LOST AND FOUND

Locating Foundlings in the Early Modern World

edited by
Nicholas Terpstra

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I Tatti – The Harvard University Center
for Italian Renaissance Studies
Via di Vincigliata, 26
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itatti.harvard.edu

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Introduction: Locating Foundling Care in the Early Modern and Modern World

Nicholas Terpstra

The recent six-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Ospedale degli Innocenti provided an opportunity to reflect on the impact of an institution often treated as a pathbreaker, both for its pioneering social service and for its iconic building. Celebrating the Innocenti has often been proxy for celebrating the Renaissance generally and for praising the dynamic mix of idealism, innovation, charity, and civility that animated Florence in the fifteenth century. The lightness of the loggia and the almost whimsical ceramic rondels showing infants in various stages of swaddled dress and undress project a generosity, humanity, and optimism that many associate with the Renaissance in general and the city of Florence in particular.

But nothing is as it seems, or at least as it *has* seemed. Research of the past few decades has brought out the all-too-human aspects of the Innocenti's history, aspects that were often none-too-humane, despite what its founders asserted and its later propagandists proclaimed. Infants died by the hundreds and thousands. Their largely unmarried mothers abandoned them there because they were themselves victims of a sexual economy that considered them marginal and their offspring disposable. Those who survived were drafted into other exploitative economies—boys into day labor and girls into factory-like textile piecework that their patrons in the Silk Guild considered the height of rational charity and marvelously profitable to boot. Those who managed to pass out of the loggia and return to social life in Florence often bore the family name of "Innocenti" as a two-sided badge. It gave them a surrogate kin identity to make up for their lack of an identifiable lineage, yet the name also marked them and their offspring as outsiders who never quite belonged in the city that had fostered them.

These optimistic and pessimistic interpretations both underscore that the Ospedale degli Innocenti was a *lieu de mémoire* whose tensions and contradictions position it at the intersection of current concerns and the core of ongoing scholarly debates and public discussions about child care, Florence, and the

Renaissance. Pierre Nora's broader collaborative project addressed these *lieux* as objects or items that galvanized debates about social meaning, collective identity, human value, and cultural valences and as catalysts for the invention of tradition.[1] Considering the Innocenti not as an iconic building or a historic social institution but as a *lieu de mémoire*, we approached the anniversary with the aim of using it as an opportunity to explore the foundling home's contexts, spaces, historiography, and impact with new questions, approaches, and methods. We aimed to probe more deeply into how these charitable enclosures were employed in Europe's social and global expansion from the sixteenth century and to test how they might function in its collective memory now.

The questions we aimed to pursue were particularly those that probed beyond the walls into the broader cultural and legal contexts shaping family, lineage, illegitimacy, and abandonment. Most accounts of the Innocenti's origins focus on the growing concern among some Florentines who were horrified by the increasing number of infants being abandoned on streets, at doorsteps, and even in the Arno and on the work of the Silk Guild in commissioning a shelter and getting it up and running. This story emphasizes Florentine humanity, civic consciousness, and organizational genius. We wanted to ask about broader contexts and mixed motives among some of the leading figures associated with the Innocenti's early years. Leon Battista Alberti and Filippo Brunelleschi have long been considered exemplars of positive Renaissance rationality, humanity, and self-fashioning. What does Alberti's obsession with his own illegitimate status within a largely hostile or indifferent family tell us about the meaning of these family ties in early humanist thought? He wrote his famous *I libri della famiglia* as the Innocenti's emerging structure was reshaping one of Florence's major piazzas. Do these simultaneous creative actions intersect at all? The structure gains its memorable profile above all from Brunelleschi's loggia, which is never absent from any review of the most important architectural innovations of the Renaissance. Yet what if Brunelleschi's early plans for the Innocenti were more flash than substance—an early case of a starchitect hoodwinking his patrons with a plan that in the end never really "worked," forcing his removal from the project? Alberti and Brunelleschi stand out as early Renaissance innovators who were willing to burst traditional boundaries, and we can see this in their associations around the Innocenti. Yet we can't forget that most Florentines continued to color within the lines. Family life, law, and identity were tightly framed and governed by legal structures, and we should recall that in a period when many of the early humanists were trained and practicing lawyers and notaries, these weren't structures that they

would quickly set aside. As we examine the structures that framed and constructed paternity, legitimacy and illegitimacy, and identity, might they lead us to see the Innocenti's purpose and innovations differently?

We aimed to pursue these questions by focusing on space, materiality, sense, and globality, approaches that have transformed scholarship in the humanities in the past two decades. The spatial turn has moved attention to the physical, sensory, and psychic spaces that institutions such as the Innocenti occupied. Behind Brunelleschi's facade, the spaces of this often reworked building reveal their forms and purposes only very slowly. We know that the early patron Francesco Datini wanted nothing to do with priests and so forbade construction of a chapel. Yet one was built, regardless, to accommodate worship, altarpieces, and tombs. With the space itself, long since lost to later renovations, how might we recreate these settings, uses, and ornaments and understand what social and spiritual values they advanced? How did a foundling home make space for death and memorialization? How did the Ospedale degli Innocenti occupy its immediate neighborhood and engage with those on surrounding streets that were largely vacant when construction began? How did it gradually extend its reach further into the whole city, particularly as it became wealthy enough to become a critical part of the textile economy, one of the city's largest institutional landlords, and a major property developer? The material turn leads us to examine how we might read food and clothing as markers of care, particularly as these intersect with issues around gender and class. The sensory turn takes us beyond purely practical considerations as we consider what messages were conveyed by the feel, cut, and color of a uniform or who might enjoy the taste of a watermelon and when and why. The global turn is newer to Italian Renaissance studies, and moving beyond neighborhood and city can be a challenge in an often intensely local field. Did this quintessentially Italian institution respond to or influence global movements in its approach to foundling care? We can see some diffusion of its institutional form in other venues around the globe; can we reverse this and explore how global parallels help us see new dimensions and meanings in its own development? As we aim to trace the evolving consciousness of race across early modern Europe, we might now reevaluate some of the policies of an institution that obsessed over lineage, legitimacy, and the body. Tuscany has not traditionally been seen as much affected by the global push of Europe's Atlantic nations, yet, like them, it was marked by a frontier, conscious of race, and dependent on slaves to build parts of its early modern economy, cities, and structures.

The spatial, material, sensory, and global turns in Renaissance studies

represent approaches that have opened new directions and put new questions on the agenda. They frequently demand new methods of research and analysis and rely increasingly on digital tools to assemble, manipulate, and analyze significantly larger quantities of data that are assembled by larger teams of scholars. Approaching the Innocenti as a *lieu de mémoire* offers a rare opportunity to promote these research collaborations among digital humanists. They allow us to visualize hidden social and spatial relationships, to recreate built spaces, and to locate this institution not only geographically but demographically and economically. They move beyond traditional approaches not only as intensely collaborative undertakings but also in being largely open-ended, given the sheer volume of materials, the complexity of methods required to process them, and the evolving software applications that allow us to experiment with new conjunctions, comparisons, and visualizations of data. Often evolving, iterative, and multivalent, they may challenge not only the results of earlier research but the very processes by which that research moved forward and was presented in lectures, articles, and monographs.

In considering how to mark the six-hundredth anniversary of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, we wanted to prioritize these new questions, approaches, and methods. We wanted to pick up older questions about the complex and the care offered within it and also explore the broader contexts that might provoke rereadings of administrative documents, with a closer consideration of what was between the lines or even off the page entirely. And beyond that, in aiming to locate foundlings in the early modern world, we wanted to look at the Innocenti both for what it was and for what it represents.

One overarching issue makes it more important to mark this particular anniversary and to look beyond the dynamics of the Innocenti's origin story and local significance. The Innocenti emerged at the beginning of a period when Europeans began to rely increasingly on institutions like it to shelter, govern, repair, or discipline their populations. It has often been considered Europe's first dedicated foundling home. Like all claims to temporal priority, this one quickly becomes stuck in the mud of a tediously competitive *campanilismo*. Yet the Innocenti was definitely among the most resonant of these institutional enclosures for its size, its reach, and its organization. It took in dozens, then hundreds, and eventually thousands of infants as the horizon of expectations around foundling care steadily expanded. It buried a good number of these infants and children as the hard realities of disease and malnutrition cut like a scythe through the sequestered population. It was simultaneously poor and wealthy, a paradox driven by the way Florentines chose

to fund it. While they were so generous with legacies that its accumulated endowment and property portfolio quickly matched and then exceeded those of many far older local hospitals, Florentines were nonetheless parsimonious with the donations that would provide food or clothing to the children abandoned there. Donors supported its built wards more than its human ones. Its captive population made it a labor resource for those who aimed to profit from factory production, while its sunk wealth made it a financial resource for Florentine oligarchs both before the Medici became dukes and increasingly after that point. The Medici exploited, mismanaged, and drove it into bankruptcy. While the Innocenti did not invent the administrative model and language of kinship that turned institutional officials and civic governors into surrogate parents and the wards into symbolic siblings, it refined these to an exceptional degree. While it was not the first to put locks on its doors, gendered signs on its interior spaces, or a wall around the property that extended far beyond that open and welcoming loggia, it did perfect the architectural model of the monastic or conventual enclosure as one that would underscore how *this* family was different from others. And while it was not the only institution to implement the sometimes counterproductive contradictions of Christian charity, its interpretation of foundling care abetted the sexual exploitation of vulnerable women, facilitated the anonymous abandonment of their illegitimate offspring, worked for the complete erasure of these children's identity, and trained them for their reemergence as the model productive citizens of a capitalist economy. The Ospedale degli Innocenti was neither the first nor the worst of the kin-modeled enclosures that would spread across Europe and then out to Europe's colonies around the globe. Yet it sticks in our memory, perhaps because what we see now when looking at it from the outside is largely what a sixteenth-century Florentine would have seen; what we find inside are the voluminous records that Florentines of that and later centuries accumulated as a testimony of pride, spirituality, and paradox. It is a Florentine *lieu de mémoire* that sticks in the global memory.

And what is remembered? These kin-based enclosures institutionalized the double-sided character of protection and punishment that could make the care within them schizophrenic and seriously damage the mental health of those who were raised there. Bernardino Poccetti's memorable 1610 fresco (figs. 8 and 9 in this volume's chapter by Diana Bullen Presciutti) contrasts the regimented care of the home with the murderous chaos of the biblical Massacre of the Innocents which gave the Innocenti its name and spiritual model. Yet Renaissance custodial care had its own victims. By the time Poccetti was

painting, the earlier kin model had broken down to some extent, and the Florentine state, which the artist represented in the form of the benevolent *pater* Grand Duke Cosimo II, had been governing it directly for decades. This kind of transfer happened across Europe, as the confraternities, guilds, and religious orders that had founded charitable homes could no longer manage them, and state authorities gradually increased their supervision. Some historians have seen this as a step in a grand narrative that plots the rise of the state through the early modern period. Yet it was never quite so smooth, since states were often reluctant administrators and financiers, and kin groups and kin forms continued to play a part in running these homes. And as Philip Gavitt and many others have pointed out, in the case of the Innocenti, the tightening grip of the Medici had less to do with advancing the state as a political abstraction than with advancing their personal ambitions as heads of state to control people and resources. More than rational efficiency, this entailed promoting an administration that was in turn committed to promoting the family's shifting strategies for survival.

Through all this, the charitable enclosure for children emerged as a machine of modernity, unapologetic in its goal of retooling abandoned *creaturi* into productive *cittadini*. Europeans embraced the model of the kin enclosure with true missionary zeal for both its religious vision and its practical efficiency, adapting it to residential schools, orphanages, workhouses, and shelters of various kinds. They opened thousands of homes across the continent and in their colonies around the globe. Admittedly, no walls were impermeable, and no institution was total. The majority of those children who needed care or education continued to receive it informally in extended families (the "child circulation" that Joel F. Harrington describes in this volume) or in the overlapping improvisations of Olwen Hufton's "economy of makeshifts." There were more open public schools than closed residential ones in towns and cities. Yet through the early modern and modern centuries, when Europeans prioritized social discipline at home and aimed to rationalize overseas colonization as a civilizing process, institutional shelters were the tools they reflexively employed to "govern" those they took into care, with all the dimensions of protection, punishment, and transformation this implies. The act of taking those children into care might be motivated by need if families broke down. It might be driven by ideology, as happened increasingly when Europeans aimed to subdue and acculturate indigenous peoples. In these latter cases, from the Americas to India to Southeast Asia, these machines of modernity were tools for separating children from their parents, communities, languages, and customs and for

refashioning them to meet Europeans' needs for labor, interpreters, or cultural collaborators.

There are many sad ironies in these homes. They often emerged out of a genuine religious and charitable impulse to help the needy yet often degenerated into places that betrayed those humane and spiritual values. They were intended to promote demographic growth but were often places of death. Their cultural reengineering promoted a Western and Christian family model, yet former wards of a London foundling home, a Canadian indigenous residential school, and the Innocenti itself have said the same thing: being raised in these enclosures left them without the psychological or cultural tools to raise their own families.[2] These survivors struggled to make an emotional connection with their children, since they had been unmoored from their own parents, siblings, and culture and raised by staff or clergy who considered them a project, a job, or an opportunity for exploitation. Violence; mental, physical, and sexual abuse; and substance dependency were rife. Disease, abuse, and neglect continued to kill many of the wards, and in too many cases, they were buried on the grounds without memorialization, markers, or even a notice to their families. By the twentieth century, as reports spread of the horrors being perpetrated in these foundling homes, orphanages, residential schools, and asylums, most of them were closed. Some were repurposed, but others were quickly demolished, as though only their physical erasure could atone and make space for alternatives.

We don't know how much of this was the experience of those raised in the Ospedale degli Innocenti. Yet it was certainly the broader legacy of the experiment in charitable, residential, kin-based enclosure that the Florentine foundling home represented. It's the legacy we need to evaluate as we aim to locate foundlings and foundling care on the six-hundredth anniversary of the Innocenti's opening. The modern Istituto degli Innocenti remains a site dedicated to children, housing a school, a day care, a toy library, the offices of UNICEF, regional and national research centers for the study of childhood and adolescence, and the library, archives, and museum that document the life that took shape within its walls from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries.[3] The recently reorganized Museo degli Innocenti conveys and confronts this past openly and honestly and invites and channels the voices of those raised within the Innocenti. It effectively conveys the humanitarian impulses present at the Innocenti from the beginning, displays mute testimonies of pain such as the tokens left with babies whose mothers hoped they would someday recover, and recounts sobering reminders of the human cost of discipline

and regimentation. Moreover, the wide range of activities carried out at the complex today underscores the fact that the Innocenti is not simply a historic site or an archive but remains a functioning shelter. It has continued to house those in the city who need care, with children fostered there in the 1980s and '90s, migrants welcomed in recent years, and a newly opened set of apartments sheltering abused women and their children.[4]

This project was born and fostered within the environment of the Harvard Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (Villa I Tatti), as a collaboration with the Istituto degli Innocenti. My thanks go to I Tatti director Alina Payne for her invitation and strong support and to the directors of the Istituto degli Innocenti, Stefano Filipponi and Arabella S. Natalini, for their warm and open collaboration. A series of planning discussions led first to a workshop at I Tatti on "Speaking of Foundlings: Contexts of Care at the Ospedale degli Innocenti" (May 9–10, 2019) and then to an international conference at I Tatti and the Innocenti itself on "Common Children and the Common Good: Locating Foundlings in the Early Modern World" (December 9–10, 2019). Thanks are due here to the participants in both events, whose findings, hypotheses, and discussions have informed all of the essays gathered in this volume.

We intended from the beginning to move beyond simply celebrating an anniversary to exploring broader cultural contexts, employing newer methods of analysis, engaging with digital research tools, and presenting new findings. Through this same period, I Tatti has been aggressively expanding its own integrated program of supports for digital scholarship on the Renaissance, with new postdoctoral fellowships, staff positions, dedicated virtual and physical digital hubs, and creation of a consortium—called Florentia Illustrata—to facilitate collaboration among six international digital projects dealing specifically with the art, architecture, spaces, and history of Renaissance Florence. I Tatti had earlier provided space and support for a series of workshops that allowed some of these project teams to move toward collaboration, and the Innocenti project marks the first concrete collaboration that uses each team's distinct digital tools to demonstrate research contributions focused on a single subject.[5] As such, the collaborative framework realized in the Florentia Illustrata consortium is a model demonstrating how distinct digital projects can build a common project and how these digital tools generate new research findings and open new questions for further analysis.

An early and enthusiastic participant in the broader anniversary project was Philip Gavitt, who had been closely identified with the Innocenti for decades as a result of his wide-ranging research into its children, staff, administrators,

and ideologies. Phil shared his findings in lectures, articles, and books, and he shared his learning even more generously as a mentor who freely offered counsel, advice, archival notes, and document scans to those aiming to understand one or another aspect of the Innocenti's Renaissance and early modern history. In his recent work, Phil had been examining medical care in the Innocenti more closely, considering both broader questions around diet and governance and the work of the medical professionals it kept on retainer. At our May 2019 workshop, he discussed his findings on pediatric medicine, diet, and space at the Innocenti. He drew on account books and food purchases to track menus and then compared these with medical texts in order to demonstrate how seriously the institution took the dietary recommendations outlined in pediatric and other medical manuals. He was planning to expand on this at the December conference with more contextual and comparative detail on pediatrics, infant mortality, and public health in Florence and Siena, and with a closer focus on one particular practitioner. The Innocenti's early-sixteenth-century barber-surgeon Maestro Baccio Alberighi had a medical practice that extended to include Giovanni de' Medici and also the staff and inmates of the Florentine prison of the Stinche. His career promised to offer the kind of case study that would allow Phil to reconstruct far-reaching networks of care and patronage that spanned Florence's considerable social divisions. Unfortunately, a fast-moving cancer quite literally silenced Phil before the conference and then took him a few months later. Many of the authors brought together by this project are deeply indebted to Philip Gavitt's scholarship, mentorship, and friendship, and this volume is dedicated to his memory.

Notes

1. Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–1998).

2. Christine Oliver and Peter Aggleton, *Coram's Children: Growing Up in the Care of the Foundling Hospital, 1900–1955* (London: Coram Family, 2000); Philip Gavitt, "The Reinvention of Childhood in Everyday Life: Observations on the Recent Renovation of the Museo degli Innocenti," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 11, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 314–321.

3. Stefano Filipponi, Eleonora Mazzocchi, and Ludovica Sebregondi, eds., *The Museo degli Innocenti* (Florence: Mandragora, 2016).

4. Gavitt, "The Reinvention of Childhood," 314–321. Diana Bullen Presciutti, "The New Museo degli Innocenti, Florence," *IAS Newsletter* (Winter 2017): 4–5.

5. These have included "Italia Illustrata: Digital Mapping and Techniques of Visualizing the Pre-modern Italian City," with the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (June 17, 2013), and "Florentia Illustrata," the consortium's organizing meeting (November 29–30, 2018).

CONTRIBUTORS

Niall Atkinson is Associate Professor of Art and Architectural History at the University of Chicago. He focuses on public space, urban history, soundscapes, geography, and travel, as well as the architecture and urbanism of late-medieval and Renaissance Italy. His research has concerned the relationship between sound, space, and architecture and their role in the construction of pre-modern urban societies. Atkinson's publications include a monograph titled *The Noisy Renaissance: Sound, Architecture, and Florentine Urban Life* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016). His current projects explore digital visualizations of early modern urban soundscapes through GIS technology, as well as the visual and sonic cultures of the Indian Ocean.

Luca Brunke is an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded MPhil/PhD candidate and is working on the collaborative doctoral project "Research-Based 3D Modelling of Renaissance Built Environments" jointly supervised by the University of Exeter and the National Gallery, London. He did an MSc in digital archaeology at the University of Leiden and a BA in archaeology at the University of Tübingen. As a researcher on the Florence4D project, he has carried out 3D scanning and 3D modeling of Renaissance built environments in Florence. He has helped to develop a pipeline for research-based 3D modeling and has provided material for museum exhibits.

Chiara Capulli is an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded PhD candidate in history of art at the University of Cambridge and a predoctoral fellow at the Bibliotheca Hertziana–Max Planck Institut, with a research project that examines the consequences brought by the 1529 Guasto of Florence to the city's artistic and architectural heritage. She received her BA and MA from La Sapienza, Rome, and an MPhil from Cambridge and worked as a research assistant at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence. Alongside her primary research activities, she has developed an interest in the methodologies and possibilities of digital humanities, in which she has provided training to students and professionals in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. As a digital art historian on the Getty-funded Florence4D project, she has carried out art historical research, trained interns, and helped develop a pipeline for research-based 3D modeling and metadata mapping and sharing.

Carmen Jaramillo Caswell is the digital humanities research liaison at the University of Chicago. She assists faculty in using digital technologies and methods to further their humanities research. Her focuses include the creation of text corpora, text processing, optical character recognition, digital mapping, data management, and digital curation. She has also assisted in several Web-based archives and exhibitions, including the South Side Home Movie Project and the Scrolling Paintings Project, and has served on the committee for the Chicago Colloquium in Digital Humanities and Computer Science.

Donal Cooper is Associate Professor in the Department of History of Art at the University of Cambridge. His research focuses on the ecclesiastical art and architecture of medieval and Renaissance Italy, with an emphasis on the reconstruction of historic ritual and devotional settings for artworks. He has explored these concerns through a series of 3D digital visualization projects, most recently as co-investigator of the Florence4D project. His coauthored book with Janet Robson, *The Making of Assisi* (Yale University Press, 2013), won the Art Book prize in 2014.

Joel F. Harrington is Centennial Professor of History at Vanderbilt University. His books include *Dangerous Mystic: Meister Eckhart's Path to the God Within* (Penguin Press, 2018; Siedler Verlag, 2021), which was honored in 2020 with a Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; *The Unwanted Child: The Fate of Foundlings, Orphans and Juvenile Criminals in Early Modern Germany* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), winner of the 2010 Roland Bainton Prize in History; and *The Faithful Executioner: Life and Death, Honor and Shame in the Turbulent Sixteenth Century* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013), which has been translated into fourteen languages and was named one of the Best Books of 2013 by the *Telegraph* and *History Today*.

Daniel Jamison has been an affiliate of the DECIMA project since 2011, first as a graduate student researcher and later as a postdoctoral fellow. He helped lead successive groups of RAs through the transcription, entabulation, and mapping of several early modern censuses from Florence and its dominion. He earned a doctorate from the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto for a thesis on the customs tax of late-medieval Lucca, the *gabella maggiore*, which addressed the wider context of fiscal policy in the republican commune. After completing a postdoctoral fellowship with DECIMA in 2021, he now resides in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he continues to pick away at census material from time to time.

Thomas Kuehn is Associate Professor at the Department of History of Simon Fraser University. His research interests include state formation, governance, governmentality, and knowledge production in the late Ottoman Empire (ca. 1700-1923); culture and imperialism in the late Ottoman Empire (ca. 1700-1923); comparative colonialism in the Modern Middle East (ca. 1700-Present); nationalism, nation-building and culture in the Modern Middle East (ca. 1850-Present). Kuehn's publications include a monograph on *Empire, Islam and the Politics of Difference: Ottoman Rule in Yemen*, 1849-1919 (Brill, 2011).

Anne Leader is Visiting Fellow at the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, where she is developing Digital Sepoltuario, an interactive website that chronicles the memorial landscape of medieval and Renaissance Florence. She holds an MA and a PhD in the history of art and archaeology from the New York University Institute of Fine Arts. She was Rush H. Kress Fellow at the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (Villa I Tatti) in 2008–2009. Her publications include *The Badia of Florence: Art and Observance in a Renaissance Monastery* (Indiana University Press, 2012), the edited collection *Memorializing the Middle Classes in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (De Gruyter, 2018), and contributions to several essay collections and exhibition catalogues. Her articles and reviews can be found in a variety of journals.

Martin McLaughlin was Agnelli-Serena Professor of Italian at Oxford from 2001 to 2017 and is now an Emeritus Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford. He has published widely on Italian literature from the Middle Ages to the present, including *Literary Imitation in the Italian Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 1995), *Italo Calvino* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), and *Leon*

Battista Alberti: La vita, l'umanesimo, le opere letterarie (Olschki, 2016). He has also co-edited volumes on Dante, Petrarch, Alberti, Machiavelli, and others and translated works by Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco. He is currently working on a monograph on Leon Battista Alberti for Princeton University Press.

Fabrizio Nevola is Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at the University of Exeter (UK). His research focuses on urban and architectural history of early modern cities, with particular attention to public spaces in Italy, considered in *Street Life in Renaissance Italy* (Yale University Press, 2020). He has developed digital humanities spatial approaches using geospatial, 3D modeling, and GPS technologies through several grant-funded research projects, including as principal investigator of the Florence4D project. The underpinning research for the "Hidden Florence" and "Hidden Cities" apps has recently been published as *Hidden Cities: Urban Space, Locative Apps and Public History in Early Modern Europe* (Routledge, 2022), edited with Nicholas Terpstra and David Rosenthal.

Caspar Pearson is Senior Lecturer at the Warburg Institute. His work focuses on the art and architecture of the Italian Renaissance, as well as historiography and the afterlives of the Renaissance in later periods. He is the author of two books on the architect and writer Leon Battista Alberti. He is particularly interested in images and writings regarding cities, in the relationship between representation and place, and in Renaissance theories of architecture and urbanism. He also writes about aspects of contemporary architecture and visual culture, especially in relation to the European Union.

Diana Bullen Presciutti is Professor of Art History at the University of Essex (UK). She is the author of *Visual Cultures of Foundling Care in Renaissance Italy* (Routledge, 2015) and *Saints, Miracles, and Social Problems in Italian Renaissance Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). She has published research articles in *Art History*, *Artibus et Historiae*, the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, *Renaissance Quarterly*, and *Renaissance Studies*, as well as several chapters in edited collections. She is also the editor of *Space, Place, and Motion: Locating Confraternities in the Late Medieval and Early Modern City* (Brill, 2017).

Colin Rose is Associate Professor of European and Digital History at Brock University (Canada). He is co-director of the DECIMA project with Nicholas Terpstra. His research focuses on the daily lives of ordinary Italians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially their participation in community politics and their navigation of institutional structures. He has published *A Renaissance of Violence: Homicide in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). His current project is a geospatial examination of Florentine crime and policing under the reign of Cosimo I de' Medici.

Isabel dos Guimarães Sá is Associate Professor of History at the University of Minho, where she teaches early modern European history. She is also a research member of the Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade (CECS) at the same university. She has researched widely in the history of Portugal and its empire from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries and has published several books and articles on the Portuguese confraternities of Misericórdia, as well as biographies of Portuguese Renaissance queens (Leonor de Lencastre, Isabel and María of Castile and Aragon). Her most recent book, *O regresso dos mortos: Os doadores da Misericórdia do Porto e a expansão ibérica (séculos XVII–XVIII)* (Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2018), was awarded the Embaixador João de Deus Ramos prize.

Nicholas Terpstra is Professor of History at the University of Toronto, working at the intersection of politics, religion, gender, and charity. His *Cultures of Charity* (Harvard University Press, 2013) won the Ruth Goodhart Gordan Book Prize of the Renaissance Society of America and the Howard Marraro Prize of the American Historical Association. *Religious Refugees in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) explores exclusion and exile from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries and develops a new paradigm for the Reformation, further explored in two volumes on *Global Reformations* (Routledge, 2019, 2021). He also launched DECIMA (Digitally Encoded Census Information and Mapping Archive), an online digital tool that maps social, sensory, and built environments in Renaissance Florence and other Tuscan cities.

Marvin Trachtenberg is Edith Kitzmiller Professor of Fine Arts at New York University. He has studied how late-medieval and early modern architecture stimulated new perceptions of buildings in their environments, notably in *Dominion of the Eye: Urbanism, Art and Power in Early Modern Florence* (Cambridge University Press, 1997). His work *Building-in-Time: From Giotto to Alberti and Modern Oblivion* (Yale University Press, 2010) recovers and illuminates a lost aspect of the architectural past: the vital dimension of time-as-duration in the design and construction of monumental buildings as a single, fluid, imbricated process. Process was challenged and ultimately upended when Leon Battista Alberti, in keeping with his invention of the architectural author, proposed a new conception in which time and change would ideally be excluded from the making of architecture.

Ann Twinam held the Walter Prescott Webb Chair in History at the University of Texas at Austin (2017–2021). She focuses on histories of gender and race in colonial Latin America and the Spanish Atlantic. Her current project centers on "Gender, Sexuality, Illegitimacy, and Family in the Hispanic Atlantic World: 1476–1800." Her publications include *Miners, Merchants, and Farmers in Colonial Colombia* (University of Texas Press, 1982); *Public Lives, Private Secrets: Gender, Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America* (Stanford University Press, 1999), which gained honorable mention for the Bolton-Johnson Prize (Conference on Latin American History); and *Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattos and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies* (Stanford University Press, 2015), which won the Alfred J. Beveridge Award (American Historical Association), the Bryce Wood Book Award (Latin American Studies Association), the Bolton-Johnson Prize (Conference on Latin American History), and the Bandelier-Lavrin Book Prize (Rocky Mountain Council for Latin American Studies). She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2018.

Spirit-Rose Waite holds a PhD in history from the University of Toronto. Waite's research explores the material, embodied, disciplinary regimes of person shaping carried out in early-sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Tuscan civic-religious institutions, with particular focus on the practical/economic and spiritual/rhetorical implications of contemporary charitable workfare as carried out at institutions such as Florence's Ospedale degli Innocenti and Prato's Misericordia e Dolce.

Angela Zhang has carried out advanced research in medieval and early modern history at York University, Queen's University, and the University of Toronto. She currently holds a postdoctoral fellowship in history at Harvard University. Her work has been supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Renaissance Society of America, the Medieval Academy of America, and the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities. She has also held fellowships at the Centre for Feminist Research and the Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies. Her research focuses on race formations, gender, and enslavement in the European Mediterranean, where the Innocenti plays a key role.