
Everything about this monumental work, which itself might be considered a photographic objet d’art, is super-sized. Its dimensions are 11.2 x 1.3 x 13 inches and it weighs in at 5.2 pounds. We should be extremely grateful to Abbeville Press for translating this huge, beautiful book for an English-language audience as it was originally published in 2011 in Italian.

The introduction, by editor Luca Trevisan, is a brief chronology of the century-and-a-half lifespan of the art of wood intarsia, which flourished mostly within Italy, first in ecclesiastical settings. Eventually the elaborate art, consisting of intricate wood pieces inlaid upon sacred architectural niches, including choir stalls, spread as a decorative medium to the studioli (private study areas), of rich and powerful politicians such as the Duke of Urbino. Numerous Renaissance woodworking guilds trained apprentice artists in the art/craft of wood intarsia. These artists were required to develop a sophisticated knowledge of the coloration, density, and texture of wood from various tree species, an ability to create a design, often with the help of a painter’s “cartoon,” as well as learning to cut, cure, size, and finish the wood pieces for an intarsia project.

Renaissance Intarsia: Masterpieces of Wood Inlay, is arranged into three major parts: “Nature and Ideal: The Birth of Perspectival Intarsia in the Quattrocento,” “The Triumph of Perspective: Intarsia at the Birth of the Cinquecento;” and “Light, Shadow and Desegno: The Evolution of Intarsia in the Cinquecento.” These parts divide into eleven chapters, each written by an art or architecture historian. A final chapter provides an overview of the techniques of wood intarsia. The work concludes with an extensive, chronologically-arranged bibliography in which the first three citations are books dating from the sixteenth century. Most works cited are written in one of several European languages, with only a handful in English.

Although the book’s narrative targets art and architecture scholars, it will also appeal to those who have visited the surviving architecture of Renaissance Italy or viewed an exhibit of Italian Renaissance painting, sculpture, or architecture. The now somewhat obscure art of wood intarsia intersects parts of all three of these genres. Large photographic color plates, contributed by noted Italian photographer Luca Sassi, are gorgeous and will appeal to anyone interested in Renaissance art/architecture.

As one of very few English language titles addressing Renaissance wood intarsia, this book belongs in the collections of university libraries and museums supporting art and architectural history curricula. It should also be considered by public and specialized libraries able to afford this rather expensive, though very high-quality, product.

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