

**ON *UT PICTURA POESIS* ONCE AGAIN:
SPECIFIC MEANINGS OF THE *TOPOS* IN ITALY,
IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE
SIXTEENTH CENTURY.**

A HISTORY OF IDEAS APPROACH CENTERED ON
TEXTUAL SOURCES PERTAINING TO THE DISCIPLINE
OF ART HISTORY

By

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SUMMARY

Keywords: art history, art theory, history of ideas, conceptual history, aesthetics, source criticism, poetics, reception-history, late Italian Renaissance, *Cinquecento*, sixteenth century, *ut pictura poesis*, Rensselaer Lee, liberal arts, anti-normativity, pluralism, anti-humanism, landscape theory, tenebrism, *rilievo*, Caravaggio, Giorgione, Leonardo da Vinci, Giorgio Vasari, Giovanni Baglione, Francesco Bocchi, Raffaello Borghini, Federico Borromeo, Cristoforo Sorte, Lodovico Castelvetro, Gabriello Chiabrera, Lodovico Cigoli, Anton Francesco Doni, Giovanni Andrea Gilio, Francisco de Hollanda, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, Bartolomeo Maranta, Jacopo Mazzoni, Gabriele Paleotti, Lodovico Dolce, Paolo Pino, Alessandro Tassoni, Federico Zuccari.

This thesis offers a new reading of the Italian textual (mostly literary) sources of the second half of the 16th century pertaining to the topic of the relationship between the figurative arts and literature – an idea spanning European culture since classical antiquity. *Ut pictura poesis*, the ubiquitous topos coined by Horace, has been of utmost interest for generations of historians of various cultural aspects of early modern Europe. However the majority of art historians and scholars of the history of aesthetic ideas continue to address this multifaceted topic through the conclusions put forward by Rensselaer Lee in his famous paper published in *Art Bulletin* in 1940¹ whose merit lies in mapping a vast material in a much detailed manner compared to previous authors. Lee focused on a narrow selection of Italian and French sources which he approached from a *longue durée* perspective, having as a prerequisite the supposed uniformity of the European culture between the 15th and 18th centuries. His main conclusion is that during this long period the aesthetic reasoning was dominated by a „humanistic theory of painting” consisting in several commonplace topics which circulated *ad infinitum*.

Approaching the history of the meanings linked to the *ut pictura poesis* topos by a reassessment of Lee’s premises as well as revising his conclusions by focusing on a much more

¹ Rensselaer Lee, “*Ut pictura poesis*. The Humanistic Theory of Painting”, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 22, 1940, pp. 197-269.

firmly defined context (*i.e.* the visual culture of late *Cinquecento* Italy) are among the main goals of the present study. In the chapter dedicated to the spatio-temporal frame of my research (Chapter I.2) I presented briefly the specific and cohesive features of this socio-cultural context. One of the premises I intended to test was that “the humanistic theory of painting” could not have remained unchanged in an age in which the “humanistic” modes of thinking had been subjected to unprecedented pressure. In my research I tried to highlight several specific concerns which the participants to the late Renaissance visual culture had been envisaging when using the topos *ut pictura poesis*. To this end I proceeded to contextualizing, assessing the critical value and interpreting the iterations of the idea of compatibility between “the sister arts”, as well as tracing the intricate links within a web of sources having various origins and biases.

I started by questioning the goal traditionally ascribed to the rhetorical discourses centered on the affinity between the visual arts and literature, which is the elevation of the status of painting to the rank of poetry, a presumably much prestigious art – a still dominant historiographical idea (Chapter III.1). In an attempt to expand the knowledge regarding the ways in which painting and sculpture were perceived in the Italian milieu in the last decades of the 16th century I took into consideration the attitudes of the literary critics whose concerns were often different than those of the authors of texts on the figurative arts. This inquiry revealed that in most cases the points of view encoded by the texts on poetics are highly deferential towards the visual arts and the theories related to them. Their authority was almost undisputed and they were recommended as legitimate standards for poets and poetry. A modern critical concept such as *costume* (derived from the Aristotelian *ethos*) which soon came to be associated with the contemporary discourse on visual arts was also popular among literary critics and such popularity increased the prestige of painting and sculpture even more. Many authors thought that the proximity of poetry to the *arti del Disegno* within the system of the arts is desirable and even a source of legitimacy. Given the incessant attacks against poetry inspired by the critical tradition rooted in Plato’s *Republic*, the standing of this art had been vigorously contested during the *Cinquecento*. Therefore many literary critics and poets – the famous Torquato Tasso among others – used to resort to the most recent notions and ideas related to the figurative arts in order to restore poetry to the status bestowed upon it by the Italian humanists from much earlier

generations. In the second half of the 16th century the interest in poetry and literary theory among educated strata of society was presumably higher than ever. Nonetheless this interest – which was manifest in the fierce disputes on literary subjects that had been occupying the foreground of the cultural scene for decades – had turned poetry in one of the most controversial topics of the time. Thus far from warranting an unequivocal enforcement of status, the comparison with the art of poetry could not have been a source of legitimacy for the visual arts but rather an argument for placing them in the arena of ambiguity and disputability. Therefore, contrary to some widely accepted historiographical stances, if the various iterations of the *ut pictura poesis* topos had been directed to real, non-rhetorical goals during the period I am interested in, these goals must have lain outside the traditional concerns about the system of the arts and their ranking.

The negative connotation of the dictum attributed to Simonides of Ceos (“painting is silent poetry, and poetry painting that speaks”) – a well-known and much repeated saying in the Renaissance – had been concealed in Italy, in the second half of the 16th century. Chapter III.2 is an inquiry into the ways in which the meaning of this famous statement had been diverted during this period. Many partakers in the visual culture of the late *Cinquecento* used to claim that painting “tells” more than it displays and that, contrary to poetry, it addresses (“speaks” to) a very wide public, including the educated. Some of them considered that the allegorical representational strategies as well as the extra-narrative details have the function of extending the communicative power of images. The old preoccupation with the types of public sometimes brought into discussion the interpretative tools with which one can grasp the hidden meaning of such details and even the „intention of the artist”. One of the main themes debated in the numerous treatises about the highly popular hybrid devices known as emblems and *imprese*, which were ubiquitous in the second part of the century, is the one related to the specific ways in which the image (*imago*) and the text (*motto*) combine in order to convey the overall significance of the device. Many authors argued that the non-discursive nature of the image, its „silence”, was an effective stimulus for learned conversations and for interpretative discourses. Varied sources – writings on the visual arts, on emblems, on poetics, on courtly behavior etc. – state that the contemplation of an image is a social act, taking place in the presence of the others, not an individual, reclusive one. The meanings associated to the artwork as well as its assessment were

established based on criteria shared within social groups, which were often the result of social exchanges. Therefore the reception was perceived – and in all probability *was* – the outcome of mediation processes with a social nature. The significance of an image was not considered static but fluctuating, generated by such processes. Several sources even credited the artist with the intention of nurturing this kind of plural, interpretative responses. There were also voices who spoke about a new aesthetic criterion inspired by those *Ars poetica* lines in which the phrase *ut pictura poesis* was first used. This criterion is the capability of an image to stand up the test of being subjected to recurring acts of contemplation, its power of retaining its so-called “speaking” faculty even after its first reception. Thus Simonide’s dictum, which presented poetry and painting as conflicting arts, was time and again a pretext used by the critics in the second half of the 16th century for putting forward modern ideas about the intention of the artist, the techniques of meaning production, the facets of modern reception and its social nature.

One of the assumptions still credited by modern historiography is that before the essay *Laokoon: oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1766) most early modern authors did not use to question the compatibility between painting and poetry. In chapter III.3 I argue that the difference between the “sister arts”, which is central to Lessing’s stance and was previously put forward by Leonardo who ascertained painting as a spatial art and poetry as an art of temporal progression, was widely familiar to the *Cinquecento* Italian milieu despite the fact that *Libro di pittura (Codex Urbinas Latinus 1270)* had been transmitted only in manuscript copies. Moreover, the *Cinquecento* writings on the visual arts reveal that critics such as Francisco de Hollanda, Giorgio Vasari, Domenicus Lampsonius, Cristoforo Sorte associated to this distinction meanings in line with contemporary attitudes towards aesthetic matters. One of these new attitudes was the interest in defining painting as a self-sufficient activity, having a specific object which other arts did not share. The way such interest was directed in the second half of the 16th century indicates that the partakers to the visual culture south of the Alps were less attached to the idea of the congeniality of the “sister arts” encapsulated in the phrase *ut pictura poesis* than generally thought and also that they were sensitive to the what Svetlana

Alpers termed “the nature of picturing in the North”, synthesised by Kepler’s dictum *ut pictura ita visio*.²

Thus in the chapters of the second part of my thesis I argue that the ways through which deeply rooted and widely accepted formulae such as those coined by Horace and Plutarch – which stated that literature and visual arts are inseparable – were understood in the last decades of the *Cinquecento* not as commonplaces, but as “dilemmas”. By facing such “dilemmas” old aesthetic stances had been reassessed and new ones had been nurtured. The partakers to the visual culture of the late Italian Renaissance had continued to use the old codes for disseminating new ideas initially configured through the mediation of the classical tradition. Such codes were inextricable parts of their reference system. The coordinates and the possibilities of their own culture were familiar to the critics to such an extent that they did not feel the need to invent new ones in order to communicate to one another the things they had just imagined *in those conditions*. They knew so well what they meant when they uttered, *in those same conditions*, the old dictum *ut pictura poesis* that for a while they did not care for other articulations.

One of the main goals of the present study is pleading for the historical value of the type of sources it is based on, pleading in particular for their value for the discipline of art history. These sources are literary in nature – if one defines literature as the production of writings marked by rhetorical tendencies, by constraints forced upon them by literary traditions and also by their public purposfulness. Chapter II.1 – which contains an extensive case study – is in fact the result of ruminations on the ways in which such sources might be questioned in order to make them relevant for the study of the conditions of image production understood as pinpointing the set of criteria and the set of “dilemmas” to which artists, patrons and viewers tried to respond by using the visual arts. In Chapter II.2 I attempt to assess the critical potential of the literary production of the second half of the 16th century. I argue in it that this production is distinguishable by its tendency to question the authority of the tradition and to valorize the novelty – a tendency which was also manifest in the writings on aesthetic matters. Such tendency

² Svetlana Alpers, “Cap. II: *Ut pictura ita visio*: Kepler’s Model of the Eye and the Nature of Picturing in the North”, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983, pp. 26-118.

is indicative of the flexibility of the mindset of the partakers to the late *Cinquecento* visual culture. Therefore this culture may be appraised as akin to those “open traditions” theorized by Mark Bevir in his consequential *Logic of the history of ideas* (1999)³, i.e. traditions suitable for reacting uninhibitedly to the “dilemmas” they nurtured.

³ Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, 2004, p. 264.