



FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT
WRITERS IN MUSEUMS 1798-1898

EDITED BY
ROSELLA MAMOLI ZORZI
AND KATHERINE MANTHORNE



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22. ‘Shedding Light on Old Italian Masters’: Timothy Cole’s Series for *The Century*

Page S. Knox

Arguably the most popular journal of the late 1800s, *The Century Magazine* regarded itself as an important vehicle of the arts to its upper middle class American audience. One of its central missions was the education of its readership in all things cultural, as its editor in chief, Richard Watson Gilder, sought to make the magazine a ‘work of art.’ With a widely regarded art department, led by Alexander Drake, and a reputation as one of the most visually appealing periodicals in America, driven by the innovations of printer Theodore deVinne, the magazine was deeply committed to the specialty of wood engraving and employed the best illustrators of the day to fill its pages with extensive and lavish imagery.¹ In the 1880s, *The Century’s* educational effort moved beyond an awareness of contemporary American art, and sought to introduce many of its readers to the entire Western artistic tradition. As a central part of this agenda, Gilder, Drake and deVinne agreed to publish Timothy Cole’s illustrations of ‘Old Italian Masters,’ a compendium of the great works of the Italian Renaissance. Cutting each engraving in front of the original work, Cole brought rare images from numerous museums, churches and galleries throughout Italy to Americans who had never before experienced them (Fig. 22.1, a-e).

¹ For more on the history of *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* and its predecessor *Scribner’s Monthly*, see Page S. Knox, ‘Scribner’s Monthly 1870–1881: Illustrating a New American Art World’, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2012, <http://academiccommons.columbia.edu/item/ac:146372>



DEATH OF ST. FRANCIS, BY GIOTTO.
Fresco in the Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence.

a



MADONNA AND CHILD, BY GIOVANNI BELLINI.
Detail from the Altarpiece in the Sacristy of Sta. Maria della Salute, Venice.

b



THE ANNUNCIATION, BY FRA ANGELICO.
IN THE MUSEUM OF SAN MARCO.

c



ST. AGNES, BY ANDREA DEL SARTO.
IN THE PISA CATHEDRAL.

d



Fig. 22.1 (a-e) Timothy Cole, selected engravings from *Old Italian Masters Engraved by Timothy Cole with Historical Notes by W. J. Stillman and Brief Comments by the Engraver* (New York: The Century Co., 1892), Public domain.

Cole would go on to engrave Old Masters for *The Century* in France, Spain, the Netherlands and England, creating the largest and most monumental art historical project in print media during the late nineteenth century. This chapter presents Cole's body of work during his years in Italy, from 1884 to 1892, during which time he engraved sixty-seven reproductions of Italian Renaissance mosaics, paintings and altarpieces for monthly publication in the periodical, and considers his first-hand descriptions of the environments in which he toiled. While the series is recognized for introducing the work of artists from Cimabue to Correggio to the American public, it also offers a unique window into the conditions that Cole labored under and provides an extraordinary account of the challenges he faced in providing accurate reproductions.

Emerging from a coterie of woodcarvers for the periodical industry in the 1870s, Timothy Cole established himself early on as the premier engraver of his time. Cole was recognized for his 'new style of engraving' which sought above all else to provide a literal translation of the image he was reproducing. In 1883, when asked by *The Century's* Art Department to engrave an image by a popular French painter from a photograph, Cole, always searching for greater realization of the artist's intent presciently inquired, 'Why don't you have me do these things from the original pictures instead of the photographs?'² When they considered the impact on their audience of Cole's images from the contemporary art world, *The Century* editors immediately saw the possibilities. Cole was sent to Europe for a full year with a mandate to engrave the work he encountered. Little did he know that this one-year assignment would lead him to relocate his family to live in Florence, Orvieto and Venice, or that he would become immersed in the art of the Italian Old Masters, particularly those of the early Tuscans and Sienese (Fig. 22.2, a-b).



a

2 Alphaeus P. Cole and Margaret W. Cole, *Timothy Cole Wood Engraver* (Dublin, New Hampshire: William L. Bauhan, Publisher, 1935), p. 36.

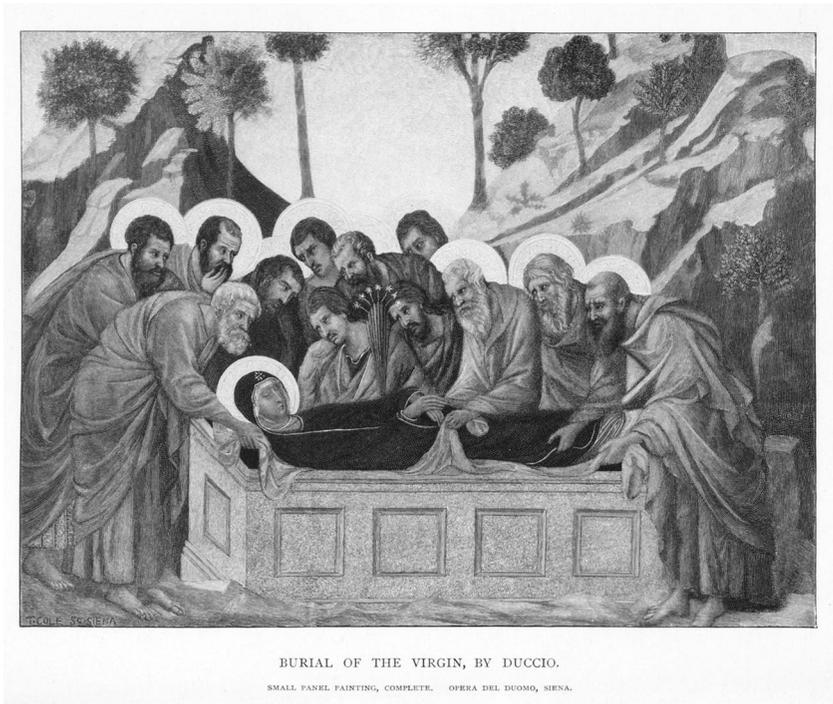


Fig. 22.2 (a-b) Timothy Cole, selected engravings dedicated to Byzantine and Trecento Renaissance Painting, from *Old Italian Masters Engraved by Timothy Cole with Historical Notes by W. J. Stillman and Brief Comments by the Engraver* (New York: The Century Co., 1892), Public domain.

Upon arriving in Paris in November of 1883, instead of engaging with contemporary art, Cole went straight to the Louvre and began engraving Botticelli's *Madonna and Child* (ca.1465–70), along with Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* (ca.1503–06) and Titian's *Man With a Glove* (ca.1520). Upon receipt of these blocks, *The Century* decided to make a serious investment in Cole's new found obsession, agreeing to publish a series on old Italian Masters that would appear on a monthly basis and later be compiled in book form.³ Cole moved to Florence in August of 1884 and began the job in earnest.

In keeping with the periodical's mandate for cultural edification, William J. Stillman was chosen as the author of the accompanying

³ *Old Italian Masters Engraved by Timothy Cole with Historical Notes by W. J. Stillman and Brief Comments by the Engraver* (New York: The Century Co., 1892), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433071001907>

text for the illustrations. A product of his years as an acolyte of Ruskin and an admirer of the Pre-Raphaelites, Stillman provided background information on the life of each artist and his style, while also reviewing the scholarship on these artists to date. Frequently quoting and discrediting Vasari while referencing Morelli, Crowe, Cavalcaselle and other well known academics, Stillman brings a clear Ruskinian approach to his critical discussion, which enhanced the series' reception as art history. He also introduced Cole to the Trecento and Byzantine painters, a group with which most Americans were entirely unfamiliar and whose inclusion required a strong appeal to the editors of *The Century* on the part of both critic and engraver. Their work was often found in the most difficult conditions for reproduction, thus adding to their allure and mystique. Aware that the engraved line practiced by Cole captured this type of work most effectively, Stillman underscored in the text the affinity that emerged between Cole and this group of early Tuscan and Sienese artists over the course of the project (Fig. 22.2).⁴

The more cerebral criticism of Stillman was balanced by Cole's straightforward description of the works he reproduced and the conditions he encountered in the process. The introduction to the series provided a thorough account of Cole's method, describing how he selected images that not only resonated with him aesthetically but were also acceptable for engraving. Hiring local photographers to document the chosen piece, its photograph was then copied on to the wood block, allowing the block to become its own proof when printed. Essential to Cole's process was his commitment to engrave the block in front of the original work. Prior to Cole, all of the line engravings made from old masters had been done from black and white drawings; no reproduction by engraving directly from the original pictures had ever been attempted. Between the photographic image and the method of wood-cutting, which allows for delicately modeled forms and subtle textures, Cole's method was unique in its ability to call into play both the black line (the positive element in engraving) and the white line (the negative element). Further, the use of wood engraving allowed for an unlimited circulation of high quality images thus far never available to the general public. Cole believed that the method allowed him to act

4 For more on Stillman see Stephen Dyson, *The Last Amateur: The Life of William J. Stillman* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

as an organ through which the mind and hand of the original artist were made present; that the method made a true representation of the original intent possible.⁵ According to Cole: 'I have always had pleasant experiences while working in the galleries and many favors have been shown me, and I should judge that Italy, of all places in the world, is the ideal spot for an engraver.'⁶

When Cole arrived in Florence in August of 1884 he immediately went to the town officials and received 'permission to copy here, which gives entrance into all public and private galleries to work. It is not necessary to have permission to copy in the churches as they are free at all times.'⁷ He began work in the Uffizi, and continued throughout the winter with the aid of a 'scaldino,' a small tin box with a perforated cover and rests for the feet, which is filled with a light charcoal called a 'braca' (sic) made of twigs. The braca produces little or no smoke and, when kindled by sprinkling a small amount of live ash on the top, burned downward and became a glowing hot mass that stayed warm for ten to twelve hours. According to Cole, were it not for these little stoves it would have been impossible to work in the museums, and all of the artists used them.⁸

Cole often became overwhelmed by the intense history and beauty of his surroundings, noting for example that the Pitti Palace 'is the most stupendous thing in the world. It bursts upon one from the narrow streets like a glorious vision.'⁹ Discussing his work on the engraving of Titian's *Bella* (ca.1536) Cole recounts,

they allow me fifty days in which to complete it, during which time I have the picture solely to myself. It is a fixture on the wall, but can be swung out on hinges and so adjusted to the light. They have given me a high fine table and a padded stool which brings me nearly on a level with the picture [...] I must do many of the portraits here in the Pitti; how startling and impressive it is!¹⁰

5 W. J. Stillman, 'Cole and his Work', in *The Century* 37 (November 1888), 57–59, <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=cent;cc=cent;rgn=full%20text;idno=cent0037-1;didno=cent0037-1;view=image;seq=0067;node=cent0037-1%3A9>

6 Timothy Cole, 'Engraver's Note to the Preface', in *Old Italian Masters*, p. xi.

7 Letter from Thomas Cole, 8 August 1884, quoted in A. Cole, *Timothy Cole*, p. 42.

8 Letter from Thomas Cole, 12 February 1885 quoted in A. Cole, *Timothy Cole*, p. 47.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

10 Letter from Thomas Cole to Alexander Drake, August 1885 quoted in A. Cole, *Timothy Cole*, p. 52.

Apparently in his early months in Florence he became so engaged with the art and the staff of Florence's museums that he fell behind his commitment to one block a month, and a long term tension developed between the artist and the business editors of *The Century*. According to letters, Cole stated that he was 'greatly helped by the directors of the Italian museums who had no hesitation in removing from the walls any picture I might select for reproduction and placing it on an easel in a good light.'¹¹ Given his method of engraving the block in front of the original, the issue of light was of prime importance to Cole. While museum directors sought to help Cole whenever possible, gallery conditions were not always conducive to the work.

In Venice, Cole was forced to deal with the lack of light in the Sala dell'Assunta of the Accademia in his reproduction of Tintoretto's *The Death of Abel* (ca.1551–52). His method of photography was ineffective given the painting's high placement on the ceiling and the positioning of the light which, falling from above, cast a glaze over the surface of the painting. Unable to remove it for copying, Cole worked on the outline of the photograph, and engraved the block in the well-lit adjacent room of drawings. There he was able to see the original better through its reflection in a mirror that he brought for that purpose, and with the use of an opera glass. He cut Tintoretto's *Miracle of St. Mark* (1548) using the same method.¹² According to Cole, Veronese's images in the Sala del Collegio of the Doges Palace were remarkably well preserved and much more easily reproduced, as the light shone brightly into the room to reveal the image of *Venice Enthroned with Justice and Peace* (1575–78) 'in all its regal splendor.'¹³

One of Cole's greater challenges was the reproduction of the Benozzo Gozzoli frescoes in the Riccardi Chapel. He writes extensively of the unique circumstances of the room, which preserved the painting well but also created conditions that made engraving almost impossible. The fresco occupies two sides and the entrance to the small chapel and in all probability there was originally no window as the one in situ appears to have been installed later (see Acidini's essay in this volume). Cole notes that even with the new window the image was difficult to see. The

11 Ibid., p. 51.

12 Timothy Cole, 'Tintoretto, Notes by the Engraver', in *Old Italian Masters*, p. 273.

13 Timothy Cole, 'Veronese, Notes by the Engraver', in *Old Italian Masters*, p. 268.

Procession of the Magi (ca.1459), which includes a number of Florentine personages of the day in contemporary costume on foot and horseback, had a great deal of detail that Cole found extremely challenging to capture with the low level of light available. This required a bit of ingenuity on his part:

As it also is in a dark corner I have it lighted, first by means of a white sheet hung upon the opposite wall of the court outside upon which the sun shines, the reflection of which is increased powerfully this way. Then, inside, I have a large mirror, which is so placed as to bring down the blue sky, otherwise not visible, and then I have six other reflectors which light up my subject.¹⁴

In a letter Cole describes his process in the chapel:

I am working standing on the altar, which brings me to a sufficient height to see these frescoes well. The light from the large window in front is very good in the afternoon, as the sun shining against the outside walls of the courtyard causes a fine soft reflection, and the picture is lighted as well from the reflection of a large mirror which is used for that purpose, and which makes it as light as its companion on the opposite wall which receives the full benefit from the light outside. Here each day for two short fleeting hours I am rapt in ecstasy.¹⁵

Rather than attempting to recreate the entire fresco, Cole chose specific groupings within the larger scene, featuring a group of angels as well as Gozzoli's self portrait. Cole used this method frequently when attacking large and complex canvases, as seen in his single images of Botticelli's *Flora and the Three Graces* in a full engraving versus the outline form of the larger *Primavera* (ca.1482), as well as the Virgin and Child from the larger *Adoration of the Magi* by Gentile da Fabriano (ca.1423).

In his letters, Cole described the conditions under which he worked in the churches of Florence, where it was impossible to have a picture removed from the walls of a chapel. Often the subjects he sought to reproduce were in dark places above an altar with numerous candles obscuring the view, although according to Cole, 'fortunately the priests were glad to do what they could to assist the man who was endeavoring to make Italy's masterpieces known to the New World.'¹⁶ Cole described

14 Letter from Timothy Cole, August 1885, quoted in A. Cole, *Timothy Cole*, p. 53.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

16 A. Cole, *Timothy Cole*, p. 51.

his situation while engraving Filippino Lippi's *Vision of St. Bernard* (1480) in the Badia Church:

Working on top of the altar in the church in order to get at the devils which are strangely not visible from below, a thousand and one beauties reveal themselves from this elevation and I am an object of wonder if not of adoration for those who come to worship. I certainly have a monopoly of Filippino Lippi.¹⁷

Cole notes that his position on the altar allowed him the single view of the two satanic creatures hiding behind St. Bernard, which he sought to make visible in his engraving; he also mentions that since that time the painting was rehung in a better light to allow observers to view these unique details. When Cole learned that panels from Duccio's Altarpiece were being moved from the cathedral to the Opera del Duomo, he decided to postpone their engravings as the light was so greatly improved in the new location. Cole's time in Italy in the early 1880s marked a period when many works were being removed from their original environments in chapels and churches in order to be seen in improved lighting conditions.

Stillman was quite critical of the situation in Venice, where he complained that altarpieces still in the city's churches were dangerously exposed to the smoke of the altar candles; Stillman mentions specifically the Titian of S. Salvatore whose lower portion of the canvas was splattered all over with the wax of the candles of the altar. Further, he implies that the popular opinion in Venice was that the priests actually encouraged the intense use of candles near paintings, intensifying the risk of fire, to punish the government for the removal to the Accademia of so many of their pictures!¹⁸

Also disconcerting was the somewhat savage dismantling of pictures for distribution and sale. While beginning to work on the Duccio Altarpiece in the Siena Cathedral (1308), Cole describes how the back of the large wooden panel was sawn in half with the pictures on the reverse divided up to be sold separately. A close friend and colleague of Cole's, John Fairfax Murray, worked tirelessly to collect these missing panels and reassemble them in the Museum of the Opera del Duomo and was

¹⁷ Letter from Timothy Cole to Century Company, 27 October 1885, quoted in A. Cole, *Timothy Cole*, p. 52.

¹⁸ W. J. Stillman, 'Giovanni Bellini', in *Old Italian Masters*, p. 131.

also responsible for moving the Duccio there as well. Cole decried the dismantling: 'I would hang the man who would dare tamper with these inestimable and sacred treasures, for here is holy ground indeed.'¹⁹

In addition to the lighting, Cole also had to respond to uniquely American concerns over issues such as nudity. He entered into a major argument with *The Century* over the engraving of Mantegna's *Circumcision* (1460–64) in his triptych in the Tribune of the Uffizi:

It was my intention originally on account of the difficulty and loss of time that would attend the engraving because of the poor light in the Tribune, to change this subject in preference for one which hung in a splendid light for engraving, and which indeed I might have had on an easel at my elbow; but after careful comparison of the two and much reflection, I felt impelled to do the 'Circumcision' though it entailed three times the labor as I sat in the next room to it and had to keep running in and out continually while doing it.²⁰

If this process of running back and forth from one room to the next in the Uffizi was not enough, upon receipt of the block, the art editor took great exception to the noticeable penis, obviously an important part of the narrative of the story. Cole begged,

If you alter it, cut off its left side and blue the penis you will damn the whole thing [...] let me beseech you my dear Drake to not do this thing. Do not alter the block. There is not a human being on the face of the globe who would be so brazen faced as to quibble at this subject. They would not dare to. The subject is too sacred.²¹

Surprisingly, Cole got his way and the image was reproduced with true fidelity to the original.

'Old Italian Masters' also reflects the frequent misattributions of the time, with an entire essay devoted to the *Madonna of the Rucellai Chapel* (ca.1286), believed to be painted by Cimabue. The painting was soon to be attributed to Duccio by Franz Wickhoff in 1889, and would later be moved to the Uffizi in the mid 1950s. In his discussion of the viewing conditions of the altarpiece in Santa Maria Novella, Cole describes the space as

19 Letter from Timothy Cole to Century Company quoted in A. Cole, *Timothy Cole*, p. 67.

20 Timothy Cole, 'Mantegna: Notes by the Engraver', in *Old Italian Masters*, p. 126.

21 Letter from Timothy Cole to Alexander Drake, 1 December 1888, quoted in A. Cole, *Timothy Cole*, p. 67.

Dingy and veiled by the dust of centuries in an unimposing, almost shabby chapel, probably where Dante saw it, its panel scarred by nails which have been driven to put the ex votos on, split its whole length by time's seasoning and scaled in patches, the white gesso ground showing through the color.

In spite of the poor conditions, or possibly because of them, Cole became drawn to the Madonna as well as the art of the Trecento, seeing in the supposed Cimabue

An inexplicable magnetism, which tells of the profound devotion, the unhesitating worship, of the religious painter of the day; of faith and prayer, devotion and worship, forever gone out of art. And the aroma of centuries of prayer and trust still gives it, to me, a charm beyond that of art.

Unable to work for long periods in front of the original because of the dark conditions, Cole noted that

It should be known that the best time for seeing the Cimabue here (Santa Maria Novella) is between 5 and 6 PM on a sunny day in summer, and in the winter an hour or so earlier. At that time the sun shines through the windows of the Strozzi Chapel, directly opposite, with such force as to light up the picture admirably and only then can the fineness of its details be seen. Many visitors coming in the morning to see the picture quit the place summarily, disappointed and declaring the place too dark for anything.

Cole noted that it was necessary to get as near to the painting as physically possible and that this was done by asking any one of the guardians for permission to ascend the altar, which he was readily granted. Apparently a set of portable steps was always kept in a corner of the chapel for this purpose; one had to place the steps against the altar and, having ascended, lift them up behind oneself, and place them securely on the altar so that one could ascend even farther. This position allowed the viewer to inspect the details of the drapery and to fully discover the beauty and coloring of the piece, which Cole described at length in his account. He labored over the writing of each and every essay, attempting to capture the essence of the image in the text as well as advising readers as to the best times of daylight to experience these pieces in their original environments.²²

22 Timothy Cole 'Cimabue: Notes by the Engraver', in *Old Italian Masters*, pp. 15–18.

In conclusion, Cole's mission to 'shed light' on these iconic works both in a literal and a metaphysical sense is best described in Stillman's remarks to readers in the first installment in *The Century* of the 'Italian Old Masters':

The undertaking to which THE CENTURY is devoting its resources in this series of works on which Mr. Cole has been for several years engaged, is therefore in the widest sense of the term a great education work. For such a work, on a scale which permits popularization, there is no method comparable to the work of this engraver — a more appreciative lover of early Italian art than he I have never known.²³

Cole's engraving and discussion of the sixty-seven reproductions of mosaics, paintings and altarpieces not only provide us with a first-hand account of lighting conditions in Italy's galleries, collections and churches in the late nineteenth century, but also reveal Cole's deep commitment to enlighten Americans about the artistic treasures of the Italian Renaissance.

23 W. J. Stillman, 'Cole and his Work', in *The Century* 37 (November 1888), p. 58, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924079618934;view=1up;seq=68>