

OBJECT

GRADUATE RESEARCH AND REVIEWS IN
THE HISTORY OF ART AND VISUAL CULTURE

Number 26 2026

Esme Garlake

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studiolo: an ecocritical
reading of small-scale
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Reviews



OBJECT

EDITORIAL

The editorial board is delighted to present the twenty-sixth anniversary issue of *Object: Graduate Research and Reviews in the History of Art and Visual Culture*. Since it was founded in 1998, *Object* has been produced by postgraduate students in UCL's Department of History of Art. Over the years, the journal has remained committed to three key aims: sharing the latest research from the department with a wider audience (something that has been greatly supported by moving online), encouraging discussion and debate around new ideas and perspectives in Art History, and reviewing recent publications and exhibitions relevant to the department's research interests.

As an accredited journal, *Object* continues to rely on a rigorous external peer-review process, helping to situate our contributors' work within broader scholarly conversations in Art History. Our reviewers – including several former postgraduate students and friends of the department who now hold academic and curatorial positions across the UK – have generously given their time, expertise, and thoughtful feedback. We are deeply grateful for their support.

We would also like to thank the faculty and staff of the Department of History of Art, particularly Mignon Nixon, Cadence Kinsey, Tamar Garb, Jenny Nachtigall, Stephanie Schwartz, Richard Taws, Alison Wright and Rose Marie San Juan, for their invaluable guidance and encouragement. Special thanks as well to Eleanor Day for her essential assistance.

We are equally grateful to the many contributors, past and present editorial board members, and external reviewers who have helped make *Object* such a rewarding and vibrant part of postgraduate life within the department. Finally, we would like to thank Andrew Brown of Art /Books, whose distinctive design has shaped the journal's visual identity since its first issue, and Ian Caswell at UCL Press, whose support has made the online publication of *Object* possible.

Akin Oladimeji, Aoife Stables and Henry Tudor-Pole

Published annually by the Department of History of Art, University College London

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ISSN (ONLINE) 2396-9008

Design and typesetting by Cheshire Typesetting, Cuddington, Cheshire

Front Cover:

Alice Oliphant, *Druze Women*,
c.1884–5, albumen print [TR20].

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FROM SHORELINE TO *STUDIOLO*: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF
SMALL-SCALE BRONZE SEA CREATURES IN EARLY SIXTEENTH-
CENTURY NORTHEASTERN ITALY

Esme Garlake

In the Veneto in the first two decades of the sixteenth century, most likely on a desk or shelf in a study, there sat a small bronze sculpture of a strange creature with a human head and a scaly amphibious body. Its beholder – then as now – encountered an object that seems to scream for attention: its human face has a gaping mouth that forms a dark hole, lined with a row of small square teeth. Its eyes are wide set and cast upwards, leaving deep grooves in its dramatically furrowed brow. This pained face is framed by a beard and crown of acanthus leaves, from which two large, pointed ears emerge, closer to those of a satyr than a human. The creature’s scale-covered body is decisively not human: it has frog-like front limbs, spindly fins at its sides, and a lizard-like curling tail that terminates in a tulip-shaped flipper. It cranes its neck upwards, its muscles tensely pushing away from the flat surface beneath, as if struggling against its own weight. *Statuette in the form of a sea monster* (c.1505–1520, figure 1) invites the beholder to ponder what the creature is trying to communicate, as both an image of human/animal hybridity and as a physical bronze object that inhabited the beholder’s material environment of the study.

This is one version of several dozen humanoid sea monster bronzes which survive today,¹ a sculptural type generally agreed to have been devised by the sculptor, modeller and marble carver Severo Calzetta da Ravenna (born between around 1465–75; died before 1538).² Severo was working in Padua in the first decade of the sixteenth century, a university city under Venetian rule that already had an established network of bronze foundries.³ There, Severo tapped into the significant appetite for small-scale functional bronzes among a growing cosmopolitan audience, with the sea monster type becoming one of his family firm’s most popular products. Scholarship has been characterised primarily by a comparative approach, looking at different



Figure 1 Workshop of Severo Calzetta da Ravenna, *Statuette in the form of a sea monster*, c.1505–20. Cast bronze, 24 × 15.5 × 11 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
© Victoria and Albert Museum.

versions of sea monster bronzes side by side. It led Bernice Davidson to designate an ‘extended family of sea monsters’, the *paterfamilias* of which resides at the Frick (figure 2, c.1510).⁴ It is from the latter that discussions of other versions emerge, reinforcing notions of authorship that do not always sit comfortably with the collaborative nature of small bronze production during this period.

This article proposes that the bronze sea monster type allows us to develop a more nuanced picture of how, as Steven Swarbrick and Karen Raber put it, ‘the Renaissance human was, like the posthuman now, open to novel configurations with the lives of ‘others’’.⁵ Among the variety of hybrid sea creatures associated with Severo’s output, no type is quite as ambiguous – and therefore as imaginatively generative – in its combining of human and



Figure 2 Severo Calzetta da Ravenna, *Sea monster*, c.1510. Bronze, 24.8 × 17.1 × 11.4 cm. The Frick Collection, New York. © The Frick Collection

nonhuman forms and scales as the humanoid sea monster (which I will refer to generally as the ‘sea monster type’).⁶ Whilst the semi-aquatic creature in the far left of Andrea Mantegna’s double engraving *Battle of the Sea Gods* (1475–88, figure 3) is frequently cited as the key source of inspiration for Severo’s sea monster type, there are many other points of reference between the bronze and the engraving.⁷ I approach this sculptural case study with an ecocritical sensibility that takes seriously nonhuman animals as ambiguous cultural constructions, starting from an understanding that historical perceptions of animals speak as much to cultural imaginaries as to actual animal presences. The sea monster type is a form of antiquating hybridity (drawing upon an entertaining, pathos-infused visual language frequently seen in ancient Roman and Greek imagery), but it is also connected to actual



Figure 3 *Battle of the Sea Gods*, Andrea Mantegna, 1475–88, engraving print on paper. Left sheet: 27 × 40.4 cm, courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Right sheet: 28.6 × 37.5 cm, courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

sea monsters that were deemed to exist in the world as a range of unnamed sea creatures, referred to in biblical and classical sources.⁸

As a sculpture that evoked imaginative environments and animals beyond the study walls, and as far as the destabilising realm of the shoreline, it had the potential to disrupt and challenge notions of human control and dominion over the material world. In this sense, the sea monster type complicates a view of the Italian Renaissance as the beginning of modern extractivism, as a period frequently absorbed into later-sixteenth-century histories of European colonial violence and expansion. By grounding the sea monster type in the first two decades of the sixteenth century, this article aims to recover some of the more ambiguous perceptions of nonhuman animals in Northeastern Italy at the time. It adopts an ecocritical framework that understands environmental art histories not only in terms of extracted materials or ‘natural’ resources, but also in terms of actual and imagined environments and beings. Speaking closely to the so-called material and affective turns, this ecocritical lens need not – indeed, should not – deviate vastly from the growing body of scholarship that takes seriously questions of interactions, exchange and affect in object histories. However, it is also guided closely by a consciousness of the historical time in which one is writing – that is, at a time of rapid breakdown of the planetary systems on which life on earth depends.⁹

As we shall see, whilst it is tempting to look to the past for different modes of thinking about human relationships with the nonhuman world (which we then might either emulate or avoid), this case study invites us instead to sit with contradictions. It begins with an analysis of the sensory aspects of the bronze sea monster type, locating it firmly in the context of the *studiolo*. I then explore the sculpture’s relationship to the shoreline as both an actual and imagined environment for beholders at the time, followed by a comparative study with bronze life-casts of animals. Finally, I propose that the sea monster type can be connected to the Mediterranean monk seal, a common inhabitant of the Adriatic Sea during this period. In each section, I seek to recover a sense of the beholder’s reception of the bronze sea monster type, a sculptural site in which imagined environments and animals converged with actual ones.

Varied qualities, consistent delights: recovering the sensory potential of the sea monster type

As with small-scale bronzes in general during this period, the sea monster type was designed to be handled, to offer beholders a range of sensory, textural experiences, and to respond dynamically to its surroundings. Its patinated scales would have seemed to glisten in the flickering of candlelight, or in the sun – if near a window – during the day. It may have been thrilling, or perhaps repulsive, to run one's fingers over the scaly surface of the sea monster's body or the curly folds of hair on the back of its head, or to feel the smoothness of its muscular human neck emerging from the scales below.¹⁰ Along the sea monster's back, bumpy spinal ridges run all the way down to the intricate curl of its tail. When partitioned behind glass in the museum space today, this sensory potential is obviously diminished. Among art historians – particularly those focused on cultural histories of the material world – there is a growing range of attempts to mitigate this inevitably flattening effect of the museum display, reflected in Jás Elsner's suggestion that 'we need to get a lot more material and hands-on in our approaches'.¹¹

In the context of small-scale bronzes, an emphasis on tactility and material engagement can reveal the varied quality of modelling and casting. The warm tonality of bronze, and the variation of its surfaces, textures and hues (as a result of patination and gilding) would certainly have affected the beholder's engagement with a sculpture.¹² Bronzes commissioned specifically by wealthy patrons could be of extremely high quality and were, to quote Victoria Avery, 'intended for intimate scrutiny and loving handling',¹³ whereas those that were produced speculatively in batches, as stock for the shop, were generally less well-finished, and may not have been as closely scrutinised by such wealthy owners and buyers. This qualitative variation is visible in the scales on two sea monster versions. In the version already discussed in the introduction, the modeller has clearly taken care over each individual scale, carved into a wax model as a raised semi-circle. The scales are adapted in size for different parts of the body (the front limbs are covered in noticeably smaller scales), and consistently follow the direction of movement, most notably in the spiralling tail. Under the sea monster's neck, a line of semi-circles creates a border between the creature's scaly body, and its smooth, muscular neck, indicating the careful creation of textural differences between body parts. In another, slightly later version (c.1520–1540, figure 4), the scales



Figure 4 Workshop of Severo Calzetta da Ravenna, *Statuette in the form of a sea monster*, c.1520–40. Cast bronze, 21 × 16 × 9 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

appear as incisions made relatively quickly by pressing or dragging a tool (or perhaps a fingernail) into the wax, once per scale, and with space in between (figure 5). The muscular human skin transitions into scaly body through a smooth foliate pattern located halfway down the creature's back, beginning above its side fins and extending to its front limbs and neck. The smoothness of this foliate pattern – closer to the texture of the human neck – has allowed the modeller to bypass a significant area of the body which would otherwise have been covered in scales. Although this detail could be understood as indicating a seemingly 'lower' quality of technical modelling, it creates a looser, less obvious transition between human and nonhuman body parts, further blurring the divide between human and animal for the beholder.

Despite the obvious qualitative differences in the two examples discussed here, the tactile appeal of the latter should not be dismissed, nor should we



Figure 5 Workshop of Severo Calzetta da Ravenna, *Statuette in the form of a sea monster* (detail), c.1520–40. Cast bronze, 21 × 16 × 9 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: author's own, courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum.

assume that it was necessarily handled less. Indeed, if less intricately modelled small-scale bronzes were ostensibly more functional, then even the roughest sea monsters would have been interacted with physically by their beholders. It is necessary to remain open to what may be called the cruder examples of bronze sea monsters, particularly since it was serialised workshop products that formed the foundation of Severo's family business (after returning to Ravenna between 1509 and 1511, his workshop flourished, and remained active for almost seventy years, first under Severo and then under his son, Niccolò).¹⁴ Furthermore, in order to locate a bronze sea monster within the study, we must recognise that it would probably have been the only model of its kind in its context, existing in relation not to other sea monsters – as the 'extended family' approach assumes – but rather to its environment.

Desk dreams, shoreline sites: the sea monster type in its *studiolo* environment

The bronze sea monster type was designed for tabletops or shelves, while the context of the study is often implied by their immediate function as tools

of writing (inkwells and sandboxes) or illumination (candlestick holders). Assuming it was placed in the human-made space of the study, or the *studiolo*, for which it was designed, the sculpture would have likely sat on a flat tabletop, or else on a shelf or cupboard – turning it over, it is possible to see where the points of contact with the surface have been smoothed and levelled by the modeller. This sculpture would have formed part of a wider scene among many other collected possessions, including books, papers and inkwells, as well as perhaps medals, statuettes, and paintings. Together, these furnishings created a physical manifestation of the owner's self-fashioned identity, bound up with contemporary ideals of scholarly knowledge of antique culture.¹⁵ For the human who furnished this space, it was a site for contemplation, reflection and, largely, solitude, where hours could be spent reflecting on the knowledge of ancient thinkers. As a compact, contained indoor space, the study encircled and enclosed its human and more-than-human inhabitants, and – as a place of, usually male, withdrawal – kept them secluded from the incursions of the larger household.¹⁶ It was for this curated enclosure of mental labour, overflowing imagination and antiquarian schemes that the bronze sea monster was made.

Within this environment, the sea monster could quickly assume a de-centred position, either as a functional, amusing and, in many ways, ornamental object, marginalised through its familiar daily use or as an entertaining curiosity that was handled occasionally.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the sea monster is designed as an object that seems to resist – or at least call into question – its own marginalisation and absorption into its environment. Its human head reaches upwards with a scream, and its frog-like front limbs are taut with the effort of pushing away from the flat ground, as if beached or stranded. Although it sits firmly without wobbling, many parts of the body do not directly touch the surface, but instead hover slightly above it to cast a shadow beneath, drawing attention to the closeness – and gaps – between bronze object and surface. The sea monster seems to resist, materially and figuratively, both the surface beneath it, as if to say *I am not meant to be here*, and its own object-ness, pleading *do not forget me*. This plea is also an aural interjection into the quiet secluded space of the *studiolo*. Of course, the extent to which the sea monster is heard, or met with sympathy or fear, was determined by the individual beholder.

Whilst the sea monster's physical environment was the *studiolo*, what of the imagined environments it evoked for contemporary beholders? Its

appearance as a stranded, agitated being, uneasy on the tabletop, raises the question: where would this creature feel at home? Its scales and webbed feet suggest an aquatic environment, but its human or satyr head determines that it cannot exist entirely in water. As an *all'antica* hybrid, the sea monster is also infused with temporal ambiguity, as if a relic from a distant, ancient world.¹⁸ I propose that, beyond the flat surface in a study, the sea monster might find a more comfortable environment in a space defined by changeability and ambiguity: the shoreline. This porous site of encounter between land and water makes visible the destructive and generative power of water. For people living in early sixteenth-century Venice – where Severo had worked as a younger artist – and its mainland territories, the tensions and interactions between water and land would have been felt acutely, not only in the Adriatic Sea but also in the estuaries and tributaries of Venetian-controlled cities such as Padua and Ravenna (the latter is constructed on the marshy land between the Padenna and Lamisa tributaries of the River Po).¹⁹ In the Venetian printmaker Jacopo de' Barbari's monumental bird's-eye view of Venice – made up of six woodblock printed sheets – one can see a small detail of two fisherman who, having left their boat, wade through shallow waters to gather shellfish (1498–1500, figure 6). For early sixteenth-century scholars, the generative space of shorelines found intellectual resonance in the idea of spontaneous generation proposed by classical philosophers: Aristotle describes how 'some [fish] are of spontaneous growth... either from mud or sand, or from the putrid matter on the surface'.²⁰ Perhaps most relevant to the bronze sea monster is the shoreline as an imaginative, almost dream-like environment in certain early sixteenth-century visions, where anxieties and fantasies could play out.²¹

This is visualised in an engraving, sometimes called *The Dream* (c.1509, figure 7), by printmaker Marcantonio Raimondi and produced in Venice about a decade after Severo may have been working in the city. It depicts two naked nymphs asleep on the bank of the river Styx, unaware that four monstrous creatures – made up of composite animal body parts – emerge from the water nearby. On the other side of the river, small figures of people can be seen fleeing a burning cityscape under a thunderous sky. Beverly Louise Brown suggests that this print reflects contemporary anxieties about plague, war, and civic disasters in Venice, at a time in Europe when monstrous forms and unusual occurrences were frequently interpreted as omens of



Figure 6 Jacopo de' Barbari, *View of Venice* (detail), 1498-1500. Woodcut, 132.7 × 277.5 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio. Courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art.



Figure 7 Marcantonio Raimondi, *The Dream*, c.1508. Engraving, 33.3 × 23.5 cm. British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

societal misfortune.²² The four monsters are the clearest – if only – point of contact between the sleepers and their background, with the potential to either fictionalise or confirm the reality of the apocalyptic scene behind. Here, the shoreline is an unsettling place in which monsters seem to spawn and spill out erratically. As a hybridised creature, the bronze sea monster type shares this potential to evoke a similar sense of threat, occupying an imagined space in which decay and destruction co-exist with burgeoning life.²³ This environment's generative capacities also speak to the intricately entangled associations at the time between artistry and nature. Whereas, for example, Claudia Swan notes that shells were understood during the early modern period primarily as 'instances of nature's artistry', here the hybridised monsters – whether engraved or modelled in bronze – establish clear associations between the artist's *ingegno* (inventive talent) and processes of organic creation.²⁴

For the beholder in early sixteenth-century Northeastern Italy, the sea monster presented a sculptural site in which imagined environments converge with actual ones. It enlivened the indoor, human-made environment by evoking fantastical imagined worlds with all their overlapping possibilities and dangers: the shoreline and *studiolo* seep into each other. Today, it is notable that our own societal anxieties and hopes often find expression through the shoreline and its inhabitants. In an era when the life-giving and life-taking forces of water are unfailingly entangled with human activities, the shoreline is a site on which these consequences are visibly registered – from the devastating effects of cyclones, coastal flooding, and rising sea-levels, to the mass strandings of marine animals (as a result of warming oceans) and tragic scenes of people fleeing violence and poverty, villainised and abandoned by our political and media classes. Although we should primarily understand the sea monster type within its own historical moment, these points of resonance in our own time might encourage us to reflect on shoreline imagery that we encounter in our daily lives, and its imaginative role in reinforcing perceptions of planetary fragility today.

Bronze life-cast crustaceans: the fiction of historical animal presences

Much of our discussion so far can also relate to early sixteenth-century Paduan life-casts (also known as nature casts). Not only did they function as

decorative *studiolo* objects and curiosities with secondary uses as paperweights, inkwells, oil lamps, and sandboxes, the life-casts of crustaceans in particular shared many of the same associations with the shoreline. There is, of course, a key difference: the sea monster type appears to be entirely fantastical (and therefore related only to the historical human), whereas life-casts seem to present an opportunity to excavate the historical presence of an actual animal. Art historical discussions of sixteenth-century life-casts therefore tend to emphasise developments in scientific inquiry and knowledge of natural history, in which the nonhuman animal is conflated with material agent, to the detriment of the former.²⁵ When historians do recognise the once-aliveness of the animals, and the violent processes through which life-casts were made, it is guided by an interest in the artisanal techniques. In a French manuscript from the 1580s, cited by Pamela Smith and Tonny Beentjes, the anonymous author gives instructions on how to kill an animal from which to produce a mould:

To kill your animal put it into a bottle or a vessel... Then cover your animal with some good vinegar or urine, and shake your animal to death, which takes one hour or half an hour. But if you are in a hurry to mold, pour some brandy into its mouth, or add some brandy to the vinegar, and your animal will die very quickly without any injuries that could deform it.²⁶

This extract excites no acknowledgement from Smith and Beentjes of the lived experiences of animal suffering, which reflects a general scholarly (and societal) tendency to approach the nonhuman animal body as matter and an object of technological and artisanal knowledge and skill, rather than a once-sentient being. In many ways, human perceptions of – and interactions with – life-cast bronzes in early sixteenth-century Italy may have aligned with the anthropocentric tone of art historical discussions today: these animals have been *literally objectified*, the organic matter of their bodies physically burned to ashes and replaced by the human-made matter of bronze.²⁷ In an attempt to move away from human-centred narratives, it is tempting to read the ‘real’, once-alive animal into life-cast bronzes, in the hopes of recovering a sense of nonhuman agency.²⁸ Just as the sea monster’s bodily expressions invite reflections on its (imagined) emotional capacities, the bodies of individual crabs might also be read as responding in subtly different ways to



Figure 8 Paduan workshop, *Edible crab (natural cast)*, early sixteenth century. Bronze, width 16 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. © KHM-Museumsverband

their environment. In some bronzes, the crab's two front claws are drawn together in front of its body (figure 8), poses that are tense, defensive, and compact, as if hiding or, by contrast, emphasising a capacity for capturing prey. Either way, they seem to shrink even more into their weighty object-ness as paperweights or boxes. In other versions, the crabs' legs and claws are spread wide apart, or raised upwards, somewhat echoing the sea monster's pushed-up front limbs.²⁹

Crucially, however, all poses of life-casts are the artificial construction of the bronze sculptor, who pinned into place the body of the dead or dazed animal(s) before casting. To overlook this is to underestimate the dominant power dynamics between human/animal.³⁰ Some animals are posed relatively simply – an open-mouthed toad acts as an inkwell – or more dramatically, such as a larger frog carrying a small frog on its back to create a parent and child dynamic, or a crab pulling open a toad's mouth to function as a two-in-one inkwell and sandbox. Once cast, most life-casts were filed down in certain areas, to balance more effectively on flat surfaces. Other traces of the sculptor can be seen in crab sandboxes, in which an incision around the main shell creates the box lid.

For the beholder of a life-cast, an imaginative leap is required to reconcile the coldness, hardness and weight of the bronze with the *perception* that this

is a ‘real’ animal – or at least, an uncanny, almost mimetic record of one. Much of the intrigue of a bronze crab sandbox emerges from the relationality between the inorganic and organic forms of the crab, inviting a constant shift back and forth between two contrasting states. The solidity of the bronze shell echoes the armour-like shell of an actual crab, its bronze hinges presenting a playful nod to a crab’s pincers, which anatomically have their own hinge. Its transformation into a small box plays on the crab shell’s original function, formerly as a container of organic matter that is now an empty vessel to be filled (most likely with sand, an ironic nod to the crab’s shoreline habitat). It is possible that, for contemporary beholders, the culinary familiarity of crab meat also emphasised the organic ‘before’ and inorganic ‘after’ – tender, fleshy inner matter, once only accessible by breaking open the crab’s hard outer shell, is replaced by a small empty space encased in cold metal, and accessed easily through a lid mechanism.³¹ By bringing bronze life-casts, specifically of crabs and frogs, into dialogue with the sea monsters, we are more equipped to appreciate the fluidity between fiction and ‘fact’, and to better understand the life-cast as a human-made object designed for the *studiolo*.

Old man of the sea: finding ‘real’ animals in the bronze sea monster

To further explore the false dichotomy between life-casts as ‘fact’ and bronze sea monster as ‘fiction’, it is helpful to consider the sea monster type and actual animals in early sixteenth-century Italy. Although it may be most tempting to discuss this in relation to its plausibly life-cast details (primarily in the detachable mollusc shell included in some versions),³² the ‘real’ does not only belong to these elements of the sea monster type. I propose that the sea monster type may have connections to the monk seal, an animal inhabitant of the Adriatic Sea that is now endangered after centuries of hunting. The monk seal shares with the bronze sea monster a seemingly fantastical hybridity in terms of its bodily forms, its ability to move between habitats, and even in its compound names used at the time such as ‘vitello marino’ [sea calf], ‘vecchio marino’ [old man of the sea] or ‘orso marino’ [sea bear]. By the late sixteenth century there is written evidence of monk seals being brought – stolen – from the eastern shores of the Adriatic (modern-day Croatia, then under Venetian imperial rule) to Italy, where they were domesticated and used for public entertainment. An extract from *The Kingdom of the Slavs* (published in 1601) by late-sixteenth-century Ragusan chronicler Mavro Orbini, includes

a description of a tame seal, named Martino, who was displayed to the public in 1599 in Pesaro, a *comune* in the Marche region on the Adriatic coast.³³ Despite the chronological distance from the bronzes in our discussion, this description offers insight into early modern experiences of semi-aquatic mammals. Martino the seal was carried ‘in una cassa per molti luoghi d’Italia’ [in a box around many places in Italy], locked in the box at night, and put into ‘un mastello grande, e pieno d’acqua’ [a large tub filled with water] during the day. Note the artificial framing of a semi-aquatic creature through replications of habitats, as if to emphasise its ability to move between land and water. Orbini’s rhetorical comparisons between the seal and other animals – Martino’s front limbs are compared to those of geese, and his movements are often described as snake-like – further emphasises this hybridity, developing a contrast between wildness and domestication, ‘meraviglia’ [marvel] and familiarity.

Most significant to the sea monster type are Orbini’s comparisons between the monk seal and humans, particularly in his description of the animal’s mouth. Orbini writes that, when Martino is asked by his trainers whether he is hungry, the seal:

subito apriva la bocca, et battendo i enti, pareva che volesse dire de si, tenendo gli occhi fissi nel padrone... egli incoltamente mandava fuori una voce, che pareva fusse propriamente di persona arrabbiata, facendo sembiante di volerlo mordere [immediately opened his mouth, chattering his teeth, as if he wanted to say yes, keeping his eyes fixed on his master... He rudely let out a shriek, which seemed to be that of an angry person, making it appear as if he wanted to bite him].³⁴

There is an uncanny resemblance between this description of the seal and the facial expression of the bronze sea monster. Orbini grapples to interpret the communicative gestures of a nonhuman animal – the seal ‘*pareva fusse... di persona arrabbiata*’, ‘*facendo sembiante di volerlo mordere*’ (my emphasis) – just as a beholder of a bronze sea monster was challenged to make sense of the sculpture’s ambiguous expressions. This communicative ambiguity generated by human-animal hybridity is reflected more broadly in the local linguistic description, by Adriatic travellers, of seals as ‘old men of the sea’, and might be productively re-imagined in relation to ancient hybrids more generally –

satyrs, for example, were often represented as libidinous old men with beards. A feminine counterpart may be found in the mermaid (*sirena* in Italian), as another semi-aquatic creature associated with the mysteries and dangers of the shoreline, where boats were at very real risk of catastrophe. Within the bronze sea monster, then, actual animals come to occupy a more porous space between human imagination and physical reality, allowing us further insight into some of the possible imaginative habits of early sixteenth-century beholders in Northeastern Italy.

Conclusion

The bronze sea monster type reflects, at its point of creation, an artistic interest in blurring boundaries not only between human and nonhuman (both animal and plant), but also between subject and object, margin and centre. This continued into the realm of the sculptures' reception, through myriad overlapping representational, sensory, functional or environmental details that presented their erudite beholders with stimulating questions and experiences, both physically and imaginatively – from the textural delights of handling and daily use, to the generative and destructive capacities of the shoreline environment, and the affective game of deciphering what this strange human/animal creature was trying to communicate. At least to some degree, then, the sea monster type resists a conflation of early sixteenth-century Italy with the proto-Enlightenment and European colonial developments of the subsequent decades (which today tend to characterise perceptions of the century as a whole).

This sculpture type was a purposefully ambiguous, multi-layered object, and its popularity among the educated classes living in the early sixteenth-century Veneto reflects a willingness to engage with – and delight in – realms of uncertainty, particularly when unsettling the divide between human and nonhuman animal. This capacity – even desire – for ambiguity between human/animal boundaries is a reminder of the discrepancies and contradictions that existed in early sixteenth-century Italian perceptions of nonhuman animals. Human control over the nonhuman animal was not only violently enacted through the processes of life-casting, it was ever-present (albeit indirectly) in the contained, human-made environment of the *studiolo*. At the same time, this article's ecocritical approach helps to recover the bronze sea monster's potential to repulse or entice, to evoke pity or

bemusement, to resist marginalisation or to be marginalised – in other words, to better understand its capacity to simultaneously disrupt and reinforce the beholder's sense of their own humanness. It lays out a roadmap for exploring human responses – historical and present – to actual and imagined nonhuman animals, encouraging us to reflect on, and learn from, its richness of ambiguities.

Notes

I would like to thank Alison Wright and Bob Mills for their support and advice, with thanks also to UCL's Research Excellence Scholarship. My work is always indebted to the dedication of climate and social justice activists across the world – your actions, as much as those of any historian, show that other worlds are possible.

- 1 Alison Luchs, *The Mermaids of Venice: Fantastic Sea Creatures in Venetian Renaissance Art* (London: Miller, 2010), 162.
- 2 Jeremy Warren, 'Severo Calzetta detto Severo da Ravenna', in *Donatello e il suo tempo: il bronretto a Padova nel Quattrocento e nel Cinquecento*, ed. Franco Ambrosio (Milan: Skira, 2001), 131–134.
- 3 Peta Motture defines bronze as 'a copper-tin alloy, with so-called 'true bronze' generally described as 90% copper to 10% tin', noting that Renaissance bronze alloys varied greatly. Motture, *The Culture of Bronze*, 13. On the infrastructure of bronze foundries in Venice and its *terraferma* territories, see: Victoria Avery, *Vulcan's Forge in Venus' City: the Story of Bronze in Venice, 1350–1650* (New York: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2011), 13–22.
- 4 Bernice F. Davidson, *Severo and the Sea Monsters* (New York: The Frick Collection, 1997), 15. The Frick sea monster displays Severo's Latinised signature 'O.SEVERI. RA' in a rare moment of confirmed authorship that also speaks to Severo's classicising aspirations.
- 5 Steven Swarbrick and Karen Raber, 'Introduction: Renaissance Posthumanism and Its Afterlives', *Criticism* 62, no. 3 (2020), 314.
- 6 Severo's workshop – and other Paduan workshops – produced a variety of hybrid sea creature types during this period. There is the Neptune type, in which a figure of Neptune holding a trident stands on top of a dragon-headed monster. A Neptune type which was part of Isabella d'Este's collection, listed as 'Neptuno sopra un monstro col tridente' in the 1542 inventory, may be identical with a bronze in the Frick Collection in New York (inventory extract cited in H. J. Hermann, 'Pier Jacopo Alari-Bonacolsi, genannt Antico', in *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen* 27, no. 3 (1910), 216). The Triton type survives in smaller numbers, and depicts an amphibious, fish-tailed creature that is human from the waist up, which raises a hand and screams in agony as a snake attacks him. Another type, the double-tailed siren candelabra, is also associated with Severo's workshop, and includes a life-of-a bird of prey's talon to form the candelabrum base.
- 7 On the connection between Mantegna's engraving and Severo's sea monster type, see Davidson, *Severo and the Sea Monsters*, 15; Luchs, *The Mermaids of Venice*, 159; Peta

- Motture, *The Culture of Bronze: Making and Meaning in Italian Renaissance Sculpture* (London: V&A Publishing, 2019), 160–161.
- 8 Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, 'Monsters: A Case Study', in *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150–1750*, eds. Daston and Park (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 173–214.
 - 9 It is predicted that reaching or exceeding 2.5 degrees celsius of planetary warming by 2050 would result in around 2 billion human deaths worldwide. *Global Tipping Points*, 'Earth System Tipping Points', accessed July 1, 2026, <https://global-tipping-points.org/earth-system-tipping-points/>. On the implications of the climate, ecological and biodiversity crises on the United Kingdom specifically, see *National Emergency Briefing*, 'The Expert Briefings', accessed June 6, 2026, <https://www.nebriefing.org/expert-briefings>.
 - 10 'Horror, pleasure, and repugnance... overlapped and coexisted during much of the early modern period, although each had its own rhythm and dynamic'. Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 176.
 - 11 Jaś Elsner, 'Objects and History', in *Cultural Histories of the Material World*, ed. Peter Miller (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 170.
 - 12 It is also possible that the quality varied because of the practice of after casting, which reduced the surface definition. In other cases, the patina has been worn away, which may provide physical evidence of repeated handling.
 - 13 Avery, *Vulcan's Forge*, 128.
 - 14 The output of Severo's workshop was prolific, largely due to the use of the indirect casting method which could be carried out quickly with re-usable moulds by artisans without much training. On the commercial success of Severo's workshop, see Warren, 'Severo Calzetta', 142.
 - 15 See Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in his Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 1–9.
 - 16 See Luke Syson and Dora Thornton, *Objects of Virtue: Art in Renaissance Italy* (London: British Museum Press, 2001), 80–83.
 - 17 The sea monster type does not fall neatly into the category of the ornamental. It may share certain characteristics, primarily that of relationality, as Ethan Matt Kavalier notes in *Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470–1540* (New Haven (Conn.): Yale University Press, 2012), 50. However, as a physical handleable object, it also has the capacity to glide between central and marginal spaces: Elsner writes that objects 'are also reminders of real and tangible things, things we know or can conjure in our imaginations from a space of real-life experience outside the narrative'. Elsner, 'Objects and History', 167.
 - 18 Luchs ponders whether owners of Severo's land and water hybrids may have 'shared the hybrids' imagined nostalgia for a lost antique Arcadia'. Luchs, *The Mermaids of Venice*, 161.
 - 19 On Severo's time in Venice, his connections to the Lombardo family workshop there, and how this may have played a part in developing his sea monster imagery, see Alison Luchs, *The Mermaids of Venice: Fantastic Sea Creatures in Venetian Renaissance Art* (London: Miller, 2010), 161.
 - 20 Aristotle, *Aristotle's History of Animals*, trans. Richard Cresswell (Project Gutenberg,

- 2019), 157, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/59058/pg59058-images.html>. Philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi – a former graduate and professor at Padua university until 1509 – was a significant exponent of this theory during this period. On Pietro Pomponazzi's 1518 lecture at Bologna university on the doctrine of spontaneous generation, see Diego Pirillo, 'Philosophy', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Michael Wyatt, Cambridge Companions to Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 269–70. Pirillo notes too that 'this materialistic explanation of the origin of life drew much attention in the Renaissance also beyond the restricted world of academic culture' (Ibid, 270). See also Amos Bertolacci, 'Averroes against Avicenna on Human Spontaneous Generation: The Starting-Point of a Lasting Debate', in *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Anna Akasoy and Guido Giglioni (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 40. For a short historical overview of spontaneous generation as a theory, see Jerry Bergman, 'A Brief History of the Theory of Spontaneous Generation', in *C.E.N. Technical Journal* 7, no. 1 (1993), 73–81.
- 21 For late-fifteenth and early sixteenth-century Venice, the dream as a site of imaginative encounter holds significant cultural resonance, as exemplified in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, published in Venice in 1499. On this book, Clare Lapraik Guest notes that 'the desire for antiquity becomes a dream of continuous sensual diversity'. Clare Lapraik Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 357.
 - 22 Beverly Louise Brown, 'Troubled Waters: Marcantonio Raimondi and Dürer's Nightmares on the Shore', in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 92, no. 2 (1 September 2016): 25–43. On the emergence of the prodigy tradition in the early sixteenth century, and the implications this had for perceptions of monstrous forms, see Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 175–76.
 - 23 The landscape of Venetian mainland territories featured many waterways and irrigation systems, and through the sixteenth century there was growing concern about flooding caused by deforestation. See James Pilgrim, 'Jacopo Bassano and the Flood of Feltre', in *The Art Bulletin* 105, no. 3 (3 July 2023): 115–137.
 - 24 Claudia Swan et al., 'The Nature of Exotic Shells', in *Conchophilia*, Shells, Art, and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe (Princeton University Press, 2021), 26.
 - 25 Droth describes the life-cast as 'a kind of embodiment, or alchemical metamorphosis, where one substance is transformed into another'. Droth et al., *Bronze: the Power of Life and Death*, 64.
 - 26 Smith, Pamela H., and Tonny Beentjes 'Nature and Art, Making and Knowing: Reconstructing Sixteenth-Century Life-Casting Techniques*', in *Renaissance Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2010), 129.
 - 27 This will develop into objects found in cabinets of curiosities, in which as Bruce Thomas Boehrer notes, 'automata aspire to the status of living beings, while birds and beasts are translated into inert matter'. Bruce Thomas Boehrer, ed., *Cultural History of Animals in the Renaissance* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 19.
 - 28 I agree with Matthew Rampley's argument that expanded notions of agency are not currently providing an effective alternative to the standard theory of agency (i.e. the capacity to act intentionally towards a goal) – instead 'they merely seek to extend the

- range of objects that can be considered agents'. Matthew Rampley, 'Agency, Affect and Intention in Art History: Some Observations', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 24 (June 2021), 18.
- 29 See the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna collection for examples of early sixteenth-century bronze crabs posed with claws partially raised (numbers 5922 and 5927) and/or wide apart (number 5902).
 - 30 On the dangers of siloing the nonhuman, see T.J. Demos, *Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective*, ed. Karl Kusserow (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2021), 21.
 - 31 Laura Giannetti, *Food Culture and Literary Imagination in Early Modern Italy: The Renaissance of Taste, Food Culture, Food History before 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 34–35.
 - 32 The detachable shell on the Frick sea monster (figure 2) is a life-cast of a common Mediterranean mollusc, and a piece-mould would have allowed for multiples. Davidson suggests that the sea monster type's front limbs were possibly cast from the feet of actual frogs (Davidson, *Severo and the Sea Monsters*, 22), however it is more feasible that frogs' feet were observed from life to form part of a loose visual formula for future versions and replicas.
 - 33 William Klinger, 'Note sulla presenza storica della Foca monaca nell'Adriatico' in *La Ricerca*, no. 57 (2010), 6–10. <https://monachus-guardian.org/library/klinger10a.pdf>.
 - 34 Ibid, 6.

THE ENCOUNTER AND THE LAND:
ALICE OLIPHANT AND THE SHEIKH'S DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

Darya Aloufy

A woman and two children pose before the camera. The woman, dressed in layers of dark clothing, a white scarf covering her head, is the centre of the composition, seated upon what appears to be a sheepskin or animal pelt draped over a low bench. She cradles an infant close to her breast, nestled in a swaddle of cloth, while an older child stands barefoot by her side, wrapped in a patterned dress, leaning gently toward the figure we can reasonably assume is his mother. The photograph depicts a location out of focus and non-specific, yet unmistakably outdoors, marked by the presence of a tree trunk directly behind the bench, the faint outline of a rural or village landscape in the distance, and the bare soil at their feet.

At first glance, the photographic image (figure 1) conforms to the conventions of nineteenth-century Orientalist photography, reflecting the tropes through which Western photographers depicted those they referred to as 'Orientals'. The seated woman, dressed in religious attire characteristic of Middle Eastern communities, is framed as a maternal archetype as she is accompanied by her children, one of whom is wearing what appears to be a locally handwoven or printed garment.¹ And indeed, this photograph of a Druze woman and her children was taken by an Englishwoman, Alice Oliphant, sometime between 1884 and 1885, in Daliat el-Carmel, Ottoman Palestine.

Yet, when I first encountered this photograph, it elicited an unexpected sense of intimacy. While fully aware of the camera's presence, the portrayed woman does not appear to be 'performing' for the camera, but rather engaging in an exchange with the photographer. And then there is the hazy whiteness that veils the left side of the printed surface, obscuring it completely and destabilising the composition, before drifting across the woman's face and dissolving toward the right, where a clearer sense of place begins to flicker into view.



Figure 1 Alice Oliphant, *Sheikh Yousef's daughter in law & children from him came the land on which the house at Dalieh was built*, c.1884–5, albumen print [TR12]. © National Maritime Museum, Haifa.

Scanning the photograph from top to bottom, the bare soil and rural landscape emerge as central to the composition, situating the encounter within a specific terrain. The caption on the back of the print makes this connection explicit, gesturing toward the circumstances that made this moment possible by identifying the photographic subjects as ‘Sheikh Yousef’s daughter in law & children from him came the land on wh [sic] the house at Dalieh was built.’ The soil beneath the figures therefore does more than locate the scene geographically; it hints at the conditions through which this meeting came into being, grounding the image in a set of relations that extend beyond the frame. In this sense, the printed image lingers as a fragment of something only partially accessible to us, while photography becomes a way of thinking with land, mediating the relations through which this encounter became possible.

This impression stands in contrast to the ‘transparent’, ostensibly objective gaze attempted – though never fully achieved – in most nineteenth-century



Figure 2 Alice Oliphant, *Druze Women*, c.1884–5, albumen print [TR20]. © National Maritime Museum, Haifa.

Orientalist portrayals.² This does not mean that Oliphant, a Westerner in the Middle East subject to the cultural frameworks and ideological constructions of her time, did not produce photographs of women imbued with Orientalist tropes. Such conventions are visible, for instance, in her group portrait of Druze women (figure 2). With its emphasis on local cultural artefacts and its generic title, the image seems to capture and preserve an idealised vision of communal identity through costume and setting, echoing Orientalist narratives, constructed mostly by and for Western travellers against the backdrop of imperial and colonial power dynamics. Yet unlike the transient gaze of the colonial traveller, long-term residents in Ottoman Palestine, such as Oliphant, who settled in the region, had the opportunity to embed themselves in the area's daily life. The photographic practices of some such residents were shaped

not only by the conventions of the medium but also by their immersion within the social, cultural, and political fabric of the region. In conjunction with women's access to female-only spaces and situations, women residents found themselves entangled in local networks, where, at times, encounters unfolded in ways that defy simple interpretation.³ The public sphere revealed some of these interactions, such as Western women's involvement in local education, for instance, but photographs provide us with a way to witness exchanges that are less public or straightforward, appearing as 'sparks of contingency', to quote Walter Benjamin, in a photographic moment.⁴

Understanding the photographic event as a site of potential interaction broadens the scope of what we would consider an 'exchange'; it includes nuanced moments of recognition that might extend beyond the frame of the camera and resist assimilation into the dominant historical narrative and thus are not easily articulated elsewhere. In this context, the strangeness of the scene and the sympathetic facial expression of the woman and children in the photograph invite a reading that acknowledges the photograph as simultaneously recording an asymmetrical, colonial encounter and manifesting something that exceeds this framework, expressing the fragile, unstable intimacies formed within the shared, fraught terrains of colonial life. This might be what Homi Bhabha has termed the 'Third Space': a site of hybridity where new, relational, and often ambivalent meanings emerge, unsettling the rigid categorisations of coloniser and colonised as well as other East/West binaries.⁵ Such interpretation suggests that while some photographs by Westerners reiterate reductive or conventionalised representations of local subjects, others, at times even by the same author, may manifest traces of negotiation or proximity that occasionally emerge within colonial settings, indicating that these divergent visual registers can coexist within a single body of work, and implying that such relations can coexist within one reality.⁶

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While this essay centres on selected Alice Oliphant photographs, these represent only a fraction of her wide-ranging pursuits. Born in Paris in 1847 into the distinguished Le Strange family of Norfolk, Oliphant was raised in an educated English household, receiving comprehensive education in the arts and sciences, languages, and music. Yet beyond these details, relatively little is known about Oliphant's life before her marriage, an absence that has



Figure 3 Alice Oliphant, *House at Daliéh*, c.1884–5, albumen print [TR69]. © National Maritime Museum, Haifa.

contributed to biographical accounts positioning her primarily in relation to her husband, Laurence Oliphant, a prominent British author, traveller, diplomat, and mystic, whom she married in 1872.⁷ In 1882, the Oliphants set up residence in the German Colony in Haifa, Palestine, then a small coastal town of roughly 4,500 inhabitants under Ottoman rule. Two years later, they acquired land in the Druze village of Daliat el-Carmel, building a summer residence on the slopes of Mount Carmel (figure 3). The couple hosted notable figures from across the region's diverse religious and ethnic groups, making their home a hub for social and cultural exchange. In a memoir of the lives of her cousin Laurence and his wife Alice, Margaret Oliphant notes that in the Haifa house,

The American visitor from Brocton, shrewd yet visionary, filled up the curious tale of company, along with the Roumanian [sic] Hebrew, and the quick-witted Syrian of the plain, and the Druses [sic] from Carmel, and the travellers from Belgravia. The two central figures in this curious jumble of nationalities and conditions were equally at home with every one of them, and delightful and friendly to all.⁸

The primary reason for the Oliphants' move to Palestine was Laurence's preoccupation with the settlement of Jews in the region. No document affirms his motivations for this endeavour, but in a letter from 1878 he recognised the political and economic benefits a Jewish settlement might offer to the British.⁹ His scheme, though framed in strategic terms, was entirely unofficial: Oliphant had no backing from the British government and was not sent on any formal mission. A Christian Westerner operating independently on Ottoman grounds, his endeavours point to the various positionings and entanglements with the colonial apparatus that existed in the region at the time.

While Laurence was engaged in his political and ideological pursuits, Alice spent most of her time alone, attending to the daily affairs of their household and its guests, painting, writing, and, on occasion, engaging in what she casually referred to as 'photo'ing' the people and landscape around her.¹⁰ Alice's writings do not mention the Jewish population in Palestine or elsewhere, nor does she refer to her husband's mission to their resettlement. Her visual production in drawing and photography excludes them as well. While there is no evidence to suggest that this absence stemmed from ideological disagreement, it does indicate that the couple led largely separate lives.

According to the latest scholarship, which has only recently expanded to include the work of women, Alice Oliphant is among the first female residents of Palestine to document it through photographs.¹¹ During her time in Haifa and Daliat el-Carmel, Oliphant took at least 31 photos, now preserved in the archives of the National Maritime Museum in Haifa. The collection includes documentation of the family's summer house in Dalieh, landscapes around Mount Carmel, the Galilee, and the streets of Haifa, European guests, and local Druze individuals. As a whole, the collection offers a fragmentary yet intimate glimpse into Oliphant's life in Palestine. The photographs were compiled in a private family album, not intended for public circulation, and Oliphant was not a professional photographer, but an amateur working within the domestic and social circles of her everyday life. As such, her practice was not directly bound to market forces or institutions of power. This does not mean that her use of the medium was detached from the dominant political and social forces of Ottoman Palestine, but that these appear in her photographs in ways that are not necessarily the explicit

reason for her use of the medium.¹² In her writings, Oliphant describes her engagement with the ‘little photo apparatus’, noting that her control of the device was limited and ‘clumsy’.¹³ It seems, then, that Oliphant employed photography as a means to structure and examine her life, relationships, and surroundings.

Viewing her photographs today, additional layers of meaning inevitably emerge, constantly rearticulating our reading of the images. Shaped by ongoing relations and situated in a specific territorial context, I read photography as a web of interactions that are not frozen in the moment of exposure; they stretch across time, shaped by both the conditions of production and the many acts of looking, circulating, and exchange that follow.¹⁴ Photography is interpreted as ‘the product of an encounter’, to use Ariella Azoulay’s phrasing, between the photographer, the photographed subject, and the camera, unfolding as an event that extends to the spectator and defies the exclusive authorship of any one party as well as the fixing of meaning.¹⁵ These intricate dynamics – imperial, gendered, racialised, religious, but also intimate, local, and affective – seem at times to contradict one another and destabilise binaries and categorisations. We are then prompted not to read into the photograph what we have already learned elsewhere and wish to demonstrate through visual evidence.¹⁶ Instead, we are invited to open new avenues for inquiry that complicate both our understanding of history and its visual documentations, to look past indexicality and univocal interpretations and treat the photograph as a complex and layered object, holding multiple temporal and spatial standpoints.¹⁷

This is an important emphasis, as it highlights that the inability to completely decode Oliphant’s photograph of the Druze woman and children may illustrate that photography cannot, in fact, be used as an illustrative tool. By this I mean that historically informed, yet open-ended interpretations embrace photography’s incoherence, messiness, and historical opacity as some of its strengths in complicating and nuancing our understanding of the past. With regard to the photograph that opened this essay, its haziness becomes more than a technical quality, functioning as a metaphor for the fog of history. The photograph itself does the work of veiling; its deterioration over time points to its multiple lives since the photograph was taken, its continuous exposure to light and possible mishandling, registering the photograph’s resistance to a clear reading of history in its materiality. The photograph’s



Figure 4 Alice Oliphant, *Terrace in front of Dalieh house. The village butcher & our best orchard & vineyard work man in the white turban*. Both Druses, c.1884–5, albumen print [TR18].

© National Maritime Museum, Haifa.

power lies precisely in this refusal: in showing history's opacity and blurriness, our shifting understanding of it from our contemporary vantage point, and the entangled relations, half-seen gestures, and unresolved tensions at its core. In other words, the printed image registers a condition of ambivalence, a persistent instability of meaning, shaped by margins, discrepancies, and forms of uncertainty that have been widely noted in photographic theory.¹⁸

This ambivalence may be exemplified through a brief comparison between this photograph and a photograph of Druze men taken by Oliphant. It shows two men seated beside one another on the veranda of the Oliphants' house in Dalieh, their posture relaxed and informal (figure 4). One man faces the camera directly, while the other smiles in Oliphant's direction as his body turns toward his companion, suggesting a conversation briefly interrupted by the photographer. Their expressions convey a sense of ease and familiarity, implying a convivial relationship between photographer and subjects.

At first glance, it is similar to the relational quality present in Oliphant's portrait of the Druze woman and children. Yet the distance from which the photograph was captured evokes ethnographic documentation more than an intimate encounter. Furthermore, the men's posture suggests that, engaged in private dialogue, they are interrupted by the photographer, who, although acknowledged, remains external to their exchange. It is a moment of friendly recognition captured in the act of interruption. As a result, the traditional dynamic between photographer and photographed remains intact: the photographer is 'merely a documenter' rather than a participant in the scene. The scene, then, retains a degree of legibility: the photograph's framing and the men's expressions and positioning imply a social dynamic that the viewer can parse.

Conversely, the image of the Druze woman and children refuses such ease of interpretation. It resists resolution through a surplus of suggestive elements that do not cohere: the proximity between the three figures, and that between them and the photographer; the traditional posture; the indoor furniture placed in an outdoor setting. This incoherence is intensified by the porousness of the photograph's spatial logic, and particularly the visible space on the bench beside the seated woman. This unclaimed space destabilises the otherwise fixed and neat classificatory logic of colonial representation, dividing observer from observed, Western from native, subject from background. The bench-space urges the viewer to ask: Who is this space for? Why is it there? The space appears available, extended outward in a gesture of invitation. Could Alice Oliphant have been sitting there before moving to the other side of the lens? Is someone else invited into the photographic space to join the mother and children on the bench? The actual presence or absence from the scene is irrelevant to this examination, but their potential materialises the openness this photograph offers. This spatial element's emphasis on the speculative presence of a past or future figure in dialogue creates a photographic encounter that emerges as a form of negotiation that is not fixed in time, transforming the image into a site of layered meanings. The photograph transmits the sense that it is, to some degree, co-authored; the exchange is not between two subjects of photography interrupted by an outsider, but across the lens, between the photographed woman and the photographing woman. The camera, it seems, does not break the scene but becomes folded into it.

Oliphant's decision to photograph Druze individuals complements written accounts of her life in Palestine. In Margaret Oliphant's biographical account of Laurence and Alice's time in Palestine, Alice's everyday activities are portrayed as deeply enmeshed within the local Druze community.¹⁹ Her affection for the people of Daliat el-Carmel, with whom she spent a significant part of her time, is expressed in a letter she wrote to her sister, Jamesina Waller, in January 1885, where she notes the Druze have a 'special character for honesty' and describes them as good neighbours. In the same letter, she also details her ongoing study of Arabic.²⁰ Other correspondences by Laurence, Jamesina, and Margaret repeatedly emphasised Alice's relationship with the Druze community, particularly in the context of mourning her death. Laurence writes of the 'void' left by her loss, 'which the whole community, Moslem [sic], Druze [sic], and Christian alike, feel'.²¹ In a letter to Jamesina following his wife's passing, he quotes the Druze as saying Alice 'was a Druze all the time, and is one now'.²² Although the recurrence of affectionate depictions of Alice's relationship with the Druze across multiple family-authored sources cannot be uncritically accepted as reflecting how the Druze community perceived her, it nonetheless suggests that these relationships formed a meaningful part of her life and emphasises the significance her relatives attributed to these interactions.

The photograph's caption identifies the woman in the image as the daughter-in-law of the village sheikh, a designation that suggests a degree of prominence among her people and situates her within specific familial and social structures that intersected with the Oliphants' presence in the village. The negotiations around the purchase of land for the Dalieh house are recounted at length in Laurence Oliphant's writings.²³ After unsuccessful attempts to acquire land in Isfiya, where he claims to have encountered dishonest dealings with members of the local Christian community, Oliphant was approached by the sheikh of Daliat el-Carmel, who sought his assistance in releasing his son from Ottoman military service. In exchange, the sheikh offered the land on which the house was eventually built. The unfolding of these events highlights the social status of the Oliphants, and of Westerners more broadly, in Ottoman Palestine, which at times even surpassed that of the most prominent local families, such as the sheikh's, who relied on Western intermediaries to navigate relations with Ottoman authorities. Laurence's account mentions the son's wife – presumably the subject of Alice's

photograph – and refers to her deep sorrow at her husband's conscription. This context provides reasonable grounds to assume that the two women were personally acquainted, and that this woman was among Alice Oliphant's first acquaintances in the village, with whom she was in direct contact while their family patriarchs were sorting the purchase of the land.

The specificities of this encounter also introduce another set of negotiations into the relationship between the two women around the land, its ownership, and function. The presumably incidental inclusion of the bare soil in this image becomes charged with meaning when we consider that this very ground was the subject of the transaction that brought these women into contact. The Druze woman sits, quite literally, upon land that her family had sold to the photographer's family, transforming the earth beneath her into a complex site of exchange and negotiation. Once the earth's presence is noticed, it cannot be overlooked; the land asserts itself as a third element in the triangular composition – photographer, subject, land – a material foundation that grounds the encounter in its territorial reality.

As we further attempt to decode the photograph according to these triangular dynamics, additional layers of instability emerge. While the photograph must have been taken sometime between 1884 and 1885, after the Oliphants arrived in Dalieh, we cannot determine whether it documents a scene from before the purchase of the land was finalised, when sheikh Yousef's family may have retained some form of occupancy or ownership, or from a later period after the construction of the house was completed and the Oliphants had established themselves as the new proprietors. The resulting ambiguity is therefore both temporal and spatial, destabilising any reading of the power dynamics at play: we do not know whether the woman sits upon land that still belongs, to some degree, to her family, or whether she occupies it as an employee, neighbour, or guest of the new English owners.

Most prominently, this territorial dimension marks the photograph as a document of entangled, strategic relationships. It emerges from a convergence of interests: sheikh Yousef's family gained access to Western influence, while the Oliphants secured land for their residence. In this way, the photograph also serves as a material trace of the uneven and often non-linear processes of dispossession, which encompassed not only overt land seizure but also calculated choices made by local populations who, facing shifting imperial conditions or economic uncertainty, opted to sell land or align with foreign

actors as a means of survival and social positioning. Such decisions, made under precarious conditions, drew local communities into the gradual process of their own marginalisation.

The question of dispossession here underscores the layered entanglements that characterised land transfers in Ottoman Palestine. In an interview with Dalieh's elders, some of whom are now over ninety years of age, the sheikh in the caption was identified as Sheikh Yousef Nasereldeen Nasereldeen (يوسف نصرالدين نصرالدين), a member of the Nasereldeen family, one of the first families of Dalieh.²⁴ As such, the family held extensive landholdings across the region and mobilised it as capital in exchange for Oliphant's protection and political leverage. Thus, the sale of land to Oliphant did not entail full dispossession but constituted a form of strategic negotiation. Within this arrangement, land functioned not as a sign of loss alone but as a leveraged asset, deployed in response to evolving power dynamics and local needs.

These contested relationships to land are transmitted in the photograph's broader refusal of interpretive clarity, revealing instead the irreducible complexity of territorial relationships in Ottoman Palestine. Observing this photograph anew, one notices how its visual opacity dissolves toward the bottom edge, shifting our focus: the woman's facial expression becomes peripheral to the bare soil, which, perhaps unintentionally, becomes the focal point of the image. As we examine this lower register in more detail, other visual cues offer interpretive depth: while the woman wears traditional leather shoes, her older child stands barefoot on the earth. This physical contact between his feet and the soil suggests a direct, enduring bond with the land on which he stands. The two pairs of feet positioned side by side accentuate a certain contrast between them: the woman's shoes symbolise negotiations over ownership as well as raise questions about belonging and cultural transformations, while the child's bare feet suggest an unmediated, embodied relationship to the ground beneath him. In other words, the act of selling may alter political and material realities, but the image invites the possibility that belonging to a place – its memory carried through bodies – outlasts and is not reducible to the mechanisms of its ownership.

The portrayal of land in this photograph contrasts Oliphant's depictions of land in her drawings. These focus almost exclusively on views and sites around Mount Carmel and the Galilee, and rarely include human figures (figure 5). Oliphant's apparent use of three planes and panoramic perspectives



Figure 5 Alice Oliphant, *The Colony, Haifa*, 1884, ink on paper [NMM 3532]. © National Maritime Museum, Haifa.

in these drawings, alongside her focus on ancient ruins and rural landscapes, point to her formal artistic training, revealing her familiarity with European picturesque conventions of landscape painting and travel drawing in both technique and thematic subjects.²⁵ Crucially, these drawings demonstrate how ‘land’ is configured as ‘landscape’: a coherent visual field organised and manipulated according to specific Western assumptions. This landscape then maintains a certain alienation between viewer and viewed; it is a ‘way of seeing’ that is removed from the flux of life on the land.²⁶

Oliphant’s reluctance to draw people is especially striking when set against her photographic work. It is only occasionally interrupted when human figures appear as indistinct components of the terrain or as ‘staffage’, indicating scale rather than appearing as subjects in their own right. This aestheticisation of the scenery speaks directly to Western desires to demystify foreign lands and subject them to preconceived visual frameworks. The drawings portray a vast, empty land in a seemingly neutral manner that in fact participates in a visual logic that conforms to colonial aesthetics and reveals an integral connection to imperialism.²⁷ Conversely, the photograph examined here

operates differently. It reveals Oliphant's limited technical proficiency, which may have allowed less preconfigured depictions to emerge. Unintentionally, Oliphant's amateurism draws attention to the raw texture of the earth, exposing its uneven surface and presenting it as always in contact with its inhabitants. The soil thus becomes an active surface of encounter, binding the subjects and photographer alike to the terrain they occupy. Through its literal margins, the photograph thus reveals a central tension at the heart of colonial encounters, and the dirty, messy reality of any engagement with and in relation to the territory.

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From today's vantage point, the fact that written documentation of Daliat el-Carmel from the period was produced only by and about Western experiences amplifies Oliphant's visibility while obscuring that of the Druze woman. It is in such instances that other forms of knowledge become crucial. And indeed, oral testimonies by Daliat el-Carmel's elders have helped identify the Druze sitter as Fooda Hassoun (فُؤدة حسون), wife of Kasem Yousef Nasereldeen Nasereldeen (قاسم يوسف نصرالدين نصرالدين).²⁸ This identification is significant: it transforms the subject from an anonymous 'type' within a colonial archive into a named individual with a place in her community's lineage. In Hassoun's case, this also situates her within a distinguished family in her own right, as the Hassouns shared the Nasereldeens' high social status and frequently intermarried. However, beyond the act of naming, village elders were unable to provide information about Hassoun or other women of the period, including Oliphant. Their testimonies centred instead on Laurence's endeavours in the village and the male villagers' interactions with him. In this sense, these narratives ultimately perpetuate male domination in historical accounts.

Examining Druze women's fight for visibility beyond the act of naming, recent studies on Druze womanhood suggest that in Druze culture, women's resistance does not take the form of direct opposition to power but is expressed in nuanced forms of independence that operate within existing social structures. One way in which Druze women navigate the patriarchal conditions under which they live is through bargaining, accepting certain societal norms in order to gain independence or self-expression in other domains they deem more vital.²⁹ Applied to the context of this image, we

might read the photograph as documenting a moment in which Hassoun navigates the constraints of both patriarchal and colonial framings. The image captures her role as a mother in a composition that may even recall the Christian iconography of the Madonna and Child with John the Baptist, while simultaneously suggesting that her engagement with the camera exceeds this containment.³⁰ Hassoun's facial expression and ease, her proximity to her children, and the natural-looking pose she shares with her older child suggest that they were aware and in agreement with their photograph being taken.³¹ The photograph thus holds both the violence inherent in any photographic encounter as well as signs of exchange that cannot be reduced to that violence alone.³² What emerges is not a clear narrative of resistance or compliance, but a photographic trace of negotiation whose full dimensions remain partially inaccessible to us. Given her personal acquaintance with Oliphant, Hassoun may have seen this as a chance to be photographed by someone she knew, and perhaps even trusted, to make herself visible while still maintaining her accepted role. The lineage of negotiation surrounding this encounter and its resulting photograph thus extends from the men and their land deals to the women and their sense of agency. It is the land that connected these women, and it is within this triangular relationship – Alice, Fooda, Daliat el-Carmel – that this photograph should be read. This relational space would not have been possible had Oliphant not lived in Dalieh and developed an intimate familiarity with the Druze community, nor had Hassoun occupied a social position that allowed her to interact with outsiders. Hassoun's smile and apparent confidence suggest conviviality while also conveying a visual sense of dignity and control over her representation. It positions her as an active participant in shaping the encounter, even under the asymmetrical conditions in which it took place.

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The question, then, appears to hinge on the elusive notion of 'belonging'. Considering the emphasis placed by both Alice and her family members on her close ties with the Druze, the photograph she took of Fooda and her children may be read as reflecting Oliphant's own desire to belong, to be 'a Druze all the time', as her husband stresses after her passing. The act of photographing may register Oliphant's own ambivalence, her attempt to position herself within a world to which she remained proximate yet

external. While accounts by nineteenth-century Druze commentators, and by Hassoun in particular, are absent, contemporary oral testimonies suggest that the Druze, too, regarded the Oliphants' proximity to their community not only as a strategic alliance against the Ottomans but also as a source of communal pride. Interviewees repeatedly stressed that Laurence had become 'part of the village' and that he frequently attended local events and religious rituals. His landholdings were specifically cited as evidence of deep ties: 'he [Oliphant] began building his future here. Those who buy land do not intend to sell it tomorrow'.³³ Although Alice and Fooda are not mentioned in these testimonies, they suggest that a sense of belonging and high social standing were aspirations shared by both the British and the Druze, with each party seeing their association as socially beneficial. Being photographed by Oliphant could have been considered a mobilising tool for Hassoun, just as it might have been for Oliphant herself.

The resulting photograph of the encounter between these two women situates Oliphant and Hassoun within a fraught historical moment and introduces the intricate web of relations between interlocutors that frames our reading of history. Photography, in this context, becomes a means of navigating the complexities of women's positionality. It does not necessarily resolve these tensions so much as document the photographer's and subject's entanglement within them. The photographic moment becomes a 'Third Space', revealing itself as a site where colonial binaries become insufficient as analytical frameworks. Rather than confirming or subverting the unidirectional model of imperial encounters, the photograph suggests that such encounters were always more complex than these models allow. Bhabha's 'Third Space' emerges here as a fraught, uneven, yet vital ground where subjectivities clash, rearticulate, and hybridise.

What is at stake in this analysis is the recognition that photographs elude the clarity we often demand from historical evidence. Accordingly, photography's refusal of interpretive certainty becomes a resource for understanding the irreducible complexity of colonial encounters. The lives it records are present, and yet partially obscured; the encounter it documents is charged, but unreadable in full. If the photograph gestures to an alternate vision of the land and its inhabitants, it does so through a kind of historical excess – an accumulation of small, relational traces that refuse to resolve into clarity and operate in the register of the optical unconscious.³⁴ The photograph of

Fooda Hassoun by Alice Oliphant is an opaque fragment caught between private intimacy and colonial asymmetry, between personal acquaintance and structural domination. Attending to this allows us to glimpse the messy social fabric in Ottoman Palestine.

Notes

- 1 A foundational text on nineteenth-century photographic representations of Middle Eastern women is Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
- 2 Many scholars have challenged photography's assumed transparency and its claims to provide unmediated access to reality. Focusing on nineteenth-century photography specifically, John Tagg's analysis of the use of photography in the service of institutional power is worth mentioning, as is Allan Sekula's insistence that photographic 'truths' are shaped by the social and institutional conditions under which images are produced and circulated. I have also found useful Elizabeth Edwards' analysis of British amateur photography and its embeddedness in imperial imaginaries and historical narratives. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988); Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,' *Artforum* 13, no. 5 (January 1975): 36–45; Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive,' *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3–64; Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 3 Prominent research in the debate on Western women's position in the Levant includes Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991); Nancy Micklewright, *A Victorian Traveler in the Middle East: the photography and travel writing of Annie Lady Brassey* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003); Nancy Stockdale, *Colonial Encounters among English and Palestinian Women, 1800–1948* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).
- 4 Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography,' in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), 243.
- 5 The dominant Saidian interpretation of Orientalism has been critiqued for its purported homogeneous narrative of Orientalist phenomena as well as its alleged reliance on binary oppositions which fail to acknowledge the nuances of Western-Eastern relationships. Concepts like Bhabha's 'Third Space' have provided more ambivalent, relational approaches to colonial encounters, though these have also been challenged. Critics have noted that discourses of hybridity and cultural mixing can dehistoricise or depoliticise colonialism, and emphasise the need for a more nuanced understanding of race, class, and gender intersections in postcolonial theory. Some have noted that the

- very use of the term 'hybridity' is problematic, pointing to its biological and botanical origins and the pure antecedents it presumes, and questioning whether the concept can ever fully break from its racialised history. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). For critiques of Said and Bhabha, see for instance Ali Behdad, *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997); Katharyne Mitchell, 'Different Diasporas and the Hype of Hybridity,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 15, no. 5 (1997): 533–553; Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 6 Mary Louise Pratt has written extensively on spaces of negotiation in the imperial context. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 8–9.
 - 7 A relatively extensive biography of Alice Oliphant appears in the catalogue of one of the only exhibitions dedicated to her visual work. See Yossi Ben-Artzi, 'Alice Oliphant – A Personality in Her Own Right,' in *In Lady Oliphant's Drawing-Room*, curated by Lida Sharet-Massad (Haifa: Haifa Museums, National Maritime Museum, 2000), 58–42.
 - 8 Margaret Oliphant, *Memoir of the Life of Laurence Oliphant and of Alice Oliphant, His Wife*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1891), 154.
 - 9 Herbert W. Schneider and George Lawton, *A Prophet and a Pilgrim: Being the Incredible History of Thomas Lake Harris and Laurence Oliphant; Their Sexual Mysticism and Utopian Communities Amply Documented to Confound the Skeptic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 331.
 - 10 Oliphant, *Memoir*, vol. 2, 302.
 - 11 Curator Guy Raz has contributed significantly to identifying and tracing the work of women photographers in Palestine, most visibly through the exhibition 'Her Own Portrait' at PHOTO IS:RAEL in 2019.
 - 12 Gil Pasternak, 'Photographic Histories, Actualities, Potentialities: Amateur Photography as Photographic Historiography,' in *Reconsidering Amateur Photography*, ed. Annebella Pollen and Juliet Baillie (Bradford, UK: National Media Museum, 2012), accessed May 28, 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170218094345/http://eitherand.org/reconsidering-amateur-photography/photographic-histories-actualities-potentialities-/#fn12>.
 - 13 Oliphant, *Memoir*, vol. 2, 197.
 - 14 One particularly relevant exploration of photographs as material objects that function across time and space in the colonialist context is Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).
 - 15 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Relä Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008): 11, 13. My argument is indebted to Ariella Azoulay's conception of the photographic encounter. Azoulay further articulates how these relations are bound by civic and ethical obligations that exceed the moment of exposure. At the same time, I remain attentive to the critiques of her work, which highlight issues of clarity and question the universalising reach of claims grounded in specific political contexts. See for instance Justin Carville, 'Intolerable Gaze: The Social

- Contract of Photography,' *Photography and Culture* 3, no. 3 (2010): 353–58. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, in particular, challenges Azoulay's treatment of gender, arguing that her account of women's vulnerability risks collapsing distinct forms of violence into an undifferentiated category. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Azoulay Accords,' *Art in America* (September 2009): 45–48.
- 16 Christopher Pinney, 'How the Other Half...', in *Photography's Other Histories*, eds. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 3–4. Pinney also draws on what Carlo Ginzburg termed 'physiognomic' readings – interpretive approaches that reflect a scholarly inclination to support pre-existing Saidian or Foucauldian political hypotheses.
 - 17 Ibid, 4–5. Pinney extends Michael Aird's use of the term 'look past', as introduced in his essay in the volume.
 - 18 For instance, see Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011); Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002). Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley have pushed the notion of ambivalence following Freud, articulating it as 'the simultaneous holding of different (even binary) positions that are perhaps irreconcilable... They not only exist but also coexist in ways that cannot necessarily be disentangled.' Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley, eds., *Ambivalent: Photography and Visibility in African History* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019), 3. For an account of how photography's 'uncertainty' destabilises its assumed evidential function, see Elizabeth Edwards, 'Photographic Uncertainties: Between Evidence and Reassurance,' *History and Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2014): 171–88. Similar notions are also explored by Kaja Silverman in her discussion of analogy in Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy: Or The History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
 - 19 Oliphant, *Memoir*, vol. 2, 159. For more about Druze culture and history, particularly on Mount Carmel, see Kais M. Firro, *A History of the Druzes* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1992); Salman H. Falah, 'A History of the Druze Settlements in Palestine During the Ottoman Period,' in *Studies on Palestine During the Ottoman Period*, ed. Moshe Ma'oz, 31–48 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1975); Aehab As'ad and Rabei G. Khamisy, 'The Druze Settlement on Mount Carmel: Daliyat al-Karmil as a Case Study – Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Evidence,' *Middle Eastern Studies* 57, no. 5 (2021).
 - 20 Oliphant, *Memoir*, vol. 2, 169.
 - 21 Ibid, 211.
 - 22 Ibid, 236.
 - 23 Laurence Oliphant, *Haifa; or, Life in Modern Palestine*, ed. Charles A. Dana (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1887), 162–3.
 - 24 An interview with Abu Fuad Hassan Salah Nasereldeem, Fuad Nasereldeem, and Riad Hassoun, conducted by the author, Daliat al-Carmel, September 12, 2025.
 - 25 For more on drawing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
 - 26 Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984; repr., Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998). Cosgrove situates this 'way of seeing' within the emergence of capitalist relations to land in early modern Europe.

- 27 About landscape's function in the service of imperialism see W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Imperial Landscape,' in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5–34. Mitchell has also written specifically about the holy landscape of Israel/Palestine in W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Holy Landscape: Israel, Palestine, and the American Wilderness,' *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (Winter, 2000): 193–223.
- 28 Interview with Abu Fuad Hassan Salah Nasereldeen, Fuad Nasereldeen, and Riad Hassoun, September 12, 2025.
- 29 Ebtesam Barakat, 'Gender Struggle Within Complex Religious Realities: Druze Women in Israel as a Case Study,' *Gender Issues* 39, no. 1 (2022), 39–63. Barakat draws upon earlier scholarship that critically interrogates gender, agency, and authority in Middle Eastern societies, notably the work of Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood. Her use of 'bargaining' draws on the work of Deniz Kandiyoti, particularly in Kandiyoti, 'Bargaining with Patriarchy,' *Gender and Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274–290.
- 30 While Oliphant never explicitly used religious motifs in her visual production, her immersion in a culture saturated with biblical imagery suggests that such references may have shaped her composition, even if only subconsciously.
- 31 In her analysis of images titled 'Zulu Mothers' circulating in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, Christraud Geary identifies visual cues that may suggest a measure of voluntary participation on the part of the sitters, even within the asymmetrical dynamics that structured their encounters with (likely Western) photographers. She particularly points to the ways in which children's cooperation may signal parental consent. Christraud Geary, 'Zulu Mothers' and Their Children Traveling Around the World: From Photograph to Picture Postcard,' in *African Photography from the Walther Collection: Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*, ed. Tamar Garb (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl/The Walther Collection, 2013), 70–80.
- 32 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 99.
- 33 Interview with Abu Fuad Hassan Salah Nasereldeen, Fuad Nasereldeen, and Riad Hassoun, September 12, 2025.
- 34 Walter Benjamin's concept of the optical unconscious foregrounds photography's capacity to register involuntary and contingent details that escape conscious intention and exceed the limits of human perception. Rosalind Krauss later reworked the term to critique modernist claims of pure visual autonomy, foregrounding the repressed psychological and bodily dimensions of vision. More recent scholarship has returned to Benjamin's idea specifically in relation to photography, developing the optical unconscious as a historical and political concept. Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography'; Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993); Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski, eds., *Photography and the Optical Unconscious* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

CARLO CRIVELLI BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Henry Tudor-Pole

When Carlo Crivelli left Venice for the last time, in the winter of 1457, he travelled, like everyone else coming and going from the city, by boat. Nothing is known for certain about his movements until 1465, when he is recorded as a citizen of Zadar, suggesting that he had lived there for several years.¹ It is, however, more than likely that he arrived at this Dalmatian city via a sea route, as this was by far the most effective means of transport between the coastal areas of the Adriatic Sea. Towards the end of his life, in 1491, Crivelli completed a large altarpiece for the town of Matelica, nestled within the part of the Apennine mountains that fell within the March of Ancona (figure 1). Now housed, intact, in the National Gallery, London, the altarpiece includes a predella which contains a series of narrative images that pay particular attention to the land and the sea. Four of its five sections represent different locations around the Mediterranean, three of which contain an extra-urban landscape, and two of these represent the sea in contrasting ways: bright and hopeful, and dark and ominous (figures 2–7).

This article will examine Crivelli's representation of land, sea, sky and human inhabitant, in order to interpret how he imagined the geographical region he lived in. This region is understood as a place invested with distinct characteristics. The category of place is useful for two principal reasons. First, it might be considered a less anachronistic category than the more abstract idea of space. During the late fifteenth century, the absolute extension of space, which would later come to dominate European thinking about the universe, was by no means the default. Rather than a universe, Crivelli inhabited an Aristotelian, finite cosmos, subdivided into places, which can be defined as spatial areas invested with their own distinctive, and frequently immutable, characteristics.² As I will argue, the Adriatic can be considered



Figure 1 Carlo Crivelli, *La Madonna della Rondine* (The Madonna of the Swallow), 1491, egg tempera on wood, 247 × 185 cm. © The National Gallery, London. Inventory number: NG724.



Figure 2 Carlo Crivelli, *La Madonna della Rondine*, predella, 1491, egg tempera on wood, 29 × 146 cm. © The National Gallery, London. Inventory number: NG724.2.

as one such place, a region distinct from the others around it. Secondly, place already occupies a significant role in the literature on Crivelli, albeit usually in a negative sense. It is unusual to find a publication on Crivelli that does not begin with remarks on his incompatibility with conventional modes of art-historical categorisation. Whether his style is deemed belatedly Gothic for a Renaissance artist, or his patrons too theologically conservative to foster the humanism that flourished elsewhere, Crivelli's difference from the better-known artists of Italian cities like Venice, Florence and Rome is regularly explained as a result of the peripheral region he inhabited.³ His exclusion from the *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, for example, was due to his work being situated in little cities and districts of the Marche, too remote for news to reach the ears even of that most prolific anecdote gatherer, Giorgio Vasari.⁴ Exiled from his home city of Venice and cut adrift in a region lacking the kind of artistic centres which, according to Enrico Castelnovo and Carlo Ginzburg's influential model, produce stylistic progress, Crivelli's peripherality is legible in both his work and the geographical itinerary of his life.⁵

An account of place as Crivelli imagined it might shed light on aspects of his work that are missed by Castelnovo and Ginzburg's model. While it ascribed value to artistic peripheries, proposing them as potential sites for productive alterity freed from the hyper-competitive conditions of the urban centre, the model left the notion of periphery somewhat vaguely defined, and was notably silent on major cities, such as Naples, with which no distinct artistic style was associated.⁶ However, rather than outline a general, nomothetic approach to the geography of art, the aim of this article is instead to explore how place was imagined by the artist, which might provide a different kind of contribution to the debate on the relationship between Crivelli's emplacement and his work. Crivelli's own life was passed between the littorals, hinterlands and the body of the Adriatic Sea, specifically its more northerly 'upper' and 'middle' parts.⁷ As a result of the extensive maritime trade and pilgrimage routes that passed through it, this region was profoundly connected with the wider world. The sense of place here, in a similar way to the idea of it advanced by cultural geographer Doreen Massey, seems to have been determined just as much by its relationships to other places beyond its parameters, as by its locally originating characteristics.⁸ To what extent did this region affect the way Crivelli represented the landscape?

For much of the last two thousand years, the Adriatic has been a geopolitical border zone. Home to a wide variety of religious, linguistic and ethnic groups, it has frequently marked a boundary between East and West, whether those cardinal directions denote communism and capitalism, Orthodoxy and Catholicism, Islam and Christendom, or the two principal halves of the Roman Empire. On the other hand, more topographically-oriented histories of the Adriatic echo Fernand Braudel's statement that it was 'perhaps the most unified of all the regions of the Mediterranean Sea',⁹ although these claims rarely escape political interests either, whether redolent of Italian irridentist ambitions over Istria and Dalmatia,¹⁰ or efforts in the 1990s to emphasise the European belonging of the newly independent state of Croatia following the bombardment of Dubrovnik.¹¹ Such a historiographical lens inevitably colours the study of Carlo Crivelli's life and work, and a similar tension between unity and fragmentation can be discerned in that place during his lifetime. Although, as this article will explore, the predella of *La Madonna della Rondine* represents places within the wider Mediterranean, not the Adriatic itself, the experience of inhabiting this distinctive place appears to have been of crucial importance for determining its form.

Housed today within its original frame in London's National Gallery, the altarpiece known as *La Madonna della Rondine* was made for the convent of San Francesco in Matelica in 1491. The altarpiece was an important work of art within the town, having been commissioned by the local prince, Ranuccio Ottoni, and Fra Giorgio di Giacomo, guardian of the convent.¹² As might be expected given its patronage, the highly elaborate main panel unites aristocratic and Franciscan resonances. The enthroned Madonna and Child are flanked by a young Saint Sebastian dressed as a fashionable knight in pale hose, slashed sleeves, and abundant jewellery, while Mary wears a gold crown so large it obscures most of her halo. At the left, Saint Jerome wears a generous, red cardinal's robe that spills over the ledge he is standing on. A popular saint across Italy and especially amongst the Franciscans, Jerome might also have resonated in the Marche, given his Dalmatian or Istrian origins. As Ines Ivić has shown, Jerome was considered the 'universal patron of all Schiavoni coming from the different parts of the Eastern Adriatic Coast',¹³ and there were considerable migrant populations in the Marche, having been invited from across the Adriatic as part of efforts to repopulate following the fourteenth-century outbreak of the Black Death, a pattern

which continued in the fifteenth century, providing a substantial source of domestic, artisanal and agricultural labour in the region.¹⁴

The economy of the Marche had strong connections with the coast.¹⁵ When he completed the Matelica altarpiece in 1491 Crivelli had been an inhabitant of Ascoli, a city deeply embroiled in maritime trade, for well over a decade. In addition to his own experience of it, the importance of the sea to life in these places appears to have had an effect on Crivelli's representation of topography in the predella of the *Madonna della Rondine*. It represents a series of different environments characterised by the interaction of saints, topography and narrative. Juxtaposing several different saints' lives, it invites a sense of journeying and cyclicity that situates itself and its beholders in an imagined world characterised by sea travel and religious conversion. Like the Adriatic in Crivelli's day, it represents an interconnected maritime region in which identity and territorial control is in flux. The altarpiece's typological perspective on the world also produces comparisons with events from Roman history in order to make sense of the present. In so doing, it challenges the historiographical construct of a firm East-West dichotomy, instead indicating a more fluid approach to place and an almost cyclical temporality.

The predella

All of the figures in the enclosed, heavenly setting of the main panel have an episode from their lives represented in the predella: *Jerome in Penitence*, the *Nativity*, the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (figures 4–6). These three hagiographic images, situated respectively in the Egyptian desert, the outskirts of Bethlehem, and Rome, are bookended by an aristocratic *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* in an architectural niche, and a chivalric *Saint George and the Dragon* in a desert landscape outside the Libyan city of Silene (figures 3 and 7).¹⁶ In addition to evoking the locations of each hagiography, the predella images construct a geography through which the altarpiece's beholders are invited to imaginatively progress, as if on a journey. An initial sense of participation in the spaces represented throughout the altarpiece is suggested by their constant lighting, which strikes the forms from the same direction, behind and to the right of the beholder. This illumination corresponded to the position of a window at the back of the chapel in which the altarpiece was installed, thereby integrating the beholders' space with those represented within the altarpiece.¹⁷ As this suggests, the altarpiece itself, as is often the

case with Crivelli's work, acted as an interface of heightened connection between the saints and the beholders, rather than a frame containing a series of paintings to be appreciated from the position of a detached observer.¹⁸ This sense of participation is deepened by the remarkable series of natural and architectural arches that occur throughout the predella.

Arches point upwards, and they act as frames that direct the gaze through them. That Crivelli wanted to draw our attention to the directional and framing functions of the arches in the predella is suggested by Saint Catherine, who gestures to the arch formed by the intersection of her wheel with the lower edge of the panel. Unlike the rest of the sections of the predella, Catherine is represented in an iconic rather than narrative mode, standing in front of the niche rather than within an encompassing landscape, and looking into the space of the beholder. With her right hand she gestures towards the wheel which, in its position at the right edge of the panel, opens up an implicit space between the architectural background and the immediately adjacent edge of the frame. The beholder's gaze is invited to pass through it.

Several other arches are visible in the predella. Apart from those at the gates of distant cities, all frame areas of sky, drawing attention to the variable conditions of weather and visibility, which correspond to the action occurring in the landscapes. In the *Jerome in Penitence* section, for example, the saint's self-inflicted torment takes place under suitably dark clouds, part of which is framed by the natural and rugged arch at the top right corner. In contrast, in the triumphant *George and the Dragon* panel, the similar rock arch frames an orange sun rising, or perhaps setting, over the sea in a resplendent fashion. In the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* section, while the saint is penetrated by arrows, a small area of clear blue sky is visible under the complex and apparently incongruous network of Roman arches in the city, but our view of this sky is mostly blocked by trees that bend as if in strong wind. In the *Nativity* section, the logic of the arch is pushed further, in keeping with the central moment in time it represents. The night sky is supernaturally white, with the moon, gold stars and an angelic apparition visible within it – evidently also visible to the upward-looking shepherds at the right edge. This clarity signals a heightened connection between heaven and earth, an idea which is confirmed by the break in the arch, with the uppermost stems of a tree just reaching through, suggesting the removal of obstacles to heaven and the interpenetration of the heavenly and the earthly in the person of Christ.¹⁹



Figure 3 Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* predella panel from *La Madonna della Rondine*. © National Gallery, London. Inventory number: NG724.2.



Figure 4 *Saint Jerome in the Desert* predella panel, from *La Madonna della Rondine*.
© National Gallery, London.

Guided by these arches, the beholder is taken through an imagined geography in which the land is in dialogue with the sky. Given the altarpiece's Franciscan patronage, the skies are suggestive of a Franciscan perspective on nature – or rather, creation – which saw all of it in terms of a chorus of praise to God's glory, whatever the weather. This idea is memorably expressed in Saint Francis' *Cantico al sole*, a song that rejoices in aspects of the world such as the sun, moon, water, fire and wind, and establishes a sense of kinship between human beings and these nonhuman things:

Laudato si, mi signore, per sora luna e le stelle, in celu l'ài formate clarite et pretiose et belle.



Figure 5 *The Nativity predella panel, from La Madonna della Rondine.* © National Gallery, London.

Laudato si, mi signore, per frate vento, et per aere et nubilo et sereno et onne tempo, per lo quale a le tue creature dai sustentamento.

[Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather, through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.^{20]}

In it, Francis refers to ‘Brother Sun’ and ‘Sister Moon’ as means through which creation praises its creator, but also less pleasant phenomena such as ‘Brother Wind’ and even ‘sora nostra morte corporale’ – ‘our Sister Bodily Death’.²¹ Composed at a moment of crisis for Francis, the hymn praises

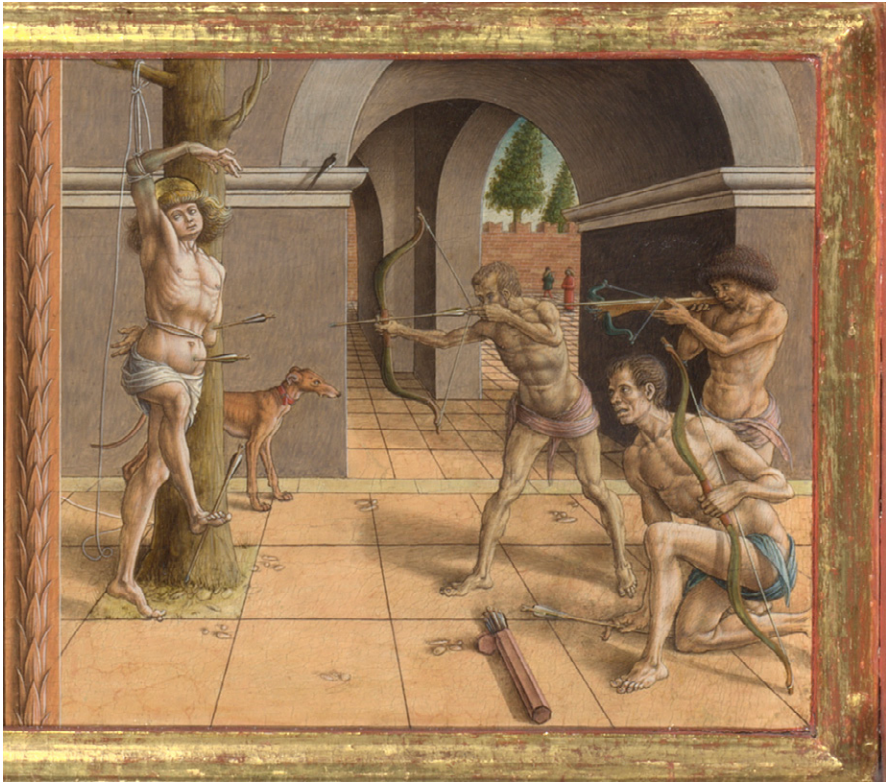


Figure 6 *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* predella panel, from *La Madonna della Rondine*.
© National Gallery, London.

the glory of the world despite its hardships, and also serves to diminish humanity's sense of estrangement from the rest of creation, emphasising their symbiosis.²² The predella can be approached in a similar way. In the *Nativity*, the personified moon fringed by a red penumbra and shining through the arch recalls 'Sister Moon', while the *George* might have reminded the friars of 'Sir Brother Sun' ('*messor lo frate sole*') who Francis says resembles God ('*de te, altissimo, porta significatione*'): suitable for the triumphant moment of the panel.²³ From this point of view, the less propitious wind and clouds of *Sebastian* and *Jerome* might similarly have been seen as cause for joy despite the earthly hardships with which they correspond, because the saints' eventual victory is assured.



Figure 7 Saint George Killing the Dragon, predella panel, from *La Madonna della Rondine*.
© National Gallery, London.

With an unmistakable sense of what John Ruskin called the ‘pathetic fallacy’, the skies therefore seem to act in tandem with the events occurring beneath them, and the arches, whether natural or man-made, reinforce this relationship by directing the beholder’s gaze through and up. However, other aspects of the landscapes are likely to have disturbed the buoyancy of the Franciscan approach to nature. Given the dangers associated with the sea, the dark clouds of the *Jerome* panel might have appeared even more ominous in 1491 than they do today. On their way to the Holy Land in 1483, the Swiss Dominican friar Felix Fabri and his companions crossed the Alps and caught sight of the Adriatic Sea from a high vantage point. Fabri recalled the experience in the following way:

Casting our eyes out across the region which lay to southward, we looked from the mountains into the Italian plain, and beyond the plain saw the Mediterranean Sea; at the sight of which my lords, being young and sensitive, were appalled and stood still, contemplating the sea and their future dangers. And in fact I too was struck by some qualms at that sight, for all that I had tasted its bitterness thoroughly [on his previous voyage]. For the view from the mountain did have a sufficiently wild appearance. What was near could be seen clearly and the evening sun displayed all the forward part – but all the rest, whose bounds no one could detect, seemed to be towering clouds, thick, gloomy and darkling in atmosphere and colour.²⁴

Here, in terms similar to Crivelli’s, the sea is an object of fear. Fabri contrasts the forbidding clouds with the comfort of the evening sun, similarly to how Crivelli contrasts the cloudy sky in the *Jerome* with the orange sun in the *George* section of the predella. The sea’s remote boundaries are evoked by Crivelli’s dark horizon, and their proximity to the Holy Land is indicated by the figures surrounding the city behind Jerome, who are dressed in the robes and turbans by which Crivelli, like many artists of his time, represented the inhabitants of that place. For example, on the left of the *Nativity* section of the predella, the figures entering the city, implicitly Bethlehem, are similarly attired. Jerome’s penitence took place in the Egyptian desert, which, although perhaps not quite the Holy Land, was close to it and far to the east, for which the figures wearing turbans appear to be wearing a suitable costume.

Conversion

The dress of the distant figures, however, demands further attention as a sign of the way in which the predella has been shaped by the concerns of the Adriatic region. They might be considered a place marker, denoting the far-off (but reachable by sea) Holy Land and its environs, or, perhaps, the 'East' in general, an idea more or less coterminous with the Islamic world.²⁵ Although fairly loose, these were far from neutral spatial designations. Authors, both during Crivelli's day and ours, vary in their willingness to divide the world into East and West. However, James G. Harper contends that, 'used flexibly the terms 'East' and 'West' denote dominant political, religious, and cultural systems, as well as a historically accurate awareness of early modern perceptions of difference'. With its roots stretching as far back as Herodotus, 'the East-West dichotomy is operative and predominant during the period under examination'.²⁶ Both Nancy Bisaha and Suzanne Akbari argue that, while medieval references to a dichotomised 'East and West' were rare, from the eleventh century effectively the same distinction was preserved under the labels 'Christian' and 'Infidel'.²⁷ With the notion of place tied so closely to religion, the robed, turbaned figures in the *Jerome* and *Nativity* sections of the predella carry an unmistakeable sense of religious difference.²⁸

Although small, the robed figures in the *Jerome in Penitence* and the *Nativity* sections appear to be wearing the Ottoman style of turban, a white cloth wrapped around a red cap known as a *tāġ*.²⁹ Following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, coastal cities along the Adriatic had been falling to the Turks at an alarming rate. In 1478 they had captured Valona, or Vlorë, in Albania, giving them their first major Adriatic port at a particularly narrow choke point of the sea, from where they were able to occupy the coastal town of Otranto, Puglia, spreading fear throughout Italy.³⁰ The presence of robed figures under the dark sky of the *Jerome in Penitence* seems indicative of the fear provoked by the Turks' apparently unstoppable advance. In this context, the altarpiece's representation of saints who inhabited an early Christian moment, characterised by confrontation with the institutionalised Roman religion or its cultural vestiges, might have provided a historical parallel by which beholders could make sense of their own times. As Suzanne Akbari notes, despite its scrupulous monotheism, medieval Latin references to Islam tended to posit it as a form of idolatry, which could easily overlap with representations of Roman polytheism.³¹ Other representations of the

penitent Jerome do in fact represent elements of Roman culture in the position where Crivelli paints Turks, such as a 1460 panel by Jacopo Bellini now at the Museo di Castelveccchio which has a closely related composition to Crivelli's – but a 'pagan idol' on a column in the place where Crivelli inserts his robed figures (figure 8). Following the conquest of Constantinople, the Turks were often considered as the successors to the barbarians who sacked Rome, a reference that Crivelli may be making here.³² Albeit more rarely, the Ottomans could also be directly associated with the Romans themselves. This was something that had been actively encouraged by Sultan Mehmet II (d. 1481), who commissioned Italian medals representing him in the guise of Roman emperor.³³ The typological flexibility of the turbaned figures could therefore have allowed beholders to identify the city of the *Jerome in Penitence* panel with the idolatry of the Roman world, or its fall to the barbarian invaders, or indeed the contemporary Islamic 'idolatry' of the Egyptian setting of this part of Jerome's hagiography. Whether associated with temporal power or religious heterodoxy, they seem, under the clouds, to be intentionally contrasted with the fervent piety of Jerome.

From this starting point, the rest of the predella encodes a meta-narrative of religious conversion that leads from tribulation to triumph. To a greater degree than the English word 'convert', the Latin '*converto*' carries the sense of physical turning as well as religious reorientation. As well as the celestial objects circling the earth in Ptolemaic fashion, a sense of rotation is introduced by Catherine's spiked wheel.³⁴ The *Catherine* panel's asymmetry sets it apart, as if in introduction to a narrative arc that is subtly plotted through the *Jerome in Penitence* panel to the left and the *George and the Dragon* panel at the right. These two panels roughly mirror each other: both contain a rock arch at an opposite edge, both have a coastal, walled city thronged with people, and in both the spatial relationship between saint and city is mediated in a similar way, by a wooden plank that bridges a narrow crevice otherwise separating the two. Furthermore, each saint has his companion animal, Jerome's lion and George's white horse, and both sections contain a dragon in a state of subjection. While Jerome's dragon slinks away with its tail between its legs, George's is gravely wounded, its imminent killing lending a sense of completion to the ad hoc narrative cycle, while preserving the symmetry between its beginning and its end. As Fabio Mariano noted, the city in the *George and the Dragon* panel resembles a typical Veneto city with a fortified



Figure 8 Jacopo Bellini, *Saint Jerome in the Desert*, c. 1460, tempera on wood, 95 × 65cm, Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona. Public Domain: <https://www.wikioo.org/paintings.php?refarticle=D79AE8&titlepainting=Saint%20Jerome%20in%20the%20Desert&artistname=Jacopo%20Bellini>

gate and bell towers, plus the unusual addition of a veranda above the gate.³⁵ This description also matches the city behind Jerome, lending an architectural cohesion to the whole. The most significant difference is in the figures that surround the cities. The *Jerome in Penitence* panel's turbaned figures ignore Jerome. In contrast, the figures outside the city in the *George and the Dragon* panel are dressed in red caps and hose or dresses – that is, clothing of a kind worn in a Latin Christian city – looking on as George performs his heroic action, with a regal figure appearing on the balcony. According to the *Golden Legend*, once George had killed the dragon outside the Libyan city of Silene, the grateful inhabitants were baptised en masse.³⁶ Based on the change of clothes and direction of attention between the otherwise similar cities, the same process appears to have occurred across the predella. The citizens have been converted from idolatry to Christianity.

The meta-narrative resolves Jerome's pain and suffering in George's triumph and the mass conversion of the city. This theme would have been agreeable to the Franciscans, whose principal tasks were to preach, repent and win converts, and its arc mirrors a core Christian concept of trial through suffering leading to eventual victory, most obviously figured in the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Taking place between two similar coastal cities, the story locates itself within a kind of geography that would have been familiar to many of its beholders, as well as to Crivelli, and where the exchange of cities between different confessional groups is likely to have had an immediate resonance. While it ends on a hopeful note, the encoded conversion narrative also reflects an awareness of the mutability and even precarity of identity of coastal cities in the region, caught between competing powers of different faiths. The courtly, chivalric qualities of the Ottoni commission also allude to the perilous nature of the region. The notion of crusade, frequently called for throughout the fifteenth century, including in Franciscan texts, is present within the military overtones of the altarpiece in combination with the conversionary theme. Especially after 1453, calls for crusade often blurred the distinction between the Ottomans and other Islamic powers, treating them as equally valid targets.³⁷

East and West?

It would, however, be reductive to characterise the encounters between the Latin and the Islamic parts of the Adriatic solely in terms of hostility.

The extensive trade and pilgrimage networks are an indication of peaceful exchange and cooperation, and Crivelli's predella also hints at this in the turbaned figures in the background of *Jerome in Penitence* which are, in themselves, in no way threatening or hostile. Unarmed, they stroll around the city, two men rowing innocently in a little boat. As Claire Norton has argued, the notion of a firm East-West dichotomy, albeit emphasised in humanist texts, is not borne out by the extensive artistic, mercantile, diplomatic and intellectual relationships between the eastern and western Mediterranean. Following Wilson and Brummett, Norton characterises the Mediterranean rather 'as a zone of diffusion *and* difference', while Anna Contadini suggests that 'we need to heed the complexities of trading patterns and look at the Mediterranean less in terms of large-scale power blocs and more in terms of a patchwork of cultural centres participating in a set of loosely structured transactions.'³⁸ Instead of a civilisational battle between East and West, many of Crivelli's viewers are likely to have understood their region in this more piecemeal fashion. The late fifteenth century was also a time of change in Christian representations of Muslims. Julian Raby introduced the term 'Oriental Mode' to describe a way of representing the East that emphasised its difference from the Latin West. Yet this 'mode' appears to have taken place in a different milieu from Crivelli's, and slightly later.³⁹ In the wake of Bernard von Breydenbach's printed pilgrimage account, *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam*, first published in 1486 with its topographical illustrations by Erhard Reuwich, and Gentile Bellini's 1479–81 visit to Ottoman Constantinople, artists made concerted attempts to represent the eastern Mediterranean in terms of its contemporary appearance, such as Gentile and Giovanni Bellini's 1504–7 *Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria* or Vittore Carpaccio's 1507 *Saint George Baptising the Selenites* in the Scuola degli Schiavoni. These helped to emphasise its inherent difference from the Latin world. Crivelli, on the other hand, prefers a generic, typological representation of cities and their inhabitants, determinable by the signifiers 'Infidel' or 'Christian', which are liable to be exchanged. Rather than emphasising the exoticism of a remote East, this mode of representation suggests its closeness to Crivelli's own geographical location. The implication of the conversionary narrative across the *Madonna della Rondine* predella is that the places represented are part of a shared region, with a flux of temporal powers, of orthodoxy and idolatry. Absent is any strong notion of difference along cultural lines that

is prominent in Breydenbach, the Bellini or Carpaccio. Crivelli's imagined geography therefore seems not to be a region of immutable difference, but part of a common sphere with which union was possible, either in the favourable terms of a unification with the Latin church, or catastrophically by Ottoman conquest. Domination by an idolatrous power had happened before in its history, and Crivelli therefore represents a cyclical repetition to the events that occur within his imagined geography, an interconnected maritime region of perpetual conversion and reconversion.

As the mutability of the otherwise nearly identical cities in the predella suggests, Crivelli's representation of a Mediterranean littoral is more in keeping with this account than with those of a later generation who would emphasise exoticism and difference. There is a further sign of this in the predella. While the figures in the *Jerome* panel wear clothes that define them in negative, religiously inflected terms, the Christian converts in the *George* panel also owe elements of their dress to the Islamic world. The princess' bi-horned escoffion was a fashion in Latin countries based on encounters with Ottoman military headgear.⁴⁰ In addition, the carpet draped over the balcony is redolent of the Turkish carpets that proliferated throughout the Adriatic as objects of prestige, used here as a sign of the king of Silene's high status in a way that was found across Christian courts. Rather than the cardinal directions 'East and West', Crivelli's places are imagined in terms of a wider region that is contested, but nonetheless closely connected: an expansive, outward-looking sense of place.⁴¹ Undoubtedly there was a tendency for 'West' to imply orthodoxy and 'East' heterodoxy, but, as shown by the presence of heretical groups in the Marche, the Islamic caliphates in Africa and Iberia, and Crivelli's fluid imagination of different places in the predella, this dichotomy appears to have been far from rigid.

The imagined geography of *La Madonna della Rondine* is therefore highly responsive to events taking place within the region of the Adriatic and can contribute to our historical understanding of life there. It represents a coastal topography in religious flux, in which human events are mirrored in the skies. In contrast with accounts of Crivelli as an artist outside the main currents of his time, here his work grapples with global historical events, both ancient – the conversion of Rome to Christianity – and modern – the rise to world power status of the Ottoman Empire, and it identifies similarities between them. Historians regularly describe the Adriatic littoral as a zone of heightened

contact and exchange, and this is borne out by Crivelli's imagined geography of both diffusion and difference.⁴² This perspective applies pressure to the characterisation of the Adriatic as a border between the innately different Eastern and Western Mediterraneans. While it was the site of religious and political conflict, it was also defined by more friendly contact, suggesting that many of its inhabitants did not perceive it as a civilisational boundary. The same place, as Massey emphasises, is experienced in starkly contrasting ways by its different inhabitants. The altarpiece's Franciscan and courtly interests certainly impute a moral imperative to this state of affairs: repent and convert; go on a pilgrimage or a crusade. The general tenor of humanist texts is to emphasise the implacable opposition of Christendom and Islam. Yet Crivelli's work also implies the existence of other, less dichotomised ways of understanding the region, which, for many of its inhabitants, might have been considered one of the central meeting places of the world.

Notes

This article is based on my Upgrade paper, the outcome of the first year of my PhD. Thanks are due in particular to my PhD supervisor, Professor Alison Wright, as well as to my secondary supervisor, Professor Rose Marie San Juan, and my external advisor, Professor Donal Cooper of Jesus College, Cambridge, for their invaluable contributions.

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REVIEWS

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.2392](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.2392)

Sophie Calle and Jean-Paul Demoule, *The Elevator Resides in 501*, Actes Sud, 2022, 372 pages, paperback, ISBN 9782 3301 5948 1.

Alice Moylett Davies

The Elevator Resides in 501 comes wrapped in a glassine paper dust jacket, forming a pocket that holds four loose leaves: a catalogue card for the book itself written from a future without books, a scanned room number plate, a blueprint map. And there is a photograph of Calle sitting on a bed in a derelict hotel room, credited to her friend Richard Baltrauss.

Good luck finding these slips of paper in any library edition of the book; like the objects they record, they will inevitably get lost. The book describes itself as an ‘object’ in the ‘form of a 372-page paper book’.¹ You would not know that it is in fact an exhibition catalogue because it never mentions the exhibition that it originates from: *Les Fantômes d’Orsay* [The Ghosts of Orsay] by Sophie Calle and her guest, archaeologist Jean-Paul Demoule. The catalogue explores, through photographs, scanned images and text, the abandoned Hôtel Palais d’Orsay. The hotel was constructed on the site of the Palais d’Orsay, which stood from 1810 until 1871. Following this, the building became the Gare d’Orsay with a 370-room hotel above it. The train station closed in 1939, but the hotel remained in use until its abandonment in the

1970s – the period in which Calle roamed its rooms. Following a period of modernisation, the derelict building became the home of the Musée d’Orsay collection in 1986, and the space of Calle’s exhibition in spring 2022.

The title of this spectral exhibition, *Les Fantômes*, reveals the narrative push of the book: ghosts and their hauntings. The character list includes Calle and Demoule, but the real ghost of this ghost story is the hotel’s old handyman, Mr Oddo, who exists only in scraps of handwritten letters found among the abandoned debris.

Sophie Calle is perhaps most well known for her projects *Suite Venitienne* (1980) and *The Address Book* (1983), in which she undertakes clandestine information-gathering. *The Elevator Resides at 501* brings together themes prevalent across Calle’s career. *Les Dormeurs* (1979), where strangers were invited to sleep in her bed, demonstrates an interest in the politics of space. *Prenez Soins de Vous* (2007) deals with interpretation by asking 107 women to respond to a breakup Calle received over email. In *À toi de faire, ma mignonne* (2023), Calle’s entire apartment is inventoried and appraised, displayed in the Musée Picasso Paris, revealing the artist’s preoccupation with collecting and organising.

It remains a mystery whether Donatien Grau, head of contemporary programs at the d’Orsay, was aware that upon invitation

to exhibit, Calle would produce her own personal archive of photographic documents of his gallery's derelict interior from over forty years ago. Although, looking at her previous projects, it should hardly be surprising. Calle has a way of always being a few steps ahead, even if it appears that she is following a few steps behind.

In *The Elevator*, Calle prefers to use clairvoyance to look backwards, rather than forwards. The book opens with a diary entry from Calle's self-designated residency in the abandoned hotel: '1978. The last days of the year. I was back in France, in Paris, and I was walking along the quays of the Seine'.² From here, the book can be thought in three sections: the first presents black and white photographs of the hotel taken in 1978; the second produces a deluge of scan images of found objects, each with archaeological analysis from Demoule; the third section brings us to the present day, with dim photographic reproductions of canonical artworks currently hanging in the d'Orsay.

This project started in 1978, the year before *Suite Venitienne*, in which Calle trailed a fellow dinner party guest, Henri B., all the way to and around Venice. She spent two weeks looking at his back. *The Elevator* dedicates a significant proportion of attention to reproducing objects that were swallowed by the hotel's history, and there is a notable preoccupation with the back of these objects. 'Red-enamelled metal room numbers ripped from the doors, client records from 1937 to 1940, [...] relics of telephones, bells, water bills, gas bills'.³ They become 'souvenirs', remembered only by Calle. Each object is recorded, photographed from the front and the back and reproduced across the verso and recto of the page. Three-dimensional water-pressure meters are flattened into text, while

pages of notebooks covered in handwritten meter readings are translated into artworks themselves. What was once information has been rerecorded and transformed into an object. Through *Inception*-like visual reproductions and multiple textual interpretations, objects are read and text is looked at. In character, Calle plays with the relationship between art and literature. The automatic prioritisation of the front of things is denaturalised; we spend as much time looking at their backs.

The third section solidifies this. First a colour photograph, which signifies a move into the present. It shows an emergency exit sign above a staircase. It is room 501 as it stands today. This photograph forms a pair with the earlier portrait of Calle taken by Richard Baltrauss. Mimicking the documented objects, the pair forms the front and back, taken from the past and the future, of room 501. The book closes with a series of some of the most recognisable works in French art history, photographed under low-light in the Musée d'Orsay. Only one follows the project's methodology and is photographed from the back. It is Cuno Amiet's *Deep Winter* (1904). The museum's curator reveals that from this perspective there is a tiny skier, just visible, who was lost under an avalanche of white paint. Calle alludes to a connection between the hotel's ghost, Mr Oddo, and the painting's reversal 'au dos'.⁴ Calle's project brings literature's turning pages to art objects, expanding narrative across the front and back.

1 Sophie Calle and Jean-Paul Demoule, *The Elevator Resides in 501* (Actes Sud, 2022), unpaginated.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.2393](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.2393)

Barbara Kruger: Another Day. Another Night. Guggenheim Museum Bilbao 24 June to 11 September 2025

Akin Oladimeji

Let's start with one of Barbara Kruger's most well-known works in this exhibition, *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)* (1989), which was created for the Women's March on Washington of the same year, a demonstration tackling restrictions of abortion and reproductive rights in the US. It is a striking black-and-white photograph of a woman's face which has been divided into two, one half printed positive, the other in negative; the work's titular phrase printed on white text over a bold red background. Kruger's poster has only gained further resonance today and, by employing the second person perspective, Kruger draws viewers into the contested laws and social spaces of bodily autonomy, specifically those of women. The lasting impact of the artwork stems from how it continues to address authoritarianism and how it intersects with religion. So effective are Kruger's graphics (she started her career as a graphic designer) that Supreme – a trendy skaters' clothing brand – use her choice of font and layout (which, for unclear reasons, she has never contested in court).

In the late 1960s, Kruger served as a designer and picture editor for various publications where she honed her abilities to attract attention through effective visual composition and clarity. This experience not only enhanced her sensitivity to the circulation of images in consumer culture but also deepened her interest in the art of visual persuasion. During this time, she began utilising sans serif typefaces – most notably

Futura Bold and Helvetica Ultra Compressed – both renowned for their stark legibility and impact. These fonts became defining features of her artwork, enabling her 'to cut through the grease'.¹

The exhibition starts with *Untitled (I shop therefore I am)*, 1987, originally a photographic silkscreen on vinyl. It has been remade numerous times, including in 2019 as a large-scale LED installation over five meters tall complete with animation and sound, where it cycled through – with clanking metal sounds – various phrases such as 'I shop therefore I hoard', 'I need therefore I shop', and 'I love therefore I need'.

The curator, Lekha Waitoller, pointed out that Kruger is playing with ideas of authorship by taking work that she has discovered online that bears striking stylistic similarities to hers and presenting it without comment. There is humour too; for example, in a sound work installed across various corners of the galleries we hear a female voice – in the style of a US reality TV star – uttering the phrase 'I love you'; another, 'Sorry', followed by a rim shot. Similarly, there's a certain absurdity that flows through the video *Untitled (No Comment)*, 2020, which features an animated cat singing a pop hook from Lady Gaga's song 'Shallow' alongside a politically charged speech. The curator describes it as 'both humorous and unsettling'.²

Kruger has covered the floors of the gallery corridors with her well-known phrases in the Basque language. It not only alludes to the linguistic landscape of Bilbao but also acts as a visual link that connects the numerous galleries of the exhibition. Kruger's work overwhelms the senses, dominating the viewer as if to remind us that we are steeped

in the results of political decisions whether we like it or not.

Christian Viveros-Faune argues in the introduction to 'Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art' that since the Enlightenment in Europe there have been two overriding ambitions of modern and contemporary art: the trope of the artist as historian and the artist as activist. He analyses activist work by Goya, Turner, Jenny Holzer, Guerilla Girls, Ai Weiwei, Francis Alys and Barbara Kruger to illustrate his thesis, his notion of 'epoch-defining political art.'³

Now in her eighties, Kruger can still make us care about the trials and tribulations of this world. Through humour, she navigates the intricate web of communication, revealing the threads that connect us and those that separate us.

- 1 "Barbara Kruger Artist Bio," *The Broad*, <https://www.thebroad.org/art/barbara-kruger> (accessed 10 October 2025)
- 2 Waitoller described it as such when she took me on a guided walkthrough on the 7th July 2025
- 3 Christian Viveros-Faune *Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art* (David Zwirner Books, 2018) 5.

[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.2394](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.2396-9008.2394)

Still Mad: Ding Hongdan at MAMOTH London (10 Nov 2024 – 14 Jan 2025)

Colin Mao

Entering MAMOTH Gallery's 'Still Mad', one immediately encounters a vibrant clash of realism and spectacle. The solo exhibition by Ding Hongdan – the culmination of her residency in the gallery's upstairs studio – is a phantasmagoria of bright oils, larger-than-life figures, and pop-cultural apparitions. Born in Beijing in 1995, Ding trained in oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts under Liu Xiaodong, a renewed socialist realist painter, before relocating to London for MAMOTH residency. Working between Beijing and London, she fuses academic realism with pop-surrealist colour to chronicle Gen-Z diasporic life.

Over several months of in-situ creation, Ding transformed quick sketches and private observations into polished tableaux that pulse with youth-driven energy. The result

is a show that not only displays a new body of works developed during her London residency, but also foregrounds the temporal process behind it. Each canvas carries the imprint of its making: layers of immediacy and duration, private gestures become public performance.

MAMOTH's residency allowed Ding to paint London life as it unfolded, echoing an almost plein-air energy yet filtered through a distinctly twenty-first century lens. Armed with strong academic training in realist oil painting, she focused on capturing her contemporaries' lived and psychological states within a new city. But unlike the traditional modes of socialist realism that once shaped Chinese art, Ding's vision is playful and suffused with pop culture. Whereas socialist-realist painting in the Mao era naturalised state ideology by depicting idealised workers in muted, monumental tableaux, Ding subverts that legacy by saturating her canvases with high-key colour and individual self-curation,

replacing collective virtue with diasporic self-performance.¹

Her practice is also intrinsically time-based: she begins with quick watercolour or ink sketches drawn from live sittings or from her phone snapshots, preserving spontaneous moments. These sketches – intimate, gestural, almost diary-like – serve as ephemeral transcripts of immediacy. Over subsequent weeks, they evolve into full-scale oil paintings, gradually accumulating the deliberation and density that define her current style. In that protracted process from sketch to canvas, one senses a dialogue between the fleeting moment and the permanence of exhibited works.

Ding's in-situ production effectively turns her creative process into a private performance. Though the studio upstairs remains mostly invisible to visitors, its presence is keenly felt in the final display. Each painting bears the residue of sustained effort, countless small interactions with friends and strangers, and a practice shaped by daily immersion with both the work and its surroundings. What emerges is the result of a months-long durational act that transforms casual friendship into painterly labour, unsettling the romantic myth of effortless youth. For those interested in time-based media, the show demonstrates how even the ostensibly static medium of painting can encode temporal processes. The private gesture of a quickly scribbled face eventually becomes a larger-than-life portrait that invites public attention.

One outstanding work is *Stranger* (2024). Depicting a group of young, fashion-forward individuals in a domestic setting, the composition evokes both a spontaneous photograph and a film still. The figure in a hot pink suit dominates the foreground,

gazing outward with a blend of defiance and self-awareness, while other stylishly dressed friends linger behind in mid-conversation. A translucent, ghostly silhouette hovers in the background near a chandelier, introducing a sense of narrative ambiguity: is it a presence from memory or a pure flight of fancy? The painting resonates differently for anyone who recognises the sitters as mutual friends of the artist. For an insider, the pop-infused theatrics become anchored in actual lived relationships, transforming it from a seemingly fantastical work into a stylised record of real acquaintances. Yet the layered composition, radiant palette, as well as the ghostly figure, also keep *Stranger* firmly in the realm of fiction. Ding dramatises routine social interaction, turning her subjects into characters in an durational performance. The canvas therefore exposes a tension at the heart of post-socialist portraiture: private memory is packaged as export-ready spectacle, and the viewer becomes complicit in that transaction.

If Ding's academic training in realism provides the scaffolding, her love of pop-cultural references and cinematic grammar injects a feeling of mischievous unreality. From cartoonish bunnies to neon hair and meme-like imagery, her works speak to an overload in our present attention economy. Still, her precise brushwork and carefully observed details ground these paintings in a recognisable world. The painting *Caught by the Tides* (2024), for instance, casts a friend, also an artist, as a swaggering figure inspired by Hong Kong cult film series *Young and Dangerous* (1996–2000), while the background consists of swirling wave motifs that echo both Chinese ink painting and anime storms. Another work presents an oversized self-portrait of Ding, placed in a theatrical scenario that winks at art historical

nudes. These cinematic or fantastical flourishes do not negate realism so much as expand it, adding an emotional vibrancy and narrative depth. The viewer is invited to piece together a loose storyline, as if multiple frames of a film were collapsed into one.

Ding's London stint places her squarely within what cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls a 'diasporic double consciousness': a continual negotiation between the pull of home and the possibilities of elsewhere.² In *Stranger* and the related canvases, that tension surfaces in the ghostly pink figure and in casual references to Tower Bridge: markers of London seen through Beijing-trained eyes. Rather than staging diaspora as loss, however, Ding treats it as generative friction: intensely local friendships, global pop memes, and prismatic colour collide to produce an aesthetic that refuses either nationalist nostalgia or total assimilation.

'Still Mad' is a fitting demonstration of how a residency can yield an art that is at once reflective and immediate, deeply personal yet open to broad interpretations. By bringing her drafting table, her friends, and her multifaceted references into a single creative space, Ding has produced an exhibition that holds time at its core. Each painting is a result of a durational practice that transposes fleeting impressions into sustained compositions, merging the diaries of everyday life with the scale and craft of contemporary painting.

1 Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 185–210.

2 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora,' in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–37.

THESES IN PROGRESS

Manon Abt, *Between Re-imagination and Resignation: The Preservation of Early Computer-Based Artworks (1960–1991)*

Darya Aloufy, *Now You See Me: Women Photographing Women in pre-1948 Palestine*

Caitrin Barrett-Donlon, *Revisioning: Experimental Dance, Museums and Yvonne Rainer*

Ann Coxon, *New Tapestry: Textile Art in Europe, 1960–1979*

Evelyn Earl, *Tea in Dutch Visual Culture, ca.1650–1750*

Philomena Epps, *Erotic Objects, Erogenous Zones: Fetishism and Sexual Difference (1957–1984)*

Esme Garlake, *Non-human life in early sixteenth-century Italian art*

Elliot Gibbons, *Art, Activism and the AIDS Crisis in Britain (1987–1996)*

Jacqueline Mabey, *This Must Be the Place: Mapping Artistic Kinship and Economic Change in Downtown New York, 1973–1987*

Colin Zhongping Mao, *Towards New Materialities: Time-based Media Art in Chinese Socialist Realism from 1976 to 2019*

Anna Mladentseva, *Tracing, Situating and Remembering Infrastructures in the Conservation of Software-based Art & Design*

Irene Montero Sabin, *Art and the War on Terror: A Genealogy of Critical Responses through Thematic Exhibitions and Biennials 2001–2012.*

Stuart L.A. Moss, *Removed and Recontextualized: Monastic Art and the Bavarian Secularisation of 1803*

Renee Mitchell, *The Black Body in the Archive: Victorian Photography, Race and the Poetics of Difference. A Curatorial & Art Historical Enquiry*

Akin Oladimeji, *Corporeal Disobedience in Performances of Jelili Atiku, Wura-Natasha Ogunji and Zina Saro-Wiwa*

Jessica Owens, *Photography and White Afrikaner Identity*

Daen Palma Huse, *Transient Visuals: Hand-Held Ephemera in Nineteenth-Century Peru*

Emilia Pearce, *The Sound of Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Painting*

Elsa Perryman Owens, *Melted, Singed, Incinerated, Saved: Catastrophe and the Non-Human in The Great Fire of London*

Isabelle Sagraves, *Félix Buhot and the Borders of Print in Nineteenth-Century France*

Zaena Sheehan, *Porous Bodies: Bio-materialism in Contemporary Art*

Aoife Stables, *Picturing Purity, Weaponizing Womanhood: Visual Culture and the Social Order in Fifteenth-Century Valencia*

Lena Szalewska, *Women of the Apocalypse: The Spectacle of Gendered Bodies in Alpine Apocalyptic Painting (c.1350–1530)*

Henry Tudor-Pole, *Carlo Crivelli, Vittore Crivelli and the Adriatic Sea*

Elissa Vinh, *The Gǎp: On the Formation of Vietnamese Identities Across Time and Borders*

Daniel Ward, *So That You Can Live: Art and Politics in Britain, 1982–1997*

Anne Wildschut, *(Re)defining Ancient Etruria in the Renaissance: Etruscan art and history in the formation of local, regional and national identities in central and northern Italy*

CONTRIBUTORS

Darya Aloufy is a PhD candidate in the History of Art department at UCL. Her doctoral project examines how women photographers documented and portrayed local women in Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine, focusing on photography as a space of female visibility, interaction, and contested belonging. Her research is supervised by Professor Tamar Garb and funded by the History of Art Department Research Studentship. Darya holds a BA History of Art and Humanities from Tel Aviv University and completed her MA in History of Art at UCL.

Esme Garlake is a PhD candidate in the History of Art department at UCL, supervised by Professor Alison Wright. Her thesis investigates a range of early sixteenth-century Italian artworks that depict nonhuman animals, semi-human beings and the natural world across different media, including bronze statuettes, woodcut illustrations, single-sheet engravings, furniture paintings and fresco ceiling decorations. At the heart of the project is a critical engagement with ecocriticism as a generative (and at times possibly limited) framework for writing these particular art histories. Esme graduated with a BA in Modern and Medieval Languages (Spanish and Italian) from the University of Cambridge in 2019 and completed her MA at The Courtauld Institute of Art in 2021.

Colin Zhongping Mao is a PhD candidate in the History of Art department at University College London. His doctoral research focuses on Chinese socialist realism, time-based media, materiality, and contemporary visual culture. His research is funded by a Critical Histories of Art scholarship and he is supervised by Dr. Hélia Marçal and Dr. Amanda Ju. Colin holds a BA in History of Art, Materials and Technology from UCL and completed his MA in History of Art at the Courtauld.

Alice Moylett Davies is a master's student in UCL's History of Art department where her dissertation traces ideas of waste through the photography of the Irish Forestry Service. She is supervised by Dr Nicholas Robbins, and her research is partly funded by BAIS. Before her MA, she completed a BA in Comparative Literature, also at UCL.

Akin Oladimeji is a PhD candidate in the History of Art department at UCL. His dissertation examines contemporary Nigerian performance art, exploring how Jelili Atiku, Wura-Natasha Ogunji, and Zina Saro-Wiwa negotiate indigenous cultural traditions and global Euro-American art frameworks. Drawing on postcolonial and decolonial theory, it argues that their performances use memory, ritual, and embodiment to enact corporeal disobedience, challenging enduring colonial structures and creating a "third space" for new forms of meaning, identity, and cultural expression. His research is supervised by Professor Tamar Garb and funded by LAHP. Akin holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia and an MA in History of Art from Birkbeck, University of London.

Aoife Stables is a PhD candidate in the History of Art Department at UCL. Her project examines constructions of whiteness and racial identity in the visual culture of fifteenth century Valencia, with a particular focus on images of Christian women. Her research is supervised by Professor Bob Mills and is funded by the UCL Research Excellence Scholarship. She holds a BA in History of Art and French from Trinity College Dublin and an MA from the Courtauld Institute of Art.

Henry Tudor-Pole is a PhD candidate in the History of Art Department at UCL. He is researching how the work of Carlo Crivelli responded to and helped produce a sense of place in the northern Adriatic region in the later fifteenth century. He graduated with a BA in History of Art from Oxford University and an MA from UCL. His project is supervised by Professor Alison Wright and is funded by a Wolfson Scholarship.

Editors	Akin Oladimeji, Aoife Stables, Henry Tudor-Pole
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