

Bravura: Virtuosity and Ambition in Early Modern European Painting.

Nicola Suthor.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. viii + 296 pp. \$65.

Nicola Suthor's *Bravura* surveys the breadth of meaning that *bravura* conveys, probing the subtleties of the concept from multiple viewpoints. Though *bravura* is traditionally associated with painterly brushwork, Suthor shows how boldness (in painting and in personality), confidence (in rapid execution and dispensing with preparatory studies), artifice (as self-conscious display and through shortcuts), and overcoming difficulties (dissolving walls, extreme foreshortenings) made virtuosity a virtue in early modern European painting. The author's virtuoso command of the biographical and theoretical literature provides the framework for a survey of numerous artists (mostly Italian) and biographical anecdotes (pan-European) in which painters ostentatiously championed their own skill and the value of their works. This breadth, which makes it possible to see patterns and similarities over centuries and national boundaries, is refreshing in our age of narrowly defined specialist studies and helps us see the consistency over longer periods in European art, something that is often lost in our focus on differences.

The volume opens with violence in painted depictions (massacres, martyrdoms), presenting cases in which artists identify with the perpetrator or the victim, fashioning their own image in direct rapport with the emotional intensity of their subjects. The next chapter, on battles scenes and dramatic foreshortened poses, explores demonstrations of competence and superiority as artists' self-conscious attempts to be noticed. Chapter 3 deals with the related issue of overcoming the difficulties of curved and flat walls; Domenichino and Caravaggio are included for painting figures that project in relief on concave surfaces, before the author turns to painterly brushwork, in chapter 4, exploring its checkered reception and its ramifications. Chapters 5 and 6 look at speed and facility both as *bravura* displays and as a necessity due to the need to earn money in a competitive world. Chapter 7 surveys the role of artifice and beauty, while chapter 8 surveys ideas about the risk of facility and other criticisms of *bravura* painters. The two concluding chapters present a historical narrative of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century objections to *bravura* painting that led to its demise.

The publisher is to be commended for producing a volume with high-quality paper and a wealth of pleasingly arranged color illustrations. Less commendable was the decision to update the 2010 German publication with a new bibliography without accounting for valuable secondary literature that has appeared in the past fifteen years. Where are the major contributions in the fields of art vocabulary and theory by authors such as Michèle-Caroline Heck (2006, 2018), Thijs Weststeijn (2008, 2015), and Angela Cerasuolo (2014, 2017)? The discussion of loose brushwork and depth, essential to *bravura*, overlooks the essential concept of *houding*, which Paul Taylor first elucidated in 1982. Without considering Robert Williams (2017) on Raphael's production

strategies and Richard Spear and Philip Sohm's groundbreaking *Painting for Profit* (2010), discussions of the economies of practice and the need for speed read like a collection of anecdotes rather than a considered analysis of the issue.

While a translation of the 2010 volume with an epilogue might have been preferred, this would not have prevented the inclusion of a few glaring inaccuracies, such as defining *vaghezza* as "vagueness"; this concept is well defined in historical dictionaries such as the TLIO and GDLI and elucidated in relation to beauty and allure in four chapters by Stuart Lingo (2008, Federico Barocci). It seems ironic that Suthor's virtuosity inevitably leads to criticism of her lack of diligence, much like the *bravura* artists she treats—but what else can explain how Titian's Europa "looks back beseechingly" as "she searches for her companions" yet, in the same paragraph, her eyes "ecstatically roll back in her head" (176)?

These criticisms aside, I learned a great deal from *Bravura*, enjoyed the author's in-depth descriptions of paintings, and found myself entertained by the many anecdotes quoted. Her skill at integrating theory and practice is commendable and provides a service to the theorists and biographers who were artists themselves, reminding those who would study paintings in isolation from the ideas valued by their makers that they do so at serious peril.

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Framing the Church: The Social and Artistic Power of Buttresses in French Gothic Architecture. Maile S. Hutterer.

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In the history of architecture, the development of flying buttresses was not only structurally revolutionary; it was visually transformative, dramatically reshaping church exteriors across France and far beyond. While scholarship on the subject has focused primarily on issues of structure and chronology, in this book Maile S. Hutterer explores buttressing systems (defined to include piers, flyers, and decorations) as aesthetic, social, and iconographic entities. As her title suggests, Hutterer brings to her study a specific interpretive lens: the idea that buttressing systems acted as churches' frames or margins, especially as conceptualized by Michael Camille in *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (1992).

In the first of four chapters, Hutterer examines the visual significance of buttressing systems. She looks for evidence that their aesthetic qualities were prioritized and finds it in builders insisting on using ornamental openwork flyers despite known structural risks, and deploying flyers as decorative motifs. She then turns to representations of buttressing systems in other media. Here Hutterer introduces Camille, and the idea of the