

die Rekonstruktion von Ausführungsmodalitäten anbetrifft, in seiner Anschaulichkeit mustergültig.

Schier unschätzbar ist schließlich die *check-list*, mit der der Band abschließt. Hier findet sich briefmarkengroß abgebildet und mit den Eckdaten versehen, was jemals mit Cafà in Verbindung gebracht worden ist und zwar alphabetisch in den Kategorien *autograph*, *casts*, *probable* und *improbable* aufgelistet. Damit ist das Oeuvre zwar nicht annähernd kritisch gesichtet, aber es ist wenigstens erstmals vollständig abgebildet. Die Abbildungen selbst hätten etwas größer ausfallen können, wenn auf das mehrfache Reproduzieren desselben Motivs zugunsten einer straffen Bildredaktion verzichtet worden wäre. Sympathisch hingegen die unverkrampfte Zweisprachigkeit des Bandes mit seinen englischen und italienischen Beiträgen bei konsequent englischen Bildunterschriften.

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Thomas Rohark: Intarsien. Entwicklung eines Bildmediums in der italienischen Renaissance (Rekonstruktion der Künste, 9); Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2007; 291 S., 11 SW-Abb., CD-Rom mit Abb.; ISBN 978-3-5254-7908-7, € 66,90.

Intarsiated furniture seems a relatively underestimated form of decoration, at least in mainstream art history. When it is discussed, this is often because of the involvement of some important artist, such as Lorenzo Lotto.¹ Apart from that, a number of detailed studies have been published on artists – or craftsmen, as they are often considered to be – whose names are known from the sources, or of well-known examples of the technique.² The present publication aims to provide the reader with an overview of three centuries of wood inlay in Italy – from the late Middle Ages to the end of the Renaissance. Rohark has however decidedly taken a positivistic approach towards historical issues and has moreover only limited attention to the details of the individual works he discusses. The book is thus not more than a useful overview of the state of research, without leading to more insight into this particular form of applied art.

Rohark's aims with this book are rather ambitious, especially since his introduction starts off with an extensive critique on the present literature. Not only are many

1 See for example MAURO ZANCHI: Lorenzo Lotto e l'immaginario alchemico: le „imprese“ nelle tarsie del coro della basilica di S. Maria Maggiore in Bergamo; Clusone 1997. – FERNANDO NORIS, ORAZIO BRAVI (Eds.): Le tarsie di Lorenzo Lotto: un itinerario fra Bibbia e alchimia; Bergamo 1998. – MAURO ZANCHI: La Bibbia secondo Lorenzo Lotto: Il coro ligneo della Basilica di Bergamo intarsiato da Capoferri; Clusone 2003.

2 An example of the first is ANTOINE WILMERING: Domenico di Niccolò, Mattia di Nanni and the Development of Sieneese Intarsia Techniques, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 139 (1997), 387–397. A recent example of the latter is GRAZIANO MANNI BELFIORE: Lo studiolo intarsiato di Leonello d'Este (1448 – 1453); Modena 2006.

important objects insufficiently discussed or neglected, according to Rohark, he also claims that aspects such as the supply and demand of intarsiated furniture is not taken into account in most publications. But before all else, he sets out to explain the comet-like popularity of the intarsia technique in the fourteenth century and its just as sudden disappearance from the Italian scene around 1600. After this high-flown introduction, the reader finds a rather unoriginal argument that fully rests on the secondary literature. And while the author continues to criticize the lack of factual information in other publications, he nevertheless is not able to creatively fill these omissions by means of either new research, nor can he offer an imaginative description on the basis of what is indeed known.

The first chapter contains a chronological discussion in which the author shows a marked tendency to describe the history of art as a linear progression towards increasing realistic depictions thanks to growing technical abilities. The chronology of intarsia as an art form begins, according to Rohark, at the end of the fourteenth century with its introduction to Italy. Its main centre is Tuscany, and more in particular Siena. All the earliest known examples of intarsiated choir stalls in Florence, Orvieto and elsewhere, were produced by Sienese masters. Obviously, there was already an influential and widely known workshop in that city by the second quarter of the fourteenth century. The surprising fact is, as Rohark notes, that nothing of this early phase remains in Siena itself, and therefore the origins of this tradition cannot be ascertained. It is only with Master Domenico di Nicolò (ca. 1363-ca. 1435), nicknamed *'dei Cori'* after his successful career in designing and executing choir stalls, that the sources in Siena begin to record this tradition; but at the same time, the many functions that Domenico had in the *opera* of the Sienese Duomo also suggests that these *intarsiatori* were carpenters, furniture-makers and builders who specialised in this trade of wood inlay, and became successful in it. Why Siena happened to be the birthplace of intarsia is, however, not discussed by Rohark.

From the early fifteenth century onwards, masters working on projects in the north of Italy seemed to come from various places. The Sacrestia delle Messe in the Florentine cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore was made in the 1430s by craftsmen from Poggibonsi, Arezzo, Florence itself and elsewhere, which indicates that intarsia had become a widely practised craft. And its practitioners had become respected, also by their fellow artists. Francesco di Giovanni di Francesco (1428–1495), nicknamed Francione, was mentioned by Vasari as having been the teacher of for example Giuliano da Sangallo and Baccio d'Agnolo. Therefore, architects and painters were often familiar with the skills of specialised woodworkers, either because they had received training in this field, or because they collaborated in larger projects of interior decoration. Ferrara was another town where a number of *intarsiatori* was active, and this was probably due to the presence of an art-loving court there, as Rohark suggests. The demand for elaborate furniture and interior decoration, and most conspicuously in the combination of the two in the typical *studiolo* for the nobility was probably a reason for the presence of so many intarsia artists. And from Ferrara, these masters also travelled to nearby cities such as Padua and Venice, in order to produce choir

stalls and other elaborately decorated pieces of furniture, thereby further spreading the vogue over the north of the peninsula.

The question why intarsia became such an appreciated form of woodwork decoration – which Rohark indicated as an important omission in the present literature – only receives a very general discussion in this book. In the chapter on ‘Success factors’ of the technique, studies by Goldthwaite and others on the changes in consumption patterns in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence are referred to, and the subsequent demand for high-quality furniture as an aspect of conspicuous consumption is then conjectured.³ But neither these secondary sources, nor the ego-documents also cited by Rohark in this chapter relate these general phenomena to the increasing specific demand for intarsia work. Only the inventories of the Medici and the d’Este households cited here do illustrate the demand of such elaborate furniture in the private context, but these examples are first of all too restricted. A discussion of more inventories from other regions would have helped the understanding of this aspect, and they fail to illustrate the demand for this kind of work among the less elevated classes in Renaissance cities, which certainly must have been conspicuous.

In the chapter on the complex issue of the meaning of intarsia, Rohark disregards the iconographical relations with other art forms. Apparently, the technical characteristics isolate woodwork from all other artistic trends; it must be said, though, that quite a number of Renaissance intarsia show mathematical figures not found in painting, sculpture or other art forms. But this book expresses the remarkable thesis that intarsia, although in other instances representing clearly readable figurative images, did not aim to instruct the viewer through the realistic depiction of recognisable objects. Indeed, the recurrence of certain scenes and motifs leads Rohark to assume that these compositions were completely devoid of any iconographic significance. From that point on, it is argued that the meaning of intarsia lies elsewhere, namely in the explicit demonstration of artistic perfection. The simile between artistic creation and divine Creation brings Rohark to assume that the meaning of the intarsia in choir stalls should be sought in this analogy between the human and the divine. Whether this system of meaning also operated in non-religious contexts of public or private commissions remains unclear, just as the question whether recognisable depictions as for example in the *trompe-l’oeil* interiors of the studiolo at Urbino were also not intended to carry a particular meaning.

The book closes with a chapter that seems to mourn the disappearance of the technique in the Italian peninsula. After 1600, Rohark argues, the decoration of wooden furniture no longer consisted of intarsia inlay in the strict sense of the word. From the mid sixteenth century onwards, inlay materials such as metal, bone or artificially coloured pieces of wood are increasingly applied in the search for ever more rich effects of colour and surface. Based on this assumption of falling technical quality (which can be debated, as it might have been considered by contemporaries as a step

3 See RICHARD A. GOLDTHWAITE: *Wealth and the demand for art in Italy 1300 – 1600*; Baltimore 1993, which is not mentioned in Rohark’s bibliography.

towards increasing realism), Rohark already assumes that after the 1530s the downfall sets in. In this context, he cites a textual source as confirming his view. In 1591, Francesco Bocchi wrote in his guide to Florence on the choir stalls of S. Maria Novella, that „these decorations of the choir stalls were made after a design of Giovanni Gargioli, and they are still appreciated today, and they show in their use the great knowledge of this rare art.“⁴ Just how this citation and the use of the word ‚rare‘ prove that in 1591 the technique of wood intarsia was forgotten remains unclear; and in the rest of this chapter, the assumptions made in the introduction of the book are referred to as further proof that there was indeed a definite decrease in the art of intarsia. It becomes even more ludicrous when a general economic depression at the end of the sixteenth century is cited as the reason for the loss of this form of art. In contrast, the simple and elegant proposal made by Peiresca in his chapter in Italian intarsia work still seems more convincing than Rohark’s contextual approach. According to Peiresca, it was the increasing use of curved surfaces in Baroque furniture that prohibited the decoration by means of wood inlay.⁵

While methodologically this book suffers from serious flaws and hardly provides new insights – especially when understood in Rohark’s concept of art history as consisting of objective facts – it first and foremost fails to live up to its own standards. None of the many interesting issues addressed in the introduction is satisfactorily solved at the end of the book. The reader is also hampered by the lack of good images in the book itself, and the insufficient quality of the images provided on the CD-rom. These almost invariably show choir stalls in their entirety, and in such a low resolution that it is impossible to zoom in and study the intarsia panels that are the main theme of the book. The better alternative to Rohark’s attempt at reintroducing a ‚forgotten‘ form of art therefore still remains the old introduction to the field as provided by Helmut Flade and others in 1986. This might be more general in scope, but shows markedly less disdain for complex historical issues, more respect for other scholar’s work, and really pays attention to the detail.⁶

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4 Cited after ROHARK, 142.

5 GIUSEPPE PEIRESCA: Die Intarsia in Italien, in: HELMUT FLADE ET. AL.: Intarsia. Europäische Einlegekunst aus sechs Jahrhunderten; Dresden 1986, 55–115, esp. 64.

6 See note 5.

Peter Gössel (Ed.): The A-Z of Modern Architecture, 2 vols.; Köln: Taschen 2007, 1072 pp, numerous colour and black and white illustrations; ISBN 978-3-8228-6313-8, € 200,00

Everybody who has spent some time among architects will have had the opportunity to observe that more than any other skill and characteristic a big ego is what makes the successful architect. Without such ego, it is almost impossible to survive the global