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The Art of Poverty: Irony and Ideal in Sixteenth-Century Beggar Imagery by Thomas R. Nichols (Review)

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Thomas R. Nichols. *The Art of Poverty: Irony and Ideal in Sixteenth-Century Beggar Imagery.*

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. xxi + 266 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$94.95. ISBN: 978-0-7190-7582-7.

In *The Art of Poverty* Nichols identifies new developments in the representation of the beggar in sixteenth-century art in Northern Europe and in Italy. In chapter 2, "Lazy Beggars: The Working context," Nichols examines the novel imagery of Hieronymus Bosch and his contemporaries and followers in Northern Europe. Breaking from traditional representations of the poor as sanctified, discussed in chapter 1, Bosch and his contemporaries portrayed the beggar in a satirical manner. Assuming a wide variety of visual attributes from similarly despised sectors of society, the beggar appears as disfigured, violent, lame, and blind. Concurrent with the image of the false or roguish beggar, the "deserving" poor were also portrayed occasionally.

In chapter 3, "Paragons of Poverty: Picturing the Deserving Poor," Nichols examines representations of the sacred poor in both Northern and Italian art. In response to the attempts of city officials to bring almsgiving under civic control, a new type of image emerged in which appointed officials give alms to the truly, or deserving, poor. The popularity of images portraying beggars also grew considerably in Italian art and the manner of representing the beggar underwent significant changes. Italian artists were not influenced by the new iconography of the beggar found in the North, but rather, influenced by the High Renaissance style, followers of Raphael and Michelangelo transformed the beggar into a heroic and ideal figure.

Accompanying the stylistic changes to the figures of beggars in Italian religious art was the increase in their visibility and ability to convey complex meaning. Images of beggars played a more prominent role in sacred scenes and they appeared in scenes which did not call for a depiction of a beggar.

One of the strengths of *The Art of Poverty* is that it goes beyond simply outlining the different iconographical approaches to representing the poor in Italy and in Northern Europe. Using a variety of methodological approaches, Nichols explores what shaped beggar imagery and how this imagery was received by its audiences. For example, Nichols attributes the popularity of the roguish or false beggar to the innovative printmaking medium, which gained popularity in urban centers in the North, and to the dissemination of anti-beggar literature. In the variety of types of literature on the subject of beggars they were increasingly described as disruptive and threatening; a sentiment that is certainly echoed in the art of the period.

Religion also played a significant role in how beggars were perceived and depicted. Along with the factors outlined above, Protestantism contributed to the dissemination of false beggar imagery. Luther and other Protestant leaders discouraged begging and divested it of any sacred associations. South of the Alps, the strength of Catholicism in Italy explains why the beggar continued to be portrayed in a sacred context and did not succumb to the satirical mode popular in the North. Only toward the end of the sixteenth century did artists such as Annibale Carracci adopt the roguish beggar type. According to Nichols, Annibale and his followers became interested in false beggar imagery when the conditions in Italy reflected those in the North in terms of the spread of the print and anti-beggar literature. Along with the pivotal role of religion, Nichols also examines the importance of market factors, public opinion, and anti-beggar literature and legislation, among other factors.

Turning momentarily to the question of audience, Nichols considers the viewer and his response to the beggar imagery that developed. As the gap between rich and poor widened in the sixteenth century, Northern representations of the roguish beggar permitted members of the working class to distance themselves from this despised sector of society. These images also functioned on another level for the working class, warning them not to descend into the same situation. In Italian art, the beggar became a model of piety and representation of the ideal of Christian humility to be imitated by the viewer.

Nichols challenges scholarly interpretation of several well-known images and bodies of works by particular artists. For example, according to his interpretation, based on the presence of inscriptions, Annibale Carracci's portrayal of beggars was not sympathetic but rather satirical.

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