



'A chosen few': Lady Eastlake and the appreciation of early Florentine art

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Durante il suo primo soggiorno a Firenze, nel 1855, Lady Eastlake sviluppò un vivo entusiasmo per la pittura fiorentina delle origini, arrivando a definirsi «fairly bitten» dai Preraffaelliti. La sua predilezione si concentrò in particolare su quelli che chiamava i «great four»: Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Fra Filippo Lippi e Filippino Lippi. All'epoca, l'interesse per l'arte fiorentina del basso Medioevo rappresentava ancora un ambito piuttosto circoscritto in Gran Bretagna e coinvolgeva soltanto una cerchia che l'autrice stessa definiva «a chosen few». Lady Eastlake manifestò tuttavia il desiderio non solo di «mettere in salvo» opere significative della pittura fiorentina del Quattrocento, ma anche di farle conoscere al pubblico britannico. Attraverso l'analisi della sua corrispondenza e dei suoi scritti a stampa, questo contributo esamina il ruolo svolto da Lady Eastlake nella promozione dei maestri fiorentini delle origini e ne indaga la funzione di mediatrice culturale. La disamina argomenta il suo impegno per ampliare le conoscenze e affinare il gusto estetico del pubblico inglese colto, andando oltre i confini di una ristretta élite di intenditori.

During her first visit to Florence in 1855, Lady Eastlake developed a passionate enthusiasm for early Florentine art, describing herself as «fairly bitten» by the preRaphaelites. She became particularly devoted to what she termed the «great four»: Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Fra Filippo Lippi, and Filippino Lippi. Her admiration for early Florentine art was relatively niche in Britain at the time, and audiences were limited to those she termed as «a chosen few». Nevertheless, Lady Eastlake expressed a desire not only to «rescue» notable examples of early Florentine art, but also to «introduce» them to British audiences. Drawing on her letters and published writings, this paper explores Lady Eastlake's promotion of early Florentine painters and analyses her role as a cultural mediator. It argues that she actively sought to expand the knowledge and aesthetic taste of the Englishreading public beyond an elite circle of informed admirers.

Keywords: Lady Eastlake, Pre-Raphaelite, Florentine Art, Botticelli, Ruskin

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Julie Sheldon

Lady Eastlake first visited Florence in October 1855 with her husband, Sir Charles Eastlake. Sir Charles was on a business trip: Florence was an important stop on the newly appointed National Gallery Director’s annual round of picture inspections in continental Europe.¹ Lady Eastlake’s purpose was less well defined – but because her presence was not ‘official’, she was able to comment on their engagements with art with an unfiltered voice in letters to friends. While her husband was measuring, recording and negotiating for the purchase of artworks, Lady Eastlake, freed from the requirements of the business-end of the art world, spent her time in enterprises associated with expressions of humane learning and self-improvement. She became absorbed by the idea of Florence as the dominant environment of art where the distinctive status of an individual artwork could not be detached from the culture in which it was produced. Above all else, there appeared to be no conceptual opposition between experiencing an exquisite painting and a magnetic cityscape defined by its profusion of churches and private collections. For reasons not unrelated to each other, Florence was both a space of knowledge and a source of revelation; and it comes as no surprise that later on she described it as foundational to «my early days of art worship».² In a semi-rapturous state she declared «I am fairly bitten with all the true pre-Raphaelites [...] and I shall be truly proud if we succeed both in rescuing some examples, and in introducing them into England, where already there are a chosen few who adore them».³ My twin aims in this article are to outline and explain how these and related thoughts worked their way into a public intellectual position, and to provide a synoptic account of how Lady Eastlake addressed the nature, character and qualities of early Florentine art.

Before I consider Lady Eastlake’s revelatory encounters with what she called the «true pre-Raphaelites», I want to briefly introduce Lady Eastlake (fig. 1) and review her dealings with Florentine art prior to 1855. Lady Eastlake was born Elizabeth Rigby in Norwich in 1809. In her youth Miss Rigby wanted to be an artist and was formally tutored by John Sell Cotman, one of the most talented British landscape artists of the nineteenth century. Despite being an accomplished pupil, she en-



1. Lady Eastlake, National Gallery Archive. Credit: © The National Gallery, London.

tered the public world as a woman of letters, rather than as an artist. Her first publication was a translation of Passavant's *Tour of a German Artist in England* in 1836 and in 1841 she edited her letters from a visit to Estonia as *A Residence on the Shores of the Baltic*.⁴ While she was able to include engravings after her drawings in the volumes, she was never to realise her childhood ambition of becoming a professional artist. Nonetheless, by the 1840s she began to write for the «Quarterly Review», one of the most celebrated periodicals of the age, and, by the time of her marriage to Charles Eastlake in 1849, had become a well-known commentator on cultural matters, both national and international. Just a year into their marriage, in 1850, Eastlake was appointed President of the Royal Academy, and, in 1855, he became the first Director

of the National Gallery. Exceptionally, Lady Eastlake accompanied her husband to Downing Street to receive the formal invitation. This set a precedence: Lady Eastlake would be by Sir Charles' side on all but two of his European travels, sharing his packed itinerary of inspecting pictures for the nation and recording their encounters and experiences in her letters. Lady Eastlake only visited Florence on four occasions: October 1855, September/October 1858, September/October 1862 and January 1866. By my calculation, that amounts to 8 weeks in Florence. We can reasonably suppose that her last visit to Florence, which was undertaken solely for the purpose of burying her husband (temporarily as it turned out) in the English (Protestant) Cemetery, was not an occasion for visiting art collections and thus shortens Lady Eastlake's active commerce with works of art in Florence.

Lady Eastlake had seen examples of Florentine art before she saw it *in situ* and at scale. The National Gallery had «specimens», as her husband called them, and European picture galleries had assorted panels in their collections. On her first tour of continental Europe as the wife of Sir Charles Eastlake in 1852 she was especially drawn to the early Italian pictures in Berlin which, she reported «have spoilt my eye for the late masters; their forte was expression, every element beautiful as contributing to that, but none claiming attention for itself. I had no idea that the Pre-Raphaelites could have given me such intense pleasure».⁵ Some readers might be surprised to find out that her sentiment, which implied that there was at once a pictorial unity and authenticity of character in early Italian art, was in keeping with that proposed by John Ruskin, for whom such art marked the pinnacle of artistic honesty and ethical purity. It should be pointed out that Lady Eastlake's «intense pleasure» in the art of the *quattrocentisti* was given added dimension on their 1854 tour of North Italy, when she reported: «The different schools of painters, which clustered in the North of Italy – Milanese, Bergamese, Brescian, Paduan, and Venetian – are now getting disentangled in my mind, and I begin to know their differences and affinities».⁶ Not the comment of a connoisseur, as might be inferred, but rather a comment that reveals her incremental education in the history of art.

Lady Eastlake had a formative, albeit proxy, experience of Italian art at the Crystal Palace in 1854. The original glass structure, constructed for the famous 1851 Great Exhibition, was reassembled at Sydenham in South London as an exhibition venue. The reconstructed Crystal Palace was here divided into a series of courts that recreated European and Middle Eastern architectural beacons along with casts after

famous sculptures. Lady Eastlake was especially drawn to the Italian Court and the Renaissance Court. In the former a replica of the upper arcade of the Farnese Palace, Michelangelo's Tomb of Lorenzo de Medici and sculptures by Bernini jostled for the viewer's attention (fig. 2).⁷ There were also 132 copies of Old Masters in reduced watercolour images, 17 of which were labelled as Florentine School.⁸ Yet it was the sculpture that gave her the most pleasure, as seen in a letter to Ruskin's wife, Effie, where she proclaimed:

I do not hesitate to say that that is the most enchanting place that ever has been devised by man [...] There are pleasures for all, but to me the Italian Court was like going to Italy. I saw much sculpture from Genoa & Pavia & Florence as gave me the same sensations of intellectual delight as a first rate picture gallery.⁹

We should pay close attention to the phrase «sensations of intellectual delight» since it seems to indicate a general receptiveness to innovation in forms of artistic expression rather than sensuous pleasure for its own sake.

We are fortunate that Lady Eastlake produced an assured and detailed account of the exhibition for the «Quarterly Review». Before I turn to her account of the Renaissance Court, it is worth indicating how she opens her review article, which focuses on the entrance to Crystal Palace:

we are wafted into a region [...] more dreamlike than anything which even fond memory had retained of the past. More than ever we are astonished at the space



2. Philip Henry Delamotte, *Monument to Lorenzo de' Medici, Italian Court (north side), Crystal Palace, Sydenham, London, 1854*. Photograph. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Credit: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

which lies dim and mysterious before us – more than ever do we wonder at the quantity, not of fire, but of air, which this modern Prometheus has stolen from on high – and still more in character with the unearthly vision are the objects that meet the eye. No sign, at least at first, of the working-day-world here – no angular machinery, uncouth raw material, or gaudy manufactured wares – no things of use only, but not of beauty – but just that mixture of nature and art which gives fresh beauty to each.¹⁰

This is not the place to attempt a systematic survey of the matters addressed in this perceptive notice, but it is important to stress that these opening remarks paint a picture of a dynamic environment, a living space which forges powerful relationships between separate experiences. What Lady Eastlake described, in considerable detail, is an open domain where objects are brought together rather than categorised. What we see here is how art, woven into the everyday experience of life, becomes a monument to modern sensibilities and practices. Likewise, it was the assertiveness of Italian sculpture which she felt obliged to acknowledge when discussing the casts in the Renaissance Court:

The fact that sculpture was as much the art of the fifteenth as painting of the sixteenth century has not been admitted into the average standard of the knowledge of art; nor was it to be wondered at while nothing short of a journey to Italy itself could, till now, introduce us to such men as Donatello and Luca della Robbia, nor in any way show their connexion with the standards of high art in painting which have succeeded them.¹¹

It is only by simulating an Italian environment, she implied, that the British critic was in a position to realise that sculpture and painting shared approaches, practices and ideals. At the same time, she proposed that these art forms did not evolve simultaneously: «the marvel rather is how the feeling which inspired Donatello, born in 1383, should not sooner have been followed by the feeling which inspired Raphael, born in 1483. Not only are the purity and beauty of the Raphaelesque outline and composition anticipated in these exquisite flat reliefs peculiar to Donatello, but much of the naïveté of expression also».¹² In her view, the study of sculpture should not focus on a set of external features; it required a sensitivity to the rendering of «feeling», the expression of human experience. Naturally, Sir Charles Eastlake would not have been able to make a case for a purchase based on its drive towards «feeling», but Lady Eastlake's account of sculpture was in accordance with his developmental model of art history as realisation of human character. In presenting her exposition of the sovereignty of sculptural expression, she was acutely aware of the strongly contrasting conventions at

work in painting. She contended that sculpture had a relative freedom to pursue «that ease of movement and grouping which constitutes the picturesque», in large part because there were «strict ecclesiastical laws which laid traditional fetters upon the sister art [painting]». At this point she referred to Luca della Robbia's *cantoria*, which exhibited the properties and characteristics that allowed the plastic arts to surge ahead of the pictorial arts: «the solemnity of an ecclesiastical act in those tender white-robed choristers, and the ardour of musical enjoyment in their eager gestures, the freedom of a pagan fête in those naked children, and the holiness of nature in their hold on their mother's drapery – all instinct with knowledge, beauty, truth, life, and sound».¹³ Here was an aesthetic realm in which there were no impediments to the pleasure of living in an environment defined by free association and sociable action.

Sir Charles Eastlake had a growing private art collection¹⁴, and it included a Luca della Robbia plaque of the Virgin and Child, present whereabouts unknown, and another relief that he believed to be a Ghiberti.¹⁵ Their attribution to Ghiberti is interesting since it was a cast of Ghiberti's bronze doors that caused Lady Eastlake to construct a reading based on the master-terms of freedom and restriction:

When we look at the ease and grace of Ghiberti's forms and groups, and consider that he was earlier than Fra Filippo Lippi, earlier than Masaccio, earlier even than Fiesole, almost three-quarters of a century earlier than that grand, unformed Titan, Sandro Botticelli – all Florentines like himself, all struggling for the same reality, with the same life around them – one is tempted to conclude that colour must have been an obstruction in art, and not an assistance. Figures move and walk with ease in Ghiberti, which stand still, and that stiffly, in many a painter later than himself.¹⁶

The assertion that colour was an «obstruction» formed part of a broader debate about polychromed sculpture that is beyond the scope of this essay.¹⁷ At this point, however, I want to pick up on Lady Eastlake's telling contrast between «ease» and «stiffness» as markers of different conditions of expression. The Florentine artists, she explained, were united in a common struggle, but the medium dictated the speed of the struggle. In her judgement there were greater restrictions and pressures on painting. If sculpture and painting were on unsynchronised paths to «ease and grace», this allowed her to pair Botticelli («that grand, unformed Titan») with Ghiberti despite their temporal separation. She celebrated the «ease and grace» of Ghiberti and Botticelli's figures because she saw the human figure as the principal carrier of meaning, even in the treatment of divine subjects. It was, in fact, the apprehension of Divine Grace that



3. After Mantegna, *The Circumcision* (detail) from 'The Uffizi Triptych' inscribed: 'Mantegna Oct. 1. 1855'. Pen and ink, over graphite. National Gallery Archive. Credit: © The National Gallery, London.

ensured that the figures created by Ghiberti and Botticelli were independent from subjection to all other external forces.

Companion and Copyist

One of Lady Eastlake's assumed roles as Sir Charles's travelling companion appeared to be as a copyist. She had sketched avidly in her youth and continued to make topographical sketches of the places visited by the couple. There are no known surviving examples of views of Florence, but she took on a new challenge during her European visits with Sir Charles, copying some of the paintings they encountered. By way of illustration, there are several surviving drawings after the Uffizi Triptych from 1855 in an album of her drawings now in the National Gallery, London (fig. 3). In each she has chosen to isolate the

Virgin and Child from Mantegna's panels, all of which assert the structural power of the mother-child motif. By amplifying the tectonic and sculptural features of the Virgin and Child from Mantegna's panels, she asserted the body-centred nature of religious painting. Accordingly, the Uffizi was a perpetual reference point for her copyist practices. In their 1858 tour she enthused:

I am so in love with some of the early pictures in the Uffizi, that I could draw there all day long. Still, I have not done much, as these early masters are so correct and elaborate in drawing, that one must try to be the same when imitating them. Nor is the light enough – that is, in copying a figure from a large picture, which hangs fully high, and can't be unhung: a small picture they take down and put on an easel for me.¹⁸



4. Sketches from Lady Eastlake's Album, The National Gallery Archive. Credit: © The National Gallery, London.

Above: After Bernardino Luini, *The Virgin and Child with background of trelliswork and roses* (*La Madonna del Roseto*), Milan, Brera, inscribed: 'Luini Brera Oct.r 13. 1854'. Pen and ink, over graphite, 17 x 12.7 cm 117.
Below left: After Leonardo, *The Litta Madonna*, now in the Hermitage, St Petersburg, inscribed: 'Milan Sept.r 19. 1855 Casa Litta'. Pen and ink, over graphite, 17 x 12.7 cm 118
Below right: After Boltraffio, *The Virgin and Child* (*The Madonna of the Roses*), now in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan, inscribed: '1. 1 3A w. 1 5 Y * h.' [in pencil] and 'Milan. Sept.r 19. 1855. Casa Litta' [in pen]. Pen and ink, over graphite, 17 x 12.7 cm

The proposed injunction to authenticity of experience by prolonged drawing may have been her way of imagining the copy as vehicle of experience and feeling. Sadly, however, there are no known examples of her drawings from this visit to the Uffizi. Nonetheless, we do get the sense that copying the early masters was in no sense a constraining exercise. Instead, it appeared to combine happiness with a pedagogic need to affirm the characteristic forms of human nature.¹⁹

Given her assertions in 1855 that sculpture had won against painting in the 'struggle for reality', it is interesting to note that there are no surviving examples of Lady's Eastlake's drawings after sculptures in Florence – or elsewhere.²⁰ However, in an album of her drawings there are several copies after Old Master paintings, dated 1854 and 1855, from Milan – each depicting the Virgin and Child. One of these, the disputed Leonardo from the Litta Collection, may also have served as a visual reminder of the painting for her husband. In this instance, Sir Charles had his doubts about the attribution to Leonardo, although their great friend Gustav Waagen was persuaded. Sometimes in his notes, Eastlake wrote «see sketch by 'e'» and thus, in the absence of an engraving or photograph, Lady Eastlake's faithful sketches may have served as a useful *aide-memoire* to his work as Director of the National Gallery (fig. 4).

«True» Pre-Raphaelites

As we have seen, Lady Eastlake was an attentive and enthusiastic participant in scholarly matters, and this enables us to return to the declaration of 1855 that «I am fairly bitten with all the true pre-Raphaelites.» To be sure, the adjective «true» is suggestive and, read in a topical context, could imply that the Victorian Pre-Raphaelites were not «true». The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood formed in 1848 and accrued much public notoriety for their Royal Academy pictures. Some prominent figures recoiled from what they took to be the confusing combination of retrogressive style and everyday subject matter.²¹ However, Lady Eastlake was no enemy of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood *per se* and, in her letters to Euphemia (Effie) Ruskin (later Millais), she often declared her admiration for the work of John Everett Millais, whose early works combined archaic stylisation and generic subject matter.²² In the public sphere, Sir Charles and Lady Eastlake were relatively circumspect in their utterances about Millais and his fellow Pre-Raphaelites. As Avery-Quash and Carleton-Paget have cogently argued, Sir Charles Eastlake's relationship with the Pre-Raphaelites was at once more complicated and yet less oppositional than is of-

ten supposed.²³ Lady Eastlake makes only one public remark on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (and that anonymously) in her review of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* in the «Quarterly Review» of March 1856. In this long and unremitting attack on Ruskin, she remarks: «And here we may refer to that mis-called pre-Raphaelite school, we have hitherto forborne to criticise – their merits being, in our judgment, great, and their faults sufficiently censured by Mr. Ruskin's praise».²⁴ The fact that Lady Eastlake thought the «pre-Raphaelite school» (Brotherhood) was mis-called is germane and simultaneously confirms and confounds her designation of «true» Pre-Raphaelites in 1855. But before consigning her remark to a mere barb we should contextualise the letter in which her remark was contained. This passage originated in a letter likely written to her mother.²⁵ Mrs Rigby (Lady Eastlake's mother) received regular reports from her daughter, especially during her trips abroad and these were animated by Lady Eastlake's inimical commentary. Mrs Rigby may have followed the press reports on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and may have been able to pick up on her daughter's reference to true Pre-Raphaelites as an impish observation on the saga surrounding the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. However, it seems just as straightforward to read the remark about the true Pre-Raphaelites as simply a higher order of quattrocento painters: those whom Lady Eastlake would always call «the Great Four».

«The Great Four»

In 1858 Lady Eastlake was able to deepen her appreciation of Florentine art when spending three weeks alone in the city.²⁶ Writing to her friend Sara Austen she declared:

you will be surprised to hear that I am alone now in Florence. Sir Chas having left me just a fortnight ago for a round of remote places which he kindly judged would be too rough work for me. I have had many things to see for Sir Chas in his absence & it is very delightful to have time also to mature one's impressions of certain masters. I have many new loves among the painters, & fortunately in the art world it is not necessary to be off with the old before you are on with the new. I have all Vasari too with me, & pore over him of evengs²⁷

We note the air of self-assurance arising from her independent study of art works. At the same time, she insists that she is still learning about Florentine art. It is worth stressing that she always regarded herself as an autodidact and it is revealing that she programmed her continuing self-education by drawing during the day and reading Vasari in the evening. Although Lady Eastlake does not name the



5. «Punch», January-June 1848, p. 197. Credit: Internet Archive.

«many new loves» here, a letter penned shortly before this second visit to Florence gives us a strong indication of who those masters were. In July 1858 Lady Eastlake advised a friend visiting Florence «to try and fill your heart especially with the grandeur and earnestness of the great four – Sandro Botticelli, Dom. Ghirlandajo, Fra Filippo Lippi, and his son Filippino Lippi».²⁸ Indeed the Eastlakes' private art collection contained examples of works by, or attributed at the time to, the «great four».

Many distinguished writers on the arts saw this attitude as evidence of critical imposture. We might speculate about the contexts which may

have prompted these disputes and controversies, but it is more fruitful to provide an example of the critical discourse applied to early modern art. In a well-known notice the eminent French poet, dramatist and critic Theophile Gautier memorably dismissed the taste for early Italian art: «You must be mad, or German, to prefer the gaunt cut-outs of Ghirlandaio or Bizzamano to Correggio's Dianas and Ledas. The former are merely laughable barbarities, valuable as curiosities, like tomahawks or the loin-cloths of savages, while the latter are masterpieces of genius, observation, and science».²⁹ It was impossible, Gautier insisted, for any sensible person to imagine that they could write feelingly about objects that did not have the capacity to convey human empathy in pictorial form. By contrast, Lady Eastlake's sympathies were with the «mad or German» contingent. Her art expertise, at least in 1855, was based on Germanic writing (recall she did not read Vasari until 1858). She had translated Passavant, Kugler and Waagen and, as Caroline Palmer has written, «it was [her] linguistic expertise and key friendships with German artists, writers and curators that enabled [her] to contribute so imaginatively to this nineteenth-century transformation in taste».³⁰

One way of approaching the alteration of taste noted by Palmer is by attending to a cartoon from «Punch» entitled *High Art and the Royal Academy* in 1848.³¹ This inventive image lampoons the modern cult of what is dubbed a 'Angelico-Pugin' rendition of history painting by staging a confrontation between what purports to be a neo-medievalist design and a body-centred High-Renaissance design (fig. 5). The pictorial terms of battle are evident: the Michelangelesque style is muscular and kinetic, the neo-medievalist style is flaccid and inert; the Michelangelesque style is dramatic and rhetorical, the neo-medievalist style is stilted and confused; the Michelangelesque style implies the world is shaped by human action; the neo-medievalist style implies that life is automatic. In short, the cartoon and the accompanying article were designed to illustrate how the true workings of power at the Royal Academy were designed to favour art forms devoid of the commanding powers associated with traditional academic painting. The world of heroic human individuals, we are informed, is being replaced by abnormal specimens and robotic forms.

We do not know if Lady Eastlake was aware of this modelling of neo-medievalist art, but she would have rejected the picture it presents of human subjects devoid of social feeling, a quality she praised when reflecting on early modern painting. More broadly, prominent commentators, such as John Steegman and Francis Haskell, placed her «at

the vanguard of well-informed taste»³² with a «readiness to appreciate, what was [...] generally considered to be [...] beyond the average range of approval».³³ She certainly was an early adopter of Botticelli, even though John Ruskin and Walter Pater would later claim bragging rights.³⁴ However, it is interesting that Michael Levey, Director of the National Gallery between 1973-86, in writing about the reception of Botticelli in the nineteenth century described Lady Eastlake as «almost suspiciously *à la mode* in such things».³⁵ His remark rather undermines the «chosen few» thesis and relegates her prescient interest in Botticelli to a conscious desire to be *à la mode*.

It is, perhaps, not surprising to find that Lady Eastlake was interested in both early modern and High Renaissance art or that her appreciation of their methods of pictorial composition underwent critical modification. She spent a considerable part of her Homeric review of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* protecting Raphael from Ruskin catastrophist vision of him and Michelangelo in particular and the High Renaissance period in general. Her withering dismissal of Ruskin – she implied that he was a common hobbyist for whom art appreciation was a subset of a petty worldview – was part of a much bigger attack on the application of associationist psychology to art criticism, specifically the idea that the qualities of the painted image reinforced pleasures derived from external sources.³⁶ By contrast, she maintained, in a key passage of the review, that

a work of art can but hold a certain amount of interest, beyond which the mind of the spectator, its real correlative, though strained to comprehend, cannot be forced to enjoy – a measure undefinable and incalculable in itself but perfectly understood by the painter and the spectator, and which, more than anything else establishes the right sympathy between them. This being accepted as a *law*, we suspect that wherever an art admits of the marriage with another art, or another faculty, the union can only be effected by dividing the field between them; in other words, that the more of art the less of superadded thought will be picture be found capable of containing and *vice versa*.³⁷

There are two points to make here. In the first case, she imagines that the motivations and intentions of the artist are reexperienced by the spectator as agreeable outcomes guaranteed by the laws of a shared language. In the second case, this argument – a modification of Lessing's famous formalist thesis that each artwork develops in accordance with its own critical properties and independent laws – was used to justify the claim that pictorial composition was successful when it was derived from a single thought or principle. It followed that

There is but one form in which the old masters, who were compelled occasionally to address themselves to superstition at the expense of true taste, made the mistake of attempting to combine a number of thoughts, incidents, allusions – call them what we may – in one picture.³⁸

It is telling that the example she gives for this confusion is the representation of The Last Judgement, and that the artist she admonishes is Fra Angelico, not Michelangelo. Two years later, this framework had been altered, however. Visiting St. Peter's in 1858 she found «Art is at its lowest vulgarity, when the artist can only invent things bigger and odder than those before him». For her, Bernini was «the prince of degeneracy». She thought that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel «has that grandeur which will ever distinguish it, though coarse and ungraceful; but the 'Last Judgement' is a daub». The visit to the Sistine Chapel was redeemed when the Eastlakes lowered their gaze to the frescoes by Perugino, Ghirlandaio and Botticelli. They were particularly taken by the frescoes of Botticelli which they judged «to contain every element of art, grace, action, grandeur, splendid colour, and fine landscape, that constitutes the maturity of art».³⁹

These somewhat generic terms – in which the pictorial arts seek to maintain the principle of the unity of expression by avoiding forms and subjects that would darken their powers – would form the critical architecture of *The History of Our Lord* (1864), a book Lady Eastlake co-authored with Anna Jameson, who had died in 1860. In this double-volume publication she held fast to her «great four», invoking Sandro Botticelli, Domenico Ghirlandajo, the Lippi as beacons of an elevated spiritual consciousness.⁴⁰ *The History of Our Lord* reflected on «one of the magnificent frescoes [...] in the Sistine Chapel, by Sandro Botticelli, which is generally overlooked by those who think themselves bound to admire only Michael Angelo there. Those who appreciate the other great Titan in Art, will find much to admire in the grand conception of Jethro's daughters, and the pastoral beauty of the scene».⁴¹ Lady Eastlake admired Botticelli's understated treatment of biblical subjects. For example, berating other artists for treating the Pieta to a «most unseemly frenzy», she called Botticelli «that painter of Titanic forms and normal emotions [...] has left one of the [...] most passionate conceptions of this subject that exist».⁴²

The impression of such comments is that Botticelli, unlike High Renaissance artists, knew how to render human feeling as complex arrangement of internal forces and external powers. It is undeniable that one of the features in *The History of Our Lord* is the tendency to identify Michelangelo and his followers as fatalists, unable to imagine

human life without disturbing and damaging restrictions of one form or another. The description of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* is a case in point, since the representation of demons bearing the condemned is a scene of «unsurpassable in power» and a subject to which his «tremendous art was most sympathetically applied». That this is no more than a back-handed compliment indicating that Michelangelo was addicted to subjects that overpower ordinary human experience, and where everything is demonic, is confirmed by the assertion that he gives Christ «a violence and vindictiveness which would have startled the pious [Fra. Angelico]», from whom he borrowed the figure.⁴³ What is unexpected, however, is that *The History of Our Lord* urges its readers to understand High Renaissance painting from Ruskin's perspective. Ruskin claimed, in *Modern Painters*, that medieval artists subordinated art to theological facts whereas High Renaissance artists used theology as a vehicle for the mere display of the power of art. This sentiment – in which technical accuracy replaces spiritual honesty – is repeated in *The History of Our Lord*, which declares that «art expanded in material form [but] degenerated in sentiment». Hence, «the office of angels became more burdensome or more frolicsome. Instead of the mere typical forms of our Lord's suffering, a cross large enough to have borne Him and a column of equal dimensions are hoisted into the air, either to their evident entombment or to their boisterous delight. Both effects are visible in Michael Angelo's *Last Judgement*».⁴⁴ Lady Eastlake takes it to follow that there was a crucial difference between early and High Renaissance: «mature Art [...] overlooks the capacities of a subject and frequently employs its better technical skill to degrade rather than raise it. Early Art, however limited its conditions, has always the vindication of a close adherence to Scripture».⁴⁵ There was no confusion between theological facts and human living for medieval artists, and so Fra Angelico «stands foremost in beauty of feeling» and treats his subjects with «the most reverential reality».⁴⁶ In Botticelli's *Lamentation* she praised the way that «Grief here only beautifies these faces [...] such is its tremendous truth, that we care not how it distorts them».⁴⁷ Filippino Lippi's rendering of the same subject as of «the highest spiritual expression and pathos».⁴⁸ In each case, the artist finds human truth in the relationship between the Divine and the diurnal world.

Towards Five Great Painters

Up to this point, Lady Eastlake has been present as the wife of the Director of the National Gallery, but she was also the wife of the Presi-

dent of the Royal Academy. She was literally and figuratively wedded to the cause of improving the national school of art by examples from the National Gallery collection. The Eastlakes had their differences, to be sure: Sir Charles Eastlake leaned towards the Venetian School for his exemplars and Lady Eastlake the Florentine.⁴⁹ But they were united in their belief that the works of the great Italian painters were lode-stars for the national school of art. In the *Crystal Palace* review Lady Eastlake reflected the broader educational mission of the exhibition of 1854, namely, to improve the standards of British art and manufacture by the example of the Italian Renaissance:

Whether we be ever intended for a great, creative people in the way of art is a question that does not belong here; but meanwhile, the great old masters are fulfilling their boundless mission to a people they know not of; and it is not too much to say that Raphael and Titian are ours by right of a far higher worship and more intelligent knowledge than they ever found in their fellow countrymen.⁵⁰

This startling claim that the great Old Masters were «ours by right» brings us back to Lady Eastlake's letter of 1855 in which she talks of «rescuing some examples». The works were «examples», in the sense that they were specimens, but they were also 'examples' in the sense that the national school of painters could learn from them. But rescuing examples required great effort as she reported to a friend, following her first visit to Florence:

We saw precious things perished and perishing, which the government won't save themselves and yet won't allow others to rescue. With our tastes now stimulated for the great old Florentines it is doubly hard that it should be so difficult to rescue them.⁵¹

Lady Eastlake believed that «Modern Florentines are so degenerate that they think far more of a Carlo Dolci, or a Sassoferrato, than they do of their really great masters».⁵² Harsh, perhaps, but Lady Eastlake was at her husband's side during many deliberations about a potential purchase and she often amplified his feelings in her own, unfiltered reactions. She also found it difficult not to try and assist her husband, sometimes without his knowledge, in his professional life. In 1855 Eastlake was refused an export licence by the Tuscan Government for a Ghirlandaio that he had purchased in Florence. During the protracted but unsuccessful negotiations for the purchase of a Ghirlandaio painting, Lady Eastlake tried to sway matters with one of the Italian officials, writing «I went to see good old Count Buonarrotti [who] kindly said he would do his best» in the purchase of the Ghirlandaio.⁵³ Note

the first-person singular. We do not know if Lady Eastlake was acting on her husband's instructions – or if Eastlake thought his charming wife would be irresistible to the old count – but it is just as likely that she took a unilateral decision to try her luck. In the end, Eastlake found it easier to export pictures from Northern Italy, where the occupying Austro-Hungarian powers took a more lenient view of sales of art. Hence most of his Florentine artists were purchased elsewhere – for example, the Fra Angelico paintings he managed to secure were bought in Rome or Milan.

Conclusion

Lady Eastlake's appreciation of early Florentine art was, as I hope to have shown, grounded in its confrontation with the world of human feeling. *Five Great Painters* was Lady Eastlake's first solo authored book to be published in her own name when she was almost 74 years old, offering her mature and decisive thoughts on Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian and Dürer. None of the «great four» featured in *Five Great Painters*. As we have determined, Michelangelo had been decidedly outside her canon in the 1850s. She always admired Raphael, whose *Sistine Madonna* in Dresden was, she thought «the most beautiful picture in the world».⁵⁴ But then *Five Great Painters* was not a handbook of paintings, instead it was a book about value based on the 'character' of the artist. In a moralising account of art, she emphasised each artist's struggle with human corruption in the exercise of what she called «genuine individual character».⁵⁵ Reviving her formulations for the «great four» in the «five great», Lady Eastlake zoomed in on the life and works of the single artist, with a form of home-grown empirical Protestantism, which highlighted how the innovative artist found grace in the natural world through observation of human character and human relationships.

To conclude then, Lady Eastlake was not the only vector for the appreciation of early Florentine art in the English reading world. However, she was an early adopter – prefiguring more fashionable aesthetic interests in the 1870s and beyond. As I hope to have shown, Lady Eastlake did not make early Italian art fashionable, but she did lay out the terms on which the public might appreciate it. By asserting the value of scriptural adherence coupled with an appreciation of early Florentine figure painting, she shifted the public attention away from what might be called formulaic religious productions by picturing the humanity of the depicted situation.

¹ See Susanna Avery-Quash & Julie Sheldon, *Art for the Nation: The Eastlakes and the Victorian Art World*, National Gallery and Yale University Press, London, 2011. For a discussion of Charles Eastlake's acquisition of early Tuscan paintings in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, see Susanna Avery-Quash's contribution in this issue.

² Charles Eastlake Smith, ed., *Journals and Correspondence of Lady Eastlake*, 2 vols, John Murray, London, 1895, vol. 2, p. 89.

³ Ivi, vol. 2, p. 76.

⁴ Subsequent editions were entitled *Letters from the Shores of the Baltic*, 2 vols, John Murray, London, 1842.

⁵ Smith, *Journals*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 285–6.

⁶ Smith, *Journals*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 24–5.

⁷ John Kenworthy-Browne, *Plaster casts for the Crystal Palace*, Sydenham, «Sculpture Journal», 15, 2 <https://doi.org/10.3828/sj.15.2.2>

⁸ M. Digby Wyatt & J.B Waring, *The Italian Court in the Crystal Palace*, John Burley, London, 1854.

⁹ Letter to Euphemia Ruskin, 8 July 1854, in Julie Sheldon, ed., *The Letters of Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2009, p. 161.

¹⁰ Anon. [Elizabeth Eastlake] *The Crystal Palace*, «Quarterly Review», 96 (March 1855), pp. 303–354, p. 305.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 330.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Ivi, p. 331.

¹⁴ See Susanna Avery-Quash, «A gallery of art»: Fresh light on the art collection of Sir Charles Eastlake (1793–1865), «British Art Journal», XV, 3, Spring 2015, pp. 11–37.

¹⁵ The work that the Eastlakes believed to be by Ghiberti is now attributed to Luca della Robbia, *The Virgin and Child with Six Angels*, now in the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, CA.

¹⁶ Lady Eastlake, *Crystal Palace*, cit., p. 332.

¹⁷ See, for example, Kenworthy-Browne, *Plaster Casts*, cit.

¹⁸ Smith, *Journals*, cit., vol. 2, p. 102.

¹⁹ Notwithstanding those adjustments that the Uffizi made to facilitate access, she also had to content with poor lighting, wall placement and sometimes she also had to contend with the restrictions that, for example, prevented women from being in certain sacred spaces, such as the choir of the Certosa di Pavia where she had to peer at the «forbidden ground» through the grilles of the lady's corner. See *Journals*, cit., vol. 2, p. 63. It is also worth pointing out that she required special dispensation to copy a miniature in San Marco, Florence. See Smith, *Journals*, cit. vol. 2, p. 172.

²⁰ This may be purely practical – for Eastlake was not collecting sculptures for the nation. It may also reflect the gendered lines along which drawing after sculpture (usually antique sculpture) was a routine part of training for artists enrolled in academies of art. Copying after canonical paintings became a more informal route for training women artists. See, for example, Paul Duro, *Copyists in the Louvre in the Middle Decades of the Nineteenth Century*, «Gazette des Beaux-Arts», April 1988, CXI1, pp. 249–53 and Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art*, New Haven & Connecticut, 2000; and Cristiano Giometti, Loredana Loriccio e Cinzia Maria Sicca, eds, *La fabbrica della copia. Firenze e Napoli fra Settecento e Ottocento*, Carocci, Roma, 2023.

²¹ For a contemporary view see Ralph Nicholson Wornum, *Epochs of Painting*, 2nd edn, Chapman & Hall, London, 1859, p. 56. For a succinct discussion of the complex reworkings of pre-Renaissance art by the Pre-Raphaelites see Paul Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005, pp. 9–29.

²² See Sheldon, *Letters of Lady Eastlake*, pp. 172, 390, 405.

²³ Susanna Avery-Quash & James Carleton-Paget, «A Few Suggestive Sentences, as Pregnant as They Are Unobtrusive»: Sir Charles Eastlake and the Pre-Raphaelites, «The British Art Journal», 13, 2, 2012, pp. 3–18. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43490533>. Accessed June 2026.

²⁴ Anon. [Elizabeth Eastlake], *Modern Painters*, «Quarterly Review», 98 (March 1856), p. 429.

²⁵ Most of the correspondence in the *Journals and Correspondence of Lady Eastlake*, written before 1872, was taken from letters written to her mother.

²⁶ Lady Eastlake writes: «Florence is a thing by itself, I was once left alone there for 3 weeks & never enjoyed myself more – drawing every morn'g at the Uffizi». ALS to Miss Ashton 5 May 1889, NG Collection.

²⁷ Letter to Mrs Austen 26 Sept 1858 in Sheldon, *The Letters of Lady Eastlake*, cit., p. 159.

²⁸ Smith, *Journals*, cit., vol. 2, p. 89.

²⁹ Cited in Robert Snell, *Théophile Gautier, a Romantic Critic of the Visual Arts*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982, p. 133. [Originally in *Le Cabinet de lecture*, 9 April 1836].

³⁰ Caroline Palmer, «A fountain of the richest poetry»: Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Eastlake and the Rediscovery of Early Christian Art, «Visual Resources», 2017, pp. 48–73. p. 66. See also Julie Sheldon, *Lady Eastlake, Gustav Friedrich Waagen, and the Ethos of Kindred Connoisseurship*, in *Il mestiere del conoscitore. Gustav Friedrich Waagen, Charles Lock Eastlake*, a cura di Neville Rowley, Bologna, 2025, pp. 107–120.

³¹ The cartoon appeared in «Punch», January–June, 1848, p. 197. For a treatment of the scholarship and critical engagement covered in this section see Christopher S. Wood, *A History of Art History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2019, pp. 196–266.

³² John Steegman, *The Eastlakes and Lord Lindsay*, «The Listener», 14 July 1949, pp. 61–2, p. 62.

³³ Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion, and Collecting in England and France*. Ithaca, NY, 1976, p. 20.

³⁴ Adrian S Hoch, *The Art of Sandro Botticelli through the Eyes of Victorian Aesthetes*, in *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Lene Østermark-Johnsen and John Law, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005.

³⁵ Michael Levey, *Botticelli and Nineteenth-Century England*, «Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes», 23, 3/4, 1960, pp. 291–306. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/750597>. Accessed June 2026, p. 295.

³⁶ On this matter see Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982, pp. 54–57.

³⁷ Anon. [Elizabeth Eastlake], *Modern Painters*, cit., 391–392.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 399.

³⁹ Smith, *Journals*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 108–9.

⁴⁰ Anna Jameson & Elizabeth Eastlake, *The history of Our Lord as exemplified in works of art: with that of His types; St. John the Baptist; and other persons of the Old and New Testament*, John Murray, London, 1865, vol. 1, p. 52.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 17.

⁴² Ivi, p. 230.

⁴³ Jameson & Eastlake, *The history of Our Lord*, vol. 2, pp. 411, 408.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 404.

⁴⁵ Jameson & Eastlake, *The history of Our Lord*, vol. 1, p. 113.

⁴⁶ Jameson & Eastlake, *The history of Our Lord*, vol. 2, p. 16 and p. 76.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 231.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 185.

⁴⁹ The factual bedrock on which much Eastlake scholarship rests remains, David Robertson, *Sir Charles Eastlake and the Victorian Art World*, Princeton University Press, 1978.

⁵⁰ Lady Eastlake, *Crystal Palace*, cit., p. 311.

⁵¹ Letter to Mr Harford 2 Jan 1856 in Sheldon, *The Letters of Lady Eastlake*, cit. p. 176.

⁵² Smith, *Journals*, cit., vol. 2, p. 90.

⁵³ Ivi, pp. 74–5.

⁵⁴ Smith, *Journals*, cit., vol. 1, pp. 150 and 191. For the Sistine Madonna comment, see, Anon. [Lady Eastlake], *Giovanni Morelli: Patriot and Critic*, «Quarterly Review», 143, July 1891, p. 252.

⁵⁵ Anon. [Elizabeth Eastlake], *Five Great Painters: Essays Reprinted from the Edinburgh and Quarterly Review*, London, 1883, 2 vols., vol 2, p. 129.