From the Anchor to the Crow’s Nest: Ships and naval imagery in Renaissance Art

Panels I-IV (Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Isola San Giorgio Maggiore)

Organised by

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Panel I

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Ships, Status and Seals: the representation of power on admiral’s seals in the Renaissance.
From the thirteenth century the ship has been an image used for seals for towns and cities. From the fourteenth century, it was used on admiral’s seals in England and France. From the fifteenth to the late seventeenth century the size and materials of such seals developed and changed. Seals, primarily used for the authentication of documents, reveal not only details of the construction, such as the shape of the hull, prows, poops, sails and rigging, but also status and importance is indicated through the size of the seal, its material, and the display of heraldic badges and decoration. Admirals became increasingly important and powerful in the period, and were also increasingly conscious of their importance in this period. The reasons for this will be explored in the lecture.

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Ships on Maps in the Renaissance.
In the Middle Ages ships virtually never appeared on maps. By the middle of the sixteenth century they were standard images for the waters on all kinds of maps from grand planispheres to sailors' charts to sketch maps used in court suits. What is more the ships were typically of the latest designs, showing major advances in ship technology which made possible the voyages to all parts of the world - the great accomplishment of the age. While ships might be dressed in classical garb for depictions of classical myth for maps they were painted from life and often highly accurately. Cartographers included images of sailing vessels for a number of reasons, but certainly among the most compelling was the desire to demonstrate success in gaining dominion over the seas and the extension of European political authority, prefiguring the same pattern on land and in the depiction of dominance on maps of the lands of the world.

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The Ships on the Berlin 'Città Ideale'. Some Observations on their Naval Typology, Structural Characteristics and Rigging Details.
The three "Città ideale" panels in Urbino, Baltimore, and Berlin, are generally dated "around 1500", in any case not before 1490. The Berlin panel which opens a view towards a maritime landscape scenery is dated considerably later for its architectural forms did not appear after 1500. The three ships in the foreground instead are definitely much earlier. The two merchant vessels (carracca type) and the galley in the center must be dated before 1490. They show details of rigging and hull and poop constructions which were outmoded by 1480. The lifetime of a ship of that period was extremely limited for structural reasons and due to rapid technological changes in naval architecture between 1450 and 1500; so the painter either intentionally depicted old-fashioned ships, while the architecture around is utterly avantgarde, or the depicted architecture anticipates built form. Hence the painting may be dated well before 1490.
Eternal Triumph. Ship Monuments in Rome
The ship is may be the most striking metaphor of human life and political power. Not by coincidence the first triumphal monument on the Roman Forum was the rostra: its name alludes to the attached ship prows (rostra) of the victorious naval battle in Actium 338 BC. Ships brought Rome its global power and influential Roman art patrons used the ship motif for propaganda and self-promotion. The paper will focus on what I call “ship monuments”: Cardinal Giovanni de’ Medici erected an ancient marble boat, the Navicella, next to his title church S. Maria in Domnica, and cardinal Ippolito II d’Este engaged Pirro Ligorio to build the shipshaped fountain for a Rometta in the gardens of the Villa d’Este at Tivoli. I will analyse these and other built, sculpted and painted ships which demonstrate the ecclesiastical or secular power of their patrons.

Old East India House: a late Renaissance anachronism for an imperial city?
Before its replacement in 1726, East India House (built 1648), the home of the British East India Company in Leadenhall Street, London, advertised itself in the metropolitan urban space through the prominent display of a large-scale emblematic depiction of ships and mariners on the building's street facade, conceived and executed in a distinctly Renaissance idiom. This paper will focus on the decoration of Old East India House as a case study to examine the changing rhetorical significance of nautical and maritime iconography during the late-Renaissance / early-modern era in Britain - from 'emblem to expression' in Ronald Paulson's phrase - within a context that saw not only significant changes in the East India Company's own profile, but more generally, in the construction of metropolitan identity as a growing maritime-imperial state.

Velum: From Veil to Sail. On Some Nautical Implications of Venetian Painting in the 16th Century
The Latin word velum comprises two very different strata of meaning: on the one hand, the veil pointing to the dialectics of revealing and concealing, to metaphysics of visibility; on the other hand, the sail referring to the more profane realm of the cultural techniques of navigation and shipbuilding. There is no doubt that Byzantine models - such as the mandylion, exemplary instances of the veil as pictorial concept - are among the antecedents of Venetian teleri as paintings on textile support. The actual material and the mode of fabrication of canvases in Venice, however, are more related to sails and sail-making. The paper tries to contextualize the development of Venetian painting practices of the 16th century in the cultural sphere of seafaring. Thus, a movement is detected leading from a theological or textual to a material and textile conception of painting, in short: from the veil to the sail.
Panel III

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Peter BELL (SFB 600 C2, Universität Trier) bellp@uni-trier.de
The Passage between Historical Event and Visual Representation: The Galley of John Palaiologos VIII on Filarete’s Bronze Door of Old St. Peter
In November 1437, the Byzantine Emperor boarded one of the Venetian galleys which brought the Greek delegation to the Council of Ferrara and, after the Union, returned to Constantinople by ship as well. Perceived as the decisive success during the pontificate of Eugene IV, the Council of Ferrara/Florence is represented in two of four contemporary bas-reliefs, with Adventus and Profectio being framed by the sea passage. A close reading of these images however, reveals the distance between the events as described in historical sources and the visual representation. To some extent, the differences result from Filarete’s aesthetic and narrative choices, but they are also due to the Pope’s propagandistic intentions: his primacy and Rome’s position as the centre of Christianity are thus underlined. Filarete’s reception of Antiquity has been analysed extensively yet, but the details of the seascape may also symbolically allude to Giotto’s nearby Navicella mosaic.

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Disoriented Sailing in Sir Thomas Wyatt’s “My Galley Chargèd with Forgetfulness”
Criticism of Thomas Wyatt’s “My galley chargèd with forgetfulness” tends to focus on its status as an English rendition of Petrarch’s Rime 189 (“Passa la nave mia colma d’oblio”). But it should be remembered that Wyatt composed his sonnet during two pivotal developments in European history: the Age of Discovery, when real ships were central to Europe’s “awakening” to “new” worlds, and the Reformation, when controversy about how the soul reached salvation highlighted the complicated matter of determining one’s moral, salvational status. By examining Wyatt’s poem against this Reformation debate and the navigational problem of determining a ship’s position at sea, an urgent problem during the Age of Discovery, I argue that ship imagery in “My galley” expresses the fundamental difficulty, if not impossibility, of self-knowledge and exemplifies how during the Renaissance the ship could stand as a powerful image, not of firm faith, but of disorientation and doubt.

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The galleys of Livorno, insignia of the grand dukes of Tuscan’s potency: from Jacques Callot to Baccio del Bianco
In the sixteen engravings dedicated by Jacques Callot to the Life of Ferdinand I, the construction of Livorno is presented as one of the major achievements of the reign of the grand duke. The representation of the Tuscan harbour and its galleys officially asserts, all across Europe, the commercial and political potency of the Medici. In comparison, the Views of Livorno drawn by Baccio del Bianco (1604-1654) give a more informal and modest vision of the harbour: in his books of drawings, the scènes de genre complete the study sketches of ships, giving a colourful portrait of the port’s life apparently taken dal naturale. However, the Florentine engineer, as well as the Lorraine artist, stages reality: thanks to a theatrical rhetoric, the galleys become the emblematic actors of grand-ducal potency.
Barbara PERUCKA (Institute of Art History, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań)
The ship and its meaning in the illuminations of the Livre des merveilles (Paris, BnF, ms. fr. 2810)
Shortly before the beginning of the Renaissance in Italy and not long before the Age of Discovery, in Burgundy appeared the manuscript collecting relations from journeys in the East. It is interesting to pay attention to it even if its decoration belongs to the late Middle Ages. I would present in my paper the image of the ship in the decoration of this book, showing what meaning did the naval imagery have for John the Fearless. After his stay by Turks as the Nicopolis prisoner he was interested in everything that came from the East. I would like to answer to the question: did the image of the ship, quite frequent in the illuminations of ms. fr. 2810, have any political meaning? Or the ships were the symbol of the journey Outremer and of the discovery (fol. 188). This perspective seems important on the eve of the Renaissance.

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Patinir’s legacy or the art of interpreting a seascape
Already in early 16th century seascapes offered a wide horizon for possible interpretations. They seem to convey us with an impression of seafaring which can never actually have occurred like this. They remind us more of “Weltlandschaften” like the works of Joachim Patinir and ascribed to be of his “circle” they are relying on his tradition. These paintings did indeed encourage the spectator to create his own version from the most diverse perspectives, so that they were in most cases interpreted rather than being looked at. It is the intention of this short note to focus on the artistic features taking one of these works as an example and to ask for the most revealing ways of looking at this type of painting. The research considers whether the “multilingual” approach of interpretation may also have hindered to (re-)discover their aesthetic composition and meaning.

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Sailing ships, frigates and galleys in the Grünes Gewölbe at Dresden
The Grünes Gewölbe, one of the oldest and most famous European “Schatzkammern” (Treasures) contains some shipshaped objects from the late 16th to the early 17th century which deserve much more attention. It appears to me that the natural material itself, such as rock crystal, nautilus shells and ivory, defines the scope for artistic designs like these “shipshaped” in a very special way. In addition to these material-aesthetic aspects, the talk investigates the iconographical dimension: the example of the ivory frigate by Jacob Zeller (1620) demonstrates how a “ship” can be used to “transport” an extremely complex set of ideas and the consciousness of dynastic history, or how the wall of the rock crystal galley by the Milanese Saracchi workshop serves as a kind of “stage” for the presentation – in extremely fine deep cut – of scenes from Classical mythology which are set in, beside or above the sea.