

Leonard Barkan. *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of a Renaissance Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 428p.

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Leonard Barkan has written a bold, daring, and exciting book. His study of the rediscovery of ancient sculpture in Rome during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brings together archaeology, aesthetics, and theory to illuminate what he calls the “energy gap—the sparking distance—that exists between an artistic source and its destination.” Barkan’s purpose is not just to recover the past, but to interrogate the past as that past helped produce a multivalent Renaissance culture. Particularly compelling is Barkan’s argument that in recovering ancient sculpture the Renaissance discovered the origins of its own society. In five chapters, Barkan explores various facets of those excavations and recoveries as they shaped a very different cultural grounding from our own.

In chapter one, Barkan recounts Francesco da Sangallo’s account of the recovery and identification of the *Laocoön* in 1506 in order to establish his historical and theoretical strategies. By deconstructing the role of classical ekphrasis, he opens up the reception of these recovered works to new insights, showing both the delight and the tensions these rediscoveries held for the artists of the period. Chapter two provides an authoritative and original reexamination of Pliny’s texts on art by contextualizing them in terms of their own setting and in terms of the Renaissance reception and appropriation of them by Vasari, Petrarch, Alberti, Ghiberti, Landino, and others. The rediscovery of ancient sculpture filtered through the interpretive eye of Pliny helped establish a new aesthetics and configure a new relationship between the ancients and the moderns.

Barkan, in chapter three, explores the significance and consequences of the damaged and fragmentary state of most of the recovered antiquities. Numerous artists speculated about and sketched ways to complete statues, especially the *Laocoön* with its missing arm. Indeed, the fragmentary nature of the recovered works helped establish a new creative and historical relationship to the past. Barkan’s examination of the many sketchbooks supports three central propositions in this chapter, namely that the Renaissance perceived beauty in ruins, fragmentary works like the *Torso Belvedere* were not restored because they were considered beautiful as is, and that Michelangelo’s practice of not finishing works or even defacing works was a deliberate part of his aesthetic.

In chapter four, Barkan traces the Renaissance reconstruction of the fragmentary through imaginative discourses. Focusing mainly on two works, the *Pasquino*

and the *Bed of Polyclitus*, Barkan discusses how these fragmentary works stimulated the beholder's imagination, producing endless poetic variations on a theme. In the case of the latter, Barkan imaginatively teases out all the erotic potential in a work that is not known to have been based on any classical narrative.

The last chapter focuses on the unusual case of Baccio Bandinelli, a man who rivalled Michelangelo and who was subjected to withering criticism by Michelangelo, Vasari, and Cellini. Barkan examines Bandinelli's life and career in terms of the humanist concept of *imitatio*, especially in the drawings. According to Barkan, Bandinelli's career is shaped by the power of the rediscovered antiquities that he fully assimilated to create numerous variations on classical themes. Unlike other artists, Bandinelli was in the habit of placing models in classical poses and then drawing them instead of drawing the originals. The mediating rhetoric of Bandinelli's draughtsmanship served as advertisements to patrons in the competitive world he worked in.

Barkan's study bridges two worlds, that of the traditional art history and that of the new theoretical art history. By moving in and out of these two modes, Barkan opens up a traditional topic to fresh cultural insights that reveal just how vital recovery of the past was for the presence in the Renaissance. Renaissance scholars will want to study this book. ✨