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Zorach, Rebecca. The Passionate Triangle

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Zorach, Rebecca.
The Passionate Triangle.
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. xiii, 264. ISBN 978-0-226-98939-6 (hardcover) $45.

As the title suggests, Professor Zorach is passionate about triangles in the intellectual, theological, philosophical, and visual culture of early modern Europe. Theological concepts like the Trinity were rendered as triangles during this period, and, as we know so well, the triangle shaped theories of vision in relation to linear perspective. This book makes explicit the link between mathematical thinking and the expression of abstract relationships within Christianity. Zorach lays out the terrain using a broad brush, uniting triangular excursions across social, theological, and phenomenological subjectivities.

She sets out the general parameters of her study in the introductory chapter, "The Passionate Triangle." Chapter 2 reviews the key tenets of art historical thinking, Renaissance and modern, on theories of perspective in European visual culture before 1450. This chapter makes a convincing argument for the close linkage between the social world of Renaissance artists and their cultural formation in practical geometrical studies. She demonstrates that an artist and theorist like Leon Battista Alberti embraced circumscription, a concept that regulated the correct placement and mathematical measurement of objects, all the while creating powerful fictive illusions of visual reality. The next two chapters focus on the different ways in which the triangle was used to express spiritual geometry. Chapter 3 discusses representations of religious scenes, such as the Annunciation, where a triangular relationship is established between the Virgin Mary, Gabriel, and God the Father, or the familiar image of the three-fold nature of the Christian godhead in the Trinity. Major religious thinkers such as Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa are considered here in relation to the symbolic work of the triangle. Zorach also considers the Trinitarian diagrams created by the sixteenth-century theologian-mathematician Charles de Bovelles. Her classification of diagrams as anti-naturalistic (65) needs further elaboration, given the complexity of epistemic functions and processes evidenced in late medieval and early modern diagrammatic imagery.

Chapter 4 evaluates the important role of the triangular compositional arrangement in Renaissance *tavole quadrate*. Zorach argues for the symbolic use of geometry in many fifteenth-century altarpieces. She also suggests that

the triangle was employed as a conceptual tool, helping to convey notions of spiritual hierarchy, which she aligns with contemporary discussions on church hierarchy. She lays out the use of the triangle as a vehicle for defining spiritual and papal hierarchy in the mind of Heyermicus de Campo at the Council of Basel, Ramon Lull, and Nicholas of Cusa, linking these excursions in thought to a complex moment in pre-Reformation history. The chapter concludes with a reading of three Renaissance altarpieces by Fra Angelico, Domenico Veneziano, and Fra Filippo Lippi, all of whom present the body of the Virgin, whether seated or standing, at the centre of a triangular *sacra conversazione* involving saints, martyrs, and the Mother of God with her infant son. There can be little doubt that Renaissance artists relied on the symbolic power of the triangle to convey sacred mysteries to the faithful of the day.

In Chapter 5, Zorach continues her meditation on sacred geometry, indicating that artists such as the Bellini—or even Raphael at a slightly later date—used a triangular arrangement for the Madonna of Humility to underscore the association of Mary's body with fecundity, even melancholia. Dürer's image of *Melancholia I* relies on a triangular presentation of a personified body to express the passion and dark emotions of the human psyche. Her argument is that artists and thinkers in this period were caught between high and low, heaven and earth, in a triangular movement that was directed heavenward but also pulled down again to embrace the earthly struggle with the darker side of the human condition.

The penultimate chapter assesses the role of oblique viewing positions, challenging the canonical work on perspective propounded by Daniel Arasse and Hubert Damisch. This forms the basis for Zorach's articulation of the gaze as multiple, social, reliant on the ability to negotiate multiple sites of authority and lines of socio-political connection. Chapter 7 analyzes early modern images of love triangles within the classical mythological tradition, as part of a mapping of webs of sexual desire. Zorach also assigns complex triangular points of intersection in works expressing the more intimate, personal fantasies of artists like Tintoretto, Titian, Primaticcio, Parmigianino, or Annibale Caracci.

Since so much of the book focuses on the work of the gaze and the controlled point of view shaped by perspectival systems, it seems odd to come to the issue of gender only in the book's epilogue. The female eye is shown to be vulnerable, recursive, contradictory rather than masterful. It was disappointing

that Zorach left this analysis, which offers a radical de-centring of traditional discussions of early modern patriarchal culture, to the end.

On the book's dust-jacket, several commentators note that this book offers a radical new map for Renaissance art history. Zorach's study definitely provokes readers to revise their understanding of previous scholarship on Renaissance perspective. There can be little doubt that the triangle was utilized in its day as a complex symbolic system within different cultural spheres. The book's conclusions are broad, ambitious, and deeply thought-provoking. Like any worthy hypothesis, we are now called to test, evaluate, and refine more precisely Zorach's ideas on the relationality implied in the triangle, and the connection between multiple subjectivities and Renaissance image-making.

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