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Renaissance Italy in Mediterranean Networks: The Impact of Islam on Italian Identity

My dissertation explores cross-cultural interactions between Italy and other Mediterranean cultures during the early modern period (c.1350-1600). This project will highlight the interconnectedness and reliance of Italian polities on bordering cultures for crafting their own local identities through a nuanced consideration of cross-cultural interaction between various early modern Italian sites and Ottoman and North African cultures. This project builds on recent scholarship that expands the Italian Renaissance through re-examining geographic and cultural peripheries, and places Italian artistic developments within larger global networks. This scholarship, however, has primarily considered the role of contemporary, external cultures on Italian art as a mutually beneficial movement of objects when many forms of contact were antagonistic at best. This dissertation will help expand scholarship by integrating sites in Southern Italy, which have been largely overlooked, into the ongoing discourse of "Global Renaissance." My dissertation argues that the various forms of contact and appropriation of other cultures was a major part of artistic development during the early modern period, though one that demands consideration of the local idioms in which it manifests. This project emphasizes the multi-faceted nature of the Italian Peninsula during the early modern period to articulate the diverse modes of identity and identity formation articulated through cultural production in various sites impacted by cross-cultural exchange: Venice, Otranto, Palermo (Sicily), and Naples.

Chapter 1 examines how Venice selectively engaged with the cultural heritage of sites like Crete and Venetian Dalmatia, and the divergent modes in which Venice utilized cultural products as a means of enacting control and demarcating its presence throughout the Adriatic. This will then lead to a consideration of sites in Puglia in Chapter 2, where Venice directly and indirectly controlled cities that were nominally part of the Kingdom of Naples, as manifested in paintings created in the region. However, when the Ottomans invaded Otranto in 1480, Venice refused to intervene and Puglia's cultural identity shifted, echoing Neapolitan style as well as establishing local modes of examining Ottoman and North African culture with attention to inland versus coastal responses. This mode of interaction with Islamic culture stands in stark contrast to that of Sicily as examined in Chapter 3. A city like Palermo inherited many buildings from its Arabic and Norman phases which remained in use centuries later. Sicily was a vibrant source of Renaissance artistic production that was in direct dialogue with sites like Rome and Florence, where artists were actively looking for inspiration in antiquity, and this chapter will explore how local Sicilian artists and patrons engaged with this aspect of their own history. Chapter 4 will examine how and why Naples consciously brought in geographically diverse works and artists to assert its financial and commercial reach, especially as it related to the painted depiction of foreign goods. Beyond considering the trans-cultural collecting practices of Naples in its identity formation, I will also examine the porous nature of identity within the early modern Mediterranean by focusing on the Ottoman-born Visconti de Sayd, son of Sultan Mehmet II who invaded Otranto just fifteen years earlier.