Giovan Pietro Bellori

The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects:

A New Translation and Critical Edition

Translated by Alice Sedgwick Wohl, with notes by Hellmut Wohl and introduction by Tomaso Montanari

Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xii, 504.

The seventeenth-century Roman antiquarian and scholar Giovan Pietro Bellori (1613–1696) was also an amateur painter, a personal friend of such great artists as Domenichino and Poussin, an active member of the Roman Accademia di San Luca, and (later) an honorary member of the Parisian Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. In 1672, Bellori published a collection of biographies of the twelve artists whom he deemed the greatest to have appeared since the second (1568) edition of Giorgio Vasari's *Vite*. Titled *Le vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni*, Bellori's text is informed not only by his direct access to contemporary artists and art collectors, and his extensive knowledge of the theory and practice of art, but also by the scholarly rigor with which he approached his biographical project. Indeed, specialists have long prized Bellori's text as the most reliable contemporary source for factual data concerning seventeenth-century Italian artists and their works, and an equally reliable resource for understanding the art-theoretical and critical issues of the period.

Alice Sedgwick Wohl's new English translation of Bellori's text is both an important contribution to Bellori studies and a powerful new tool for the university-level teaching of seventeenth-century European art. Her title is somewhat puzzling, since the volume contains only an English translation, not a critical edition (that is, an edition of the Italian text based upon a philological comparison of authoritative manuscript and printed sources). The 1672 edition of Bellori's *Vite* is a rare book, and the old anastatic reprints (e.g. Genoa: Centro Nazionale delle Ricerche, [1968?]) are now difficult to find. Specialists mostly use Evelina Borea's excellent critical edition of Bellori's text (Turin: Einaudi, 1976), which includes not only the twelve original *Vite* published in 1672 (those of Annibale and Agostino Carracci, Domenico Fontana, Federico Barocci, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, François Du Quesnoy, Domenichino, Giovanni Lanfranco, Alessandro Algardi, and Nicolas Poussin), but also the three additional *Vite* (those of Guido Reni, Andrea Sacchi and Carlo Maratti) preserved in manuscript in the Bibliothèque Municipale de Rouen (MS 2506) and published in 1942 in Michelangelo Piacentini's diplomatic transcription. Wohl's highly accurate translation is based upon Borea's critical edition and therefore includes the lives of the same fifteen artists. While

specialists will continue to rely upon Borea's critical edition, Wohl's translation opens up the text to a vast new readership including scholars in non-Italian fields of early modern European art history and culture—and, most importantly, university-level students. Indeed, while smaller projects such as Catherine Enggass's translation of Bellori's *Lives of Annibale and Agostino Carracci* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968) once enabled students to get a glimpse of the kind of primary sources from which the current art-historical narratives are constructed, Wohl's complete translation opens the door to building entire courses around this fundamental source and thus raising the level of methodological sophistication that can be achieved in the undergraduate classroom.

For the professional scholar, Tomaso Montanari's introduction represents a major contribution to Bellori studies, not only synthesizing the best and most recent information into a useful, compact form, but also providing an original contribution complementing Giovanni Previtali's still-indispensable introduction to Borea's 1976 critical edition. Montanari reviews Bellori's own biography, and provides a new contextual analysis of the *Lives* themselves, including sections on the genesis of Bellori's book project (which Montanari traces to 1642–1645, when Bellori first read and was disappointed by Giovanni Baglione's then freshly published *Vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti*); on Bellori's historical vision, which Montanari sees as “profoundly neo-Vasarian”; on the problem of selection, that is, the perennial question of how Bellori decided which artists to include, and why he elected not to include biographies of such major figures as Gianlorenzo Bernini and Pietro da Cortona; on Bellori's inclusion not only of Roman and Italian artists but also of French and Flemish masters; on Bellori's innovative foregrounding of the works of art themselves through the use of rhetorical ekphrasis; and finally on Bellori's choice of the genre of “the lives of the artists” and the problem of his intended audience and larger cultural agenda.

The book's notes and bibliographic apparatus are exemplary if necessarily selective. The inclusion of additional aids to the reader further enhances the book's usefulness for advanced students and non-specialist readers. These include glossaries explaining Bellori's systems of measurement and money, as well as his fundamental critical terms; a chronological table covering the rulers of later sixteenth- through early eighteenth-century Europe; an appendix of biographical notes on frequently cited historical figures; a brief appendix on Bellori's accuracy (Wohl counts a total of only 127 errors, mostly minor ones, as against the many thousands of factual assertions in the book, concluding that Bellori's text does live up to its reputation for accuracy); and another appendix, analyzing the problem of orientation in Bellori's

descriptions of images, challenging the belief that Bellori's frequent reversal of left and right is due to his use of reproductive prints, and instead offering the novel hypothesis that Bellori was actually describing images as if he himself were inside them looking out.

The *acta* of the 1996 conference *Art History in the Age of Bellori*, edited by J. Bell and T. Willette (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and the catalogue of the exhibition *L'idea del bello: Viaggio per Roma nel Seicento con Giovanni Pietro Bellori*, edited by E. Borea, C. Gasparri et al. (Rome: De Luca, 2000), contributed a number of important scholarly essays shedding new light on aspects of Bellori's biographical, critical and antiquarian methods. Wohl's translation of Bellori's *Vite* makes an significant contribution to this wave of new scholarly work while making the text accessible in a way that will attract a new generation of art historians to the rich realm of Bellori studies.

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