Introduction

The Art of Embassy: Situating Objects and Images in the Early Modern Diplomatic Encounter

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In a chapter published in the 2000 volume *The Diplomacy of Art*, Anthony Colantuono suggested that works of art, particularly monumental oil paintings and sculpture, could play a salient role in the delicate negotiations that comprised European diplomatic relations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rather than being peripheral accessories to political action, objects could ease the terms of negotiation or present subtle and sensitive messages, even rebukes, which could only be communicated through the veils of allegory and rhetoric. As such, a work of art, when given as a gift or offered during a tense moment of political uncertainty, could be an “instrument of diplomatic persuasion, even of seduction” and thus function effectively as a “mute diplomat,” relying upon shared codes of visual communication.1

Over fifteen years later, Colantuono’s proposals continue to hold resonance, for they suggest that art and material objects should be understood as central to the project of early modern diplomacy, rather than being dismissed as frivolous items subject to the de-politicized whims of collectors. As Colantuono has shown, narrative images were complex go-betweens that worked effectively because they could suggest divergent meanings or varied intentions to their...

* This volume was initially inspired by a panel entitled “The Art of the Gift: Theorizing Objects in Early Modern Cross-Cultural Exchange,” held at the Annual Meeting of the College Art Association in New York in February 2013, organized by Nancy Um and Leah Clark. The editors of this volume wish to recognize those who spoke on the original panel, many of whose articles are featured here, in addition to the generous colleagues who participated enthusiastically in the discussion that followed it, all of which helped to guide the present endeavor.

givers and receivers, while deftly operating within the language of cross-cultural politesse. By locating diplomatic art within this dynamic locus of exchange and meaning, Colantuono aptly set the stage, and perhaps even presaged, John Watkins’ later call for a “new diplomatic history,” as a theoretically engaged and wholly interdisciplinary revival to this long-standing and generally conventional field of study.2

The present volume builds on Colantuono’s theorizations, an influential contribution to that forerunning volume of 2000,3 while also responding to Watkins’ invitation, by asserting that visual and material approaches should be located at the center of the study of early modern ambassadorial exchange, which was always undergirded by the transfer of objects and often represented (or imagined) in pictorial form. By privileging objects of exchange as crucial and active tools of cross-cultural mediation and communication, while also looking closely at visual representations of encounter, the articles in this volume collectively make the case that a patently visual and material approach offers a productive path to pursue a new diplomatic history that is synthetically, rather than cosmetically, interdisciplinary.

The essays that follow eagerly adopt Colantuono’s commitment to more fully theorizing the role of objects in diplomatic exchange, but they do so while also considerably opening up the corpus of material considered beyond the expected scope of monumental works in durable materials, such as painting on canvas or sculpture in bronze or marble. Indeed, a whole range of goods appears in the pages that follow: textiles, maps, prints, and tapestries, classes of objects that were much less resilient physically and some more resistant to dense allegorical readings, but even so were quite prevalent media of early modern exchange. Images of the diplomatic encounter are also featured saliently, although these are never taken as transparent documents of events that occurred. Rather, they are seen as mediations, often personal or at least individualized, which provide certain windows into the world of the early modern ambassadorial encounter and therefore must be interpreted carefully.

Moreover, this volume looks at diplomatic encounters that took shape across acknowledged regional borders, rather than remaining within the

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3 Not all of Colantuono’s fellow contributors to the 2000 volume deployed the dynamic interpretational framework that he presented. For an example of the “collecting” paradigm that he was critical of, see Vicente Lleo Canal, “The Painter and the Diplomat,” in *Diplomacy of Art*, 121-50.