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REVIEWS

Francis Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2000) 322 pp., illustrations.

In *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, Francis Ames-Lewis presents the case for the rise of the Renaissance artist as an intellectual from 1390–1520. The questions Ames-Lewis seeks to answer include: what evidence exists to indicate that early Renaissance artists successfully aspired to be more than high-quality craftsmen? In what ways were these aspirations fulfilled? And what roles were played by the increasingly sophisticated intellectual aspects of artistic creation that justified artists' claims to match their peers in other humanistic disciplines? His presentation of the evidence affirms that early Renaissance artists were engaged in a rapidly increasing intellectualization of artistic activity—a combination of classical and literary influences and technical developments that advanced the visual arts (primarily painting and sculpture), and created a sophisticated elite who legitimately claimed the elevated social status of practitioners of established liberal arts.

Each chapter considers a unique aspect of the intellectual life of the artist. Chapter 2 treats the education of the artist, which although not generally classical, gradually necessitated some familiarity with classical languages and themes, and which often caused artists to go to great lengths to gain such knowledge. Thus, even as the artists traditionally educated in an abacus school and apprenticed in a *bottega* gained opportunities to study in Academies such as the Giardino di S. Marco, they also found themselves in need of knowledge beyond what their formal educations provided, and were often reliant on literary men. Although important works such as Leon Battista Alberti's *On Painting* (*De pictura*) were quickly translated into the vernacular, classical knowledge became more important because, as Ames-Lewis discusses in chapter 3 ("Social and Cultural Activities"), the rapidly rising social status of the artist meant greater association with the higher levels of society. Interaction on higher social levels—often in official courtly capacities—created new expectations and increased demands on artists' knowledge. This rising social and political position was reflected in the ways that artists were commemorated after their deaths, discussed in

chapter 4, as evidence affirms that artists began to receive funerals formerly associated with nobility, eminent statesmen, and *letterati*. The trend was aided by the diligent efforts of artists themselves in designing their own memorials, such as the bronze bust of Andrea Mantegna above his tombstone, evidence which also attests to the high regard in which artists were held by patrons, who often had artists' memorials located near their own. In Mantegna's case, the inscription itself favorably compares the artist to his ancient counterpart, Apelles—an example of the status enhancement of a Renaissance artist through comparison to an ideal classical painter. Chapter 5 delves more deeply into the artist's visual and intellectual engagement with the material culture of the classical past in considering the relationship of archaeology to art. In this regard, Ames-Lewis cites evidence that shows how Renaissance artists expanded beyond borrowing from antiquity to develop an acute historical consciousness that enabled reconstruction and, in a broader sense, recreation of the classical past. Chief among his evidence are paintings and sculptures that draw directly on ancient works that suggest both an artist's erudition and exercise of imagination in the process of reconstructing the past. In so far as artists engaged in archaeological investigation, as distinguished from mere antiquarian interest, he asserts they were perceived as scholars both by their patrons and intellectual peers. Examples given include Antico's *Apollo Belvedere* and Raphael's study of Roman ruins.

Chapter 6 addresses the single most significant formal debate regarding the relative merits of the visual—the *paragone*, or comparison of painting and sculpture. The issue was intellectually significant because it derived from ancient comparisons of the arts, and from earlier comparisons of painting and poetry. Thus, the emergence of a serious discussion in the second half of the fourteenth century regarding the relative merits of painting and poetry indicates a surge in concern about theoretical issues which set the stage for the debate between painting and sculpture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. While the debate drew sharp opinions from such luminaries as Alberti, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, Ames-Lewis points to broad textual and visual evidence that shows ordinary artists engaged in the debate. Moreover, as the debate became intellectually respectable, it also drew the opinions of *letterati*—including a famous debate in Castiglione's *Courtier* (in a dialogue between Emilia Pia, Count Lodovico da Canossa and the Mantuan court sculptor Giancristoforo Romano purported to occur at the

Montefeltro court at Urbino in 1506). In chapter 7, Ames-Lewis considers the relationship between painting and poetry. He notes the parallels that commentators drew between Renaissance art and poetry as well as the efforts of artists as poets, such as the successful efforts of Michelangelo. In particular, he addresses the use of themes and characters taken from poetry as pictorial subjects. He also discusses the creation of poetic effects in painting—or “poetry as painting”—which follows no particular narrative, but relies upon technique to evoke poetic moods. The increasing intensity and complexity of the relationship between art and poetry in the early Renaissance supports the idea that the status of the artist had begun to approach that of the poet.

Chapter 8 looks at artistic license, invention and *fantasia* as indicators of artists’ use of imaginative faculties. The incorporation of *fantasia* or imaginative elements in painting demonstrates a new focus on the creative faculties of the artist that contrasts with earlier, more formulaic approaches. Ultimately, the artist’s ability to create or invent is associated with quasi-divine powers, as in Vasari’s account of the life of Leonardo da Vinci. Moreover, the increase in artists’ creative license is accompanied by greater self-awareness of creative liberties. As an indicator of the greater freedoms accorded to artists, Ames-Lewis provides evidence that artists were granted more license in how they approached commissions, not only because patrons found it ever more difficult to specify how works were to be carried out, but because artists often refused them altogether. Examples indicative of dramatic change in artist-patron relations include Bellini’s refusal of Isabella d’Este’s requests for a painting because of restrictions placed upon subject matter, and Leonardo’s refusal to provide any work for her under any circumstance.

Chapter 9 concludes the treatment of the relationship between art and text begun three chapters earlier by examining the early Renaissance artist’s interest in the literary description of a work of art known as *ekphrasis*. Because *ekphrases* were found in classical literature (Lucian, Pliny) as well as classically-influenced fourteenth-century poetry (Dante, Boccaccio), this interest drew upon their desire for classical knowledge (discussed in chapter 2), but distinguished itself in that *ekphrases* gave artists opportunities to directly model their work on ancient artists, such as Phidias, Zeuxis, and Apelles. Thus, while humanists imitated classical writings that praised artists’ works and indicated artists’ high social status, artists pictorially “reconstructed” an-

cient works, effectively paralleling these claims. Such reconstructions include Botticelli's *Calumny of Apelles* and Raphael's *Galatea*.

Chapter 10 relates the significance of self-portraiture. While Ames-Lewis acknowledges the difficulty of determining an artist's intent, he asserts that self-portraits are primarily intended to demonstrate intellectual and artistic skills rather than to commemorate the individual for posterity. He finds the increasing sophistication of self-portraits reflected in diverse ways: identification with a celebrated figure of the past (Giorgione's *Portrait of the Artist as David*), emphasis on the hand of the painter (Parmigianino's *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*), display of conspicuous technical skill (The Master of Frankfurt's *The Artist and His Wife*), inclusion of self among rulers (Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi*) and letterati, incorporation of classical elements (Filarete's self-portrait medal), and self portrayals as intellectuals and heroes. Chapter 11 continues the discussion of works—engravings, drawings, and paintings—intended primarily to demonstrate intellectual ability. In general, display pieces lack any evidence of a named patron or intended purpose, remain relatively small or rely upon inexpensive materials that can be used for experimental purposes, and conspicuously display skill in representation, execution, or intellectual value. Works in this category include Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation*, Dürer's *Melencolia I*, and Antonello da Messina's *St. Jerome in His Study*.

The concluding chapter considers how the reputation of the artist as an intellectual evolved in the Renaissance. Ames-Lewis argues that as artists' awareness of their talents and belief in themselves increased, they came to recognize their own status as intellectuals and creators. Moreover, patrons and others began to acknowledge that the artist exercised "creative imagination and individuality in producing his works" (273). Thus, artists came to be respected for their individual qualities—such as Piero di Cosimo's "brutishness" or Perugino's "angelic air"—and to expect greater sensitivity to their needs. As artists self-consciously recognized their status as intellectuals and creators, they more persuasively claimed that their work belonged among the liberal arts.

The primary value of this book lies in the amount of evidence cited in support of artists as intellectuals whose work rivaled their peers in other arts. At times, Ames-Lewis's skepticism regarding evidence detracts from his argument, as when he points to the difficulty of determining the meaning of self-portraits or the fallibility of textual sources

(e.g., Vasari's *Lives*) before drawing conclusions based on conditional assumptions. He admits that early in his career he believed Renaissance painters and sculptors gained minimal benefit from theoretical works such as Alberti's translation of his *De pictura* (1436) and aspired only to be high-quality craftsmen. He credits the work of Michael Baxandall, Martin Warnke, David Chambers, and Creighton Gilbert in revising his views. While he does not advance a new argument, his presentation of artists' intellectual engagement and claims for higher status is persuasive, and additionally valuable because the reader grasps their scope in a single work. There is also an excellent bibliography.

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