embezzler of public money, a friend and afterwards an enemy of Cosimo de' Medici, related with the cycles of the Dominicans and the papal entourage. Thus the reader is guided to understand the preferences of iconography, in which scenes from the life of St Peter emphasize the supremacy and authority of the pope.

This book by Alkis Charalampidis is a valid tool for approaching Italian Renaissance art, especially that of Florence, assisting us to avoid the danger we all risk when visiting Italy: to disconnect works of art from the background at the time of their creation, from their original status and from the way they were regarded and utilized by their contemporaries.

Eugenia Drakopoulou

Institute of Historical Research/NHRF