

Martin Wackernagel, *The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist. Projects and Patrons, Workshop and Art Market*, trans. by Alison Luchs. Princeton (N.J.), Princeton University Press, 1981. xxx + 447 pp., \$37.50 (cloth), \$14.50 (paper)

Bruce Cole, *The Renaissance Artist at Work. From Pisano to Titian*. New York. Harper and Row, 1983. viii + 216 pp., 110 illus., \$28.95 (cloth)

Barbara Dodge

Volume 13, Number 1, 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073571ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073571ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dodge, B. (1986). Review of [Martin Wackernagel, *The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist. Projects and Patrons, Workshop and Art Market*, trans. by Alison Luchs. Princeton (N.J.), Princeton University Press, 1981. xxx + 447 pp., \$37.50 (cloth), \$14.50 (paper) / Bruce Cole, *The Renaissance Artist at Work. From Pisano to Titian*. New York. Harper and Row, 1983. viii + 216 pp., 110 illus., \$28.95 (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 13(1), 86–88. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073571ar>

century 'more in its own terms,' they use the comparative 'more.' They are not like Ranke in believing that the historian can show 'how it really was.' They can neither adopt the views of the nineteenth century nor avoid the influence of orthodox modernism. Despite the fears of Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner (*Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth Century Art*, 1984, p. 216) that their sort of 'neo-conservative' revisionism will overturn the avant-garde pantheon, this does not happen. The authors reconfirm the stature of all its major figures, though often for different reasons. Artists like Turner, Courbet and Van Gogh merit whole sections of their own, yet they are treated neither as gods nor as pawns in some grand historicist system, valued only as 'prophets' for later movements. Many previously forgotten or now despised artists have a small but respected place in history. Despite much recent hoopla over the 'pompiers' and 'juste milieu' artists – Bouguereau and Bastien-Lepage, for instance – the authors see them as representative of the past. Whatever their fascination individually as men or the formal beauty or bizarre curiosity of their work, they are still not transformed into gods. The selection of Frederick Leighton's *Flaming June* to grace the book's dust-jacket makes this point very clear.

One of the great strengths of this book is the way it compares major and minor artists and shows how similar aims exist in works of widely varying quality. Some of the comparisons are unexpected, and all are well chosen to illuminate various points. The sublime historical landscapes of Turner are compared to those of Karl Briullov, John Martin, Francis Danby and Domingo Antonio de Sequeira, the urban scenes of Seurat to those of Gustave Doré, Gustave Caillebotte and Atkinson Grimshaw.

Rosenblum, especially, writes very well and manages the difficult task of being both urbane and enthusiastic. While Rosen and Zerner succer at his appreciation of what they see as kitsch, even they exempt him from the 'sinister detachment' of most other revisionists. A final note is that the book is lavishly illustrated and has an extensive bibliography (9 pages of fine print). Though its price is high for a text-book, there is nothing on the market that can match it.

ROBERT J. LAMB
University of Alberta

MARTIN WACKERNAGEL *The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist. Projects and Patrons, Workshop and Art Market*, trans. by Alison Luchs. Princeton (N.J.), Princeton University Press, 1981. xxx + 447 pp., \$37.50 (cloth), \$14.50 (paper).

BRUCE COLE *The Renaissance Artist at Work. From Pisano to Titian*. New York. Harper and Row, 1983. viii + 216 pp., 110 illus., \$28.95 (cloth).

First published in 1938, Martin Wackernagel's *Der Lebensraum des Künstlers in der florentinischen Renaissance* was a pioneering study of the relationship between Florentine art and the circumstances in which it was created. Wackernagel sought to present no less than 'the whole complex of economic-material, social and cultural circumstances and preconditions which in any way affected the existence and activity of the artist.' Highly regarded on its initial publication, it has remained a classic in the social history of Renaissance art, although difficult to access for students without a thorough knowledge of German. This excellent translation by Alison Luchs serves to make it available to a much wider audience.

Wackernagel's book is divided into three main sections, each of which presents extensive information on the art world of Florence between the years 1420 and 1530. The first section, on commissions, begins by tracing the evolution of the decoration of three major religious centres, the Cathedral of S. Maria del Fiore, the Baptistery of S. Giovanni and the Dominican church of S. Maria Novella, and one secular monument, the Palazzo Vecchio. Wackernagel reconstructs their decoration from documentary references in order to place 'each individual monument as far as possible back in its original context and functional setting,' and considers the symbolic significance of these sites.

Later chapters in the first section survey systematically types of sculptural and painted decoration for a wide variety of works and contexts, both religious and secular. In 'Sculpture for Church Buildings,' Wackernagel looks at bronze doors, statues and busts of saints, altarpieces, tomb sculpture, Madonna and Child tabernacles, *ex-voto* images, and a large number of ecclesiastical works by goldsmiths. 'Painting in Domestic Interiors' includes mural decoration and paintings

on canvas and wood, classified by size, manner of display and function. The synoptic character of these chapters gives a very full account of the types and purposes of decoration in Renaissance Florence and is one of the most valuable aspects of this book. Wackernagel draws from extensive documentary sources and presents a full picture of the commissions given to artists and the original appearance of churches and domestic buildings in Florence. In addition, the author explores a number of themes, which recur throughout the book, including the development of the significant theme of the figure of David in Florentine art and the close interweaving of secular and religious values in many aspects of life.

Patronage also emerges in the first section as a vital interest of the author and becomes the focus of the second part of the book. Wackernagel is particularly concerned to stress the significance of the patron who commissioned the work of art, paid for it, and intended a particular use for it. He begins the second part with a survey of the categories of patrons from the 'great public-state bodies and the secular or spiritual corporations down to the petty bourgeois individual customers.' He traces significant evolutions in patterns of patronage, particularly the importance, early in the fifteenth century, of communal patrons, and the emergence of the individual patron in the later Quattrocento. The Medici and their circle, which included the most important families in Florence, are investigated in two chapters, and finally, the linked phenomena of the rising significance of the private patron and the growth in taste for luxurious items sumptuously executed are studied.

Section III focusses on the artist and his activities. The author comments first on the number of artists active in Florence during the Renaissance and their organization into guilds which closely regulated artistic activity. Workshop procedures are reviewed, including a brief survey of the major techniques of drawing and painting employed by artists. Business practices of artists – prices, forms of payment, contract stipulations – form yet another chapter, and finally, the artist's social status and growing self-consciousness as a creative individual are explored. Sub-themes of the third section are again the widespread demand for art in Renaissance Florence and the functional rôle of art.

What is the current value of having a classic work like Wackernagel's book available in translation? First, the synthetic descriptions of the historical context of Florentine Renaissance art the author draws are in many cases still unsurpassed. Wackernagel's text has been of seminal importance to later research, such as Ernst Gombrich's study of the Medici as patrons, and Hannelore Glasser's work on artists' contracts of the Renaissance. While superseded in many respects by later studies, Wackernagel's work is still immensely suggestive for further research into the work of Renaissance painters and sculptors. In order to update the material in Wackernagel's text, the translator provides an extensive bibliography of post-1938 sources, including works on architecture, which Wackernagel omits from his discussion. In her introduction, Luchs also points out the difficulties in bringing up-to-date such a far-reaching text with its many references, but further notations of changed locations, attributions and datings would have served to eliminate numerous areas of confusion and error without greatly overburdening the text.

Bruce Cole touches on many of the same topics as Wackernagel in his book on the social and material circumstances of the Renaissance artist. Writing for a non-specialist audience, Cole's interests are much less detailed than Wackernagel's and his field of enquiry much broader, taking in works from the mid-thirteenth to mid-sixteenth centuries, while still concentrating on Central Italian art.

The author begins with a sweeping survey of the growth of mediaeval communes, the rise of the mendicant orders, the significance of the Church and religious images in the life of the people, and the nature of streets and buildings within the city walls.

This introduction is followed by the first chapter on 'The Artist in Society' which lays out much information about the Renaissance artist in three parts on the 'Social World of the Artist,' 'Artistic Training,' and 'Functions, Location, and Patronage of Art.' Each of these parts reads as a mini-catalogue of facts. The first includes material on the organization and procedures of artists' workshops, the varied tasks undertaken by artists (ranging from fine works of painting and sculpture to pieces which today we would call crafts, though the distinc-

tion is anachronistic), functioning of guilds, the economic status of artists, books by artists, self-portraits and the rising consciousness of artists in the sixteenth century. The next two sections continue this dense survey. To overcome the isolation of the work of art in a museum from its original social and physical context, Cole comments on the furnishings and decoration of private chapels, churches, communal buildings and family buildings. Briefly, patrons are identified and contracts for commissions are commented.

This is, to my mind, the best chapter in the book, attempting to recreate a synthetic picture of the historical context of the Renaissance artist. Where it fails to satisfy completely is the lack of sufficient details or examples to reinforce the general points. Part of the problem lies in the format of the book. The reader must turn to the complementary but independent illustrations (each with a lengthy caption) for more detailed material. Ultimately, the specific examples presented in the reproductions only partially fulfil the need for more detailed references to works of art in order to clarify the main arguments of the book.

The subsequent chapters are equally ambitious in the amount of material they reveal. The second chapter presents a synopsis of materials and techniques used by Renaissance painters and sculptors. The masterful use of techniques and materials was of signal importance to Renaissance masters, and good craftsmanship was an integral part of artistic training in artists' *botteghe*. Here is a great deal of useful information for the student of Renaissance art. The discussion of panel painting, for instance, covers the various steps from carpentry to final touches and varnishing, and reviews the alterations in surface condition of tempera paintings arising from damage, pigment changes, overcleaning, poor restoration or repaints. The consequences of the development of new techniques and materials (such as the greater freedom and spontaneity made possible by oil glazes) are briefly considered. The discussion of fresco painting is typically clear and concise, although, the rôle of small-scale drawings to prepare frescoes in the fourteenth century needs to be strengthened. Given the practical and creative challenges of an unprecedented, large-scale composition such as the Pisan Camposanto *Triumph of Death* or *Thebaïd*, it can be argued that *sinopie* were frequently the second stage of

ideation and preparation in fresco cycles well before the mid-fifteenth century. Also, detached fresco cycles are normally remounted on tempered masonite or, more recently, on thin sheets of polyester, and their flattened surfaces result primarily from the removal of much of the backside of the *intonaco* after detachment.

Printmaking and sculpture techniques are also considered in the second chapter. In the case of woodcuts and engravings, the concentration on Central Italian art to the exclusion of other schools leads to the unfortunate absence of any mention of Northern European artists and their fundamental contributions to these media.

Finally, in the third chapter, types of art are considered. In a long catalogue (which reads like an embellished list), Cole reviews the kinds of works made by Renaissance artists. Altarpieces appear in a wide variety of shapes and subjects: paintings of the Madonna and Child and various saints; diptychs, triptychs, polyptychs, with and without predellas and pinnacles; processional paintings, bierheads, altar frontals. Works for various sites are noted: domestic painted objects such as *cassoni*, *deschi da parto*, *spalliere*, portraits. Types of fresco paintings for churches and homes, works for town halls and civic buildings are briefly remarked upon. The numerous kinds of statues for different environments are quickly listed, including equestrian monuments, tombs, portrait busts, pulpits, *cantorie* (which are actually organ lofts in the case of the works by Donatello and Luca della Robbia), baptismal fonts, doors and fountains. In this chapter, Cole's ambition to include everything within a primer format reduces the text to a useful but rather dry account.

However, several themes emerge in Cole's book which balance the tendency towards formal and iconographic studies of Renaissance art: the power of the image, particularly religious, in the life of Central Italians; the close links between secular and sacred; the strong traditions in iconography and shop practice; the collective and co-operative environment of Renaissance workshops; and the strong craftsmanship of objects produced.

The common value of both books, on their different levels, is to redress the frequent detaching of the work of art from its original context, physical and social, and the equally common emphasis on stylistic considerations to

the exclusion of technique and function. While Wackernagel's work is not suited to the non-specialist, due to its length, detail and lack of illustrations, Cole's book will whet the appetite of the beginning student and will be useful for the tourist who wants more than the usual guidebook provides.

BARBARA DODGE
York University

K.D. WHITE *Greek and Roman Technology*. Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1984. 272 pp., 177 illus., \$55.00 (cloth).

The main body of this new book on ancient technology is divided into two parts. The first of these contains chapters dealing with the physical and intellectual atmosphere in which Greek and Roman technology developed, and the sources and methods available for the study of this development. The second section explores in detail the progress made in several specific areas of technology. Throughout, the book is well-written and profusely illustrated.

The need for a survey of ancient technology, which is based on literary evidence (read in its original languages), representations of technological processes in art, as well as archaeological findings, is plausibly argued by the author in his Introduction. Here, Professor White also points out that technological development did not take place in a vacuum, but was at the mercy of the contemporary economic situation, of the reluctance on the part of those for whom new inventions involve changing their work habits. These two points are elaborated admirably in the first section.

The second part, however, suffers from a certain unevenness in the treatment of the processes described. In almost all cases, the contributions made by the Greeks are incompletely reported or dismissed as being unimportant, while those of the Romans are emphasized and described in detail. In Chapter 7, 'Building,' the author states that Greek architects did not provide detailed instructions for the builders who would have to erect the structures they had designed. In his book entitled *Greek Architects at Work*, J.J. Coulton states (p. 16) that the architect was expected to supervise the

construction of his building, inspecting and approving each stage of the procedure before the next was begun. Clearly, this would obviate the need for more precise written directions for the builders. Further on in the same chapter (pp. 82-83), White mentions in passing the optical refinements which provide Greek architecture with the near visual perfection still admired today. But the methods for adjusting the lines used in Greek buildings are only hinted at in this chapter.

The author seems most at home when discussing agricultural technology and the processing and transportation of food. This is not surprising, as a glance at the bibliography reveals that a great deal of his research has been in these areas. The depth with which agricultural processes are explored reflects the author's interest and expertise, and we are presented with a very detailed account of the problems encountered by ancient man in feeding himself, and of the measures he took to overcome them.

In Chapter 4, 'Innovation and Development: A Survey,' the author describes briefly several areas of technology, most of which are not dealt with elsewhere in the book. Notable among these is pottery production. Pottery is one of the criteria on which the chronology of the ancient world is based, and for this reason deserves more than the minimal treatment accorded here.

Greek and Roman Technology is a valuable book in that it initiates a study of this important aspect of man's past based on all the evidence available to us. As the author himself says in his conclusion (p. 173), it is 'a survey, and a starting-off point.'

DONALD SEDGWICK
Concordia University

LIVRES REÇUS BOOKS RECEIVED

ARCHER, JOHN *The Literature of British Domestic Architecture 1715-1842*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London, The MIT Press, 1985. xxvi + 1078 pp., 11 illus. (cloth).

BRYSON, NORMAN *Tradition & Desire: From David to Delacroix*. Cambridge University Press, 1984. xxii + 228 pp., 122 illus. (cloth).

CHICAGO, JUDY *The Birth Project*. New York. Doubleday & Company, 1985. 231 pp., illus. (cloth).

DORMENT, RICHARD *Alfred Gilbert*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art), 1985. vii + 350 pp., 201 illus. + 8 colour pl. (cloth).

GAUGUIN, PAUL *The Intimate Journals of Paul Gauguin*. London, KPI Ltd., 1985 (1923). x + 138 pp. (paper).

HESS, HANS *George Grosz*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985. 272 pp., 200 illus. + 16 colour pl. (cloth/paper).

LAMBLIN, BERNARD *Peinture et Temps*. Paris, Klincksieck, 1983. xiv + 654 p., 120 illus. (broché).

MEISENHEIMER, WOLFGANG, et al. (eds.) *Daedalos. Berlin Architectural Journal*. Contents 13 (15 Sept. 1984): Between Inside and Outside.

MERLIÈS, VICTOR *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin*, vol. 1: 1873-1888. Paris, Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1984. xiii + 561 p., illus. + 12 pl. couleur.

WATSON, JENNIFER *George Romney in Canada*. Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press (Exhibition catalogue for the Kitchener/Waterloo Art Gallery), 1985. 102 pp., 47 illus. + 6 colour pl. (cloth).

Correction:

In RACAR, XII, 2, p. 125, last line,

read '... Guelph; and the Friends of the Department of Art History at Carleton University.'