

Jonker, Matthijs: *The Academization of Art. A Practice Approach to the Early Histories of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca (= Papers of the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome; volume 70 (2022))*, Rom: Edizioni Quasar di Severino Tognon 2022

ISBN-13: 978-88-549-1256-4, 189 Seiten, 38.00 EUR

Reviewed by: Eva Struhal, Dipartimento di Filosofia e Lettere, Università di Trento

Even though learned academies of early modern Italy have attracted increasing scholarly attention over the last decade [\[1\]](#), investigations into methodological approaches suited to fit this complex intellectual and social phenomenon have lagged behind the sheer quantity of sources that still need to be taken into account and analysed.

Focusing on the two first art academies in Italy, the Florentine Accademia del Disegno (founded 1563) and the Roman Accademia di San Luca (founded 1593), Matthijs Jonker's book based on his dissertation introduces two case studies to improve our understanding of the intricacies of academic settings. While academies are generally studied as a single institution, Jonker pursues a comparative angle. Furthermore, by introducing what he calls the "practice approach," Jonker aims to contextualise these two academies in their cultural setting. By focusing on "practice" as a heuristic tool, he adopts an approach that has been successfully applied to art history in the context of the cultural history of science (see for example the ground breaking studies of Pamela S. Smith or Pamela Long) in order to abolish the binaries of dry "theory" and unintellectual "practice," that has long created an obstacle to fully understand theory-informed practice in several domains of early modern culture [\[2\]](#). Jonker portrays these two art academies in their complexity as versatile institutions combining the roles of religious confraternity, guild, site of education for young artists and site of art theoretical discourse. He also addresses the complex and dynamic system of power relations negotiating the role of the academy in relation to their patrons and introduces into the discourse of academies the role of a "cultural broker".

Jonker distances his view of these two art academies from earlier avenues of interpretation: Pevner's idea that art academies mainly served the social nobilitation of artists and Barzman's conception of the Accademia del Disegno as mostly a political instrument of the Medicean state [\[3\]](#). Nevertheless, Barzman's book as well as Peter Lukehart's edited volume are the main publications of reference and points of departure for this book [\[4\]](#).

Chapter 1 constructs a methodology to deal with the social reality of the two art academies. In fact, Jonker considers one of the basic conceptual problems of understanding academies as to grapple with the social reality of these institutions. He thus offers an in-depth analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's and Theodore Schatzki's sociological theories. They open up a field that goes beyond the dichotomy of "structure" (large-scale, objective, abstract social structures that do not take into consideration an individual point of view) and "agency" (reality as the result of interrelated individuals). Schatzki's concept of "practical understanding" - understanding that joins practical and the-

oretical dimensions and embeds them within social reality - is for Jonker a more valid concept than Bourdieu's more famous "habitus." While I agree that Schatzki offers the more fine-tuned framework to conceptualize practice, "habitus" as trained disposition and as second nature this concept has a long pedigree going back to Aristotle's concept of "hexis". In fact, it is a concept used in Benedetto Varchi's theories, which Jonker in chapter 5 parallels to Schatzki positions at the beginning of a practice-oriented art theory in connection with the Accademia del Disegno [5]. Since much of both academies' didactic activities were based on Aristotelian notions, a reconstruction of the term "habitus" as understood by them may have opened up deep connections to think about the relationship between art theory and art practice in these settings because what else are academies if not institutions that create an improved "second nature" or a "habitus"?

Chapter 2 is dedicated to a detailed description of religious activities of these two art academies. Jonker derives much of the material included in this chapter from primary sources, as expressed in the theatrical sceneries or "apparati" for religious feast days and the distribution of alms, in particular concerning the Accademia del Disegno. Such a cross reading had already been introduced by Karin-Edis Barzman and Lukehart [6]. Very inspiringly, Jonker places artworks that resonate with the religious practice of both academies such as the Roman "St. Luke painting the Virgin in the presence of Raphael" (c. 1585) and the Cappella di San Luca, Ss. Annunziata, Florence (1560-62) into the context of this discourse. Yet, as Marsha Libina's reading of both pictures has highlighted [7], the substantial reform in the iconography of St. Luke representing a vision of the Virgin instead of her being present in real space, moving the role of the painter from observer to witness of a divine apparition. Counter-reformational art notoriously aims at forming its beholders; what then would be a reading of both pictures that interprets its focus on guiding the "imaginative vision" of artists in relation to the book's "practice approach"?

Chapter 3 revises another misconception about art academies: that artists preferred the status of "accademia" rather than that of the guild, that researchers erroneously have linked with the artisanal, medieval aspect of artistic creation. This is one of the chapters that invites us to rethink established periodizations along institutional lines as it underscores that the categories "modern" and "premodern" or "medieval" are not readily applicable to these two academies. At this point Jonker reopens the question of whether artists appreciated being part of an academy rather than a guild. The question builds on the sheer mass of archival material dealing with contracts and other debates found in the Accademia del Disegno that today are kept in the Archivio di Stato in Florence. Jonker argues that artists were more invested in being part of an association that –like a guild–supported them when they faced practical and legal problems rather than interested theoretical debates (of which, in effect, none survive for the Cinque- or Seicento among the papers of the Accademia del Disegno).

In chapter 4, Jonker investigates a series of art theoretical treatises that were written in the context of both art academies, focusing on the ideals and the practice informing the education of young artists. Like academies, art theoretical treatises are also usually studied in isolation. Therefore, conceptually grouping authors of treatises that represented the didactic aims of both art academies (Benedetto Varchi, Giorgio Vasari, Ignazio Danti, Alessandro Allori, Benvenuto Cellini and Federico Zuccari) in itself invites a reconsideration of the practice-theory interaction ascribed to these academies in prior studies.

Chapter 5 focuses on the “educational practices” of both academies. Jonker underscores that the basic conceptualization of the different stages of acquiring the art of ‘Disegno’ was similar in these academies. However, there were some differences in instructional modalities: while the Florentine academy focused on the training in mathematics and life drawing, the Roman academy, during the government of Federico Zuccari, established a series of lectures by artists on art theoretical matters intended to complete their practical training.

In chapter 6, Jonker complexifies the traditional view that art academies were instruments of power for political rulers. In fact, drawing on the discipline of patronage studies that has impacted political science, sociology etc. the roles of patron-client-cultural broker that Jonker introduces were not firmly distributed but could also be swapped and undertaken institutionally by an academy. Academies functioned as a client in the traditional role of top-down power distribution vis-à-vis a powerful patron, but they sometimes took on the role of a cultural broker, mediating between artists and patrons; and in other situations, functioned as patrons: for example, when commissioning works from their own members.

Although certain chapters of Jonker’s book appear at first sight reiterations of Barzman’s book or Lukehart’s volumes, his complexification of angles through which he evaluates the relationship of academies to their surrounding culture, includes novel details to inform and deepen our reflection on these two early Italian art academies. Jonker’s book covers a lot of ground and, through his stimulating search for interdisciplinary methodological frameworks, opens up important new avenues for thinking about early modern academies more generally.

[1] Jane E. Everson, Denis V. Reidy and Lisa Sampson, eds. *The Italian academies 1524-1700: networks, of culture, innovation and dissent*, Routledge, 2016; Simone Testa, *Italian Academies and their Networks, 1525-1700. From Local to Global*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015.

[2] Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan. Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution*, The University of Chicago Press, 2006; Pamela O. Long, *Artisan/Practitioners and the Rise of the New Sciences, 1400–1600*, Oregon State University Press, 2011.

[3] Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art Past and Present*, Cambridge at the University Press, 1940; Karen-edis Barzman, *The Florentine Academy and the Early Modern State: The Discipline of Disegno*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

[4] Peter Lukehart, ed. *The Accademia Seminars. The Accademia di San Luca in Rome, c. 1590-1635* (Yale University Press, 2009).

[5] On the importance of the building of “habitus” for the formation of the early modern connoisseur see Eva Struhal, “Filippo Baldinucci’s Autopsies. Autopsy and Art Theory in the *Vocabolario Toscano dell’Arte del Disegno* (1681) and His Lettera a Vincenzo Capponi (1681),” in: Oy-Marra, Elisabeth, ed., *Zeigen - Überzeugen - Beweisen: Methoden der Wissensproduktion in Kunstliteratur, Kennerschaft und Sammlungspraxis der Frühen Neuzeit*. Merzhausen: ad picturam, 2020, pp. 67-71.

[6] See Barzman 2000, ch. 6; Peter Lukehart, *The Accademia di San Luca between Educational and Religious Reform*, in: Everson, Reidy, Sampson (eds.), *The Italian Academies 1525-1700*, ch. 10.

[7] Marsha Libina, *Divine Visions*, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 61. 2 (2019), pp. 235-263.

Recommended Citation:

Eva Struhal: [Review of:] Jonker, Matthijs: *The Academization of Art. A Practice Approach to the Early*

Histories of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca (= Papers of the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome; volume 70 (2022)), Rom 2022. In: ArtHist.net, Jul 9, 2023 (accessed Apr 4, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/reviews/39714>>.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License. For the conditions under which you may distribute, copy and transmit the work, please go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>