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Preface

Special Issue "Mendicants, Humanists and the Aesthetics of the *civitas*"

Claudia Jentzsch and Katharine Stahlbuhk

Abstract

The title of this special issue invokes the concept of *civitas*, understood as the collective body of a town's inhabitants bound together by a shared commitment to the common good. In contrast to the monastic orders, who typically lived apart from urban centers, the mendicant orders deliberately embedded themselves in the fabric of the city. Consequently, mendicant friars engaged in dynamic exchanges with the lay world, participated in humanist discourses revolving around the *valori civici*, and exerted both direct and indirect influence on conceptions of the "body of the city" – in its immaterial, imagined dimension as well as in its material, built form. Bringing together six case studies by scholars of art history, history, and the history of philosophy, this special issue explores how mendicant involvement shaped art, architecture, and urban space in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy.

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Friars engaging with civic values

[1] The present *RIHA Journal* special issue is the outcome of a two-day-conference held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome in 2021 (October 5–6) and presents seven case studies by scholars from art history, history, and the history of philosophy. We seek to offer a 'kick-off' volume which, by addressing the mendicants' contribution to humanism from a multidisciplinary perspective, will inaugurate further inquiries into this theme. The hypothesis of the conference was that the friars played a significant role in the formation of cultural and social identity within their respective communities and, moreover, engaged in reciprocal exchange with the lay world regarding the aesthetics and the iconography of the city. The intention was to approach the topic from two angles: first, the mendicants' participation in (humanist) discourses in the context of the *valori civici* and their impact – directly or indirectly – on shaping ideas of the body of the city, both the immaterial one conceived in the imagination and the one built of brick and mortar (and other materials). Second, our focus lay precisely on the friars' appropriation of such an 'aesthetics of the *civitas*'.

[2] The contributions to this issue include studies on Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians, and Carmelites, and span topics ranging from preaching activities and the organization of general chapters, through building campaigns undertaken in close collaboration with civic authorities, to the literary works of individual mendicant authors. The essays focus on questions and topics relating to the Italian peninsula, with an emphasis on Florentine as well as northern and central Italian examples. However, precisely in view of the networked structure of the mendicant orders – spanning all of Europe and even beyond, and necessarily involving the circulation of friars, books, objects, and ideas – we are committed to broadening the geographical scope of our investigation in future research and publications. Coming from an art-historical background, we as editors of the present issue are particularly interested in exploring whether and how the use of certain materials and iconographic features, as well as the conscious reception of antiquity versus local tradition, and even the construction and design of space within convents relate to discourses on community and civic values and to a fresh reading of ancient texts. With this in mind, this special issue interrogates, *inter alia*, the formation of identity, the transfer of knowledge, and the construction of history through rhetorical practices, mendicant sermons, and humanist texts.

Humanism(s): from civic to Christian to mendicant

[3] Today, we are faced with a seemingly endless list of scholarly publications on humanism, so-called humanisms, humanists, and the often highly debated interpretations and/or definitions produced over more than a century and a half of historiography.[1] The complexity is further increased by the range of disciplines engaged in the study of the humanist period (from the history of ideas to philosophy or philology, from sociology to political history), which, moreover, often fail to communicate with one another.

[4] It has been mainly historians who have critically questioned, negated, or refined the validity of the groundbreaking – even if sometimes opposing – theses formulated by scholars such as Hans Baron, Eugenio Garin, and Paul Oskar Kristeller; in its different aspects, this historiography reflects ideological stances, scholarly convictions, and the historical and documentary evidence.[2] But even in the purely historiographic realm, the debate is further complicated by different academic schools. Furthermore, many fundamental studies on this historical period have been written

[1] The references in this and the following notes cite only selected exemplary contributions and do not aim to provide a comprehensive bibliography. Useful overviews on the historiography of humanism are presented by Paul F. Grendler, "The Italian Renaissance in the Past Seventy Years: Humanism, Social History, and Early Modern in Anglo-American and Italian Scholarship", in: Allen J. Grieco, Michael Rocke and Fiorella Gioffredi Superbi, eds., *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century*, conference proceedings (Florence 1999), Florence 2002, 3-23; Christopher S. Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance. Humanists, Historians and Latin's Legacy*, Baltimore 2004; Mark Jurdjevic, "Hedgehogs and Foxes: The Present and Future of Italian Renaissance Intellectual History", in: *Past & Present* 195, 1 (2007), 241-268; Christopher S. Celenza, *The Italian Renaissance and the Origins of the Modern Humanities. An Intellectual History 1400–1800*, Cambridge, UK 2021. For the complexity of the terminology, see Augusto Campana, "The Origin of the Word 'Humanist'", in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 9 (1946), 60-73; Giuseppe Billanovich, "Auctorista, humanista, orator", in: *Rivista di cultura classica e medioevale* 7 (1965), 143-163; Vito R. Giustiniani, "Homo, humanus, and the Meanings of Humanism", in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46, 2 (1985), 167-195.

[2] See Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, Princeton 1955; Eugenio Garin, *Der italienische Humanismus*, Bern 1947; Eugenio Garin, *L'umanesimo italiano: filosofia e vita civile nel Rinascimento*, Bari 1952; Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Humanism and Scholasticism in the Italian Renaissance", in: *Byzantion* 17 (1944–1945), 346-374; Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, ed. Michael Mooney, New York 1979; Jerrold Seigel, "'Civic Humanism' or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni", in: *Past & Present* 34, 1 (1966), 3-48; Albert Rabil Jr., *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, 3 vols., Philadelphia 1988; James Hankins, "The 'Baron Thesis' after Forty Years and Some Recent Studies of Leonardo Bruni", in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, 2 (1995), 309-338; Ronald G. Witt, "Introduction: Hans Baron's Humanism", in: *The American Historical Review* 101, 1 (1996), 107-109; Ronald G. Witt, "The Crisis after Forty Years", in: *The American Historical Review* 101, 1 (1996), 110-118; John M. Najemy, "Baron's Machiavelli and Renaissance Republicanism", in: *The American Historical Review* 101, 1 (1996), 119-129; John Monfasani, "Toward the Genesis of the Kristeller Thesis of Renaissance Humanism: Four Bibliographical Notes", in: *Renaissance Quarterly* 53, 4 (2000), 1156-1173; James Hankins, ed., *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, Cambridge, UK 2000; Robert Black, "Review of Hankins (ed.), Renaissance Civic Humanism", in: *The English Historical Review* 116, 467 (2001), 715-716; Brian Maxson, *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence*, Cambridge, UK 2014; Stefania Zanardi, "Note sui rapporti tra Eugenio Garin e Hans Baron", in: *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 73, 1 (2018), 181-194.

under the shadow of the darkest chapters of 20th-century history, and their appraisal of the actions and thoughts of Quattrocento humanists likely bears the imprint of ideological allegiances, even when this concerns merely the emphasis on their secularity. Regarding this last point, an often-overlooked study, *Gestalt eines christlichen Humanismus* by Herbert Werner Rüssel published in Amsterdam in 1940, introduces us to the so-called Christian Humanism.[3]

[5] Apart from these early contributions, the relationship between humanist thought and religion has been the focus of significant scholarship since at least the 1970s, with important studies, again by Kristeller and then by Kaspar Elm and by Charles Stinger. The relationship continues to arouse scholarly interest mainly in disciplines like the history of religions and the history of philosophy.[4] What we recognized, however, in our own research is a clear deficit of art historical studies on this subject. Elm mobilized the term *Verflechtung* to describe the linkage and interlocking between the two realms, and, since the term captures this in such an apt and comprehensive way, we have likewise adopted it when referring to the 'intertwining of convents and the city'. Building on this foundation, this *RIHA Journal* issue seeks to examine humanism through the lens of a specific category of religious people: the mendicants. The first and utmost fundamental difference of these orders, which were relatively 'new' during the early stage of humanism compared with older monastic orders, lies exactly in their close relationship with urban centers. Instead of being built far away from highly populated areas, their convents and other structures were intimately embedded in the expanding towns and cities – a fact that on its own foregrounds the social and public impact of their actions.

[3] Herbert Werner Rüssel, *Gestalt eines christlichen Humanismus*, Amsterdam 1940. The editors are preparing a study of this text that is deeply informed by the historical context in which it was written. Rüssel (1897–1940), who was accused of homosexuality and of involvement in the resistance, died as a victim of the Nazi regime in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

[4] Oskar Paul Kristeller, "The Contribution of Religious Orders to Renaissance Thought and Learning", in: *The American Benedictine Review* 21 (1970), 1-56; Kaspar Elm, "Mendikanten und Humanisten im Florenz des Tre- und Quattrocento. Zum Problem der Legitimierung humanistischer Studien in den Bettelorden", in: Otto Herding and Robert Stupperich, eds., *Die Humanisten in ihrer politischen und sozialen Umwelt*, Boppard 1976, 51-85; Charles Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers. Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance*, New York 1977. Other works addressing the dialogue between religion and humanism include Charles Trinkaus, "Humanism, Religion, Society: Concepts and Motivations of Some Recent Studies", in: *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, 4 (1976), 676-713; Riccardo Fubini, *Humanism and Secularization: from Petrarch to Valla*, transl. Martha King, Durham 2003; Harald Müller, *Habit und Habitus: Mönche und Humanisten im Dialog*, Tübingen 2006; Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2–1498*, Leiden 2008; Erika Rummel, ed., *Biblical Humanism and Scholasticism in the Age of Erasmus*, Leiden 2008; Alasdair A. MacDonald et al., eds., *Christian Humanism: Essays in Honour of Arjo Vanderjagt*, Leiden 2009; Cécile Caby and Rosa Maria Dessì, eds., *Humanistes, clercs et laïcs dans l'Italie du XIIIe au début du XVIe siècle*, Turnhout 2012.

The friars and the *civitas*

[6] It is here that the third key word of our title, the *civitas* with its different aesthetic programs, comes into play. The term *civitas* – and likewise its Greek counterpart *polis* – refers to the collectivity of the inhabitants of the city with clear implications regarding community and common good. The friars – as noted, in contrast to the monks, who lived apart from the cities – were explicitly and consciously active in both small and large urban centers.[5] Since their orders were founded mainly in the early 13th century, the friars' extensive building campaigns across the Italian peninsula (and Europe) profoundly shaped the cityscape, playing a significant role in urban development and expansion and the stylistic orientation of the buildings. It is undeniable that the construction of convents had major repercussions on the commercial and artistic trades and crafts, i.e., on the 'ancillary industries' in general, by attracting financing from lay donors as well as from civic institutions. A vivid example of this early state of affairs and the naturalisation of convents within the new city walls can be seen in the well-known detail from the *Allegory of the Misericordia* in the confraternity of the Bigallo in Florence. Here, the ring of the city wall comprises a stack of buildings representing both civic and religious structures, and is eloquently labelled *civitas florentie* (Fig. 1: The Dominican convent of Santa Maria Novella and the Franciscan convent of Santa Croce can be seen on the far left and right, respectively).

1 Bernardo Daddi, *Allegory of Mercy*, detail, 14th century, mural. Spedale del Bigallo, Florence (photo: authors)

[5] See, e.g., Bernadette Paton, *Preaching Friars and the Civic Ethos: Siena, 1380–1480*, London 1992; Caroline Bruzelius, *Preaching, Building, and Burying: Friars and the Medieval City*, New Haven 2014; Johannes Bartuschat, Elisa Brilli and Delphine Carron, eds., *The Dominicans and the Making of Florentine Cultural Identity (13th–14th Centuries) / I domenicani e la costruzione dell'identità culturale fiorentina (XIII–XIV secolo)*, Florence 2020; Silvia Beltramo and Gianmario Guidarelli, eds., *La città medievale è la città dei frati? / Is the Medieval Town the City of the Friars?*, Sesto Fiorentino 2021.

The title of this special issue, *Mendicants, Humanists and the Aesthetics of the 'civitas'. Rhetoric, Political Debates, and Cultural Identity in 14th and 15th Century Italy and their Impact on Art, Architecture, and Urban Space*, invokes the concept of *civitas*, as it encompasses these various dimensions: the city as a physical, built 'body' corresponding to urban space; as a social body; and as a 'body of ideas'. The volume thus addresses the discursive negotiation of these notions of *civitas* in both written and oral discourse, including their rhetorical deployment and their incorporation into sermons, as well as their role in shaping the semantics of materials, artworks, and monuments. In summary, it examines how such discourses mediated between the city and the community.

About the Guest Editors

Claudia Jentzsch is director of the August Bebel Institute in Berlin, which is dedicated to political education. She studied art history as well as communication and media studies in Leipzig and Florence, specializing in Early Modern Italian art history. She worked in the communications department of *documenta 12* (Kassel) and the *Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art*. Her Ph.D. project, *Order and Community: The Aesthetics of the Florentine Augustinian Hermit Church of Santo Spirito*, is being undertaken at the Berlin University of the Arts and has been supported by a Berlin State Scholarship (Nafög), as well as by grants from the DAAD and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut. Her research focuses on pre-modern visual, material, and memorial culture; the art and architecture of the mendicant orders – particularly the Augustinian Hermits; and the cultures of learning in Italian Humanism. In her teaching, she has focused on methods of cultural mediation and on approaches to integrating cultural and political education. Her research presented in this volume was supported by the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, Rome, and by the DFG Research Group "Imaginarien der Kraft" at the University of Hamburg.

Katharine Stahlbuhk is an art historian and specialist in 14th- and 15th-century Italian art. Her research explores the materiality and technical execution of artworks, as well as the ethical implications of humanist aesthetics. She is particularly interested in the intersections of visual art and literature, with a focus on the mendicant orders and their contributions to humanism. She has held fellowships at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Villa I Tatti, University of Padua and at the Italian Academy, Columbia University, New York. Her first book, *Oltre il colore. Die farbreduzierte Wandmalerei zwischen Humilitas und Observanzreformen*, was published in 2021 with Deutscher Kunstverlag. She is the co-editor of the first German translation and annotated edition of Leon Battista Alberti's *Profugiorum ab aerumna* (*Über die Seelenruhe*, Berlin: Wagenbach 2022, 2nd ed. 2023). Since 2026, she has been a researcher in the project *A Minor Model? Structures, Iconographies and Materials for the Milanese Franciscan Observance between Invention, Disruption and Anachronisms (1420–1550)* based at the Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana (SUPSI) and financed by the Swiss National Fund.

Handling Editor

Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, Rome

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