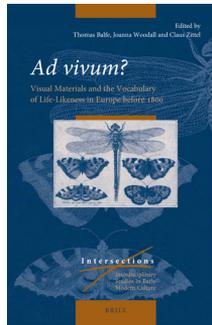


THOMAS BALFE, JOANNA WOODALL,
CLAUS ZITTEL (EDS.), *AD VIVUM?
VISUAL MATERIALS AND
THE VOCABULARY OF LIFE-LIKENESS
IN EUROPE BEFORE 1800*

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Reviewed by
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What does it mean if a picture is drawn or printed “after life” or “to (the) life”? According to the editors “[A]d vivum condenses at least three possible claims about the image – that is ‘from life’, lifelike and lively” (p. 10). The term *ad vivum* and its early modern vernacular forms such as *naer het leven*, *au vif*, *al vivo*, and *nach dem Leben* occur in descriptions of early modern images, on frontispieces of books and even on the images themselves. But what exactly does it correspond to within our modern schemes of accuracy, objectivity, correctness, and likeness? This volume is the final result of the *Ad vivum?* conference that took place at the Courtauld Institute, London, Friday, 21 November to Saturday, 22 November 2014. Almost twenty-five years after the publication of the groundbreaking article by Claudia Swan and five years after the German publication of Robert Felfe’s article, we finally have an entire collec-

ted volume dedicated to this topic.¹ With the increasing interest in scientific/epistemic/knowing images in premodern scholarship of the past few decades, there has been a corresponding increase in the research into the understanding of period terminology. What does it mean when Erasmus writes that his courier carries a portrait of Luther and his bride Katharina von Bora, which has an *ad vivum* likeness, although he has never met the two people in person and thus would seemingly not be in a position to make such a judgement (Kusukawa, pp. 94–95)?

In an introduction and two synoptic essays (a revised and translated version of Felfe's 2012 article and a new article by Sachiko Kusukawa), the editors of the volume have provided us with an overview of current research and a springboard for further inquiry. The introduction focuses on two major issues, namely the unraveling of the meaning of "life" in *ad vivum* and the role of the "artist-as-mediator". The first issue makes it clear why a volume on this topic was long-needed, as the range of imagery encompassed by use of the term is vast. At the same time the concept is unstable, both in its meaning over time as well as in the meaning it has even for a singular person. Felfe has already shown that there are four "representational modes" in which the term finds particularly frequent usage: "portraiture, landscape and topographical imagery, depictions of single objects found in nature (usually flora and fauna), and finally, nature castings and prints" (p. 2). However, it is with regard to the second issue concerning the role of the early modern artist that the full fruitfulness of this line of inquiry comes into view, as this consideration brings early modern agency to the foreground and highlights the manifold applications which early modern image makers and viewers made of the approach associated with the notion of *ad vivum*.

The articles unfold a further breadth by moving away from the mainly Netherlandish and German contexts in which the terminology has been studied so far. While Felfe's article discusses the Dutch phrase *naer het leven*, Kusukawa's article investigates the Latin term in the European context of nature and knowledge. And while the wishful thinking of historians of science might have made *ad vivum* seem a useful term in the context of early modern visual "objectivity", Kusukawa suggests using the terminology to "re-assess what was involved in historical practices of observation" (p. 112). In the following eight articles, we are witness to a series of insightful case studies drawn from a wider geographical area as well as from a broader set of representational modes. Noa Turel analyses the French term *au vif* in a Burgundian context and introduces the term indexicality – the proximity and immediacy between artists and the subjects of their images – into the volume's context. She

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Claudia Swan, *Ad Vivum, Naer Het Leven, from the Life. Defining a Mode of Representation*, in: *Word & Image* 11, 1995, 353–372; Robert Felfe, *Naer het leven. Eine sprachliche Formel zwischen bildgenerierenden Übertragungsvorgängen und ästhetischer Vermittlung*, in: Claudia Fritzsche, Karin Leonhard and Gregor J. M. Weber (eds.), *Ad Fontes! Niederländische Kunst des 17. Jahrhunderts in Quellen*, Petersberg 2012, 165–196.

argues that both concepts became intertwined for the fifteenth century. The following two articles discuss depictions of cities. Pieter Marten questions the concept of eye-witnessing and the reliability of printed images of the cities under siege between 1525 and 1565. Daan van Heesch uses an anonymous drawing of Jerusalem (ca. 1530–1550) as a starting point to discuss cityscapes and the viewer's understanding of likeness, concluding that the inscription *naert Leven* on this drawing might have been the later interpretation of a viewer who had never travelled to the Holy City. The following article by Carla Benzan guides the reader into Italy with sacred images and sculptures on the Sacro Monte of Varallo. In post-Tridentine Italy these scenes had to be presented to the pilgrim as *al vivo* in such a way that the “animation of the image depends on their own imaginative capacity as beholders” (p. 244) instead of the idolatry of polychromatic sculpture.

Eleanor Chan discusses how mathematical and geometrical thinking ingratiated its way into the intellectual culture of seventeenth-century England and the Netherlands and how as a result expressions and metaphors of artisanal practice were used to capture bodily and embodied processes in mathematical diagrams. By studying the reports on two different dissections of crocodiles in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, José Beltrán reconstructs in his article the process by which *au naturel* had become the most common French translation of *ad vivum*. Adopted with particular enthusiasm by naturalists, it signifies a shift in meaning away from first-hand witnessing to a form of communicating that was not purely visual, but also highly verbal. Mechthild Fend introduces us to the plates with which Gérard de Lairese illustrated Govard Bidloo's *Anatomia humani corporis*. She shows convincingly how these plates, which were described on the title page as “*ad vivum delineatus*”, in actual fact present a complex relationship between observation and representation, laying claim to accuracy while playing with dimensions, scale, and the materiality of the human body. The final article by Richard Mulholland problematizes the use of colour in botanical drawings. With his focus on eighteenth-century botanical works he shows how another shift has taken place in the understanding of botanical images, namely that their creators should produce them “not as an artist, but as a mathematician” (p. 352). This entailed an aptitude for combining observational and drawing skills with a mathematical understanding of colour-coding. In contrast to the previous centuries, when these qualities would have been reported in text and image together, the eighteenth-century reader had come to expect the image to deliver all.

This beautifully and colourfully illustrated new *Intersections* volume represents the long-awaited state-of-the-art on the scholarship on *ad vivum*. It has brought together historians of art and science in a common search for an understanding of the uses of *ad vivum* images and rhetoric. This volume speaks thus to both disciplines and as such is a must-read for any scholar who has ever

pondered whether we can arrive at an understanding of what early modern Europe looked like by observing the images that this culture brought forth in such diverse aesthetic and scientific contexts.