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Developing a field of knowledge through bibliography: art history in the 16th century

Abstract
We propose a discussion on two 16th century writings, specifically the fourth chapter of Giovan Paolo Lomazzo’s *Idea del tempio della pittura* (first published in 1591), dedicated to “the ancient and modern writers of art” (Lomazzo, 1971, p. 34) and the chapter “Painting precepts transmitted by the ancients and the moderns”, from Antonio Possevino’s *Tractatio de Poesi et pintura ethnica, humana et fabulosa collata cum vera, honesta et sacra* (1595). Alongside the much better-known Vasari, consideration should be given to Lomazzo and Possevino, since both authors began to elaborate systematic approaches to art books, specifically by compiling bibliographies, which was somewhat of a fresh means of expanding what was then a new field of knowledge, namely art. The present study uses a historical approach, focusing on original sources, so as to understand the choices in art literature that formed the basis and marked the frontiers of knowledge organization (KO) in the field of art as developed within art history. Source studies and literary reflection combine to inquire what kind of knowledge field was designed by these authors and how it determined developments in art studies.

1. Introduction: about the history of art history and the purpose of this paper
The purpose of this paper is to analyze two writings from the second half of the 16th century, written respectively by Giovan Paolo Lomazzo – the fourth chapter of his *Idea del tempio della pittura*, published in 1591 – and Antonio Possevino – “Painting precepts transmitted by the ancients and the moderns”, from his *Tractatio de Poesi et pintura ethnica, humana et fabulosa collata cum vera, honesta et sacra*, published in 1595. We wish to view these writings through the perspective of knowledge organization (KO). We recognize the need to increase critical study of KO in the field of art, considering that historical sources have traditionally tended to be read with a focus on how esthetical conception has evolved over time. Not much attention seems to have been dedicated to the composition of indexes and repertoires of bibliographic production through the ages. This does not mean there is little interest in KO. On the contrary, art history and historiography seem, in fact, to have always turned their interests towards sources that essentially show esthetic and formal principles, which means that objects such as paintings, sculptures and their reproductions have remained central to the study of art, being its main source and thus deserving all attention. The order and cataloguing of artworks and their reproductions are of central concern to bibliography, together with books, which are considered more relatively than in other fields of knowledge, where written books stand as the privileged, or even the only sources. In this paper, part of a wider research project, we will try to show how this KO practice originates from the era when the field designated “art” began to be developed according to a specific design. Authors involved in art criticism and theory within the
knowledge field of art history, such as Blunt (1966) and Venturi (1966), clearly show how the “architecture” of the art field was thought out during the Renaissance. It is during this time that we come across a discipline that can be defined as art history, clearly distinct from previous written records. We consider it important to reflect on these first statements on art, made during the Renaissance, in order to understand how and why the art field developed its own KO, which by the 18th century had achieved a systematic status (Strassoldo 2010): Art System created its own rules and established its own actors, and analyzing the sources of its foundation can help to better understand its mechanisms and its present directions.

The 16th century is considered the age that gave rise to this new field of knowledge called “art”, which was shown to need its own history. Historically, this is related to a major work by Giorgio Vasari, a mannerist painter, architect and the author of *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*, first published in 1550 (1986). This work is considered the first of its kind, dedicated exclusively to art and artist. There are, of course, numerous references in ancient literature to what we classify as art, such as paintings, statues or buildings. This way of writing about art essentially continued from antiquity into the Western Middle Ages, from which time survive accounts of the building activities of certain individuals, anecdotal descriptions of sites and manuals of techniques from the various arts, as extensively shown by Tosatti (2007).

The art texts we begin to recognize as art history writings in the Renaissance differ from these older kinds of writings in at least three ways:

1) In antiquity and the Middle Ages comments on art are all embedded in accounts of other subjects, whereas with the Renaissance, art becomes a subject in its own right.

2) There is an established tradition of writers on art history from the Renaissance to the present day, but not from antiquity.

3) One of the most formative ideas established in European culture, namely the cyclical image devised by Petrarch in the 16th century – whereby civilization reached a peak in antiquity, followed by a decline and then a revival, in the 14th century – was applied by Ghiberti to the chronology of art. According to Fernie (1996), Ghiberti states that Christianity had resulted in the destruction of all statues and pictures of nobility and perfection, such that art itself had ceased until Giotto’s talent revived it.

Vasari’s book *Le vite…*, first published in 1550 and in an expanded edition in 1568, is the first text on visual art and architecture extensive and consistent enough to be called a proper history. There is agreement, among scholars, that it was Vasari who set out the ground rules for history of art as a discipline, as it was followed for at least two centuries. The main elements of his approach can be grouped under the headings of “connoisseurship” and “humanism”, both acknowledging the central role of the idea of “genius”. Today, one cannot really speak of Vasari’s method as art history because he paid almost no attention to the historical and social context of what he was writing,
while stressing the achievements of each artist, frequently using anecdotal stories. Nevertheless, he opened a new direction, through studying documentary evidence and using techniques of connoisseurship.

Not until the 18th century was Vasari’s method of art history revised when Johann Joachim Winkelmann wrote a history of art that went further than merely being a history of artists.

On the premise that, as we stated, art history is based not only nor mainly on literature, but on the materiality (or representation) of art works, allowed by and rooted in the abilities of connoisseurship, we can observe that contemporary analyses in KO in the field of art (such as the Art & Architecture Thesaurus – AAT, a project linked to the Getty foundation that began in the late 1970s, or Iconoclass, a Dutch classification system planned as long ago as the 1950s) still tend to design, describe and organize art as a field in which art objects (their representation/reference) and art writings are not hierarchically distinguished. We think this deserves further research, and, in order to understand this particular scheme of KO in art history, we have focused attention on the way the field became explicit when it started to become autonomous, that is, when it emerged from the Renaissance.

Our inquiry revolves around the issues: how was the field’s conception also a result of written texts, of books? What about the constitution of bibliographic “maps” of authors and titles at the very beginning of the development of this field of knowledge?

We consider art a non-scientific field, related to practice and techniques of crafting, so it seems logical that authors who wrote on art favored this aspect of knowledge, as did Vasari. On the other hand, as we will see in the texts by Lomazzo and Possevino, another perspective began to appear in the field, more related to bibliographic discussion.

Without entering a theoretical discussion about bibliography, we would like to relate our paper to the idea of an enumerative bibliography, as Stokes (1982) defines the bibliography whose main goal is to create a document on all the existing material, or all that is known to have existed. From the perspective that bibliographies aim to provide scholars with research tools, we can focus on the author we choose to analyze in this paper. Our method consists in working on the original texts, so as to understand the choices in art literature that formed the basis and marked the frontiers of the field. Source studies combine with literary reflections to inquire what kind of knowledge field was designed by these authors and how it determined the development of art studies.

2. The author and his text: Lomazzo

Giovan Paolo Lomazzo (1538-1600) was a Lombard mannerist painter who moved from practice to theory when he became blind. One of the main results of Lomazzo’s reflection is the separation between art and art theory (Venturi 1966). In the writing we analyze here he presents a bibliographic review from antiquity until his age. The fourth
chapter of his *Idea del tempio della pittura* is a short enumerative bibliography containing a list of authors and titles of books, both in manuscript and printed form, but, above all, including examples of written texts as well as drawings and engravings. We believe that this demonstrates the central issue in a discussion that needs to be expanded with respect to KO: though art has always been considered an area in which unique pieces of visual art and architecture stand out, to a certain extent, it is a field in which there is a clear notion of the importance of documents that are not written. In this sense, art history, is the first discipline which, from its inception, has not been based on written texts alone.

We will now turn our attention to the text by Lomazzo. Ancient writers: practically all the authors he lists are lost. They can be found cited by Pliny the Elder, but Lomazzo talks about them as if they could be found:

1) Menecmo. In Pliny’s Index: “Menaechmo qui de toreutice scripsit”. Toreutics is the art of working metals with hammer and chisel.
2) Lysippus. About him, Pliny again provides a reference, Durid of Samos (340-280 BC), disciple of Theophrastus – this is actually one of the references Pliny makes in his Index.
3) Pasitele. In this case, Lomazzo confuses this author with Praxitele, attributing 5 volumes on sculpture to him. Pliny writes: “qui mirabilia opera scripsit” on sculpture and among those “qui de pictura scripsersunt”. And further: “qui et quinque voluminis scripsit nobilium operum in toto orbe”.
4) Euphranor of the Isthmus. Pliny cites him as an author on colours: “volumina quoque composuit de symmetria et coloribus”.
5) Antigonus. Pliny states that he wrote on toreutics and “qui volumina condidit sua arte”.
6) Xenocrates. Pliny says Xenocrate Zenonis wrote both on painting and sculpture, “Et de sua arte composuit volumina”.
7) Apelles. On this writer, Plinio says “voluminibus etiam editis, quae doctrinam eam continent” and “Apellis discipulus Perseus, ad quem de hac arte scripsit”.

After these ancient authors, whose works are lost, Lomazzo lists some references regarding mathematics and geometry:

1) Alhazen Ali Muhammad ibn al Hasan ibn al Haytham – (Bássora, 965 – Egypt 1039). Lomazzo explains that he who wrote 7 books, known since the 13th century thanks to a translation by a Polish monk, Vitellionis, the 3 books *De aspectibus* containing writings on light and the *Opticae Thesaurus*. Lomazzo probably knew them from the edition published by Risner in Basel, in 1572.
2) Vitruvius is, of course, cited by Lomazzo.
3) Caius Julius Iginus (60 a.C.-10 d.C.), who supposedly was a librarian during the empire of Augustus and wrote about optics.
4) Euclides. Lomazzo cites *I quindici libri degli elementi*. We can’t really know if
he refers to the edition translated by Cajano, published in Rome by Blado, 1545, or the complete works published under the title *Euclide*, translated by the famous mathematician Nicolau Tartaglia, in Venice, 1565.


6) Gemino. (a Greek astronomer).

At this point in his enumeration, Lomazzo states that nothing was written after these authors. In this sense he fully reflects the Renaissance vision of cycles of rise and decadence, subsequently going on to identify the modern authors on art. This part is particularly interesting, because he refers both to printed books and manuscripts as well as to sketch books, drawn and engraved:

1) Donato Bramante, a book of hand-made drawings, also cited by Vasari.
2) Bartolomeo Suardi (a.k.a. Bramantino), from Milan, who wrote various books on antiquities, not published, says Lomazzo.
3) Vincenzo Foppa, a Lombard painter, whose writings he saw, but were lost. This author is not cited by Vasari.
4) Baldassarre Petrucci (or Peruzzi). Lomazzo attributes him with authorship of a work on architecture, which, however, appears as a work by Sebastiano Serlio (*I cinque libri dell’architettura*).
5) Andrea Mantegna, a book containing drawings with explanations, a manuscript that Lomazzo saw in the collection of Andrea Gallarato, a noble abbot from Milan.
6) Bernardo Zenale, a treatise on perspective, published in 1524 and lost.
7) Bernardino Butinone, a collaborator of Zenale.
8) Marco da Siena, author of a volume on Architecture – also lost.
9) Leonardo da Vinci – a treatise on anatomy. Lomazzo states he saw it in the collection of Francesco Melzi, a pupil of Leonardo. (The master left Melzi all his books in a testament drafted in 1518). Lomazzo also refers to a part of the *Codex Urbinate*, in which the same Melzi reunited loose texts and thoughts of Leonardo, including some withdrawn from sources now lost. Lomazzo says none of these texts can be found printed, and that the manuscripts were given by Melzi’s son to the king of Spain’s sculptor, Pompeo Leoni. Later, they went to Guido Mazenta, brother of the architect and jurist Giovanni Ambrogio.

Lomazzo then offers a list of printed books by modern authors:

1) Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura* and, more relevant in Lomazzo view, the *De Re Aedificatoria*, 1450.
2) Pomponio Gaurico (who we also find in Possevino, but not presented by Vasari), *De sculptura*, Florence, 1504.
3) Luca da Borgo (a.k.a. Pacioli) *De divina proportione* – Veneza, 1497 and 1509.
4) Iacopo Barozzi (a.k.a.Vignola), *Regola dell’elli cinque ordini d’architettura* (1562)
and *Le due Regole della prospettiva pratica* (posthumous, 1583).

Lomazzo further extends his references beyond Italian borders, listing foreign authors he considers significant:

1) Jan Steven van Calcar, author of the *planches* of Vesalius’ *De Humani corporis fabrica*.


3. **The author and his text: Possevino**

Jesuit Antonio Possevino (1533-1611), author of *Bibliotheca Selecta*, is considered “the most relevant catholic bibliographer of the 16th century” (Ceccarelli 1993, p. 713). His *Bibliotheca Selecta* offers an

encyclopedic model rigidly delimited, that of catholic counter-reformed doctrine, it becomes an instrument of strict control of bibliographic information and of books circulation, aimed to build […] a collective memory selected according to a specific pedagogical program. (Balsamo 1984, p. 45).

Like Lomazzo, he proceeds chronologically in his narrative on art. Unlike the former, however, he doesn’t cite authors contained in Pliny as available sources. He only cites Pliny, using his volumes XXIV and XXV as the only source to provide a report on art techniques and artists. Possevino chooses to give bibliographic publications only when the sources can indeed be found. Such is the case of Philostratus of Lemnos, born in the 2nd century AD, author of the *Immagini*, or *Icone*, as Passevino explains. The work can be read in Greek, Latin and French, and the Italian version, by Giovanni Andreozzi from Lucca, had not yet been published. Our bibliographer explains that the Latin translation had been made a long time before, being published in Milan by Giovanni Castello in 1521. He also talks about the French translation, realized by Blaise de Vigenère.

A list of authors follows: Albrecht Dürer and Pomponio Gaurico, also reported by Lomazzo; Pierre Gregoire, author of the *Syntaxes artis mirabilis*, an author put in the *Index librorum prohibitorum*; Giulio Cesare Scaligher, who wrote against Cardano (an author accused of being a magician).

From this point on, Possevino, who is not an artist, selects a set of authors and books that are not dedicated to techniques, but to morality in painting and sculpting. About each of these books he gives a short abstract:

1) Gregorio Comanini, a religious man from Lateran, author of *Il Figino*, published in 1591, in which Comanini discusses the aim of painting, whether it is useful or a matter of leisure and how to use it among Christians.

2) Giovan Battista Armenini, *De’ very precetti della pittura*, 1586, where issues on
how to paint places and people are discussed. Possevino highlights the preface, in which Armenini blames those artists who hide the rules of art so that without rules, learning is harder and slower. In his abstract, Possevino highlights moral qualities of art and artists in their duty.

3) Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane*, Bologna, 1582. Possevino states that what the cardinal, “compelled by the ardent love for his diocese, wrote in his devote book about images is so important that no painter will ever regret to read it” (Possevino 1971, p. 53).

4) Andrea Gilio, who published a dialogue dedicated to cardinal Alessandro Farnese (1564), where he outlines the mistakes and abuses committed by painters in paintings stories. He also criticizes Michelangelo for his Final Judgement and other artists, explaining how sacred images must be.

5) Bartolomeo Ammannati, author of a letter to the *Accademici del disegno* (1582). As we can see, Possevino offers a devotional review of the figurative texts of his century. It is interesting to point out that the last part of his bibliography on art is dedicated to the moral damage caused by the artistic representation of nudity.

4. Final remarks

The bibliographic repertoires by Lomazzo and Possevino are exemplar: both use ancient sources, opposing the criticism raised by Vasari, who was against their use (Pliny, Vitruvius etc.). Lomazzo and Possevino served to broaden the knowledge of authors working far from the Florentine circles, the former offering publications on Lombard books and authors, while the latter, more involved with moral concerns, highlights authors who do not necessarily “produce” art, but discuss it from a more theoretical point of view, being sensitive to the provisions of the Council of Trent (such as Gilio, Paleotti, and Comanini). Possevino does not consider Vasari among the authors.

It may be interesting to observe that Lomazzo, as a painter, is more concerned about sources (printed or not) that can be used by artists, such as works on geometry or perspective and sketch books. On the other hand, Possevino, a bibliographer, not an artist, worries about moral meanings expressed in art objects, suggesting books that depart from technique.

Considering that both authors are among the pioneers in compiling bibliographies on art, we consider them two important figures that can help us understand what kind of KO determines the field of art.
References
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