President’s Message from Mark Rosen

February 5, 2021

Dear Members of the Italian Art Society,

I want to wish all of our members a happy and healthy new year and thank you for renewing your memberships, especially at a moment when COVID cases continue to rise in most countries and most instruction remains online. At the moment of this writing, some museums in Italy are starting to reopen (including the Uffizi and other Florentine museums, as well as some archeological sites like Pompeii) while other areas, such as Venice, will—to the consternation of some—continue to keep many museums closed through April in response to the Italian government’s declaration of a national State of Emergency through the end of that month. With the spring 2021 conferences of the CAA, RSA, and ICMS all being held online, we unfortunately won’t be gathering in person before the summer (at earliest), although one of the consolations of the virtual conference is the ability to see even more presentations than would be physically possible in person.

With the focus on the virtual foremost in everyone’s mind, it’s worth highlighting that the IAS website redesign is complete. This demanded the efforts of many people, beginning with Amélie Walker-Yung, of Castle Builder Design. I want to give a special nod to Sarah Wilkins, IAS Executive Vice President, who thoroughly combed the existing site for outdated language and links. During the launch, Melissa Yuen has served as interim Webmaster and has done a fantastic job of keeping the new site running. Also, this fall, the MOD (Membership, Outreach, and Development) Committee introduced new membership levels, including offering institutional membership for the first time. Katie Brown and Nicola Camerlenghi, the MOD co-chairs, took great initiative in rethinking membership for the organization and keeping it active and dynamic even during a pandemic year.

As I write, our slate of candidates for committee and board positions is up for election. Please take the time to vote and show support for those who have put themselves forward. As I can attest after serving in IAS board positions for six years, it takes time and energy to keep the organization running. I was fortunate to learn so much from the examples of my presidential predecessors, Sheryl Reiss and Sean Roberts, and I hope that anyone interested will consider serving in the future.

On the immediate horizon is the 2021 CAA, where Emerging Scholars Committee Chair (and incoming Executive Vice President) Tenley Bick has organized “‘Italianicity is not Italy’: Questioning Italian Art History.”
with presentations from Brian McLaren, Tenley Bick, Allison Kim, and Sean Anderson. The live Q&A for the participants will take place online Friday, February 12, from 1 to 1:30 EST. We’ve scheduled the annual IAS Business Meeting for the slot immediately following, from 1:30 to 2:30 EST; a Zoom link for all of our members will be sent in the days leading up to the conference. We’d love to see you at both!

At the April RSA, we’ll have five IAS-sponsored panels: two on “Women and Gender in Italian Trecento Art and Architecture” (organized by Judith Steinhoff), two on “New Perspectives on Italian Art” (organized by Kelly Helmsutler Di Dio and Ilaria Andreoli), and “Visual Networks of Healing in Renaissance Italy” (chaired by Sandra Cardarelli and Valentina Živković). The schedule is not yet live, but all panels will be available to viewed by RSA members between April 7 and 10, with live Q&A sessions similar to those at the RSA. All of our upcoming (and past) sponsored sessions can now be viewed on the website at the Conferences at a Glance page.

Our Awards committee is currently deliberating on this year’s round of publication and dissertation grants, with the intention of announcing the winners before CAA. Thanks to Max Grossman for overseeing that process for the first time this year.

Finally, I should note that this is the last message I’ll write as IAS President. In the last two years I’ve benefitted greatly from so many others in the organization, from VP Sarah Wilkins as the organizational wizard to Tenley Bick and her dynamic strengthening of the Emerging Scholars Committee. Both move forward to the top positions, and I couldn’t be more confident of their abilities in those roles. Given that the pandemic has greatly curtailed our gatherings this year, it’s a little bittersweet ending my tenure without being able to host a big CAA or RSA reception and seeing you all in person. In the meantime, avanti!

A presto,

Mark

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**ITALIAN ART SOCIETY NEWS**

**Take a look at our** [new website]!

Launched at the beginning of December, our new website is easier to use, bringing to the fore the society’s endeavors to support and promote the study of Italian art.

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**Congratulations to IAS Members Barbara Wisch, William R. Levin and Kelli Wood**

Barbara Wisch’s co-edited volume *A Companion to Early Modern Rome* has been chosen as the joint recipient of the 2020 [Roland H. Bainton Prize](#) for Reference Works by the Sixteenth Century Society & Conference. The prize committee commended this multidisciplinary study as a volume which will be “of tremendous use to scholars and students because its focus is very well conceptualized and organized, while still covering a breadth of topics. The authors celebrate Rome’s diversity by exploring its role not only as the seat of the Catholic Church, but also as home to large communities of diplomats, printers, and working artisans, all of whom contributed to the city’s visual, material, and musical cultures.”

William R. Levin received SECAC’s presidential [Service to the Arts Award](#) in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the society, his numerous publications and his broader commitment to the discipline.

Kelli Wood. Assistant Professor at the University of Tennessee, was awarded a 12-month fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities to support her [research](#) on 17th-century Italian board games.
IAS Co-Founder and Distinguished Member Diane Cole Ahl is Honored in a Special Issue of the Journal Predella

Diane Cole Ahl is among the founders of the IAS, and also served as its vice-president and president. In 2017, the society honored her with a Lifetime Achievement Award. The publication, which gathers several contributions on Italian art in issue 47 of the journal Predella, was edited by fellow IAS member Barbara Wisch. Further details can be found below in the Member Publications section.

Congratulations and warmest wishes to them all from the IAS community.

IAS-sponsored Sessions at Virtual RSA 2021

We are delighted to sponsor the following sessions at this year’s Renaissance Society of America Meeting. All abstracts may be found on our website.

Visual Networks of Healing in Renaissance Italy

Organizers and Chairs:
Sandra Cardarelli, University of Aberdeen, UK
Valentina Živković, Institute for Balkan Studies, SASA, Belgrade

This session explores faith and medicine as two of the traditional methods of healing represented in the visual arts in the Renaissance, and how its local and global dimensions influenced Italian art. Visual imagery will be examined to establish the ways in which narratives of healing practices and healing saints were formed and became an integral part of cultural traditions. Healing will be discussed in both its physical and metaphysical dimensions to highlight the ways in which religious and cultural values related to healing translated into shared visual idioms that were sought after, acquired, adapted and effectively utilized to foster new religious cults and/or healing practices. As imagery was actively used to forge devotional, social and political networks between different locales, main centers and liminal communities, we will examine how the practice and representation of healing differed and influenced dominant cultural centers and the periphery.

Speakers:
Theresa Flanigan, The College of Saint Rose, “Art, Compassion, and Healing at the Tomb of St. Francis in Assisi.”
Louise Marshall, University of Sydney, “Topographies of Salvation: The City Model in Renaissance Plague Images.”
Alessandra Foscati, University of Lisbon, “Healing Saints and Disease: Images and Texts.”

Women and Gender in Italian Trecento Art and Architecture I and II

Organizer and Chair: Judith Steinhoff, University of Houston

These two sessions examine both the patronage and the representation of women in 13th- and 14th-century Italian art, topics that remain under-explored despite the large body of scholarship on women and gender in other cultures and periods. Papers go beyond the stereotypical gender identities and roles promoted by the Church and theological writings, to seek a complex understanding of the models for and the lives of Trecento women.

Speakers in Session I:
Angelica Federici, Cambridge University, “Convents, Clausura and Cloisters: Female Religious Patronage in Medieval Lazio.”
Janis Elliott, Texas Tech University, “The Art of Royal Propaganda: Recovering the Queen of Naples’ Reputation.”

Speakers in Session II:
Judith Steinhoff, University of Houston, “Up Close and Personal: Gendering Small Devotional Ensembles.”
Sarah Wilkins, Pratt Institute, “Late Medieval Vita Panels and Mary Magdalen as a Gendered Model of Penitence.”
Erik Gustafson, George Mason University, “In the Footsteps of Women: Gender Segregation or Inclusion in Mendicant Churches.”

New Perspectives on Italian Art I-IV

Organizers:
Kelley Helmsztifter Di Dio, University of Vermont
Ilaria Andreoli, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Paris

These sessions create a space for emerging scholars (recent Ph.D.s or Ph.D. candidates) to present their work on any area of early modern Italian art (1300-1600). These scholars work with new methodologies, new areas of study, or innovative approaches to more traditional areas of Renaissance studies. The sessions provide new scholars a forum to present their
ideas and methods and an opportunity to receive constructive feedback from senior scholars who will serve as respondents.

**Session I – Sculpture**

**Respondent:** Sarah Blake McHam, Rutgers University

**Speakers:**
- Vincenzo Sorrentino, Università di Firenze, “Seeking a Roman Identity: the del Riccio and Michelangelo.”
- Lindsay Sheedy, Washington University in St. Louis “A Feast for Worms: The Rise and Fall of the Presepe in Early Modern Naples.”

**Session II – Iconography**

**Respondent:** Bruce Edelstein, New York University, Florence

**Speakers:**
- Amanda Hilliam, Independent Scholar, “Against Naturalism: Carlo Crivelli’s Artifice.”
- Bar Leshem, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, “‘Warning’ Imagery on Sixteenth-Century Italian Cassoni.”
- Clarisse Evrard, University of Lille, IRHiS “A Semiological Approach to the Domestic Universe of Renaissance Italy: Maiolica Services.”
- Francesca Casamassima, University of Genoa “Perseus’ Adventures: Iconographic Study of Two Genoese Mythological Cycles.”
- Caroline Koncz, Ohio State University “The Price of Preserving Chastity and Paralyzing Masculinity in Jacopo Bassano’s Diana and Actaeon.”

**Session III – Late 16th Century**

**Respondent:** Catherine R. Puglisi, Rutgers University

**Speakers:**
- Angelo Lo Conte, University of Melbourne “A Visual Testament by Luca Riva, a Deaf and Mute Pupil of the Procaccini.”
- Aisling Reid, Queen's University, Belfast “‘Virtù nelle Pietre’: Lithic Agency in Early Modern Italian Culture.”
- Gabriele Tonizzo, University of Udine “Between Religion and Politics: The Altarpiece in Venice during Late Mannerism.”

**Session IV – Patronage**

**Respondent:** Sheryl Reiss, Independent Scholar and Tracy E. Cooper, Temple University

**Speakers:**
- Sara Bova, Università IUAV di Venezia “Cultural and Architectural Syncretism in Quattrocento Rome: Patronage of a Venetian Cardinal, Marco Barbo (1420-1491).”
- Eveline Baseggio Omiccioli, SUNY, Fashion Institute of Technology “When Faith meets Philosophy and Politics: Girolamo Donato at Santa Maria dei Servi in Venice.”
- Negar Rokhgar, Rutgers University “Imperial Self-Fashioning and Anti-Ottoman Alliance: Persian Gifts and Embassies in Early Modern Venetian Visual Culture.”
- Giulia Zanon, University of Leeds “Cittadini Artistic Patronage within the Scuole Grandi in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Venice.”

**Call for IAS-Organized Session Proposals**

**American Association for Italian Studies (AAIS) 2021**

**28 May - 6 June 2021 (virtual)**

The IAS seeks proposals for IAS-organized sessions at the annual meeting of the American Association of Italian Studies (AAIS).

In keeping with the mission of the AAIS, sessions that approach Italian Studies through interdisciplinary lenses and represent a range of interests and time periods are particularly welcome. Topics that are broadly conceived to also include
architecture, cinema, mass media, etc., are of special interest. In recognition of the format, we welcome exploration of intersections between Italian Studies and the digital humanities. Further, linking to the Association’s efforts to adopt a greater pro-active position regarding racial injustice, we particularly welcome interventions that address questions of antiracism and decoloniality.

IAS members interested in putting together a panel should submit the following items:

- session title
- abstract (100 words max.), to be forwarded to the AAIS in the event of selection
- short list of potential or confirmed speakers
- longer text (up to one page) contextualizing the proposal; this includes explaining the relevance/importance of the session and the related expertise of the organizer(s) and speakers
- brief CV (1–3 pp)

Send materials by 12 February 2021 to programs@italianartsociety.org.

Online submission form.

Additional conference-specific guidelines, including AAIS membership requirements, are available here.

Key Deadlines:
Submit Session Proposals to IAS: 12 February 2021
Submit Session Proposals to AAIS: 15 February 2021
Recorded Sessions to AAIS: 9 May 2021

SPECIAL FEATURES

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Artemisia
3 October 2020-24 January 2021 (originally scheduled for 4 April-26 July 2020)
National Gallery

By Claudia Daniotti, University of Warwick

I was not among the fortunate who were able to visit Artemisia in person, the first ever exhibition devoted to this artist in the UK, which was first postponed to the autumn of 2020 and then closed twice because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the excellent accompanying catalogue and virtual tour of the show led by curator Letizia Treves somehow make up for the missed opportunity, and even succeed in the challenging task of giving some sense of the overwhelming physical presence of Artemisia’s life-size painted figures.

In the rooms of the National Gallery, some forty artworks illustrate the career of the most celebrated female artist of the seventeenth century, who was born in Rome in 1593, was first trained there by her father Orazio, established herself as an artist in the years she spent in Florence, visited Venice and London, and settled in Naples, where she died sometime after 12 August 1654. A selection of twenty-nine paintings securely attributed to Artemisia’s hand – spanning from Biblical and historical episodes to portraits and self-portraits, from religious to allegorical subjects – is displayed alongside a variety of items that help place her work in the larger context, for example by including two canvases by her father Orazio. The show also testifies to fellow artists’ and friends’ admiration for her by featuring portraits of her in different media, including one bronze medal and one engraving, whilst at the same time bringing to life Artemisia’s own voice in the selection of love letters, both highly intimate and incandescently passionate, that she wrote to her lover Francesco Maria Maringhi.

The chronological order in which Artemisia’s paintings are shown is bookended by two depictions of Susannah and the Elders, which are also her first and last-known signed and dated works (1610, Pommersfelden, Kunstsammlungen Graf von Schönborn; and 1652, Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale). The Pommersfelden painting and a third version also on display (1622, The Burghley House Collection) are notable examples of what made Artemisia’s art so unique and sought-after among seventeenth-century patrons and collectors: namely, her peculiar treatment of the female body, the unprecedented truthfulness which turns the often idealized and statuesque protagonists of Biblical and ancient historical stories into creatures of flesh and blood we can easily relate to, belonging as they seem to our time rather than to a distant and remote past. Artemisia was well aware that no (male) artist of the time could contribute this, and that her depictions of female heroines, envisaged as they were by a painter who was herself a woman, would remain unrivalled – so much so that they are surely a most significant part of her production, which the National Gallery exhibition rightly underscores.
But Artemisia did not just engage with any neglected heroine, giving her new life with her brush. Unlike Elisabetta Sirani, who occasionally turned to more obscure, almost never-treated subjects (most famously, her Timoclea murdering the Thracian Captain Alexander, 1659, Naples, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte), Artemisia shows a distinct preference for empowered ancient women (e.g., Susannah, Lucretia, and Bathsheba) whose iconographic tradition was well established by the early seventeenth century and whose stories enjoyed a significant popularity on the art market. By making the most of her distinctive ability to get “under her heroines’ skin”, as curator Letizia Treves put it, Artemisia breathes new life into even the more conventional subjects.

This is most notably true for the Biblical Judith, whom she famously painted time and again. In Artemisia’s work, there is no way of forgetting the brutal, violent nature of Judith’s story. Whether presented with her maid in the immediate aftermath of the beheading of Holofernes (both the 1614-15 version of the Uffizi and the later candlelit version of Detroit are on show) or caught in the murderous act, no Judith like Artemisia’s had ever conveyed so forcefully the courage, resolve, and determination that such a deed required. How much physical strength would she need to actually decapitate an inebriated, but still muscular, military commander with his own sword? How could she get away with such an horrific act and leave unnoticed the murder scene while carrying her gruesome booty away with her? In the two almost contemporary versions of Judith Beheading Holofernes (Naples, Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, and Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi), which visitors of the exhibition had the privilege to admire side by side, Artemisia answers these and other questions that no Guariente, no Botticelli, no Mantegna, no Cranch, not even Donatello or Caravaggio, had answered. No Esther had swooned so convincingly (and theatrically) before the Persian king Ahasuerus like the one Artemisia made in Venice (c. 1628-30, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), nor any other Allegory of Painting had appeared so intriguing by conflating the two distinct traditions of self-portraiture and allegorical subjects (c. 1638-9, The Royal Collection).

Alongside the often problematic literal and disguised self-portraits of Artemisia, including the Self Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria purchased by the National Gallery in 2018, the portrait that Simon Vouet made of her (c. 1623-26, Pisa, Palazzo Blu) incarnates at best the personality of a woman and an artist that every source tells us was not only beautiful but fierce, ambitious, and proud. The golden medal that she wears, which bears the image of an imposing monument qualified as a mausoleum by a Greek inscription, is a witty reference to Artemisia’s namesake, the widowed 4th-century BC queen of Caria who built the Mausoleum per excellence in memory of her husband. But in Antiquity this Artemisia was often confused, and from Boccaccio onwards combined, with another, unnamed queen of Caria, a widow who lived in the 5th century BC and personally led her fleet in battle against the Greeks in aid of the Persian king Xerxes. One is reminded of the words that Artemisia herself wrote to one of her patrons, when she proudly claimed to possess “the spirit of Caesar in the soul of a woman”.

How much of Artemisia’s life is reflected in her work and to what extent her paintings should be understood in light of her biography is a matter that has preoccupied scholars for several decades. The rape she suffered in 1611 at the hands of the painter Agostino Tassi and the famous trial that ensued – the transcript of which, held at the Archivio di Stato di Roma, is publicly shown for the first time – has long overshadowed Artemisia’s art and led to interpreting a significant part of her production, and her Judths in particular, as “revenge painting”. As curator Letizia Treves has long advocated and this exhibition has made clear, to interpret Artemisia’s work only through the lens of one single event, however violent that event may be and significant its consequences, would mean to belittle an oeuvre which is far more complex that it may at first appear. In the essay that she wrote for the catalogue, Elizabeth Cropper has made an important remark: “It was easier to write about Artemisia Gentileschi when we knew less of her story and, whether as a connoisseur, a feminist, or a social historian, we could impose a narrative upon her”. The material which has been recently discovered or more thoroughly investigated – a few, previously unknown paintings, the business correspondence to patrons and rulers that Artemisia dictated, the very private letters to her lover that she wrote entirely in her own hand – provide a wealth of information which expands, deepens and enriches our understanding of both Artemisia and her work, and does not suffer the fetters of long-held, and surely more convenient, assumptions. This is good news indeed: the more we know, the more there is to be understood – and the more to enjoy.
IN CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTIST

Franco Guerzoni. L’immagine sottratta
September 9, 2020 – February 14, 2021
Museo del Novecento

By Matteo Cocci, Independent Journalist

According to the words of Franco Guerzoni himself, the exhibition L’immagine sottratta, curated by Martina Corgnati at Museo del Novecento in Milan, should not be intended as a retrospective, but rather as an insight into some of the research paths that the artist developed through the years.

As of Sunday 31 January, museums reopened in Lombardy, enabling visitors to discover, on the one hand, works belonging to the artist’s 1970s production – such as Affreschi (Frescos), namely niches dug on plaster board holding photographs of crumbling houses and, on the other hand, more recent ones – such as Archeologie senza restauro (Unrestored Archaeologies) and Paesaggi in polvere (Powdered Landscapes). Moreover, the exhibition includes small unreleased 2020 works such as Intravedere (Glimpse), a series of chipped miniature rooms that force the viewer to adopt an awkward, sideways point of view in order to experience them in depth.

Aside from these paintings and objects, the exhibition presents photographs and texts which document Guerzoni’s creative process, whilst also featuring the art books that accompanied the artist’s production throughout his whole career. These include contributions by literary scholars, critics and art historians – such as Sebastiano Vassalli, Paolo Fossati and Henry Martin – who shared with Guerzoni not only a professional collaboration, but a deep friendship as well. Finally, a video by Eva Marisaldi and Enrico Serotti highlights Guerzoni’s full artistic evolution.

To what extent has the artistic collaboration with photographer Luigi Ghirri influenced your work in the 70s?

F.G.: The close collaboration with Luigi Ghirri was certainly precious at the beginning of the 70s, as well as the cultural exchange that occurred with many other artists, poets and scholars that I had by my side in those hectic but purposeful years. By exploring with me the facade as well as the interior of many abandoned, suburban buildings, Luigi helped me to find in photography a cold and descriptive answer to my early research. When I think of Ghirri, however, I feel a sense of friendship beside the esteem for his undoubtable artistic ability. Our personalities differed and completed each other at the same time: he thought that photography stood on its own two feet, while I added to it objects, plaster and more.

When and how did the shift from photography to painting happen? Is there a specific event or memory that brought it about?

F.G.: The decision to give up photography for painting has not been easy. After a decade of research through photography, I felt that this tool had somehow exhausted its purpose, as if images had started to blur. In the early 80s, the return to drawing, a practice that I considered rusty, served as a connecting bridge between my two creative periods. I became interested in technical drawing and in the drawings made by artists who accompanied archaeologists on their trips. From those adventures came out my art books, now displayed inside light tables at Museo del Novecento. The book is a form of expression that I have never abandoned since then.

Could you explain roughly your visual technique? For example, how did you create the series Strappo d’affresco (Fresco Tearing), currently displayed at Museo del Novecento?

F.G.: I always enjoyed the opaque painting of frescos, where color soaks into the wall, settles and lives inside it. The techniques I prefer today are those which provide me with color at its purest state: colored dusts that, mixed with plaster or stucco, produce “calcinate” shades, as if they were already weathered. My paintings can be leafed through like a book: a layering that includes the practice of adding and removing from the surface, which is experienced in its depth. The fresco tearing, a technique used in restoration practices, allows me to enter the body of the paintings and to receive insights that traditional technique cannot offer me. Then, it is in the body of painting that, every time, you can find answers to the questions that the picture, in its materiality, asks as an object.

What is the meaning of the fragment in your work? Think of the pieces of glass and ceramic, the iron and copper wire that you applied to a board, for example in Museo ideale (The Ideal Museum) and Paesaggi in polvere (Powdered Landscapes), in a series which is experienced in its depth. The exhibition, curated by Martina Corgnati at Museo del Novecento in Milan, should not be intended as a retrospective, but rather as an insight into some of the research paths that the artist developed through the years.

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Landscapes). Does the use of fragment derive from the concept of ruin, so often present in your poetry?

F.G: The title given to the exhibition by curator Martina Corgnati is L’immagine sottratta (The Stolen Image). A second title could have been: Accudire il frammento (Taking Care of the Fragment). To this title I am now dedicating a series of small works in order to show how the fragment is actually the most important theme in my work. The fragment, which is self-sufficient, does not require artificial reconstruction, tells its own story and triggers fantasies of loss in me. The past, that I always conceived as a loss, often appears in my paintings in simple forms, such as the oxidized copper wires that remind me of those abandoned house facades that I used to photograph with Ghirri. The painting surface becomes a 180° scene that can provide the visitor with different perceptions. It is a vision of ruins from an undefined past, that could even be yesterday.

Which are the fundamental themes of your artistic production? Can the stratification operated by time on things be considered as one of them? For example, Archeologia (Archaeology) is a recurrent term within the titles of your works. Can you elaborate on that?

F.G: The fundamental themes of my work are related to the concepts that time, in its infinite meanings, presents to my gaze. The insights that the galaxy of fragments brings us from the past are definitely central in my research. I think that writer Marguerite Yourcenar’s words “time is a great sculptor” well represent what I look for in my research. True, the concept of archaeology is recurrent in the titles of my works. It reveals the practice of searching and finding again. Archaeology unveils fragments not only from the past, but also from everyday life, presenting them in the form of either a chipped wall or a brick in a water puddle. The living mold on the walls is an old passion of mine.

Has the purpose of your research changed, or is there a continuity between your early and recent works, for example the series Intravedere (Glimpse), currently displayed in the Milanese exhibition?

F.G: I believe that artists in general look for the same thing, which can manifest in different shapes, namely a form of obsession that drives their work through a labyrinth of images that add up together. Even the small, recent works, such as Intravedere - tiny rooms made of painted plaster, fragile as if they were about to fall apart just by being looked at - represent my curiosity about other people’s perspectives. The visitor, in order to properly look at them, is forced to adopt an awkward position, looking at them askance. Perhaps the memory of those abandoned houses that Ghirri and I visited in the early 70s, perceiving their imminent demise, is more evident in these works than anywhere else. Their image had to be captured before vanishing.

CURATORIAL INSIGHTS – EXHIBITIONS MOVING ONLINE

Building a Virtual Bilderatlas – An Interview with Bill Sherman, Director of the Warburg Institute, London

At his death in 1929, Aby Warburg left his magnum opus, the Bilderatlas Mnemosyne, incomplete. Whilst he is at times considered an unorthodox figure, Warburg’s contribution to art historical scholarship, especially on Italian Renaissance art, is undeniable. From 1927 the Bilderatlas had been Warburg’s constantly evolving work in progress, exploring the legacy of the Classical world in Western culture. It physically structured his ideas and methodology via a series of panels on which he pinned clusters of images, therefore giving us a unique insight into his thought processes. Nearly a century later, and for the first time since Warburg’s death, the Bilderatlas’s final iteration has been reconstructed using Warburg’s original images and displayed at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin. The reconstructed Bilderatlas has also been published as a book (Hatje Cantz, 2020) which won the 2020 Apollo Magazine Book of the Year award.

Featuring nearly 971 images across 63 panels – sourced principally from the Warburg Institute’s Photographic Collection and Library - the HKW exhibition was a casualty of the pandemic. Originally due to open in April 2020, it finally opened in September, but was shuttered prematurely. Before it closed, it was transformed into an innovative virtual exhibition – now available on the Warburg Institute’s website. This virtual exhibition also integrates selected exhibits from the parallel Between Cosmos and Pathos exhibition at
Berlin’s Gemäldegalerie in a virtual dialogue between the two exhibitions.

We spoke to Bill Sherman, director of the Warburg Institute, about the past, present and future of the Bilderatlas exhibition.

Before we start to discuss the virtual exhibition, could you tell us a little bit about the genesis of the physical exhibition?

B.S. In a sense, it starts with Aby Warburg himself in 1928-29, putting panels of visual materials up in his Hamburg library. It is unlikely that they were presented as an exhibition per se, they were much more of an assistance to his presentations or lectures. However, there was a display component built into Warburg’s original library in the 1920s. Then, particularly in the 1990s, people started to want to reconstruct the Bilderatlas and show it as a single object in space. That was done using reproductions of the photographs from the 1920s which had been taken to document the process as it was left at Warburg’s death. In 2016, a very important exhibition happened in Germany at ZKM in Karlsruhe, where the entire Atlas was shown in one space using reproductions – except for two panels which were shown using Warburg’s original working materials, retrieved from the Photographic Collection and other archives at the Warburg Institute in London. Those two panels persuaded the two curators of the ZKM exhibition, Roberto Ohrt and Axel Heil, that it might be possible - and would certainly be desirable - to reconstruct the entire Atlas using Warburg’s original materials. In 2018, the curators persuaded HKW in Berlin to host an exhibition if they were able to find, organize and display the materials. The next step was, of course, to ask us here at the Warburg Institute in London if we would support the project. We also said, “yes”. The work really got intense in 2019, when over the course of maybe four months about 85% of Warburg’s working materials were ultimately located, most in the Warburg Institute in London, some in Hamburg. These were conserved, photographed, reconstructed on panels and, eventually, sent to Berlin for the exhibition.

At what stage was the decision made to have a virtual exhibition – was the decision driven by the pandemic, or was it always part of the project?

B.S. We knew that there would be a lot of people who wouldn’t be able to visit the exhibition. We knew that there would be a desire to visit this exhibition which would be frustrated by the pandemic. That was the most important factor, but there were probably one or two other things lurking at the back of my mind. One, that the exhibition was a really historic reconstruction. My previous role was at the Victoria and Albert Museum [Director of Research and Collections 2014-2017], where I was used to a very rapid succession of exhibitions which generally left very little trace. In the museum world you tend to preserve not much more than a catalogue (if there is one), and an installation dossier – a set of shots of what the exhibition looked like. Internally, museums keep their own archives but, really, in most cases, it’s impossible to visit an exhibition when it’s been taken down. I had a sense that it would be a valuable endeavor in this case because of the consequence of the reconstruction effort. Also, something which was very far at the back of my mind at the beginning, and came closer and closer to the front of my mind as the project continued – and indeed as the pandemic played out – was that the project itself deserved a digital platform, because in some ways it is a proto-digital project. At a certain point, having done both an exhibition and a book, we thought that there was one missing platform, and that was the web.

When you made the decision to go virtual, were there any particular models of existing virtual exhibitions you wanted to follow – or did you have to create it from the ground up?

B.S. Marco Vedana, from documenta, who we hired to create the exhibition [see the Technical Note below], specializes in creating virtual environments for visiting museum collections online. Marco’s previous projects were our first template. Like everybody else, as the pandemic kicked in and more things have moved online, I’ve been looking at other people’s products and seeing what they look like, what works and what doesn’t. My previous experience at the V&A was very helpful here because at the V&A we had a fairly close collaboration with Google Arts and Culture around certain parts of the collection – especially fashion. So, I had some exposure to how the virtual has been working over the last few years and the potential for it. However, my final model, I would say, is Warburg’s. What would Aby Warburg – who didn’t know, of course, about computers – what would he have imagined this project looking like? I think he would have really liked the online platform, its navigability and, ultimately, its potential for being connected to other things – which is still nascent and, largely, a matter of potential.

Was it important for you to distinguish between a virtual exhibition and a virtual tour?

B.S. It’s funny because we used those terms interchangeably – at least for a while. Whether you call this a tour or an
exhibition, we wanted to provide additional material for the visitor to this exhibition – material which was not in the exhibition itself in Berlin. The physical exhibition was presented in a very stark way – in a manner of individual discovery and individual exploration. There were no videos with the curators. There were no commentaries on individual panels. In this case, we wanted that individual discovery to be enabled, but to also give more guidance than we felt the Berlin exhibition was able to provide, by adding these aspects in. Additionally, although it’s a disembodied experience, as it is a virtual capture, you are a body in the exhibition space in that your sight line is fixed. When you look up you get that distortion you would get in real life, rather than having the camera artificially move up. We consciously wanted this to be a guided experience, but also one in which ultimately the visitor was empowered and able to go where they wanted to go.

What would you like visitors to take away from the virtual experience?

B.S. I hope that those who wanted to be able to see it but couldn’t get to Berlin have at least been given a vicarious experience. I hope that they will also feel a bit more guided in terms of the curatorial experience than perhaps they were in Berlin, where some people felt a little lost. I hope they’ll want to return to it and that it is something that they will be able to go back to - unlike an exhibition which tends to disappear once it’s over - and continue developing their own new connections. Finally, I hope people will keep coming to me with their own ideas about how it can be used. Warburg’s work is not very accessible – and I mean that in both senses – it’s hard to access, and it’s also hard to understand. It’s sophisticated, and radical and, even, a little bit wacky. So, it’s exciting to now have it in a form which can be grasped by anyone. I was very heartened in the exhibition itself by the number of people who didn’t know anything about Aby Warburg, but were clearly interested in the array of images on display. Finally, there is a level on which the digital is the most accessible form of presentation. One of the most important things about this exhibition for me is that it makes the loose sense of Warburg’s method as “anything goes”’ impossible to sustain. You realize that there is a structure, there is a system. You may not understand it, and it may not ultimately be graspable, but the virtual exhibition makes clear to people that the Atlas is not just a random assemblage of images, which, for a long time it was all too easy to assume.

Did virtual allow you more flexibility than the physical exhibition or vice versa?

B.S. One thing which the virtual platform does which the exhibition in Berlin doesn’t do particularly well is translate texts. The physical exhibition was largely in German, whereas we agreed that in the virtual exhibition everything would also be translated into English. Also, the virtual version gave me, as director of the Warburg Institute, the chance to frame the exhibition in terms of the Institute here in London, its building, its collections, its history and also its future. The motivation for this virtual platform came largely from our fundraising trustees who felt that it would be a great opportunity to bring the Institute and its ambitions for its own exhibition space and digital facilities to the knowledge of the world while our profile was high.

What did you learn from the process?

B.S. For me on an intellectual level it has probably been most interesting to add this digital component, because this legendary project really was only seen in black and white photos in books for so many decades. To put it into color and into physical space as a display was such a shocking and interesting process. Then, to add it into the very different environment of a navigable, virtual space - the Atlas performs, or behaves, or even means differently in each of those platforms. It’s been very interesting to start to see that and to explore that.

Where does the virtual Bilderatlas go from here?

B.S. What digital is so good at is connecting things which are, for example, remote in space or fragile. Now that the platform exists, I hope to build additional connectivity – either to other projects or to other resources. We’re all familiar with Google’s timeline function where you can go back in time – it would be very interesting to show different versions of the panels more fully. Three sets were documented in full, with the same materials being moved around for each. This exhibition only shows one of them. Another really crucial feature I’m very much hoping to develop is augmented reality - to be able to give additional information on individual items as you are looking at them. That would really be exciting, and I think Google themselves are excited about exploring a possible project around this. It would connect you – even in an automated way – between an image on a panel and the world of information around that image, its history, its other versions, its metadata etc. Finally, we very much hope that it will become possible to have a more interactive and reconfigurable version of the Atlas at some point. For me the dream would be to show the panels as we had them in Berlin, but also to have a digital environment - maybe a touchscreen environment - where we can reconfigure different versions of
the same images and add images to see what happens. That’s the vision of the future.

**A Technical Note**

The complex process of transforming the Bilderalas exhibition into a virtual experience was undertaken by Marco Vedana from documentart. He tells us how he went about it:

**What process did you use for creating the virtual exhibition?**

**M.V.** For every point which I want to use as a ‘node’, I take seven photos to cover the 360° view: six horizontal photos and one photo at 90°. Back in my studio I post-produce the pictures. I don’t do any fancy image processing - I prefer to reproduce the exhibition space as authentically as possible. After editing the photos, I stitch them together to make one large, distorted panorama. Once I have the panoramic photos I load them into my panorama software which reproduces a sphere, so, from the distorted image I can now move around as if I were standing at that point of view. The next step is to set the default view of every node and to retouch the nadir point (looking 90° down). Then I connect the nodes and insert all the additional content, like text, photos, videos, audio etc. This is a crucial point, because it defines how the visitor moves through the tour.

**What specialist equipment do you use?**

**M.V.** I use a DSLR camera with 30 megapixel and a fisheye lens mounted on a multi-row panoramic head and a tripod. For special assignments I also use a motor-driven panoramic head as well as super tall tripods.

**Did you face any challenges in creating the virtual exhibition?**

**M.V.** The biggest challenge was the slight movement of the panels at the HKW. I take photos with ISO 100 and aperture of f8-11. That means that, especially in dark rooms, the exposure takes between 2 to 6 seconds, during which time there needs to be no movement. I had to find a solution to keep the quality and sharpness of the image, so I slightly increased the ISO and slightly opened up the aperture and stopped the panels carefully by hand to take the pictures. Luckily, it worked out!

**Was there a difference because the panels are composed of multiple images - rather than focusing on one painting or object?**

**M.V.** No not really. I treated it as one large format artwork as the focusing plan was flat.

**Are you working on any exhibitions now?**

**M.V.** At the moment I am working on a new tour for Hamburger Kunsthalle, for the Peter & Irene Ludwig Foundation and the Zephyr - Raum für Fotografie.

**Has demand increased because of the pandemic?**

**M.V.** It has increased a lot since March 2020. Every museum and art gallery is facing the new challenge of bringing their content to the people in a digital way. Virtual tours are a strong medium at the moment - and that is just the beginning. I am always thinking of ways to improve and to develop new forms of a virtual tour.

**A further reflection on online exhibitions and on the sustainability of blockbuster shows, featuring insights from American and British curators and art professionals, can be found [here.](#)**

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**2021 EXHIBITIONS**

Uncertainty linked to the pandemic continues to wreak havoc on exhibition schedules worldwide, with many museums postponing events until 2022. Nonetheless, we’ve rounded up some suggestions for Spring 2021, as well as a selection of virtual-only exhibitions to enjoy no matter where you are.

**Dates and information below correct at time of writing**

**Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace**

*The Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace, London until 31st December 2021*

Sixty-five of the most important works which usually hang in Buckingham Palace’s Picture Gallery have been brought together in a special exhibition, allowing the visitor to experience them much more closely than usual. Although Tier 4 rules (at the time of writing) have forced the closure of the physical exhibition in London, *Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace* includes a strong virtual offering. The large amount of online content linked to the exhibition includes a virtual tour, curatorial introduction, detailed information on each exhibit and exhibition labels available to download in a variety of languages. The section *Painting in Italy 1500-1740* includes highlights such as Lotto’s portrait of Andrea Odoni, Titian’s portrait of Jacopo Sannazaro and Cristofano Allori’s arresting *Judith with the Head of...*
**Holofernes.** In addition to this Italian material, there is a strong showing of Dutch Old Masters, including works by Vermeer, Rembrandt, Rubens and Frans Hals.

**Dürer's Journeys: Travels of a Renaissance Artist**  
**National Gallery, London**  
**6 March - 13 June 2021**  

Sure to be one of the blockbuster exhibitions of 2021, the National Gallery will present the first major UK exhibition on Dürer in more than 20 years, including the first-ever UK display of Dürer’s *Madonna and Child* from the National Gallery in Washington. Combining paintings, drawings, prints, and letters, the exhibition will be structured around Dürer’s travels through the Continent, including Italy.

**Empresses, Matrons and Freedwomen: Women, Power and Emancipation in Ancient Rome**  
**Uffizi Gallery, Florence**  
**until 14 February 2021**  

Closed at the time of writing, this exhibition focuses on the lives of Roman women in the first two centuries of the Empire, through statues, coins, epigraphy and drawings. Limited photos available to view online.

**After Raphael: 1520-2020**  
**Hermitage, St Petersberg**  
**Until 28th March 2021**  

Marking the 500th anniversary of Raphael’s death, this exhibition investigates his artistic legacy up to the present day. It includes eight monumental frescoes by the school of Raphael from the Hermitage collection that are being presented to the public for the first time after the restoration begun in 2015 – each in a different state of restoration.

**Canaletto: Painting Venice**  
**Holburne Museum, Bath**  
**22nd January – 5th September 2021**  

With their usual home of Woburn Abbey under renovation, this exhibition displays 23 views of Venice by Canaletto commissioned by the Duke of Bedford in 1731 and created over a four-year period. The exhibition provides the opportunity for much closer scrutiny than their usual method of display and will also investigate aspects of 18th-century Venice and the Grand Tour.

**Caravaggio: The Lute Player**  
**Galleria Borghese, Rome**  
**29th April – 26th July 2021**  

This small exhibition directly compares two of Caravaggio’s versions of the same well-known subject, a lute player – one from the Hermitage Museum and one latterly of Badminton House, Gloucestershire. The two paintings will be placed among six other works to provide context and theorise possible dating. The exhibition also aims to test the methodology of the Caravaggio Research Institute, an international project aimed at creating an integrated digital platform to share scientific data relating to Caravaggio’s works of art.

**Virtual Resources**

2021 marks the 700th anniversary of Dante’s death, with many events and exhibitions planned in Florence – both in person and online. For the latest information, visit: 700 Dante.

Meanwhile, you can start off the Dante celebrations at the Uffizi Gallery with two online exhibitions:

“To rebehold the stars” - Dante Illustrated displays eighty-eight 16th-century illustrations by Federico Zuccari of the Divine Comedy. The drawings have never been displayed in their entirety before and the last time any of them went on display was 1993. At the time of writing, the exhibition commentary is only available in Italian.

Non per foco ma per divin’arte, Dantean echoes from the Uffizi Galleries is an online slideshow of 25 artworks in the
Uffizi Gallery with links to Dante, each presented with expert analysis.

**Some virtual tours:**

**Uffizi Gallery** (Google Arts and Culture). A navigable 360º tour of the landmark Florentine museum.

**Musei Vaticani, Rome**
Six navigable 360º tours of aspects of the museum complex, including one of the Sistine Chapel.

Frick Collection, New York: 32 online virtual tours of past exhibitions including:

- Tiepolo in Milan: The Lost Frescoes of Palazzo Archinto (2019)
- Renaissance and Baroque Bronzes from the Hill Collection (2014)
- Piero della Francesca in America (2013)
- Mantegna to Matisse: Master Drawings from the Courtauld Gallery (2012)

**The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles** (Google Arts and Culture). A navigable 360º tour, plus detailed online exhibitions and close-ups of collection items.

**MASP - Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand** (Google Arts and Culture). A navigable 360º tour, plus detailed online exhibitions (including, Art from Italy: from Raphael to Titian) and close-ups of collection items.

**National Gallery London**
Google virtual tour of Rooms 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15 and Central Hall.

### NEWS AND NOTES

The decision by Mayor Luigi Brugnaro to close all City Museums in Venice has ignited controversy and led to the publication in YTALI of an Open Appeal calling for the reversal of Brugnaro’s pronouncement as well as an invitation to sign the petition.

For those based in or able to travel to Italy, and dually interested in art and agriturismo, the Etrurio Museum in the Tuscan comune of Scarlino (Province of Grosseto) offers private viewings of the Oratory of the Holy Cross with its early-Quattrocento fresco. This fresco was restored and then described by Stefania Buganza and Alessio Caporali in 2018–2019, a compressed video of their work becoming available online in late 2020.

**The current pandemic is affecting language in Italy**, with five very formal, relatively archaic words making a comeback as buzzwords.

**The Baptistery in Florence is undergoing restoration.** Four of its eight internal walls are now restored, and the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore still aims to complete the job by the end of 2021. A video is available [here](#).

The Baptistery’s restoration is part of a major campaign, ongoing since 2017 and worth 1.5 million euro.

**Botticelli’s Portrait of a Young Man sold for $92 million** at Sotheby’s Auction, the highest price ever paid for an Old Master painting after the Salvator Mundi attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. Proceed from the sale may be used to establish a private museum in Manhattan.

**Museums reopened in Florence in January**, sending a sign of hope for the cultural life of the city.

Cristina Acidini will be giving an online talk about Florence’s Accademia del disegno. One of the most prestigious, historic institutions in the city, the Accademia counted amongst its members Michelangelo, Broziono and Artemisia Gentileschi, the first woman to be granted membership. Watch live on February 5 (12.30pm EST; 5.30pm UK; 6.30pm Italy). Thereafter available on YouTube.
MEMBER PUBLICATIONS End of 2020 & 2021

Congratulations to IAS members who have recently published books


De Girolami Cheney also wrote two essays for this volume:


Congratulations to IAS members who have recently published articles, essays, and catalog entries:


A further IAS member, Timothy McCall, contributed an article: ““Questo misto di profano e di sacro’: The *Studiolo Oratorio* di Torrechiarara,” 165-183.

**Book and Exhibition Reviews**


**Newsletter Contributions and Notices**

IAS members are warmly encouraged to write for upcoming issues of the IAS Newsletter. For the spring issue, we are looking for reviews of shows listed in the exhibition section, news of recent conservation campaigns in Italy, and articles on research topics or new methodologies. If you are interested in writing a feature (approximately 800-1200 words), please contact the editor at any time, or by May 7 for the next issue. Deadlines for IAS newsletters are: Fall Newsletter: news deadline September 7/publication date October 7; Winter Newsletter: news deadline January 7/publication date February 7; Spring Newsletter: news deadline May 7/publication date June 7.

**Italian Art Society Membership and Donations**

Please join or renew your IAS membership today. Members are encouraged to pay on-line through our user-friendly website. If you wish to send a check, contact Janna Israel. While the IAS will continue to offer student membership at $20.00 and regular membership at $35.00, there are now several levels of membership for both individuals and institutions or businesses. Our Patron and Donor memberships, at $100.00 and 250.00 respectively, allow generous members to support programming, awards, scholarship, and additional endeavors. We have also added three further levels of individual membership for especially generous benefactors, and two kinds of institutional memberships. Institutional members include programs, organizations, or universities that want to promote the study of Italian art and architecture through support of the IAS. Thank you for your continued membership. Please encourage students, colleagues and organizations to join.

As a non-profit organization, the IAS seeks donations from individuals and organizations wishing to promote the study of the visual arts and architecture of Italy, from prehistory to the present. Funds will help support the IAS’s annual operations, including travel grants for graduate students and emerging scholars who are presenting their work at conferences in the USA and abroad, as well as research and publication grants. The IAS seeks general operating contributions, and is also happy to work with donors to direct contributions toward specific purposes, including travel grant support and the establishment of research or publication funds. If you have questions, please e-mail Janna Israel, treasurer@italianartsociety.org.
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