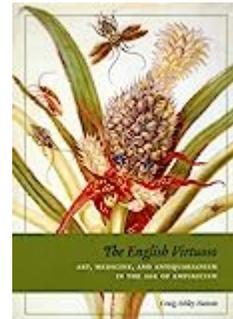




Craig Ashley Hanson. *The English Virtuoso: Art, Medicine, and Antiquarianism in the Age of Empiricism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 344 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-31587-4.



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Conflict or Concord between Art and Medicine?

Craig Ashley Hanson opens *The English Virtuoso* with an account of the artist Sir Godfrey Kneller's dispute with John Radcliffe over the doctor's access to (and abuse of) his noted garden. The two men were neighbors, but just how neighborly were their respective professions, wonders Hanson. Framing his book with this quarrel, Hanson links art and medicine in a absorbing, erudite, and lavishly illustrated account of English virtuosi from the early seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century. This supports his reconsideration of English art history which replaces the virtuosic support of the arts in this period "as the foundation for what is commonly referred to as the golden age of English painting" (p. 16). Also important within Hanson's book are the tensions between rationalism and empiricism, and between physicians and quacks. While such epistemological concerns in this period have been well documented, Hanson's approach, drawing material principally from the intersections of art and medicine, is refreshing and introduces new characters and relationships.

Hanson divides his material into five chronological

chapters, selecting medical practitioners with interests in art with whom he explores the ambiguous character of the English virtuoso. Chapter 1 begins with a book review article published in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* which juxtaposed books on natural history, natural philosophy, mathematics and art. Hanson then proceeds backwards to the early Stuart period and the cultural influences that shaped the Royal Society's polymathic agenda, exemplified by the circle of virtuosi that formed around Lord Arundel. Here William Harvey, Sir Théodore Turquet de Mayerne, and Richard Haydocke point to the medical profession's exchanges with the arts, through which they sought credibility as physicians. In chapter 2 the origins and intentions of the Royal Society's History of Trades project are surveyed through the virtuosic engagements of John Evelyn and Sir Christopher Wren. The History of Trades project, forever problematical, is credited with creating an intellectual and institutional space within the Royal Society for the visual arts, which in turn enabled the production of English art texts in the second half of the seventeenth

century. Again the medical and artistic interests of both men are pointed to: Evelyn's anatomic tables (mounted specimens of human arteries, veins, and nerves) and his writings on art, and Wren's anatomic training and architectural work.

Chapter 3 furthers the comparative study of English and continental European approaches to art, introducing principally Dr. William Aglionby and William Salmon, and their respective works *Painting Illustrated* (1685) and *Polygraphice* (1672). It also addresses questions of legitimacy, empiricism, and quackery. Aglionby charted a conventional course as a physician, establishing his credentials as an active member of the Royal Society and a virtuoso. Salmon, in contrast, was a quack who invented his own credentials. Both sought legitimacy through their publications on art: Aglionby reworked Charles-Alphonse Dufresnoy's *De arte graphica* (1688) for an English audience, while Salmon produced a best-selling compendium on art and medicine. The troublesome nature of empiricism is again addressed in chapter 4. When an empiric could either refer to an adherent to the New Science espoused by the Royal Society or a quack who diagnosed on the outward appearances of a sick body, how could an orthodox physician address the epistemological challenge between the espousal of received, ancient textual knowledge, and knowledge derived from personal observation? Here Hanson addresses the points of contact between art, medicine, and antiquarianism, and their uneasy relationship to empiricism, through satirical references made to Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605; 1615). He concludes that in the early eighteenth century

“[e]mpiricism, even in the visual arts, still required the security that came with rational systems” (p. 156).

Chapter 5 continues the story into the early Georgian period, placing the physician Richard Mead and the artist William Hogarth within the “virtuosic legacy” (p. 193) of the preceding century. Both men attempted to sustain a balance between empiricism and rationalism in a period when ancient authority was being directly challenged by the New Science. Ultimately this proved unsustainable, and empiricism was disconnected from rationalism. In his short conclusion Hanson sketches some ways in which his story might be continued into the final decades of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, and notes that it was upon the virtuosic tradition, typified by the Royal Society, that “late Georgian art would be erected” (p. 195).

One slight doubt persisted throughout my reading of *The English Virtuoso*: to what extent was Keller and Radcliff's dispute representative of a particular conflict or concord between art and medicine? Could it have been a simple domestic spat in which their professions were ultimately irrelevant? Hanson presents the relationship between art and medicine in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as somehow unique, but the lack of comparative studies of how other profitable professions engaged with art in this period weakens his argument for a special case with regard to medicine. Nevertheless, this is a richly detailed book which opens up the social weave of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in unusual and fascinating ways. It contains much that will engage those interested in this period of English history.

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