



## Contagion and Purity in the Making and Reception of Early Modern Art, Architecture and Landscape

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Review of Lauren Jacobi and Daniel M. Zolli (eds.), *Contamination and Purity in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021, 368 pages, ISBN: 978-94-6298-869-9. Jacobi and Zolli offer an insightful collection of essays that probe the ways in which early modern culture – from sculpture to tapestry, coinage, architecture, and painting – engaged with ideas of pollution and purity. The two concepts are found to have seeped into the artistic cultures and anxieties of society across religion, economy, geography, trade and more. A perceptive and useful publication for readers of early modern history, art and architecture.

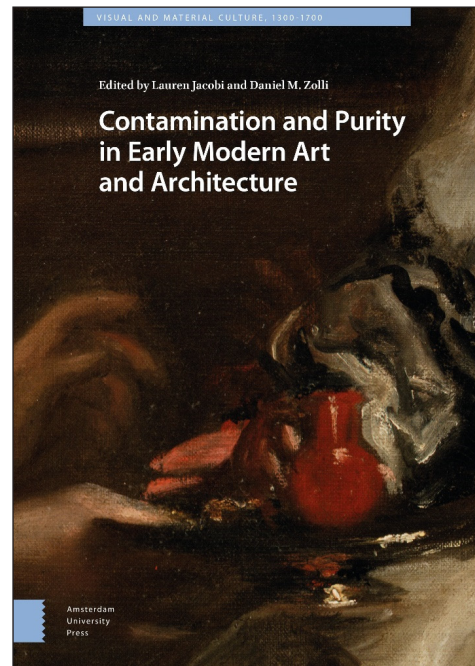
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In his prologue to *The Decameron*, Giovanni Boccaccio describes the bubonic plague epidemic of 1348. In doing so he sets the scene of his frame tale: a group of men and women sheltering from the lethal outbreak in a villa on the outskirts of Florence, who pass the time by telling stories. As well as the inevitable scenes of pain, fear, and death, Boccaccio stresses society's attempts to contain the disease through quarantine and the swift, deadly contagion that results from any contact with the infected. 'Whenever those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected', he writes, 'it would rush upon these with the speed of a fire racing through dry or oily substances' (Boccaccio 1972: 51). Lauren Jacobi and Daniel M. Zolli, the editors



of *Contamination and Purity in Early Modern Art and Architecture*, which originated as a conference held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2016, could not have known how prescient the topic of their volume would be when it was published in 2021. Yet very few of the book's essays focus on health and illness. The one exception is a contribution by Lisa Pon, which makes thought-provoking connections between the regulation and porosity of Jewish ghettos and plague hospitals in Venice.

The primary issue at stake in this volume is how concepts of contagion and purity inform the making and reception of art, architecture, and landscape. In doing so, it builds upon publications such as Claire L. Carlin's edited volume *Imagining Contagion in Early Modern Europe* (2005), in which the authors consider how notions of contamination and transmission infiltrate ideas around religion, gender, and artistic media such as printed images and the novel. Contributors were asked by Jacobi and Zolli to 'focus their essays around historical instances in which purity and contamination assumed particular salience' (19). The result is a collection of ten chapters that explore a pleasingly wide range of objects made or discussed in the 16th and 17th centuries, including sculpture, tapestry, coinage, architecture, and painting. In so doing, *Contamination and Purity* reminds us of the interdisciplinary nature of early modern life — where the builder and architect shared concerns with those of the sculptor and printmaker.

The danger of volumes structured around stand-alone case studies is that the essays can appear disjointed and unconnected to each other — quarantined. Happily, this is not the case here: common themes and questions cross-pollinate and mutate

across the different studies. It is a delightfully recursive expression of one of the book's central theses, and of the very etymology of the word contamination (the Latin word *contaminare* coming from *con-tangere*: 'to touch or bring together' (18)).

Just as Boccaccio's metaphoric fire spread into 'dry or oily substances', a central theme arises from the mixing of artistic matter. Christopher J. Nygren's chapter, 'Sedimentary Aesthetics', explores the practice that emerged in 17th-century Italy of painting on *pietra d'Arno*, a sedimentary rock formed of compressed riverbed. This rock was typically deemed less pure than other stones due to its multiple muddy colored layers (140). But as Nygren recounts, in these artworks, artist, paint, and lithic matter meet and integrate with one another to potent effect. The stratigraphy of the rock directly informs the representational logic of the pictures (131): in Filippo Napoletano's *Jonah and the Whale*, c. 1610–1620, wavy sediments become bodies of water (141); likewise in Francesco Ligozzi's *Dante and Virgil in the Inferno* (1620), mineral fissures transform into the trunk and limbs of a tree (148).

Material mingling also took place in the wake of the 1527 Sack of Rome, when the enormous sum of 400,000 ducats was required to secure the freedom of Pope Clement VII from the plundering soldiers employed by Emperor Charles V. As a result, papal treasures within the walls of the Castel Sant'Angelo were hastily melted down: ecclesiastical plate transformed into roughly cast ducats. It is in this 'moment of flux — when solid object became molten metal' in the minting of emergency currency that Allison Stielau, in chapter 4, finds a fraught moment of purity or contagion (159). Since the casting of the coins took place by necessity outside of standard minting procedures, anxieties abounded about the coins' material purity. The metal could easily have been corrupted, along with the moral integrity of those inside the papal fortification.

Sylvia Houghteling, likewise, finds potential contamination in the process of fabrication. In 1546, a colossal tapestry series was commissioned by Charles V to commemorate his 1535 conquest of Tunis and the Ottoman forces of Sultan Suleiman I stationed there. Moving beyond these objects as pictorial expressions of Charles V as a defender of Christendom, Houghteling deftly explores the significance of the material components (dyes, silk, and metal threads) and the diverse artisanal labor that went into the tapestries' creation. She highlights the significant fact that the 6,637 Flemish pounds worth of silk purchased from Granada, for example, was almost certainly made with Morisco labor. The dyes for this silk, meanwhile, originated from geographically diverse regions. The red cochineal was cultivated in Central and South America, the European import of which was monopolized by Spain (of which Charles V was King). The gold and silver wrapped threads were similarly sourced from Charles V's territories, this time from his mines in the New World. Houghteling demonstrates how

these materials can be seen as both contaminating the tapestries with non-Christian processes and substances while also offering a 'material embodiment of the emperor's imperial reach' (197). In doing so, Houghteling makes an important contribution to postcolonial scholarship and the globalization of Renaissance art (building upon research found in publications such as Savoy 2017). It is through essays like these that *Contamination and Purity in Early Modern Art and Architecture* also engages directly with the 'material turn' in the humanities, and the view expressed by Lorraine Daston that objects 'communicate by what they are as well as by how they mean' (2007: 20).

Another productive theme in the volume addresses the display of artworks, particularly in terms of how different locations engender certain interpretations and encounters. Paintings on stone, Nygren tells us, were commonly placed in the *studiolo* or curiosity cabinet precisely because they were a hybrid (and so impure) medium that 'troubled the distinction between natural wonders and man-made objects' (137). When patrons found themselves in the possession of Michelangelo's *non-finito* sculptures, they likewise sought innovative curatorial strategies to navigate the statues' troubling, partially carved states, as explored in a chapter by Carolina Mangone. Cosimo I de' Medici, for example, officially opened the Medici Chapel (New Sacristy) in San Lorenzo in 1561 in a radically incomplete state. While Francesco I de' Medici later installed Michelangelo's four unfinished *Slaves* in 1585 in the Grotta Grande of the Boboli Gardens, a space that transformed the sculptures' lack of finish into an expression of nature's generative forces.

Turning from place to surface, the dark exterior of the famous *Black Madonna of Loreto* was commonly believed to be caused by the sooty residue of candle smoke. According to Grace Harpster, such a view complicated early modern thought on ritualized devotion. On the one hand, the dirt believed to coat the *Madonna's* surface attested to centuries of veneration. One text from 1621 described the statue as 'tinted [and thus contaminated] with devout blackness' (111). On the other hand, it contradicted the imperatives placed on increased cleaning and care to ensure the decorum of Italy's venerated images following the decrees of the Council of Trent.

As might now be clear, a real strength of this publication is its interdisciplinary and, at times, cross-temporal approach, which results in thought-provoking perspectives and comparisons. Bruegel's winter landscapes are brought into dialogue with scientific theories of atomism by Amy Knight Powell. Lauren Jacobi shows that both Pope Sixtus V and Mussolini used their draining of the Pontine Marshes as a metaphor for moral and ethnic purification respectively. If one were to find a limitation, it would be the volume's geographic scope. Of the ten chapters, six examine objects of study in Italy, and all but one — by Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn — are based in Europe. This may be considered by some to be a missed opportunity to move beyond the dominance of Italian art and architecture in discussions of early modern culture, particularly because,

as Dean and Leibsohn's chapter makes clear, within non-European communities, distinctions between 'pure' and 'contaminated' may make little sense and be viewed in a far more fluid, overlapping manner (283). Indigenous epistemologies often propose significant means with which to augment Western understanding of key societal and cultural issues, and the making and reception of art and architecture.

Dean and Leibsohn put forward this point with care when they take the Awatovi pueblo in the Hopi reservation of Arizona as their subject. The Awatovi pueblo is a site with a complicated history of settler colonialization, rebellion, and inter-Hopi warfare. This history is, as a result, tightly bound to ideas of contamination, particularly that of Christian (Catholic) practices into that of the Hopi, and subsequent gestures of cleansing. In the West, it has largely been assumed that the reuse and transformation of Catholic structures and objects into Hopi traditions signaled a Pueblo rejection and overwriting of Catholicism. By unpacking the complex chronicle of events at the Awatovi pueblo, however, Dean and Leibsohn explore how this is not necessarily the case. Instead, the Hopi adaptation of Christian structures and items expresses appreciation for the sanctity within such objects regardless of religion. As such, Hopi thought in this instance transcends and defies European, largely Christian, ideas of pollution or purity.

As Jacobi and Zolli note in their introduction, the very concept of the Renaissance and early modern period in the West is bound to notions of purification (49). Renaissance thinkers framed their own time as one in which classical culture was reborn in a manner that purged the stains left by interim styles and centuries. Petrarch, as early as 1339, described how, 'After the darkness has been dispelled, our grandsons will be able to walk into the pure radiance of the past' (1977: 17). This unsullied idea of the Renaissance was repeated and reinforced in later interpretations of the period, not least in the co-opting of a 'purified' interpretation of the ancient Roman Empire and Italian Renaissance by Mussolini's fascist regime (Lasansky 2004). While postwar scholars such as Eugenio Battisti sought to undo this perfected, politically motivated idea of the Renaissance through publications like *L'antirinascimento* (1962), it is only in the past twenty years that the long afterlife of such ideological constructions of the period has begun to unravel.

*Contamination and Purity* offers a rich, productive addition to this vein of scholarship. Its essays demonstrate that this period was far from 'pure' — but rather was a time in which ideas, materials, people, and practices were interacting and co-mingling to create a culture of interdisciplinary contagion. If, as expressed by the editors, a major scholarly touchstone for the publication was Mary Douglas's groundbreaking *Purity and Danger* from 1966 (2002) — a structuralist book in which social ideas around dirt and cleanliness are seen as mutually reinforcing — then this volume attests that such a culturally constructed binary is never clean cut, but rather shifting and permeable.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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