Shape-shifters of Transculturation

Giovanni Bastianini's Forgeries as Embodiment of an Aesthetic Patriotism

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Just what is it that makes art forgeries so different, so appealing, as long as they are considered original? one could ask, thus quoting and adapting the title of *Pop* artist Richard Hamilton's famous collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* from 1956. Yet, after a forgery has been revealed as such, it loses the favour of the beholder and the once "true, beautiful and good" appears tainted.[1] While the artwork itself remains unchanged, the process of exposure changes the way we look at the artwork. So it is the context — such as art historical classifications — rather than the artwork itself that changes perception and valuation. To this effect art forgeries can be thought of as semantic shape-shifters, since they shift their shape in our gaze from supposedly authentic to false, once exposed (Öcal 2014: 176).

In contrast to the ambiguous images also known as reversible figures, this metamorphosis in the reception of forgeries is irreversible, since we will never look at a forgery the same way we did when we considered it to be original. So, what defines the uniqueness of an artwork, when we can see it in a forgery as well, provided it is considered to be original? Therefore, the pastiche-like characteristics of Hamilton's work can quite well be applied to forgeries, which combine several recognisable aspects of already existing, original artworks to a kind of modernised hyper-version of these originals, what in turn makes forgeries 'so appealing'. Thus, as a child of his time, the forger paraphrases the prevailing taste and gaze of this time into the pictorial expression of the forged artist, so that he resembles a translator, who not only reproduces the model but

1 | Initially rooted in Plato's philosophy, the trinity of the "true, beautiful and good" originates from a new reception and interpretation of Plato's writings from the early 18th to the 19th century, when it became a concept of 19th-century art, literature, and culture (Kurz 2015).

recontextualises it into a new form.[2] Accordingly, a forgery emulates the original, re-presenting that original from a contemporary point of view and taste.

This can be illustrated particularly with reference to the example of the Florentine sculptor and forger Giovanni Bastianini (1830-1868), whose busts, reliefs and statuettes claimed to originate from the *Quattrocento*, while simultaneously fulfilling the stylistic expectation of the European and American audience of the 19th century.

"A Tuscan Worthy to Stand by the Side of his Predecessors"

Bastianini's portrait bust of the Florentine Renaissance Dominican friar and preacher, Girolamo Savonarola, that he made in 1863 in the style of the *Quattrocento*, is a striking example (fig. 1). The lively expressions, the affective posture, and the detailed composition of the traditional habit are comparable to Donatello's bust of Niccolo da Uzzano from 1432 (fig. 2). Both busts are distinguished by their emotive posture and naturalness, illustrated by their gaze to the upper right or left as well as by their detailed drapery. This preference for lively expressions is rooted in the Florentine Renaissance and fostered by its resurrection in Bastianini's period, so that *Quattrocento* busts were classified according to how pronounced their naturalism was. But Bastianini's works not only adopt this preferred naturalism, they carry it to extremes by appearing to be torn from real life. Indeed, Bastianini shaped most of his busts after living models such as friends and workers in nearby factories.[3] Thus, he applies a contemporary artistic method which blends Renaissance models with modern techniques. This is also found in the staging of a painting's composition by Stefano Bardini, an artist, forger and one of the most famous art and antiques dealers of the 19th century in Florence.[4] Like a reverse *tableau vivant*, Bardini, who was equipped with the latest photographic instruments, dressed several people in Renaissance costumes, placed them in

2 | Following Denis Diderot, an artist who reproduces paintings in engravings is not just copying but rather creating a new artwork: "le graveur […] est un prosateur qui se propose de rendre un poète d'une langue dans une autre" (Diderot 1984: 314).

3 | One of them is Giuseppe Bonaiuti a worker of the nearby tobacco factory, who was the model for Bastianini's bust of Girolamo Benivieni (Schüller 1959: 46). Furthermore, Bastianini made a portrait bust of his friend and fellow artist Gaetano Bianchi (Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana) whom he dressed in Renaissance costumes.

4 | See the current research and recent publications of Lynn Catterson (New York) on Stefano Bardini (2015; 2016).

Figure 1: Giovanni Bastianini, "Girolamo Savonarola", 1863, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

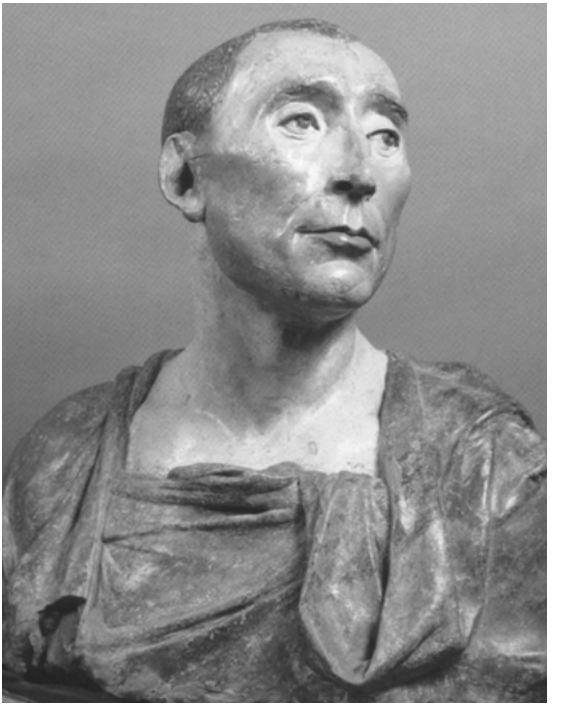

Figure 2: Donatello, "Niccolò da Uzzano", 1432, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

historical surroundings, and photographed them so as to later paint these contrived sceneries in oil (figs. 3; 4).[5]

In this sense, Bastianini's skilful imitation of the stylistic and technical characteristics of the *Quattrocento* are significant for the great revival of the *imitatio* and *aemulatio* tradition during the *Ottocento*.[6] Rooted in a long artistic tradition as well as in historical circumstances, this reborn concept also indicates the different attitudes of Italians and non-Italians towards copies and imitations. In contrast to other European and American collectors, Italians did not regard them as intentionally deceptive. In fact, *imitatio* and *aemulatio* were forms of playful competition of distinguished artistic and technical skills and a tribute to the ideal of the Renaissance respectively of the Antiquity. The aim was to resituate the golden era of the *Rinascimento* in the contemporary *Ottocento* and in its national context so that "Italian art in the nineteenth century was diverse in subject matter and rich in regional variation, paying homage to the past as well as experimenting with the technologies of the future" (Helstosky 2009: 804).

Hence, the 'discovery' of the larger-than-life bust of Savonarola was a real sensation, because until then only two-dimensional profile portraits of the Dominican friar existed.[7] Bastianini took these portraits as a model, illustrated by the striking resemblance of his bust to Fra Bartolomeo's *Ritratto di Girolamo Savonarola* from 1498 (fig. 5). Following Bastianini's contemporary Alessandro Foresi, he also modelled characteristic parts of his bust, like the habit revealing the forehead and hairline, after an ancient bronze medal (fig. 6).[8] Furthermore, Bastianini's bust was perfectly timed for a public resurgence of admiration for Savonarola during the *Ottocento*. Accordingly, Bastianini's busts of Marsilio Ficino, Girolamo Benivieni and Dante, who sooner or later became ardent followers of Savonarola, illustrate that Bastianini specifically selected figures of the Italian Renaissance who belonged to Savonarola's followers. Benivieni for instance rewrote his profane poems and translated Savonarola's writings into Italian

5 | I would like to thank Stefano Tasselli and Giuseppe Rizzo for their help in gaining access to archival material on Stefano Bardini and for sharing their valuable insights.

6 | On *aemulatio*, both as artistic and social concept during the Renaissance see Müller et al. 2011.

7 | Savonarola rose to fame with his prophecies and his so-called 'bonfire of the vanities', which was part of his plan to make Florence the centre of Christianity. His open antagonism to Rome and Pope Alexander VI led to his excommunication and execution in 1498. To avoid the possibility of Savonarola's posthumous martyrdom, Pope Alexander VI aimed to destroy every image of Savonarola.

8 | "d'après une ancienne médaille, le buste en terre cuite du célèbre moine qui fut brulé vif sur la place della Signoria" (Foresi 1868: 33).

Figure 3: Stefano Bardini, staged group of persons, undated, photograph, Archivio Stefano Bardini, Florence.

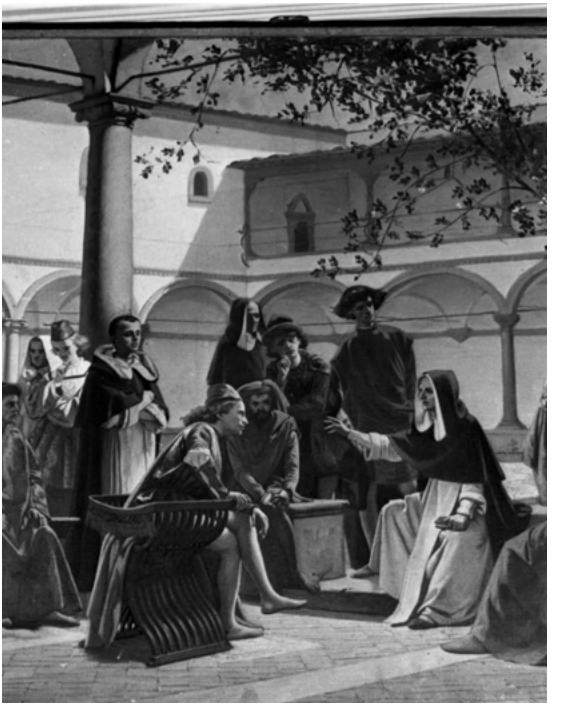

Figure 4: Stefano Bardini, painting after his photograph, Archivio Stefano Bardini, Florence.

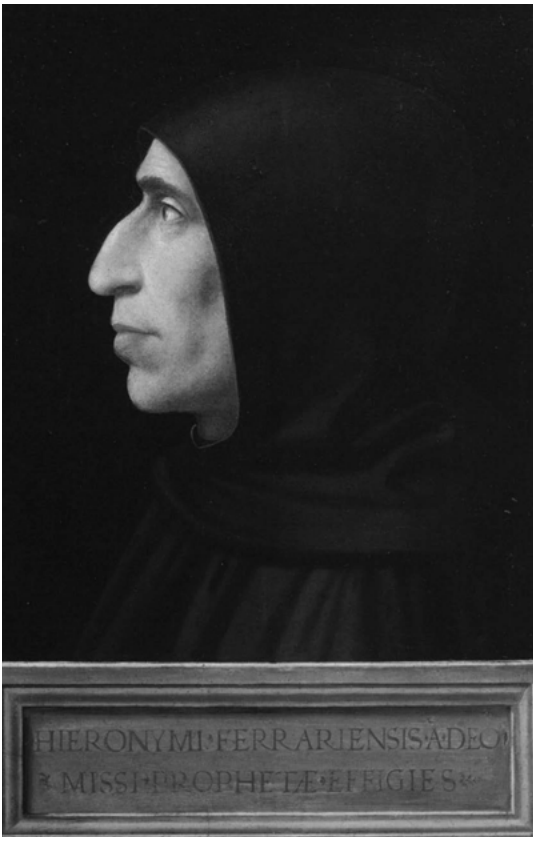

Figure 5: Fra Bartolomeo (Baccio della Porta), "Ritratto di Girolamo Savonarola", 1498, Museo di San Marco, Florence.

Figure 6: Florentine school, "Portrait Medal of Girolamo Savonarola" (obverse), 15th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Ann and George Blumenthal Fund), New York.

such as *Della semplicità della vita cristiana*. Consequently, Bastianini's forgeries are largely based on a blend of reception history, stylistic expectations and historically documented scarcity value.

Eventually, the patriotic artists Cristiano Banti and Giovanni Costa bought the Savonarola bust for 10,000 Lire in order to keep it in Italy. Yet, after its exposure as a forgery they felt no remorse. Quite the contrary, Costa claimed to be "glad to find that such a distinguished artist was living and not dead" (after Barstow 1886: 506). Thus, Bastianini's works were appreciated even as forgeries, as Sir Frederic Leighton's letter to Sir Thomas Armstrong, the former director of the South Kensington Museum, now the Victoria and Albert Museum, demonstrates: "Bastianini was a man of impressive talent — a Tuscan worthy to stand by the side of his predecessors of the quattrocento; it is no concern of ours that poverty drove him to use his rare gifts in the service of vendors of spurious works" (in *Department of science and art* 1888).

Forgeries in the Melting Pot of Cultural Travels and Nation Building

In fact, after the exposure of a forgery there is generally a two-stage reaction: initially, the deception apparently devalues the artwork entirely. But secondly, the new criminal context bestows a newly-historicising value upon the forgery. Just as the graffitied signature of Vladimir Umanets, the founder of the *Yellowism* movement, on Mark Rothko's *Black on Maroon* in London's Tate Modern was considered vandalism, understandably so, it also became an intrinsic part of that painting's history (Barrett 2014). Accordingly, Umanets and his fellow artist Marcin Lodyga assert in their "Manifesto of Yellowism": "We believe that the context for works of art is already art" (Umanets/Lodyga 2010). With its 2010 exhibition "Close Examination: Fakes, Mistakes and Discoveries", the National Gallery in London made this concept presentable by exhibiting forgeries specifically on account of their contexts that is to say of the histories behind them, or as stated on the museum's website: "The exhibition will showcase some of the most intriguing stories behind paintings in the Gallery" (National Gallery 2010).

The reasons for this appreciation of a forgery precisely because it is a forgery have been changing since the 19th century. While in the 19th century primarily the aesthetic quality defined the value of a forgery, it is the historicising context that adds value to a forgery today. This is why they can increase in value over time, or forgers are regarded as con-artists who have beaten the market. The case of the German art forger Wolfgang Beltracchi, who after forging for approximately thirty years in the style of such artists as Heinrich Campendonk

or Max Ernst now has his own show on television, is a notable contemporary example.[9]

And yet the debate about whether Bastianini should be thought of as a forger or an artist continues to the present day. While some experts and art historians refuse to accept Bastianini as a forger and portray him as a skilful artist and victim of the ruthless art dealer Giovanni Freppa, others describe Bastianini as a forger who enjoyed deceiving others.[10] But the fact that Bastianini signed and dated his original works, which were exhibited throughout the 1850s at the *Promotrici Fiorentine* and at the annual exhibitions of the Florentine Academy, and that he didn't sign and date but rather artificially aged his forgeries, shows that Bastianini clearly differentiated between an original and a forgery.[11] With Jeremy Warren's detection of a letter from Alessandro Foresi to the French collector Charles Davillier, there can be no doubt remaining that Bastianini continued forging even after the end of his contract with his art dealer Giovanni Freppa (Warren 2005: 741).

It has, however, been argued that the true narrative about Bastianini is not the typical story of a frustrated genius or exploited victim, but rather about the contest of power between France and Italy (Helstosky 2009: 795). Bastianini's forgery of the bust of Girolamo Benivieni is virtually a paradigm for this argument (fig. 7). Exhibited at the 'Exposition Rétrospective' of the Palais de Champs-Elysées in Paris in 1865, the art critic Paul Mantz praised the terracotta bust as an excellent work of the *Quattrocento*.[12]

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9 | "Der Meisterfälscher. Wolfgang Beltracchi porträtiert…" is the name of a series which is now broadcasting in its third season at 3Sat. (https://www.3sat.de/page/?source=/sfdrs/179706/index.html, last accessed on 12 June 2017) For an interdisciplinary view of Beltracchi's forgeries see Keazor/Öcal 2014.

10 | The narrative of victimisation about Bastianini felling prey to the unscrupulous art dealer Giovanni Freppa, first was published in an article in the British Magazine of Art by Nina Barstow in 1886. However, a wide range of opinion regarded Bastianini as having the intent to deceive and not being a victim at all. They furthermore portrayed him as conspiring with his art dealer (Helstosky 2009: 797). With her aim to baptise Bastianini as an artist and not a forger, Anita F. Moskowitz unfortunately delivered a rather fragmentary, partly outdated and biased presentation that does not consider current research such as Barbara Bertelli's 2012 published PhD thesis, which investigates the art market of the Florentine *Ottocento* in general and Bastianini's art dealer and accomplice Giovanni Freppa in particular (Moskowitz 2013; Bertelli 2012).

11 | On Bastianini's exhibitions see Sani 1973 and Helstosky 2009.

12 | Accordingly, Paul Mantz worships the bust in the Gazette des beaux arts: "Die ganze italienische Feinheit offenbart sich in der ausdrucks-

Figure 7: Giovanni Bastianini, "Girolamo Benivieni", 1863, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

In 1866 Alfred Émilien O'Hara van Nieuwerkerke bought the bust at an auction at the Hotel Drouot in Paris and resold it only a year later for 14,000 Francs to the Musée du Louvre in Paris (Hôtel Drouot 1866: 15). The participation of the sculptor and collector Nieuwerkerke brought a heightened political emphasis to the so-called 'Benivieni affair', as he was the most powerful individual in the French art world during Napoleon III's reign. With the assistance of Princess Mathilde, Napoleon III's cousin, Nieuwerkerke rose to power and was appointed superintendent of the Imperial Museums. Due to his long-standing affair with the Princess, his questionable acquisitions of public art and his arrogant way of dealing with artists he was the subject of controversies throughout the 1860s and eventually fell from favour in 1870 (Helstosky 2009: 800).

After Giovanni Freppa revealed the Benivieni bust as a forgery in December 1867, followed by Bastianini's confirmation soon afterwards, a polemical controversy broke out involving not only art experts and dealers, but also Italy and France as nations.[13] The possession of Renaissance art supposedly reflected France's advanced level of civilisation, implying the strength of Napoleon III's regime (Helstosky 2009: 804-05). In particular, the acquisition of large parts of Giampietro Campana's Collection for the Louvre had been considered a big coup for Napoleon III, whereas for Italy it had been a humiliation, forcing them to part with significant artistic treasures. Whilst foreign collectors regarded picture hunting as a good opportunity, for Italians a feeling of incapacity around their ability to protect their cultural heritage arose. In turn foreign art collectors rationalised their purchase of Italian art by asserting that Italians wouldn't appreciate or care for their artistic heritage properly or would be unable to inherit their past; similar arguments justified the "civilised" British in their ongoing quest to protect their cultural heritage, as being on the behalf of humankind (Black 2003: 159-60). France's hunt for artistic emblems of past civilisations was likewise based in the megalomaniacal desire to safeguard the world's treasures for the benefit of mankind (McClellan 1994: 7). In his letter to the *Times*, Bernard Berenson stated that Italians had a greater appreciation for forgeries, copies and replicas than for their own artistic patrimony (Berenson 1903).[14]

Yet on the contrary, in the spirit of unification during the *Risorgimento* a new patriotism gathered strength in Italy, so that Italians defined themselves mainly through their own cultural heritage. The issue was to locate, categorise and

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vollen Physiognomie. Wir kennen Benivienis Portrait nicht; wir möchten schwören, daß es gut getroffen ist" (Mantz 1865: 339; also Schüller 1959: 44).

13 | Further details of this controversy that mainly took place in the print media are documented in Becker 1889: 30-34.

14 | This position was also represented in contemporary literature such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860).

protect existing art, antiquities and architecture, which led to a more urgent need for coherent art policies (Helstosky 2009: 812). But whilst Italians were trying to determine the extent of Italy's cultural and artistic heritage, tourists and art collectors were contributing to its steady depletion. In 1880 the British art dealer William Le Queux determined that most valuable art works had disappeared from Italy. The only objects that remained were forgeries and imitations, as Le Queux noted (Le Queux 1904: 8). Although his descriptions may be exaggerated, it can be seen that even Italian art dealers had to travel to other European countries in order to refill their stock with genuine Italian art for the next wave of tourists. Significant examples are plaster models of reliefs by Giovanni di Bologna, which were purchased by an Italian dealer for £ 20 in an antique shop in London and taken back to Florence where they were sold to a British buyer for £ 300. Later, the Victoria and Albert Museum acquired them for £ 470 (Helstosky 2009: 814).

In the framework of unification and cultural travels, forgeries not only responded to an increasing demand, but also acted as a means of protection for Italy's own cultural heritage, so that it remained within the Italian frontiers while at the same time benefitting from foreign currencies. Therefore, Italian forgers used the visual expectation of their foreign audience as mediums for a culturally-coded pictorial expression. In turn this procedure is comparable to Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's use of the Spanish language in *The First New Chronicle and Good Government* (1980), which Mary Louise Pratt, Professor of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literature, describes as "an example of a conquered subject using the conqueror's language to construct a parodic, oppositional representation of the conqueror's own speech" (Pratt 1991: 35). As an autoethnographic text it addresses both the author's own community and the Spanish conquerors, adopting and foiling the observations the Spanish have made of Guaman Poma de Ayala's nation (Pratt 1991: 35). Therefore, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala wrote his new chronicle in a mixture of Quechua and ungrammatical expressive Spanish (Pratt 1991: 34). This is comparable to Alessandro Foresi, who wrote about the "Benivieni affair" in quite an amusing and polemical way (Foresi 1868). But instead of Italian, his first language, Foresi used French in order to directly address his parody to the French connoisseurs.

Hence, 19th-century Italy and its art market represent a multi-national social space, where cultures of different times and nations of different places meet or clash. As a result this period of highly flourishing cultural transfer generated "contact zones", to use a term coined by Pratt (1991), in which forgeries reflect this transculturation as a specific pictorial language diverging between the Italian Renaissance model and the foreign 19th-century view.[15] Thus, in the nation-building process

15 | The notion of 'transculturation' derives from the book, published in 1940, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (the English trans-

of the *Risorgimento*, authenticity had an existential significance for Italy, while art collectors considered authenticity as an increase in value of their art trophies. In this melting pot of identity remembrance and picture hunting, forgeries become objects of the 'contact zone', by commingling the transculturation of the European-American gaze of the 19th century with the works of the early Renaissance.

Accordingly, Bastianini's bust of Piccarda Donati had been praised for its resemblance to *Quattrocento* works, although or even because it follows the stylistic expressions of the Pre-Raphaelites (fig. 8). Alexander Munro's bust of his wife Mary for example bears striking similarities to Bastianini's bust, particularly the facial expression (fig. 9). A comparison of both works illustrates how precisely Bastianini adapted to foreign taste and transformed it into a *Quattrocento* style by dressing his bust in Renaissance costumes. It is unknown whether Bastianini ever saw works by British Pre-Raphaelite sculptors. However, both the Pre-Raphaelites and the artists of the *Ottocento* share the same model, which is the art of the *Quattrocento*, precisely pre-Raphael. Given that Bastianini shaped his bust in 1855 and therefore prior to Munro, the question arises, who actually influenced whom? Was it the Florentine Neo-Renaissance sculpture, seen by the Pre-Raphaelites as a genuine work of the *Quattrocento*? Or was it the taste of British cultural travellers, who brought the stylistic expressions of the Pre-Raphaelites to Florence and in doing so, influenced the artworks of the *Ottocento*?

Furthermore, the desires and visual expectations of the cultural tourists were generated both by the rise of connoisseurship, as well as the emergence of art history as a scientific discipline. At the latest with the rise of museums and collections the Italian art market had been structured by an unrestrained demand for valuable genuine yet inexpensive Italian art especially of the *Trecento* to *Seicento*, while contemporary Italian art played almost no role in the realm of European art during the 19th century. Therefore, Italy was confronted with the quandary of being praised for its past but not its present. Even the honouring of the artist Stefano Ussi at the "Universal Exposition" in 1867 had been dismissed by French art critics as a political rather than aesthetic choice.[16] It was considered as a symbolic act of French support for the Italian *Risorgimento*.

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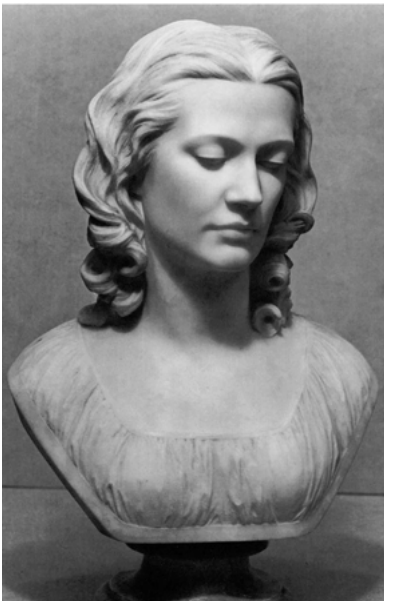
lation *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* was published 1947 in New York) by the Cuban essayist and anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. Exemplified by the devastating influence of colonialism on Cuba, which Ortiz describes as failed transculturation, he uses the term to describe merging cultures in general (Ortiz 1995: 100).

16 | "Critics even pointed out how Ussi's work was little more than a debased form of history painting. Given Italy's prior history of classical artistic tradition, such mediocre work was tantamount to treason" (Helstosky 2009: 804).

Figure 8: Giovanni Bastianini, "Piccarda Donati", ca. 1855, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Florence.

Figure 9: Alexander Munro, "Mary Munro", 1861, Private Collection.



The "desire for inexpensive authenticity" (Helstosky 2009: 817) of Renaissance masterpieces inevitably created the market in which forgers operated. Thus, the resurgent *aemulatio* and *imitatio* traditions developed their own dynamics evolving into an aesthetic patriotism where international visual expectation met national cultural heritage. By unifying the *Quattrocento* model with the *Ottocento* gaze, Bastianini's forgeries had been compounded as a kind of *pasticcio* of different epochs and cultures, so that their success was mainly due to cultural transfer and aesthetic patriotism. On the one hand, his works could be perceived as a tribute to Italy's own history, and on the other hand they enabled Italy to benefit from foreign currencies and to preserve its cultural heritage by selling forgeries as substitutes for the originals to foreign travellers.

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