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TRUTH AND INTENTION IN
THE LIBRO DELL'ARTE
LARA BROECKE

Pour citer cet article

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Résumé

Cet article examine la question de la précision du *Libro dell'Arte*. En montrant que de nombreux objets d'art, contemporains à sa rédaction par Cennino, sont étroitement conformes aux descriptions présentées dans l'ouvrage, l'auteur soutient que celui-ci est, la plupart du temps, une source fidèle pour les techniques et les matériaux de son époque. Cependant, Cennino décrit des technologies spécifiques à différentes régions géographiques et aborde une gamme de disciplines plus vaste que celle relevant normalement de la compétence d'un seul praticien. L'auteur affirme donc que Cennino ne visait pas à présenter toutes les techniques et tous les matériaux qu'il connaissait mais ceux qu'il jugeait les meilleurs ou les plus intéressants. En rédigeant son *Libro dell'Arte*, son objectif n'était donc pas d'écrire un manuel d'atelier ou un livre de guildes. Ensuite, en recontextualisant Cennino sur son lieu d'activité, c'est-à-dire la cour de Francesco da Carrara, l'auteur examine les raisons qui l'ont conduit à produire un tel recueil. Il en arrive à la conclusion que le projet de Cennino visait plus à renforcer sa propre estime de soi et sa position aux yeux de ses contemporains qu'à satisfaire les exigences d'un lectorat particulier.

Abstract

This paper examines the question of accuracy in Cennino Cennini's Il Libro dell'Arte. By showing that numerous art objects dating from the period in which Cennino was writing conform closely to his descriptions, the author argues that Cennino is, for the most part, an accurate source for the techniques and materials of the period in which he lived. However, by demonstrating that Cennino's descriptions cover techniques specific to a number of different geographical regions as well as a wider range of disciplines than would normally fall under the remit of a single practitioner, the author argues that Cennino's book was intended to showcase the best or most interesting techniques and materials known to him, rather than to be of use as a workshop manual or a guild book. Placing Cennino in the context of the Carrara court, where he worked during the writing of the Libro dell'Arte, the author then examines Cennino's motives for producing such a compendium, concluding that the project aimed to bolster his own self-esteem and his standing in the eyes of others, rather than to satisfy the demands of any particular readership.

1. Truth

The question of why Cennino Cennini wrote the *Libro dell'Arte*, and what exactly it is, has long vexed scholars.

In order to approach the subject it is fundamental to examine the level of accuracy in the *Libro dell'Arte*. There are two main ways of doing this. Firstly, Cennino's recipes can be followed in practice to see if they work. Secondly, existing works of art can be analysed to see if they conform to his prescriptions.

In the course of making a new translation of Cennino into English the author carried out practical experimentation and read accounts of other researchers' experiences in the area. The research was in no way exhaustive, however, as it formed part of a much larger project.¹

It emerged that very many examples of objects exist which conform closely to the techniques described in the *Libro dell'Arte*. Widely varying techniques are discussed here to show that Cennino's accuracy is not confined to any particular area of expertise.

As concerns panel painting techniques, we can cite the work of Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, who worked in Florence in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and Sassetta, who worked in Siena in the first half of the fifteenth century, as well as Agnolo Gaddi, with whom Cennino trained in Florence and Lorenzo Monaco, who also worked in Agnolo Gaddi's studio. Although stylistically very different to each other, examination of extant paintings has shown that all these artists used precisely the methods advised by Cennino for painting flesh, in terms of pigment mixtures, layering and outlining, as described in chapters [160-1].²

1 The new translation was published in April 2015 as Lara Broecke, *Cennino Cennini's Il Libro dell'Arte. A New English Translation and Commentary with Italian Transcription*, London, Archetype, 2015. All chapter numbers in this article are those used in the Broecke edition of the *Libro dell'Arte*.

2 For Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, see Francesca Bettini, "La Pala di Niccolò di Pietro Gerini della chiesa di San Carlo dei Lombardi: riflessioni sul restauro in corso", in Marco Ciatti (ed.), *Per la conservazione dei dipinti: esperienze e progetti del Laboratorio dell'OPD (2002-2012)*, Florence, Edifir, 2013, p. 116. For Sassetta, see Roberto Bellucci, "Il polittico di San Sepolcro: studi sulla tecnica del Sassetta", *OPD Restauro*, 23, 2011, p. 320-322. For Agnolo Gaddi, see Sue Ann Chui and Carole Namowicz, "Agnolo Gaddi, Die hl. Ursula. Einetechnische Untersuchung", in Wolf-Dietrich Löhr and Stefan Weppelman (eds), *'Fantasie und Handwerk': Cennino Cennini und die Tradition der toskanischen Malerei von Giotto bis Lorenzo Monaco*, Berlin, Hirmer, 2008, p. 106. For Lorenzo Monaco see C. Hale, "The technique and materials of the *Intercession of Christ and the Virgin* attributed to Lorenzo Monaco", in Caroline Villers (ed.), *The Fabric of Images: European Paintings on Fabric Supports in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, London, Archetype Publications, 2000, p. 36.

Cennino's account of reverse glass techniques (chapters [199–203]) describes exactly what can be seen in a small devotional diptych from Padua in the Cloisters Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, dated 1400–1420.³ Other objects employing the same techniques are widespread, for example two small diptychs of unknown date in the Bargello Museum in Florence.

Cennino's accounts of drawing techniques also appear to be accurate. Examination of Italian Renaissance Drawings in the British Museum and the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille has shown that the preparation techniques for the support and the drawing materials themselves conform closely to those described by Cennino. Even his assertion that a ratio of two parts lead to one part tin for lead point in chapter 11 can be supported by analysis of fifteenth century Italian drawings in Lille.⁴

Reconstructing Cennino's instructions in practice has also served to show that he is remarkably accurate. If his prescriptions for drawing a man in chapter 70 are followed, a very serviceable figure is produced (**fig. 1**).

It is also notable that his instructions are far clearer and easier to follow than those given by Vitruvius or in the Montpellier Manuscript, which is also Italian and has a similar date to Cennino's treatise. These other instructions employ various measures, including face lengths, fractions of the complete height of the man and foot lengths, and they skip from one part of the body to the other. Cennino, in contrast, works methodically from top to bottom of the figure and establishes his measures at the outset – using face-lengths and thirds of face-lengths throughout.⁵

Reconstruction of his mordant recipes, in chapters [164] – [165], showed that, not only were functional mordants produced, but Cennino's stated open

3 William Wixom (ed.), *Mirror of the Medieval World*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999, p. 170–171.

4 Janet Ambers, Catherine Higgitt and David Saunders (eds), *Italian Renaissance Drawings: Technical Examination and Analysis*, London, Archetype Publications in association with the British Museum, 2010, *passim*; Barbara Brejon de Lavergnée, Odile Liesse, Alain Duval, and Hélène Guicharnaud, "Dessins florentins du XVe siècle à la pointe métallique du musée des Beaux-Arts de Lille", *Technè*, 13–14, 2001, p. 81–82; Letizia Montalbano and Cecilia Frosinini, "Italian metal point drawings: international studies of the artistic technique", in Roy Vontobel (ed.), *Preprints of the ICOM-CC 13th Triennial Meeting*, London, James & James, 2002, vol. 2, p. 613.

5 Marcus Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, H. Langford Warren (ed.), Morris Morgan (tr.), Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1914, p. 3.1.2–3.1.3; Mark Clarke, *Mediaeval Painters' Materials and Techniques: The Montpellier Liber diversarum arcium*, London, Archetype Publications, 2011, p. 99.

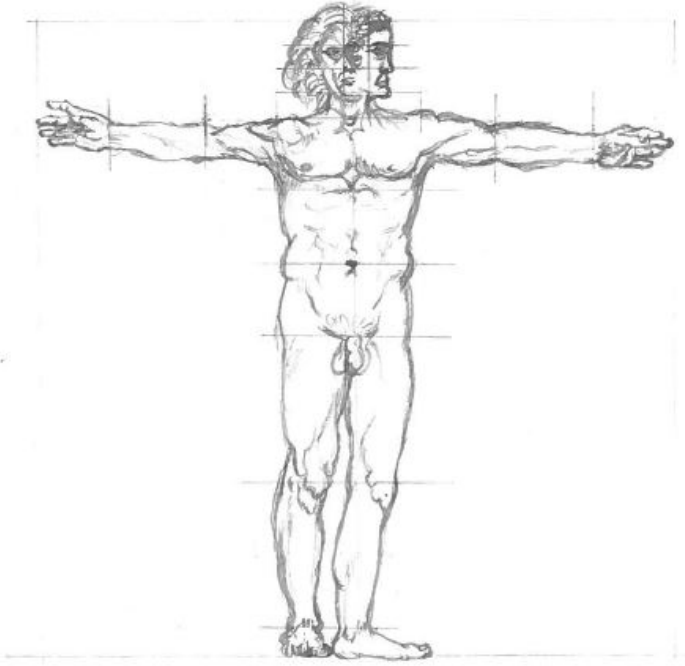


Fig. 1. 'Cenninian Man', drawn by the author according to Cennino's prescriptions in chapter 70 of the *Libro dell'Arte*.

working times for each different mordant were correct.⁶ Likewise, ultramarine pigment and sappanwood colorant could be produced without marked difficulty following Cennino's recipes (in chapter 62 for ultramarine and [177] and [211] for sappanwood), despite that for sappanwood being very brief.⁷ Tiny details are overlooked in these two recipes, but it was easy to fill these in from common sense, and this would have been even easier for a person living in a medieval artistic milieu, used to working with the kinds of equipment and materials described.

6 My thanks to Renate Woudhuysen for her collaboration on these reconstructions.

7 My thanks to William Whitney and Anne Servais for their collaboration on the sappanwood reconstruction.

However, although there is a high level of accuracy in the *Libro dell'Arte*, there are also occasional instances of inaccuracy. Some of the chapters on pigments betray a certain amount of confusion, probably because Cennino bought most of his pigments ready-made from an apothecary, as he repeatedly advises his reader to do; he would therefore have had only second-hand knowledge of the origins and preparation methods for the majority of them. Chapter 42, on haematite, for example, seems to conflate descriptions of red iron oxide and black crystallised haematite. In addition, chapter 50, on arzica, appears to contain some information pertaining to orpiment, probably due to an old name for orpiment, 'arzicon', being so similar to 'arzica'.

Although there are not many, there are also some recipes in the *Libro* which do not work. The brief instructions on making shell gold by grinding gold leaf in egg white in [chapter 174], for example, if followed produce nothing but a messy sludge; comparison with recipes in other manuscripts shows that Cennino has left out vital information about abrasives, without which it is impossible to achieve a successful result. Moreover, the instructions for creating a mould to cast your own body by throwing yourself down onto a bed of soft plaster or clay in [chapter 242] are clearly fantastical, and those for creating a cast of a complete figure in [chapter 241], though workable, could never be used to produce sculptures with anything more than the most basic of poses.

2. Intention

Armed with this information about the levels of accuracy in the *Libro dell'Arte*, we can return to the question of Cennino's possible motive for writing it.

It has often been suggested that the *Libro dell'Arte* is a guild book, and that Cennino was commissioned to write it. The guild would then have used the book to instruct its members in the correct techniques to be used or to lay down guidelines against which works could be judged and artists called to account. The title of chapter 96, 'How you should always make a habit of working with gold leaf and with good quality pigments', might indeed suggest an intention to set standards. However, the body of the chapter does not say that the best quality materials *must* be used but only that it is better to use them because they will win you more custom and thereby more money.

In addition, the descriptions in the *Libro* cover a number of techniques that were new and unusual at the time, as well techniques typical of a variety of regions both within and outside Italy. Amongst new techniques can be cited the decoration of walls in green monochrome (described in chapters [229-232]), which was sporadic in the fourteenth century and only really flowered in

Florence in the second quarter of the fifteenth century.⁸ There is also drawing from life (to which Cennino directly alludes in chapters 28 and 70), the first extant examples of which, in Italy, are found in a volume known as the *Taccuino* of Giovannino de' Grassi, dating from the late fourteenth century.⁹ Moreover, the use of powdered gold in paintings seems to have reached Italy only in the later fourteenth century.¹⁰ Indeed, its novelty combined with Cennino's stated habit of buying his pigments ready-made may account for Cennino's lack of accuracy in describing how to make powdered gold, discussed above.

Many examples can be cited to demonstrate that Cennino drew on techniques particular to a variety of regions. The reverse glass painting discussed above was practised in Bologna and Padua, and details of Cennino's description suggest that he was familiar specifically with Paduan techniques.¹¹ Green monochrome on walls, on the other hand, as mentioned above, became typical of Florence.¹² The use of precious stones or glass beads set into gesso relief on panel paintings, described in chapter 124, was typical of Siena in the period when Cennino was writing, having fallen out of fashion in Florence.¹³ Looking further afield, the use of an oil binder, described in chapter 89, and the use of linden or willow panels as painting supports, mentioned in chapter 113, were associated with northern Europe rather than Italy.¹⁴

8 Paolo Bensi, "Materiali e tecniche dei dipinti murali nelle fonti Quattrocentesche", in *Materiali tecniche nella pittura murale del Quattrocento: storia dell'arte, indagini diagnostiche e restauro verso una nuova prospettiva di ricerca*, Barbara Fabjan, Marco Cardinali and Maria Beatrice De Ruggieri with Marisa Dalai Emiliani (eds), Rome, ENEA, 2010, vol. 1, p. 80; Almut Schäffner, *Terra Verde. Entwicklung und Bedeutung der monochromen Wandmalerei der italienischen Renaissance*, Weimar, Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2009, p. 46-159.

9 Alfredo Aldrovandi, Mauro Bacci, Laura Busotti, *et al.*, "Il 'Taccuino' di Giovannino de' Grassi della Biblioteca Civica di Bergamo: tecnica di esecuzione e restauro", in *Le Antologie di OPD Restauro: I materiali cartacei*, Florence, Centro Di, 2006, p. 20.

10 David Bomford, Jill Dunkerton, Dillian Gordon, Ashok Roy with Jo Kirby, *Art in the Making: Italian Painting Before 1400*, London, National Gallery Publications Ltd, 1990, p. 46 and 147.

11 See note 3 above.

12 See note 8 above.

13 Broecke, *Cennino Cennini's Il Libro dell'Arte...*, *op. cit.*, p. 160 (note 3).

14 *Ibid.*, p. 125 (chapter 89, note 1); Peter Wyer and Werner H. Schoch, "Alles Linde oder was? Übersicht über die Holzarten des romanischen und gotischen Skulpturenbestands im Schweizerischen Landesmuseum", *Zeitschrift für Kunsttechnologie und Konservierung*, 18, 2004, no. 2, p. 393-395; Raffaella Bruzzone and Maria Clelia Galassi, "Wood species in Italian panel paintings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: historical investigation and microscopical wood identification", in *Studying Old Master Paintings: Technology and Practice*, Marika Spring (ed.), London, Archetype Publications, 2010, p. 257.

It is evident, therefore, that the techniques described by Cennino would not be suitable ones against which to judge the proficiency of an average artist wishing to enter a guild. Such an artist would not necessarily need to be familiar with cutting-edge techniques and it might even be undesirable, from the point of view of a guild, if its artists were using techniques associated with other geographical areas.

That Cennino intended his treatise instead as a workshop manual might be inferred from the fact that large parts consist of very clear and thorough instructions, which can be followed step-by-step with success. In addition, if Cennino's treatise is compared to other treatises on painting materials and techniques of the period we find that, while other treatises provide instructions for synthesising materials, very few give any idea of how to apply them. Alcherius, for example, provides similar mordant recipes to Cennino but Cennino, in chapters [164-165], supplements the recipes with detailed information on how to control and apply the mordants.¹⁵ However, while many parts of the *Libro dell'Arte* can successfully be treated as a practical manual, others, as mentioned above, contain mistakes and omissions which make them unusable.

In fact, Cennino himself refutes the theory that the treatise was intended as a workshop manual with his repeated advice that the techniques which he describes can only be learned by watching a master at work and by practice. Cennino places great emphasis on the importance of learning through apprenticeship in chapters 2 and 3 and, famously, in chapter 104, where he acknowledges that no one could become an artist simply by studying his book.

On top of this, circumstantial evidence suggests that Cennino's book was not put to practical use in workshops. The oldest manuscript containing the treatise, probably dating from 1437, is bound in a volume together with a number of works of literature in Italian, as opposed to other technical treatises. This binding dates from 1575 at the latest, when the group of manuscripts is first recorded in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, implying that from a fairly early date Cennino's treatise was not viewed as a practical manual. Physical examination of the pages of the manuscript also suggests that this copy of the *Libro dell'Arte* was never used in a studio context. The pages appear barely to have been thumbed and are considerably less dirty than those of the poetry collection that follows Cennino's treatise in the same

15 Mary Philadelphia Merrifield, *Original Treatises, Dating From the XIIth to XVIIIth Centuries, on the Arts of Painting, in Oil, Miniature, Mosaic, and on Glass; of Gilding, Dyeing, and the Preparation of Colours and Artificial Gems; Preceded by a General Introduction; with Translations, Prefaces and Notes*, London, John Murray, 1849, vol. 1, p. 94.

binding. In addition, Vasari claims to have seen the manuscript in the house of a Sieneese goldsmith; Cennino does not cover the goldsmith's art, therefore it cannot have been in his possession for practical purposes.¹⁶

Perhaps, rather than being a guild book or a workshop manual, the *Libro dell'Arte* was a presentation book, made at the behest of a wealthy patron as a sort of medieval equivalent of a coffee-table book. Such books are known from the period and Cennino's occasional oratorical flourishes and attempt at a learned opening chapter, as well as his repeated claims to be a direct professional descendant of Giotto, might encourage this view; they could be seen as being intended to flatter the intelligence and taste of the patron while also reassuring him of Cennino's pedigree.

The passing note in [chapter 157] to the effect that panel painting is such a tidy pursuit that it can be practised by a nobleman because he need not fear that he will damage his expensive clothing would also seem to support this theory, along with the contention, in chapter 2, that to become an artist for love of the work is more commendable than to do so for profit. In opposition, however, are a number of references to the hard life of the artist and recommendations intended to maximise the reader's profits.

Moreover, a presentation book would normally begin with a dedication to the patron. The *Libro dell'Arte* has no such dedication, although it is conceivable that one might have been added in a later draft, since the treatise is unfinished. As it stands, the *Libro* begins and ends with religious invocations and dedications to the reader, portrayed by Cennino as an impoverished, aspiring artist; not a characterisation calculated to appeal to a rich sponsor.

If the *Libro dell'Arte* was not a guild book, practical manual or presentation book, the author would suggest that it seems most likely to have been a vanity project. Cennino appears to have written the *Libro dell'Arte* towards the end of his sojourn in Padua. There, he spent his days at the Carrara court, famous for its humanist scholars, in the company of men for whom writing was the natural culmination of a thought process. Perhaps he was not just inspired but also encouraged by them; having heard him talking about his work and possibly having seen him in practice we can imagine that they might have persuaded him to put his thoughts and experiences down on paper. The appreciation and judgement of works of art was considered a worthwhile intellectual

16 In his life of Agnolo Gaddi in the second edition of his lives (Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, Rome, Newton and Compton, 1997, p. 228).

pursuit in the period and there may have been an appetite at court for a book on art techniques in order to facilitate this.¹⁷

Cennino may also have had something to prove. Giovanni Conversini, a scholar and the chancellor of the Carrara court under Francesco il Novello, described the kinds of courtiers with whom a prince should surround himself in 1399, when Cennino was numbered among the Carrara courtiers. He praised the intellectual and practical benefits derived from, for example, scribes, cooks, doctors, historians and poets but grouped painters with harp players, singers, actors 'and other foolish people', who are not of any use but are of value simply for the pleasure which they give. He went on to blame the downfall of Antonio della Scala, a notoriously evil ruler of Verona from 1381 to 1387, on his over-familiarity with harp players, actors and singers as opposed to philosophers, physicians or lawyers.¹⁸ With this attitude propounded by one of the most influential members of the Carrara circle, it is easy to see why Cennino might have been stung into trying to prove his worth by producing a work of literature.

A hint of similar frustration is detectable in Armenini's treatise, published in 1587, when he notes that an artist should have a good grounding in the humanities, not only in order to become acquainted with the subjects which he will have to paint, but also to ensure that he will not be taken for ignorant and worthless.¹⁹ Presumably, Armenini felt that artists were treated as rude mechanicals and this at a time when painters were held in far higher regard than they were in Cennino's day. That Cennino was galled by a perceived underestimation of his mental abilities would not be implausible.

In all likelihood, then, Cennino would not have fully considered the question of whether the *Libro dell'Arte* might actually be of practical use to other artists. Whatever Cennino may claim in the treatise, the point of the *Libro* was not the benefit that it would bring to the reader but the benefit that it would bring to himself in terms of esteem and self-esteem. The *Libro dell'Arte* was a repository for all that gave Cennino pride in himself and that he considered most likely to raise his status and that of his profession in the eyes of others.

He includes thorough and workable accounts of many processes to establish himself as a master of his field. However, he also references techniques and materials that were new to Italy in the period and draws on methods used

17 Victor Schmidt, "Hypothesen zu Funktion und Publikum von Cenninis *Libro dell'Arte*", in Löhrr and Weppelmann, *Fantasie und Handwerk*. . . *op. cit.*, p. 148-150.

18 Giovanni Conversini da Ravenna, *Two Court Treatises*, Munich, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1987, p. 167 and 225.

19 Giovanni Armenini, *Dei veri precetti della pittura*, Pisa, Niccolò Capurro, 1823, p. 57-58.

in a variety of regions in order to showcase the best rather than merely formulate the average. There is no one artist, even Cennino himself, whose oeuvre would have encompassed everything which is set down in the treatise.

The advocacy of life drawing is part of the considerable innovation that Cennino shows in his theoretical approach to the learning of painting. He places a strong emphasis on the mastery of drawing, encouraging work from the observation of nature and championing imagination. These bold new ideas went on to become subsumed into the art technical discourse of the fifteenth century. It is noticeable that Cennino's greatest innovations occur in the theoretical arena, precisely where innovation would be most likely to strike and appeal to intellectual readers. In the core business of painting, on the other hand, which was least likely to be understood or valued by the same readership, while not outdated, Cennino is for the most part conventional. This supports the view that the *Libro dell'Arte* was intended to raise Cennino's profile among the literati at the Carrara court.

The section on pigments is included, despite Cennino's evident lack of first-hand knowledge of the preparation methods for many of these because, to anyone with a knowledge of medieval treatises on art, which make pigments their main focus, Cennino's treatise would seem strangely incomplete without it. Cennino's desired audience would have been far more familiar with the technical treatise as a literary form than with the practical details of pigment synthesis. In addition, because the discussion of pigments is allied to the study of alchemy, Cennino may have felt that the inclusion of material concerning the origins and making of pigments would bring intellectual prestige to his treatise.

Cennino attempts to set all of this off with a highly literary preface and an impressive, oratorical style, using devices such as metaphor learned from Cicero, the favourite of humanist scholars of the period.

To sum up, the *Libro dell'Arte* seems to be intended as a spectacular display of the summit of Cennino's knowledge and abilities, formed into a satisfying literary whole, designed to impress the cutting-edge intellectuals of the Carrara court.

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Liste des illustrations

Figure 1. 'Cenninian Man', drawn by the author according to Cennino's prescriptions in chapter 70 of the *Libro dell'Arte*.

Author

Lara Broecke has a degree in classics and a masters degree in the history of art from Oxford University as well as a diploma in the conservation of easel paintings from the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Cambridge University. She has worked as a paintings conservator in both private and public settings in the UK and abroad, including at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. She has worked on paintings by artists including Canaletto, Turner and Breughel and was one of the conservators involved in work on the Coronation Chair in Westminster Abbey. She has published widely on subjects relating to paintings conservation and the history of painting materials and techniques and in 2015 her annotated translation of Cennino Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte* was published by Archetype, London.

Lara Broecke, Paintings Conservator Independent, 59 rue Rouget de Lisle, 78100 Saint Germain-en-Laye, France, conservation@broecke.com, 0033 7 61 07 22 18
