

# Books

## The discovery of Gaspare Celio's seventeenth-century compendium of Vasari's 'Lives' provides new details about artistic life in Baroque Rome

**Le vite degli artisti di Gaspare Celio: 'Compendio delle Vite di Vasari con alcune aggiunte' (Biblioteca dell' 'Archivum Romanicum'. Serie I: Storia, Letteratura, Paleografia, 504)**

By Riccardo Gandolfi. 392 pp. incl. 32 col. ills. (Olschki, Florence, 2021), €48.

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by PATRIZIA CAVAZZINI

With his PhD thesis on the paintings by Gaspare Celio (1571–1640; Fig.1) proving intractable and his supervisor refusing to change the subject, Riccardo Gandolfi decided instead to concentrate on Celio as a writer. It was known that, in addition to *Memoria delli nomi dell'artefici delle pitture che sono in alcune chiese, facciate, e palazzi di Roma*, published in Naples in 1638, Celio had written a compendium of Vasari's *Lives*, but there was no evidence of the existence of the text after 1643, when it was mentioned by Giovanni Vittorio Rossi in his *Pinacotheca*. Gandolfi's search of libraries throughout Europe resulted in the unexpected discovery at Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, of a manuscript of the complete text of the *Compendium*, which Celio must have prepared for printing.

As a painter, Celio is known mostly for his two ceiling frescos in Palazzo Mattei di Giove, Rome. He seems to have painted little in the last twenty years of his life and, by a series of unfortunate circumstances, many of his works were lost. His contribution as a writer is more substantial: by 1620 he had finished his *Memoria*, a guidebook to Rome. By 1614 he had completed the *Compendium*, which he kept updating until the end of his life. But his writings also met with bad luck. The *Memoria* was published in 1638 only in a small and rather inaccurate edition and the *Compendium* had only a limited circulation as a manuscript. Clearly, as Gandolfi demonstrates, Giovan Pietro Bellori (1613–96) knew it, since the annotations he made in his copy of Giovanni Baglione's *Lives of the Artists* (1642) are to a large part taken from

the *Compendium*. One can only imagine the impact the *Compendium* would have had if it had been published twenty-eight years before Baglione's volume. However, the two texts cannot really be compared, since Baglione's contribution is original, whereas Celio's relied largely on Vasari.

Apparently, Vasari's *Lives* was expensive and difficult to find in early seventeenth-century Rome as it had not been reprinted since 1568. Celio owned only the first volume of the edition published by Lorenzo Torrentino in 1550, which he annotated (his copy is now in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence, Coll. Palat.[11], C.7.2.2) and he seems to have borrowed or consulted the second volume of the edition published by Giunti in 1568. To remedy the scarcity of Vasari's *Lives* and because he considered it prolix, Celio set out to write an abridgement, occasionally adding sentences and paragraphs, especially when he had first-hand information. For example, he knew that Jacopo Rocchetti had surreptitiously saved some of Michelangelo's drawings from a bonfire lit by the master when he was at death's door; Celio was later allowed to borrow them, although only briefly. He also added biographies of later artists, including Caravaggio, the earliest biography of the artist after the one written by Karel van Mander (1604). In colourful detail Celio described Caravaggio's initial poverty and unruliness as well as the reception of his art in Rome. Whereas Caravaggio's friend Prospero Orsi gathered lesser-known painters to sing the praise of the paintings in the Contarelli Chapel in S. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, and thus spread Caravaggio's fame, the well-established Giovanni de' Vecchi believed that 'for not being able to draw he has achieved much' (p.321).

Gandolfi's edition of the *Compendium* is preceded by a careful analysis of Celio as a painter and writer, a discussion of the history of the manuscript and its relationship to other sources as well as a study of the annotations the artist made in his copy of

the *Lives*. The text makes a clear distinction between Celio's words and his borrowings from Vasari; the notes are up to date with recent scholarship but they are aimed only at specialists. They never specify whether a work is extant or not and do not explain, for instance, that the 'Paris' from Rome is Paris Nogari (c.1536–1601), or clarify which room is the one 'next to the Sala Regia' in the Vatican. Gandolfi emphasises that the *Compendium* was not born out of admiration for Vasari but out of antagonism. Born in Rome, Celio believed Vasari's insistence on the artistic supremacy of Florence to be misguided. Rome was the true capital of the art world, famous for its Classical remains and for the abundance and quality of its medieval mosaics and paintings. For Celio, Pietro Cavallini was more relevant and innovative than Cimabue or Giotto; he also mentions that Cavallini was active in 1291, without giving his source, which may be a much-debated, lost inscription on a mosaic in S. Maria in Trastevere.

According to Celio, artists profited from the variety of styles that could be found in Rome. The city was welcoming to foreigners, as Van Mander also noticed, and valued their works, unlike artistic circles in Florence and Bologna, which were known for their exclusiveness. Some artists were intimidated by the greatness of Rome; Andrea del Sarto, for example, went back to Florence after seeing a single painted façade in via di Ripetta; others, such as Titian, did not know how to profit from its lessons. Amusingly, Celio adds that when, towards the end of his life, Titian used free brush strokes, he was only pretending to improvise since they were always based on a well-defined *disegno*.

Celio's main enemies, apart from Vasari, were Baglione and Caravaggio. Baglione wrote a long biography of Celio, which subtly undermined his achievements. Celio never once mentions Baglione, either in the *Compendium* or in the *Memoria*, thus subjecting him to *damnatio memoriae* by silence, as Gandolfi rightly highlights. As the head of the Accademia di San Luca and as a Knight of Christ, Celio despised Caravaggio's way of life as well as the fact that his paintings were not based on drawings. However, Celio must have known that long before Caravaggio's arrival there were problems with the education of artists in Rome, which included the scarcity of well-organised workshops, the habit of hiring collaborators by the day and the lack of any rules that controlled access to the profession, thus allowing any untrained painter to

undertake any task without proper training in draughtsmanship. Indeed, since the 1570s painters had tried to establish an academy in part to remedy this situation. As Celio recounted about his own experience, many young painters had no proper master; they were at least partially self-taught, going around the city drawing the most famous works of art in Rome. Essential to their

1. Gaspare Celio, by Ottavio Leoni. 1614. Pencil and white chalk on blue paper, 23.2 by 16.3 cm. (École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris).



training – and to the aesthetic fabric of the city – were the many palace facades painted in monochrome by Polidoro da Caravaggio and others.

Celio hardly ever provides the reader with new attributions or dates for works of art, and his indications of birth and death dates are invariably wrong. Most likely incorrect is also the affirmation that Maturino da Firenze died of the plague in L'Aquila, since Vasari claims he was buried in the parish of S. Eustachio, Rome, where he was certainly living in 1517.<sup>1</sup> Scholars will have to ponder

the veracity of the many anecdotes – it is certainly not true, for example, that Annibale Carracci used Raphael's drawings to paint the vault of the gallery in Palazzo Farnese, Rome.

As Gandolfi notices, Celio was a connoisseur, well able to distinguish different hands and between oil and fresco, while rarely identifying supports. He paid attention to the economic lives of artists, for example providing the information that Girolamo Muziano and Scipione Pulzone were paid per figure, a rather old-fashioned custom in the Rome of the period. Celio often goes even further, detailing whether an artist was well or poorly paid, whether he was owed money by his patrons, how well-off he left his family and whether his offspring squandered his inheritance. Intriguing also are his many references to professional practices, often of medieval origin. His numerous complaints about artists willing to finish the work of another artist are clearly based on the guild's prohibition of the practice. Useful also are his comments about the valuations made of works of art and the rivalries and jealousies behind them.

Celio was certainly no Vasari and no Baglione either, but Gandolfi's book is nonetheless a rare and thought-provoking new source for knowledge of the artistic world of early seventeenth-century Rome.

1 E. Lee: 'Habitatores in Urbe': The Population of Renaissance Rome, Rome 2006, p.109, no.2368.

### Designing Norman Sicily: Material Culture and Society

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by CLARE VERNON

As scholars have grown more interested in the pluralistic nature of societies in the medieval Mediterranean, work on Sicily has blossomed. For art historians, the focus has been on the court of the Norman King Roger II (d.1154). Particular attention has been paid to his celebrated palatine chapel in Palermo, a mixture of Byzantine, Islamic and Romanesque styles; his mantle embroidered with gold and pearls; the royal porphyry sarcophagi; the garden palaces of La Zisa and La Cuba, built by Roger's descendants; and the magnificent cathedrals of Monreale and Cefalù. In 2015 the Arab and Norman monuments of Palermo