

*The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist.* By Francis Ames-Lewis. Yale University Press 2000. pp. 322 + 149 ill. £25.00

At first sight this book has everything working in its favour: an interesting subject, pertinent topics, fascinating illustrations and beautiful production. It is a testament to the publisher's art. Reading soon leads into disappointment, however. Art historians will find much familiar material; intellectual historians will wonder whether the author has a full grasp of his subject simply because it reads like 'normal' art history. The subject is very tricky, the evidence is scant on the ground and, give the author his due, the book is replete with reservations about its arguments. It is deeply questionable whether the visual evidence that the author uses can stand the burden that is placed upon it. The problem was stated memorably by Heinrich Wölfflin in relation to Gothic art: 'we still have to find the path that leads from the cell of the scholar to the mason's yard'. (*Renaissance and Baroque* 1964, p. 77) Can intellectual history be done by art history as such, relying largely on the evidence available from images supplemented by a paucity of texts? The author rightly says that texts present problems of interpretation as much as images. This is true but they are of a different order: a text can make a statement, an image can't (although any number of texts may be generated in response to an image). Even the text of this book contains an implicit argument but with who? Major protagonists, such as Warburg, Wind, Gombrich, Panofsky and the Young Turks of the Warburg Institute (Hope and McGrath), though they are not so young, have disappeared out of sight. The range of reference in the bibliography is limited and there appears to be no original material by way of textual discoveries. Nevertheless, as Wölfflin indicated, the subject is still extremely important and new work needs to be done.

The first chapter sets the scene, in relation to documentation, and the second proceeds to discuss artists' training and education. The author believes that the time has come to shift the perception that Renaissance artists 'were essentially artisans in outlook' to the view that 'there was at least an élite group of early renaissance painters and sculptors who

had much higher aspirations'. (p. ix) This picture has already been born out by Pevsner's classic study *Academies of Art Past and Present* (1940) though some of the details have been filled in by later research. In quattrocento Florence the artist was typically a tradesman, which I think is a better characterisation than artisan or craftsman, and a smaller number, even smaller than a number of merchants, had intellectual aspirations. The most famous early case was Ghiberti and it is a great pity that the author chose to ignore Gombrich's important paper 'The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress and its Consequences' (*Norm and Form* 1966) because it goes to the heart of the question of Ghiberti's artistic, and intellectual, aspirations. We get things in the right kind of perspective when we see him as in 1430 as a 'member of that codex-swapping crowd that included Aurispa, Traversari, Niccolò Niccoli and Poggio Bracciolini' (Gombrich, p. 6) and remember that Niccoli was a wealthy merchant and Traversari a monk. This was certainly an 'élite group', though Ghiberti was the sole artist. It is stretching terms to say that there was an 'élite group' of artists in Florence: how many intellectually aspirational painters were there stretched across the century? This leads to an even deeper problem.

As the humanists would have known, classic sources were not entirely consistent on the subject of artists' social or intellectual status. Plutarch (*Life of Pericles*, 2) commented that while one might admire the art of Pheidias or Polykleitos, no one would actually like to be like them because there is a difference between the quality attached to the work and esteem for the person. It's interesting that that in my dictionary the mark of an intellectual should be 'the creative use of the intellect, as expressed in abstract thought, study and developed artistic and literary tastes', not the ability to create works of art. Who would have wanted to know Jackson Pollock as a person and what is the perception of the kind of skills that he needed to produce his art? – the handprint on his canvas, did he fall on it in a moment of drunkenness? Shades of Socrates' conversation with Ion! There was a case to be argued that the painter should have the same kind of intellectual status as the poet or philosopher and the argument was still being conducted into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Johnson expressed incredulity that an artist such as Jonathan Richardson should have had so much to say about painting. Why need to argue the case if the artist could be taken to be an intellectual as a matter of course? There's an interesting book to be written on this subject but as far as this book is concerned there was a significant difference between fifteenth and sixteenth century attitudes, in certain courts, towards the intellectual standing of the artist. To project the cinquecento back into the quattrocento would be wrong. On the subject of courts, a cross-cultural perspective is useful. The emperor Jahangir (1619) was very generous to his dagger producers, showering them with presents and honours, but does this mean that he had intellectual respect for them?

It is, of course, possible to be over-precious over the notion of the intellectual but to what extent would it have been expected for the artist to have his 'own ideas' in the quattrocento? Alberti suggested that painters should consult poets for their, ie. the poets', ideas. There is, however, regrettably little evidence to suggest that they did this. We find Vasari talking about the originality of his inventions in his autobiography but he wasn't working in that period. In the latter part of the century, the textual evidence suggests that a very small number of painters were asked to produce the kind of inventive work that they didn't want to produce. Perhaps the most important invention at the end of the century was Leonardo's highly innovative drawing techniques (see Gombrich's 'Leonardo's Method for Working out Compositions', again in *Norm and Form* and not mentioned). This is not to deny that a significant number of Florentine artists were highly imaginative and creative but that was tied to the practice of their art and not to the kind of intellectual inventiveness constructed by post-Panofskian iconographers. Who dreamt up the subjects of Botticelli's mythologies? The answer is that we simply don't know and no amount of clever guessing is going to solve that problem. He certainly didn't need any advisors for his religious paintings.

It's a pity, in a way, that Inquisitors were not active in quattrocento Florence because then, at least, we might have more documentation on artists' ideas and art historians could write books like Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-*

*Century Miller* (1980) though one must not expect too much. When they got their hands on Veronese in 1573 and asked him what he did for a living he replied “I paint and compose figures” and when they asked him why he painted “a man dressed as a buffoon with a parrot on his wrist” in what could have been a *Last Supper* he replied “For ornament, as is customary.” (Klein and Zerner, *Italian Art 1500-1600*, 1966, p. 131) We know that Mantegna was fascinated by the Antique; we also know that other artists picked up decorative motifs from antique art. We don’t know whether their intellectual aspirations were the same and there is good reason to doubt it: they didn’t pursue the same antique thematic in their imagery as did Mantegna. But there again, we don’t know what did run through their heads and we don’t know what went on in Mantegna’s head either.

We do know that the concept of artistic excellence began to blossom in the quattrocento and that this probably had a great deal to do with individual stylistic accomplishment. We also know that in the quinquecento artists on the run from the guilds took it into their heads to form academies and that these increased in number in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We also know that, thanks to the invention of printing, Alberti’s *De Pictura* and later literary and theoretical texts gained greater circulation (for this see Schlosser’s classic *La letteratura artistica* 1964, not mentioned) and artists who had learned the basics of reading in school could educate themselves out of their artisan/tradesmen’s background. Printing also made available pattern-books that could turn drawing into a form of recreation for the people who had that kind of leisured time.

There is a big book to be written on the intellectual life of artists. It could start by describing what an intellectual life might be. The Renaissance did witness an important transition, for some artists, from being tradesmen to being courtiers. But what did that amount to? It also witnessed a re-evaluation of drawing to an activity akin to dancing and making music: a decided social accomplishment for the few who were good at it. It also witnessed the emergence of collectors and patrons who were fascinated by the demonstration

of artistic skill but virtuosity is a conspicuous accomplishment that has no implications for  
'intellectuality'.

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