

C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
2 June 2021

In a recent *Abwechslung*, I outed myself as a lover of rusty trash compactors and cluttered interiors. That I prefer them over shiny gadgets and bland widgets can in all likelihood be attributed to a *déformation professionnelle*. It's a preference I am happy to own, since I see little point in desperately searching for affinities between old master printing and interior decorating (unless, that is, the prints in question are *Riesenholschnitte* or were meant to be used as wallpaper—I will reserve those for another missive).

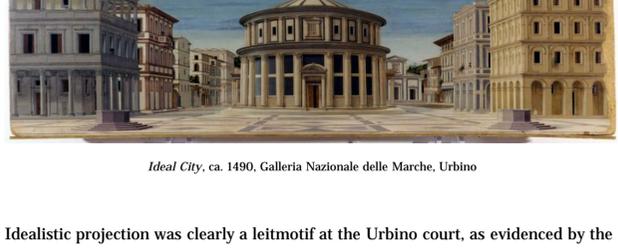
Yet doesn't writing about such retrograde convictions in an email already represent a concession to progress? Compare such willingness to compromise with the unrelenting stance of someone like Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino (1422–1482)!



Justus van Gent or/and Pedro Berruguete, *Federico da Montefeltro and His Son Guidobaldo*, ca. 1475
Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino

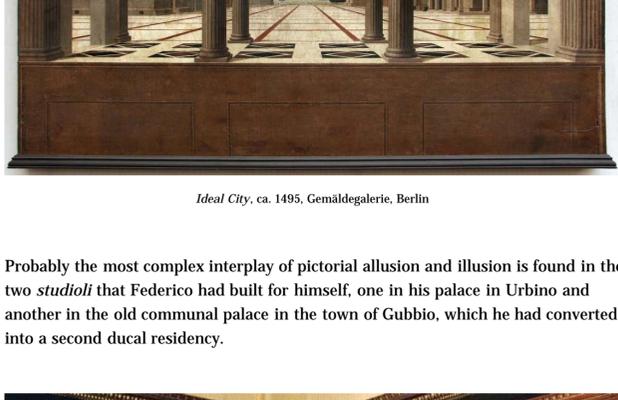
One of the most successful warlords of Renaissance Italy, Federico also had high intellectual ambitions. As a patron of the arts and book collector, he was so fastidious, that, as Edgar Wind tells us in the chapter on “The Mechanization of Art” in his study *Art and Anarchy* (1960), he “would not allow a printed book to enter his library. For him the act of reading a classical text was desecrated by the contemplation of the printed page. Words that were beautifully written by a scribe seemed to address his eye and mind in a personal way which was obliterated by mechanical type; and a manuscript illuminated by hand-painted miniatures gave him a pleasure that no woodcut could equal.” Wind goes on to analyze Federico's stance as only partially “the kind of preciousness that is sometimes found among modern collectors who have turned Veblen's principle of conspicuous waste into a policy of sound investment.” He also tries to understand it as a reaction to the fact that early printed books *pretended* to look like manuscripts in the same way that early pictorial photographs tried to look like paintings. “Before the film had found its own powerful idiom, it looked like degraded theatre, just as television now looks like degraded film,” Wind writes. It's a pity we can't ask him to opine on video or digital photography! Wind surely would have interesting things to say, since his exacting way of thinking made him turn even Federico's snobbery against itself: “Had the Duke of Urbino been consistent in his prejudices, he might have extended his disdain for manufacture from printed books to his hand-written library. The scribe who copied one manuscript from another, was he not a degraded mechanic compared with the rhapsodes who had recited the *Iliad* live? At the time of the rhapsodes, no doubt, there must have been critics who fastidiously regretted the better days when the poets themselves recited their sounds and had not yet relegated that function to a tribe of menial substitutes, etc.”

Jacob Burckhardt, in his 1860 classic *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*, describes Federico as “one of the most splendid representatives” of a Renaissance prince. He sees Federico's realm and the court in Urbino as well-calculated and well-organized works of art. Perhaps it was also the ruthlessness of the *condottiere* that fueled Federico's desire for not just visual propaganda but also aesthetically refined representation.



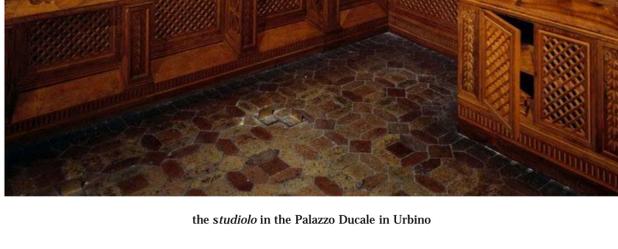
Ideal City, ca. 1490. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino

Idealistic projection was clearly a leitmotif at the Urbino court, as evidenced by the enigmatic paintings that each depict a perfectly constructed *città ideale* devoid of people. To this day, the artists who created them remain unknown, but the paintings (two of the three that are known are shown here) all seem to originate from Federico's court.



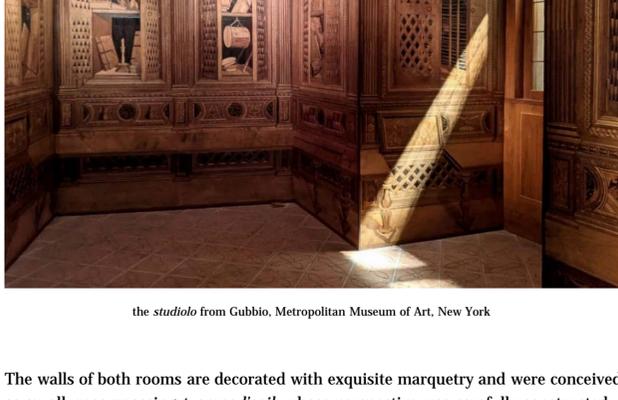
Ideal City, ca. 1495. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

Probably the most complex interplay of pictorial allusion and illusion is found in the two *studioli* that Federico had built for himself, one in his palace in Urbino and another in the old communal palace in the town of Gubbio, which he had converted into a second ducal residency.



the *studiolo* in the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino

Whereas the *studiolo* in Urbino can still be seen *in situ*, the one in Gubbio was sold in 1874. By then, the building was being used as a silk-spinning mill. The buyer, Prince Filippo Massimo Lancelotti, planned to have it reinstalled in his villa in Frascati, but this never came to pass and, in 1937, the packed-up panels of the *studiolo* were bought by the dealer Adolph Loewi. Two years later, Loewi succeeded in selling them to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the ensemble alternated once more between gallery and storage before it was installed—now thoroughly researched and carefully restored—in its current form in 1996.



the *studiolo* from Gubbio, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

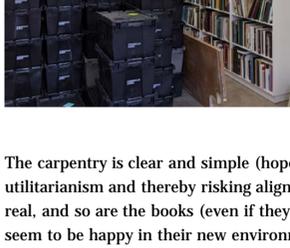
The walls of both rooms are decorated with exquisite marquetry and were conceived as an all-encompassing *trompe l'oeil*, whose perspective was carefully constructed for a beholder of medium height. The lower zone in the Gubbio *studiolo* shows a balustraded bench. Above, pilasters frame cabinets with latticed doors that are left ajar at different angles. They contain numerous objects that themselves allow for a seemingly endless display of perspectival tricks: books; candlesticks; writing utensils; musical, geometric, geodetic, and astronomical instruments; arms and armor.



Each object is itself a symbol of the duke's interest in and mastery of the many disciplines of *arma et litterae*. Yet, all these “spiritual tools” (André Chastel) are just images whose depiction by means of wood inlay (intarsia) demanded an especially sophisticated level of craftsmanship—*not* the unsimular to that which the duke expected from the scribes of his books. Behind all the *trompe l'oeil* cabinetry, however, are neither books nor instruments but merely walls (or, in the museum in New York, probably a sophisticated climate-control system). The *studiolo* was therefore a place not of study but of meditation—or, more likely still, the room as a whole functioned as a representation of the idea of meditation.

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One could say that with C.G. Boerner's recent move from the third to the fourth floor in the West Chelsea Arts Building, our New York gallery has now also turned into a *studiolo*—as long as one uses the term in a decidedly different and far less precious way.



The carpentry is clear and simple (hopefully without betraying WALL-E's utilitarianism and thereby risking alignment with EVE's slickness) but the shelves are real, and so are the books (even if they are printed). Most importantly, the prints seem to be happy in their new environment, and their mats have taken on a new role in smoothing the transition from the colorful (and somewhat messy) bookshelves to the printed images.



our New York gallery at 526 West 26 Street, now in room 419

Dare I say that the pandemic restraints are gradually easing up? If so, you might want to stop by the next time you are in town and see the new space for yourself.

And to anyone worried that the new setup might be too organized for C.G. Boerner's notoriously untidy “style”: I promise to always keep some framed prints resting on the floor.



previous examples of our signature prints-on-the-floor display at the Minneapolis Print and Drawing Fair

