

Yuen-Gen Liang
Associate Research Fellow
Institute of History and Philology
Academia Sinica, Taiwan
yglhistory@gmail.com

Tunis: Renaissance Portrayals of an Islamic City

Renaissance artists pioneered new representations of perspective, secular themes, and the “individual.” Scholars have long focused on these developments in Europe and only recently started inquiring about artistic perceptions of new encounters with non-European “others.” While attention is now concentrating on the Americas, North Africa has been overlooked despite its role as an “other” in European affairs. This paper presents the preliminary results of a comprehensive survey of Renaissance portrayals of Tunis, a leading population, economic, and military center in the central Mediterranean. I will first present a typology of images that feature the city. Next, I will hone in on key examples such the renowned tapestries depicting the Emperor Charles V’s conquest of the city as well as secret manuscript drawings of its fortifications. Close analysis of these cases will reveal how Europeans viewed Islamic Tunis through the classicizing lens of the Renaissance, an approach that tied the area to Roman and Christian motifs shared by the northern Mediterranean while at the same time diminishing the presence of Muslims “usurpers.” Overall, I argue that northern Africa was present early, if sometimes as a type of “negative space,” in the development of Renaissance visual culture.