

In view of international standards, the exhibition *Titian to Tiepolo: Three Centuries of Italian Art* held by the National Gallery of Australia in 2002 attracted attendance figures well below the 250,000 visitors required as an entry mark to “Blockbuster” status.¹ It cannot be refuted however, that *The Italians* was conceived as a “Blockbuster”. Whilst the majority of artists on display would not be known to the general public the inclusion of works by the great names of Italian art as Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael shows an attempt to popularize by appealing to those attendees desirous of seeing Masterpieces of incalculable value. This essay will argue that the integrity of *The Italians* exhibition and associated scholarship was critically compromised from its conception as it was more of a financial exercise in timely profit making as opposed to a considered curatorial endeavour.

In June of 2001, the National Gallery of Australia was approached with the concept for an exhibition which spanned three centuries of Italian art. Foremost amongst its organizers were Gilberto Algranti, a former art dealer, Vittorio Sgarbi, the then Italian Under-Secretary for Culture and Rory Steele who acted as the Australian coordinator for the exhibition. Rory Steele was also the director of Italinx Pty Ltd which is a corporation whose primary focus is to foster bilateral trade between Australia and Italy.

The exhibition proposal came at an opportunistic time for the National Gallery as they had an “unexpected gap” in their calendar due to a deferral of planned restructuring works.² The travelling exhibition had originally been planned for a minimum of three destinations within Australia. The expedient time frame for the project however, presented difficulties for potential venues such as the Gallery of New South Wales and the Queensland Gallery of Fine Art both of whom declined on the basis of a fully booked schedule for the following two years.

Thus the exhibition was limited to the Melbourne and Canberra venues both of whom were required to pay an exhibition fee to the Italian organizers for the provision of exhibition services. These services included the conceptual development of the exhibition right through to the selection and arrangement of works, the development and publication of the catalogue including the procurement of essays by “eminent scholars who can ensure the highest scientific standards”, just in case the National Gallery had any ethical qualms concerning the use of public funds to pay for an exhibition curated externally.³

Sebastian Smee places the exhibition fee at a sum of \$300,000 Australian dollars.⁴ According to the Hansard readings from the parliamentary inquiry of 2003, the figure was in fact considerably more. During the inquiry, Dr. Kennedy was requested to provide a complete table of costs whereby the true sum paid to the Italian organizers was revealed to be \$986, 774.⁵ To whom the fee was paid, however, was indeterminable. The National

¹ Barker, 1999, p.127

² Steele, 2002, p. 1

³ www.tekne-eventi.com

⁴ Smee, 2002, p. 1

⁵ Hansard, 2002, p.8

Gallery particularly desired to keep this information confidential and even Senator Carr did not wish to reveal names.

Artificio who “organizes exhibitions such as this one on a profit making basis” was proposed by Smeë as a potential recipient of the fee.⁶ There is no documentation to be found with which this can be concluded. Artificio was connected to the production of *The Italians* only through its relationship with Skira and their involvement in the catalogue publication.

The organization that does make a claim of ownership over *The Italians* exhibition however is the Tekne Cultural Association of Milan.⁷ Tekne is an organization whose “specific aim is to conceive and produce large exhibitions in Italy and around the world” in order to “widen the knowledge for and revaluation of unacknowledged periods of Italian art” thus “stimulating big museums and cultural organizations, especially those in the United States... to purchase masterpieces of Italian painting.”⁸ The director of Tekne is none other than the curator of *The Italians*, Gilberto Algranti. This statement clearly shows that the motivation behind the exhibition was purely financial. The drive to further knowledge and scholarship of Italian art was seen to further financial profit.

The priority given to financial concerns over issues of scholarship was recognized even at the conceptual stage of the exhibition development. In a reversal of the normative curatorial practice, the concept of the exhibition was derived from an initial list of 22 works from private collections. Assuming those works from the international collectors were not part of the original 22, the Italian works present a variety of subjects ranging from portraiture of the 16th and 17th centuries to religious narratives, allegorical subjects, genre scenes, landscapes, studies for altarpieces and small mythological scenes. Rory Steele speaks of his amazement at how Gilberto Algranti first “conceived the idea of an exhibition which would span Italy's most glorious post-renaissance period” which also includes an expansive “geographic spread.”⁹ In consideration of the disparate nature of the works in question, however, it must be argued that the curatorial approach of the “overview” was the only approach feasible.

During the development stage of the exhibition, the organizers experienced a setback which resulted in the withdrawal of five key works, notably Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* and a Bronzino promised by the Galleria Borghese. Gilberto Algranti was able to obtain in their stead, Leonardo's *Head of Christ* (cat.1), and three works attributed to Caravaggio: the *Narcissus* (cat. 49), *St. Francis Meditating* (cat. 50) and *St. John the Baptist* (cat. 51).¹⁰ The interchanging of these works was thought to have strengthened rather than diminished the overall quality of the exhibition.¹¹ The veracity of this statement is debatable, the fact remains, however, that the curatorial theme of the exhibition and its title *Titian to Tiepolo: Three Centuries of Italian art* did not

⁶ Smeë, 2002, p. 1

⁷ www.tekne-eventi.com

⁸ www.tekne-eventi.com

⁹ Steele, 2002, p. 1

¹⁰ Steele, 2002, p. 1

¹¹ Steele, 2002, p. 1

change alongside that of the works. This flexibility suggests a weakness rather than strength and an absence rather than presence of a well considered curatorial concept. Hence, the promotional title *The Italians*.

The scholarly symposium which accompanied the exhibition presented a number of more interesting curatorial concepts or thematic groupings for the works. Instead the exhibition was broken down into thematic tours for the entertainment of the general public. “The beauty of the show, Kennedy says, is the various ways it can be seen: Chronologically, thematically, even by mood and sense. There are different types of tours you can do. The light-and-shade tour, the several-dozen-ways-to-kill people tour” and of course “sexuality is very much to the fore”.¹² By reducing the potential educational value of the exhibition into a Hollywood style tourist attraction the institution imparts a sense of non-confidence in the intelligence of the viewing public. They have effectively “dumbed down” the content of the exhibition in the belief that attendances would otherwise suffer. This highlights the institutions intention to appeal to broad audiences as a method of increasing ticket sales and thus financial profit.

The attempt to provide universal appeal was nonetheless unsuccessful, at least for the National Gallery whose projected attendance figure was 120,000, a considerable 17,000 short of the final figure¹³. In comparison the Melbourne Museum enjoyed an attendance of almost 130,000 representing an increase of 30% over its initial projection.¹⁴ The cause of this increase was directly related to the negative publicity generated by Benjamin Genocchio. The majority of which centered on the inclusion of private works within the exhibition, particular those by Vittorio Sgarbi who was instrumental in its organization.

Three paintings from his collection were exhibited, Guido Cagnacci’s *Allegory of Human Life* (cat. 42), Andrea Sacchi’s *Hagar and Ishmael in the Wilderness* (cat. 62) and Baciccio’s *Portrait of Cardinal Giulio Spinola* (cat. 64). Since its discovery in 1997, the Baccicco has been exhibited only once before, in *Giovan Battista Gaulli, Il Baciccio: 1999-2000*, coincidentally also a Skira editore publication. As a feature work of *The Italians* exhibition, Baciccio’s portrait enjoyed the honour of being the singular focus of a symposium paper. Micheal Hill’s status as a professor at The National Art School of Sydney lends the work credence whilst adding to its provenance.

A more prominent example of this is the Andrea del Sarto Painting *Madonna and Child* (cat. 5). It was discovered in the attic of a New England Church in 1986 and sold at auction to the Matthiesen Gallery in 2001 for 1.1 million US dollars. Doubt over its attribution was expressed at the time by John Shearman, a del Sarto scholar, but Sotheby’s disregarded this in light of more favourable attributions.¹⁵ The del Sarto *Madonna and Child* appears in *The Italians* as an autograph work. Furthermore, it enjoys a lengthy discussion in the accompanying symposium publication where

¹² Nelson, 2002, p. 3

¹³ Hansard, 2003a, p. 5

¹⁴ Melbourne Museum, 2002, p. 44

¹⁵ Sukrow, 2000, p. 1

Richard Spear provides a connection to a similar autograph work held in Ottawa at the National Gallery of Canada. He asserts that both the London and Ottawa *Madonna and Child* paintings were “derived from the same cartoon and that both may be autograph”¹⁶. This assertion not only legitimizes the attribution but also provides scholarly documentation which flags the work for potential purchasers as being historically relevant. This may be reflected in the re-sale value as the economist William D. Grampp has contended that “the opinion of experts is the principal determinant of price”.¹⁷

As a result of the exposure obtained through the exhibition many of these works were listed for sale upon their return. Andrea del Sarto’s *Madonna and child* is no longer listed on the Matthiesen gallery website and can only be presumed to have sold privately. Bachiacca’s *Madonna and Child with the Young St John the Baptist* (cat. 8), however is currently listed for sale at an estimated price of 1-1.5 million pounds.

The potential for the misuse of scholarship as a method of increasing the provenance or relevance of a work and thus its financial value casts doubt upon the scholarly contribution of the exhibition catalogue. The curator Gilberto Algranti does not provide a historical overview of the three centuries of art on display but rather he prefers to leave that to “scholars more knowledgeable than himself” in order that “the exhibition’s true cultural and political significance” can be conveyed.¹⁸ He believes “they will be able to make sense of the historical events which gave such impetus to so many artists, leading to so many masterpieces”¹⁹. What is imparted, however, is not sense but rather confusion assisted by the assemblage of thematic essays written by scholars who had little involvement if any in the development of the exhibition. Whilst the credentials of the scholars involved were universally acknowledged and their scholarship considerable, there was no coordination to enable comprehension for the average reader.

In some instances, there was an overlap of subject matter and authors like Strinati elaborated on themes that have very little pictorial presence within the exhibition such as the paragone debate. Some authors gave precedence to the stylistic division between Tuscan *disegno* and Venetian *colorito* whilst others focused on the contrast between the sacred and profane. Each author seems to have had a particular focus depending on their respective areas of expertise. These varying focal points not only served to highlight the diversity of Italian art but also the lack of curatorial concept.

Furthermore, the catalogue contained images that were wrongly printed in reverse and not only once, but twice as was the case with Guido Reni’s *The Penitent Magdalene*. The *Italians* website, moreover, contained such a high number of discrepancies between itself and the catalogue where images in one were so often the reverse of the other. It became difficult to discern which format was correct, especially in regard to those works which have recently come to light for which there are no pre-existing records. As the curator

¹⁶ Spear, 2002, p. 28

¹⁷ Grampp, 1989, p. 31

¹⁸ Algranti, 2002, introduction

¹⁹ Algranti, 2002, introduction

and editor, Algranti should have noted and corrected these discrepancies prior to publication. The publication of newly discovered works is an important avenue for potential scholarship. The fact that these errors remained evidenced a fast and sloppy production ethic which was more concerned with expediency rather than scholarship.

If the scholarship is marginal and does not result in a catalogue of significant reference value, that is able to stand on its own beyond the duration of the exhibition, it could reasonably be argued that exhibitions such as *The Italians* are unnecessary. They most certainly are costly with a total expenditure of \$ 2,955,818 million.²⁰ This was three times more costly than any other exhibition staged by the National Gallery that year²¹. Dr. Kennedy attributes this increase in cost to the large number of works on display, 108 works for *The Italians* compared to 78 for the *Rodin* exhibition. Moreover, the artworks for *The Italians* were shipped from various locations within Italy, the United States and the United Kingdom which resulted in higher freight costs than exhibitions like *Rodin* where the works are gathered from a single location. The works that incurred these costly freight charges were notably those from private collections and commercial dealers such as The Matthiesen Gallery and Simon Dickinson both of London and the Maison d'Art of Montecarlo.

Overall, the exhibition covered a period of history that was too vast to enable a comprehensive overview or analysis. 108 works were not enough to convey 300 hundred years of history within eleven regions each with their own distinct stylistic traditions. The uneven representation of periods and regions evidenced a scant curatorial concept. A concept which was developed on financial grounds, based as it was around the inclusion of private works, as opposed to more scholarly curatorial practices. The result, however, was not entirely negative. The public and scholars alike were presented with many works of both exceptional beauty and scholarly interest of which they would not otherwise have seen. Whilst the contribution of *The Italians* exhibition to lasting scholarship is dubious, the opportunity for Australian scholars and institutions to work with foreign representatives cannot be undervalued. Exhibitions such as *The Italians* are necessary, if only for the future lending opportunities that they provide.

²⁰ Hansard, 2002, p. 8

²¹ Hansard, 2003b: p. 114

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