



Picturing Courtiers and Nobles from Castiglione to Van Dyck: Self Representation by Early Modern Elites. John Peacock.

Routledge Research in Art History. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020. xvi + 208 pp. \$160.

John Peacock's erudite study of the self-reflexive nature of Van Dyck's *Self-Portrait with Sunflowers* (2006) was praised for his imaginative use of primary sources to address the picture's vivid intellectual context during the reign of King Charles I. His profound knowledge of Caroline literature, culture, and society outweighed his lesser familiarity with art historical studies in Northern Baroque portraiture.

The literary scholar now revisits the painter and the English court. Peacock's concern is the influence that Baldessare Castiglione's *Cortegiano* and its concept of *sprezzatura* exerted on the ideal of nobility even a century after its publication in 1528. While nobility was much debated and Castiglione's suggested kinship between a courtier and a painter faded in time, the concept transcended visual representations as exemplified by Van Dyck's courtly portraiture and transformed the very notion of nobility, as well as the self-awareness of the British aristocracy and other elites.

It is tempting to present traceable evidence for this since Van Dyck's sitters seem to embody the courtier's *sprezzatura* in such a way that the painter himself, through his art, elevated himself to nobility; that this is not an imagined embodiment but one that is fully supported by contemporary writings and discussions of the dual nature of nobility—lineage and merit—is eloquently argued throughout the different chapters of the book, which is perhaps as much a study of Castiglione's aftermath as a genealogy of diverging ideas on gentry or, indeed, Van Dyck.

The first chapter introduces Castiglione's book and its frequent evocations of artistic metaphors (painting, sculpture, and even architecture). Castiglione's profoundly rhetorical debates address the ideal courtier—his behavior, his appearance, his character—by alluding to artists and their craftsmanship. Such allusions, Peacock demonstrates, were also featured in subsequent guides of conduct by authors like Giovanni Della Casa and Stefano Guazzo, as well as Laurence Humphry and James Cleland.

Peacock then looks at the notion of *sprezzatura* and investigates how its exercising perfection—both in action and in ethics—was to transform the courtier into a living portrait of the self. He addresses its literary reception and shows how, during the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, authors of treatises on courtesy, starting with Tasso, gradually altered the *Cortegiano*'s idealistic notions by presenting an increasingly precautionary attitude to the courtly environment. The emphasis shifted from the creation of a noble identity to the emulation of a variety of attitudes that were to ensure success and survival at court, as in Nicolas Faret's rewriting of Castiglione's book, published in 1630.

The third chapter is devoted to English-language works: Thomas Elyote's *Governour* (1531) and Henri Peacham's *Compleat Gentleman* (1622, revised 1634). It examines the role both authors assign to the arts in the education of nobles. Peacock looks at

the latter's arguments for a nobleman's dual education in arms and in arts, and demonstrates that for Peacham some of his ideals were embodied by Thomas Howard, the Earl of Arundel, and one of the earliest English patrons of Van Dyck. The discussion then moves to Franciscus Junius's *Paintings of the Ancient*, in which this librarian and admirer of Arundel revived the notion of *sprezzatura* as he embraced *grace* as a crowning quality of artistic expression that perfectly balances ingredients such as proportion, color, and so on. The study's first part concludes with the dissemination of Castiglione's ideas into art theory and how this, in turn, informed Bellori's narrative on Anthony van Dyck in his *Lives* of 1672, as well as an anonymous French biographer, who touches on the artist's transformation into a gentlemen's painter.

The three chapters of the book's second part examine selected portraits of noblemen by Van Dyck. The intriguing *Portrait of George Gage with Two Men*, now believed to have been painted in Rome in 1622, is the starting point of a discussion that moves on to Van Dyck's courtly portraits and double portraits made in England in the 1630s. Peacock argues convincingly that Van Dyck, sometimes in close discussion with his patrons, developed highly original, sometimes contrasting representations that commented on—and helped shape—the very nature and self-image of nobility.

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doi:10.1017/rqx.2023.416

Poussin's Women: Sex and Gender in the Artist's Works. Troy Thomas.
Visual and Material Culture, 1300–1700. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press,
2020. 386 pp. €119.

For students and lovers of Poussin's work, Troy Thomas's book on Poussin's paintings of women has something to offer almost everyone. A rich and fully illustrated compendium that features iconographical analyses of sixty-two artworks, the book includes examples of mythological, historical, literary, and religious subjects, all selected on the basis of their treatment of themes elucidating Poussin's understanding of women. Although I wondered at times whether an individual work merited inclusion in a study of women (sometimes the rationale seemed somewhat forced), there is no denying that the pages of the volume provide enriching and informative examinations of famous and at times lesser-studied examples of the artist's work.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first is a brief introduction to the themes in which Poussin revealed his understanding of women, and includes an overview of some basic scholarship on gender and sexual themes in the early modern era. The second focuses on contextualizing Poussin in terms of the time period, the cultural and social issues that have bearing on how women were perceived. The meat of the book lies in the third part, where the sixty-two paintings and drawings that Thomas discusses