

Hungarian University of Fine Arts

Doctoral School

Words and Pictures

The Art of Painting in Cennino Cennini's Treatise Entitled *Il libro dell'arte* and in the Artistic Literature in Italy from the 14th Century to the middle of the 16th Century

DLA thesis abstract
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„Rules of art can be useful, but they do not determine the practice of an art; they are maxims, which can serve as a guide to an art only if they can be integrated into the practical knowledge of the art. They cannot replace this knowledge.”

Michael Polányi: *Personal Knowledge*

My doctoral work is a tentative to understand the treatise of Cennino d'Andrea Cennini entitled *Il libro dell'arte*. This was the first treatise on art written in Italian and was rediscovered as early as in the 16th century. Its importance is above all doubt until the present day. Yet this outstanding work is not a sole and isolated phenomenon and therefore it is a possible approach to read it in the context of similar sources.

The dissertation gives an overview of the Italian writings on art from Cennini's *Libro dell'arte* to the middle of the 16th century, when Vasari's *Vite* was published. The other part of my work (the so called “master's work”) is a collection of translations made by the present author. It contains seven texts on painting including Cennini's book and earlier writings as well. These two parts of the doctoral work are inseparable and closely related to each other.

My most important findings are summed up in the following theses.

1. *The significance of treatises on painting in the field of understanding artworks*

The understanding of the procedures and techniques of painting is based on three fundamentals. The first one is the research of the artwork itself, the second is the study of the written sources and the third one is the practical testing and reconstruction of the past methods.

In my doctoral work I have investigated one of the three fields of study mentioned above: the written sources or more precisely a well defined group of them, the treatises on art. Thus my attention was not focused on the study of otherwise valuable sources like letters, account books, tax declarations etc.

One of the main motives of my work was the conviction that considering these texts we might be given a unique opportunity to know the thinking and creative methods of artists of the past. The actuality of a work like this is supported by an increasing number of publications on this topic in the past years. The study and publication of the treatises on painting has a long history. One of the first and still important sourcebooks was compiled by Mary Philadelphia Merrifield in 1849.¹ This was followed by the publications of the Milanesi brothers with the first entire text of the *Libro* among them. In the twenties and thirties of the 20th century Daniel Varney Thompson made influential efforts in publishing sources. From the nineties a number of scholars turned

¹ MERRIFIELD, Mary P. : *Medieval and Renaissance Treatises on the Art of Painting, Original texts with English translations*, Dover Publications, Mineola, New York, 1999, (first edition: 1849)

to this field and a lot of sources were published. Some of them are previously unknown works but a good number of the texts are new editions of texts already published.² A part of this scientific phenomenon is the edition of Cennini's book by Fabio Frezzato just like the exhibition in Berlin dedicated to his pictorial oeuvre. A good example of revealing new data is the discovery of second manuscript of the treatise *De arte illuminandi* and the publication of its new critical text.

Many groups of scholars work even presently on editing interpretations of treatises on painting – let me refer to the new German translation of Cennini or to the project organized by the University of Cologne for the publishing of the famous *De diversis artibus* by Theophilus. The latter attempts to make the manuscripts of the book accessible as an online database. Thus one of the main sources of my dissertation was the increasing scientific activity on this field of research.

2. *Methods for the interpretation of the Libro dell'arte*

The literature agrees on the marked significance of the *Libro*. In the past years no new information arose about the author and there is a wide consensus on the book's time and place of origin. We know that Cennino d'Andrea Cennini was born in Tuscany in a small town called Colle di Val d'Elsa and studied painting in the workshop of Agnolo Gaddi. In 1398 he was in Padua where he belonged to the court of Padua's sovereign Francesco Carrara, as a painter and *familiare*, and his brother Matteo also served the Carrara family as a musician. Cennini had already been married that year, his wife was Ricca della Ricca from Cittadella, a settlement near Padua. Some sources confirm that both Cennini's and his wife's family was of a high rank in the society of those times. The *Libro* was written with all probability during his Paduan sojourn.

The sporadic data on Cennini's professional career give only a few clues to the approach to the *Libro*. Despite this there is a number of conceptions about the goals and reasons of the writing. One of the hypotheses states that Cennini wrote his book on the commission of the Paduan painters' guild and it was intended to be used by the members of the corporation. On my opinion this suggestion lacks all the supporting arguments. There is no detail in the text referring to such a goal and the form and the content of the usual guild statutes are both quite different from Cennini's language.

I must declare the other hypothesis to be completely uncertain as well, which names the Carrara court as the commissioner of the writing. At the same time I do

² ERACLIO: *I colori e le arti dei romani e la compilazione pseudo-eraciana*, (translated and edited by GARZYA ROMANO, Chiara) Bologna, Società Editrice il Mulino, 1996. ; ARCOLAO, Carla: *Le ricette del restauro. Malte, intonaci, stucchi dal XV- al XIX secolo*, Venecia, Marsilio Editori, 1998.; CAFFARO, Adriano: *Scrivere in oro. Ricettari medievali d'arte e artigianato (secoli IX-XI). Codici di Lucca e Ivrea*, Napoli, Liguori Editore, 2003.; CAFFARO, Adriano – FALANGA, Giuseppe: *Il libellus di Chicago. Un ricettario veneto di arte, artigianato e farmaceutica (secolo XV)*, Salerno, Edizioni Arci Postiglione, 2006.; VASARI, Giorgio: *Einführung in die Künste der Architektur, Bildhanerei und Malerei*, (translated by LORINI, Victoria, introduction and notes by BURIONI, Matteo) Berlin, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 2006. ; CAFFARO, Adriano: *De clarea. Manuale medievale di tecnica della miniatura (secolo XI)*, Salerno, Edizioni Arci Postiglione, 2004. CAFFARO, Adriano – FALANGA, Giuseppe: *Isidoro di Siviglia. Arte e tecnica nelle etimologie*, Salerno, 2009.; FREZZATO, Fabio – SECCARONI, Claudio: *Segreti d'arti diverse nel regno di Napoli. Il manoscritto It. III.10 della Biblioteca Marciana di Venezia*, Saonara, Il prato, 2010.

emphasize that these ideas were not formulated by chance: the *Libro* can be read as a book for the members of the guild or for the nonprofessional amateurs as well.

Another assumption also emerges: the obvious pedagogical intention in the work of Cennini may lead us to interpret the *Libro* as a course-book. It is sure that the author's intention is to teach, but we have no data confirming that the work was used as a means of learning the art at any workshop or by any group of amateurs. On my opinion there is no need to link the work to a well defined group of commissioners or to reconstruct the author's intention restricting it to a narrow group of readers. The *Libro* speaks about art to anyone who is interested in it and "anyone who wants to enter this profession."³ In that sense the book is not a text to learn but an introduction: the author leads us as a guide on a pathway "to approach the glory of the profession step by step".⁴

The central concept of my work was that reading Cennini's work parallel to similar texts helps its better understanding. Connecting the texts is indispensable for interpreting some details and on the other hand the knowledge of other sources as complete works enables us to see Cennini's book not as a unique phenomenon but as a part of a tradition, and to appreciate its real value.

This kind of approach is far from being wholly original. Albert Ilg, one of the earliest translators revealed a lot of connections between the sources in the endnotes of his edition, and I cannot deny that one of the models of my work was the two volumes of Mary Merrifield's classical book. I have followed their methods showing the similarities of the texts which interpret both themselves and each other.

The majority of the texts discussed is not dealing only with questions of technique in a modern sense but many other aspects of the creative progress appears in the writings of Cennini's forerunners as well as in those of his followers. I am convinced that we cannot neglect this type of texts: considering the sources it is recommended to know them as a whole and an unabridged publication is desirable in case of editing. One of the recent examples of a partial publication is the English edition of Borghini's *Il riposo* (1584)⁵ omitting almost all the passages dealing with the methods and techniques of painting and sculpture. In this case the obvious principle of editing was that the technical texts were considered of secondary importance, despite the fact that the author shows no sign of this opinion.

The distinction mentioned above is partly reasonable, but considering the texts discussed in my dissertation and translated in the source-book I am convinced that the authors did not treat artworks as objects which can be separated into material and spiritual content as if the piece of art could be divided into a corruptible material body and an eternal spiritual meaning. In the discussed period the technical literature is not clearly distinct from the artistic theory and despite the differences of emphasis the painters, architects, sculptors and connoisseurs writing on art from Cennini to Vasari agree in treating the practical questions of making art as important as stylistic or iconographical problems or even as the behaviour of the artist.

³ *e a ultolità e bene e guadagno di chi alla detta arte vorrà pervenire.* (*Il libro dell'arte*) English translation by D.V. Thompson.

⁴ *Per venire a 'llucie dell'arte di grado in grado* (*Il libro dell'arte*, XXXV. fej.)

⁵ BORGHINI, Raffaello: *Il Riposo*, (translated by ELLIS, Lloyd H. Jr.) Toronto – Buffalo – London, University of Toronto Press, 2007. The PhD dissertation of the translator contains the whole text.

Reading a sentence or a chapter of a treatise we can only state: this is what the texts tells. To interpret an expression we are referred to other words at first where the same word makes itself clearer in a different context.

The question of the relation between the sources and the actual practice has an obvious answer: the reliability of the texts can be measured with the help of data produced by research of the artworks and published in the art conservation literature. I am convinced that the most important way to improve the present doctoral work is to interpret these publications along with the above mentioned reconstructions of painting methods. However, a number of questions arise when we compare texts with the results of modern technical research. If a procedure documented in a source cannot be verified by any hard data obtained from scientific measurements there is still no reason to say: the author is mistaken. And if the case is the opposite and we find an artwork completely corresponding to a written source, it is wiser to interpret it as an evidence for the existence of a limited number of paintings comparable to a historic description. Let us say: in this particular case text and object, word and picture tells the same, but do not judge the written source as misleading if the opposite is true, for there can be thousands of artworks hiding information confirming the texts. Consequently the data obtained from modern research techniques and the sources can be reasonably compared if a high number of researched artifacts (hundreds at least) can be compared. This task was not fulfilled by the present author.

3. Italian treatises on painting from Cennini to the middle of the Cinquecento

Only few motifs can be found in the *Libro dell'arte* which has no precursor in the writings of the previous centuries. But in a certain aspect Cennini surely deserves the first place: there are no earlier writings on the role and significance of drawing. His work stands at the beginning of the triumphant history of the concept of *disegno*. The man of letters Anton Francesco Doni (*Disegno*, 1549) and the sculptor Baccio Bandinelli (*Libro del disegno*, around 1551) treat this term as a central theme of their work. And Giorgio Vasari speaks of *disegno* in his *Vite* as a framework connecting the three arts of drawing: architecture, sculpture and painting.

It is highly remarkable that in this period there were treatises written by non-artists (Doni, Michelangelo Biondo) in which the author deals with the practice of painting. The dialogue of Lodovico Dolce (*Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Areino*, 1557) is the first text with the question weather a relevant opinion could be articulated by a writer who has no practical experience in painting. Even this fact shows that such a statement by an outsider was not a matter-of-course phenomenon.

Reviewing the sources I had the impression that in the history of the texts written on painting there is no straight line of progress. I state this despite that especially in the comparison of Cennini and Alberti a simple result is given: these books belong to two distinct worlds. If we focus on the differences, we see Cennini as a man of the past era, the author of a writing based on the tradition of recipe-books and the heir of the medieval studio practice. Alberti as a counterpart possesses the future: he is the divulgator of the science of linear perspective, a highly educated humanist writing on pure theory. But in the *Della pittura* Alberti describes himself as a painter thus his book is to be read as a painter's treatise just like Cennini's, despite the widespread opinion of

scholars which defines Alberti's book as composed for the educated audience and not for the artists. The main evidence is a painter's book, Paolo Pino's dialogue from 1548 (*Dialogo di pittura*) that Alberti's treatise reached the artists of the brush. And though Pino explicitly neglects the painters' methods and techniques but not because of their unimportance. On his opinion these things are compulsory elements of a painter's skill, too obvious to write about. And Vasari writes some chapters resembling those of Cennini in the detailed description of the painting procedures.

4. *Questions of translation*

All the translations were made from the original language on the basis of the best critical editions of the texts. It is senseless to translate from an intermediate language but the study and use of the modern translations is indispensable.

I have not found any single principle to follow in the course of my work apart from the intention of constructing an understandable Hungarian text. In some cases the original was followed word for word in other cases only the meaning was reproduced. There are some terms with uncertain meaning or lacking a certain Hungarian equivalent. These terms appear in the translation in their original form in italics. My goal was to avoid over-interpreting that is to make a translation which tells more than the original. For example if the word *verderame* is translated as *verdigris* according to the modern terminology, the translation means more and less than the original at the same time. It means more because we identify it with a well defined compound, and less for with this solution all the other interpretations are excluded. It is more honest not to tell more than the author. Thus the *verderame* is *réz-zöld* ("copper-green") in my Hungarian text and for the same reason I translate the pigment called *azzurro della Magna* as *németkék* ("German blue") and not as *azurit* ("azurite"). Some shades of meaning are inevitably lost in the course of translation. In such cases the comments in the footnotes play an important role.

The translation is to be followed by the original which makes aware the reader of controlling the text and emphasizes that the present translation is only *one* interpretation to be improved again and again.

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Neither the work of Cennini, nor all the other similar sources cannot describe the whole artistic practice of the given period. He shows the way to follow but at the same time emphasizes that the knowledge recorded in his book is insufficient. As we read in Chapter CIIII.: from this book "even if you study it by day and by night, if you do not see some practice under some master you will never amount to anything, nor will you ever be able to hold your head up in the company of masters." Like other authors Cennino Cennini was aware that all the things he wrote are part of a practice which cannot be converted to words, constituents of a personal knowledge to be learned in the course of the creative process.