

Raphael and the redefinition of art in Renaissance Italy

In memoriam Robert Williams

Review of:

Robert Williams, *Raphael and the Redefinition of Art in Renaissance Italy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 304 pp., 113 b. & w. illus., hdbk, ISBN 978-1-107-13150-7, £75.00

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This handsomely produced volume is organised into three chapters of different length and importance. After a profound introduction on Raphael's influential place in the entire history of art, Robert Williams addresses in chapter one the crucial issue of the theory of imitation in the early modern period in the context of cinquecento discussions on style. The second chapter offers the best analysis to date of the concept of decorum, introducing the reader to what the author has labelled as the 'systematicity of representation'. Finally, the last chapter describes in depth the entrepreneurial functioning of Raphael's workshop, highlighting the division of labour as a commercial strategy. A balanced conclusion wraps up all the themes of this ambitious - in a positive sense - book that intends to revise, reorient and redefine the study of Italian Renaissance art, 'and, beyond that, the history of art as a whole' (p. 2), a reorientation that may eventually have an impact on our aesthetic values as well.

If the volume is obviously a fundamental contribution to the rich scholarship on Raphael, the introduction reveals that a second protagonist occupies centre stage: namely Giorgio Vasari, whose two *Lives of the Artists* (1550; 1568) have inevitably contributed to shaping the reception of Raphael's work until the present day. Taking a slightly polemical stance, Williams rescues Vasari and his book from the critique of those art historians who have ignored his 'modernity' because they did not understand his project. Indeed, Williams is convinced that Vasari's problematic concept of artistic progress was more complex and profound than generally acknowledged, and he chastises recent scholarship for not recognizing 'the ways in which Renaissance art anticipates aspects of artistic modernism and postmodernism' (p. 6). Vasari was not only an advocate of the 'real', as was to be expected for someone who lived in a period dominated by the ideology of naturalism, but he also assigned 'as much importance [...] to the expression of abstract ideas' (p. 3). In this book, therefore, two different narratives cross their paths repeatedly and integrate perfectly: a theoretical, discursive structure of great sophistication buttresses the new interpretations of Raphael's impressive artistic output.

The first chapter begins with an in-depth analysis of the principle of stylistic eclecticism that Vasari was the first to notice and to describe accurately. As is well known, Raphael was particularly astute in borrowing and transforming the formal and structural inventions of older colleagues. Recent studies have justly contested

some of Vasari's assumptions: for example, it is unlikely that Raphael was ever a member of Perugino's workshop. Yet it is undeniable that Raphael's early works developed in the context of a critical appraisal of Perugino's output. Later, after his move to Florence, Raphael creatively assimilated forms and themes originating in the workshops of Leonardo, Fra Bartolomeo and Michelangelo. Later still, he did not hesitate to change his style while frescoing the Stanza di Eliodoro, partly under the spell of Michelangelo's monumental figures on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Furthermore, even his last work, the *Transfiguration*, shows points of contact with the theoretical research pursued by Leonardo, who was still in Rome when his younger colleague drew the first sketches for the composition of the gigantic altarpiece. Raphael's contemporaries, like Pope Leo X, as well as Vasari, were well aware of these borrowings, but they certainly did not attribute them to lack of invention. On the contrary, Raphael's mature style was the result of a creative method of assimilation and transformation. His practice of 'synthetic' or 'critical' imitation, to use Williams' vocabulary (p. 73), was not dismissed as derivative, but became instead an authoritative model followed and disseminated by the most gifted members of his workshop, like Giulio Romano or Perino del Vaga. This model was so successful that Vasari himself and other artists of the younger generations adopted it as well. As Williams rightly observes: 'The style he [Raphael] achieved was more than a personal style in the usual sense; it was something like a super-style or meta-style' (p. 7) that in its turn should be and was imitated.

These theoretical considerations frame the discussion of the working method developed by the artist in his daily praxis. In this first chapter, therefore, the author also examines Raphael's intense study of the models he found in Florence, most notably Leonardo's art of variation in his numerous sketches depicting the Madonna and Child. During the early period of his career, Raphael painted many pictures of this kind, and it is likely that some of his more sophisticated patrons were aware of his efforts to maximise the art of variation, developed to produce new compositions efficiently. After all, this working procedure found parallels in the poetry of his time, as the beautiful pages dedicated to Pietro Bembo and the theory of imitation in literature show (pp. 53-63). As Williams notes, Bembo's ability to produce endless variations on a single theme was a demonstration of great originality, not of lacking invention. The same was true for Raphael.

Vasari was fully aware of the problems that the young artist had to face when he moved to Florence. Exposed to many different stimuli, Raphael finally developed his own *modo mezzano*, a middle course, both in drawing and in colouring. Out of many styles, he made one, transforming it into a 'mode' or 'method'. Interestingly, this fundamental passage about Raphael's stylistic borrowings was added in the second edition of Vasari's book. Williams believes that this addition was motivated by the desire to clarify the relationship between Raphael and Michelangelo, so that young artists would be discouraged from following only one of these two possible models. Perhaps, but the most important point the author makes here is that this passage documents how Vasari had understood that 'Raphael had created a new idea of what style is, and thus of what art is' (p. 29).

The second chapter, entitled 'The Systematicity of Representation', is the longest and the most important of the book; it is indeed its core, as the author himself informs us (p. 9), and it deals with the fundamental issue of decorum. If in

the first chapter Williams has investigated Raphael's early altarpieces and above all his early Madonnas, the second offers a sustained analysis of the Stanze, the cartoons for the tapestries of the Sistine Chapel, the late altarpieces, the Loggia of Leo X, and the portraits. The pages on the Stanze and the cartoons are particularly innovative, since the author does not rehearse the heuristic knowledge accumulated by generations of scholars since the pioneering monograph written by Johann David Passavant (1839-1858), but looks afresh at the works themselves in order to clarify the amazing qualities of the artist as a storyteller.

In this very original discussion of the principle of decorum, Williams argues that what for us may have negative connotations, since the term is inevitably associated with restrictive social norms and censorship, was perceived then, instead, as a positive, potentially liberating force. For the people of the Renaissance, decorum was not a synonym for repression, but an empowering concept that could be used in three different senses. Usually the term points to 'the principle that governs the relation of things in a picture to the things in the world that they represent' (p. 77). However, there is a second sense of the term: 'A second way in which decorum works is in governing the relation of an image as a whole to its setting or purpose' (p. 78). In this sense, this principle can govern stylistic choices. Therefore, it is a crucial term in sixteenth-century debates about style. 'The third way in which decorum operates is as a principle governing the relation of the parts of a picture to one another' (p. 79). If decorum is understood in this third sense, the term implies "notions of organic wholeness and functional integrity frequently evoked in ancient and Renaissance definitions of beauty" (p. 80). A short review cannot do justice to the complexity of the author's theses. The reader, therefore, must see for herself or himself, whether the observations made above apply well to the actual works of art painted or planned by Raphael. What cannot be questioned is the great level of sophistication of Bob Williams' argument. No other expert on the artist has ever reached this level of intellectual subtlety, which owes much to his deep knowledge of linguistics.

This second chapter begins with a section entitled 'Unpacking Decorum'. A few brilliant pages on the discursive potential of painting follow. They open with a quotation from Vasari's *Vita*, which is taken from the end of his account of the Stanza dell'Incendio, that is from the very end of his detailed survey of the entire complex of the Stanze: 'Everything in its silence seems to speak' ('Non si può scrivere le minuzie delle cose di questo artifice, che in vero ogni cosa nel suo silenzio par che favelli'). The same principle of the discursivity of the visual arts also shapes the three following sections devoted to the Loggia of Pope Leo X, the late Madonnas and altarpieces, and finally the portraits. This glorious chapter concludes with a section entitled 'Repacking Decorum' (pp. 168-172) which is the most innovative part of the book. It would deserve a long review in itself, but I hope that the reader will forgive me, if I limit myself to quoting what the author writes in his lucid introduction to the volume:

A fundamental condition of representation is its *systematicity*. This insight anticipates the idea, more fully elaborated in twentieth-century linguistics, that the relation of signs to things is arbitrary and that their efficacy depends upon the way they work within a system of signs. [...] Decorum [however] is much more than the correspondence between an individual sign and the

object it signifies; it is *the legibility in an individual representation of the systematicity of representation as a whole*. Decorum is the principle that governs the relation of representation to the world; as such, it defines that relation as systematic. Beyond producing the effect of “rightness” that the viewer may sense between any particular image and the thing it depicts, or between any particular work of art and its function, decorum does a much deeper kind of discursive work: it grounds our experience of any individual sign in the ideal correspondence between all possible signs and all possible objects. Any decorous image is thus the image of an ideal knowledge of the world as a whole, an ideal subjective disposition toward the world, an ideal mode of being. [emphases in the original] (p. 11).

Williams concedes that the term *systematicity*, borrowed from modern philosophy, is awkward-sounding, but he defends its simplicity, and concludes that it is indeed central to art as the hidden source of its psychological and social power. ‘It is specifically the systematicity of representation that art must be concerned to comprehend and instrumentalize, and it follows that the specifically artistic quality of any individual representation is indicated by the degree to which it exemplifies that systematicity, the degree to which the systematicity of representation as a whole is legible in it’ (p. 169). This sense of ‘the systematicity of representation’ is also present in the juxtaposition of different modes that was so characteristic of Raphael’s decorative schemes (p. 171).

One last point needs to be made. This rather complex intellectual system created by the author to do justice to the figure and works of Raphael has developed partly as a response to other models of interpretation of the visual culture of the early modern period. The first four pages of the section dedicated to discursivity and devotion, for example, are a sustained critique of Belting’s arguments about devotional imagery as they are presented in his *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, published in 1990 and translated into English four years later with the title *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (pp. 127-130). Williams laments the dramatic shift of interest in recent scholarship on Renaissance art, which seems to have forgotten the value to the early modern period in the emergence of a secular mentality and in the development of the Albertian notion of *istoria*. He concedes that Belting reformulates with refreshing arguments the old assumption of an essential difference between devotional images and so-called ‘works of art’, but he criticizes the German art historian and his American followers for arguing, for example, that visual images are fundamentally different from language. Williams proposes a different approach: ‘rather than project some essential difference between narrative and devotional images, we should recognize discursivity as their common goal’ (p. 131).

Belting is not the only target of Williams’ theoretical stance. The footnotes to his important introduction reveal other intellectual debts and revisions. He admits that his study is informed by the approach to ‘subjectivity effects’ characteristic of Greenblatt’s ‘new historicism’, but he also seeks to maintain a certain distance from it. More seriously, Williams distances himself from issues of self-reflexivity. As he writes: ‘Although it ought to become more obvious as the argument proceeds, the reader should note that the idea of systematicity as essential to the idea of art circumvents the concept of “self-reflexivity” now common in discussions of early

modern art such as Stoichita 1995' (p. 12, note 21). Williams is referring to the English edition of *L'instauration du tableau : Métapeinture à l'aube des temps modernes* (1993).

After so much theory, it is beautiful to re-emerge in the world of Raphael's artistic products. The third and last chapter is incredibly rich in new discoveries and aperçus. Interestingly, Williams does not refrain from addressing problems of connoisseurship, which, as is well known, are particularly intractable in the case of Raphael's workshop. However, the author is more interested in the division of labour, in the artist's use of assistants, including printmakers, who helped him in realizing and marketing his numerous late projects. If the first two chapters were dedicated to issues of *Metatechne*, the last one concentrates on the issue of work. A detailed study of how a well-organised workshop, like Raphael's, functioned, can help us to place the practice of art in a larger context, like the emergence of capitalism, to see art, as *Techne*, as part of the history of labour. This is one of Bob Williams' most important intellectual legacies. If his first book analysed artistic theory in Florence during the sixteenth century, from *Techne* to *Metatechne*, which culminated in the foundation of the *Accademia del Disegno* in 1563 under the guidance of Don Vincenzo Borghini, this volume on Raphael investigates his workshop as a form of proto-industrial organisation.

If each part of the book addresses special theoretical issues (style, decorum, labour), it also deals with a particular phase of Raphael's career. As we have seen, the first chapter dealt with the early altarpieces and his numerous variations on the theme of the Madonna and Child. The second chapter was devoted to the great narrative cycles, the late altarpieces, and the portraits. Finally, the third one analyses the prints and the late works, realized with considerable help from his assistants and collaborators. Raphael's terrific output, quantitatively as well as qualitatively, has generated an overwhelming bibliography over the centuries, and the c. 900 items listed at the end of this splendid book are a humbling reminder of how much work the author had to deliver in order to develop his original theses and ideas. The bibliographical apparatus is indeed daunting, and I am particularly impressed by the fact that the German literature on the artist is given the same visibility usually reserved for publications written in English or in Italian. Having known the author well, and having read the book, it is obvious that these titles have actually been read and critically assimilated. This is not always the case, unfortunately. German titles *are* quoted in the bibliographies, but they are rarely read.

Furthermore, we should also emphasise Williams' profound knowledge of postmodern theoretical discourses, philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and literary theory. When he quotes the works of Agamben, Genette, Luhmann, Benjamin, Barthes, Adorno, etcetera, it is obvious that their texts are functional to his line of argument.

2020 is approaching, and it is easy to predict that the market will be flooded with more or less interesting exhibitions, almost useless catalogues, and many more or less successful coffee-table books produced rapidly to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Raphael's death. It seems to me easy to predict that Bob Williams' study will remain unchallenged. Nobody will be able to compete with a text that took almost twenty years to write. It has been a great joy to read it, and we are all grateful to the stars that the author lived long enough to see his monumental work in print. Bob passed away on 16 April 2018. He will be greatly missed by his friends:

not only because he was a fantastic scholar, who was able to say something utterly new on one of the most important artists who ever lived, but above all because he was a luminous presence, a generous colleague, a stellar teacher. The two sessions in his honour organized at the last meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Toronto (Sunday, 17 March 2019) were certainly just the beginning of more events to come. *Lebe wohl, mein Freund.*

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