
This book is as rich, copious, and complex as the media it interprets: painting, sculpture, architecture, decorative arts, medals and coins, ornamental stucco and strapwork, prints and drawings, books, and tapestries, with particular attention paid to the value — both economic and symbolic — of materials either represented or employed in the artistic process. It offers a synthetic study of French Renaissance art and culture, at once a complement to and dialectic with Henri Zerner's *Renaissance Art in France: The Invention of Classicism* (1996). As the author notes, this book's aim is to “identify a stylistic register in sixteenth-century French art, one of a highly ornamental profusion and abundant detail, and connect
it with certain thematic preoccupations — fertility, eroticism, and organic abundance — and with political and economic ideas about the natural (and infinitely regenerating) origins of French wealth” (4). In sixteenth-century France, as Zorach observes, the antique meant an artistic as well as social engagement with a cornucopia of things, sometimes desirable, sometimes threatening in their excess.

Right away the reader is prepared for a fresh and fast-paced approach to some of the most beloved imagery of the French Renaissance. The book is divided into four sections corresponding to four materials in their liquid, and therefore mutable states: blood, milk, ink, and gold. As opposed to more traditional iconographic approaches, Zorach seeks multiple layers of significance with the images under discussion. Indeed, the goal is not so much what the works of art mean but how they read, where obscurity frequently served to manifest princely authority through the performance of illumination.

"Blood" centers on the fresco The Death of Adonis (here read simultaneously as The Punishment of Attis) from the Gallery of Francis I at Fontainebleau, and addresses courtly preoccupations involving the connection of body and state, or how sacrificial symbolism, realized through the spilling of blood (notably through emasculation), promotes issues of regeneration, cultivation, and salvation for the Christian ruler. Zorach makes both compelling and challenging associations between Adonis and Attis, and the potential relationship of the fresco to Rosso Fiorentino’s startling images of the dead Christ, works made for different contexts and at different times.

"Milk" opens with a discussion of II Tribolo’s multi-breasted statue of Nature, sent to Fontainebleau around 1529, and goes on to analyze numerous examples of the productive female body, from the figure of Earth on Cellini’s saltcellar to the various paintings of a Woman at Her Toilet, seeing them in light of a broader courtly imperative regarding France’s investment in its own natural resources and earthly abundance. This is the most rewarding chapter of the book, with much new insight into the relationships between art and nature, the fertile body and the fecund state.

"Ink," which largely considers the ornamental framing devices in illustrated printed books, sees the medium as reproductive, able to disseminate a decidedly French style developed at Fontainebleau. Drawing from the writings of Emanuel Kant, Jacques Derrida, and Oleg Grabar, Zorach observes how ornament “may thus imply order, power, capture, but it seems also to open a space for the conversion of these impulses into play and production” (156).

"Gold," on the other hand, explores the material and its fashioning in terms of its value and excess, where the abundance of artifice could be seen as unnatural and troubling. The French court relied on lavish displays of material wealth, but Zorach keenly observes how the goldsmiths, for example, took advantage of the king’s fetish by adulterating their products, driving up prices on the façon (the making), and hence contributing to the problem of inflation. The king’s fascination with luxury goods and magnificent spectacles also became the object of political critique, leading to accusations of social deviance and idolatry.
Some observations appear forced in support of the overarching themes of the book. A case in point involves images of putti peeing, laughing, wearing masks, wrestling about, and even playing with their genitals, which one finds in the ornamental framework at Fontainebleau and in prints. It is a stretch to read their actions as “sympathetic” to the pain of fallen heroes (70), registering virile potency, and alluding to “anal eroticism” (173). With their childish follies, these putti have a broader history (see Charles Dempsey, *Inventing the Renaissance Putto*, 2001), and more readily provide an ironic foil to scenes of education, love, sacrifice, and death, not to mention the deluded fancies of the male hero. As supplements, such ornaments distract, calling attention to artistic investment in courtly wit.

Throughout the book, Zorach adduces the critical theories of a number of important writers. One might wish, however, that she had dealt with some of their ideas more extensively; her voice risks at times disappearing into the montage of authorities. Also, her claim that scholarship frequently exhibits anxiety over analyzing the courtly context of French Renaissance art might strike a discordant note with a number of experts in the field, especially given the variety of relevant exhibitions in recent years. She also has little to say about Francesco Primaticcio, who assumed control over all royal commissions from 1540 until his death in 1570. But these last remarks should not override the fact that this book provides fertile research for the field of Renaissance studies.

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