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978-0-521-18433-5 - Art, Theory, and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Italy: From Techne to Metatechne

Robert Williams

Excerpt

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## Introduction

IN addition to the great works of painting, sculpture, and architecture for which it is best known, the Italian Renaissance produced a large body of literature concerning the visual arts. Some of it can be called theory – systematic expositions of the principles and practices of, say, painting, addressed primarily to craftsmen – but much takes the form of essays, biographies, guidebooks, poems, and published letters, texts that testify to a widespread interest in the arts among educated people generally. From a traditional art-historical point of view, this literature is of value in the first place for what it tells us about works of art: Not only did great artists, like Leonardo da Vinci, write theory, enabling us to better understand their intentions, important works of art generated quite a lot of commentary, which helps us to understand how viewers experienced them. An obvious approach to these texts is to treat them as critical tools for the understanding of particular works of art or groups of works. At the same time, they lend themselves to consideration in a purely intellectual-historical perspective: Though they vary as greatly in sophistication as they do in purpose and form, and though even the best are highly derivative, some, at least, are impressively complex structures of ideas that integrate a wide range of sources in imaginative ways. Such texts might also be approached as literature.

In beginning to define the aims of the present study, it is tempting to claim that an effort has been made to combine these various approaches; in fact, the intention is to propose another mode of inquiry altogether. The reader will have noticed that there are no plates: Direct

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insights into specific works of art are clearly not a priority; yet, though this is a book about theory, it is also a book about art. By considering the texts as documents of a larger historical process, it seeks to demonstrate that they do indeed enhance and revise our understanding of the development art underwent in the Renaissance, making explicit things that the images themselves only suggest. An essential aspect of that development, it argues, is the way in which theoretical concerns became increasingly important: Indeed, the case is made that the fundamental achievement of Renaissance art was a theoretical one – a new and enduring conception of what art is.

By the same token, readers who are expecting a history of ideas may be puzzled by the structure of the argument and the placement of emphases, especially by the movement from theory to other kinds of texts and back again. The aim is to show that the art-historical development documented by these writings can only be understood as part of a still larger process of cultural formation and rationalization. Accounts of the ways in which people experienced works of art shed especially revealing light on this process, and when set against the theoretical writings, offer a means of exposing the relation of Renaissance art to the historical forces at work in and around it. Even the way in which art comes to be set apart from other kinds of activities and experiences, posited as the privileged and autonomous realm we call the “esthetic,” is ultimately a product of these same forces. Thus, although the subject of this book may seem at first to be narrow and rarified, the approach is designed to show that the material can be made to yield new insights into issues of the most fundamental and far-reaching kind.

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Studies of Renaissance art theory have assigned a position of primary importance to the idea that art is an imitation of nature. This emphasis is supported by abundant textual evidence, but even more compellingly by the images, by what seems to be the unquestionable fact that their distinctive quality is their naturalism. Closely associated with this view is an emphasis on the redefinition of the visual arts as sets of techniques specifically concerned with the visible, and a particular attentiveness to the scientific interests reflected in art and theory – the application of

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optics to perspective, for example – even to the way in which the development of representational technique resembles the “progress” of scientific investigation.<sup>1</sup> No one familiar with the sources can deny that the interest in nature and the concern with the appropriation of relevant scientific lore are anything less than pervasive and profound, but it is also true that the kind of scholarly treatment these themes have received owes just as much to modern investments in the notion of nature – and the rootedness of the social order, of culture, in nature – as well as to the prestige attached to science as the uniquely true mode of knowing. Of course, these investments themselves have their origins in the Renaissance, yet for all that they have opened our eyes to much of what makes it modern, they have also blinded us, not only to all the things that make it unmodern, but even – and even more importantly – to crucial aspects of its modernity. The naturalism of Renaissance art, its visual and scientific quality, is deeply significant; it is also a symptom of something still deeper.

The fact is that naturalistic and scientific ambitions not only fail to explain Renaissance art as a whole, they fail even to account for the real nature of what might be called its epistemological project. Beauty, for example, was certainly as important a goal as naturalism, and whether one understood the artist’s ability to idealize in terms of divine inspiration or as the product of gradual intellectual synthesis, the beauty that resulted was felt to represent a kind of knowledge. The expression of complex abstract ideas through symbolism and allegory, like narrative, was also seen as an essential function of art, and it too involved the appropriation and deployment of specialized and diverse knowledge. Although these aspects have hardly been neglected – one need only think of the scholarship devoted to Neoplatonic idealism<sup>2</sup> and humanism<sup>3</sup> – they do not fit entirely comfortably with the view that the distinctive quality of Renaissance art is its naturalism; indeed, they seem to point in another direction, underscoring its role in a larger economy of signs, ideals, and social codes. The kind of emphasis placed upon representational technique has tended to marginalize considerations of signification and function – namely, the function of signification – and thus encumbered our path as historians to the deeper, more complex work that art is made to perform.

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The theoretical literature examined here indicates that the range of knowledge artists felt called upon to engage extended potentially over the entire realm of human experience. In addition to natural science and the formalized disciplines we usually think of as humanistic – rhetoric and poetics, history and ethics – artists were eager, for example, to lay claim to the understanding of social habits and expectations that would enable them to better satisfy their patrons. Although some theorists, attentive to practical limitations, are careful to insist that one cannot really know everything, that the ideal of perfect learning is unattainable, the ideal is still necessary to formulate and to keep in mind: An understanding of art's potential range always makes one a better artist. And though individual writers might give more attention to one kind of knowledge than another – stressing optics, poetry, or courtiership, depending upon their own inclinations – no single model entirely encompasses the development that actually occurs. All knowledge is equally at the disposal of art and subordinable to it: Art comes to be understood as a *superintendency* of knowledge, a form of knowledge or mode of knowing that necessarily involves a mastery of other modes and is distinguished by being potentially, ideally, a mastery of all modes. The thesis of this book, the principal claim being made about what the literature of art documents, is that the redefinition of art in just these terms is the distinctive achievement of the Renaissance.

Accounts of the ways in which people responded to works of art offer abundant support for the further claim that this redefinition was more than purely theoretical. A good deal of attention in recent scholarship has been paid to the issue of viewer response: Much of it perpetuates a naturalistic orientation by emphasizing perceptual processes – the way in which the beholder is posited or constructed by the technique of one-point perspective, for example.<sup>4</sup> But just as the artist superimposes different kinds of knowledge, so the viewer must engage a variety of codes, superimpose and integrate a variety of interpretative techniques: The experience of art becomes an experience of signification, of meaning in the most comprehensive and fundamental sense. If the distinctive development reflected in theory is not the move toward the specifically visual, but rather toward the assimilation to knowledge and the exercise of the rational faculties generally, then viewing is not

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an isolated technique but a discursive exercise of potentially limitless scope and depth: the experience of art – what we habitually call “esthetic” experience – assumes new intellectual and affective dimensions.

Although recent scholarship has also drawn attention to the way in which looking at images, thinking and talking about them, become highly-developed rituals in polite society,<sup>5</sup> the perceptualist framework characteristic of such studies has tended to limit the investigation of how deep the effects of this process were – of just how, in exercising the discursive skills necessary to the particular culture that was taking shape, the experience of art became a medium for the formation of individual identity, on the one hand, and the order of society as a whole on the other. At the risk of getting ahead of the argument, it may be suggested that the texts discussed in the following pages bear witness to an awareness that, at the moment of the perception of meaning, the viewer becomes the site of a complex transaction: subjective states are objectified in signs at the same time that the objective validity, the social authority, of those signs is reaffirmed – grounded – in subjective experience. Because scholars of a perceptualist bent will argue that the consideration of this kind of deep conditioning does not belong to the history of art proper, the case has been constructed in such a way as to demonstrate that it cannot be excluded, that it was a central concern of Renaissance artists, theorists, and viewers, both consciously and in ways that historical hindsight is better able to detect. And as some historians will insist that the claims of theory are one thing, practice another, and the experience of viewers something else again, it is worth the effort to show that such claims did have a resonance in the world of lived experience, that art, thus redefined, did in fact come to acquire something like the role its most ambitious advocates tried to articulate – a fundamental role in the constitution of all meaning.

The argument, then, is that the theoretical redefinition of art documents an important development in the evolution of its social function; and this development, in turn, documents a still larger process, a transformation of society as a whole in which the exercise of power through representation assumes a new and characteristically modern form. The bold claims made in theory about the relation of art to

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knowledge indicate an awareness that art participates in what might be called the instrumentalization of the imaginary, the process by which the deepest resources of the mind are mobilized – liberated and harnessed at the same time – to structure and maintain the system of representations on which the social order depends. Because the imaginary becomes so crucial – powerful on the one hand, vulnerable on the other – its *ideal* configuration becomes a pressing matter to determine: Art theory of the early modern period addresses just this task, and much of its historical interest lies in the fact that, like utopian literature, it is a primary site for this important cultural work. Still, the new psychological and social efficacy of representation may owe less to the instrumentalization of the imaginary than to a simultaneous and closely related process, one that might be described as systematization: Any individual representation depends upon all others and works to reinforce all others; individual representations become less significant than the system, representation itself, to which they belong. Theory, the attempt to define art as a principle, a system, thus both responds and contributes to a new historical reality: Far from being a retreat into specious and sterile intellectualization, it is an urgent attempt to locate, to seize upon and exploit, the source of art's greatest power.

The claim that art involves the superintendency of all knowledge is, in other words, a claim that all order depends upon representation; it documents a recognition of the way in which representation serves to integrate and reconstitute diverse realms and categories of experience and activity in the larger system we call culture. The boldest Renaissance theorists claimed nothing less than that art creates culture; in so doing, they followed the example of ancient orators who insisted that all the benefits of civilized life issue from eloquence. As historians, we will want to put it differently, to say that such claims reflect an awareness that representation is fundamental to culture, fundamental to the process by which the raw disposition of power is reconfigured as order, integrated, rationalized, suffused with the aura of ideality and necessity. We might even want to venture the suggestion that culture be defined as the mediation of power through representation: Such a definition, which comes very close to what is usually meant by ideology, would at least have the advantage of emphasizing the ideological quality

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of the particular kind of culture that comes into being in the early modern period. A final point to be made in connection with the larger thesis is that this new culture should be identified with humanism, that the fundamental achievement of humanism was thus to have created a new idea of what culture is. That there was an important relation between art and humanism in the Renaissance should come as no surprise, of course, but to define it in this way is to define it rather differently than has been done in the past.

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The idea that art is a superintendency of knowledge is basically a rather simple one; it could arise intuitively, in any number of ways, out of the diverse circumstances of practice, and might be explained in any number of ways, depending upon the conceptual tools at one's disposal. On the one hand, superintendency could be understood as no more than knowledge "for use," the painter's sense of having to know only as much about something as he will need for a particular representation of it. Even if he knows much more than is necessary, the form his knowledge takes – what he emphasizes and what he suppresses – is determined by the demands of his particular task. On the other hand, superintendency could be understood as an objective "knowledge of knowledge," the form that the knowledge of something would take if left to itself, so to speak, unconditioned by circumstance. "Knowledge for use" might be said to correspond to a rhetorical concept of art; "knowledge of knowledge," to a philosophical or scientific one. Though it is possible to oppose them, they are not necessarily exclusive of one another; ideally – and this is what matters – they overlap: The "philosophical" artist understands his knowledge as encompassing all contingencies; the "rhetorical" artist regards his particular representations as presupposing, dependent upon, and always, as it were, pointing to, a more general understanding.

Although simple in itself, the principle of superintendency gives out onto realms of almost infinite complexity. If an image not only represents a particular thing but also a mode of knowing that thing, and if there are an infinite number of such modes, then the artist's task becomes one of determining which mode is best, either for a particular



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purpose or absolutely, or both. The choice may not be arbitrary, moreover, but must indicate the higher principle by which it has been made. And might there not be, in turn, an infinite number of such principles, themselves requiring subjection to one still higher? Once begun, such a process acquires a momentum of its own: There is no end to the demand for an ever more comprehensive superintendency. Art seems to empty upward into pure intellectual speculation: The artist's subject is less the visible particulars he depicts than the hierarchy of mediating abstractions that shapes his depiction. And beyond the particularity of even the most all-encompassing formulations there remains the possibility of a still higher, absolute knowledge, one that might be understood as the perfect realization of mind.

Then again, the principle of superintendency may be understood as the product of a unique combination of skills, yielding a particular kind of knowledge – a knowledge specific, say, to painting. In this way, it enhances the awareness of painting's unity and identity as a craft but also reinforces the distinctness of painting from other crafts. The further the process of superintendency progresses, however, the more painting is bound to discover and emphasize its relatedness to other visual arts, to arts of other kinds, indeed, to all kinds of rational activity. The artist's knowledge "empties out," so to speak, into a more general knowledge; his particular art becomes a species of art generally, and is ultimately assimilated to rationality itself. We may regard this development, this emptying either upward or outward, as evidence of art abandoning its native strengths for literary or philosophical ambitions it cannot hope to satisfy; we may see it as the confession of a kind of inner bankruptcy; but the artists of the Renaissance clearly felt that engagement with these larger issues was part of the artistic challenge they had to face. They did not see such interests as a threat to art but as of the very essence of art, that which allowed it access to those higher mental operations, to that higher, systematic understanding which was its true and proper domain.

This process culminates in notions of absolute art, of art as an essence or principle distinguishable from individual works of art, above and beyond them, so to speak – above and beyond even arts such as painting and sculpture, or the visual arts as a group and literature or



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music. This is not to say that such notions correspond to any meta-physical reality, that absolute art is something toward which all individual works actually “aspire” or toward which all historical development actually tends. The claim is rather that the need to define art in such terms is historically important, that it represents a logical extension of the epistemological project implicit in the notion of superintendency. The need to formulate a single principle, in particular, a one among many, indicates that the process involved is not simply one of intellectualization, but may be defined more specifically as rationalization.

Although such an ideal may seem remote from the everyday concerns of artists, the pressures of which it is an outgrowth reveal themselves in many ways. Perfection, for instance, could be understood as the making manifest, in a particular work, of art in a comprehensive sense. Pliny wrote of Polykleitos, whose *Canon* had come to serve as a model for the representation of the body, that “alone among men he was judged to have revealed the art itself by means of a single work.”<sup>6</sup> With more fulsome rhetoric, Giorgio Vasari made a similar claim about Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*:

And this is to our art that example and that great painting sent down by God to men on earth, so that they may see how fate works when intellects of the highest type descend to earth infused with grace and divine knowledge. This work leads after it enchained all those who believe that they understand their art; upon seeing the signs made by him in the contours of whatever he represents, every bold spirit trembles and is afraid, no matter how skilled in design, and while one looks at the labor of this work, the senses are benumbed just to think what other pictures – those made and those yet to be made – would be if compared to this model.<sup>7</sup>

In the second edition of the *Lives of the Artists*, in response to criticism of the *Last Judgment* by those who saw it only as a display of artifice – and therefore indecorous in the sacred context of the papal chapel – Vasari added a passage that gave his account a rather different thrust:

It is enough that one see that the intention of this singular man has been to avoid painting anything but the human body at its most perfect and well-proportioned, and in diverse attitudes; not only this, but also

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the effects of the emotions and the satisfactions of the spirit; it being enough for him to excel in that part in which he has been superior to all artists, and to show the way of the grand style, of the nude, and of all that he knows of the difficulties of design; and finally, he has opened the way to facility in this art in its primary object, which is the human body, and attending to this task only, has left aside all the charms of color, the caprices and the delicate and exquisite fantasies that many other painters, not without reason, have not neglected. So that some, not being well-grounded in design, have sought, with variety of colors and shadows, and with various bizarre and new inventions, and in short, by following that other way, to make a place for themselves among the leading masters. But Michelangelo, standing firm always in the profundity of art, has shown to those who know better how to arrive at perfection.<sup>8</sup>

Although the scope of Michelangelo's mastery is defined more narrowly – confined to the nude – this only makes his achievement in signifying absolute perfection that much more remarkable: He possesses most surely what is most profound; he has captured the “essence” of art, an essence that somehow comprehends even those virtues he does not explicitly reveal. Vasari seems unable to decide whether the picture “leads in chains” all other works of art or whether it “opens the way” to future innovation, and this kind of contradiction, which we may at first want to dismiss as an instance of careless editing, is also an indication of the challenge this highest perfection poses to comprehension and articulation.

Even a very modest work might succeed in suggesting the notion of absolute art by adopting a style or mode appropriate to its limited aims. Such a work points beyond itself to a hierarchy of the genres, not to a single standard of perfection but to a system of standards. The meaning of any one picture comes to depend upon other pictures; the individual work of art comes to signify an idea or system of art. This system, in turn, points beyond itself to the order of the world: Modes of representation correspond to modes of knowing and of being, and the fact that all such variety is potentially comprehensible within the system of art, subordinable to a higher unity, confirms the belief that reality itself is governed by an intelligible order. The cultural work that