

## A view to a kill Renaissance paintings as living objects

Review of: Elsje van Kessel, *The Lives of Paintings. Presence, Agency and Likeness in Venetian Art of the Sixteenth Century* (Studien aus dem Warburg Haus, vol. 18), Berlin, De Gruyter, Leiden, Leiden University Press, 2017, 348 p., ISBN: 9783110495775, € 79,95.

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A painting imbued with healing power. A donor portrait in an altar piece that fell victim to acts of iconoclasm prompted by hatred towards its prototype. Two portraits of ladies, treated as living people. These are the protagonists of Dutch art historian Elsje van Kessel's study on 'the lives of paintings' in sixteenth-century Venice. As fascinating as their stories may be, they hardly come as a surprise. Did not, for instance, a painted crucified Christ speak to Saint Francis of Assisi in 1205? Did not, in 1495, a lady in Ferrara place a portrait of her absent dear friend, Marchioness Isabella d'Este, on a chair at her table to allow her to imagine the noblewoman herself present at dinner? Was (and is, for that matter), not the world full of images speaking and weeping, bleeding and healing, charming or provoking their audiences in one way or the other?

To expect the book under review to be a kind of inventory or suchlike instances in Renaissance painting, however, would be to underestimate its scope and ambitions. Indeed, Elsje van Kessel, now affiliated with the School of Art History of Saint Andrews University, succeeds in elevating the discussion of the social function of painting to a higher level. The book results from the author's doctoral dissertation defended at Leiden University in 2011, which itself had originated in the research programme 'Art, Agency, and Living Presence in Early Modern Italy'. Van Kessel extensively treats quite a small number of paintings from the perspective of their functioning as living objects within a specific social network, making use of the theory of art and agency, as it has been formulated by British social anthropologist Alfred Gell in his *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (1998). In his view, a work of art functions as a social agent embedded in a network consisting of the thing or person represented (the 'prototype'), the art object (the 'index'), the artist, and the recipient.

Keeping the research to the city and mainland of Venice during the sixteenth century, Van Kessel presents four case studies. The first deals with *Christ Carrying the Cross* (ca. 1510), a canvas attributed to Titian, originally in the church of San Rocco in Venice (now in the Scuola di San Rocco). This was known to be a miraculous painting with healing power already within ten years after its completion. As it turns out the painting fits well within the context of other miraculous images and relics in the church, and served as a fundraiser for the Scuola di San Rocco related to it. The

suggestion that one of the central members of this confraternity, Francesco di Zuan, may have considered the depicted cross-bearing figure *identical* to Christ, seems improbable. It is hardly conceivable that this devout man, involved as he was in the rigorously religious circle around the later Saint Gaetano Thiene, would ever have given in to such outright idolatrous opinions. A minor flaw is the confusion of the (in Van Kessel's argumentation not unimportant) feast day of the Crucifixion 1519 with that of the Annunciation (25 March), two Catholic holidays that may coincide, but not in that particular year.

Chapter two concentrates on the *Annunciation* Titian made to adorn the altar in canon Broccardo Malchiostro's private chapel in Treviso Cathedral, where it is still kept. This painting stands out for its unusual composition with the donor himself strikingly placed in a central position. From legal documents we know that already a few years after its completion, the painting was attacked and precisely the figure of Malchiostro was stained with 'pitch and other filthy stuff', while at the same time Malchiostro was mocked in a caricature drawn on the church wall. Taking these facts as a starting point, Van Kessel presents a series of insightful observations on, among other things, the provoking frontal pose of the portrayed donor, on the relation between the portrait and its not particularly well-liked prototype, and on iconoclasm and mockery in images being two sides of one and the same coin.

The third case study concerns a painted portrait of Venetian noblewoman Irene da Spilimbergo, begun in around 1555 by a certain Zuan Paolo Pace and possibly finished some time later by Titian (now in Washington DC, National Gallery). After the highly cultured lady had died at age 21 in 1559, a volume of 381 poems in Italian and Latin was compiled in her honour. Van Kessel meticulously reconstructs how the painted portrait served as a substitute for the deceased lady's persona, as well as the way in which the collection of poetry formed a portrait of her. The poems were clearly inspired on Petrarch's famous sonnets dedicated to his beloved Laura, not only in the sense that they present Irene as unreachable, but also because of the fact that, like their fourteenth-century example, each poem describes only one aspect of her appearance or character. One of the most fascinating aspects of this literary reception is a poem which blames a painting (not the one in Washington) for Irene da Spilimbergo's untimely death. The latter was a painter herself, and according to Neapolitan poetess Laura Terracina a self-portrait seen by Jupiter caused the supreme god to take her life in order for her to remain young and beautiful forever in her image: 'from a view to a kill', so to speak, as the nineteenth-century hunting song *D'ye ken John Peel* has it.

While the written sources for the first two chapters were already well-known in art historical literature, and also the poems in honour of Irene da Spilimbergo have been studied before, be it mainly in a literary context, the archival documents at the basis of the fourth case have hitherto remained unpublished. They concern the correspondence between a certain Francesco Bembo in Venice, and Grand Duchess Bianca Capello in Florence. The letters' content circles around her painted portrait in Bembo's possession, this time not by a Venetian, but by Scipione Pulzone, a Neapolitan artist active in Rome (the painting is now in Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum). Of the four cases, this is the one most instructive about a painting being treated as a living person. For instance, the image played a role in various social groups in Venice up to the Doge himself, it was prayed for when the sitter was ill, and it was adorned with an elaborate ebony frame to 'clothe' and protect it.

The introduction to the book underlines that it was not Van Kessel's intention to write about the life-likeness or aliveness of art works as such. Nor does she turn out to be very much interested in the effects of the visual appearance of an art work on the beholder. Although she looks for evidence in style (e.g. Pulzone's invisible

brushstroke), compositional characteristics (the life-sized, close up figure of Titian's cross-carrying Christ looking directly at the viewer), or iconographical conventions and anomalies (the Treviso *Annunciation*), Van Kessel pays more attention to context in historical, religious, biographical facts and circumstances, sometimes taking us rather far away from the paintings that stood at the beginning. At the same time, however, Elsje van Kessel makes clear the necessity of this procedure to come to an admirably thorough and well-documented reconstruction of the lives of paintings.

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