



Anno 30, 2015 / Fascicolo 1 / p. 114-115 - www.rivista-incontri.nl - URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-117209
Content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License - © The author(s)
Werkgroep Italië Studies in cooperation with Utrecht University Library Open Access Journals

The Many-Sided Interplay Between Art and Knowledge in Rome

Review of: Thijs Weststeijn (ed.), *Art and Knowledge in Rome and the Early Modern Republic of Letters, 1500-1750* [*Fragmenta: Journal of the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome*, 5], Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2014, 372 p., ISBN: 9782503536385, € 74,00.

Anna-Luna Post

This volume, a special issue of *Fragmenta: Journal of the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome*, aims to provide us with insights into the role of artists in producing and communicating knowledge. That should certainly be considered an admirable goal: the interplay between artists and knowledge has been a topic of scholarly debates for some time, and a systematic analysis or a synthesizing work is much called for. However, this volume does not offer such a systematic analysis. Instead, it consists of a large number of articles (sixteen, including the introduction) on widely varying subjects, ranging from the learned self-fashioning of Michelangelo through his use of the letter Q in the Sistine Chapel to an Aztec mask in the Medici collection. The volume thus presents its readers with an idea of the enormous variety of ways in which art and knowledge intersected in early modern Europe, with a particular focus on Rome. The overall result is certainly not without merit, yet the volume would have profited greatly from a more extensive introduction or a conclusion, which is currently lacking - as is a list of contributors.

In such an introduction, two very important questions could have been answered or at least addressed: what constitutes knowledge, and who exactly counts as an artist? The only thing Thijs Weststeijn, editor of the volume, writes in regard to these questions is that the volume focuses on a broad spectrum of literary, antiquarian, and scientific knowledge that became available to European artists from the sixteenth century onwards. If this is rather vague, a definition for the word 'artist' is missing altogether. Throughout the volume we encounter painters, poets and architects, but also collectors and art-theorists. For example, in Jan de Jong and Sjef Kemper's article we encounter Aernout van Buchel and are informed about his strategies to gather information on the Pantheon - but as the authors themselves state, Van Buchel was primarily a historian who consulted mainly literary sources. Admittedly, he also consulted drawings and incorporated eleven pen drawings of his own hand in his *Iter Italicum* - but to typify him as an artist is perhaps a little too enthusiastic. The same is true for the otherwise interesting and convincing contribution of Weststeijn, who explores the influence of Dutch antiquarians on the formation of the new field of Egyptian studies in Rome.

Many of the other contributions do focus on known artists or persons that meet the traditional idea of what constitutes an artist. These articles, such as Ilse Slot's contribution on the Sistine Chapel, Simone Kaiser's article on the Villa d'Este garden in Tivoli and Alessandro Borgomainero's piece on Borromini's façade of San Carlino, often do not establish how these artists contributed to generating *new* knowledge, but instead chose to explore how they employed and incorporated already existing knowledge in their own works of art. Given the volume's aim to also focus on the way artists communicated knowledge, this choice can easily be justified. And indeed, these articles are all insightful and interesting in this regard, but at least some attention to the impact of the works of these more traditional artists would have been welcome.

A more extensive introduction could also have provided us with some insights into continuities and changes in the relation between artists and knowledge during the period covered (1500 and 1750). This time-span is, especially in combination with the volume's broad theme, rather long. Readers, especially non-specialist ones, would have profited greatly from some general remarks from the editor in this regard: the articles are presented in chronological order, but that is in itself not sufficient to advance the reader's understanding of general developments. Perhaps a division in three or four parts, each focusing on a more specific type of artist or knowledge, would have made this volume a little easier to digest. In terms of space, the volume's scope is more limited: here the emphasis lies on Rome and the role the Eternal City played in connecting cultures and networks. It is in this regard that the volume offers its most useful insights, especially by showing how different networks of artists and scholars intersected and how Rome formed both a point of departure and arrival.

To sum up, this volume highlights the many different ways in which art and knowledge intersected in early modern Rome. The greatest part of the individual contributions consists of interesting and insightful articles on individual artists (in a very broad sense) and their works. However, the volume as a whole could have better contributed to a more general understanding of the interplay between art and knowledge through a more extensive introduction or conclusion that transcends the individual contributions.

Anna-Luna Post
Vinkenstraat 69
1013 JM Amsterdam
annaluna.post@gmail.com