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Nino Costa (1826–1903)
Transnational Exchange in European Landscape Painting

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Nino Costa, *A Scirocco Day on the Sea Coast near Rome* (detail), c. 1852–1874, oil on canvas, 86.5 × 193 cm.
Florence, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, on loan from the Gagliardini Collection
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Introduction: Nino Costa – a cosmopolitan artist

“[...] when the propitious moment has arrived, new ideas, towards which the past has been silently, often unconsciously, working, reveal themselves spontaneously, simultaneously, in widely separated lands, amongst people who have had no previous intercourse. After all, such movements are but the inevitable result of all that has preceded them. Revolutions, in art as in politics, are but the sudden revelation of a slow and silent evolution; and thus, at this period, we have the Pre-Raphaelites in England, Corot, Millet, and the plein-air Barbizon school in France, and Giovanni Costa in Italy, all proclaiming in different accents, and independently of one another, the same artistic truth.”¹

In her biography of the Roman-born painter Giovanni Costa, called Nino by his friends and family,² the English writer Olivia Rossetti Agresti describes art as a supranational phenomenon and places Costa within an artistic elite of innovators. By 1850 Costa had abandoned his academic training³ and turned to members of the international artist community in Rome for inspiration, dedicating himself to the landscape genre. In the second half of the nineteenth century his concept and style advanced through continuous exchanges of ideas with his international peers and he became an influential intermediary of approaches to art and nature across national boundaries. Letters and accounts of Costa's life and character provided by his friends and critics were pivotal contributions to Agresti's vibrant and insightful book, *Giovanni Costa. His Life, Work and Times*, published in 1904.⁴ She also drew on the manuscript of Costa's autobiography *Quel che*

vidi e quel che intesi,⁵ first published in 1927, which the artist had dictated to his daughter Giorgia between 1892 and 1896.⁶ Costa's memoirs⁷ conclude with the events of 1870 and more specifically with his political involvement in the immediate aftermath of Rome's annexation to the unified state of Italy. According to Costa's daughter this was because her father had stopped work on his autobiography after the death of his dear friend Frederic Leighton, who had encouraged Costa to write down the history of his life.⁸ Agresti complemented the manuscript with information mainly gathered during long interviews with Costa at Bocca d'Arno and in Rome in 1902 and drew on his extensive correspondence.⁹

Taking into consideration the biased nature of biographical texts, and of autobiographical accounts in particular, the attentive reader can retrieve information on different levels.¹⁰ Costa had written his memoirs towards the end of his long and eventful life, and this inevitably led to inaccuracies and shifts of focus regarding events, artistic ideas and the importance of relationships with colleagues and patrons. Still, the self-fashioned image in his autobiography generally shows the artist in the way he wanted to be remembered by the following generations and thus gives an authentic picture of the artist's aspirations and sources of inspiration, even if inaccuracies concerning actual events slip consciously and unconsciously into the narrative. Constantly alluding to Costa's cosmopolitanism Agresti emphasized the importance Britain had for the artist's creative development and professional

¹ AGRESTI 1904, pp. 60–61.

² Giovanni Costa was called Nino by his friends and relatives, but he signed his works, correspondence and articles with either name. While nineteenth-century critics almost exclusively referred to him as Giovanni, scholarship has come to discuss him as Nino. Following twenty-first century practice and to stress the importance of his personal relations for his artistic development as well as to distinguish him from his contemporary namesake from Livorno (1833–1893), a painter of female portraits and genre scenes, he will be referred to here as Nino.

³ Costa trained in the studios of the academic painters Vincenzo Camuccini, Francesco Coghetti, Leonardo Massabò and Francesco Podesti for a short period at the beginning of his career. COSTA 1983, pp. 36, 65, 125.

⁴ Olivia Rossetti Agresti was the daughter of William Michael Rossetti and niece of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, thus strongly linked to the Pre-Raphaelite circle. A political activist as well as a writer, editor and interpreter she was fascinated by Nino Costa whom she met in Rome after her marriage to the Italian anarchist and journalist Antonio Agresti in 1897. Her admiration for the patriot and painter induced her to

write his biography, published in London in 1904 with Gay and Bird. AGRESTI 1904, pp. v–vi.

⁵ COSTA 1983.

⁶ COSTA 1983, p. 3.

⁷ In the following pages *Quel che vidi e quel che intesi* will be referred to as Costa's memoirs.

⁸ “La massima parte di questi ricordi suoi mio padre dettava a me nelle sere invernali, a cominciare dall'inverno 1892–1893. [...] Egli intendeva di dedicarli al suo fratello amico Lord Frederick Leighton, per incitamento del quale si era deciso a dettarli. Venuto a morte l'amico sui primi del '96, mio padre da tal lavoro si disamorò e lo lasciò interrotto.” Giorgia Guerrazzi Costa in COSTA 1983, p. 3.

⁹ “Abbiamo anche con noi la Signora Agresti che mi viene giornalmente ad intervistare per le mie memorie.” Letter from Costa to Paolo Ferretti, Marina di Pisa, 18 October 1902, BGCA, Lionello Venturi Papers.

¹⁰ In their book *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist. A Historical Experiment* Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz analyse some major leitmotifs of artist biographies. KRIS/KURZ 1979.

career. While there is no doubt about the crucial part English artists and patrons played in Costa's life, as will be explained later, the overall anglophile tone of Agresti's biography is also an expression of the author's own national pride as well as of Costa's gratitude towards his English friends.

Published and unpublished primary sources and the close study of visual and written documents produced by Costa, his international friends and professional contacts complement the basic information presented in the biographical texts and allow the intriguing story of Costa and his international network to unfold. More than 750 mostly unpublished letters written by or to Costa have survived in private and public archives and libraries in England, Italy and Switzerland.¹¹ The majority of these are accessible in the form of photographic reproductions or transcripts made from documents in the possession of Costa's descendants at the Nuovo Archivio dei Macchiaioli in Rome.¹² The letters Costa addressed to his artist friend and patron George Howard, the 9th Earl of Carlisle, and to his wife Rosalind and their children have recently been translated into English and edited by Giuliana Pieri.¹³ Major points of discussion in the correspondence deal with journey plans, progress on artists' works, technique, artistic concepts and polemics on the contemporary state of the arts in different national contexts. These documents reveal Costa as a cosmopolitan painter – a rarity among Italian artists of the mid-nineteenth century. They provide information on private and professional aspects of Costa's life and on that of his international group of friends, while his drawings, sketches and paintings are visual testimonies of transnational experience filtered by personal preferences.

This book focuses on Costa's exemplary position as the central figure within a transnational network and is not a *catalogue raisonné*. The latter would confine Costa's achievements to his visual product and neglect aspects crucial to the understanding of his pivotal position in the development of European landscape painting so far not fully acknowledged by scholarship. The project faced the challenge of an oeuvre scattered mainly in private collections¹⁴ in England, Italy, the United States and Argentina. The resulting limited accessibility of Costa's art is one of the reasons why the painter has

fallen into oblivion. Yet even during his lifetime his work was only known and appreciated by a select few, as this comment by Costa's loyal follower Giuseppe Cellini suggests: "Ma se questo è avvenuto in parte per la elevatezza stessa della sua pittura, non facilmente comprensibile ai molti, grandemente pure vi contribuì il fatto che le sue pitture non furono da noi conosciute che tardi, e raramente esposte."¹⁵

In his lifetime Costa sold only two paintings to Italians, most went to English collectors. On his death a great number of works and a huge collection of letters were left in the possession of his heirs. These paintings, sketches, drawings and documents were photographed before the patrimony was divided and records lost. These photographs are kept at the Nuovo Archivio dei Macchiaioli and are complemented by reproductions of works in other collections. Even though incomplete, these visual records allow a good insight into Costa's oeuvre, development and artistic process.¹⁶

Titles of Costa's paintings in biographical texts, correspondence and exhibition catalogues are not consistent. This problem was already present in Costa's lifetime as the artist himself noted: "Non poca confusione si fa per i titoli dei miei varii quadri; sia perché ne ho dati diversi ad uno stesso quadro, sia perché altri titoli hanno loro attribuiti i miei amici ed i cataloghi delle varie esposizioni alle quali io gli inviai."¹⁷

This book contributes to a growing field of studies on transnational exchange in the nineteenth century, which led to a number of publications, conferences and exhibitions. The importance of approaching history and its material as well as intellectual manifestations from a global point of view is reflected in Akira Iriye's and Pierre-Yves Saunier's *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History. From the Mid-19th Century to the Present Day*, published in 2009.¹⁸ Narrowing the field down to the importance of internationalism as both cause and consequence of artistic activity several initiatives have lately instigated the examination of reciprocal transnational exchange in two or more cultural contexts.¹⁹ Most of these studies address the crucial argument of whether or not transnationalism and nationalism are mutually exclusive, a point of great relevance in nineteenth-century Europe when the formation of nation-states required artists to find new

forms of artistic expression to represent their countries – and a dilemma which confronted Costa throughout his career. Due to his close connections with English artists and patrons Costa was perceived as an exponent of English art by the majority of Italian critics, while his apparent Italian roots had the English press welcome the breath of fresh air he contributed to English landscape painting, but it would never have occurred to them to treat him as one of their own. Not fitting in with either the Italian or the English tradition, or, in fact, with any particular national school, led to Costa's marginalization as an artist. But, as Lucy Delap observed when discussing the role of the cosmopolitan artist, "[...] some figures that appear marginal in one national context can seem very important as transmitters of ideas or practices between countries."²⁰ Delap's comment provides a key to reading Nino Costa as a niche artist who did not fit into a national canon because he promoted a transnational idea of art, one that lacked a consistent platform.

As a consequence of his position as an outsider and the scarcity of his works in public collections, Costa's life and work have attracted relatively little scholarly attention. Despite his undisputed importance for the development of Italian landscape painting as frequently stressed in literature on the Macchiaioli – a group of realist artists in Tuscany – and on *fin-de-siècle* Rome,²¹ during his lifetime he was appreciated by only a small number of Italian artists and an elite circle of international (mostly English) painters and patrons, and he was largely forgotten after his death. The exhibition on Costa and his English friends, organized by Sandra Berresford and Paul Nicholls in Milan in 1982,²² and Christopher Newall's 1989 exhibition *The Etruscans. Painters of the Italian Landscape 1850–1900*,²³ provided fundamental research on Costa's relations with English artists and patrons. On the occasion of the monographic exhibition on Costa at a commercial gallery in Rome in 1990, the Italian art historian Alessandro Marabottini published a critical and well-informed profile of Costa's life and works in the accompanying catalogue. The exhibition and catalogue *La Poesia del Vero. La pittura di paesaggio a Roma tra Ottocento e Novecento da Costa a Parisani* curated by Gianna Piantoni in 2001 underlined Costa's crucial position in the artistic societies known as the Etruscan School of Art and In Arte Libertas.²⁴ In 2009 Stefania Frezzotti and Francesca Dini organized the exhibition *Nino Costa* e

il paesaggio dell'anima. Da Corot ai macchiaioli al simbolismo in Castiglione, a small seaside resort on the Tuscan coast.²⁵ The show and accompanying catalogue succeeded in giving the public the opportunity to rediscover Costa and was an important first step towards the re-evaluation of his paintings and his crucial role as an intermediary in the nineteenth-century artistic world.²⁶

Until recently scholars have followed in the wake of nineteenth-century critics who concentrated exclusively on Costa's position as a master in the circle of his English friends, neglecting elements of reciprocity, which will be discussed in chapters four and five. Sandra Berresford attributed Costa's success with artists and collectors in England to a network based on personal sympathies. Giuliana Pieri's book *The Influence of Pre-Raphaelitism on Fin de siècle Italy*²⁷ puts this idea into perspective and suggests that Costa's approach to art and nature was in tune with ideas flourishing in Victorian England and that this was the primary reason for Costa's success with a select circle of artists and patrons across the Channel. Pieri's research is based on both literary and visual phenomena, an interdisciplinary approach also applied by Michele Amedei in his thesis on the literary and visual testimonies to the lure of Italy uniting the members of the Etruscan School of Art.²⁸ Following on from the work of these two scholars, this book adds a new perspective to current scholarship as it evaluates Costa's pivotal role in the establishment of a transnational idealist approach to landscape painting. It also proposes a closer reading of the cultural exchanges between Costa and his foreign colleagues and how these exchanges in turn resulted in a transnational, yet personal way of expression with a strong national accent, a phenomenon that – considered on a larger scale – demonstrates how transnationalism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive.

The first chapter introduces the reader to aspects of Costa's life and highlights the dynamics within the international artist community in Rome in the 1850s. This creative environment was crucial for shaping Costa's views on art and nature and manifests itself in works he began during this decade. Three major examples of his early work are closely analysed to define key aspects of his artistic concept, work process and philosophy. These fit in with tendencies within the realist movement, which are outlined to provide a theoretical framework to Costa's intuitive approach. The subsequent

¹¹ The correspondence is mostly in Italian and some in French. Costa's foreign friends all spoke Italian or, like Maraud Huish from the Fine Art Society in London, communicated with Costa in French. (Letter from Maraud Huish to Costa, London, 14 June 1882, NAM, Nino Costa Papers). Agresti relates that Costa had once resorted to Latin to make himself understood by an English doctor. The sketchbook from Costa's first trip to England, which will be referred to here as the Staffordshire sketchbook, features basic English vocabulary. But he does not seem to have pursued learning the language, as the letter to Cecilia Howard from 17 March 1884 (CHA, Giovanni Costa Papers) shows: "[...] sono un vecchio asino che non conosce la lingua de suoi migliori amici."

¹² The current location of the original material is unknown.

¹³ PIERI 2014; I worked with the originals that can be consulted at the Castle Howard archive in Yorkshire.

¹⁴ Castle Howard in Yorkshire, which in the nineteenth century was the home of Costa's friend and patron George Howard and his family, holds thirteen paintings by Costa. This is the most substantial

collection of Costa's work accessible to the public.

¹⁵ CELLINI 1928b, pp. 3–4.

¹⁶ The archive's holdings comprise about 230 images of paintings and oil sketches and a similar number of reproduced drawings. Letters and contemporary writings on Costa draw attention to Costa's experiments with mixed media and his increasing use of tempera towards the end of his life. However, the present text and captions will follow consensus in referring to oil as Costa's painting medium, as no representative study of the media Costa used has so far been undertaken.

¹⁷ COSTA 1983, pp. 215–216, 220.

¹⁸ *Palgrave Dictionary* 2009.

¹⁹ Initiatives include the symposium at Norwich University on *British Art as International Art, 1851 to 1960* in April 2012, the French-German research project *ArtTransForm* (2010–2015), which examines the transnational formation of artists between France and Germany from 1789 to 1870 and the proceedings of the conference on *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle* published by Grace

Brockington in 2009. Grace Brockington traced the origins of the word "Transnationalism" to Norman Angell's *The fruits of victory* (1921) where it was used to convey the post-World War One generation's search for peace. It developed from the concept of internationalism first discussed in 1851 and now "emphasises global networks and processes of exchange" (BROCKINGTON 2009, p. 8). Furthermore, Bettina Baumgärtel organized an international conference in 2010 and exhibition in 2011 considering cultural transfer and its impact on artistic national and international profiles entitled *Die Düsseldorfer Malerschule und ihre internationale Ausstrahlung 1819–1918 (Düsseldorfer Malerschule 2011)*.

²⁰ DELAP 2007, p. 10.

²¹ *Aspetti dell'arte a Roma* 1972.

²² BERRESFORD/NICHOLLS 1982, s.p.

²³ NEWALL 1989.

²⁴ *La Poesia del Vero* 2001.

²⁵ *Nino Costa e il paesaggio dell'anima* 2009.

²⁶ Also in 2009 the art historian Simona Rinaldi published a report on her technical analysis of Costa's *Women Loading Wood on Boats at Porto d'Anzio*. RINALDI 2009, pp. 205–216. The same year Francesco Leone published the commercial catalogue *Ragione e sentimento: l'eterno vero nell'arte senza tempo di Nino Costa. Otto dipinti dalla raccolta di Franco Di Castro* (LEONE 2009).

²⁷ PIERI 2007.

²⁸ AMEDEI 2010a.

three chapters focus on transnational exchanges between Costa and non-Italian artists and their cultural contexts. They are presented in a roughly chronological order: French and German examples had a greater impact on Costa at the beginning of his career, while his interaction with England intensified over the years and much influenced the kind of art Costa promoted in Rome after 1870. The last chapter is

dedicated to Costa's attempts to improve the quality of artistic production in his own country according to his standards and analyses the impact Costa's cosmopolitan training had on his Italian colleagues. He promoted the positive effects of transnational exchange for an artist's development first with the future Macchiaioli and towards the end of the century with enthusiastic young artists in Rome.

I. Aspects of Costa's life and work and the international context

"I had been dining at the Lepre, and, after dinner, I went to the Greco for coffee and a game of dominoes... He [Leighton] was sitting with a dark-skinned man of about forty, thin, supple, vigorous, small-headed, with an enormous but well-shapen nose of the true Etruscan type, eyes black and bright as diamonds, full of mischief, a very beautiful mouth unconcealed by a small moustache. This was Cavaliere Giovanni Costa. Leighton introduced me to his companion, and I saw at once that I had met a friend in the great patriot and painter – which shall I place first? for the two were so interwoven in Costa's strong, virile Etruscan character that each reacted upon the other, making up the man of whom Leighton justly said that he was an artist in a hundred and a man in a thousand."¹

The artist William Blake Richmond thus described his first encounter with Costa in 1866, an encounter that marked the beginning of a master-student relationship which turned into a close friendship. The vivacity and strong character reflected in the appearance of the charismatic Italian (fig. 1) led his contemporaries to either dislike him or to be drawn under his spell. Costa was passionate, frank in his opinions, jovial and spirited, in many ways the antithesis of the elegantly restrained and sophisticated Englishmen he met in Rome and a stereotype of the southerner whose zest for life northern travellers found particularly attractive. Firmly rooted in Italy Costa fought for his country's unification as an active participant of the Risorgimento and took the Italian countryside as the main focus of his oeuvre. Yet major stimuli for his career as an artist mostly came from colleagues outside the Apennine peninsula; a small but elite group of Englishmen interested in Aestheticism were fascinated by his intimate and harmonious renderings of the Italian countryside and became his devoted followers and patrons. One of Costa's most loyal patrons, Reverend Stopford Augustus Brooke, expressed his deeply felt admiration in a letter addressed to Costa shortly before the artist's death in 1903:

"I wish I could look back on so noble and faithful a work as you have done for mankind. It matters little that you have not received the public honours that you ought to have received. Your fame and the reverence due to your works is secure. All who love beauty in the future will honour the name of Giovanni Costa. And your pictures will live in the hearts of all those that love Nature, and the living spirit in her. There is no fear of that not being felt by the future. And this recognition will not be owing only to the loveliness of the work, but to your own faithfulness, courage, unworldliness in the pursuit of the divine perfection and breath in Nature which every picture that you have done reveals to those who have eyes to see it, and a heart to feel it."²

Nino Costa and the events leading to the unification of Italy in 1870

Giovanni Costa, Patriot and Painter – with this title the English nineteenth-century critic Julia Cartwright encapsulated Costa's two great passions: his country and his art.³ In Costa's memoirs much space is devoted to his patriotic activities, yet hardly any official documents have survived to support his account. An outline of the events leading to the unification of Italy under Vittorio Emanuele II in 1870 interspersed with a history of Costa's own participation will put his revolutionary activities within the Risorgimento movement in context and account for his strongly felt patriotism that so often determined the rhythm of his biography.⁴

At the turn of the eighteenth century most of Italy, except for the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, was under foreign rule. There was a strong Austrian presence in the north and the Spanish Bourbons held sway in the south.⁵ During the Napoleonic era (1790–1815) regional boundaries were broken down and laws and procedures were aligned, a development leading to unification albeit under a foreign government.⁶ The Congress of Vienna (September 1814 to June 1815) reversed this arrangement and brought Austrian sovereignty back into large areas of Italy.⁷ Following the end of the Napoleonic era a secret revolutionary society known as the Carbonari (Italian

¹ AGRESTI 1904, p. 129.

² Letter from Brooke to Costa, London, 1 January 1903, in AGRESTI 1904, p. 283. Although Brooke was Irish, he spent most of his life in London and is therefore appropriately considered among Costa's English patrons.

³ CARTWRIGHT 1883, p. 24.

⁴ For a thorough analysis of Italian nineteenth-century history see LILL 1988 and HEARDER 1983; for Costa's patriotic activities see

CECCUTI 2009, pp. 89–93; unfortunately Ceccuti only focuses on the biographies as sources without introducing new material. An in-depth analysis of Costa's role in the Risorgimento movement is still needed.

⁵ BOIME 1993, p. 20.

⁶ BOIME 1993, p. 21.

⁷ HEARDER 1983.