

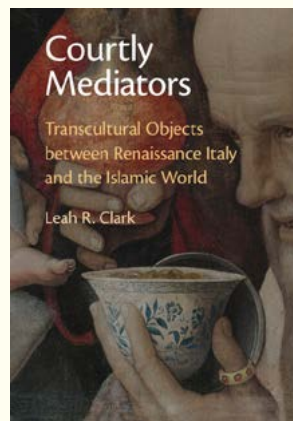
exhibition and in their paper to histories of Islamic art that exclude Africa, boldly leaning into such geopolitics. They offer insights, as well, about the curatorial duty of community consultation in their remarks on the ROM's own efforts to controversially curate African art in its exhibition *Into the Heart of Africa* (1990). Most importantly, Hirji develops a concept of “intracultural dialogue” that troubles the “reified” categories of “Islamic Art,” “Black Africa,” and the “Islamic World,” insisting on the complexity of global cultural flows, and the radical diversity of tastes, knowledge, affiliations, bodies, and opinions within these traditions and areas and not just between them (364–65).

While the fine detail and evidentiary force of the early chapters leaves no doubt about the rigor of scholarship in Islamic art, architecture, and archeology, it is these last steps taken in the book—from the collector and connoisseur's field in Currelley's time to the specialist study of Islamic art after the 60s and, finally, to a critical account of its reception and curatorial framing now—that distinguishes this volume.

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- 1 Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 57–59.
- 2 Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021); Jonathan M. Bloom and Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Arts* (London: Phaidon Press, 1997).
- 3 Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 59–62.
- 4 Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (London: Vintage Books, 1980), 86. Also see Samuel Nelson Gilbert, “Israeli Land Claims: Archeology and Ideology,” *Al Jazeera*, November 16, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/11/16/israeli-land-claims-archaeology-and-ideology>.



Leah R. Clark

*Courtly Mediators: Transcultural Objects between Renaissance Italy and the Islamic World*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023  
336 pp., 46 b/w illus.,  
14 colour plates  
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/ *Cynthia Fang* /

Leah Clark's *Courtly Mediators: Transcultural Objects between Renaissance Italy and the Islamic World* compellingly argues that the circulation of objects—facilitated by interactions in early modern courtly domestic spaces—informed sensual and material memories and experiences. Clark's book presents a new perspective on courts in Italy, positioning Naples as a nexus of exchange in which agents, material goods, and objects played active roles. By exploring the importance of diplomatic negotiation, trade, and encounters with material cultures, Clark introduces a transformative methodological framework that situates Italian courts within a larger global intersection of connection and interchange. The “courtly mediators,” such as ceramic drug jars, aromatics, Mamluk metalware, and Chinese porcelain, reveal the interconnectedness of people, materials, and things, resisting the idea of “pure” or authentic cultural traditions and products (8). Clark's argument is substantiated by extensive archival evidence and the book offers valuable theoretical and methodological insights, applicable to studies of early modern art and material culture.

Expanding on her expertise on the collection of Eleonora d'Aragona, the Duchess of Ferrara, Clark focuses on the

global connections of Naples and Ferrara during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Naples was a critical network for embassies and luxury goods from Mediterranean and Middle Eastern empires, and *Courtly Mediators* describes what happens after objects and materials were distributed to courts and centres throughout the Italian peninsula. The first two chapters examine exchange during the Aragonese period in Naples (1442–95) and Eleonora’s tenure as Duchess in Ferrara (1473–93). Inventories help piece together how far objects were dispersed through familial and political ties. The following chapters assess the survival of Eleonora’s porcelain collection under her son Alfonso d’Este, highlighting complex relationships between objects in these collections and the diplomatic entanglements with the Mamluks and Ottomans. Clark argues that the blue-and-white cup in Andrea Mantegna’s *Adoration of the Magi* (ca. 1460), for instance, referred to porcelain in the Este collections, which was likely sent by the Mamluk sultans and personalized in mounted metalwork. Part of Clark’s contribution thus invites an assessment of the ways in which canonical artworks need to be resituated within the larger global visual culture.

Given Clark’s departure from single geographical origins and Eurocentric categories, one might be surprised by her use of the phrase “Italian Renaissance,” contested for its implications that Italy was at the centre of the early modern world. Clark clarifies, however, that employing the phrase engages directly with and challenges Eurocentric understandings of the “Renaissance” as a revival of local classical antiquity (8). In response to the recent surge in scholarship on the mobility and circulation of objects, driven by the material and global turns in art history, Clark aligns herself with methodologies of material culture, entanglements, in-between spaces, transculturation, and the senses. She draws on Anna Grasskamp’s approaches to European framing devices on Chinese porcelain and adopts Jonathan Hay’s terms “surfacescapes” and “object-scapes” to interpret the translation of ornament across cultures.<sup>1</sup> Yet Clark is mindful of unequal power dynamics, forced conversions, and colonial domination that impinged upon early modern life. The trade of luxury goods was intertwined with the trafficking of enslaved people, who were

shipped alongside spices. Moreover, new discoveries or territorial expansions brought with them power struggles and occupations. Invested in the stories and agencies of transcultural objects and materials, Clark brings to light “multiple actors at play within what has conventionally been described as the ‘Italian Renaissance’” (4).

Chapter One establishes how fifteenth-century Naples was a site of both divergence and convergence, particularly in its extended negotiations with the Ottoman Empire. Drawing on archival documents and ambassador reports, Clark focuses on the mutability of objects—textiles, metalwork, and aromatics—gifted by ambassadors from the Mamluks or Ottomans, which were offered as diplomatic negotiators in semi-public ritualized events at the Neapolitan court. These objects, as material memories of those encounters, became integrated into local practices and collecting programs. They were shown when ambassadors and fellow rulers were taken on tours of courtly spaces as an extension of diplomacy. Detailed accounts of the rooms and artworks in letters and humanist texts helped visualize an inventory of the collections, and the reader’s recounting of these spaces became a rhetorical exercise through the descriptive speech of ekphrasis.

Yet if the Neapolitan court was transcultural, what happens when an object from Naples is gifted to the Ottoman court (14)? Drawing upon sociological, anthropological, and historical studies, Clark posits that most objects were already “composite,” rarely exclusive to one culture. Manufacture was usually the product of one or more cultural traditions and the materials used were often sourced from numerous geographic locales. These composite objects (*objets croisés*) served as active mediators that facilitated communication and negotiation. For instance, objects exchanged as diplomatic gestures were displayed in public and private gifting ceremonies, observed by many. The objects’ patterns were then replicated and adapted across different media—damascene motifs in metalwork were found on leather and ceramics. Court objects could therefore also be sites of “mediation” in themselves, a term with an etymological link to media, highlighting their intermediality and transmateriality (4). The *objet croisé* is thus one means of articulating the varying degrees of transculturation in the early modern world.

Chapter Two delves into the language used to describe objects in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century documents (i.e., inventories, ambassador reports, letters, humanist texts). Clark probes the vocabularies used to refer to the “style” of an object and its motifs, materials, and “origins” in order to underscore the ambiguity surrounding authorship and geographic origins in these primary sources. Taking “*alla damascina* (in the damascene style)” as an example, Clark interrogates whether “*alla*” was always employed to refer to “in the style of,” as the phrase can refer to places of production or specific motifs. The production sites of damascene metalware shifted over time from Mamluk Syria and Egypt to Iran and then to Venice, Italy—but this was not always obvious to the contemporary scribe. Clark highlights the nuanced itineraries of objects and materials that do not begin with the point of manufacture and end with a consumer, effectively putting pressure on the idea of “influence,” which suggests a linear, teleological approach that overlooks the diverse places and materials that informed artmaking processes. Descriptions of objects from “somewhere else” also point to mobility itself as a category of value (5).

Turning from words *for* things to words *as* things (61), Clark subsequently examines the migration of motifs—such as pseudoscript—not as simple two-dimensional patterns that were copied across media, but as three-dimensional objects. Ornament had the capacity to “produce visible forms of ‘distinction,’ as part of deliberate projects of place- and culture-making, as for example in the distinctive ‘regimes of ornament’ that were formulated dialogically within Ottoman and Safavid visual cultures” (64). By attributing agency to the motifs and considering them as three-dimensional, Clark emphasizes the generative and haptic responses that ornament can elicit from the beholder. She convincingly demonstrates how small portable objects traded and used across the Mediterranean informed humanistic writings such as Neapolitan court poet Giovanni Pontano’s concept of ornament.

The idea of parerga in relation to the frame and mount is taken up in chapters three and four. Noting the varying interpretations of Pliny the Elder’s use of the parergon, often translated as “extra ornament,” Clark is interested in

the philosophical understandings of the term, which suggests an “in-between-ness.” Chapter Three focuses on Eleonora d’Aragona’s Chinese porcelain collection, collected in large quantities and exchanged in diplomatic missions. These objects were often later mounted in metalwork, a practice prevalent not only in early modern Europe, but also in Iran, Ottoman, and Mughal empires. The addition of mounts, Clark argues, transforms the porcelain into composite objects, for their original motifs have been altered, either highlighted or partially covered by metalwork. The “in-betweenness” of the vessels—now both metallic and ceramic—is emphasized by the materials’ myriad reactions to light. The mounts, having provided some vessels with new handles, also change the objects’ ontological purpose, inviting the beholder to utilize them in different ways. The mounted porcelain reflects the palimpsests created through transcultural dialogues, featuring motifs and technologies that have been circulated, recycled, and transformed (124).

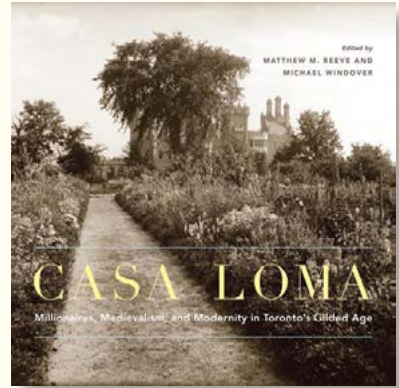
Chapter Four provides a different context in which paintings can be seen as parerga for the sculpture, vessels, and other materials on display. Focusing on Alfonso d’Este’s *camerini* in Ferrara, Clark suggests the paintings placed on the walls—Giovanni Bellini’s *Feast of the Gods*—acted as the frames for the real focus of the display: vases, metalwork, and Chinese porcelain in the rooms. These vessels prompted conversations about Alfonso’s own ceramic endeavors and inventions. His interest in the technological capabilities of the manual arts and material mimesis offered him an alternative approach to *disegno*, which Giorgio Vasari understood solely as the imitation of nature through figuration. Instead, through the objects that were displayed in his *camerini*, Alfonso explored the relationship between reality and fiction, material imitation, and counterfeiting, providing a new interpretation of these spaces.

The final chapter turns to the olfactory senses to investigate the courtly *spezieria*, or pharmacy, which reveals the multi-functional nature of aromatic vessels. Within the palace, the apothecary shop and its jars emerged as signs of news and knowledge; their proximity to the *studiolo* and other rooms of display and collections demonstrate a cohesive knowledge

network. Clark argues that the presence of illegible inscriptions on jars, such as pseudoscript or abstracted Kufic, evoked an aura of specialized knowledge and connections to Arabic sources. While the courtly apothecary shares similarities with urban pharmacies as centres of gossip and information sharing, its proximity to other aristocratic spaces such as the studioli underscored the intersections of wealth, power, and knowledge to visitors. The metaphor of the pharmacy was often used in the art of memory texts, both stimulating the mind through sensory and visual inputs. The application of knowledge in the pharmacy required recalling messages, speeches, and codes, or referencing classical authors and renowned images—similar to practices crucial for a prince or courtier's success.

Weaving together archival and visual evidence that argues for the non-linear migration of motifs and forms, *Courtly Mediators* is a captivating and rigorous study. Clark eloquently outlines the ways in which engagement with Ottoman and Mamluk objects impacted the formation of Italian court identities, thereby reorienting the readers' understanding of courts as dynamic and fluid spaces, which were continuously adapting and responding to evolving people, practices, and objects. Yet Clark's contribution is not exclusive to courtly negotiations. The conclusion compellingly recounts how Valencian floor tiles commissioned by Alfonso I d'Aragona gained popularity among Neapolitan aristocrats. These tile designs soon flourished in local workshops, became embedded in regional churches, and, in some cases, were translated across different media into doodles on paper. *Courtly Mediators* thus invites a reassessment of how transfers and exchanges could occur beyond the interactions of artists and patrons, underscoring instead the tangible—sometimes immaterial—encounters that activated a visual culture of translations and transmutations.

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Matthew M. Reeve and Michael Windover, eds.  
*Casa Loma: Millionaires, Medievalism, and Modernity in Toronto's Gilded Age*  
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/Katie Filek/

A dwelling, a castle, a node within empire, at once incredibly modern and overwhelmingly nostalgic: Casa Loma, the looming building set atop Toronto's Davenport Ridge, is at once many things. In *Casa Loma: Millionaires, Medievalism, and Modernity in Toronto's Gilded Age*, edited by Matthew M. Reeve and Michael Windover, the book's contributors delve into the history of this early twentieth landmark to both emphasize and unwrap the building's multiple identities—both as they were built into its fabric and as they have unfolded over time. The volume offers a history that is at once minutely focused and methodologically expansive. A monograph on an individual building (a well-known one at that, already with a firm place in Toronto's collective imagination) holds the dangerous potential of either appealing to too narrow an audience or of lapsing into uncritical nostalgia—yet this book avoids those pitfalls. While some chapters could be pushed further in their analysis, the editors' clear efforts to connect the Davenport mansion to far-reaching questions of imperialism and identity and contextualize it within Toronto's own social and economic history make *Casa Loma* a valuable contribution to architectural historiography in Canada. At the same time, it is significant as the first scholarly volume to focus on Casa Loma as a work of architecture in itself—building on an

<sup>1</sup> See Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2020).