

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



# Goldberg, Jonathan. Saint Marks: Words, Images, and What Persists

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Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533): Faith, Antiquity, and the Witch Hunt

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) : Foi, Antiquité et chasse aux sorcières

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as explored by Leila Rahimi Bahmany, the poem-as-mirror is the portal that leads beyond the material world. To gain access to this other space, the viewing subject must polish the reflective surface by deciphering the multiple layers of meaning in the text's highly figurative language. Elizabeth Black's reading of the woodcuts and texts in Corrozet's *Blasons domestiques* is instead anchored in the physical realm. Problematizing Corrozet's project, Black demonstrates that the very windows and mirrors that were to serve as boundaries between public and private, to safeguard against the anatomization and objectification of the female body, in reality transform the woman into the object of the poet's (and reader's) lustful gaze.

Through these threads, and indeed many others, the volume invites dialogue with students and scholars across disciplines and periods, including those who engage with traditions not featured therein. The strength of the volume resides precisely in its resemblance to a hall of mirrors. Rather than exhaust the complexities of the study, the multiplicity of reflections within and across contributions illuminates ideas, approaches, and theoretical frameworks, generating new points of consideration and serving as a reminder of why the mirror continues to fascinate.

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### **Goldberg, Jonathan.**

#### ***Saint Marks: Words, Images, and What Persists.***

New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. Pp. xvi, 170. ISBN 978-0-8232-8207-4 (paperback) US\$32.

I have always been fascinated by the work of art historians: how T. J. Clark tackled the myth of modernity through the paintings of impressionists, or how David Rosand explored the imagery through which Venice developed its foundational myths over time. Naturally, I was drawn to Jonathan Goldberg's work on Venice and his analysis of several sixteenth-century paintings of St. Mark for the Scuola Grande di San Marco. I discovered immediately that Goldberg's *Saint Marks: Words, Images, and What Persists* is not an ordinary presentation of a historical narrative of these paintings, but rather a quest for

a connection between images, texts, and the physical nature of paintings that goes beyond a story—in order to determine how marks of paintings, such as colour and pigment, connect the material with writing, a “meeting of mind and matter” as he quotes from John Ruskin (x).

In this recent work, Goldberg is in conversation with several art historians such as C. Clifton Black, T. J. Clark, Paul Hills, George Didi-Huberman, and others. While he appreciates some aspects of their methods of analysis, he aims to show that there is more to works of art than historical narrative (11). To do so, he uses the representation of St. Mark in the art and architecture of Venice, showing a “range of associations” attached to the image and the name of Mark (vii). To Goldberg, St. Mark is not a “singular biographical individual” who exists in biblical texts, literature, or various forms of material life. Goldberg is concerned about the “kind of material that outlives the human subject,” which is what he finds in the paintings at Scuola Grande di San Marco in Venice (vii, 75, 131).

By pluralizing St. Mark in his argument, Goldberg divides the text into two parts: St. Mark(s) in painting, and St. Mark(s) in writing. In the first part, Goldberg uses a selection of commissioned paintings by Titian and Mansueti, and gives particular attention to the works of Bellini and Tintoretto. Goldberg challenges art historians who position the paintings of Mark in the context of Venetian civic and political ideology. He not only claims but skilfully shows that often the meaning of the paintings surpasses the intentions of the artist or the patron (5); that art historians who show document value in artwork to demonstrate the “assurance of Venetian ascendancy” often strip the works of their sometimes unintended meanings (17). Where Rosand understood Venetian Republicanism through images of St. Mark, Goldberg argues that Mark’s image, such as in the paintings of Bellini, was more about invention than it was about documentation or even the goal of the patron (12, 17). He insists further that historians have often found “topography” of eastern cultures in Bellini’s work; and yet, what if his work meant more than a “replication of the world”? (14). Thus, representation of Mark in different paintings does not support narrative time; nor does Mark dominate where he has been placed by the artists or patrons in Venice (75).

In the second half of the text, Goldberg shifts his focus to the relationship between painting and words, and how to turn “painted marks” into something written that is more attached to materiality than to historicity (78). In this

section, he takes his previous argument further by focusing on the claims made by John Ruskin, in *The Stones of Venice*, and Paul Hill in *Venetian Colour*, where Hill shows how colour builds “a world before it imitates one” (76–77, 90). Following Hill’s example, Goldberg argues that stories cannot always be the subject of a work of art nor can they adhere to the ideological meanings historians attach to it (75–76). In the last part of the book, Goldberg returns to the multiplicity of St. Mark that exists in paint but also in text. He shows that the St. Mark claimed by Venetians had no relationship with the Mark of Scripture or the Gospel. In fact, even the Gospel St. Mark was different from that of Scripture. With evidence from both genres, Goldberg convinces us that Venetians claimed Mark only because he was an evangelist and had a “supposed authorship” of the Gospel (112).

How do these conclusions by Goldberg change our perception of paintings or architecture in Venice, or anywhere else for that matter? Goldberg suggests that one must look at paintings without any preconceived notions that the artwork first represents a specific thing, event, or relationship. In the case of Venice, I believe, it is about confronting the narrative of Renaissance Venice and what modern art historians have told us about paintings and architecture concerning ideologies of this period. If anything, scholars and students reading Goldberg’s work would search beyond the written word and historicity attached to an artwork, not only in Venetian paintings but also others. I am convinced by Goldberg’s conclusion that artistic inventions should be at the forefront of analysis—certainly, that is what our eyes see and capture first—but would it not be a challenge to remove the influence of worldly events in shaping an artist’s work, even his/her usage of colour, pigments, and shadows? A thought fit for another analysis.

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