RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne

Canadian Art Review


Barbara Dodge

Volume 13, numéro 1, 1986

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073571ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1073571ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Citer ce compte rendu

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 Realis-
om: 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
historian 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 hoop-
la over the 'pompiers' and 'juste milieu artists' - Bouguereau and Bas-
tien-Lepage, for instance - the au-
thors 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 Bruilou,
John Martin, Francois 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 suffer at his
appreciation of what they see as kitsch,
even they exempt him from the 'sin-
ter detachment' of most other re-
visionists. A final note is that the book
is lavishly illustrated and has an ex-
tenitive bibliography (9 pages of fine
print). Though its price is high for a
text-book, there is nothing on the mar-
tet 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.
216 pp., 110 illus., $28.95 (cloth).

First published in 1958, Martin Wack-
ernagel's Der Lebensraum des Kunstlers
in der flornintischen Renaissance was a
pioneering study of the relationship
between Florentine art and the cir-
cumstances in which it was created.
Wackernagel sought to present no less
than 'the whole complex of economic-
material, social and cultural circum-
stances and preconditions which in
any way affected the existence and
activity of the artist.' Highly regarded
on its initial publication, it has re-
mained 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 Baptistry
of S. Giovanni and the Dominican
church of S. Maria Novella, and one
secular monument, the Palazzo Vec-
chio. Wackernagel reconstructs their
decoration from documentary refer-
ences in order to place each individual
monument as far as possible back in its
original context and functional set-
ing; and considers the symbolic sig-
nificance of these sites.

Later chapters in the first section
survey systematically types of sculp-
tural and painted decoration for a wide
variety of works and contexts, both re-
ligious and secular. In 'Sculpture for
Church Buildings,' Wackernagel
looks at bronze doors, statues and
busts of saints, altarpieces, tomb sculp-
ture, Madonna and Child tabernacles,
ex-voto images, and a large number of
ecclesiastical works by goldsmiths.
'Painting in Domestic Interiors' in-
cludes mural decoration and paintings
on canvas and wood, classified by size,
manner of display and function. The
synoptic character of these chapters
gives a ver full account of the types
and purposes of decoration in Re-
naissance Florence and is one of the
most valuable aspects of this book.
Wackernagel draws from extensive
doctorum 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 interwea-
ving 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 par-
cularly concerned to stress the sig-
nificance of the patron who com-
missioned 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 secu-
lar or spiritual corporations down to
the petty bourgeois individual cus-
tomers. 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 par-
ton and the growth in taste for luxu-
rious items sumptuously executed are
studied.

Section III focuses 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 de-
mand 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 communities, 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 “Function, 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 distinction 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, I must admit, 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 fulfill 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 significant 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 repairs. 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 role 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 the Bead, 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 mantonaco 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, dipinti, triptychs, polypychs, with and without predellas and pinnacles, procesional paintings, bierheads, altar fronts, 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 cooperative 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 involved 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. 175), it is “a survey, and a starting-off point.”

DONALD SEDGWICK
Concordia University

LIVRES RECUS
BOOKS RECEIVED


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 “... Gaughl, and the Friends of the Department of Art History at Carleton University.”

88

RACAR / XIII / 1