Reviews Comptes rendus

Eileen Reeves. Painting the Heavens: Art and Science in the Age of Galileo. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. Pp. x, 310, illustrations.

Ever since Erwin Panofsky's 1954 publication of Galileo as a Critic of the Arts, the Florentine astronomer's relationship with the visual arts and artists of his time has been a topic of scholarly discussion. It is a topic taken up in a number of more recent works, for example, Miles Chappell's studies of Galileo's artist friend and fellow star gazer Ludovico Cigoli (esp. Art Bulletin 1975), Martin Kemp's exploration of the science of sixteenth-century art theory and practice (The Science of Art, 1990), and Steven Ostrow's investigation of the artistic culture of Counter-Reformation Rome (Art Bulletin 1996; Art and Spirituality in Counter-Reformation Rome, 1996). Eileen Reeves' book, which builds upon all of these works, is without a doubt the most sustained and carefully modulated investigation to date of the various aspects of artistic engagement in the debates surrounding Galileo's observations.

Debate, in fact, provides the organizational structure of the book, one well suited to the different materials and points of view that Reeves explores. It also gives the book the pace and shifting perspective of a tennis match, in which individual points, even splendidly played ones, are immediately subsumed in the preponderant rhythm of the match. The author's argument can be a little difficult to track in certain passages, where her explications of primary source materials anticipate ideas that are not fully articulated until later in the book. A few proleptic passages do not, however, detract, either from the intelligibility of the book, or from its importance as a contribution to the scientific and artistic culture of Europe around the year 1600.

With a modesty that belies an ambitious enterprise, the author characterizes her goal by defining its limits, stating that her aim is "to show the relationship between seven seventeenth-century paintings ... and a rather limited aspect of

Galileo's celestial observations, his conjectures concerning the new star of 1604, and above all, his discussion of the nature and substance of the lunar globe." The paintings in question all date to the two decades between 1599 and 1619 and include works by Galileo's Florentine compatriot Ludovico Cigoli, by the Fleming Peter Paul Rubens, and by the two great Sevillian painters of their time, Francisco Pacheco and Diego Velázquez. All seven paintings are beautifully represented by color plates, bound together in the center of the book. Insofar as these paintings determine those aspects of Galileo's observations that come under scrutiny, they are conceptually at the center of the book; they are not, however, precisely its subject. It is clear, as we learn in the acknowledgements, that the project began not with the paintings, but with a reading of Galileo's Sidereus nuncius ("starry messenger"), and that the book's title, Painting the Heavens, should not be taken too literally as an advertisement of a strictly art-historical study. While it is true that the book deals with specific paintings of the heavens, the title makes reference, in the first place, to the fact that Galileo's understanding (or portrayal) of the heavenly bodies he observed was deeply dependent on artists' observations concerning the actions of reflected light on terrestrial bodies. Reeves' enterprise is perhaps best described as tracing the reactions to Galileo's celestial observations as witnessed in the paintings and repaintings of the heavens, both verbal and visual, that attended the circulation of Galileo's observations in various parts of Europe.

Given the nature of her enterprise it is lamentable that Galileo's own visual renderings of celestial phenomena — his drawings and the engravings that accompanied the 1610 publication of the Sidereus nuncius — are not represented in the book. Their absence may give the reader the unfortunate impression that the paintings are offered as surrogate illustrations of Galileo's observations. In fact, the paintings are treated by Reeves not as illustrations, but rather as discrete entries in the larger debate concerning the nature of the heavens and the limits of human knowledge, a debate that is also copiously represented by letters and other forms of correspondence. For Reeves, Cigoli's two Adorations (1599; 1602) register that artist's interest in the problem of reflected light and an evolving understanding of the appearance of the crescent moon. Likewise, Rubens' Self Portrait in a Circle of Friends (ca. 1605) is presented as a record of the fleeting encounter between the ideas of the group of Neostoic scholars with whom Rubens associated, and Galileo's ideas on the relationship between the aurora borealis and the nova of 1604. Here, as throughout the book, the author attends with both acuity and circumspection to the visual evidence. The sophistication of her approach to the paintings becomes particularly evident in her discussion of the solar and lunar bodies as they appear in Cigoli's Deposition (1607). She explicates the complex and fluctuating coloristic illusion of the painting as a tentative commentary on the relationship between scientific knowledge and religious belief — between shadow and light, vision and revelation.

It is when she reaches the discussion of the relationship between Galileo's observations concerning the maculate surface and opaque substance of the moon and a series of images of the Immaculate Conception produced in Rome and Seville during the second decade of the seventeenth century that Reeves thoroughly engages in the interpretation of paintings. The shift is not accidental, but grounded in her presentation of the imagery of the Immaculate Conception as a locus for the polemical presentation of the acceptance or rejection of Galileo's celestial observations as a matter of faith. The centerpiece of this polemic is the Immacolata painted between 1610 and 1612 by Cigoli in the dome of the Pauline Chapel of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Reeves does not approach the problem of interpretation from the point of view of an iconographer. A comparison between her explication of Cigoli's Immacolata and the one generated contemporaneously by Steven Ostrow is telling on this point. Their differences lie not only in their conclusions. Ostrow's is an iconographic reading of the motif of the maculate moon, locating its significance in the intersection of the imagery of the Immaculate Conception with Galileo's observations in Counter-Reformation Rome, and concluding that Cigoli's blemished moon is to be seen both as a tribute to Galileo's observations and as a symbol of the heresy over which the Virgin/Church triumphs. Reeves, on the other hand, interprets Cigoli's vision of the Immacolata perceptually. She sees the dome painting as a celestial configuration of primary and secondary lights, which reveals itself more or less clearly depending upon the point of view of the observer. Reeves points out that to position oneself in the center of the chapel, below the light that emanates from the Immaculate Virgin, but in the cone of shadow illusionistically cast by the moon under her feet, is to stand in the shadow of ignorance by denying the opaque substance of the moon. It is also to refuse oneself a clear view of the Immacolata, whose foreshortening is only visually resolved from a lateral point of view. Willful perceptual blindness is thus identified, according to Reeves' interpretation of Cigoli's intentions, with a lack of faith. Although their conclusions concerning Cigoli's position on the relationship between science and theology differ, Reeves sees the fresco as Martin Kemp did, namely as a sophisticated and illusionistically engaging commentary on the question of the relationship of vision, knowledge, and revelation. Such an interpretation is consistent with the book as a whole, which constitutes a careful portrayal of the positionings of various interlocutors — scholars, artists, and theologians — in the debate generated by Galileo's observations.

It is to be hoped that Reeves' subtle and intelligent work does not become lost in the modern disciplinary divide between the history of art and the history of science that it so nicely bridges.

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