

The Global City
On the Streets of Renaissance Lisbon

Jordan Gschwend, Annemarie and K. J. P. Lowe eds
London Paul Holberton Publishing 2015
[ISBN: 978190372889]

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Great discoveries such as the one that gave birth to *The Global City* are rare nowadays. In the preface to this fine book, we can read how it happened: in 2009, Kate Lowe, a historian of early modern Italy and Portugal, was in the office of Dr Dora Thornton, the British Museum's Curator of Renaissance Europe and Curator of the Waddesdon Bequest (a collection of about 300 objects bequeathed to the museum in 1898 by Baron Ferdinand Rothschild, now on permanent display in a newly curated room). A photocopy of an old painting was sitting on a pile of papers. It showed part of a late Renaissance street view that nobody had been able to identify. For over a century, and without being noticed, the painting itself had been sitting in Kelmscott Manor (once the retreat of William Morris), now one of two museums run by the Society of Antiquaries of London. The wheels began to turn: Lowe suspected that the painting depicted a place in Iberia. The next day, her collaborator on earlier projects, the American-Swiss art historian Annemarie Jordan Gschwend, identified the scene as representing the central street of Renaissance Lisbon, the *Rua Nova dos Mercadores*. Official photographs of the paintings can be viewed on the website of Art UK at <https://artuk.org/visit/venues/society-of-antiquaries-of-london-kelmscott-manor-6070>.

As discoveries go, this was a spectacular one. The painting was just one of two panels that resulted from the cutting of the late sixteenth-century original at an unspecified date. From a strictly aesthetic point of view, it is not a work of overwhelming appeal. Much of the architectural scenery, consisting of dozens of narrow, three to four-storied houses with columns at the ground level, and shuttered windows further up, is held in tones of grey. A large proportion of the men, women, and children shown standing and sitting around, conversing with each other or going about other business, are dressed entirely in black or dark blue. Only a few touches of red, white, and ochre enliven the picture, along with some picturesque scenes typical of European genre paintings of the day. Yet for the historian, these two panels are of the greatest significance. They are the only known pictorial representation of the main commercial thoroughfare of one of the greatest cities of the early modern world.

In the words of Jakob Cuelvis, a German visitor to Iberia in 1599-1600 and author of the *Tesoro Chorografico de las Españas*, 'the Rua Nova is one of the richest streets

in the world.’ Tirso de Molina reported: ‘there is a street they call Rua Nova, which contains all the greatness and wealth of the Orient.’ Inevitably, the discovery of the Kelmscott panels gave rise to an exhibition project. The ambition to produce a show, not just on the paintings as such, but about Lisbon as a global city, proved too much for the Wallace Collection, which originally embraced the idea. Eventually, the exhibition was held at Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon in 2017 (with parts later transiting to the Museu Soares dos Reis in Porto). *The Global City*, published in 2015 already in English, is a catalogue of sorts to the exhibition that never happened in London—but the volume is also much more than that. It is a full-blown scholarly work that deserves to be on the reading list of anyone interested in global connections, art, and material culture during the sixteenth century. It makes excellent reading for students or art history and global history. And it has the added advantage of being lavishly produced, courtesy of a London publisher willing to print beautiful books that do not always cost the world.

A number of key themes run through the various contributions in *The Global City*. Firstly, questions revolving around representation. Two opening chapters by the volume editors offer an excellent overview of the pictorial record of Renaissance Lisbon. Fewer images survive today than one would expect from such an important city, but also more than one might fear, taking into consideration the great earthquake of 1755, which decimated large parts of Lisbon, including some of its archives and art collections. The chapters provide abundant contextualization in their inclusion of city views from other parts of Europe, namely Italy. The panorama is supplemented by a chapter about literary representations of the *Rua Nova* by the literary historian Tom Earle. Combining archival, pictorial, and archaeological evidence, a chapter by Jordan Gschwend concerns what we now know about the *Rua Nova* in terms of architecture and urbanism. The highlight here is a ‘2D reconstruction’ – that is, a computer-generated pictorial panorama – of the street, courtesy of Laura Fernández-González and Harry Kirkham.

The second theme running through the volume has to do with the population of Lisbon in the sixteenth century. Among the most striking aspects of the Kelmscott panels is the presence of numerous men, women, and children of African background. The large number of enslaved and free Blacks in Renaissance Lisbon has long been a commonplace assumption (it goes back to accounts by travelers from northern Europe who expressed their awe at such a visible non-white presence in the sixteenth century). While it is still not an aspect sufficiently embraced by the Portuguese public, it has been the subject of a growing number of scholarly projects. Kate Lowe is one of the foremost specialists in the history of black people in early modern Europe, and her discussion of ‘the global population’ of Lisbon offers precisely the kind of overview—detailed, nuanced, yet also capable of conveying the greater picture—that one would expect from such a rigorous researcher.

The third grand theme—and indeed the dominant aspect of most chapters—is material and visual culture. Here, too, *The Global City* presents the results of substantial new research. Much progress has been made in recent years on the study of inventories; Jordan Gschwend, among others, has been involved in this development. Some of the novelties now presented are remarkable in the way they go beyond the sphere of great noble households, into the world of less wealthy families and, indeed, into the shops that characterized Lisbon in the sixteenth century. The passage that perhaps most strikingly sums up the picture emerging from this new research is one that opens a chapter by Hugo Miguel Crespo on ‘Global Interiors’: ‘contrarily to what has been argued in recent years, and apart from Portuguese royal collectors like Queen Catarina of Austria, the sixteenth-century Portuguese did not collect exotic Asian objects. Instead, they used them casually in everyday life inside their homes and wore them on the streets’ (121). For example, there is evidence that an ‘upper middle-class lady’ in Porto wore an Indian embroidered cloak (*mantilha*) identical to one belonging to Archduke Ferdinand II of Tyrol. Chinese porcelain abounded in Portuguese homes, and precious silk textiles and gilded furniture could be ‘bought second-hand at daily auctions held in Lisbon’s main squares’ (121).

From here, two strands of analysis emerge: on the one hand, we are offered a welcome emphasis on materiality, an aspect that, as Ulinka Rublack has reminded us recently, is key to any understanding of the values attached to ‘art’ in the European Renaissance.¹ Crespo discusses this in the abovementioned chapter, and in another, where Sri Lankan techniques of rock crystal carving are explored in detail, along with questions of iconography and faith. An entire chapter by Bruno Werz is dedicated to the shipwreck of the carrack *Bom Jesus* (1533) recently discovered in Namibia; Jordan Gschwend explores Lisbon’s patterns of ‘global consumption’; Ulrike Körber examines lacquered Indo-Muslim shields and the way they may have been used for display. Most other chapters—including one on Chinese commodities by Rui Manuel Loureiro, and another on African ivories by Lowe—naturally carry numerous references to the materiality and commercial value(s) of the artwork discussed.

On the other hand, one also finds a great deal of information on matters of visual culture and iconography. Carla Alferes Pinto explores Christian sculpted ivories from India and Sri Lanka, and Crespo offers a detailed and inventive analysis of Ceylonese rock crystal representations of Jesus in relation to the religious world of recent converts from Buddhism and Hinduism. Crespo is particularly interested in the religious world of Bhakti Hindus and its translatability and connectability with Catholic notions of contemplation, bliss, and devotion. Some of this material is quite original and will hopefully trickle through to the next round of discussions on empire, faith, and conversion in early modern Asia.

¹ ULINKA RUBLACK, “Matter in the Material Renaissance,” *Past and Present*, 219 (2013): 41-85.

Is there anything to criticize, then, about *The Global City*? Interestingly, the exhibition held in Lisbon in 2017 gave rise to a public controversy. On the surface, this controversy was much ado about nothing. The historian Diogo Ramada Curto, not himself an expert in art, raised doubts about the authenticity of the Kelmscott panels, and also about that of another genre painting of comparable quality, which shows a social scene at the water fountains known as *Chafariz d'el Rei*.² Curto's intervention was peculiar, inasmuch as he had been involved in earlier publications in which the *Chafariz* painting's provenance was never questioned; his casting doubt was also a source of some embarrassment in the face of the doctoral research of a young art historian at London's University of the Arts. In an article published in 2015 but ignored by Curto, Julia Dudkiewicz showed beyond reasonable doubt that the *Rua Nova* paintings were part of the collection of Dante Gabriel Rossetti which ended up at Kelmscott.³ Further analysis has also confirmed, in 2017, that the *Chafariz* painting can almost certainly be dated to the sixteenth or early seventeenth century.

The question does persist, however, whether there is something in the politics of *The Global City* calling for debate. Like much of the historiography of early modern connections written over the past twenty years, this book teems with phrases such as 'interconnectedness' (47), 'diversity and entanglements' (57), or 'hybridity' (*passim*). Jordan Gschwend's work has often emphasized the colorful and exotic elements in the world of Renaissance collectors of Asian art. Of course, it would be rather strange if studies on this period did not; but one can certainly argue that a little more attention to the violence pervading early modern global trade would be welcome. The 'purchasing' of luxuries in Asia was not always just a stroll through the shops of Goa, but often involved piracy, theft, forced labor, and murder. Given the recent debate kicked off by Jeremy Adelman about the potentially pernicious politics of global history writing—its sometimes excessive attention to connections, and the way it can lead to an uncritical view of early globalization—this is something that every early modernist should be thinking about.⁴

Curto believes that the kind of global connected history which has become mainstream among Lusitanists since the late 1990s, and which resonates through the pages of *The Global City*, allows Lusotropicalism—the pernicious, rose-colored vision of a benign Portuguese imperialism formulated by the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, and subsequently appropriated by the Salazar regime in the 1950s—to return

² DIOGO RAMADA CURTO, "Lisboa era uma cidade global?," in *Expresso*, 18 February 2017, accessible online at <http://expresso.sapo.pt/cultura/2017-02-26-Lisboa-era-uma-cidade-global--1> (last accessed 16 February 2018).

³ JULIA DUDKIEWICZ, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Collection of Old Masters at Kelmscott Manor," *The British Art Journal*, XVI, 2 (2015): 89-100.

⁴ JEREMY ADELMAN, "What is global History now?," *Aeon* (2017), <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment> (last accessed 16 February 2018). Compare the vigorous rebuttal in RICHARD DRAYTON and DAVID MOTADEL, "Discussion: The Futures of Global History," *Journal of Global History*, 13, 1 (2018): 1-21.

to public discourse in an academic disguise. This raises the question in the first place of what gives a scholar with limited achievements in global history the right to dismiss the work of an entire generation of historians who have overcome precisely the provincialism of earlier Portuguese historiography. Yet apart from this question, is *The Global City* really an uncritical *encomion* of early modern globalization? There are certainly some causes for concern. Probably the most uncanny lapse is found in a passage in the chapter on ‘*Olisipo, Emporium Nobilissimum*,’ where the abundance of Sri Lankan luxury objects in the Lisbon marketplace is explored with great delight on grounds of a document written in 1552 (150). How can one revel in this abundance without mentioning the brutal looting of the Temple of the Buddha’s Tooth at Kōṭṭe—the foremost sacred place of Theravada Buddhism—by Portuguese troops, in 1551? The question may also arise of what function, exactly, is performed by a chapter by Shephard Krech III on the turkey in the Kelmscott paintings? Like so much that has been written on animals as *exotica* in the European Renaissance, this is scholarship that is delightful to read, but could benefit from some of the theoretical discussions underway concerning colonialism, animal agency and ecocide, even without going deeper into the troubled waters of the posthuman turn.

And yet it seems incongruous, and indeed unfair, to brand *The Global City* as yet another example of uncritical ‘global talk.’ Even taking into account its journalistic context, the tone of Curto’s attack is beyond what most scholars would consider civil; it accuses the exhibition curators of a conscious avoidance of the negative aspects of empire building. This is clearly excessive, given, for example, the book’s exploration of the extremely harsh conditions endured by slaves—both materially, as they carried the faeces of white people through the streets of Lisbon every day, due to the failure of the Portuguese elite to build an appropriate sewage system; and socially, as they were exposed to pejorative language and other kinds of abuse (63). Further into the book, where the rock-carvers of Sri Lanka are presented, what reader could not feel the pain suffered in the endless hours of hard manual work that went into the making of luxury objects?

Certainly such critical aspects need to be highlighted further and more explicitly than is currently standard, especially in the face of a wider resurgence of Lusotropical ideas in the ongoing boom of historical fiction written by Portuguese historians. But the criticism so far is no match for the scholarship presented in *The Global City*. A focused and informed debate is what we need, where all stakeholders are allowed to discuss the exact significance of the ‘exotic’ for sixteenth-century Lisbon, and thereby make a critical contribution, grounded in the study of material, social, and visual realities, to our understanding of the early modern world.