

INTRODUCTION

CONTENT AND METHOD

Scholarship has often claimed that a complex and demanding work of art had been created by a minimally educated artist helped by a humanist advisor. Although this is occasionally true and documented, the majority of more demanding or literature-derived topics sprang out of the artist's own invention. It is neither comprehensible that a humanist advisor was flanking the artist for an entire creation process, nor is it perceivable that an artist was intellectually gifted for one or two demanding works and otherwise little educated. This study aims to show how the educational process worked in the Renaissance in order to better understand and thereby judge the artist's intellectual capacities and engagement. Participating in education was not as luxurious as we think today, and knowledge of Latin was also more widespread than is usually assumed. Also, the artists received help from a society that made significant efforts to bring learning to the populace. Ultimately relying probably on Aristotle's *Politics*, the Renaissance had an open educational system that provided learning for different requirements.

The aim of this study is to demonstrate the range of educational opportunities for the Renaissance artist. This research deliberately focuses not on the most famous and outstanding artists, but on the very skilled average artists in order to reveal a general level of learning that was much more substantial than is usually assumed. This study wants to show how education took place in the

Renaissance, and how and where the artisan class in general and the artist in particular fit into it. I therefore intend to show what elementary and advanced education could offer to an artist's intellectual background. Also, rather than discussing humanist advisors, this book more importantly emphasizes the mediators who had a particular interest in furthering the knowledge of artists in general. Other emphasis is laid on the mediating texts that transmitted the desired knowledge in a more easily accessible manner. Making knowledge available to the less educated significantly augmented artistic possibilities. The sources used for establishing an artist's learning are therefore printed sources on ancient or contemporary Latin or vernacular literature, translations, commentaries and paratexts, often using editions that did not receive another print run after the Renaissance and are little known today. These are then confronted with the artists' literary expressions and the artistic works themselves. By tracing works of art back to their specific sources, one may investigate the learning a specific artist possessed: Did he access a Latin text, a vernacular translation or even a commentary? Some artists engaged with all of these categories, and even, as learned as they were, occasionally used a vernacular text. Some artists even faced the topic of executing paintings for almost all of the discussed texts, which shows that they were substantially knowledgeable about the literature of the Latin curriculum. Other exceptional artists received a complex humanist education, which enabled them to express themselves verbally on the same level as a *litterato*. In linking the artists' oeuvre with elementary and specific secondary education, one may show what the common texts were that an artist could easily access, and what the exceptional cases looked like that were left for the well-educated artist. Consequently, this process permits some general conclusions about how much the artist participated in general education. This book wants to show how the artist himself could participate in knowledge through his own engagement by exploring the period before the artists' academies opened, that is, before intellectual learning for artists became institutionalized. Nevertheless, one should clarify immediately that, even with the academy's opening, intellectual education was not one of its principal aims, becoming an additional goal only toward the last quarter of the sixteenth century.

If we presume that Renaissance humanism did not consider a division into disciplines, but always followed an interdisciplinary approach, we have to look beyond the visual arts to see the influences and the possibilities of an intellectual background for both the society and the artist himself. This book seeks to apply methods and research done in the fields of the history of education and of literature, and in intellectual history. The author firmly believes that opening up to these other disciplines permits one to answer questions about an educational status quo for the Renaissance artist, which it may not be possible to answer when limiting one's research to the original discipline.

Research published so far has not sufficiently expanded the field, but, rather, has tried to narrow it down to the discipline of art history alone, as if the solution must be found solely in the discipline itself – even when these studies were pursued by historians. Nevertheless, we cannot gauge the learning of a Renaissance artist without knowing about both the normal patterns of Renaissance education and, more broadly, what the society had to offer. Many researchers have taken art theory as produced either by artists themselves or by literati as the basis of their assumptions on the artist's intellectual capacities and possibilities of outreach. This literature is of course a fundamental piece of information, but in the end, it is only one piece in a much more complex mosaic, which has more to offer if we look into the situation offered by the society and at the single artwork itself.

Looking at recent scholarship, two important books by Francis Ames-Lewis and Bernd Roeck have been published on the topic of the learned artist. Neither of them, however, considers the artist's education within the context of the history of education, with both focusing primarily on the artist's social status, which is not necessarily connected to his education, not even for a court artist. Ames-Lewis's groundbreaking introduction to *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*¹ opened the argument onto a broader scale, thus moving away from the individual cases of highly gifted artisans. He wants to show that painters and sculptors were not merely craftsmen. Ames-Lewis lays much importance on contemporary Renaissance texts, an approach which will also be pursued in this book, although from a different angle. Despite the title, Ames-Lewis includes a significant amount of workshop training and figural composition, and he lays major importance on the social rank to which an artist could attain, laying almost more emphasis on the fact that an artist was famous and well connected rather than on his actual education. But he also includes image/text comparison and the importance of literary foundations. Despite being written by a historian, Bernd Roeck's *Gelehrte Künstler – Maler, Bildhauer und Architekten der Renaissance über Kunst*² hardly takes the history of education into account. Roeck is very interested in expressions made by artists about artistic theory and beauty, including anecdotes. Therefore, he deals exclusively with artists who have left their own literary expressions. Also Martin Kemp, who followed up on this topic in several publications, offers noteworthy questions about how an artist was able to transform a topic or a text and if he was able to invent the scheme by himself, in the end hardly goes

¹ Francis Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, New Haven 2000.

² Bernd Roeck, *Gelehrte Künstler – Maler, Bildhauer und Architekten der Renaissance über Kunst*, Berlin 2013.

beyond single examples.³ Although Kemp would like to assign the artist competence, he finds mostly examples of artists' advisors and presumed little education for artists like Botticelli and others. He therefore focuses on examples of "the 'super artist,' the painter-intellectual" and his reputation.⁴ But reputation and artistic skills do not necessarily go in congruence and Kemp does not explain how and why even these exceptional artists were able to perform their art and skills. Robert Williams's focus on the "superintendency of knowledge" which can be "understood as no more than knowledge 'for use'" is anticipating the direction, this book will take, although with some different means. Williams sees superintendency as "the painter's sense of having to know only as much about something as he will need for a particular representation of it," as a "knowledge of knowledge" as well as "knowledge for use" as philosophical, rhetorical, or scientific concepts.⁵ Williams's questions will be partially answered in this book, although from a different angle, looking more concrete into the situation of the society and the availability of knowledge, and its conquest by the artists.

Many researchers have focused on the reception of ancient literature in Renaissance art, starting with prominent authors like Aby Warburg, Edgar Wind, Erwin Panofsky, and many more.⁶ But they are all principally concerned to mention authors and their works or philosophical concepts, without asking how these works got to the artist. In the few cases where they have, they proposed the so-called humanist advisor in the figure of Marsilio Ficino and Angelo Poliziano. Both of these humanists will play subordinate roles in the question of this book, since they were indeed little important as advisors. The majority of important works on Italian history and humanism give little significance to the intellectual education of the Renaissance artist because they suppose that artists attended school very briefly, if at all, and that the rest of their education happened during their manual apprenticeship.⁷ There are, however, some case studies on the learning of individual artists, most prominently on those painters connected to the Florentine literary academy. They

³ Martin Kemp, *Behind the Picture: Art and Evidence in the Italian Renaissance*, New Haven 1997, p. 25.

⁴ Kemp, *Behind the Picture*, p. 227. A contrary view is expressed by Lee, who considers the learned painter "a highly theoretical personage" (Rensslear W. Lee, *Ut pictura poesis. The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, New York 1967, pp. 41–42).

⁵ Robert Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Italy. From Techne to Metatechne*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 7–8.

⁶ For example: Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, Los Angeles 1999; Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, London 1958; Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, Uppsala 1960.

⁷ See for example Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance. Culture and Society in Italy*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 51–63.

will not be explored in this context for two reasons: first, because there is already extensive literature on them;⁸ second and more importantly, they add little to the general question of the artists' learning.

The focus of this book lies chronologically in the century 1450–1550, but includes the opening of the Florentine Accademia del disegno (1563), while the geographical focus is likewise concentrated on Tuscany, with excursions to Rome, Venice, Bologna, and other cities. With the focus of the book upon the average learned artist, this naturally leads to Tuscany, which is confirmed by Peter Burke in his chapter on “Artists and Writers”: “Tuscany had 10 per cent of the population and 26 per cent of the elite.”⁹ Tuscany certainly provided a fertile ground for personal development, much more overtly than in other regions of Italy. Furthermore, the visual arts were exceptionally well developed in Tuscany. By contrast, Rome accumulated artists from other cities.¹⁰ For Rome, this does not exclude the possibility that the artists could have participated in education as boys or in their adult lives, and specific cases will be discussed later where this is true, but circumstances were certainly easier in Tuscany.

KNOWLEDGE PERIODIZATION VERSUS STYLE EPOCH

Works of art reflect the general knowledge of their time. Regardless of the fact that, if a Romanesque sculptor was ordered to make a crucifix and executed it with four nails and without affects and the Gothic sculptor with three nails and with affects,¹¹ if a Renaissance painter was ordered to paint a mythological story or an illustration of ancient poetry, he had to know about the story and the best way to present and interpret the topic. This is what Baxandall is calling “pictorially enforced commitment” which would be enforced by “a period style and personal idiom” and access to literary exegesis enforced with

⁸ For example: Deborah Parker, *Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet*, Cambridge 2000; *Bronzino: pittore e poeta alla corte dei Medici*, ed. Carlo Falciani and Antonio Natali, Florence 2010; Ambra Moroncini, *Michelangelo's Poetry and Iconography in the Heart of Reformation*, Abingdon 2017; *Michelangelo Buonarroti: Leben, Werk und Wirkung: Positionen und Perspektiven der Forschung = Michelangelo Buonarroti: Vita, opere, ricezione: approdi e prospettive della ricerca contemporanea*, ed. by Grazia Dolores Folliero-Metz and Susanne Gramatzki, Frankfurt 2013; *Benvenuto Cellini: Sculptor, Goldsmith, Writer*, ed. Margaret A. Gallucci and Paolo L. Rossi, Cambridge 2004; *Benvenuto Cellini, artista e scrittore*, ed. Pérette-Cécile Buffaria and Paolo Grossi, Paris 2009.

⁹ Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance. Culture and Society in Italy*, Cambridge 1999, p. 45, note 4.

¹⁰ See Burke, *The Italian Renaissance*, p. 45, see also p. 47.

¹¹ An example for the Romanesque four nail crucifix is the Volto Santo in the cathedral of Lucca (ca. 1200–1220) and for the Gothic three nail crucifix Nicola Pisano's lecterns in Siena cathedral (1266–1268) and in the Pisan baptistery (ca. 1260).

symbolic meaning.¹² This involved the knowledge of either theological questions, literary sources or natural phenomena. It is not likely that the artist got a detailed prescription for every commission, nor that he would ask a learned person continually for help. Many commissions, not only the highly demanding, needed a thorough preparation of the artist, including at least a basic training in literature, in the Bible and in theological questions, and some rudiments in the sciences. How much preparation an artist actually needed was an ongoing discussion from antiquity onward. In many cases we need to revise our opinion about the artist's knowledge. Increasing over the centuries, education was available on different levels, and even the basic level in elementary schools provided much more knowledge than we would nowadays offer to a six- or seven-year-old. As Baxandall is saying, Trecento painters like Simone Martini and Lorenzo Monaco were not requested to know much about interpretative circumstances, while a mid-Quattrocento painter like Fra Angelico "was set a different task and had different resources."¹³ Baxandall wants to sensitize us regarding the "pictorially enforced signification," whereas the painter consults significant literature regarding the topic of his painting. He examines the relationship of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* and Antonino Pierozzi's *Summa theologica* and his exegesis of the gospels of St. Luke and his theological concept, which transmits interpretations, knowledge, and symbolic meanings, belonging to a theological concept for the author and a practical knowledge of specific parts and their visualization for the painter. Antonino offered interpretations of the original text, which were interesting for a pictorial rendering, of which the painter was able to grasp some basic symbolic meanings to give his picture a sophisticated new way of visualization. Therefore, Baxandall supposes "a running relation between theology and painting" (which should actually be opened up to literature and painting) even though both categories had different interests, means, and levels of in-depth applications.¹⁴

Since Wölfflin, art has been categorized into either the style of an artist, a national style, or the style of an epoch with its contemporary cultural influences. Wölfflin worked with the perception of art, aesthetic categories, and compositions. Including the philosophico-aesthetic concept of beauty, an artist like Botticelli was therefore seen mainly within the perspective of beautiful

¹² Michael Baxandall, Pictorially enforced signification: St. Antonius, Fra Angelico and the Annunciation, in: *Hülle und Fülle: Festschrift für Tilmann Buddensieg*, ed. Andreas Beyer, Vittorio Lampugnani and Gunther Schweikhart, Alfter 1993, pp. 31–39.

¹³ Baxandall, Pictorially enforced signification, p. 33.

¹⁴ Baxandall, Pictorially enforced signification. On a similar vein see Peter Howard, Painters and the visual art of preaching: The exemplum of the fifteenth-century frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 13, 2010, pp. 33–77.

representations of women in either sacred or profane settings.¹⁵ Panofsky will later try a general critical approach to periodization; also he recognizes a connection between Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism between 1130/40 and 1270 as evinced through a “monopoly in education” in cathedral schools and universities. Gothic architects, as Panofsky assumes, came in contact with Scholastic education through schools, letters, and oral learning.¹⁶ Panofsky and the generations after him see style periods as being determined by influences from outside the artist, mostly culture in general, but not the artist’s education and access to information in particular.¹⁷ But what determines the artist’s oeuvre is style, on the one hand, and knowledge, on the other. Both categories, however, do not necessarily need to develop together. Knowledge gives access to topics, literature, and interpretations, whereas style can come from regional influences, the study of ancient or medieval predecessors, personal taste, etc.

I would like to propose – albeit briefly as a first rudimentary advancement – a periodization based on knowledge rather than one judged on style. The major differences between the Romanesque period, followed by the Gothic and the Renaissance, depended largely on the knowledge available either to certain social classes or to the society as a whole. When specific knowledge entered the society, it defined an epoch. The availability of this knowledge concerned everyone: the learned academics and humanists as well as patrons and artists. Coming back to our Roman sculptor being ordered to make a crucifix, he would follow the dogma of showing a convincingly dead Christ up to the middle of the thirteenth century. The source most likely would have been Augustine’s *City of God*, where the patristic author declared that God sent his Son who was nailed on the cross by unbelievers, where he definitely died, before his resurrection took place. Therefore, showing a dead Christ hanging motionless on the cross would be the required visualization. From the middle of the thirteenth century onward, however, the dominant theological questions changed. For example, in his *Summa contra gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas referred to Aristotle’s *De anima*, where the ancient theory of the soul entered. Now converted into a Christian soul, which was supposed to be immortal, it was crossed again with the ancient soul (referring to Aristotle’s *anima rationalis*),

¹⁵ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, Munich 1920, pp. 1–44.

¹⁶ Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, Latrobe 1951, pp. 1, 20–23; Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, p. 1.

¹⁷ See the chapter “Renaissance – Self-definition or self-deception?” in: Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, pp. 1–41.

the place of affects.¹⁸ This led sculptors like Benedetto Antelami to provide a scene where the dead body of Christ is taken from the cross, but the soul is still able to show affects, as here directed toward Mary. The distinction between the dead body and the soul that lives on was something that a knowledgeable artist would want to address, in order to show that he himself is aware of the discussion. Comparing Benedetto Antelami's crucifixion in the cathedral of Parma with Nicola Pisano's crucifixion on the pulpit in the cathedral of Pisa, which were both created at roughly the same time that Thomas Aquinas was composing his *Summa contra gentiles*, we can notice an increasing demonstration of affects, the vivid representation of emotions and characters, which leads to the question of how much the artist knew about ancient writers like Horace and Plutarch. Also a patron, most likely a church or monastery, would have wanted the artist to be able to make such distinctions. Pisano showed the dead Christ inclined with his head toward St. John, as if the two were looking at each other. His body, obviously dead, still shows signs of life, like the thumbs on both hands showing upward. The soldiers on the right are either holding their arms up, as if they wanted to protect themselves against this dead but vivid body, or showing signs of wonder and thoughtfulness. The idea of presenting affects in art had been addressed in antiquity, for example, in Horace (*Ars poetica*, 361–365) and in Plutarch (*De gloria atheniensium* 3, 346f–347a), who praised a vivid representation of emotions and characters. Only a few artists would have known about these ancient sources, whereas Thomas Aquinas's book was present at any major library. The affects presented in these scenes are therefore a product of theologico-philosophical debates. They would ultimately be connected to the rising gothic movement, where sentiments and emotions came into statues that had previously been fixed. This was ultimately only a secondary expression of acquired knowledge. The question of style is therefore secondary to the question of knowledge, which itself depends on the artist's education.

Access to literature was fundamental. If we look at the Renaissance, we realize that in the first half of the fifteenth century, humanists were involved in discovering the antique, but artists still had limited access to this knowledge; only those who managed Latin could participate. Then, with the three major translation periods, the 1470s and '80s, the 1520s and '30s, and the 1540s and '50s, almost all important literature became available in translation and in print (see Chapter 3 and the Appendix). Consequently, there was a big step forward in iconographical content from the 1470s onward (e.g., Botticelli's *Calumny*, Fig. 1; see also Chapter 3), followed by its passing to the high Renaissance

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, trans. Karl Albert, Karl Allgaier, Leo Dümpelmann, Paulus Engelhardt, Leo Gerken and Markus H. Wörner, Darmstadt 2013, pp. 281–285, 297–305, 371–377 (book 2, chapters 65, 66, 70–72, 79).



1 Botticelli, *Calumny*, ca. 1482. Florence: Galleria degli Uffizi. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

around 1520, when artists felt more self-confident about ancient sources. Then, from the 1540s onward, when new translations were mainly concerned with philological aspects rather than content and a lot of educational support was available from learned men, the artists started to focus differently on their *métier*. This opened a discussion on their own theory of the discipline, while refining later a *maniera*, a question of style, which grew out of the theoretical debates as a personalized style became their distinguishing and promotable feature. Mannerism happened at precisely the time when all necessary knowledge was available in the vernacular, when the visual arts finally gained an organized educational structure, and when the educated artist was becoming the norm. Nevertheless, the artists felt a need to express what was singular to their own category, freed from every input from the humanities and sciences, which otherwise took up a large part of their own educational programs.

The period circumscribed in this book (1450–1550) testifies to the evolution from the artists' manual labor and physical efforts to their conceptualization of the work process, their intellectual efforts in invention that placed them closer to the speculative sciences, and their grounding theories for the visual arts. All of these topics had a centuries-long if not a millennial history, but it happened in the Renaissance that public recognition finally and definitively changed. The *artifex* became a skillful inventor and knowledgeable promoter of his own labor. In the same period, the historical discussion about the standing of the visual arts among the liberal arts took place and was finally grounded in the

opening of the artistic academies. All of these processes evolved either due to remarkable artists going beyond the tradition and seeking out education and recognition or through dedicated literati who served as mediators. For example, the two most important (and, in fact, almost the only) texts on the visual arts surviving from antiquity were Vitruvius's *De architectura* and Pliny's *Natural History*.¹⁹ Both texts contained a broad range of topics important for artists and architects. Both texts were also widely read by most of the learned people in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The artists themselves came second, as their access to these texts was made difficult by both language problems and availability. It was probably from Alberti's artistic treatises that the artists realized the significance and importance of these texts for their own works. But, although Alberti liberally cited from both texts, he provided neither a full version nor a translation. Once translations of these works became available in print at the end of the fifteenth century, the visual arts might have felt that now, finally, they had better foundations for talking about their own *métier* with greater authority, since they now had proper access to the ancient authorities. This is similar for the availability of Euclid's *Elements*, another fundamental text for artists, which received its first translation shortly after 1500. The people responsible for these early and important translations were either humanists with a considerable affinity for the visual arts, the mediators, like Cristoforo Landino and Luca Pacioli, or the first artists with significant intellectual training, like Francesco di Giorgio and Cesare Cesariano. The availability of these texts marked an epoch, which we call the Renaissance – the rebirth of ancient knowledge – on which contemporary capabilities could build.

ARTIFEX – ARTISTA – LITERATO

When reading about *arte* in Renaissance texts, one has to carefully bear in mind that art was considered to comprise all of the manual and the liberal arts, which were the intellectual arts. Likewise, the term *artista* referred originally to a student of the liberal arts, but was then increasingly used also for a visual artist. In his Vitruvius commentary (1556), Daniele Barbaro used the term “art” in the first place for the visual arts, but also, secondarily, for the liberal arts. He does not make a clear terminological distinction, probably because he placed architecture within the ranks of the liberal arts (see Chapter 4). In the Middle Ages, an unambiguous term for a visual artist was *artifex*. As we will see in Chapter 1, Thomas Aquinas distinguished between the wise architect, a real artist (*artifex*) who had created an architectural plan, on the one hand, and the

¹⁹ Philostratus' *Imagines* still played a much lesser important role in Renaissance literature (see Chapters 3 and 4).