



Joost Keizer, Todd M. Richardson (eds.), *The Transformation of Vernacular Expression in Early Modern Arts* (Intersections. Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture 19; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012, xix + 402 pp., ISBN 978 90 04 21204 6).

The foundation text of European art theory, Leon Battista Alberti's *On Painting* (1435), was written both in Latin and the Tuscan dialect. Since then it has been possible to characterise the Renaissance not just as the rediscovery of ancient art and writing but also as a new vibrancy of regional culture. This volume of essays analyses vernacular expressions in language, music and the visual arts in a cohesive manner. Such an ambition is especially praiseworthy because throughout the last half-century, after the historiography of art had been put to serve nationalist doctrine, singling out regional 'schools' of painting has been suspect. The notion of the vernacular makes it possible to reconsider how painterly style related to sentiments of belonging to linguistic and cultural communities. It inspires a regard of artistic identity in terms of deliberate self-fashioning rather than of inborn qualities determined by climate.

The present book pairs its interdisciplinary approach with a broad geographical reach, stretching north and south of the Alps, and with a similarly wide time frame, from the early fourteenth to the early eighteenth century. A first, obvious Leitmotiv is that the use of the vernacular reflected not only a writer's desire to appeal to a specific audience but also the wish to express adequately aspects of everyday reality. This leads to another of the book's central, more surprising, insights – intersections of image, text and music usually happened precisely at the moment when a culture tried to strengthen its basis in lived experience. A third observation is that in order to legitimise their vernacular aspirations writers and artists needed to refer to older examples from regional history. Sixteenth-century painters in the Low Countries for instance, looked not only to Italy as their model but also to the 'Flemish Primitives'; these fifteenth-century masters themselves had already sought ideological authority in thirteenth-century writers of Middle Dutch. A fourth point of attention is that most of the Early Modern objects under discussion, rather than expressing a desire for a 'pure' vernacular culture, can be characterised as hybrids that deliberately combined local and international elements.

The book's three parts discuss consecutively the intersections between the different arts, the vernacular as a method, and the shaping of regional identities. Jessica Buskirk analyses a painting by Hans Memling in relation to two of his fellow citizens of

Bruges, the poet Anthonis van de Roovere and the composer Jacob Obrecht, arguing that all three tried to intensify devotional practice by involving everyday reality (in this respect, painterly realism had the same function as references to spoken language and to popular music). The chambers of rhetoric in the Low Countries, which counted painters among their members, form an obvious focal point in which vernacular texts intersected with the other arts. Bart Ramakers argues that these institutions' approach depended on the playful integration of classical and modern components. David Levine raises the intriguing question whether Frans Hals' innovative brushwork was related to Dutch linguistic theories and whether his 'style may be understood as part of a larger effort initiated by patriotic Hollanders of the period to establish a positive cultural identity for the newly independent Dutch state'.

The editors argue that in terms of method the vernacular mode made possible a certain 'bricolage', interweaving central and eccentric forms of expression in a seamless manner. Alexandra Onuf studies two series of prints by Hieronymus Cock in which humble rural settings were given centre stage for the first time. Such an innovation was only possible because the new 'vernacular method', the author contends, was based on 'an inherent instability, flexibility, and capacity for generative self-renewal and innovation', in contrast to the universalising tendencies of the classical idiom.

In the book's final section, Jamie Smith identifies Jan van Eyck's famous Dutch motto 'Als ich can' (as best as I can) not as a translation from the Latin but a reference to a literary convention in Dutch texts such as Jacob van Maerlant's *Mirror of History* (c. 1285). The painter's proudly vernacular statement expressed a 'new formal mode' which distinguished Van Eyck's art from prevalent French styles of panel painting and manuscript illumination. James Bloom shifts the perspective from artistic form and content to the locations in which works were viewed. In the sixteenth-century Netherlands, the increasing frequency of paintings in domestic interiors was itself a moment of 'vernacularisation': courtly experiences were articulated anew in a local bourgeois context. Finally, Jing Sun explores Dutch imitations of Chinese porcelain between 1640 and 1720 and the manner in which potters combined the ostentatiously foreign elements with Dutch representational and ornamental conventions, thereby creating a highly successful new product.

Was 'vernacularity' a truly multivalent explanative category? In this book the vernacular mode sometimes means realism, but it also denotes hybridity, emotional intensity or 'modern' self-reflexivity, and eventually it appears as a forerunner of the concept of national identity. The vernacular seems to be all these things at once to the editors, who have tried to extend the concept's scope rather than to restrict it (thereby legitimising their own interdisciplinary ambitions). Yet such a broad approach runs the risk of diluting the concept's meaning and, moreover, attaching too much historical relevance to a term that was only articulated in more recent scholarship. This original and thought-provoking book leaves some questions unanswered and therefore should first of all be appreciated as a collection of reconnaissance forays.

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