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REVIEWS

Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1999) 212 pp., ill.

Given to a new mother in celebration of the successful birth of her first child, *deschi da parto*, or birth plates, have long been studied by scholars and collected by museums. These painted trays, however, were only one of the numerous categories of objects showered on the expectant mother in Renaissance Florence according to Jacqueline Marie Musacchio in her new book, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*.

The material culture of childbirth in the Italian Renaissance forms the central theme of Musacchio's book. After presenting her project and categories of evidence to her reader in the introduction, Musacchio addresses the social historical context of Renaissance Florence within which these objects were purchased and used. She attempts to recover the expectant mother's confinement chamber in her second chapter through a microhistorical examination of one expectant father's scrupulous recording of the costs he incurred leading up to the birth of his first son and during the boy's early infancy. This chapter excavates the now largely lost material culture surrounding childbirth and a mother's confinement. Musacchio then examines extant childbirth objects in the next two chapters, addressing *deschi da parto* in chapter three and maiolica ware in chapter four. Her examination of *deschi da parto* includes a recuperation of three little known categories of these trays, which are largely thought of as only painted, including intarsiated, unpainted wooden trays, and painted wooden bowls (80–89). Musacchio also clarifies the chronology of these two media, since *deschi da parto* are understood to have been made in the Quattrocento and maiolica ware in the Cinquecento. However, Musacchio points out that these media overlapped more than is commonly understood, and *deschi da parto* were being made, albeit with declining popularity, through much of the sixteenth century. The last chapter attempts to explain the plethora of childbirth objects as inducements encouraging women to fulfill their societal role, as fertility charms stimulating the birth of beautiful, healthy infants through sympathetic magic, and as talismans against the numerous evils that might befall the mother or infant.

Musacchio makes a major contribution with her excavation of now lost objects connected with childbirth from the seemingly endless Florentine archives. Her painstaking analysis of inventories, estate records and letters for references to these lost objects has yielded a rich trove of information for future scholars. The penurious father's ledger forms only the background for her discussion in chapter two of these objects which she fleshes out with these additional references. She reveals an abundance of special objects tied to childbirth in Renaissance Florence, including special clothing worn by the new mother, such as childbirth cloaks and vests of expensive fabrics and decorations. Not only was the new mother outfitted in resplendent childbirth clothing, but also her bed was suitably garbed, receiving new childbirth sheets, and pillowcases. The infant, too, had to be honorably fitted out with a coverlet, swaddling clothes and, sometimes, even a little cloak. The new mother wore childbirth apparel to receive her female friends and relatives who visited during her confinement.

Thus, like the luxurious gowns and jewelry with which the groom dressed his bride in Quattrocento Florence, childbirth attire and furnishings served to communicate the growing family's honor. Similarly, Musacchio points out the existence of a second-hand market of childbirth objects and apparel, including *deschi da parto*. An analysis of how long childbirth objects were retained in the family before being sold would neatly dovetail with Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's discussion of the reselling of bridal garb in her essay, "The Griselda Complex: Dowry and Marriage Gifts in the Quattrocento," and would aid our understanding of honorable self-presentation in fifteenth-century Florence.

In reading her social-historical overview of Renaissance Florence, which covers issues such as "Marriage and the Family," "Risks," and "Plague," one is struck by the paucity of social-historical inquiry into childbirth, especially when one considers the outpouring of marriage studies. This dearth of childbirth studies hinders Musacchio's project. While she begins to fill the lacuna from an art historical perspective, the lack of social-historical inquiry in this area of women's lives prevents her from adequately explaining why such a plethora of childbirth objects developed. For instance, she insists that "a major underlying cause of the Renaissance emphasis on the family and procreation must have been the recurring outbreaks of the plague and the demographic catastrophes that accompanied them." (32) One would prefer to see this point argued, rather than simply declared, since she then argues that the objects considered in her study encouraged the constant cycle of pregnancy and childbirth that fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian women underwent in an effort to repopulate the peninsula. *Was* there a societal emphasis on family and lineage before the continual outbreaks of the plague? *Did* a preexistent emphasis become strengthened? Did this excess of luxurious objects surrounding childbirth exist *before* 1348? These are crucial questions which require investigation.

The title, too, promises more than the book delivers. While it pledges a discussion of ritual, Musacchio admits that information concerning childbirth ritual is difficult to discover since it was the domain of women and they left few traces in the historical record. The last chapter, entitled "Maternal Mediators," suggests an analysis of childbirth rituals, but limits the discussion to the Renaissance reliance on sympathetic magic, and the use of these childbirth objects in this belief. Given the lively state of contemporary examinations of ritual theory, this limited material could have been pushed further. More disturbingly for Italian Renaissance studies, the title promises an examination of art and ritual of childbirth in Renaissance *Italy*. However, the material covered focuses largely on Florence, despite the production of maiolica ware in other prominent Italian cities. An examination of childbirth objects in other Italian provinces and cities would be an extremely valuable contribution to the field. Nonetheless, with a glossary of childbirth terms, extensive notes and bibliography, as well as four appendices, Musacchio's ambitious study, tackling two centuries, two media, and the reconstruction of those objects lost to time, is a valuable contribution to our understanding of Florentine women's life experience and their material culture.

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