

H-Net Reviews

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Livio Pestilli. *Picturing the Lame in Italian Art from Antiquity to the Modern Era.* New York: Routledge, 2016. xii + 182 pp. Illustrations. \$149.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4724-6978-6.

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“Disability is not on anyone’s agenda”—these are words I recall from an introductory disability studies class. As can be seen in recent events, the role of disability advocates is often overlooked in the press, in planning for events (even disability-oriented conferences), or in facility design, let alone public budgets. In *Picturing the Lame*, art historian Livio Pestilli reinforces such an argument, even as he points out a paradox that portrayals of physical impairment are so common that they are overlooked. By failing to think about these portrayals, and how they vary through time, we lose a great amount of understanding of how social views of disability have changed over time.

This survey of attitudes is accomplished in six chapters that are mostly chronological: invisibility in the classical world turning to early Christian portrayals, the rise of medieval Christian devotion and charity, the emergence of renewed concern about the idle and fakers in the Renaissance and early modern world, the role of Rome in constraining the worst abuses of both angles, and the modern return to invisibility. Works across this span portray many disabilities in great variety, but Pestilli’s choice of orthopedic impairments arose because they are generally clearly visible, frequent, and can be related to existing sources of social commentary.

One of the achievements of this book is how it links changing portrayals of impairments and settings to the social attitudes of the times, thus emphasizing the social nature of disability. Early in the book, the author emphasizes this social nature by discussing the language of disability. He acknowledges the difficulties around adopting

a neutral stance, settling on “lame” as a historical term, even if it is one that is not popular today.

Another social matter is class difference: the already well-off had access to treatments, but the poor had to struggle to survive and their plight draws particular attention. Thus we do not have a truly representative body of work to draw on, although that lack also indicates social attitudes. In classical Italy, portrayals generally ignored disability as they did not fit with the ideals of the body. Change came with the emergence of Christianity as a dominant force in the third century. The early Christian apologists argued that all lives had value. In response, early Christians used disabilities as healing lessons and as opportunities to speak of the church’s mission to all. Early Christian art displays a great interest in the healing narratives of the gospels: most depictions include a healed body, one that mirrors redemption by being returned to society as whole and useful. This testimony to Christ the healer is also a testimony to him as redeemer, and points to hope for better life in the present along with hope to come in the next life. Likewise, from the fourth century onward, the developing cult of the saints testifies to interest in healing. In so doing, these portrayals are also theological: they both engage in revolutionary activity of overruling, fulfilling, and surpassing the stories of the Hebrew scriptures.

Two ideological swings emerge in this survey. The first is the relationship of impairment and divine action. In the earliest periods, an impairment was often a result of the gods being angered. As Christianity gained influence, a view that impairment was not some sort of divine

punishment took hold. This held through the medieval era, but swung back to punishment in the Renaissance and early modern times. This view has become increasingly unpopular again today. This transition from impurity and exclusion parallels another view: the disabled person, healed, moves to a place of privilege, and directly reflects God's saving actions.

A second change is in the attitude toward those who cannot support themselves. Christian teaching began to emphasize almsgiving as opening the doors to heaven. Thus humanitarian concern, although fragmentary, grew, even if it was in a sense selfish in seeking an ultimate divine repayment. Along with this came a view of communal responsibility that transformed a world of rank and social disparity. These Christian ideals pervaded the medieval era, especially as reformers who viewed voluntary poverty as being Christ-like found something in common with disabled people, who have historically been poor. As the church became more comfortable with building a Kingdom of God instead of expectantly preparing for Parousia, the saints became venerated for their healing stories, using the gospels as templates. And once again, this moved toward individual responsibility in the Renaissance and early modern eras. Likewise, today, we can find social debates over support,

and not just acceptance but inclusion of diversity.

Of particular interest in this discussion is the distrust of those who faked a disability to gain support. In the Letters of Paul and the Code of Justinian we observe rules distinguishing laziness from disease in judging need for support. With the arrival of Gutenberg's printing press in the fifteenth century, wider dissemination of stories grew—and, reflecting the times, these stories emphasized fakery. As time marched on, distrust grew, as did formal government institutions to provide for those who are truly in need.

A broad view sees the disabled person as a metaphor for the general human condition and its vulnerability to disability. The meaning of this condition has varied through history, from unsightly to the embodiment of Christ, changing to a threat of cheats with the emergence of market economies. Today's attitude is also ambiguous. A considered conclusion notes the case of Enrico Toti (1882-1916), an amputee who nevertheless served in a local bicycle corps in World War I. He died in combat and became a hero. But a statue of him portrays a noble Greek athlete, displaying the ambivalence typical of a society that increasingly required beggars to leave an area while simultaneously idolizing those who "overcome" a disability.

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