Le Polemiche al Caffè Michelangiolo

Shiri Gross
University of Pennsylvania
The Macchiaioli have been defined as a group of Italian artists, democratic intellectuals, and activists who emerged in the social and political context of the Italian Risorgimento. Although scarcely existent in today’s public cultural consciousness when compared with the nearly concurrent French impressionist movement, Italians recognize the Macchiaioli for their definitive role in the artistic, intellectual, and political life of nineteenth-century Florence. Considered by theorists today to be early modernists, a movement of its own distinct from impressionism, the group distanced itself from the traditional standards of the Accademia delle Belle Arti di Firenze and were recognized by their community for their innovative experimentation with plein-air studies, tonal opposition, sketch-like effect, and a thematic focus on nature and the quotidian. Their radical identity in the realm of art is considered inseparable from their political values in support of the Risorgimento and Giuseppe Garibaldi. Within their community, they had gained a notorious reputation for their fervent support of their polemical views and were disparaged publicly by those with more traditional values. As the state-of-affairs changed in Tuscany and the Kingdom of Italy was announced in 1861, the artists aligned themselves with political leaders and society elites who shared their nationalist values. This enabled them to form a base of support, but quickly after the group had essentially dissolved.¹

Despite the apparent clarity of this narrative, retrospective attempts to define the Macchiaioli movement have faced serious theoretical challenges in delineating a framework of time, membership, and shared values.² While the Macchiaioli artists are considered within historical scholarship to have been a cohesive group that pushed for radical change in art and politics, these values in relation to their multifaceted group at the time were not
as definitive or explicit as it may seem. Examining retrospective attempts to distill their artistic, philosophical, and political ideas with skepticism, a reconsideration of articles produced contemporaneously with the short life of the group, from roughly 1848 to 1862, along with supporting historical facts brought to light since by recent scholars, indicates a challenging conclusion. When considering the definition of a group as “a collection of individuals who have relations to one another that make them interdependent to some significant degree,” the Macchiaioli can only be understood as a group defined in that they united in opposition to existing structures in their culture and society. The strength of their shared values in the absence of the challenges presented by the Florentine art world, politics, and general public is dubious—hence the dissolution of the group shortly following the events of and reception at L’Esposizione Nazionale.

It is not an undeveloped argument within the current literature that the Macchiaioli positioned themselves in opposition to the Accademia and the art criticism world of their day. However, through their writings, these artists illustrate an indiscriminate polemic against their cultural and social world, leading them even to admit their own exaggeration. Though they certainly distanced themselves from the Accademia, their artistic values were never in direct opposition to those of the institution, but nonetheless served as a mechanism for their ideological connection to one another and their definition to the public. Likewise, their rejection of the critics was necessitated by journalists’ attacks on their artistic legitimacy, and there is no proof that this was more than a defensive reaction. Perhaps their patriotism could have been seen as the initial driving value which united them in battle, in ideology, and in painting; however, the decision to reject the awards bestowed upon them by the newly united Kingdom of Italy at the National Exposition in 1861 cannot be disregarded, as most scholars have done, as a trivial action since this public rejection signifies a lack of integrity in this “fundamental” group principle.
It is perhaps for this reason that a closer examination of their actions during the Italian National Exposition of 1861 is warranted. Contemporary scholars and members of the Macchiaioli themselves cease to characterize the artists as an active group once political and cultural circumstances had changed by 1862: they stopped frequenting their local caffè, diverged in artistic explorations, and ceased to collaborate in public entirely. Examining the short span of time during which these artists united with increased skepticism, the Macchiaioli can best be characterized as a group that united in opposition to what they were not, rather than representing independent, cohesive, and binding ideals that necessitated an ongoing union.

This discussion will focus primarily on understanding their brief union in relationship to the social, political, and cultural landscape within which the group was functioning, and propose that the retrospective impression of their identity as a cohesive group is afforded by their radical disposition in the circumstances of their epoch. The present argument therefore will place interpretive emphasis on several articles: Signorini’s articles in *La Nuova Europa* in 1862, Giuseppe Abbiati’s publication in *La Gazzetta del Popolo* in 1861, the Altamura’s defensive response to a commentator published in *La Nazione* in 1861 all use the group’s later writings and historical information to further support these articles. In the end, the evidence considered together will illustrate the constructive nature of the group’s identity in relationship to their society. Unlike other historical assessments of this group, the present study will question the entire notion of their group identity set forth by their later spokesmen, Adriano Cecioni, Diego Martelli, and Telemaco Signorini. The discussion will also address a set of three articles written during the National Exposition which have yet to be reproduced in the literature or addressed in any substantial way. Examining their controversial rhetoric within the Florentine community, especially in regard to these particular articles, a fuller understanding of how the group’s reactionary formation can be discerned, and later notions of their
central identity can be challenged.

Who Were The Macchiaioli and How Do We Know?

As touched upon earlier, the Macchiaioli were a group of Italian artists active from roughly 1848 until about 1862 who worked and lived in Tuscany. The core members of the group as considered today are Cristiano Banti, Vito D’Ancona, Giovanni Fattori, Silvestro Lega, Serafino De Tivoli, Vincenzo Cabianca, Giuseppe Abbati, Odoardo Borrani, Adriano Cecioni, Raffaello Sernesi, and Telemaco Signorini, although many peripheral members are also cited and will be mentioned in this discussion. Early members of the group formed at the Caffè Michelangiolo on via Larga, today via Cavour, where the artists congregated in their own back room, off-limits to the normal clientele. Many of the group who participated in the battles of independence, including Serafino De Tivoli, Gerolamo Induno, Giovanni Costa and others, found themselves next to Garibaldi in the resistance. Giuseppe Abbati, for example, participated in Garibaldi’s 1860 campaign and lost his right eye at the Battle of Capua. Likewise, after the revolution of April 27th 1859, Lega, Signorini, Cecioni, Borrani, and Diego Martelli joined in combat in the Lombardian campaign against the Austrians that summer. Interestingly, the Macchiaioli included artists from all regions of Italy, Giuseppe Abbati hailing from Naples, Vincenzo Cabianca coming from Verona, and Silvestro Lega growing up in Modigliana, to cite a few examples. Individuals from other geographical areas fled their “indigenous subordinated cultures” or were displaced by the turbulent revolutionary years and gathered in Florence where they could find patriotic, like-minded others to discuss revolutionary ideas with at the Caffè Michelangiolo. Thus, these experiences as artists on the battlefield forged a bond among the members of the group who expressed support for a cohesive “Italian” identity in both politics and art.

The Macchiaioli movement has been considered “the first flowering during the modern period of a truly indigenous
Italian art.” In general, the artists shared the desire to capture the true quality of light and sensation through their painting. Thus, the unfinished quality of their later work was derived from their emphasis on “transitory effects of light and color” that intended to reflect lived visual experience and subjective feeling.8 The Macchiaioli’s collective artistic production consists of a rich diversity of style and subjects. Many of the artists produced paintings of historical themes and battles, aligning with their general interest in fostering a national identity. Paintings such as Stefano Ussi’s The Expulsion of the Duke of Athens from Florence (1861), Vincenzo Cabianca’s Florentine Story-Tellers (1860), and Giovanni Fattori’s The Italian Camp After the Battle of Magenta (Event of 3 June 1859) (1859-62) illustrate this stylistic commonality within the movement. Then, their early experimentation with chiaroscuro, inspired by the work of Neapolitan painter Domenico Morelli and French artists Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps,9 is represented in works such as Morelli’s Tasso and Eleonora D’Este (1863), and his Mocking of Christ. Between 1854 and 1855, the Macchiaioli began to experiment with outdoor sketching, such as Signorini’s The Street Vendor of Spezia (1858-59).10 They also became interested in depicting contemporary Italian life and scenes of nature. They traveled all around Tuscany to locations such as Castiglioncello, Livorno, and Montemurlo to study and capture the effects of light, which can be seen in work such as Banti’s Gathering of the Peasant Women and Cabianca’s Peasant Women at Montemurlo (1860-62). Thus, the artists, although definitely cohesive in their emphasis on innovative visual effects and their break from academic tradition, encompassed a variety of stylistic phases and themes within the body of work that is attributed to the group at large.

The artists were not considered historically as a nineteenth-century artistic movement until their rediscovery in the beginning of the twentieth century, attributable to their first exposition as a group. In 1905, Cristiano Banti’s private collection was exhibited
after his death in an exhibition entitled *Arte Toscana: Prima Esposizione*. After the *Esposizione Retrospettiva* of 1910 held by the *Società delle Belle Arti di Firenze*, the artists finally gained critical appreciation and reputation within all divisions of the Italian artistic community, and an aesthetic preference for the artists’ less traditional style began to be expressed.\(^{11}\)

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Following this heightened interest in the indigenous Italian modern art movement, the first recorded attempt to retrospectively survey the Macchiaioli movement took place in 1965 with the intention of celebrating the centenary of the group in an exhibition at the *Galleria d’Arte Moderna* in Rome.\(^{12}\) The exhibition directors were presented with a set of challenges in uncharted historical territory, introducing thematic and temporal issues historians have since had to consider. To begin, they had to decide which painters could be considered part of the Macchiaioli and which should be excluded. In addition, they had established date for the group’s formation that did not correspond with the writings from Signorini and Martelli claiming that the early *aggruppamento* (grouping) at the Caffè Michelangiolo took place in 1848. However, it is understandable that the group would initially be seen as having formed in 1856, as Dario Durbé notes, due to the multi-phased nature of the movement.\(^{13}\) Art historians have noted the return from the 1855 Universal Exposition in
Paris\textsuperscript{14} as the initiation of the experimentation with light and shadow, deriving inspiration from the \textit{chiaroscuro} of Decamps and Troyon, as well as \textit{ton gris} which had gained popularity in Paris at the time. It was in the beginning of the 1850s when the most heavily involved painters began meeting to develop their figurative language about their art and pushed against the institutional artistic standards set forth by the Florentine Accademia. Signorini notes the shift in focus from the battlefield to the canvas in his \textit{libretto}:

\begin{quote}
\textit{From the years 48 to 55, as a result of the time, the conspiracies and pranks prevailed, from 55 to 60 with Tivoli’s and Altamura’s return from Paris and with the Esposizione italiana getting closer... the crazy people from Via Larga did less pranks and got extremely passionate about their art.}\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

To further confuse chronology and definitions within the movement, Signorini designated 1855 as the year the \textit{macchia} was born and 1862 as the year that it died.\textsuperscript{16} The \textit{macchia} movement, as Signorini defines it, was characterized as such because of a cohesive usage of a violent chiaroscuro inspired by trends in France and the Neapolitan painter Domenico Morelli.\textsuperscript{17} Between 1855 and 1862, roughly, the artists had been instead described by critics as \textit{effettisti} and other similar disparaging names that sought to attack the sketch-like quality of their work. However, the term “Macchiaioli” first appeared as it was derogatorily applied to them by Giuseppe Rigutini under the pseudonym \textit{Luigi} in the Florentine journal \textit{Gazzetta del Popolo} on November 3rd, 1862.\textsuperscript{18} Until then, Broude notes, they did not utilize the term \textit{macchia} nor call themselves the Macchiaioli, and “the \textit{macchia} had never been, nor was it ever to become, a codified aesthetic that imposed stylistic and procedural rules.”\textsuperscript{19} Thus, ironically, 1862 is the year of the “death” of the \textit{macchia} experimentation, yet also the year that the term Macchiaioli itself was adopted by the group. Even
more ironically, 1862 marks the last year in which the group has been recognized by scholars to associate as an artistic and social unit. Hence the term Macchiaioli had been adopted almost retrospectively, especially by later auto-biographical writings and essays of Signorini, Martelli, and Cecioni, and was by no means a name they called themselves during this period of experimentation.

Besides their obvious similarities in style, the way that the Macchiaioli have since come to be understood as a distinct group with a set of ideals is through specific members’ retrospective, autobiographical narratives. It is the writings produced by Diego Martelli, Telemaco Signorini, and Adriano Cecioni that attempted to define what these friends, who shared the desire to experiment with more progressive styles of painting, were doing between the years 1848 and 1862. In 1867, Signorini and Martelli created the *Gazzettino delle Arti del Disegno* with the aim of promoting critical writings addressing what had happened, and at the time was still happening, in the field of art within Italy and Europe in general, mostly regarding themes pertaining to the Macchiaioli. Likewise, Signorini’s *libretto* entitled *Caricaturisti e Caricaturati al Caffè ‘Michelangiolo’* was published in 1893 as a tribute to the group’s friendship and reunions at the caffè. Adriano Cecioni, a sculptor, painter, and early friend of the group, published critical prose and polemical writings in defense
of the Macchiaioli art, which he published sporadically in artistic journals roughly twenty years after the dissolution of the group. He also collaborated with Signorini and Martelli in establishing the Giornale Artistico in 1873. Martelli was an international figure, prominent in both the Italian and French art criticism world and played a large role in shaping historical conceptions of the group through his polished, cohesive arguments in defining their philosophies and through the formation of these periodicals as platforms from which group members could narrate their story.

In an 1877 lecture entitled Su L’Arte, Diego Martelli presented the Macchiaioli group to the Circolo filologico in Livorno. Like Luigi, an important critic in defining the Macchiaioli movement who will be discussed later, Martelli argued that the macchia did not intend to mean opposition to form, but instead macchie (patches) of color or tone. However, Martelli’s attempts to appropriate this term, which had been originally used as an insult, to define the movement have been criticized as anachronistic attempts to align it with intellectual currents in European philosophy, in order to establish a “serious” definition of the group’s aesthetic. Broude references Martelli’s familiarity with the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley of perception of his day, as he was particularly interested in the work of physicist Hermann von Helmholtz who “denied any correspondence between sensations and things they are supposed to denote,” proposing instead a theory that “our perceptions are merely signs or abstract symbols.” There was no documentation within the primary Macchiaioli literature to suggest that the group was opposed to form. Nevertheless, Martelli’s work played an important role in initiating the idea of a “macchia theory” that was later expanded on by Cecioni around 1880.

In the context of art criticism of his day, scholars note the importance of Cecioni’s originality in blending aesthetic principles and mechanics of art while pushing the group towards established notions of modern realism. In a series of
essays written around 1880, Cecioni combined his biographical recollections of the artists with his “theoretical presentation of the macchia aesthetic” largely associated with Martelli’s work. According to Cecioni, the practice of art necessitated a backing theory: “...A piece of art can not be considered as such if it’s not supported from the principles that hold the same art, in front of which one can not reach a compromise.” Following a positivist conception of art, Cecioni stated in his writings that the *macchia* is not an “*abbozzo*” (sketch) but “*una scienza*” (a science). The push for a ‘methodology’ can be discerned in Cecioni’s demand for “*just one color stain for the face, another one for the hair, another one for the napkin*.” Expanding on the scientific, inquisitorial nature of the artists’ approach towards their world, he writes:

The macchiaioli, for those who don’t know the meaning of this word, were the first people that started to search and to study the true reason of the effects, with many drafts of stains and with the local colors and they were now trying an effect of the sun, the shadows or of the rain. They were looking to find a way to get a right division between light and shades, without the interaction of the two.

Broude warns, however, that although it is tempting to appoint Cecioni as the group’s “philosopher,” as the critics in the early twentieth century certainly did, his writings about the group’s aesthetics were colored by “subsequent changes in his own aesthetic attitudes and knowledge of later events in the history of European art.” Though he had always been preoccupied with defining the group’s technique, other writers such as Signorini point out the limited effect of this influence at the time of the actual experimentation. Cecioni’s retrospective writings regarding the scientific conceptualization of art can more clearly be linked to later writers such as Émile Zola than the Macchiaioli’s actual practice and insight in regard to what they were doing as a “group.”
Further to this point, in his later writings Signorini rejected any notion that the group gathered at the Caffè Michelangiolo had any higher philosophy guiding their conversations and experimentations. In his article “Caffè Michelangiolo” in 1867, Signorini reprimanded a Milanese journalist for calling the group “La Chiesa dell’Arno.” This characterization, put forth in an artistic review, illustrates that the artists’ frequent reunions at the caffè and their identity as a group were certainly recognized by the public at the time and deemed ideological by their critics. However, Signorini emphatically argues that the group did not follow any set of values, citing the decentralization of the group as further proof of the validity of this claim,

Our decentralization only proves what we were not, neither are we the priests of a new idea, nor are we affiliated with an artistic lobby, if we were, we would still live in a brotherly organization, how the priests of any association live.30

A church, as he continues, does not cease to exist with the loss of its followers. He characterizes the group instead as having a strong sense of irony and self-awareness, resulting in an ambivalence towards establishing a rigorous, comprehensive philosophy. As Signorini explains, they were not interested in being considered priests of a religion, and throughout his writings he continually recognizes the confining constrictions their political affiliations placed on them and their identities as artists within Florentine society.31 He depicts the artists, therefore, as benign progressive thinkers construed as polemical only by their adversaries. In his article in the Gazzettino di Disegno, he suggests that the artists desired to theorize less and create more:

And if you met a deserter of our reunion you would tell him:
- Oh, why did you not come last night at the Caffè?
- What do you want, we only discuss and fight and we don’t
have fun like we used to do, I think it’s a lot better to work more and to discuss less.
- Yes, but you don’t understand that to discuss the life of art, and to make progress it is necessary to see each other….
- Yes, yes you’re correct…. Goodbye.32

Evidently, Cecioni, Signorini, and Martelli’s retrospective presentations of the Macchiaioli group contradict one another. Cecioni took notable issue with Martelli’s retrospective presentation of the group, stating:

Il signor Martini si e anche dimenticato che, rammentando il caffè michelangelo, egli rese doppiamente necessaria quella lettera, la quale par fatta a posta per rispondere al modo con cui egli riporto l’aneddoto; modo col quale non mise solamente in dubbio i meriti dei macchiaioli, ma si provo a beffeggiarli, e dopo ch’io ebbi compiuto il dovere di rimettere le cose al loro posto, dicendo e dimostrando che i macchiaioli eran ben altra cosa di quello che il signor Martini volveva far credere al pubblico, egli osserva che, ciò facendo, mi sono divagato perché nessuno egli dice ha mai sognato di porre in dubbio i loro meriti. E carina l’idea!33

Comparing Cecioni, Martelli, and Signorini’s writings, it becomes apparent that the cohesiveness of a Macchiaioli methodology and philosophy depends on the view of the beholder. Though fundamental and useful sources for understanding the Macchiaioli movement, the writings of Signorini, Cecioni, and Martelli are inevitably tainted by the twenty or more years of distance from when the group’s activity had taken place, and therefore put forth narratives that may be slightly illusory. Due to their irreplaceable insights these texts must inevitably be utilized in any discussion of the group, but they must nevertheless be considered with skepticism and in tandem with other sources in an attempt to gain a more accurate understanding the group in its time.
The Accademia and the Critics

Perhaps the second most distinctive value that the group held in common, after their patriotism, was a closely-related disdain for the Florentine formal and thematic standards of the official Accademia. As Leopoldo II lost popularity and became increasingly dependent on Austrian reinforcement, the Accademia became symbolic of foreign domination of Tuscan institutions, emanating messages of royalty and imperialism. Since the formation of the Accademia in the mid-sixteenth century, founding members such as Vasari and Borghini were deeply connected politically to the Grand Duke—Cosimo I de’ Medici at the time of its founding. When Tuscany was taken over by Habsburg-Lorraine, however, the connection between the Grand Duke and the Accademia remained strong regardless of foreign ducal origins. Paintings such as “Portrait of His Imperial and Royal Highness, the Grand Duke Leopoldo II, our Lord” (1840) by Carlo Morelli demonstrate the ideological stance of the institution in the mid-nineteenth century. During this time, the Accademia continued to promote the schools of neoclassicism and romanticism, styles which art historians describe as imposed on the Italians “as a result of military conquest and political domination.” The Macchiaioli took issue with the foreign origin of these styles in the official program, and instead demonstrated a desire to return to Italian glory in painting, pointing to the
chiaroscuro of Italian Renaissance painters such as Caravaggio.\textsuperscript{39}

Although they all began their training in regional academies, Cecioni, for example, is described by Diego Martelli as having been favored by the Accademia as a young student, both he and the other artists came to reject the academic pedagogy. The Accademia stressed methodological and “pains-taking study” of perspective, anatomy, ornament, and drawing from plaster casts and the nude body.\textsuperscript{40} In the context of a capo-lavoro tradition that favored finish and detail, sketch exercises utilizing the chiaroscuro effect, meaning they emphasized the sharp contrast of dark and light, were not deemed worthy practices to implement into the official program of the Florentine Academy.\textsuperscript{41} Sketching practices were not considered totally irrelevant, as they did play a vital role in the evolution of a masterpiece. In direct disapproval of the Macchiaioli’s practice, however, academicians suggested that true skill could be demonstrated by the ability to “sustain the original effect of the sketch in the final tableau without sacrificing order, finish, and detail.”\textsuperscript{42} However, the Macchiaioli’s practice became increasingly harmonious with the principles of realism as they focused more on exposing the texture of the brushes on the surface of the work and emphasized effect. A work with these qualitative properties could only be considered a mere sketch in their eyes, and thus accepting it as finished work was equivalent to leaving a work in a state of incompletion. This particular aspect of the group’s aesthetic principles constituted a huge controversy and a break with the traditionalists.\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, the group’s interest in sketch, effect, and landscape, has been noted in scholarship “as a form of resistance to the practices of the grand-ducal Florentine academy.”\textsuperscript{44}

Up until the mid-nineteenth century, the market for Florentine contemporary art rested upon the commissions of the Grand Dukes and the promotional function of the annual expositions of the Accademia. As grand-ducal patronage diminished and commissions more generally ceased to exist, artists, especially painters, needed to find new outlets to market
their work.

The decrease in relevance of the formal academies for modern painters was a trend taking place across Europe during this era as well. Under these circumstances, the Società Promotrice delle Belle Arti was founded in 1843 with the help of four-hundred Florentine citizens in the cultural and artistic world, including important artistic and cultural figures such as Anatolius Demidoff, Gino Capponi, Paolo Ferroni, Alfonso La Marmora, Giuseppe Bezzuoli, Francesco Nenci and Tommaso Gazzarrini, and sponsored by the Grand Duke himself.\textsuperscript{45}

The promotrice generally rejected historical paintings, erotic sculptures and religious paintings, and instead took interest in scenes of contemporary life and nature, baffling art critics of the day and inviting the presentation of the Macchiaioli artists’ work.\textsuperscript{46}

With the opening of the Società Promotrice, the official Accademia slowly ceased to be considered a valid promotional vehicle for contemporary art, further illustrating the instability of the Accademia at this point in its history.\textsuperscript{47}

It was within this context that the Macchiaioli artists were able to promote their work and separate themselves from the practices of the Accademia.

In his later writings, Cecioni consistently described the macchia movement as a revolt against the academy and everything for which it stood.\textsuperscript{48} Cecioni fervently described the Macchiaioli’s relation to the Accademia as such: “A significant number of young people detached themselves from any type of academic teaching, and they only took nature as their teacher.”\textsuperscript{49}

Likewise, Signorini acknowledges that the Macchiaioli were publicly recognized as “A significant number of young people detached themselves from any type of academic teaching, and they only took nature as their teacher.”\textsuperscript{50}

Signorini also wrote of the polemical hypocrisy of the Accademia, stating that la vecchia scuola accademia had to defend its territory only to discard it when their opponents fully coexisted with their ideas. All across the writings of the Macchiaioli artists, including those who did not write frequently, such as Fattori,\textsuperscript{51}
the artists espoused anti-Accademia sentiments in a polemic euphony. Hence, in combination with their vastly differing aesthetic principles from the academy, a characterization of the group as inherently anti-academic is natural.

It is Signorini’s writing, however, that elucidates the exaggerated nature of some of Cecioni’s oppositional proclamations. Denied academic commissions, as Signorini noted in his article, the Macchiaioli had to severely break from the values expounded by the Florentine school, and thus bind closer together in order to create a progressive definition of art.\(^5\) In another 1874 article in *Cose d’Arte*, Signorini makes a very important distinction about the group’s relationship to the Accademia:

> In the year 1855, Morelli, Altamura and Tivoli, back from Paris Exposition, found a major defect in the official academic Italian art of the day, the absolute lack of solidity, the absolute deficiency of chiaroscuro… the art of the past sanctioned the new researches - Rembrandt and Velasquez, Caravaggio and Tintoretto…. Thus art, brought back to a recovery of those qualities that academic teaching seemed to have banished forever, took its first step, which was excessive, as every revolution that bears fruit is, and exaggerated its principles to an extreme, producing the macchia, which was nothing more than a violent chiaroscuro. Nevertheless, these artists, who were inventing nothing new, provoked many angry polemics and were called innovators, subversives, rebels, and worse.\(^5\)

To support his later claim, Signorini’s writings published in 1862 in *Nuova Europa* echoed the previous statement, lamenting,

> Although in all other cities in Italy where Societies for the Promotion of the Arts exist, exhibitions are held in the rooms of the Academy, in Florence for some unknown reason and
on account of some inexplicable duplicity, new rooms have been chosen for the purpose with a consequent waste of money and a lesser concourse of visitors. Thus modern art, being little exposed to the public eye, loses its moral and educational influence, and the neglected artists are not spurred on to further effort.

Thus, this openly antagonistic relationship must certainly be considered as reciprocal at minimum, if not entirely instigated by those in support of the Accademia, and only gradually integrated into the Macchiaioli’s identity as a defensive response.

Broude extends Signorini’s argument, explaining that the artists were not so much rejecting the formal values of art as objecting to a loss of vigor at the “hands of its nineteenth-century academic guardians.” Their espoused argument was thus not rooted in an anti-academic sentiment nor anti-traditionalist values. As Boime also suggests, “their dissent took the form of anti-academicism, but in fact it was aimed at the foreign, specifically Austrian, domination of Tuscan institutions.”54 Likewise, they were not the first in the Florentine community to take issue with the Accademia for its disconnect from the greatness of the Italian artistic past.55 Broude continues to argue, in fact, that the Accademia’s pedagogical practice, as discussed previously, was not fundamentally opposite to the Macchiaioli’s experimentation, and that many of them utilized the plein-air sketching techniques that they learned from the academies even as they were distancing themselves from the institution itself.

Likewise, the Florentine Academy ran competitions for the execution of a bozzetto a olio d’invenzione, in which many members of the Macchiaioli participated. Silvestro Lega won the triennial painting competition in 1852 with a bozzetto on a biblical theme, and Adriano Cecioni won a prize for a bozzetto in bassorilievo d’invenzione in 1857.56 Thus it becomes evident that their artistic practices were not entirely divorced from what they had learned from, and what remained in favor within, the
academies. In addition, even Cecioni, the anti-academic himself, still associated himself with the institution to a certain degree. Though it is clear that the artists had some ideological differences with the institution, especially politically, later dogmatic attempts to define themselves as completely oppositional to the institution appear exaggerated. Rejection of the Accademia at the time perhaps reflects a striving for ideological cohesion with one another as they were experimenting with progressive ideas in art and being condemned for that experimentation.

The artists also faced scathing criticism from journalists who supported traditional notions of the distinction between sketch and finish. The war with the press was so fundamental to the identity of the Macchiaioli that the name itself, “Macchiaioli,” had originally been a derogatory term launched against them in an infamous public battle with a critic after the first official exposition containing many of their works following their grand reception at the National Exposition a year prior. This specific battle, between La Nuova Europa and the La Gazzetta del Popolo, is worth examining as a rich exemplar of the group’s relationship to the critics and the main arguments espoused by both sides. Signorini first published an article in La Nuova Europa on October 10th, 1862 under the pseudonym X as an act to generate publicity for the expositions. Since being recently divorced from the Accademia, he explains, “the works of many young artists, who are striving to free art from the bonds of the old methods…. hang completely unnoticed and abandoned in these rooms.”

Signorini laments, [A] city proverbially known as a cradle of the arts, is, at the same time, extremely unfair to the artists themselves, who, in the exercise of their normal profession ask not only for a scrap in order to keep body and soul together but beg more eagerly for the moral satisfaction of publicity and a constant flow of visitors.
However, once they received a derogatory response published in the *Gazzetta del Popolo*, Signorini fully applied himself in the public battle. Signorini published his public defenses in *La Nuova Europa* against comments made in the *Gazzetta del Popolo* written by Luigi, the pseudonym for Giuseppe Rigutini (1829 - 1903). Rigutini was a “noted linguist and philologist” who was active in the contemporary art world and known as “one of the three editors the *Gazzetta del Popolo*.” Thus, the paper, which was a recurrent enemy of the Macchiaioli group, was also “a moderate conservative and anti-Mazzinian journal” supporting the constitutional monarchy of Vittorio Emanuele II. The *Nuova Europa*, alternatively, was a short-lived periodical that only ran from April 14th, 1861 to October 15th, 1863. It was a republican opposition paper supportive of Mazzini and Garibaldi and supported by bourgeois professionals, artists, and intellectuals. Using terms such as “new Europe” and “old Europe,” the paper aimed to convey the “new Europe” as one centered on social justice and political egalitarianism, in contrast with the older Europe’s “feudal and semi-feudal structure of privilege.”

Functioning within these respective socio-political contexts, Signorini and Rigutini engaged in a quintessential progressive modernist versus traditionalist debate. “A new European, Mr. X,” Rigutini mocks, “offered our Macchiaioli a consolation the other day. He informed us that although their school of painting is a failure in old Europe it will certainly be a rage in the Europe that is to come… if brains are re-fashioned to follow the sayings of the prophets!” In response, Signorini retaliates by warning that progressive innovation, especially in art, must take place, “unless we want to see the blind cult of the past leading us to a period of decadence equal to that which lies immediately behind us.” Signorini invokes the progressive values of the *philosophes*, stating: “What of the Encyclopedists, Diderot and D’Alembert? We … are still prostate in adoration dreaming of the past in the temples of our glory!” Within the thinly
veiled socio-cultural debate between the two, scathing aesthetic criticisms are also made in direct reference to the Macchiaioli’s distinctive style. In this article, like many other reviews of the group, their emphasis on effect and sketch is severely chastised. “Be logical, dear Sir,” Luigi ridicules, “and tell me how we should reproach the real Macchiaioli, who never do anything else but merely sketch out their pictures?” He goes on to directly attack the group’s emphasis on effect in their work: “There certainly has to be an effect - but it is going too far when the effect destroys the design and even the form.” In response, Signorini defends, “as if art [has] any recognized limits and the progressive activity of the human mind in all fields [has] any boundaries!”

Luigi was not the first journalist to attack the group’s emphasis on sketch and effect, echoing earlier criticisms of the group. The reviews of the various expositions attacked the Macchiaioli viciously. Their critics were mainly concerned with what they deemed to be stylistic issues rather than thematic ones. Pietro Selvatico, who reviewed their art at the Esposizione Nazionale in 1861, wrote of Cabianca’s work The Florentine Story-Tellers, it “could be described as no more than a simple sketch.” Likewise, the Livornese critic and journalist Pier-Coccoluto Ferrigni, under the name Yorick, wrote of the same painting, “Mr. Cabianca’s painting could have been a nice painting if the painter would have finished it.” Another contemporaneous writer of an Exposition guidebook dismissed these “effettisti,” the original derogatory term for the group, as “creators of pictorial illusions, which please most people when seen from a distance; but just approach these almost impoverished canvases and you will see that they look just like sketches, so fractured is the drawing and roughly applied the color.” Many of these critics aligned with the academic conceptualization of painting, and of what constitutes skill in painting. They were concerned with traditional standards of “descriptive clarity” and finish, the debate which ultimately defined the Macchiaioli in the press with the article by Luigi. Although their reviews of the artists were not
always entirely negative, only foreign critics, such as the British journalist John Stewart, noted some of the qualities for which the artists are known today, namely, their “paint into genuine atmosphere and light.”75 Thus critical reception of the group at the time extended from the traditional values of the academy, and was not in direct response to the artists’ emphasis on “expressive patterns of luminary effect,” but instead a preoccupation with the general execution.76

The bitter battle between Luigi and Signorini not only illustrates the challenges the group faced in establishing their stylistic choices as legitimate practice, but also provides an example of how the group proactively responded to criticism. Signorini boldly stated at the beginning of his initial response to Luigi,

Although we appealed to the press in an earlier article on the exhibition, in order to provoke some discussion upon certain principles which we consider fundamental to the development and future of modern art we see with regret that we have failed to achieve our aim, we would be untrue to our beliefs if we did not reply logically to those who seek to dismay us by using the blunt and vulgar weapon of ridicule.

Many of the writings of the Macchiaioli similarly serve the function of correcting or reprimanding the faulty image of them created by their critics, and attempt to explain their true artistic values. Cecioni’s series of essays written around 1880, as discussed earlier, intended to systemize the macchia into a “unit of artistic vision and sketch execution,” essentially re-appropriating the term and defending its legitimacy in the art world. Likewise, essays within the Gazzettino delle Arti del Disegno, such as Signorini’s article “Il Caffè Michelangelo,” which specifically references his debate with Luigi and against the Milanese critic who considered the artists as cult members, used these platforms for defending their artistic, political, and cultural beliefs against ferocious
public criticism. Extensive explanations of the significance of the artists’ innovative works can be found in the writings of Martelli as well.

Ferdinando Martini (1841 - 1928), an Italian journalist and politician, noted that the artists appeared anxious for the judgment of the public and excessively sensitive to journalistic criticism, even if made by mediocre, unimportant writers. This observation is seemingly accurate when considering the polemic writings of Cecioni which contain statements such as: “If the critics are mean, which happens almost all the time, then a poor copier’s opinion will influence the critic’s whole material.” Alternatively, even when the critiques are good, he complains, they utilize “improper and ridiculous wording”; critics can do no right according to Cecioni. Likewise, encountering opposition from academic authorities and the art criticism world, Signorini explains that the Macchiaioli’s circumstance necessitated a certain rebellious state of mind:

These details are not useless when we think that those brains, once convinced about healthy ideas about art, had to accept, laughing, the biggest self-denials, with the smile on their face and rejected by the academic commissions and by the government, they had to accept the disgust of the journalists, with the great sense of humor that characterizes those who a peaceful state of mind in their conscious.

Thus, Martini’s observations that the group reacted with a self-justifying, defensive approach appear correct, as even Signorini himself, the primary defender of the artists in their time, will admit in his later writings. Similar to their polemic against the Accademia, their expressed disdain for journalists and art critics grew out of debates that forced them to define their works’ artistic value against criticism. To argue that the group was inherently opposed to art criticism would suggest that they would have rejected positive responses to their work, an interpretation that is
not compatible with Signorini’s famous battle with Luigi, nor his later interpretations of the group’s response to opposition in their social environment. Their disdain for the critics seems to arise more from the critics’ complete misunderstanding of the value of their work, and to be essentially a defensive response.

**L’Esposizione Nazionale Italiana di 1861**

Since the sentiments of art critics and traditional academic values were so closely linked, it is not surprising that the Macchiaioli had antagonistic relationships with both the journalists and the academic commissions. Arguably, the dichotomous relationship between the Macchiaioli’s antipathetic public actions at the National Exposition and their close relationship to the Italian political elite, as well as their promotion of Italian nationalist ideals, is the more challenging dynamic to integrate into a cohesive group identity. Perhaps for this reason this dichotomy is only briefly mentioned, or entirely ignored, in scholarship about the group. A full examination of the decision to reject the award at the National Exposition and what it means in relationship to the general understanding of the Macchiaioli seriously undermines any argument for a stable identity based on shared core values. Thus, looking at this action in tandem with their defensive relationship to social and cultural structures in Florentine society further elucidates the Macchiaioli as a group founded upon and subsisting only in opposition.

So, the question of the Macchiaioli’s relationship with Florentine society culminates in an analysis of the most important cultural-political event of their era: L’Esposizione Nazionale Italian of 1861. After years of traveling to Paris and London to witness the innovative work on display in other parts of Europe, the Macchiaioli were likely eager to share their own progressive artwork in the glowing context of a newly united Italian kingdom. Selim Peabody, a contemporary writer who played a role in the Paris Exposition, World’s Columbian Exposition, and Pan-American Exposition, explained, “the World’s Fair is an epitome of the world’s progress; a history and
a prophecy. The latest discoveries, the newest inventions, the triumphs in art, in science, in education, in the solution of social and even religious problems, are here arrayed.”

The expositions represented what the Macchiaioli had been pushing for in the realm of art: progress. As Peabody aptly describes, “the exposition becomes a great clearing-house for the exchange of new, startling and progressive ideas, and becomes a means for their widest and swiftest distribution.”

The *Esposizione Nazionale Italiana* 1861 was a largely symbolic event in the history of both Italy and of the Macchiaioli artists. Walking past the main façade at the Stazione Leopoldo, “a lavishly wrought gateway” led to octagonal towers, producing an overall design that synthesized elements of the Crystal Palace, Paris Palais de l’industrie, and a Florentine palazzo. As the first exposition of a united Italian kingdom, the event was intended to promote a powerful “Italian” identity “by exhibiting products of its national labor and artistic genius.” Opened on September 15th, 1861 by the king Vittorio Emanuele and Camille Cavour, the leaders hoped to bind the peninsula into a “psychological whole.”

The political message was made clear in the inaugural address delivered by Prince Eugenio on August 20th 1861 which, as Boime describes, “emphasized the exposition’s relationship to the major military and political events of the *Risorgimento*.”

Similarly, the famous critical guide of Yorick Figlio di Yorick “Viaggio Attraverso L’esposizione Nazionale Italiana del 1861” illustrates the event’s political agenda by opening with a satiric description of the equestrian statue of Vittorio Emanuele: “The person of the king is sacred and inviolable, that’s what the Statute says!”

The press likewise discussed the importance of this event, illustrating the large space it held in Florentine consciousness during that year. La Nazione had a column dedicated specifically to the exposition, discussing updates every week for nearly five months prior to the opening. On the day of the opening, *La Nazione* published an enthusiastic front page describing the exposition that proclaimed, “[t]he first time that Italy will be fully represented.”
In rejecting the foreign, imperial standards of the Accademia, the Macchiaioli instead had fully immersed themselves in the Tuscan Risorgimento cultural movement, as demonstrated by their participation in the Ricasoli Competitions under the Provisional Government. The call for submissions had been placed in local pro-government newspapers and read, “Considering that in Tuscany the fine arts were always the noblest part of its civility, and that a National Government has the obligation to support them in whatever way is worth of them, [we] summon them to eternalize great deeds and great men.”

The competitions took place on September 23rd, 1859, serving as a sort of propaganda campaign calling for works entirely surrounding themes of Florentine history and Risorgimento events. Aligning in a desire for the expulsion of the Grand Duke and political interest in “preventing the fallen dynasty of Lorraine from returning to Florence,” the Macchiaioli demonstrated support for Ricasoli, as is seen in a portrait of him done by Raffaello Sernesi. The Macchiaioli were closely connected to this seminal cultural event, with close friends such as Domenico Ingundo serving on the jury. In the end, they benefited from the patronage of leaders such as Giuseppe Dolfi, Anatolio Demidov, and Bettino Ridolfi resulting from this competition. Cecioni won a prize for his model of a statue of Carlo Alberto, Altamura was commissioned to paint the Marius Conqueror of the Cimbri, Antonio Pucci’s composition of the King Receiving the Tuscan Delegation Presenting the Decree of Annexation received a first prize, and Lega and Borrani won awards for their paintings of military scenes. Most notably, perhaps, was the main prize in the battle category which went to Fattori’s sketch for the Battle of Magenta. Thus a bond was cemented between Tuscan elite and risorgimento leaders and the Italian painters, setting the stage for favorable attention at the National Exposition.

A brief two years later, these new patrons of the group, and other elites, including Dolfi, Ridolfi, Ricasoli, and Demidov, played a large role in the administration and organization of
L’Esposizione Nazionale of 1861. Ridolfi, who was the new minister of the interior under the Tuscan regime, owned a landscape painting by De Tivoli purchased after the Ricasoli competition. Connections to the administrators can be discerned as relatives of the Macchiaioli, such as the London-based relative of Serafino De Tivoli were permitted to exhibit their work in the exposition as well. Likewise, Vito D’Ancona’s brothers Sansone and Cesare, and his uncle Laudadio Della Ripa were heavily involved in the exposition; Vito’s older brother Sansone served on several of the juries and was named to its chamber of agriculture, industry, and commerce, while Cesare, a botanist and ecologist, was a judge for the class of floriculture and horticulture, and directed the biweekly newspaper La Esposizione Nazionale del 1861, which reported on the events. In addition, Laudadio was granted an award for his olive oil. The Macchiaioli therefore were not outsiders in this event, as their connections to the organizers and other participants attests to an inclusive treatment for the group. Understood in this light, their public refusal of their awards does not seem trivial. The message sent by rejecting the awards appears remarkably inflammatory when considering that it was not in conflict with their academic adversaries, but rather speaking against those who supported them.\(^94\)

In the midst of this grand cultural moment, the exposition marked a turning point for the Macchiaioli group. Several of the Macchiaioli paintings that had won the Ricasoli competition,
such as Stefano Ussi’s *Duke of Athens*, were exhibited again.\textsuperscript{95} Many of the Macchiaioli’s historical and patriotic themes within their work were received well by the public due to their political timeliness. It was this event that consolidated the Macchiaioli’s patronage, which, as Boime described, “essentially derived from the new political and social alliance represented in the show.”\textsuperscript{96} As Broude describes, their work in the exposition reflected “the entire spectrum of influences that had been affecting artists in that city over the past decade.”\textsuperscript{97} Thus there were not only themes of battles, such as Giovanni Fattori’s *Battaglia della Cernaja*, but paintings representative of the *macchia* period, such as Signorini’s *Street Vendor of Spezia*. The awareness that resulted from the exposition hence not only established their patronage base but also created their group identity within the popular press, as seen a year later in the battle between Luigi and Mr. X and in the responses they received from Yorick, Selvatico, Stewart, and other critics such as Tullio Dandolo.\textsuperscript{98}

Although the Macchiaioli artists were undoubtedly recognized by and connected to the Tuscan elite organizing the exposition,\textsuperscript{99} and their reception at the event proved vital to their independent careers, they provocatively rejected their awards. On November 16th, 1861, the artists published the following statement in the *Gazzetta del Popolo*:

*To the painting judge from the Italian exposition-*

*In the Gazzetta del popolo’s 234th publication we said certain words regarding the judge responsible for paintings in the current exposition, and we noted how the effect replied to the intention, the judgement needs to form itself from another principle; finally giving up certain methods that belong to a different era, and finally applying a logical method that is fundamental to us, the election. What certainty is there for the audience that the decision will be fair and final, if the nomination of those who have to give that judgement does not come from an authority recognized*
The jury’s judgment about the paintings was exactly what we had feared: and the judged artists, the audience and even the members of the jury disapproved. Only a few artists were recognizable and the majority was formed by people who were strangers to the art of painting, and there were no technical tasks, without those tasks a judgement will always be uncertain and incomplete. That’s why we saw that this prize was given without a fair judgement, the results are not valid; no honor to the winner, there is no inferiority for those who did not win the prize. We also have to say a few harsh words towards those members of the jury that, in such solemn circumstances for Italy, did not take responsibilities by accepting a task that implies that you should be artistically superior or at least on the same level of those being judged.

These serious inconvenient that we predicted could, we repeat this once again, have been avoided if a more logical, modern, fair and free method was applied, such as an election of judges with a vote by the representatives; a method partially used in France for the exposition in London, after our first idea was proposed by us: a method that would have given a different value and authority to the winner, and that would have given a noble value to the first Italian exposition.

This was their public opinion and they directed this with this declaration:

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE REAL COMMISSION

When the members of the jury was made public, the undersigned gave their opinion about the way that this
jury was formed, and they predicted the inconveniences that would have emerged. Since we are coherent with our opinion, we are sadly having to refuse the medal that was given to them. Perugia that the SS. VV. will want to appreciate the reasons that made them come to this conclusion, we stand with the most profound consideration.103


It should be noted that La Gazzetta del Popolo is the same periodical that Rigutini ran as an editor and where the inflammatory statements about the group would be published a year later. La Gazzetta del Popolo was a daily newspaper that supported Vittorio Emanuele. The paper was founded that year and ceased to exist by 1869. Arguably the journal did not yet have an established readership, and perhaps the publication of the Macchiaioli’s inflammatory letter served a sensationalist purpose. Indeed, this article received significant backlash from other journals such as La Nazione. It is evident, however, that Rigutini did not approve of the group, and perhaps this initial letter played a significant role in the publication of his disparaging comments against Mr. X a year later.

The artists united in rejecting the honor, essentially claiming that the awards were meaningless since they were given by non-experts in the field. There was a strong reaction in the press to what was deemed a highly unpatriotic act. In the Fatti Diversi section of La Nazione, a journalist repudiated the group for this decision. Emphasizing that these were the first awards given by a united country, the act was seen as extremely rude and inopportune. The writer proposes a challenge to the artists,
asking:

Why was the board considered to be incapable to judge while stating that one was not participating in the contest? Wouldn’t it have been better to lose that competition instead of having the double satisfaction of winning the prize and then rejecting it? Why then discredit the institution if one did not respect and trust the people of the jury, even though they were highly respected people?  

This journalist clearly found the act to be a sensationalist move on the part of the Macchiaioli, although he makes no speculation as to why they would do such a thing. Saverio Altamura wrote a direct response to this publication further explaining the artists’ intentions, which was also published in La Nazione on November 24th. They did not, as he explains, reject the symbolic significance of these awards, but rather the credentials of the jury. Thus, he defends their values and connections and implicates the jury instead. He describes the question of the choice of a judge whose intelligence will compromise the future of an artist, of a principle, and the glory of the nation, as one of supreme importance. He thus presents this defiance as an act of civic duty and argues that the artists stood steadfast for their own principles despite misinterpretation of their intentions. In addition, he justifies their decision to reprimand the committee after having won the awards:

The author of the article added petty personal considerations to the censored act; since the artists did not state not to take part in the contest, he would like them to silently accept the judgement of the jury. To fear that mistake was natural; the convicted would have been unfair and would have helped whoever likes to maliciously criticize noble intentions.

It would not have been possible, essentially, for the artists to have
stood against the jury prior to winning because they may have been either disqualified or lost credibility. Less convincingly, he argues that it would have been unjust and detrimental to their argument to condemn them prematurely.

It is difficult to comment conclusively on the significance of this debate given the gaps of information at present. Since no documentation has been found stating exactly who these jury members were or why exactly they were unqualified, it is challenging to discern the validity of Altamura’s justification. However, given what information is available, several important concerns can be raised. First, if the quality of the judges is the issue at hand, Altamura’s rationale that the group’s fear of error led them to believe that a pre-emptive condemnation was unjust, and would have brought further criticism upon the group, appears extremely suspect. A moral act defined only retrospectively by the actor as moral after the outcomes are already decided is inherently unreliable. Altamura essentially argues that waiting until they were in a position of artistic authority - an authority only provided to them by the jury themselves - enabled them to finally stand up for their beliefs. The simultaneous reliance on the status gained from the awards and the devaluation of this status confuses their argument. Perhaps even more concerning is Altamura’s admission that the artists had a fear of being wrong initially which inhibited any preemptive action on their part. Without outlining for their audience what changed in their minds between their entry into the exposition and their reception of the awards, it seems that the only difference became the status conferred with the awards. This ambiguity severely undermines their righteous, “self-sacrificing” integrity. *La Nazione’s* criticism that the artists took the unnecessary satisfaction of receiving the award prior to rejecting it was insufficiently addressed in Altamura’s response. Additionally, considering the connections they appear to have had with the organizers, it is alarming that they would have handled this protestation in this public and seemingly sensationalist manner, which essentially humiliates
those with whom they had recently established favorable relations. Hence, this public act undermines a simplistic characterization of the group as patriotic artists who opposed the Academy in hopes of recognition of their progressive values of art. Boime argues that the National Exhibition proved “decisive in the fortunes of nineteenth-century [artists] by attesting to an authentic national school complementary to the ideological projections of the 1861 exposition.”

Out of twenty-two paintings they exhibited, five of them represented Risorgimento themes. Stefano Ussi’s La cacciata del duca d’Athene and Borrani’s The 26th of April 1859, both representing nationalistic Risorgimento ideals, were official favorites and popular successes. Though never acknowledging that the artists rejected their awards, Boime noted that every winning entry at the exposition was cited in the official exposition documents for “its treatment of light effects.” He cites D’Ancona’s painting, Incontro di Dante con Beatrice, as an example of a work praised for its “very beautiful effect of light in the sky.”

Even though Borrani’s work was more independent and experimental, deviating from the academic standard, he still received recognition for his work. In a moment that it seems the Macchiaioli had been waiting for - one in which the officials of the community recognized and appreciate their work for its progressive nature - the Macchiaioli remained on the defensive. While the journalists seemed not to grasp the value of what the artists were doing, and only focused on their execution, it appears that the commission recognized the Macchiaioli artists in the manner they had expressed a desire to be recognized.

Thus despite their ideological commitment to the united Italy, a promotion of their ideas to the public, and the officials’ favorable response back towards them, the artists rejected the awards with an arguably insufficient rationale. It appears that the rejection of their awards served no justifiable ideological purpose except to react in opposition to their social environment. Considering their bold actions in direct variance with their espoused values further elucidates their utmost value as being no particular value
at all, but rather an identity formed on the basis of opposition.

This under-discussed event in the Macchiaioli’s history serves as a reminder not to simplify this complex movement in the hopes of creating cohesive synthesis of their activities and writings. On the surface it is easily stated that the artists were patriotic, nationalistic, progressive, modern, and anti-academic, and while these characterizations are valid and supported, they do not sufficiently illuminate the indiscriminate reactionary nature of the artists’ union as a group. During the short period of its existence, it seems that the Macchiaioli group united in defense against foreign rule on the battlefield, the critics in the press, and the academy in public reputation. By 1861, with a newly united Italian kingdom and a growing base of public acceptance and upper-class and political patronage, the artists had little incentive to bind together. The disintegration of the group roughly after the “Macchiaioli” title was placed upon them in 1862 also supports the idea that by the time of this period of relative stability the group had lost its raison d’être. Lacking a provocative stimulus, the artists opted instead to act at the National Exposition in defense of nothing particularly threatening. Though the validity of Altamura’s claim cannot be investigated thoroughly, it seems unjustified in context of their alliances and espoused political views, hence suggesting that it was purely a polemic action.

Concluding Remarks

Although it is tempting to take the group’s identity as an a priori assumption and integrate ideas into an existing schema of what this identity entailed, a re-examination of the entire notion of their classification as a group provides the opportunity to understand their ideological connection authentically. It is important to restate here that the Macchiaioli artists only publicly identified themselves as a group once their union had essentially dissolved. Retrospective attempts by Cecioni and Martelli to define what they were doing during that period provide interesting insight regarding how they elected to present themselves, but generally fail to acknowledge
the most fundamental role situational circumstances played in the connection between the artists. Yet still, a reassessment of several published articles, including Signorini’s battle with Luigi in *La Nuova Europa* and *La Gazzetta del Popolo* and Altamura and Abbati’s articles in *La Nazione* and *La Gazzetta del Popolo* still proves necessary in gaining insight into their actual shared values in relation to Florentine society. Their artistic values were never in direct opposition to the academies they originated from, but their opposition to these authorities, by whom they felt belittled, allowed for a cohesive identity as progressive artists in the face of criticism. Likewise, their rejection of the critics was a defensive reaction to their social environment, not a core value of their group, as Cecioni later attempts to claim in his essays. Their patriotism also seems to fluctuate circumstantially. While they were united in opposition to the Austrians, and this served as a salient, unifying value, when they were awarded recognition by the Kingdom of Italy, they rejected support from their *Risorgimento* political and cultural leaders without sufficient rationale. Though the group shared friendships, political ideals, and artistic interests, primary documents between the years 1861 and 1862 suggest that the only thing that definitively united these progressive painters at the time was a reaction against contemporary cultural and societal structures.
Le Polemiche al Caffè Michelangiolo

Notes
5 Piero Bargellini, Caffè Michelangiolo (Florence: Vallecchi, 1944), 168.
6 Bricherasio, 43.
7 Boime, 75.
8 Ibid., 72.
10 Ibid., 61.
11 Ibid., 296.
12 Ibid.
14 See p. 31 for an examination of the National Expositions.
15 Signorini, 76. Original text: “Dal 48 al 55, in conseguenza dei tempi, prevalsero le cospirazioni e le burle, dal 55 al 60 col ritorno da Parigi del Tivoli e dell’Altamura, coll’avvincinarsi della prima esposizione italiana…. i cari matti di via Larga burlarono meno e si appassionarono molto più all’arte loro.”
16 Broude, 47.
17 Ibid., 55.
18 Ibid., 96.
19 Ibid., 97.
21 Broude, 269.
22 Ibid.
23 Somaré, XXVII.
24 Ibid. Original text: “… un’opera d’arte non si può considerare come tale se non e sostenuta da qui principii che regono l’arte medesima, di fronte ai quali non si può in nessun modo transigere.”
25 Adriano Cecioni, Scritti e Ricordi. (Firenze: Domenicana, 1905), 157-158.
26 Ibid. Original text: “una solo macchia di colore per la faccia, un’altra per i cappelli, l’altra mettiamo, per la pezzuola.”
27 Ibid., 134. Original text: “I macchiaioli, per chi non conosce il significato di questa parola, furono i primi che si diedero fra noi, agli studi buoni, e che
cominciarono a cercare e studiare la vera ragione degli effetti, a forza di prove o bozzetti appena macchiati con le tinte locali dei diversi colori o toni che avevano parte in un dato effetto, ed ora tentando un effetto di sole, era di riflesso o di poggia, elaboravano il modo di ottenere una giusta e propria divisione fra la luce e l'ombra, senza dar luogo a transazioni di sorta alcuna.”

28 Broude, 268.
29 Ibid., 279.
30 Telemaco Signorini. Caricaturisti e Caricaturati Al Caffè “Michelangiolo.” (Firenze : G. Civelli, 1893), 198. Original text: “la nostra decentralizzazione non prova altro che non fummo, ne siamo i preti di una nuova idea, ne gli affiliati di nessuna loggia artistica, che se lo fossimo vivremmo ancora in associazione fratesca e fraterna, come appunto, vivono ancora i preti di qualunque associazione, casta, consorzio o camorra.”
31 Ibid., 198.
32 Signorini, “Caffe Michelangiolo,” 176. Original text: “E se per via incontravi uno dei disertori della nostra riunione e gli dicevi: O perche non venisti ieri sera al Caffè? Che vuoi, non si fa che discutere e non ci si diverte più come prima, mi pare che sia molto meglio lavorar di più e discutere meno. Si, ma non capisci che la discussione e la vita dell’arte, che per far dei progressi e necessario di vedersi…. Si si dici bene…. Addio sai.”
33 Cecioni, Opere e Scritti, 138.
34 Boime, 75.
35 Ibid., 90.
36 Ibid.
37 Libro terzo degli Atti della 1o classe dell’I. E R. Accademia Belle Arti di Firenze (Florence, 1840) “Esposizione dei quadri del 1840.”
38 Broude, 14.
39 Ibid.
40 Boime, 91.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 91-94.
44 Boime, 94.
46 Ibid., 11.
47 Spalletti, 9-11.
48 Broude, 13.
49 Cecioni, Opere e Scritti, 138. Original text: “gli apprezzamenti ed i giudizi di
Le Polemiche al Caffè Michelangiolo

“quel nucleo di ribelli alle discipline accademiche, significavano la dichiarazione di guerra che l’arte nuova faceva alla vecchia.”

Signorini, 150. Original text: “un numero non indifferente di giovani si emancipò affatto da qualunque insegnamento accademico, e preso solo maestro la natura.”

Broude, 95.

Signorini, Caffè Michelangelo, 150.


Boime, 75, see L. Biagi, L’Accademia di belle arti di Firenze (Florence 1941) 19 - 21; C. I. Cavallucci, Notizie storiche intorno alla R. Accademia delle arte del disegno in Firenze (Florence, 1873) 53-61.

Broude, 14.

Boime, 92.

See p. 31 for this discussion.


La Nuova Europa in The “Macchiaioli,” 25.

Signorini, 206.

Boime, 96.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

La Nuova Europa in The “Macchiaioli,” 30.

Broude, 95.

Ibid.


Broude, 95.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Diego Martelli, Francesca Dini, and Ettore Spalletti, Dai Macchiaioli Agli

46 Shiri Gross

79 Cecioni, Opere e Scritti, 16.

80 Ibid., 213. Original text: “se [i critici] sono cattivi, avvera ciò che avviene quasi sempre, che il parere di un povero copiatore e quello che forma tutto il materiale del critico.”

81 Ibid., 175. Original text: “Questi particolari non sono inutili quando si voglia pensare che i cervelli di simile struttura, dovevano un giorno convinti da sane idee dell’arte accettare ridendo le più grande abnegazioni, passare il calvario della ricerca moderna, col sorriso della facezia sulle labbra e rigettati dalle Commissioni Accademiche e dalle governative, accettar l’anatema degli autorevoli e lo sprezzo della plebe giornalistica, colla grande ironia che caratterizza chi è convinto nella serenità della propria conoscenza.”

82 Norma Broude and other Italian scholars such as Ettore Spalletti make a brief note of it, while Albert Boime’s historical treatment of the group’s relationship to the Risorgimento completely neglects to mention this event despite dedicating a significant part of the book to the Exposition.


84 Ibid., 8.

85 Boime, 171.

86 Ibid., 172.

87 Ibid., 170.

88 Ibid., 172.

89 Yorick, 44. Original text: “La persona del Re è sacra e inviolabile, lo dice lo Statuto!... dunque aggiungono i monello, l’artefice e rio di lesa maestà.”

90 La Nazione September 14th, 1861. Original text: “la prima volta che a luogo determinato vedrassi rappresentata tutta l’italia.”

91 Boime, 140.

92 Ibid., 136.

93 Ibid., 141-145.

94 Ibid., 91-94.

95 Boime, 165.

96 Ibid., 170.

97 Broude, 94.

98 Ibid.

99 Boime, 166.

100 Giuseppe, et. al. Original text: “del giurì di pittura nella esposizione italiana - nel no 234 della gazzetta del popolo dicemmo alcune parole a proposito del giurì di pittura per l’attuale esposizione, e notammo come a volere che l’effetto rispondesse alla intenzione, e fosse proporzionato ad una occasione così solenne, quale si è quella ove doveva convenire il tiene dell’intelligenza, e far mostra di sé l’operosità della nazione, il giurì dove formarsi derivando tutt’altro principio;
e, smettendo finalmente certi sistemi che appartengano ad altr'epoca, si cercasse
di mostrarsi più logici coll'applicare anche ad esso il principio fondamentale del
nostro edificio, l'elezione. Ed infatti quale guarentigia per il pubblico, e per gli
esponenti che la sentenza del giuri sarà giusta e inappellabile, se la nomina di
coloro che debbono comporlo non deriva da un'autorità riconosciuta da ognuno
competente in materia di Belle Arti?"

101 Ibid., Original text: “il giudizio del Giuri di Pittura è stato quale fu da noi
temuto; e i giudicati, e il pubblico, e gli stessi membri del giuri lo disapprovano.
In caso non si notavano che alcuni artisti, e fra questi poche notabilità, e la
maggioranza era formata da persone estranee all'esercizio dell'arte, e prove di quelle
nozioni tecniche, senza le quali un giudizio sarà sempre incerto ed incompleto.
è perciò si è veduto senza pieno discernimento conferito e non accordato questo
premio, argomento di nobile ambizione; il risultato è nullo; nessun onore al
premiato, nessuna inferiorità risulta per l'escluso dal premio. Non possiamo
poi astenerci da una parola severa verso quei membri del giuri, i quali in una
circostanza così solenne per l'Italia, non pesarono la responsabilità che assumevano
accettando un mandato che suppone nel giudicante nozioni superiori o almeno
uguali a quelle del giudicando.”

102 Ibid., Original text: “questi gravi inconvenienti da noi previsti potevano,
ripetiamo ancora una volta, esser prevenuti coll'adottare il sistema il più logico
e il più adatto a tempi di progresso e di libertà, quello della elezione dei giudici
per mezzo del suffragio degli esponenti; sistema in parte adottato in Francia per la
ventura esposizione di Londra, dopo che la prima idea fu proposta fra noi; sistema
che avrebbe rivestito di ben altra autorità questo consesso premiatore del merito,
e che avrebbe inaugurato con un gran principio la prima Esposizione dell'Italia
risorta.”

103 Ibid., Original text: “Tale essendo la opinione pubblicamente significata dai
sottoscritti, essi hanno indirizzata la seguente Dichiarazione: AGLI ONOREVOLI
COMPONENTI LA COMMISSIONE REALE
Allorché fu fatta pubblica la nomina dei componenti il Giuri per la classe di
Pittura, i sottoscritti emisero la loro opinione rapporto al mondo tenuto nel
formarlo, e previdero gl'inconvenienti che ne sarebbero derivati. Ora a prevenire
gli sinistra interpretazione delle loro intenzioni, e per esser coerenti alla opinione
espresa, essi si tracce nella spiacevole necessità di dover rinunziare alla medaglia
conferita loro. Perugia che le SS. VV. vorranno apprezzare i motivi che li hanno
fatti venire a questa determinazione, essi passano a dichiararsi colla più profonda
considerazione ec.”

104 La Nazione September 14th, 1861. Original text: “Perché se si riteneva
incapace il Consiglio a giudicare, non si chiaro, esponendo, che non si concorreva
al premio? non era meglio perder tal risoluzione allora, anzi che voler godere la
doppia soddisfazione di ottenere il primo e rifiutarlo? Perché poi arrogarsi il diritto
di gettar il discredito contro le risoluzioni di un Corpo che, se non riconosceva la
fiducia e la stima di alcuni esponenti, era pur composto di persone rispettabilissime?"

105 Saverio Altaura, “Invitati ai termini della legge pubblichiamo il seguente articolo,” in La Nazione, November 24, 1861.

106 Ibid., Original text: “Veda ora l’autore dell’articolo come Egli s’ingannava attribuendo a meschine considerazioni personali l’atto censurato; e come a torto vorrebbe che non essendosi chiamati fuori di concorso fin da principio gli Artisti avessero in silenzio subito il giudizio. Il temere l’errore era naturale; il condannato preventivamente sarebbe stato ingiusto, e avrebbe forse dato appiglio a chi si piace di giudicare malevolmente nobili intenzioni.”

107 Boime, 167.

108 Ibid., 182.

109 La Nuova Europa in I Macchiaioli.

Images


