BOOK REVIEWS

LARA BROECKE, ed., CENNINO CENNINI’S IL LIBRO DELL’ARTE. A NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY WITH ITALIAN TRANSCRIPTION. London: Archetype, 2015. 352 pages, paperback, $85. ISBN: 9781909492288.

After more than 80 years, a long-awaited new English translation of Cennino Cennini’s fourteenth century artist handbook Il Libro dell’Arte (LdA) comes to replace Daniel Thompson’s glorious translation, published in 1933 under the title The Craftsman’s Handbook and based on his own Italian version, which had been issued the year before (Cennino d’Andrea Cennini da Colle di Valdelsa. Il Libro dell’Arte, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1932).

From my own experience as editor of the recent Italian edition, I know that the editing of such a problematic text is an extremely difficult task to undertake. Obstacles particularly difficult to overcome are the large number of copyist errors in the surviving manuscripts, the use of words found in no other Italian texts, entire passages whose meaning is still ambiguous, as well as missing sections. In addition, many are the interpretations and caveats that must be offered to its readers and scholars who come from widely varying fields of research. And it is no simple matter to combine the different points of view of a philologist and a historian of painting techniques, the former paying attention to the literary plausibility of the text of a technical recipe and the latter to the feasibility of the same recipe. Given the absence of a single chameleon-like scholar, qualified at the highest level in all the required fields of research (linguistic, philological, literary, art historical, scientific, and technical), only a team of specialists would be able to carry out a definitive in-depth investigation of every aspect of the Cenninian text and I am afraid that the result of such an endeavor would produce one or more weighty volumes, not easily accessible.

For all these reasons, it is hard to believe that such a task can be accomplished by a single person, but the multidisciplinary skills owned by Lara Broecke, a conservator and an artist trained at Oxford and the Hamilton Kerr Institute, allow her to address all the problems concerning both painting technique and the history of art, two disciplines which constitute the essential core of the treatise and the fundamental reason for its success as a long-selling classic. The LdA is an invaluable primary source for anyone studying Italian and European painting of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This new translation is therefore to be welcomed as it takes an important step forward from the Thompson edition: it is a meticulous and thorough study of Cennini’s text, presented in the form of a handy book.

Right at the beginning, Broecke offers reasons for an improvement of the Thompson edition, quoting what he himself wrote in the 1970s: “My translation of Cennino’s Libro dell’Arte was made nearly fifty years ago and shows its age ... But over the years since The Craftsman’s Handbook first appeared I have become aware of faults which need to be corrected.” The quotation is taken from the “Daniel Varney Thompson Papers,” preserved in the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art, Washington, a part of which has been published in 2013 by Mark Clarke (Pentimenti: D.V. Thompson’s reflections on his translation of Cennini, available at: http://www.clericus.org/pentimenti.htm). In the papers, Thompson mentions words whose translation he would have liked to change. For example, “pastello” (the mixture of mastic, crude turpentine, and wax used to extract the blue pigment from lapis lazuli), previously translated as “plastic,” should have been changed to “cake” (Broecke prefers “patty”), or “sarmenti di vite,” previously “vine twigs,” but better corresponding to “tendrils” (the same translation chosen by Broecke).

Broecke also points out the different aims that a modern translation of LdA must have when compared with Thompson’s, who geared his edition “to the practising student and painter”: according to Broecke the main interest for readers today is the accurate meaning of the terms used by Cennino, as this can lead to an improvement of our knowledge of the technical treatise as a literary form and, at the same time, to a better understanding of the materials and of the painting techniques adopted by painters in Italy. Broecke acknowledges her debt to Thompson and avows that she stands to a large extent “on his shoulders.” Nevertheless, she devotes a whole chapter to highlight all the passages from the Thompson translation that needed improvement. This is not a pedantic list at all, but a very useful aid to the readers, facilitating comparison of the two translations. Along with the necessity to
translate the treatise into a more modern English, as Thompson himself acknowledged in the late 1970s (“the workshop English of 1930 is no longer current”), many passages in his translation, which when compared with the surviving significant manuscripts, needed correction. Broecke has done this with close to 400 of them. She writes: “The problems range from simple slips, through occasional examples of grammatical laziness, to conscious, I believe misplaced, ‘improvements’ of Cennino’s text.” Broecke shuns the notion of polishing the Cenninian literary style in her translation, preferring instead to imitate the same awkwardness in many passages. Aware that she risks losing fluidity, she opts for “a greater authenticity.”

As far as philology is concerned, the difference is that while Thompson published an Italian edition in 1932 as the result of his research on the surviving manuscripts, and which he used as the base for his English translation, Broecke has transcribed and translated the original Italian text in a form as close as possible to that of the oldest of the four surviving manuscripts (Codex P. 78.23, Biblioteca Mediceo Laurenziana, Florence), known as L and dated 1437. Broecke provides it as the base text, except when words or even entire sections are clearly missing; in these cases she transcribes the text from the other important manuscript, the Codex 1290 of the Biblioteca Riccardiana (Florence), known as R, probably written in the second half of the sixteenth century. These passages are denoted with a different font placed against a tinted background. Broecke’s only intervention on these manuscripts concerns many abbreviations, written out in full words. All the copyist errors and the variant readings are reported in the footnotes, along with some codicological information. I would have liked, as in other editions, more explanation of the complicated drawing up of the L manuscript and its mishaps, including the loss of some sheets. (The L manuscript was written by two copyists. When the first one was not able to continue his writing, the second one took his place, working on different sheets. This occurs in two sections. For these reasons the chapters are not placed in the correct order. Furthermore some sheets were lost, perhaps accidentally, a true misfortune for the manuscript and for us.)

The introduction contains a brief biographical sketch of Cennino, based on the few available documents. As regards some of the most debated questions, like the place where the treatise was written and its intended audience, Broecke maintains, like the majority of scholars, that the LdA was mostly written in Padua, given the references in the treatise to the “ducato veneziano,” to the “pavane,” that is to say the Paduan women. But Broecke also references other interesting clues to support the hypothesis, taken from a recent paper by Erling Skaug (More Cenniniana: technical notes on

the origin and purpose of Il Libro dell’Arte, in Arte Cristiana 857, 2010, pp. 1–8) where he states that in Florence, at the time of Cennini, panels were still entirely covered with canvas before the application of the gesso ground, while in Veneto only strips of canvas over the weak points (as prescribed by Cennino in chapter 114) began to be used in the second half of the thirteenth century. In addition, she proposes that Cennino continued the writing of the book in Tuscany, where he probably returned from Padua some time before the fall of the Lord of that city, Francesco Novello da Carrara, in 1405. As for the aim of the LdA, Broecke believes that the treatise was a “vanity project” conceived after Cennino was in the company of the humanists of the Carrara court, such as Giovanni Conversini, who was chancellor. In Broecke’s opinion the treatise “seems to be intended as a spectacular display of the summit of Cennino’s knowledge and abilities, formed into a satisfying literary whole designed to impress the cutting-edge intellectuals of the Carrara court.” I largely agree with Broecke’s idea regarding the “milieu” in which the treatise had its origin, but I also think that the gradual transition from an idealistic concept of the act of painting to the more-worldly considerations concerning money earned by painting suggests that the treatise is addressing an interlocutor, not an intellectual, but one in some way connected to the business of painting. Cennino aims to demonstrate his level of competency, hoping to be successful in improving his position within the guild of painters.

To make the edition easy to read, the transcription of the manuscripts is followed by the English translation in another font and by two types of footnotes, the first (marked with alphabet letters) concerning the mistakes of copyists or variant readings in the codex R, and the second (marked with numbers) regarding conceptual and technical matters, such as issues of materials and technique. The arrangement chosen by the editor allows the reader to have the benefit of a synoptic view of the content. Although it takes just a bit of time to get used to this layout, it is the best way to minimize the bulk of the book while still providing transparency and autonomy to the reader.

There are some Italian terms which can have different meanings depending on context, for example “gentile,” “colore,” and “gesso.” Broecke helpfully adopts the correct English terms according to the actual Italian meaning: “gentile” is translated as “noble,” “careful,” “light,” “slender,” etc.; “colore” is rendered with “colour” or “pigment,” and “gesso” is translated as “gesso” or “priming.” Thompson, on the other hand, had translated such multivalent terms by consistently using a single English word.

The meticulousness of Broecke seems to me sometimes excessive, as in the cases (I counted 15) where she adds
readings from R alongside those of L without substantial significance: for example chapter 187 (according to Broecke’s numeration) ends in L with “metti di quelloro o ariento che atte pare,” but in her translation Broecke has also included the reading of R, “metti di quelloro o ariento che atte piace e pare,” translated as “and lay of that gold or silver as you like and see fit.” The likely reason is to extend the range of meanings, but actually the forms “pare” and “pare e piace” have the same meaning in Italian, the second being only an intensifying form not always used. Therefore, from a philological point of view the inclusion of “piace” from R is a bit risky as it could be a variant introduced by the copyist of R. But, in general, really very few of these semantic, conceptual or technical questions are not convincingly interpreted by Broecke. Among them I would mention the translation of “scienza” and the interpretation of the expression “trarre a fine in secco.” The Italian term “scienza” is almost impossible to translate using a single English word and Thompson’s choice, who translates “scienza” as “theory,” is far from satisfactory. Broecke uses “intellectual activity,” which is a better choice, but the meaning associated with the combination of the two words includes all the possible products of this activity, whereas Cennino in the first chapter seems mainly to refer to the intellectual activity that improves man’s spirit and mind. The other expression, “trarre a fine in secco” is translated by Broecke as “add details,” which, in my opinion, sounds somewhat reductive, as such an expression does not encompass the whole range of operations that must be carried out “a secco” on a wall when materials incompatible with lime are to be used. For the same reasons the translation of “carta tinta” as “prepared papers” it is not completely satisfying. Although the effort to improve Thompson’s trite “tinted paper” is praiseworthy, the choice of “prepared papers” ignores any reference to the chromatic characteristic of the “carta tinte.”

The translations chosen for painting materials all look correct, but I would like to stress the problematic nature of the pigment called “verde azurro.” Broecke thinks that it could be referred to a mixture of azurite and an organic yellow, rather than malachite, but this does not explain why malachite is so widely found in wall and easel paintings (for example in the wall paintings of the Paduan Battistero, Giusto de’Menabuoi used two kinds of malachite, including the spherulitic type). Furthermore, if the “verde azurro” must be washed with water two or three times according to Cennino’s advice, the yellow could be partially or totally lost.

The helpful bibliography includes all the titles relevant to the latest studies on Cennini. Finally, a little suggestion: as this edition will likely be periodically reprinted, it would be preferable to refer to the old editions by their original date of publication (e.g. Thompson 1933 instead of Thompson 1960).

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Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner, and Maria Morris Hambourg, eds; With contributions from Mitra Abbaspour, Quentin Bajac, Jim Coddington, Lee Ann Daffner, Ute Eskildsen, Maria Morris Hambourg, Olivier Lugon, Constance McCabe, Hanako Murata, Paul Messier, Klaus Pollheimer, and Matthew S. Wiktovsky, Object:Photo. Modern Photographs, The Thomas Walther Collection, 1909–1949. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014. 400 pages, hardcover, 615 four-color, five-color or duotone illustrations, $75. ISBN 978-0-87070-941-8.

Note: Object:Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949. An Online Project of The Museum of Modern Art is a related interactive website at www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto. The exhibition was on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from December 2014 to April 2015; a related symposium, Reconsidering the Object: Researching Interwar Photography, was held at MoMA on December 12, 2014.

This book and its related website present technical and historical research on a collection of 341 photographic prints made by some 150 artists. The group of objects was brought into The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)’s collections in 2001 by the photographer/collector Thomas Walther and former MoMA curator Peter Galassi. Mostly dating from the 1920s and 1930s (“a transformative period of modern photography”) and mostly made by Europeans, the Thomas Walther Collection is described by Glenn Lowry, in his Director’s Forward, as being “one of the most important acquisitions in the Museum’s history.”

The exhibition, book and website center on European avant-garde photography of the 1920s and 1930s. It was a moment that brought unprecedented artistic freedom to photographers, and which produced diverse approaches to photography loosely grouped under the rubric Neues Sehen, or the New Vision. The rapid technological evolution of cameras and