

Angelina Milosavljević

Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

On Proto-Modernist Traits in Early Modern Art Theory¹

Abstract: Early modern art and art theory are still considered by historians and theorists of art mainly in terms of aesthetic principles in the service of the representation of political and ideological concepts. However, the body of early modern art and especially theory abounds with notions, which anticipate the modernist tendencies of self-criticism. In this paper, we would like to suggest that self-criticism also characterized pre-Modernist art, complemented by advanced art criticism, especially during the Mannerist era. We would like to point out that the notion of self-criticism equally applies to both early modern art and art theory in which the specific concentration on problems of construction and composition of painting based its foundations on abstract mathematical rules, serving to justify and dignify the medium itself. Furthermore, this tendency divorced the art of painting, specifically, from the illusion of reality, thus entrenching it more firmly in its own area competence, to use Clement Greenberg's phrase. We would also like to demonstrate that late 16th-century art theory pushed well beyond its time, especially the theory written by artists. Their programmatic reliance on pre-existing pictorial models allowed these artists-theorists to abandon the question of realism and naturalism for pure speculation, which could not have been achieved in contemporary practice. We would like to suggest that ideas of abstraction and speculation, so characteristic of Modernist art, featured well before Modernism in the writings of Mannerist artists and theorists Giorgio Vasari, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, and Federico Zuccari.

Keywords: Mannerism; Modernism; abstraction; idea; *disegno*; Giorgio Vasari; Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo; Federico Zuccari

Twentieth century art theory introduced notions long present in the history of thought about, and the philosophy of, art that reached ultimate interpretations in the Modernist theory of art written by Clement Greenberg, who identified Modernism with the intensification of self-critical tendencies.² For him, the essence of modern-

¹ The paper is realized on the research project OI 177009, *Modernization of the West Balkans*, financed by the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Serbia, 2011–2018.

² It showed its first buds with Emanuel Kant. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6, 5 (Fall 1939): 34–49; Idem, "Modernist Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina, Charles Harrison and Deirdre Paul (New York: Westview Press, 1987), 5–10; Idem, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Art in Theory 1900–1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), 562–68. Also, Stephen J. Campbell, "On Renaissance Nonmodernity," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 20, 2 (Fall 2017): 261–93.

ism lies in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize itself, in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. He also claimed that art criticism lagged behind Modernist as much as behind the pre-Modernist art. We are taking these notions as starting points in this review, in which we would like to suggest that self-criticism also characterized pre-Modernist art, on one hand, and that art criticism had not lagged behind pre-Modernist art; this applies, we believe, especially to Mannerist art theory, which was so advanced that it utterly divorced itself from the practice. The road to modern art was certainly long, leading to abstraction as the ultimate point of artistic expression and to the recognition of the idea in an artist's mind as the sole origin of art. However, the notion of artistic *idea*, or *concept* (*concetto*, *disegno*) has ever been present in the writings on art.³ As the language of art theory became increasingly concerned with the ontology of art, and as the artistic practice focused on the problems of production *per se*, the modern abstraction came as no surprise, since “art is, among many other things, continuity”, as asserted by Greenberg himself.⁴

The need to establish art as an autonomous, self-regulating and self-defining entity, combined with its re-institutionalization (similar to the modern one) represented a pressing issue in the 16th century in which this self-reflection (questioning practice, motifs, ambitions, goals, and purpose) mirrored the awareness of the contexts that regulated the creation of art. The newly established art institution, the *academy*, was not supposed to institutionalize the practice or codify the language of art. On the contrary, it was supposed to serve as the meeting place of artists who would discuss various topics, and moreover, to look for ways to overcome the saturation with the worn out models, the programmatic emulation of the works of great masters of the past, as art faced the question of future developments. This was the crisis, in which art cried for explanations and apologies, similar to the one felt during the late 19th and the early 20th century.⁵ Our intention is to give an overview of the concept of artistic *idea*, to map the major notions featured in Early Modern art theory, which progressed from the consideration of the basic principles of art production to philosophical speculation, as they appeared in the writings of painters/theorists such as Giorgio Vasari, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo and Federico Zuccari.⁶

³ To mention seminal Erwin Panofsky, *Idea. Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der altern Kunsttheorie* (Berlin: Wissenschaftsverlag Volkspress, 1985) and Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy, 1450–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁴ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 10.

⁵ Simone Testa, *Italian Academies and Their Networks, 1525–1700. From Local to Global* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 125–70. Also, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999).

⁶ Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* (Firenza: Appresso i Giunti, 1568); Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, *Trattato dell'arte della pittura* (Milano: Appresso Paolo Cottardo Pontio, 1584); Idem, *Idea del Tempio della Pittura* (Milano: Per Paolo Cottardo Pontio, 1590); Federico Zuccari, *Idea de' pittori, scultori ed architetti del Cavalier Federigo Zuccaro, divisa in due libri* (Roma: Stamperia di Marco Pagliarini, MDCCLXVIII). An also useful overview is by Mosche Barasch, *Theories of Art from Plato to Winckelman* (New York, London: New York University Press, 1985).

The 15th-century introduction of abstract mathematical principles into art divorced practice from theory, and the new concentration on the composition of an art work (endowed with its own principles) brought forth the whole process of a *conscious* detachment from the ideal of lifelike representation (for whatever it might have meant), the *awareness of the process and of the artificiality of art*.⁷

The Italian Renaissance produced a large number of treatises on art, some of which were systematic writings on the principles and practices of art, some were biographies, or guidebooks, or essays. All of them serve as witness to the widespread interest in art among the educated who (along with artists) considered the purely intellectual perspective of art, and offered complex structures of ideas. During the 16th century, theoretical concerns gained an increasing importance and we may note that the most fundamental achievement of art of this era was theory, i.e. the establishment of the *idea of art*. Renaissance art theory, to be sure, did not provide a theory of art that could be employed by artists, as speculation outbalanced the practical, technical, and iconographic instructions (as a systematized corpus of knowledge featured in the Middle Ages). Renaissance art theory did not really inquire into the origin of a work of art, although Leon Battista Alberti admitted that artists carry certain ideas in their minds as resources for artistic creation that, according to him, should be informed by the sense experience, but, also, that the composition of a painting is subject to its own laws regardless of our sense experience.⁸ We find this notion to be the one from which the modern theory will germinate.⁹

The 16th-century art theorists did not discuss the questions of the purely *visual*, but strove for an assimilation of knowledge and to the exercise of the rational faculties of human beings, seeing the process of looking and viewing not as an isolated act, but as a *discursive exercise of potentially limitless scope and depth*; the experience of art¹⁰ assumed new intellectual and effective dimensions.¹¹ Thus a writer on art had to explain the initial goal of art, and create, instill, provoke, as well as to possess the limitless knowledge. This self-sufficiency, a kind of autonomy of art, a form of knowledge, was not the autonomy from the sensory experience, but a kind of *superintendency*, as so accurately defined by Robert Williams.¹² We may note that the students of the Renaissance art theory have assigned the primary importance to the idea of art as imitation of nature, and growing naturalism of the Renaissance together with the body of writings do attest to it – to achieve naturalism one needed to use the strategies

⁷ Cf. Panofsky, *Idea*. A bibliographical list would be long here, but let us mention only Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), and Thomas Puttfarcken, *Discovery of Pictorial Composition. Theories of Visual Order in Painting 1400–1800* (Hew Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2000), 45–96.

⁸ Alberti, *On Painting*, 60–86, esp. 74–85, on drawing, composition and reception of light.

⁹ Let us remember Cézanne, or Kandinsky, or Pollock.

¹⁰ An *aesthetic* experience, albeit in a pre-aesthetic regime.

¹¹ As noted by Robert Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture in Sixteenth Century Italy: From Techne to Metatechne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4–5.

¹² Cf. Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture*, 4, 23. Cf. Alberti, *On Painting*, 87–89.

of scientific investigation (whose progress found its reflection in Renaissance art) as the true mode of knowing. In turn, to be sure, naturalism and scientific investigation proved not enough for understanding of the true nature of art, or of the true nature of its 'epistemological' project.¹³ What becomes clear from the writings on art, which gradually assumed more importance in speculations about art, is the notion that *all knowledge* is at the same time *at the disposal of art and its subordinate*: art comes to be understood as the above-noted *superintendency of knowledge*, a *form of knowledge or mode of knowing* that necessarily involves mastery of other modes and, ideally, *mastery of all modes*.¹⁴ The writings we are turning to in this paper are exactly the exercises in this process, the recognition that representation serves to integrate and reconstitute diverse realms and categories of human experience and activities,¹⁵ and as such it calls for the understanding of universal underlying principles, the *idea*, *concetto*, *disegno*, in the first place.

These notions and the quest for the (abstract) principles of art emerged at the beginning of the 15th century, in Cennino Cennini's (c. 1360–1427) *Libro dell'arte* (before 1427),¹⁶ in which he made an attempt to bring theory (*scienza!*) and practice of art together. Although his treatise is conceived as a medieval manual, he introduced the modern notion that a painting should be tested against the judgment of the artist's eye, and even more important, he introduced a paragone, a comparison between painting and poetry in order to endow painting with the status of a Liberal Art: it deserves to be *enthroned next to theory*, and to be *crowned with poetry* because, as a poet is free to compose verses according to his will, a painter is free to compose a figure as he pleases, according to his *imagination* – Cennini uses the term *fantasia*.¹⁷ Painting calls for imagination and skill of hand, for him, in order to *discover things not seen, which are hiding under the shadow of natural objects, and to fix them with hand, presenting them to sight*,¹⁸ and imagination is that innate quality a painter must possess if his hand and intellect (*intelletto*) are to work together. In addition, he introduced the division of the principal parts of painting: drawing (*disegno*) and application of colors (*colorire*),¹⁹ as well as the notion that when a painter achieves mastery (in a workshop) he is no longer confined to formulas, but free to imagine new forms of things, to demonstrate his own vision, his personal spirit (*aria*), his own individual style (*maniera*), to present what *does not really exist* – that will gain full recognition at the beginning of the 20th century.²⁰ Lo-

¹³ Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture*, 3.

¹⁴ Just as the artist superimposes different kinds of knowledge, so the viewer must engage a variety of interpretative techniques, and the experience of art becomes an experience of signification, of meaning in the most comprehensive and fundamental sense. Cf. Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁶ Cennino d'Andrea Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbook*, trans. by D. V. Thompson, Jr. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1933).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ It differs from *colorito* (colors of things we in nature), a wonderful and powerful division that will gain its significance much later.

²⁰ Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 123–331.

renzo Ghiberti (1378–1455) expressed similar ideas in his *Commentarii* (1430–1447),²¹ a biographical index of ancient artists in whose works he recognized the presence of some kind of *theory*, i.e. intellectual basis. He explained that the science (*scienza*) of painting and sculpture, of all the Liberal Arts, calls for the greatest skill to invent (he uses *invenzione*) because it is made with a certain reflection, consisting of practice and theory, of matter (*materia*) and judgment (*ragionamento*). An artist must bring together his natural talent (*ingegno*) and instruction (*disciplina*) to achieve it, with a grain of individual touch, personal style (*aria*). The basic principles, according to Ghiberti, of all arts are drawing (*disegno*) and perspective (*prospettiva*) – geometry, really.²² The writings of these artists and theorists prepared the ground for the subsequent critical reinvestigation of the rules of artistic production by Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), who in his treatise on painting, *De pictura* (c. 1435) adopted the aforementioned concepts of the pre-existence of the intellectual basis of art (*theoria, scienza*) and added another important one: the existence of specific laws of composition of an artwork that do not abide to the sensual experience. The perspective, the grid and geometry, the mathematical principles he introduced into the construction of a composition represented the first specifically non-artistic means, as well as the awareness that a composition consists of various parts united by light and shadow. The result of this reliance on the formal characteristics of painting and on the pre-existing models (in order to acquire the knowledge of the principles of art) was an artificial composition that did not necessarily represent a truly mimetic reflection of the reality perceived by an artist.²³ This trend gained its urgency in the 16th-century art, in both its practice and theory.²⁴

One of the most important writers on art in the 16th century was the famous Italian artist Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), the writer of the *Lives of the Artists*, a truly universal history of art, published in Florence in 1550, and 1568, in which he expressed the idea of (three) stages of art, of which his own age, the *età moderna*, overcame all the deficiencies of the previous ages owing to the ultimate perfection achieved by the modern artists, such as Leonardo, Giorgione, Raphael, Correggio, and Michelangelo.²⁵ Vasari introduced the concept of the arts of design (*arti del disegno*), the notion that set arts apart from other creative activities, and that points to the common origin of the visual arts.²⁶

Although the concept of *disegno* (*concetto*) featured in earlier theoretical works, Vasari developed it in the second edition of the *Lives*. Vasari's definition begins with the famous assertion that *disegno* is a general power of the mind:

²¹ Lorenzo Ghiberti, *I Commentarii*, ed. by Iulius fon Schlosser (Firenze: Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, 1912).

²² Ghiberti, "Proemio," *I Commentarii*, 3–7.

²³ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, translated by Cecil Grayson (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1972), 72–77.

²⁴ Edward J. Olszewski, "Distortions, Shadows, and Conventions in Sixteenth Century Italian Art," *Artibus et Historiae* 6, 11 (January 1985): 101–24.

²⁵ Vasari, *Vite*, 553–54. This is a very modern idea of a self-conscious age.

²⁶ The same idea, at about the same time, was expressed by Vincenzo Danti and Gabriele Paleotti (on this, in my upcoming publication on pre-modern concepts of art theory).

Because design, the father of our three arts of architecture, sculpture, and painting, proceeding from the intellect, derives from many things a universal judgment, like a form or idea of all things in nature [...] it happens that not only in human bodies and those of animals, but in plants as well and buildings and sculptures and paintings, it understands the proportion that the whole has to the parts and the parts to one another and to the whole. And because from this there arises a certain notion and judgment which forms in the mind that which, when expressed with the hands, is called design, one may conclude that this design is nothing other than a visible expression and declaration of that notion of the mind, or of that which others have imagined in their minds or given shape to in their idea.²⁷

The notion of universal judgment may help to distinguish the kind of knowledge represented by *art/techne*, a knowledge of general principles, from that of particulars that anyone may derive from ordinary sense experience: that art is produced when from many notions of experience, a single universal judgment is formed, and the *matter of art is to judge*.²⁸ The word *techne* was used for various crafts, and Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* defined it as a particular kind of knowledge (or reasoning) of scientists, philosophers, and poets, and even artists. Vasari appropriated this idea that artists have access to generalities, and deal with the intelligible rather than the merely perceptible, and claimed that these practitioners of *disegno* share in an understanding of universals, consequently defining *disegno* as the faculty of judgment.²⁹

What exactly was *disegno* for Vasari is not quite clear. Although he used it to denote a sketch, a linear configuration, its newly recognized spiritual and speculative quality is expressed in the idea that *disegno* “derives a general judgment from many things”, that is it a form or idea of all the things in nature, a sort of mental image of a thing to be represented in art. It is a mental image in an artist’s mind, which he keeps before his spiritual eye when working (not to mention that Vasari used the notions of *idea* and *disegno* interchangeably).³⁰ This mental image did depend on an artist’s sense experience, but it was a combination of his experiences and older works of art whose dry scientific objectivity was overcome by grace, by an abstract quality dependent on an artist’s personal judgment.

From the middle of the 16th century on, there appeared artists and theorists who took to reconsider art’s mimetic and affective qualities, turning to speculation rather than to definition of practical terms of execution (which, to be sure, had already been

²⁷ Vasari, *Vite*, 73.

²⁸ As reminds us Williams, in *Art, Theory, and Culture*, 44–47.

²⁹ Let us note that the uses of the term *disegno* had not been consistent in early modern era, even in Vasari’s own writings, and it has defined drawing, sketch, intellectual faculty, idea, concept, and similar. See Panofsky, *Idea*; Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture*, 37–39.

³⁰ As noted by Barasch, *Theories of Art*, 219. Cf. Panofsky, *Idea*, 60–68. We would also like to add that even in his little known early correspondence, which has been of our special interest and awaits publication, Vasari used these notions in the sense of concept, together with the notion of *faticha* (handwork).

set in the writings of previous generations of artists and theorists). In the writings of the late mannerist artists, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538–1600) and Federico Zuccari (1534–1609), *idea* and *disegno* were defined as basic principles uniting all human actions, according visual art a universal relevance, thus introducing, anew the, already mentioned, superintendency of knowledge. Lomazzo and Zuccari left the first systematic elaboration and rearrangement of the theory of artistic *idea*, and posed the most important, and ever pressing, question of the *possibility of artistic production* as such.³¹ How is it possible to form a notion in one's mind and reflect it in a visual representation? Where does it come from?

Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo offered an answer. His *Trattato dell'arte della pittura*, 1584, represents the summa of the late Renaissance theory of art, and his *Idea del tempio della pittura*, 1590, albeit confusing and drawing heavily on hermetism and astrology, represents the first developed system of the arts with the proposition to abandon the study of nature as it has already been given its most perfect rendition in the art of his famous predecessors, the 'governors' of the Temple of art, Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Mantegna, Gaudenzio Ferrari, Tizian and Polidoro da Caravaggio.³² This was an important instance in the history of art as Lomazzo, programmatically, *does not* advocate the observation of nature, but of the already existing models – the practice already criticized by the new generation of the North Italian Bolognese school of the Carracci. Lomazzo adopted the division of painting into theory and practice, where *theory gives the general precepts* which everybody must observe if they wish to excel and become famous in their art. Practice gives *rules of prudence and judgment*, instructing how to implement what has been said and imagined in general.³³ Practice, to be sure, is not less theoretical, as Lomazzo gave no precepts to outlining, application of paint, and similar. What he strived for was the codification of art and he advocated turning to the utmost perfections of art achieved by famous artists.

Another novelty introduced by Lomazzo is his assertion that artists start with anatomy in traditional workshops and studios, to proceed to the representation of *species*, and then to *contemplative form*, defining it as the *sign form (la significante*, which he uses interchangeably with *l'immaginabile, specie spirituale, accidentale, fabbricativa*); a painter cannot compose anything well that has the form of truth if he does not have an understanding first in his imagination of the form of the thing he want to compose.³⁴

This *significativa* is in its essence a form of *design, idea*, the notion in an artist's mind, which has been dealt with extensively in the writings of Federico Zuccari. In his highly speculative theory of design, his *Idea*, Zuccari states that to philosophize beyond his own profession makes the artist universal, copious, and learned. Philosophy and discourse make the understanding and practice more certain and secure; to

³¹ The revival of Scholastic, Aristotelian, Thomistic, and Neo-Platonic tendencies in late Mannerist art theory offered theoretical frameworks for their basic ideas. Cf. Panofsky, *Idea*, 71–99.

³² Lomazzo, *Idea*, 15, 41.

³³ *Ibid*, 109–113.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 111.

philosophize and to design are really one and the same thing.³⁵ Zuccari makes an important distinction between the concept formed in the mind of the artist, the human *disegno interno* (*disegno, concetto, idea, esemplare, intentione* – the terms used by him interchangeably), and its translation into a visible form, the *disegno esterno*.³⁶ There are two kinds of *disegno*: *speculative* and *practical*.³⁷ Whereas speculative is identified with philosophy, which is contemplation of divine, practical represents our contact with divine through action, moral conduct, through our ability to design what we want to do, to fashion new artificial worlds, it governs action and regulates it. But *disegno* retains its intellectual dimension throughout Zuccari's writings, in spite of his effort to explain the whole perceptual process, the transformation of the sensory experience in one's mind, to form the body of knowledge about the working of nature.³⁸ While he never abandons the importance of senses, he also insists on the primacy of the intellect, and on the soul as something that works as an influence from above downward, from the higher, more spiritual faculties through the interior to the exterior senses.³⁹

Disegno interno is an idea of all possible ideas, the source of all human thought and actions. *Disegno esterno* is any type of manifest order or arrangement: one is natural, present in nature and the order implanted in the world by God, which we perceive. The other is *artificiale* (artificial), produced by human beings, and is further divided into *artificiale perfetto*, based on the study of nature or on other artists' studies of nature, and *artificiale prodottivo, discorsivo, fantastico*, that is, "everything the mind or fantasy or caprice can imagine".⁴⁰ While *disegno esterno* is the father (*genitore*) of the three arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture, painting is closest to it and is the only one that possesses the *infinite flexibility and ability of the mind itself* to represent all things in the world, both visible and invisible.⁴¹ *Disegno* may also be understood as philosophy:

Philosophy in particular is all mental speculation, which [...] if we rightly understand it, and avoid superfluous words and disputes, we will find to be in its intellectual, discursive, substance the ideal speculation of concepts, of order, and of reasons concerning some issue; and this philosophy and philosophizing is a design and a metaphorical designing of the mind.⁴²

³⁵ Zuccari, *Idea*, 9–10.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 147–49.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 20.

³⁸ Aristotle remained the most important authority for art theory against the Neo-Platonic during the late Renaissance.

³⁹ Zuccari, *Idea*, 84–86, 95–96.

⁴⁰ *Idem*, 33–35, 39, 68–71, 86.

⁴¹ *Idem*, 18, 31, 36, 164.

⁴² *Idem*, 16. Let us mention also that Zuccari abandoned mathematical structure of painting, proposing, instead, an organic structure of composition, in which the elements are arranged according to an inner structure which binds them together (similar to Kandinsky's inner necessity) using the human body and alphabet simile, so characteristic of abstract Mannerist compositions (*Idea*, 24).

In this essay, we touched upon subtle intricacies of the ambiguity of the theory and the practice of art, where theory failed to give any certain framework for practice. The range of notions and complex terminology of art theory attest to this fact, as well as the epistemological project of art, which progressed from the interest in the natural world as model for artistic representation, to the speculation on its structure and laws divorced from the strictly visual. The recognition of the individual styles of artists, with their individual ideas, concepts, understanding, rendered them subject to scrutiny, to criticism of the public, on one hand, and to the criticism of the younger generation of artists (the Bolognese Carracci School). The critical and self-critical early modern age, is so close, yet so far away from our modern wonderings, which still fail to offer a clear answer to the question of the nature and meaning of artistic production that is so imminent to art as such.

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