BOSTON UNIVERSITY
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Dissertation

RENAISSANCE LANDSCAPES AND THE FIGURATION OF
GIAMBOLOGNA’S APPENNINO: AN ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation pioneers an ecocritical examination of the colossal monument Appennino (1580) by Giambologna (1529-1608). Because of its scale, form, and materials, the Appennino calls attention to the natural environment in an emphatic manner. A sculpted human figure, a representation of a mountain, and discrete passages of natural landscape are present in it. Living rock, fragments of lava and stalactites, and plant life simultaneously figure the human form and the Apennine landscape. These figurations prompt consideration of the relationships between art and nature and between illusion and materiality in Renaissance art. These interactions can be understood not only as generative processes, but also in terms of destructive ones. I argue that these art-nature and human-landscape interactions illuminate environmental concerns of the Renaissance.

A central concern of this dissertation is how the interactions between art, nature, and beholders in the Italian Renaissance reflect latent ecological anxiety. To demonstrate this, I take the Appennino as a point of departure and situate it within multiple frameworks: sixteenth-century natural history, botanical, and geological endeavors; early
modern reception of landscapes; art historical tropes of art-nature relationships; and
Renaissance artists’ engagement with nature. In Chapter One, I survey the scholarship on
this monument and explain how the materials used to create it were understood, used, and
valued during the Renaissance. In Chapter Two, I discuss the comprehension and
experiences of mountains and caves (the environments that produced the Appennino’s
materials) in the Renaissance. In Chapter Three, I examine the multiple iterations of
landscape within the monument, drawing attention to art theoretical issues such as “third
nature,” the “image made by chance,” and tension between illusion and materiality that
are manifest in the Appennino and that illuminate its entropic situation. In Chapter Four,
I consider the multiple ways that the human figure can be understood relative to the
monument and how the Appennino’s figural form engages art history in an exceptional
manner, destabilizing conventional art historical notions of form and style. Finally, I
evaluate the ecological and ecocritical significance of the monument’s afterlife, arguing
that the Appennino maintains an ambivalent relationship with nature.