

Art and Identity Construction: Patricia Rubin's Interpretation of Fifteenth-Century Florence

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Abstract: This article discusses Patricia Lee Rubin's *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence* and its interpretation of the relationship between visual culture and identity formation in Renaissance Florence. By combining visual analysis with historical documents, family records, religious materials, and literary sources, Rubin reveals that images in fifteenth-century Florence were not merely artistic representations, but also important media through which elite families displayed honor, reinforced power, communicated religious and moral values, and constructed social identity. Particular attention is given to Rubin's analysis of viewing as an active cultural process. Through her readings of Dante's "visible speech" and Botticelli's wedding paintings, Rubin demonstrates how images invited viewers to participate emotionally, morally, and socially in the production of meaning. This article argues that Rubin's work expands the methodological scope of art history by integrating visual, social, religious, and literary analysis, offering an important interdisciplinary model for the study of Renaissance art and identity.

Key words: Fifteenth-century Florence; visual culture; images and identity; art patronage; Renaissance art; viewing experience; social identity construction; Patricia Lee Rubin

1. Introduction

Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence is a book by Patricia Lee Rubin that was printed and published in 2007. The book is generally divided into three parts. The first part, which covers the first three chapters of the book, explores the concepts of expenditure and exchange on artworks and art investment by aristocratic families in fifteenth-century Florence. The second part covers Chapters 4 and 5, deals with theories and practices of visual display in the early fifteenth century. This includes popular notions of visual experience, the connection between visibility and identity, and the view of vision as a cultural construction. It centers on the interpretation of the verses in Dante's *Purgatory*, analyzing the concept of "visible speech" through the analysis of Dante's text and subsequent comments. The third part covers Chapters 6 and 7, and uses religious and secular paintings as examples to show how specific visual forms serve secular purposes and allow the audience to participate in the form of watching^[1].

It is absolutely an excellent book which clearly analyses the details about the meanings and functions of images and the social dynamics of the visual at that time. In my opinion, the views and theories in it are worth learning and absorbing. More importantly, the references and unique perspectives of this book are the direction for me to learn and refer to.

2. Various and innovative citations

What impressed me most about Rubin's book is that her choice of examples and citations is diverse and novel. In order to illustrate her point, she selects many fifteenth-century Florentine artworks to analyze the details to show the social structure and the function of artworks at that time to consolidate the status and promote the power of aristocratic families. Such explanations make the article's arguments intuitive and clear. In addition, she also cites fifteenth-century historical documents, family religious materials, and archival materials of public buildings. These first-hand materials make her arguments very persuasive and credible. More importantly, I appreciate her use of literary works. She quotes the descriptions and views in Dante's poems to draw out her own views. Such selection of materials makes the readability and fun of this book rise to a higher level.

2.1 Use of Artworks

Rubin cites a large number of artworks from Florence in the fifteenth century as the main source of information. Through these works of art, the power structure and religious beliefs at that time are demonstrated clearly. Here are some examples: In Chapter 1, Rubin cites the fresco Annunciation to Zacharias, which was invested by the Tornabuoni family. This fresco not only depicts the members of the Tornabuoni family, but also depicts an idealized representation of Florentine city life. Rubin points out that although this fresco does not depict scenes of their daily lives, it has many metaphors, representing the hierarchy and operation of life in that period. For example, Rubin points out that the place relationship between family members arranged by the painter can well explain the order of family and power structure of the time. In my opinion, Rubin clearly expresses the significance of this fresco in the Tornabuoni family's use of art to consolidate its social status. By using this fresco as an example, she shows the intention of the noble families of Florence in the fifteenth century to display their glory and power through artworks.

Rubin also gives an interesting example in Chapter 2. She mentions a series of paintings by the Cione brothers that depict the glory of heaven with luxurious fabric patterns. She uses the Coronation of the Virgin as an example to show how luxurious fabrics became a symbol of the power structure of Florentine society. The high value of these items is well known to the public, so they are used to show the noble status of the people in the painting. I think that this also points to the thinking of the creators. The creators must have thought deeply about the identity and daily life of their viewers to choose luxurious fabrics whose prices were known to the public as details of the painting.

2.2 Use of Historical Documents

Rubin makes extensive use of historical documents and archival materials from the fifteenth century. I believe that these materials provide important background and theoretical support for her.

A particularly striking example is Rubin's reference to the third book of Leon Battista Alberti's dialogue *On the Family*, which focuses on the topic of family economy^{[1][2]}. She unfolds her view of family honor and expenses in fifteenth-century Florence by analyzing the discourse of the Alberti family members who gathered to discuss expenses related to family honor and reputation. I think this example is very powerful. Because this example is first-hand and is the real view of the aristocracy of that era. It lists detailed views of Alberti family members on expenses related to family honor and reputation. The Alberti family participated in the donation and sponsorship of Santa Croce and other important Florentine churches, strengthening their influence in Florentine society. Rubin uses these documents to show the key role of aristocratic patronage in the construction of social identity and the views of the aristocracy at the time on such patronage.

Rubin's use of historical documentation extends beyond material records of artistic patronage to include detailed archives related to family religious activities and public buildings, making her analysis more comprehensive. This use of material shows how aristocratic families promoted their social identities through artistic and religious projects and consolidated their position in Florentine society through the expression of the visual arts.

2.3 Use of Literary Works

Rubin also cleverly quotes Renaissance literature: Dante's Canto X of Purgatory in Chapter 5. By citing Dante's concept of "visible speech" and three prints, Rubin explores how visual art can be a medium for viewers to gain moral and spiritual enlightenment through the communication of symbols and emotions. This setting not only allows readers to understand the moral function of visual art, but also emphasizes the role of these visual experiences in shaping Florentine citizens' identity and values. This reference to poetry allows readers to have a deeper and more concrete understanding of visual art.

3. Unique Perspectives

In my opinion, Rubin's uniqueness lies in her attention to the interaction between vision and identity, thereby digging deep into the role of art in social structure. Her analysis of the interaction between gaze and identity, as well as the symbolic symbols in Botticelli's wedding scene, have brought new inspiration to my art history research.

3.1 Viewing from a New Perspective: Vision and Identity

In Chapter 5, Rubin uses a novel perspective to deeply analyze the interaction between gaze actions and viewers in fifteenth-century Florentine art. Starting from the classic scene from Dante's Purgatory, she attempts to explain how viewing becomes a process of moral and spiritual self-reflection. Dante's appreciation of sculptures occupies a large part of the poem. In the poem, Dante and Virgil ascend to the first level of Purgatory and see the humble scenes carved on white marble. From this, Rubin proposed the concept of "visible speech" in the last part of Dante's poem. She believed that "visible speech" has a double sense: "that of Dante's poetic voice which makes the images visible to the imagination of his readers and that of the sculptures he describes, whose stories speak to him through his eyes" ^[1]. She pointed out that these sculptures not only show religious stories, but also make viewers feel as if they are "hearing" these stories through artistic techniques.

More importantly, Rubin compares the differences in understanding of "visible language" in different historical periods, showing the transformation of the meaning of viewing in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. She pointed out that the early comment of Francesco da Buti focused on evoking the viewer's memory through familiar religious stories and gaining a spiritual identity. In contrast, the comment of Cristoforo Landino in the Renaissance believed that artists could use the movements and gestures in sculptures to show their inner language. By showing this difference, Rubin further pointed out that this transformation reflects that artists in the Renaissance were recognized not only as retellers of religious stories, but also as embodiments of human creativity.

In addition to analyzing this transformation, Rubin also explores the acceptance and extension of Dante's perspective in fifteenth-century visual culture. Rubin proposes that people in the Renaissance gradually realized that gazing is a spiritual and moral journey. She emphasizes the role of viewing in the artist's expression and the dissemination of morality in the work.

3.2 Viewing from a Specific Perspective: Analysis of Botticelli's Wedding Scene

Another relatively novel perspective is in Chapter 7, "Happy Ending," where she analyzes Botticelli's wedding painting ^[1]. Rubin further demonstrates the relationship between art and identity construction through her analysis of Botticelli's wedding scene. The painting consists of four panels in total, and Rubin briefly describes the first three panels: The first three panels show naked women being chased by vicious dogs, thus reinforcing their fate of punishment, a narrative derived from Boccaccio's story of Nastagio degli Onesti in the Decameron ^[3]. This emphasizes the theme of cruelty and sympathy. She points out that the rabbits and deer in the forest are indifferent to the violence in front of them. This detail expresses the painter's idea that only people with rationality and aesthetic ability can fully understand the profound meaning of this painting.

In addition, she interprets the last wedding scene panel in detail. This painting depicts Nastagio raising a glass to the bride at a wedding banquet. There is a woman next to the bride who stares at her without reservation and holds a

bowl, which is completely different from the other women shown on this table. Rubin speculates that she may symbolize Philomena, the narrator of the story, and points out that as an extrovert character in the picture, she reminds the audience of the complexity of compassion in the story: "authored by a man, who gives the voice to a woman to warn other women of the need for compassion towards men through a story alternating cruelty and compassion towards both" ^[1]. Unlike the "closed narrative" approach in the first three panels, the last painting uses a more inclusive expression, inviting the viewer to resonate emotionally with the scene. The first three panels position the audience as an external witness, witnessing Nastagio's actions and the reactions of the onlookers, forming a cyclical and repetitive visual structure, suggesting that the tragic fate of the female characters cannot be escaped.

4. Conclusion

Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence holds an important place in the study of iconography and identity construction in fifteenth-century Florence. The main reason is that it explores the interaction between visual culture and social identity from multiple perspectives. Patricia Lee Rubin uses rich historical context and image analysis to show that images are not only artistic expressions, but also carriers of social identity, status, and individual or collective identity. This provides a perspective beyond pure formal analysis in the field of art history, especially in the study of the Florentine Renaissance.

Rubin's research is not limited to art history, but also combines multidisciplinary methods such as sociology and religious studies. This interdisciplinary perspective is very inspiring for my methodological choice in art history research. It can inspire me to explore how historical artworks affect social structures from multiple perspectives. Rubin analyzes a large number of artworks and historical cases. These case studies will provide me with rich learning materials to better conduct interdisciplinary comparative studies.

Therefore, this book not only helps me have a more comprehensive understanding of the diversity and complexity of Renaissance art. At the same time, Rubin's interdisciplinary approach and discussion of art and identity provide me with new research perspective.

References

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- [3] Boccaccio G. *The Decameron*[M]. Translated by G H McWilliam. London: Penguin Books, 1995.