

Re-Reading Leonardo.

The *Treatise on Painting* across Europe, 1550-1900

Review of:

Claire Farago (ed.), *Re-Reading Leonardo. The Treatise on Painting across Europe, 1550-1900*, Ashgate: Surrey (UK) 2009, ISBN 978-0-7546-6532-8, xxviii-619 pp., 5 colour plates, black/white images.

The book is an amplified collection of essays partly presented in a conference held at the Warburg Institute on September 13-14, 2001, dedicated to the *fortuna* of Leonardo da Vinci's *Trattato della Pittura*, or *Treatise on Painting*. After many years of planning and with the addition of six new contributors, beyond the participants of the conference, the result is an authentic turning point in the studies regarding Leonardo's intellectual legacy, for it constitutes the first publication ever attempted on the historical reception of the *Treatise*, considered in an extraordinarily wide horizon of chronological as well as geographical boundaries. The book is edited and introduced by Claire Farago, one of the leading specialists on Leonardo. From a critical standpoint, the book could be justly considered as a further development and an important continuation of at least two other major contributions by Farago to this specific field of research: the collection of essays entitled *Biography and Early Criticism of Leonardo da Vinci* and *Leonardo's Writings and Theory of Art*, both published in 1999.

The present book, however, focuses primarily on the reception of the abridged version of the *Treatise*, reconstructing, in the most engaging and analytical way, the history of that remarkably heterogeneous net of readers, editors, commentators and interpreters of Leonardo's notes, mostly (if not altogether) neglected in previous studies. Extensively based upon the hermeneutic premises of the *Rezeptionstheorie* or *Rezeptionsästhetik* – without mentioning, however, the name of any of its most important exponents, such as Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Karlheinz Stierle or Harald Weinrich – the book presents itself as a work inevitably in progress, as an open field of investigation, in which the several contributors provide individual case studies, mostly examined from a micro-historical perspective. This level of investigation is, then, directly connected to a broader system of inquiry, that is to say, the complex and not yet fully explored paths of dissemination of Leonardo's ideas in Europe, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.

Given that the driving force of the book lies in the pre-existing research interests of each contributor, the topic of historical reception of Leonardo's *Treatise* has been investigated within different cultural settings and in a large temporal frame, from the earliest debates in Italy – in the ambit of sixteenth-century Florentine academies or seventeenth-century Roman cultural circles – to the migration of Leonardo's theories in France, Spain, Holland, Poland and Greece for over four centuries, until the nineteenth century. Despite the plurality of interests, the diversity of interpretive methods and analytical tools adopted by each scholar, not to mention the impressive variety of problems covered by the different contributions, the reader gets a sense of strong cohesion, for all essays converge towards a common critical point, as Claire Farago underlines in the introduction: 'Ultimately, this study traces the transmission of ideas at a

supra-individual level while simultaneously identifying and historically and culturally locating the individual agents who transmitted them' (3).

As the book brilliantly explores and explains, the text that came to be known as Leonardo's *Treatise on Painting* was the result of an abridged version of a compilation of the artist's holograph writings undertaken by his heir, the Milanese aristocrat and painter, Francesco Melzi, around the middle of the sixteenth century. This manuscript has been housed in the Biblioteca Vaticana since 1657 and it is usually referred to as Codex Vaticanus (Urbinas) 1270, from which a first printed version was prepared in 1817 and, more recently, a philologically accurate and critically-oriented Italian edition was published in 1995 (*Leonardo da Vinci: Libro di Pittura*, ed. Carlo Pedretti, tr. Carlo Vecce; Florence: Giunti 1995).

Sometime before 1582, a second editorial campaign of Leonardo's *Treatise* was undertaken by editors whose identity still need to be clarified. This campaign resulted in the creation of a drastically abridged version of Melzi's compilation, probably in the attempt to fulfil different pedagogical purposes. This shorter version has been preserved in a number of manuscripts copies.

Finally, a third editorial campaign was undertaken and would eventually led to the publication of the first printed edition of the *Treatise* in 1651, both in Italian and in a French version prepared by Trichet Du Fresne, as Catherine Soussloff analyses in her essay. This first edition in two languages was definitely eclipsed when the Codex Urbinas was published in the nineteenth century, but its historical relevance could be hardly exaggerated or overrated. In fact, in the 1651 edition, the authorship of the text was, for the first time, attributed solely to Leonardo da Vinci, thus contributing to the construction of a modern reading of Leonardo as an artist, as a scientist and, more importantly, as a theoretician.

The various essays collected in *Re-Reading Leonardo* focus on the variable reception of the abridged version of the *Treatise*, namely the Codex Urbinas, and explore a much larger horizon of inquiry, significantly dilating the chronological as well as the geographical boundaries of the research, in a trans-national investigation that frames its own object of analysis on a 'longue durée'-level. Such a remarkable dilation of boundaries, incomparably broader than any other study on Leonardo has ever attempted before, emerges clearly from the structural organization of the volume. Following Claire Farago's well-balanced introduction, the book is divided in six – autonomous, yet potentially interacting – sections, reunited in accordance with their specific hermeneutic contexts and on the basis of a roughly chronological sequence, from the earliest discussions on Leonardo in Italy to the penetration of his precepts and theories in nineteenth-century Poland. Each section is enriched by the contributions of several scholars.

In the section entitled "The Italian Reception", Martin Kemp and Juliana Barone emphasize the pluralistic response to Leonardo's *Treatise*, by concentrating their analysis on the illustrations of human figures, in order to understand how the artist had possibly envisioned his book on painting passing from manuscript to printed form. In the second chapter, Robert Williams deals with the presence of Leonardo's ideas in the cultural circles of Florence in the sixteenth century, providing, on the one hand, extensive visual evidences of its multifaceted reception in the context of the Florentine academies and presenting, on the other, solid evidences of the circulation of Leonardo's writings in Florence around 1560s and 1570s. Claire Farago's chapter investigates the social function of the abridged *Treatise*, analysing the reasons and the conditions that led to the

construction of Leonardo's literary identity in sixteenth-century Florence. Particularly compelling, with regard to this topic, appears the suggestion that 'Leonardo's *Treatise* was abridged in Florence during the 1560s or the 1570s' (10). Such a historically-based suggestion offers an excellent example of a dialogic interaction between Claire Farago's research and Robert Williams' textually-oriented investigations. Michael Cole explores, in the next chapter, the pluralistic response to Leonardo's writings by readers with varying interests and purposes, emphasizing that 'philologically corrupt' versions could become meaningful carriers of historical information, beyond that interpretive paradigm that sees, in the concept of authorship, the 'privileged' agent of 'correct' transmissions. To this end, Cole takes as a case study a small notebook compiled in Florence by early seventeenth-century sculptor, Giovanfrancesco Susini. The artist's peculiar way of copying illustrations from the *Treatise* raises a series of interesting questions about how small but telling variations, such as the variable relation between text and images in the different manuscripts, could be used as historical evidence. In the following chapter, Thomas Willette investigates the Italian reception of Leonardo's ideas in a later context, that is to say, nineteenth-century Naples, focusing his attention on the analysis of the first edition printed in Italy in 1733.

The section devoted to the French reception of the *Treatise* is inaugurated by Catherine Soussloff's close reading of the *Vita* of Leonardo published by Du Fresne in the 1651 edition. In this chapter, she argues that this publication helped to create a distinct national tradition among French artists, for it presented Leonardo not only as a bridge between two different visual cultures, but, more eloquently, as a 'French' master. In her study, Juliana Barone examines Poussin's interpretation of Leonardo's pedagogical theories and schemes in the making of the 1651 edition. The main focus of her discussion lies in Poussin's personal manner of operating with proportion in the attempt to establish a new order that emphasizes 'frozen' poses instead of closely following Leonardo's dynamic representations of human figures. The third chapter offers a reprinted version of Martin Kemp's seminal study – originally published in 1987 – on the complex, highly differentiated reception of the 1651 edition of the *Treatise* in France, in direct relation to the emergence of a Parisian, classicist-oriented academicism after the creation, in 1648, of the *Académie Royale*. In the following chapter, J. V. Field further develops Kemp's arguments and focuses his essay on the methods adopted at the French Academy to teach perspective. By establishing a close relation between the Academy's rejection of Bosse's severe mathematical principles of art and the emergence of Leonardo's *Treatise* as a useful source for instructional purposes, Field argues that what we are seeing here, in such an academic context of aesthetic oppositions, is the beginnings of a modern distinction between 'art' and 'science'. Pauline Maguire Robison's contribution meticulously examines Félibien's writings and Poussin's paintings in order to verify the reception of Leonardo's theory of aerial perspective in seventeenth-century France. The conclusive chapter of the section, written by Thomas Kirchner, continues the discussion on the academic debates involving Leonardo's theories and precepts extending their boundaries until the eighteenth century. By investigating the way in which Italian physicist Giovanni Battista Venturi –who lived in Paris at the time of the Directory, had focused, for the first time, on the role of Leonardo as a scientist and had read the artist's *Treatise* in search of an all-encompassing premise that could explain both his visual and theoretical investigations – Kirchner's essay raises relevant epistemological matters and addresses important methodological issues, as Claire Farago justly notes in the introduction: 'One of the most

significant conclusions that Kirchner draws from his diachronic study concerns the way in which Leonardo's *Treatise* helped to lay a foundation for scientific art historical methods' (17).

The next section is centred on the Spanish reception of *Treatise*. Javier Navarro de Zuillaga offers a wide overview of Spanish literature on perspective in relation to the migration and transformation of Leonardo's premises, providing a close reading of several important sources, including Francesco Pacheco's *El Arte de la Pintura*, published posthumously in 1649. Pacheco's volume constitutes, also, the main focus of Charlene Villaseñor Black's essay, in which the circulation of Leonardo's ideas is directly associated with the concepts promoted by the Sevillian academician, in order to verify common elements, such as the conception of the painting as an universal art or the supremacy of practice over theory, but also to emphasize their many differences, especially in matters related to the relation between 'drawing' and 'colour'. In Pacheco's opinion, the combination of *dibujo* and *colorido* is an exquisitely Spanish predilection for painterly effects, as exemplary represented by Diego Velazquez's works.

The fourth section examines the circulation of Leonardo's *Treatise* in Dutch, Flemish and German contexts. Michele-Caroline Heck examines the complex inter-textual processes that led to the dissemination of Leonardo's ideas in Holland, offering a very analytical reading of paragraphs taken from Karel van Mander's *Schilder-Boeck*, printed in 1604, and Joachim von Sandrart's *Teutsche Academie*, published in German in 1675, in the attempt to understand the extent of Leonardo's influence over these authors. In the next chapter, Thijs Weststeijn focuses primarily on the analysis of Samuel van Hoogstraten's *Introduction to the Academy of Painting*, published in 1678. By systematically underlining the multiple similarities between Leonardo's vocabulary and van Hoogstraten's terminology, Weststeijn explores the emergence, in Holland, in an ambient closely related to Rembrandt van Rijn, of a new conception of painting as a contemplative operation, as a philosophically-oriented and theoretically-grounded activity, and not just as a practice ruled by a pre-established norms and confined within the boundaries of a manual interprise. In the final chapter of this section, Juliana Barone examines the importance of Leonardo's visual investigations and theoretical assumptions to Pieter Paul Rubens. In her essay, Barone further develops a number of premises already explored in her previous contribution – co-signed with Martin Kemp – and inserted in "The Italian Reception", providing, however, a more specific and very attentive analysis of the MS Ganay illustrations on human motion; illustrations that unequivocally confirm Rubens' distinctive method of adopting and re-shaping earlier models: in this case, borrowed from Poussin's images for the 1651 edition. By establishing a persuasive *paragone*, Barone shows how Rubens reworked Poussin's former set of images in order to further emphasize the dynamic and expressive qualities of the figures.

The fourth section, dedicated to "The English Reception", offers two contrasting and equally engaging interpretations of the first English translation of Leonardo's *Treatise*, printed in 1721, and brings new light to the particular role played by John Senex and William Taylor in the realization of the project. In a well articulated essay, Richard Woodfield demonstrates that Senex, besides being a bookseller, was also an accomplished publisher of scientific books who was made a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1728. By further exploring such an insightful premise, Woodfield argues that the decision to translate the *Treatise* should be considered as a part of a larger ideological agenda to promote Newtonian culture within a Masonic setting. Consequently, the scholar relates

the dissemination of Leonardo's ideas to the attempt to advance the cause of speculative Freemasonry, engaged in the process of observation and experimentation communicated by images and texts. In other words, as Woodfield's essay persuasively suggests, the first audience for the *Treatise* was most probably Masonic. In the next chapter, Geoff Quilley describes a very different audience for Senex's edition, relating it to the rise of a new social class, the bourgeoisie, for whom the study of painting was connected to a highly ordered conception of society. Quilley focuses, therefore, his analysis on the patrician world of patrons, amateurs and collectors directly associated with the 1721 edition, stressing however that the text of the *Treatise* might have occupied a peripheral position in the aesthetic debates of the time. In fact, Quilley compares the *Treatise's* influence with wide circulation of ideas promoted by Joseph Addison's *Spectator* essays on the pleasures of the imagination. Given that one of the central aspects of art discussed by eighteenth-century writers is novelty, and novelty is strictly associated with variety, Quilley undertakes a punctual comparison between Leonardo's notes and William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*, first published in 1753.

The next section of the volume is dedicated to the reception of the *Treatise* in Greece and in Poland, in the essays respectively written by Chrysa Damianaki and Marcin Fabiański. Damianaki follows the traces of Leonardo's precepts in the Mediterranean area and analyses the Greek translation made by Byzantine icon painter, Panagiotis Doxaras. In this chapter, Damianaki accurately describes, for the first time in English, the two Doxaras surviving manuscripts, the one in Venice and the other in Athens. The scholar persuasively suggests that the intended audience of the translation was a community of Greek artists and a group of liberal Orthodox and Catholic Greeks. In conclusion, Damianaki believes that Doxaras's ambition to Westernize the Byzantine tradition is deeply intertwined with the decision of translating Leonardo's *Treatise* and preparing a publication with engraved illustrations that could have served as an instructional manual. In the final chapter of the volume, Fabiański investigates the reception of the *Treatise* in Poland, where, as the scholar demonstrates, there was little interest in art theory until the early nineteenth century, due to the fact that painting was considered as a merely mechanical activity. Undertaking a meticulous step-after-step exploration, Fabiański follows the different events that would eventually led to the study of visual arts within an academic context, describing, more precisely, what happened at the University of Cracow in 1745. Another decisive moment is individualized in the organization of a regular art school at the University of Warsaw in 1818. From this time on, painting would started to be regarded as an intellectually-grounded discipline in need of a theory, and not just as a manual practice. Finally, in 1876, a new translation of the *Treatise* into Polish would appear thanks to Wojciech Gerson. There is a very important point stressed in Fabiański's essay that appears quite significantly as a recurrent leitmotiv throughout the pages of *Re-Reading Leonardo*: if, on the one hand, the emergence of Leonardo as the 'author' of the *Treatise* unarguably connoted the publication as the 'authentic' legacy of an *auctoritas*, on the other, the dissemination of his ideas in Europe helped each different context to distinguish and re-shape its own collective identity.

By undertaking a close examination of the variable reception of the *Treatise* and the active engagement of readers, publishers, editors, and commentators, across a variety of cultural as well as institutional settings, the volume edited by Claire Farago provides a rich panorama of historical matters and a compelling horizon of aesthetic concerns, enriching the most common philologically-oriented method of research, usually adopted

by scholars when dealing with the *Treatise*, through the reference of hermeneutic strategies borrowed from the 'Theory' or 'Aesthetics of the Reception'. Leonardo's intellectual legacy is consequently interpreted, by the various essays printed in this volume, not as a closed territory of ideas but, on the contrary, as an open land of intellectual exchange, beyond the metaphysics of the 'author'. In fact, by systematically analysing the different ways in which individual artists, editors and amateurs, as well as collective institutions such as the academies of art, were indebted to the *Treatise*, the volume overcomes the usual – and sometimes dangerously reductive – approach centred on the 'authorial presence' of Leonardo in those pages. The main point that this excellent collection of essays explores is, instead, the intertwined, and always variably articulated paths of dissemination of Leonardo's premises, precepts and ideas in Europe, examining the dialogic ways in which his pages were read, and misread, according to the different systems of expectation in which they were placed. As Claire Farago points out in her introduction, when the *Treatise* was read it 'contributed to the formation of different collective identities' (3), but also contributed notably to the emergence of a plurality of Leonardos, thus transforming a historical person in a multi-layered historiographical persona.

Since 'no text ever remains the same', due to the interactive nature of the process of reading – a process in which practices such as interpreting, misinterpreting, adding, and subtracting could play variable roles – the study of the reception of Leonardo's *Treatise* leads, moreover, to many broader questions regarding the very methods and the history itself of our discipline, the History of Art. This is, in fact, one of the most relevant aims achieved by this volume: beyond the (significant) contributions that it offers to specialists, it provides also a larger horizon of epistemological matters. Brilliantly conducted and organized, between the accurate reconstruction of individual cases and the presence of general statements concerning the interpretive paradigms of art history, the volume raises several questions about the 'disciplinization' of the History of Art, as Hayden White has named it, and its historical significance as a specific 'field of cultural production', to quote Pierre Bordieu. Initially designed as a compilation of case studies on the reception of Leonardo's *Treatise*, the volume has significantly enlarged its meta-critical goals, becoming a remarkable example of a highly epistemologically-oriented criticism, successfully conjugating the legitimate needs of a specialized branch of research with general epistemological concerns.

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