

PROGRAMME

Symposium

VISUAL HUMANISMS



Florence, October 20 - 21, 2022

Organised by

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Renaissance Humanism was an important driving force behind the ideal of bringing antiquity back to life, or restoring the ancient gods to their former glory. Was this resurrection of non-Christian gods merely an intellectual game or should we call it religious practice? Because of the education in the *studia humanitatis*, elites in early modern Italy were well versed in ancient texts relating to Roman, Greek, and other local antiquities; that knowledge was an element of social distinction and many were therefore willing to contribute to new translations and publications or to the decoration of buildings, palazzi, and gardens with reference to the ancient gods. As Ernst Gombrich already noted, Botticelli's *Primavera* (1482), showing Venus and Mercury, was the first non-religious painting after antiquity in a size that had previously been reserved for altarpieces. This raises the question if we should see this as Renaissance polytheism or paganism.

This symposium examines the role of artists in bringing about the ideals of Renaissance humanism. Many Renaissance artists were active in identifying and physically examining antiquities. Treatises of art theory - often written by artists themselves - contributed to both detailed and overview knowledge about antiquity. In this process Renaissance artists may have gained more than textual and visual information alone, that could be described as 'tacit' or 'embodied' knowledge. One could argue, that artistic research played a pivotal role in the process of reintegration of classical textual sources and visual and material culture, which was typical for the Renaissance movement.

What is more, by restoring the classical pantheon of gods, artists may have also contributed to inconsistency of belief and possibly to new forms of paganism. Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood argued in *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010), that Renaissance works of art referring to an ancient past acquire multiple temporalities; Botticelli's 'paintings became instantiations of ancient gestures', so to speak: embodiments of ancient works of art, rematerializing the pagan gods. If we focus on these visual, material and public aspects of religion and not as something people 'believed' in, does that approach give us new insights into Renaissance culture and its complex, possibly religious interest in ancient paganism?

Thursday, October 20

10.00 *Coffee/Tea*

10.15 **Michael W. Kwakkelstein**, *Director's Welcome*

Marieke van den Doel (University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht), *Introduction*

Session 1 Visual Humanism and Paganism

(chair: Gert-Jan van der Sman, NIKI)

10.30 **Susanna de Beer** (University of Leiden, Royal Netherlands Institute Rome)

Who is Best at Restoring Ancient Rome? Collaboration and Rivalry between Humanist Writers and Visual Artists

10.55 **Han Lamers** (University of Oslo)

The Dotti Greci of Italian Humanism: An Alternative Introduction

11.20 *Discussion*

11.30 **Marieke van den Doel** (University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht)

Visual Humanism and Paganism: The Case of the Tempio Malatestiano

11.55 **Matthijs Jonker** (University of Utrecht, Royal Netherlands Institute Rome)

Transcultural Visual Humanism: Understanding New World Antiquities through Images

12.20 *Discussion*

12.30 *Lunch*

Session 2 The experiment of the Renaissance artist

(chair: Joachim Duyndam, University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht)

13.30 **Joost Keizer** (University of Groningen)

What Is a Renaissance Allegory?

13.55 **Elsje van Kessel** (University of St Andrews)

Visual humanisms out to sea

14.20 **Sergius Koderer** (University of Vienna)

Giovan Battista della Porta's Physiognomics and the Pagan Gods

14.45 *Discussion*

15.00 *Afternoon Tea*

Session 3 The Ancient Gods

(chair: Anja Machielse, University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht)

15.30 **Kocku von Stuckrad** (University of Groningen), **keynote lecture**

Agential Entanglements in Renaissance Art: Locating Ancient Gods in Religious Discourse

16.20 *Discussion*

16.30 *Reception*

Friday October, 21

10.00 *Coffee/Tea*

Session 5 Botticelli Revisited

(chair: Valery Rees, London School of Philosophy and Economic Science)

10.15 **Alessandro Cecchi** (Casa Buonarroti)

Lecture Botticelliana. La Primavera e una proposta per la Villa dell'Ospedaletto

10.40 **Ingrid Rowland** (University of Notre Dame School of Architecture)

Botticelli, Vasari, and the Medici Revival of Etruscan Art

11.05 **Gert Jan van der Sman** (NIKI)

The Visual Language of Botticelli's Primavera

11.30 *Discussion*

11.40 *Coffee/Tea*

Session 6 Harmony of Concurrent Alternatives

(chair: Anja Machielse, University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht)

12.00 **Jacomien Prins** (Utrecht University)

Seeing, Hearing, Beauty and Love in Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium

12.25 **Valery Rees** (London School of Economic Science)

Reframing the 'Twilight of the Gods'

12.50 *Discussion*

13.00 *Lunch*

- 14.00 **Book presentation** Marieke van den Doel, *Ficino and Fantasy. Imagination in Art and Theory from Botticelli to Michelangelo* with Valery Rees and Anja Machiels
- 15.00 *Concluding remarks*

ABSTRACTS

Alessandro Cecchi (Casa Buonarroti, Florence)

Lecture della Primavera e una proposta per la perduta decorazione della Villa dello Spedaletto

La presentazione si propone di fare il punto sulle svariate interpretazioni che si sono avute sulla *Primavera* fino ai giorni nostri e sulla datazione dell'opera. In chiusura verrà formulata una proposta sul programma della decorazione della Villa dello Spedaletto affidata, intorno agli anni 1490, a Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Filippino Lippi e Perugino, i quattro maggiori artisti della Firenze di quel tempo, secondo il rapporto di un anonimo agente del duca di Milano.

Reading the Primavera and a proposal for the lost decoration of the Villa dello Spedaletto

The presentation aims to evaluate the various interpretations that have been made of the *Primavera* and its dating up to the present day. A proposal will be made for the visual programme for the decoration of the Villa dello Spedaletto, entrusted, around 1490, to Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Filippino Lippi and Perugino, the four greatest artists in Florence at the time, according to the report of an anonymous agent of the Duke of Milan.

Susanna de Beer (University of Leiden, Royal Netherlands Institute Rome)

Who is Best at Restoring Ancient Rome? Collaboration and Rivalry between Humanist Writers and Visual Artists

All through Renaissance Europe people were fighting over the legacy of ancient Rome. The goal: gaining prestige based on the authority that the ancient Roman past still generated in terms of power, morality, magnificence, and culture. This battle was highly complex: it was fought between groups of variable sizes and types, including families, cities, nations and empires, as well as religious factions. Accordingly, the specific goals varied from legitimizing political, religious or cultural primacy, to creating local, regional or national identities. The parties also fought in variable alliances, sometimes on the same side, sometimes against each other, depending on what was at stake.

This paper zooms in on a specific part of this battlefield, that is the part where humanist writers and visual artists found each other, both as colleagues and competitors. I will argue that they regularly collaborated in restoring ancient Rome on behalf of certain 'third parties', but that they also took up the same weapons against each other - in the context of the *Paragone delle Arti*.

Matthijs Jonker (University of Utrecht, Royal Netherlands Institute Rome)

Transcultural Visual Humanism: Understanding New World Antiquities through Images

As Elizabeth Horodowich and Lia Markey argue in *The New World in Early Modern Italy* (2017), the

Renaissance was not just the result of the rediscovery of the European classical tradition, but also of the encounters with antiquities from the “New World”. Moreover, they hold that with all its problematical connotations, the term “discovery” is not completely inappropriate in this context, insofar as Europe discovered *itself* in these encounters – and that Italy played an important role in this self-discovery. Taking this as my starting point, in my talk I will focus specifically on the understudied role of artists in this investigation of the New World and in the related European self-discovery. I will focus both on sixteenth-century indigenous artists in Mexico, who were partly trained in the European and partly in the pre-Columbian tradition, and on Italian artists who reworked the images produced in the New World. The main question is how knowledge of Mexican antiquities was Europeanized and how indigenous perspectives and agencies can still be retraced in the resulting images in treatises and in works of art.

Sergius Koder (University of Vienna)

Giovan Battista della Porta's Physiognomics and the Pagan Gods

This paper addresses the visual representations of pagan gods in Giovan Battista della Porta's books on physiognomics. The illustrations in these books have never been studied in detail as an integral part of a change in the perception of the Graeco-Roman Pantheon, that characterizes the instrumental use of these deities with the task at hand in physiognomics. This art, with its claim that it could classify and predict the characters and inclinations of human individuals, developed a particular instrumental understanding of the pagan gods.

Joost Keizer (University of Groningen)

What Is a Renaissance Allegory?

In the Renaissance, allegorical images re-emerged as a testing ground for visual hermeneutics. Artists like Andrea Mantegna, Leonardo da Vinci, and Albrecht Dürer tested *how* images were able to point beyond themselves, to concepts not readily available in the mimetic structures Renaissance traditions of art-making prescribed. Leaning towards the system of sign and referent of text, allegory was above all a way to experiment with everything an image was not. Allegory therefore turned to a particularly Renaissance obsession with defining what an image was *qua* image.

In their quest to find a visual form for allegory, some Renaissance artists delved into the ancient past and found that there, in Greek and Roman mythology, allegorical concepts were embodied by ancient gods, figures venerated at famous cult sites reported on by Pliny and others. What resulted was a revival of the pagan gods that was not just an imitation of ancient forms but also a revival of these gods' religious efficacy.

This paper studies the way a handful of Renaissance artists dealt with the problem of ancient religion in their efforts to define a new kind of visual allegory.

Han Lamers (University of Oslo)

The Dotti Greci of Italian Humanism: An Alternative Introduction

The role of Byzantine Greek scholars in the Italian Renaissance has long been recognized. The names of Chrysoloras, Plethon, Bessarion, and Lascaris are familiar to anyone studying Italian humanism. Scholarship has explored how learned Greeks in Italy ‘reintroduced’ Greek to the Latin West, inspired new ways of thinking and writing, and invigorated new artistic subjects and styles. But how have notions of their contribution changed over the last few centuries? And what can these changes tell us about evolving views of Byzantium, Italian humanism, and the encounter between ‘Greek East’ and ‘Latin West’? Instead of offering a traditional introduction, this paper sets out to explore the place of learned Greeks in Italian humanism through the lens of later discussions of their presence: from the responses of Italian humanists, through 18th-century treatments of their contribution and early scholarly studies of Renaissance humanism, all the way to where we stand now. As an alternative introduction to the *dotti greci* of Italian humanism, this paper is intended to focus and hone our thoughts on the topic and to open some avenues for further questioning and research.

Jacomien Prins (Utrecht University)

Seeing, Hearing, Beauty and Love in Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium

During the last one and a half century general historians formulated a couple of paradigmatic interpretations of Renaissance humanism that have been taken up by art and music historians. In this paper, I investigate the relationship between these general interpretations and the visual and musical historiographies of Renaissance humanism on the basis of Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium and a couple of famous Renaissance paintings associated with it. In the commentary, Marsilio Ficino offers a view on the cosmos, in which love links all its parts together. Love flows from God into all parts of his creation, which consequently correspond to each other, outwardly different as they might appear at first sight, or hearing. Moreover, love is defined as the desire for beauty, and its purpose is the enjoyment of beauty. In imitation of Plato, Ficino argues that it is the manner in which one enjoys beauty which differentiates true from false love: by seeing a shadow of God's splendor or hearing an echo of God's perfect harmony in earthly things, humans are invited to contemplate the divine, and in so doing to become better and more loving persons. Despite the fact that in recent times the term ‘humanism’ has become subject to much debate and is often discarded as ‘useless’, I argue that it still makes sense to study Renaissance ideas associated with the visual and the auditive from the perspectives of the cultural revival of antiquity and the new secular philosophy associated with it.

Valery Rees (London School of Philosophy and Economic Science)

Reframing the 'Twilight of the Gods'

A central theme of this symposium is the role of the pagan gods in art of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Was it a resurrection? or do they have a more liminal, twilight existence? The purpose of this paper is not to argue with Horst Bredekamp's thesis but to show how one Renaissance thinker wove the traditional gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome into a profoundly Christian framework of ideas. Marsilio Ficino started from the principle that fundamental religious truths have been enunciated in different ways at different times: since the ultimate divinity is one and unchanging, and on the basis that human nature also shows an essential continuity, it must be possible to trace a harmony between competing systems. Following his idea of a *prisca theologia*, this paper will explore some of the philosophical underpinnings of his adoption of the gods of the ancients, and the significance with which he invested them that allowed them to be used as powerful symbols in the visual arts even in a strongly Christian setting.

David Rijser (University of Amsterdam)

Perspective as a Theological Form

The development of so-called linear perspective in the arts is doubtless the most intensely discussed innovation connecting arts and sciences on the one hand, and antiquity and the present in early modern culture on the other. But there are significant consequences of the use of perspective as a 'symbolic form' in theological outlook as well, as Hans Belting has recently argued in his inquiry into the significance of perspective within a comparison of Christian and Islamic traditions. This lecture will probe Belting's findings within a frame of reception theory and argue that perspective contains a specific and limited reception of antique culture, connected with interpretations of anthropomorphic polytheism.

Ingrid Rowland (University of Notre Dame, Rome)

Botticelli, Vasari, and the Medici Revival of Etruscan Art

When a Sieneese banker gave Lorenzo de' Medici an urn with the ashes of Lars Porsenna in the 1470s, he knew that no one could have appreciated the gift more knowingly. No matter that the urn was labeled in Latin letters; how else would Il Magnifico have recognized whose ashes it held? From the era of Lorenzo, who amassed the first collection dedicated to Etruscan artifacts, artists were instrumental in finding ways to use specifically Etruscan motifs as a way of trumpeting the Medici's local heritage. Art was all the more important in conveying the inimitable flavor of Etruria because Etruscan inscriptions, though plentiful, were as yet illegible. Among Etruscan-minded artists, the well-read Sandro Botticelli was particularly expert at evoking Etruria for his patron Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, but a century later, another well-read practitioner, Giorgio Vasari, performed a similar service for his patron Cosimo I, who used Etruscan themes with ruthless ingenuity to assert his own authority as Magnus Dux Hetrueriae, or, as he would have put it, to declare the natural internal cohesion of Tuscany as a significant European political power.

Marieke van den Doel (University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht)

Visual Humanism and Paganism: The Case of the Tempio Malatestiano

The Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini is one of the earliest monuments celebrating the secular or pagan aspects of the Italian Renaissance. The image programme is usually explained from the perspective of self-glorification of Sigismondo Malatesta (1417-1468) and his wife Isotta degli Atti, but also contains depictions of the planets and constellations, sibyls, muses and spiritelli of water and music.

This programme probably was the result of the synergic collaboration between Sigismondo's court humanist Basinio da Parma (1425-1457), the architect and humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) and the sculptor Agostino di Duccio (1418-1481), and led to various condemnations by Pope Pius II. Sigismondo also personally retrieved the mortal remains of the Platonic philosopher Gemisthos Plethon (1355/60-1442/44) from Greece to bury in a tomb on the outside of the tempio.

It has often been argued that during the Italian Renaissance there existed no paganism or polytheism but only Christian humanism and Christian Platonism (or Hermeticism). The ubiquitous presence of the antique gods in the visual arts and literature of this period, however, calls for further discussion. If we define 'religion' not only as an inner conviction, but as a practice and a means of communication, this will create a new image of Renaissance polytheism (Von Stuckrad). How should we furthermore understand the very elaborate visual and material exposition of Renaissance artists with the non-Christian formal language of Antiquity?

Gert Jan van der Sman (Dutch University Institute for Art History (NIKI), Florence)

The Visual Language of Botticelli's Primavera

The Medici commission of the *Primavera*, the first of Botticelli's "mythologies", represented a major challenge to the artist. This paper focuses on his active engagement with the sources of the invention and the artistic ambitions that drove him to produce a work of art of unparalleled beauty. Botticelli clearly seized the opportunity to show that he was not inferior to any poet of his age when it came to bringing to life the deities of antiquity. At the same time he set himself the task to emulate the creative force and vitality of nature. Yet another challenge consisted in improving on visual examples of classical art. All three aspects appear to be intimately connected and invite us to rethink the modes of communication between painter, patron and humanist advisor(s).

Kocku von Stuckrad (University of Groningen), keynote speaker

Agential Entanglements in Renaissance Art: Locating Ancient Gods in Religions Discourse

The lecture addresses the topic of "Visual Humanisms" from the point of view of recent agential theories and explores the historical changes in religious discourse during the Renaissance period. Religions take place

in active communication between humans and the more-than-human world. In these processes of agential intra-action, the question of “belief” is less interesting than the question of meaning-making and organizing entanglements between the human and the more-than-human. When we look at the Renaissance period, we can see a change in organizing these entanglements: While the ancient Greek and Roman divinities and philosophies have always provided what scholar of religion Burkhard Gladigow called “concurrent alternatives” to dominant Christian discourses, Renaissance artists and intellectuals emphasized these alternatives in an unprecedented way. They engaged in an intra-action with ancient divinities that enhanced the agency of those nonhuman factors. The works of art that resulted from this engagement made the new entanglement “visible,” and their public status further strengthened the agency of these paintings and sculptures themselves. The concurrent alternatives that had been tacitly known in a simultaneity of “multiple temporalities” (Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood) became embodied and visually present in the works of Renaissance artists. The religious change that this rearrangement of human entanglements with the more-than-human world brought forth is a move toward polytheism, as it takes the agency of the ancient gods—and their presence in works of art—seriously and integrates these agencies in a larger discourse of religious pluralism.