Lawrence Rainey: On "Pound and Sigismondo Malatesta"

It should come as no surprise that the motif of patronage is explicitly taken up in Pound’s principal composition of this period, the so-called Malatesta Cantos, or Cantos 8-11. To oversimplify, they depict the life and times of Sigismondo Malatesta, the quattrocento ruler of Rimini, a small town just south of Ravenna on the Adriatic coast of Italy. Sigismondo sponsored the reconstruction of the church of San Francesco, a building long regarded as a landmark in architectural history. In the idealizing lens of late-nineteenth-century historiography, he was the ideal patron, discerning in his selection of an architect (the great Leon Battista Alberti), discriminating in his choice of artists (the magnificent painter Piero della Francesca and the talented sculptor Agostino di Duccio), and generous in giving them latitude to work as they wished. He was also, in the lexicon favored by nineteenth-century writers, a despot, a ruler whose authority was unchecked and arbitrary, his decisions ratified by no one, his choices subject to no identifiable norms or criteria. Sigismondo, in short, epitomized all the issues embedded in the institution of patronage, the questions of art and authority, power and public assent.

Pound saw the church of San Francesco for the first time in May 1922 while touring with his wife through central Italy; it was three months after the publication of Ulysses, two months after his first announcement of Bel Esprit, and five months before the publication of The Waste Land. Two weeks after he first saw the church, he met with Eliot in Verona to discuss the poem’s publication and plans for Eliot’s new review (supported by patronage from Lady Rothermere, wife of the newspaper magnate). In the spring of 1923 Pound returned to Italy to conduct further research into the life and times of Sigismondo Malatesta, gathering more materials to be used in writing the Malatesta Cantos. This time, while staying in Rimini, Pound had his first significant experience with members of the Fascist Party. The experience related directly to his writing about Sigismondo and later sparked his favorable view of Benito Mussolini and Fascism’s effects in everyday life--the most fateful choice of his career. Only five months later, in the late summer of 1923, Pound was already engaged in efforts (which have been discovered only recently) to persuade Mussolini to adopt a program of cultural patronage outlined and to be directed by Pound himself. Pound, in short, had found his imaginary patron and the resolution to the question of art, authority, and public consensus. The thread that links together this intricate complex of events and motifs is the figure of the great patron, Sigismondo Malatesta, and the question of faith in his judgment: through him, the modernist culture of patronage was assimilated to the emerging culture of Fascism.

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Sigismondo Malatesta (1417-1468) is known to posterity for a single mission that he pursued for more than a decade: his sponsorship of the reconstruction of the church of San Francesco, often called the Tempio Malatestiano, in the town of Rimini. The building is considered a landmark in Western architectural history because it was the first ecclesiastical edifice to incorporate the Roman triumphal arch into its structural vocabulary. The massive central doorway, flanked by two blind arches, plainly owes much to the Arch of Augustus, the oldest triumphal arch in Italy, which is also in Rimini. The interior, too, is striking: it teems with an elaborate series of sculptures and bas-reliefs by Agostino di Duccio, and the sacristy for the
Chapel of San Sigismondo houses a fine fresco by Piero della Francesca. The churches reconstruction, initially undertaken as the refurbishing of a single chapel within an extant church that dated from the thirteenth century, assumed new dimensions in 1449-1450 when Sigismondo entrusted the project to Leon Battista Alberti, one of Alberti's earliest and most important commissions. Alberti redesigned the building's entire facade, added the central doorway, and adorned the sides with a series of seven deep arches divided by massive piers. He also planned to add a transept and to crown the intersection of nave and transept with a soaring dome, but a precipitous decline in Sigismondo's political fortunes left him unable to bear the costs of construction. By 1460 work on the project had stopped and the church was left incomplete.

Sigismondo's political career was shaped by the shifting balance of power that prevailed in the Italian peninsula, divided among the five major states: Venice and Milan in the north, Florence in central Italy, and Rome (or the papacy) and Naples in the south. In the course of his lifetime Sigismondo served each of them as a condottiere, though by the later 1450s the major states increasingly regarded him with suspicion, either because his conduct of various campaigns had lacked sufficient vigor or because he was reported to have engaged in duplicitous dealings with his opponents. In 1459 he joined another condottiere, Giacomo Piccinino, in an imprudent attempt to unseat the Aragonese dynasty that ruled Naples and replace it with the Angevin dynasty of southern France. For Milan the scheme raised the specter of invasion from France, and Francesco Sforza, ruler of the Milanese duchy, reacted sharply. So did papal Rome, partly because it too wished to prevent the establishment of a French presence in the peninsula, partly because Sigismondo's actions offered a pretext for the church to reassert its claims over territories long lost to its control. The territories were those of Sigismondo. By law the Malatestas were not the rulers of Rimini and the surrounding countryside but vicars of the church who, in return for an annual fee, were granted absolute control over all taxation and legal matters. By the late 1440s, however, the papacy was beginning to change, increasingly assuming the institutional traits of the Italian casato, or extended family enterprise, and acquiring its elastic corporate and dynastic structure as well as its ambitious expansionism. Hoping to regain control over territories it had lost in the past, the papacy was taking its first steps toward the formation of the modern papal state that would rule over central Italy until 1860. Sigismondo's was among the first of many minor states that would disappear in the next half century. That, of course, was no consolation for him. In 1461 he managed to survive a ferocious campaign launched against him, defeating a superior ecclesiastical army at the battle of Nidastore on 2 July [. . . .] The next season his luck ran out. On 12 August 1462 his troops were routed at the battle of Senigallia, and less than a week later those of his ally Piccinino were annihilated at the battle of Troia. When peace terms were drafted, Sigismondo lost everything except the city of Rimini and a few nearby towns.

Already during Sigismondo's lifetime the church of San Francesco aroused discussion, and in the centuries that followed it elicited a growing body of scholarly and antiquarian commentary. But it was in the eighteenth century that new and related arguments about the church's significance began to appear. It was urged, for example, that the church was not a church at all, at least not in the ordinary sense; nor was it just a monument to the Malatesta dynasty or Sigismondo's exemplary status as its preeminent representative. Instead, the building had been designed to commemorate Sigismondo's love for Isotta degli Atti, his mistress and later (after 1456) his third wife. The crucial evidence adduced in support of this view was the entwined cipher, made up of the letters S and I, that is sculpted everywhere among the church's interior and exterior decorations. The sign, in the new view, referred to the first letters in the names of Sigismondo and Isotta. This interpretation was first broached in 1718,
debated inconclusively in 1756, then raised a third time in 1789, after which it was embraced without argument.

The figure most responsible for diffusing a new understanding of Sigismondo and his career outside Italy was the great historian Jakob Burckhardt. His Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, first published in 1860, largely created the modern notion of the Renaissance as a distinct historical period that signals the emergence of modern individualism. Burckhardt assigned Sigismondo an exemplary status, presenting him as the crowning figure among "the furtherers of humanism." His court had epitomized "the highest spiritual things" and had been a stage "where life and manners ... must have been a singular spectacle." His greatest achievement had been the reconstruction of the church of San Francesco, a project inspired by "his amour with the fair Isotta, in whose honour and as whose monument the famous rebuilding of S. Francesco at Rimini took place." Burckhardt turned Sigismondo into the epitome of "the whole man," a new human "type" who represented a form of historical existence crucial for the course of civilization, the type that had ushered in the age of modernity, a figure equally capable in war and art, in action and contemplation, one whose unfettered individuality united ruthless realism with lofty ideals: "Unscrupulousness, impiety, military skill, and high culture have been seldom so combined in one individual as in Sigismondo Malatesta." The "whole man" embodied in Sigismondo became the repository of an immense paradox: he was both the figure who had given birth to modernity and a symbol of all that modernity had later lost and betrayed, a rebuke to modernity itself. Translated into French (1876), Italian (1877), and English (1886), Burckhardt's work placed Sigismondo at the center of European intellectual debates about the nature of modernity--its origins, meaning, and prospects--and so about the very meaning of civilization.

Burckhardt's vision was recapitulated and transformed in myriad ways. The popular English historian John Addington Symonds viewed the church of San Francesco as "a monument of ... the revived Paganism of the fifteenth century" and "one of the earliest buildings in which the Neopaganism of the Renaissance showed itself in full force." Though ostensibly a church, it had "no room left for God." Symonds noted the many outrages allegedly committed by Sigismondo (including the murder of several wives), but he tempered their opprobriousness by integrating them within a liberal view of history that saw the violence of early individualism as a transient stage within the otherwise benign formation of modernity. Much bolder was a French journalist and art historian named Charles Yriarte, whose lengthy biography of Sigismondo was published in 1882. Yriarte claimed to have discovered a love poem "written by Sigismondo in honor of Isotta." He called it "the most characteristic of Sigismondo's works" and urged that its zodiacal references provided "the key to the enigma" of the elaborate bas-reliefs found inside the church of San Francesco. "It is not God who is worshiped here; instead it is for her that the incense and the myrrh are burned." His study formed the foundation of a consensus that was uncontested for decades, from its publication to roughly 1920. Encyclopedias, travel guides, novels, plays, and scholarly monographs repeated his claims again and again. From 1886 to 1929, every edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica reported that the church of San Francesco was built "to celebrate the tyrant's love for Isotta" and "dedicated ... to the glorification of an unhallowed attachment"; its sculptural decorations "derived ... from a poem in which Sigismondo had invoked the gods and the signs of the zodiac to soften Isotta's heart." Baedeker travel guides repeated the same claims, and popular novelists such as the British author Edward Hutton elaborated these motifs yet again.

The consensus forged by Yriarte began to come under attack around 1910, in the work of two scholars in Rimini who collaborated in research examining the many original and as yet
unpublished documents housed in the city's archives and library. In 1909 one of them, Giovanni Soranzo (1881-1963), published "The Cipher SI of Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta," which reconsidered the meaning of the much discussed sign. There was not a single contemporary document suggesting that the sign referred to both Sigismondo and Isotta. Indeed, the only document to discuss the sign, a chronicle by one of Sigismondo's closest collaborators within the court, specifically stated that it referred to Sigismondo alone. It was common practice, moreover, among the courts of northern Italy to use the first two letters of someone's name as an abbreviation: Niccolò d'Este was frequently cited as NI, and Sigismondo's son, Roberto, was commemorated on numerous ceramics and other artifacts by the cipher RO. Even more damaging to Yriarte's thesis, the most common spelling of Isotta's name during her lifetime was "Ysotta" or "Yxotta," a spelling that appeared in nearly all the contemporary legal documents concerning her. One year later, Soranzo's colleague Aldo Francesco Massèra issued a detailed examination of all the poems and poets allegedly connected with Isotta. The notorious poem that Yriarte claimed to have discovered, the work that he had termed "the key to the enigma" of the church's sculptural decorations, had been written not by Sigismondo but by Simone Serdini, a poet from Siena who had communicated with the court of Rimini during the decade after 1410. Serdini had died in 1419 or 1420, some twelve years before Isotta degli Atti was born. It was unlikely that his poem referred to her or her relations with Sigismondo, which began in 1446.

Yet the work of Soranzo and Massèra scarcely affected the legend of Sigismondo and the church of San Francesco. Soranzo's essay was published in a journal of provincial history devoted to Romagna, of which Rimini is a part, and Massèra's appeared in a journal for professors of Italian literature. But the more important reason for neglect of their work was a form of ideological resistance. Burckhardt had placed Sigismondo and the romantic reading of the church at the center of a much wider debate about the culture of modernity, a debate only partially responsive to issues of evidence and historical documentation. Some writers chose to ignore the research of Soranzo and Massèra; Edward Hutton, for example, in his 1913 guidebook to the province of Romagna, simply repeated the claims of his earlier novel. Others turned the historical claims into symbolic ones; Luigi Orsini's 1915 guidebook to Romagna transformed Yriarte's argument about the poems into metaphor: the church of San Francesco was "a poem of indestructible beauty, uniting all the tenderest harmonies of art and feeling."

But the most important attempt to address the arguments advanced by Soranzo did not appear until 1924, when Corrado Ricci (1858-1934), a gifted art historian, published his monumental study of the church of San Francesco. While it was true, as Soranzo had shown, that every known document indicated that the sign SI had been understood during Sigismondo's lifetime to refer solely to Sigismondo himself, this had been only the sign's "official meaning." Behind it had stood an "equivocal meaning" known only to Sigismondo, Isotta, and perhaps a few of their intimates. Sigismondo himself, in fact, had designed the sign precisely in order to create this kind of ambiguity. Ricci offered no evidence for this claim; his argument was a transparent evasion, untypical and unworthy of a scholar otherwise noted for historical rigor and insight. Yet Ricci himself may not have understood why it so mattered to him to argue for the sign's "romantic" interpretation, which merely epitomized the basic structure underlying the Romantic legend of the church itself: in each case the genuine meaning, the hidden yet true meaning, is not in conformity with culturally (and therefore historically) given values but is achieved only by the shedding of historical attributes (habits, conventions) and meanings of the cultural system, a laying bare of something other—a hidden meaning that stands apart from everyday language and institutional discourse, a privileged site in which the sign and the church express sheer authenticity, their grounding in pure
selfhood. Here, in other words, is semiosis that has been disembedded from local and
temporal contexts of interaction and restructured in a conceptual time-space that is more
indefinite, autonomous, and universal. Sigismondo acts in conformity not with historically
determinate conventions of religious piety or dynastic self-aggrandizement but with an
experiential impulse deemed universal—just as the meaning of the sign SI is located not in the
geographically determinate practices of northern Italy or the temporal context of the mid-
quattrocento but in an impulse that is largely disembedded of time and space. It is a process
that recapitulates the so-called disembedding mechanisms that some sociologists consider
one of the fundamental features of modernity. And Sigismondo was nothing, in the
Burckhardtian understanding, if not the epitome of modernity itself

While liberal historiography sought to account for Sigismondo by situating him within a
progressive account of modernity, others emphasized the more rebellious implications lodged
in the Burckhardtian interpretation. Friedrich Nietzsche accentuated them to the point of
turning the entire Renaissance into the promise of a modernity that had been subsequently
thwarted, a modernity not yet realized: "The Italian Renaissance contained within it all the
positive forces to which we owe modern civilization: liberation of thought, disrespect for
authorities, victory of culture over the darkness of ancestry, enthusiasm for knowledge and the
knowable past of man, unfettering of the individual ... indeed, the Renaissance possessed
positive forces which have up to now, in our contemporary modern civilization, never been so
powerful again.... [I]t was the golden age of this millennium."

The implications of this thought were hardly lost on Antonio Beltramelli, a restless Italian
journalist from Romagna whose admiration for Nietzsche is evinced throughout his 1908
volume The Chants of Faunus (I canti di Fauno). Four years later, in 1912, Beltramelli
published A Temple of Love (Un tempio d'amore), a brief narration of Sigismondo's life and
his reconstruction of the church of San Francesco in Isotta's honor. His account differed from
his predecessors' chiefly in its tone, which contained a note of violent lyricism celebrating the
concepts of struggle and will: "The mere presence of Sigismondo was enough to impose
subjection, and in this lay the secret of his fascination over the masses." Or again: "If
Sigismondo failed in his effort to kill Pope Paul II, it was hardly for lack of will." In his hands
the salient characteristic of Sigismondo became a ruthless, indomitable will—which also
signaled the arrival of a new ethical and cultural order, turning him into an exemplary figure for
the imagining of a new man who would address the pervasive sense of crisis that marked the
early twentieth century and modernity itself

Eleven years later, in 1923, Beltramelli published another book, The New Man (L'uomo
nuovo). It was the first biography of Mussolini published after he took power in late October
1922. Beltramelli had always been a regionalist with ties to his native province of Romagna,
where Mussolini had been born and had begun his meteoric rise through the ranks of the
Socialist Party. The New Man portrayed him as a son of his native soil, as harsh and violent
as the landscape that had nurtured him. Seeking to furnish Mussolini with a cultural
genealogy, Beltramelli located his forerunners in the house of Malatesta, also from Romagna.
There was the founder of the dynasty, Malatesta da Verucchio: "He knows what he wants and
he places his life as a pledge for his will." And the culmination was Sigismondo Malatesta, the
"warrior" who had "the heart of a poet," a figure whose "desperate energy" and
"passionateness" impressed itself in his every deed. Mussolini was pleased and wrote
Beltramelli a congratulatory letter that was reproduced in facsimile at the volume's end. It was
an appropriate gesture. Beltramelli had been a member of the Fascist Party since its inception
in 1919, and in the years after 1923 his role as a party militant expanded: he served as a
principal speaker at the Convention of Fascist Culture in 1925, the keystone in the regime’s efforts to organize the nation’s intellectual life, and he signed its chief document, the "Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals"; later he edited newspapers for the "University Youth" movement and the "syndicate" of Fascist writers. He died in 1930, and in 1937 the anniversary of his death was commemorated with an article that reprinted all the marginalia that a young socialist named Mussolini had left in his copy of The Chants of Faunus.

Beltramelli’s portrait of Sigismondo was not, however, the antithesis of the one given by the more refined and scholarly Ricci but rather its complement. His book on Sigismondo, in fact, had originated in a lecture on the church of San Francesco that he had given some years earlier, in 1907, which he had written after consulting the text of an earlier lecture on the same subject by Ricci. It is true that Ricci had kept his distance from the Fascist National Party and its activities during 1919 to 1922, and in 1923 his distinguished career—he had served as director of the Brera in Milan (1899-1903), of the Royal Galleries of Florence (1903-1906), and of antiquities and fine arts for all of Italy (1906-1919)—was culminating in a shower of honors. But now those honors were being dispensed by the new regime as part of its effort to woo the qualified personnel necessary to run a modern bureaucracy, personnel not to be found among the ill-educated and violent leaders of the squads that had brought the party to power. On 1 March 1923 Ricci was named a senator of the kingdom (senatore del regno); on 11 April he was appointed president of the Central Commission for Antiquities and Fine Arts; and on 6 May he was named president of the Casa di Dante, one of the nation’s most prestigious cultural institutions. In March 1925 he would participate alongside Beltramelli at the Convention of Fascist Culture in Bologna, and his role in the cultural politics of the regime would continue to expand, reaching its apogee at the inaugural lectures he gave in 1933 for the Fascist National Institute of Culture. Mussolini, it was reported when Ricci died in 1934, "knew him intimately and appreciated his deep learning and indomitable energy."

Pound, at one point or another, examined all the works that have been mentioned so far, and when possible he sought to meet their authors. In mid-May 1927, he first saw the church of San Francesco during holiday travels with his wife, Dorothy; before leaving he took notes from Symonds and purchased a Baedeker guidebook. While in Rimini he purchased a copy of Beltramelli’s book, and he made detailed use of it a month later when he wrote his earliest drafts for the Malatesta Cantos. When he returned to Paris he bought Yriarte’s book, later filling its pages with 150 notes and marginalia. He also purchased Hutton’s novel and Soranzo’s Pius II and Italian Politics in the Struggle Against the Malatesta, 1457-1463. In the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris he consulted volumes too rare to be easily purchased. After five months’ intense work, he left Paris in January 1923 and after a brief vacation began an extensive tour of historical archives and libraries holding books and primary documents connected with Sigismondo. His travels lasted nine weeks, from 11 February to 14 April, and covered Rome, Florence, Bologna, Modena, Cesena, Rimini, the Republic of San Marino, Pennabilli, Fano, Pesaro, Urbino, again Rimini, Ravenna, Venice, and Milan. While in Rome he met with Ricci, who furnished information about archival sources, recent archaeological discoveries, and his defense of the view of the cipher SI. In Rimini he encountered Soranzo’s colleague Massèra, though it was a meeting that seems to have been rather less cordial, as we shall see. In Ravenna he sought out Santi Muratori, a colleague of Ricci who had helped renovate the church, and in Milan he attempted to contact Soranzo, whose studies of Sigismondo he had read in Paris. Ultimately Pound accumulated more than seven hundred pages of notes and more than sixty-five drafts and draft fragments.

For Pound the Tempio Malatestiano became a resonant symbol that encompassed a broad
range of his experiences and aspirations, both literary and extraliterary. Sigismondo, after all, had been a poet, and Yriarte's attribution of the poem by Serdini to him had only given further impetus to a conception of the church as a poem in stone, a lyrical work that expressed a realm of selfhood and desire free from, and in opposition to, the everyday world of socially given meaning. The building's mélange of styles, from the severe exterior by Alberti to the luxurious sculptural decorations by Agostino di Duccio, epitomized a polyphonic eclecticism already typical of The Cantos. Alberti's adaptation of motifs from antiquity coincided with Pound's recurrent interest in the renewal of classical tradition. Sigismondo had written in lyrical genres linked especially to the time when Provençal poetry had influenced Italian poetry, suggesting that he, like Pound, had harbored a genuine sympathy for the culture of Provence. And a more romantic reading of Sigismondo's biography might suggest that his devotion to Isotta was a continuation of practices sanctioned in the Provençal culture of courtly love; moreover, his fatal political mistake had been to lend his support to the house of Anjou from southern France, the land of Provence; and perhaps the ecclesiastical campaign against him resulted not from mundane political considerations but from an attempt to suppress a heretical and neopaganizing ethos of the same sort that had been stifled before in Provence.

There was also the motif of patronage, plainly relevant to Pound when he was preoccupied with Bel Esprit and also crucial in his own career, from the financial support he had received from Margaret Cravens (in 1910-1912) and John Quinn (in 1915-1923) to his efforts to secure patronage for Joyce, Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis. Historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had long portrayed the Renaissance as an age unrivaled in its patrons, neglecting the link between political power and cultural display that fostered the practice of the Renaissance courts and assimilating their activity to post-Kantian ideals of aesthetic disinterestedness. Yet even taking these factors into account, Sigismondo could be viewed as one of the greatest of the smaller courtly patrons, one who had commissioned works from Alberti, Agostino di Duccio, Piero della Francesca, Antonio Pisanello, the poet Basinio da Parma, and many others. Finally, Sigismondo had been turned into an exemplary figure whose restless individuality and unbridled will marked a crucial moment in Western cultural history, constituting a resource for the imagining of a new man who would address the endemic crisis that was gripping liberal bourgeois culture. Sigismondo, as constructed in a complex ensemble of works and cultural practices, had become a riveting image: the source of one of the highest cultural achievements in the West and a locus for nagging questions about the cost, meaning, and purpose of that ideal moment, a figure who simultaneously heralded modernity's arrival and rebuked its failure to realize its emancipatory promise. Here were lodged all the contradictions of art and modernity, imagination and power.


Editor's Note: This excerpt represents but a small portion of a much longer essay, "From the Patron to il Duce: Ezra Pound's Odyssey," in Lawrence Rainey's Institutions of Modernism. Readers are urged to consult the full essay, along with Rainey's Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture: Text, History, and the Malatesta Cantos (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

Publication Status:
Excerpted Criticism [1]

Author:
Lawrence Rainey [2]
Review Process:
Double Blind Peer Review

Criticism Target:
Ezra Pound

Source URL: http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/content/lawrence-rainey-pound-and-sigismondo-malatesta

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