



**Francis Ames-Lewis.** *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. x + 322 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08304-0.



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**Published on** H-Ideas (May, 2005)

## Craftsman or Genius?

Who were the renaissance artists? How were they viewed by their contemporaries? Were they craftsmen, working to a plan of someone else's design, or were they creative members of the scholarly community who understood and participated in the great explosion of *quattrocento* humanism? In this carefully argued and sumptuously illustrated book, Francis Ames-Lewis returns to these questions in what he describes as an introduction for the non-specialist reader. This book represents a revision of his former views in the light of the last quarter-century of scholarship by such figures as Michael Baxandall, Martin Warnke, David Chambers and Creighton Gilbert. Ames-Lewis argues that by the early sixteenth century, artists and painters clearly saw themselves as conducting an intellectual activity and as being a part of the larger scholarly community. Art had become one of the liberal arts.

On the face of it, this seems a hard case to make, particularly if we depend heavily on the purely literary evidence. In an age when Castiglione counseled all courtiers to read not only Latin but Greek, virtually no Renaissance artist had Latin, though a few, like Mantegna, aimed at

basic proficiency. Artists who wrote about art were rare. There is, for example, no surviving treatise on art by an artist from Cennini's handbook of the 1390's to Ghiberti's commentaries of the 1450's. The education of the *quattrocento* artist, usually apprenticeship in the *bottega*, was fundamentally different from that of the education of the arts student, and often did not provide even the kind of education in the liberal arts that both Ghiberti and Alberti seemed to want for the artist. The humanistic revival of antiquity and ancient languages had established the fundamental intellectual questions of the day. Without humanist training, how could the artist hope to stand alongside the rhetorician or philologist?

Ames-Lewis faces these difficulties squarely, most of them in his first chapter on the artist's education, and then marshals a remarkably wide range of textual and visual evidence to make his argument that the artist's conception of himself and his work did change profoundly during the *quattrocento*. Chronologically, he focuses in the years from Cennino's treatise of the 1390s to roughly the death of Raphael in 1520. Geographically, he supplements the unavoidable concern with Florentine art with

evidence from Venice, Rome, Milan, Urbino, Ferrara, and Mantua. Readers will appreciate the large number of color photographs, whose placement makes the author's argument easy to follow. The argument itself is borne in ten topical chapters, so topical, in fact, that they could be read in almost any order without much detracting from the book's coherence. Elegantly and efficiently argued, these chapters vary widely in focus and are full of unexpected delights. Besides drawing his evidence from the paintings and sculptures themselves, Ames-Lewis shows that artists participated in a number of vernacular-based theoretical discourses with patrons, humanist scholars, and with each other.

A chapter on the changes in the artist's education argues that within the essentially craft-based *bottega*, there developed a greater concern with anatomy, perspective and other intellectual subjects, as well as a more critical approach to copying classical models. The next chapter easily makes the case that the social status of the artist rose rapidly as the century unfolded. Many artists bought fine houses and formed their own impressive collections of art. Many adopted a fine style of dress. Donatello's plain clothes, something of a bother to Lorenzo de' Medici, were clearly the exception. In the light of Alberti's statement that an artist cannot be considered a mere craftsman if he gains a title, the author examines the many artists who did so, including Mantegna and Gentile Bellini.

Another study examines the forms of commemoration that accompanied the artist's death and burial. Artists increasingly made provision for their tombs, or even designed them. Epitaphs grew longer and often invoked comparisons with the artists and figures of the classical past. These trends culminated in Raphael's burial in the Pantheon, in a tomb that he purchased for a small fortune. Buried with the gods, and honored with an epitaph by no less a literary figure than Pietro Bembo, Raphael certainly emerges here as on equal social footing with any learned figure of the day.

Two other chapters are closely related. One focuses on the new role that artists played in the archaeological investigation of classical ruins, paintings, and statues. This activity associated them with the glories of antiquity, and built their reputation as those who performed intellectual, as well as manual, labor. Once again, Raphael serves as persuasive example. Made "prefect of antiquities" by Leo X in 1515, Raphael headed a project to draw accurately Roman buildings with a view toward preservation. In this role, he clearly delineated the three

phases of the Arch of Constantine. Though Ames-Lewis does not mention it, this bit of detective work must have been compared by contemporaries to Valla's literary and textual investigation of the Donation of Constantine a half-century earlier. A second chapter is also concerned with preserving and restoring the classical past. The genre *Ekphrasis*, consisting of classical descriptions of paintings that an author claimed to have seen, became a topic of much scholarly discussion. Renaissance patrons exhibited a fascination with this genre, and their commissions required the artist to be able to recreate classical art by interpreting a literary account, as in Botticelli's sophisticated rendering of *The Calumny of Apelles*.

Two largely literary debates to which a wide range of writers, artists, and non-artists alike, contributed were the *paragone*, that is, debate over the relative merits of painting and sculpture, and the comparison of painting to poetry. Ames-Lewis makes good use of the high visibility of these debates over many decades to show that art was an intellectual pursuit that produced a substantial body of critical literature. The *paragone* was so well known that Castiglione could plausibly assert that his courtiers could stage an impromptu debate on it. Renaissance writers, particularly after Alberti, increasingly placed art on an equal footing with poetry, often citing Horace's dictum "as a painting, so is a poem." Some even argued for the superiority of painting to verse.

The comparison of art to poetry introduces what seems to me the most important of Ames-Lewis's arguments: that Renaissance artists increasingly saw art as a creative activity that depended on the artists's particular imagination (*fantasia*). Leonardo, for example, placed the artist's imagination alongside his ability to imitate nature, thus making it central to the artistic process. The author asserts that artists and non-artists alike came to believe that what makes a great artist is not merely technical excellence, but a certain creative insight that is a function of the artist's own unique personality. This new belief is particularly evident in the person of Albrecht Durer, who, as the author states in his introduction, is more important to the book than even such a figure as Michelangelo.

I will return to Durer's importance to the book below, but at this point the argument raises a crucial question for those more familiar with the specialized literature than I: to what extent did renaissance patronage allow for the imagination and individual personality of the artist? While not a new question, it is an important one, and the book left me wanting to know more about the

different forms of patronage in, for example, courtly and republican contexts, and how these differed from northern models. It is one thing for artists to aspire to a greater scope for their own *fantasia*, but another to find patrons who will allow it. Other scholars such as Lisa Jardine interpret renaissance artistic practice in terms of a growing acquisitiveness and the development of a consumeristic society, not values we always associate with great art. Look how differently the two authors deal with Giovanni Bellini, for example. Ames-Lewis portrays Bellini refusing to accept the subject matter for a commission from Isabella d'Este because, as Pietro Bembo explained to Isabella, "he likes to wonder at will in his pictures, so that they can give satisfaction to himself as well as to the beholder" (p. 185). The artist's interests and vision are here seen to be more important than the patron's wishes, and the painting was never done. Still, patronage mattered, for he could only afford to do this, as Ames-Lewis points out, because he had a great many Venetian clients. Jardine, on the other hand, examines Giovanni's portrait of Doge Leonardo Loredan, which features the brilliantly portrayed robes of damask imported from the orient. She notes that when Bellini painted the portrait, he "had been employed as a contracted decorator on the Doge's Palace refurbishment project for a considerable number of years.... What kind of difference does it make to our view of the Renaissance to understand that a masterpiece like Giovanni Bellini's portrait of Doge Leonardo Loredan was a strictly commercial piece of work, produced within a whole network of social obligations and power relations in fifteenth-century Venice?"[1]

It is thus crucial to Ames-Lewis's argument to show that the new kind of artist he sees coming to prominence could actually exist and work within the patronage system. Of course, some patrons were known to give the artist a freer hand than others, and the patronage game sometimes allowed for the kind of artistic independence that Bellini showed in dealing with Isabella d'Este. More importantly, however, Ames-Lewis exam-

ines two areas, self-portraiture and the production of display pieces, where artists, principally Duerer, could be free from the constraints of traditional patronage. Unlike Leonardo or Michelangelo, Duerer was fascinated with self-portraiture. Ames-Lewis argues that the fashionable dress of the self-portraits of 1498 and 1500 was designed to show the artist's rise in social status. A pen and ink self-portrait of around 1512 portrays the artist's temperament as deeply melancholic, prefiguring the well-known engraving *Melancholy I*. Likewise, the production of display pieces, pieces designed specifically to showcase the artist's technical skill or intellectual interests, increased in the early sixteenth century. These non-commissioned pieces were sometimes held by the artist for a considerable time, and were designed to attract and impress patrons. While Ames-Lewis admits that there might be critical difficulties in interpreting this sub-genre, some of his examples work well. Parmigianino produced the self-portrait as display piece; his *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* reportedly astonished Pope Clement VII and his court. Other display pieces seem to have been made for reasons largely personal and unique to the painter's *fantasia*. Duerer's famous engravings of *Melancholy*, *St. Jerome*, and others thus represent a new sort of art. Made for mass distribution, they provide the perfect medium for him to display his technical brilliance to a broad public while at the same time giving him the freedom to pursue deeply personal themes. Through Duerer's self-awareness and self-promotion, the artist's temperament becomes visible in the art.

A must read for anyone interested in the evolution of thinking about art and the artist, this book is sure to inspire debate and discussion because of its willingness to tackle large questions and to venture generalizations.

#### Note

[1]. Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: Norton, 1996), p. 28.

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**Citation:** Brian Nance. Review of Ames-Lewis, Francis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. May, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10505>

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