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Dissertation

**THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF CHARLES CALLAHAN PERKINS: THE EARLY  
ITALIAN RENAISSANCE AND A NEW FINE ARTS PARADIGM FOR BOSTON**

by

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ITALIAN RENAISSANCE AND A NEW FINE ARTS PARADIGM FOR BOSTON**

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**ABSTRACT**

The art historian Charles Callahan Perkins (1823–1886) taught Boston elites to embrace early Italian Renaissance art, and, in so doing, transformed the cultural landscape of his city. Mostly Unitarian in their religious beliefs, the local elites had previously spurned Italian paintings and sculpture of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for their Roman Catholicism. However, when the new Museum of Fine Arts opened on July 4, 1876, the institution displayed close to one hundred art objects of the period, mostly copies. Perkins, who had returned recently from twenty-five years in Europe as an acclaimed scholar and illustrator of early Italian Renaissance sculpture and an expert in fine arts museums, was responsible for this result.

Perkins focused on art whose “visual rhetoric” reflected the early Italian Renaissance humanist belief in clarity of line and subject as the most pleasing and edifying in art. These Renaissance principles emerged in his view from classical rhetoric, that is strategies for persuasive spoken and written communication, which had long been the core curriculum of Harvard University

where Boston elites studied. Perkins also capitalized on the city's taste for classical sculpture by privileging quattrocento sculpture, which, while more devotional in subject than had traditionally been displayed, did feature a naturalism that evoked ancient art.

Chapter one presents four biographical case studies of individuals who were important players in shaping the fertile cultural ground upon which Perkins built a generation later. Chapter two forges the link between classical rhetoric and the fine arts in ante-bellum Boston. Chapter three examines the broad-based revival of early Italian Renaissance art that Perkins encountered in mid-century Europe. Chapter four assesses his own professional oeuvre within that context. The concluding chapter demonstrates how Perkins revamped ideas of what constituted fine art and how it could be viewed by positioning early Renaissance art at the new Museum as a powerful visually rhetorical tool, thus achieving a far more wide-reaching cultural change than previous scholarship has suggested.