

Art for a New Audience in the Risorgimento: Past and Present Create Future Perfect?

Roberta J.M. Olson, Curator of Drawings, The New-York Historical Society (Professor emeritus, Wheaton College, Norton, MA)

Unlike most nineteenth-century European countries, the Italic peninsula had not enjoyed a single political organization since Roman times. Carved up and occupied by foreign powers, its allegiances were regional. Beginning in the late Settecento, with Napoleon's occupation, and the early Ottocento, the age of nationalism, visual artists and writers helped create an Italian consciousness or identity long before national unification (declaration of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 with the establishment of Rome as the capital in 1870). Responding to the last gasps of the Grand Tour, early ottocento artists produced works that celebrated Roman and Italian history and heroes, literature, and landscape, as well as folkloric scenes of *veri italiani*, *popolani*, and *briganti*. As the international movements of Neoclassicism and Romanticism (e.g., the paintings of Hayez) gave way to an escalating Realism, Italian artists became increasingly involved in liberal politics and the military struggles of the Risorgimento, a fair number fighting under Garibaldi. History painting with nationalistic overtones was supplanted by iconographically encoded genre scenes or contemporary historical themes, such as those of the Macchiaioli and the Induno brothers. As the Risorgimento crescendoed, full-blown commemorations of specific patriotic sentiments, events or individuals, and battles (e.g., those by Fattori) appeared. This panoramic talk will highlight some of these currents that reflect parallel complex, often cataclysmic, social and economic changes. Among them, a shift not only in taste and direction but also in patronage from the Church and the ruling classes to liberal aristocrats, industrial entrepreneurs, and professionals from the upper middle classes. Novel venues outside the old academic system for exhibiting and marketing works of art facilitated these sea changes. The roles played by the *Exposition Universelle* of 1855 in Paris, the rise of the *Promotrici* in various cities, Ricasoli's 1859 competition, and the first *Esposizione Italiana* in Florence in 1861, among others, will be considered. After unification, the institutionalization of nostalgic Risorgimento iconography was accompanied by continuing idealistic searches for social and artistic reform against a difficult backdrop of disillusionment, developing technology, and industrialization.