The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution (review)

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Roy Porter's "More than a Foreword" describes the volume as "pioneering" (p. x). I am less convinced of its overall novelty: many of the early modern contributions develop a conventional image of medical pluralism and merely confirm the importance of religious understandings of disease and affliction.

Despite the titular invocation of the cultural, few chapters seemed to depart significantly from well-established approaches in the history of medicine. A number of the essays, though, are of high quality—I will certainly be giving Hera Cook's forcefully argued examination of the medicalization of sexuality in early twentieth-century England, Logie Barrow's account of nineteenth-century disputes over vaccination, and Michael Stolberg's summary of his work on medical popularization in eighteenth-century Europe a prominent place on reading lists. My reservations may be due to the sketchiness caused by the word limit imposed upon the authors: the volume would have been stronger if it had contained two or three fewer pieces, and if the remaining contributors and the editors had developed their ideas at greater length. In particular, the editors' short introduction, "Medicine, Mediation, and Meaning," is exceptionally thought-provoking and yet deeply frustrating because they did not give themselves enough space to clarify how they were using these and other important terms. What, I found myself asking, was the role of material culture and the biological in processes of mediation? (There seems to be a tension between the editors' critique of historians who present diseases as autonomous entities [p. 5] and Hera Cook's discussion of biologically effective forms of birth control [p. 200].) How does "mediation" change over time? Is it helpful to use the term to discuss both childbirth in the seventeenth century and interferon research in the late twentieth century? With room to address such questions, this would have been an exceptionally important book rather than an interesting collection of essays.

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Pamela H. Smith. *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. x + 367 pp. Ill. $35.00, £24.50 (0-226-76399-4).

This book has an ambitious agenda: to chronicle the development of naturalism in art and science from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Pamela H. Smith attempts to demonstrate how much early modern scientists owed to artists, and how that influence flowed reciprocally back and forth through the centuries. Eschewing traditional explanations of the rise of naturalism in art and science—such as the rebirth of Classical knowledge and tradition, the weakening of the strictures of Catholicism, the development of a powerful bourgeois visual culture, and the rise of capitalism—she identifies the engagement of the body with nature as the primary impetus for the early modern worldview.

In her first chapter Smith seeks to explain how and why northern European artists (i.e., "artisans") in the fifteenth century began to articulate a new worldview by emphasizing their unique status as imitators of nature. Chapters 2 and 3 chronicle the development of a naturalist aesthetic in sixteenth-century Germany, where the artist Albrecht Dürer and the physician/alchemist Paracelsus were the primary spokesmen for a new and daring "artisanal understanding" of the natural world. Subsequent chapters explore the intersection between alchemy and "artisanship" and examine the legacy of Paracelsus. The last chapter integrates the pictorial and professional worlds of the Leiden physician Franciscus dele Boë (Sylvius) by examining his writings and art collection. The book concludes with statements about the emergence of modern science, naturalism in art, and the primacy of the individual practitioner's "bodily engagement" with nature as central components in the birth of modernity.

Pamela Smith is to be complimented for her courage in attempting such a vast synthesis of visual and scientific traditions. However, as often happens in multidisciplinary explorations, a number of significant factors are ignored or disposed of in sweeping generalizations. Perhaps this is understandable, given Smith's attempt to rewrite five hundred years of the histories of art and science; that a relevant article might be missed, or a controversial interpretation glossed over, may be forgiven. However, she not only ignores major scholarship basic to the understanding of artistic traditions, but also makes serious faux pas in the interpretation of Renaissance art. Specific instances are too many to be enumerated here. However, a case in point concerns Smith's primary thesis—that Renaissance artists eschewed the dogma of classical tradition in favor of direct experience with nature. In fact, the primary goal of visual artists during this time was to be accepted not as mere artisans who worked with their hands, but as intellectuals who worked with their minds—as no less than Aristotelian philosophers. The key image in this struggle for intellectual status is Albrecht Dürer's print *Melancolia 1,* which Smith disposes of in a single paragraph devoted not to its dominant message, but to the relatively insignificant presence of an alchemical crucible tucked away in a corner. One cannot help but pity Dürer, who struggled against his "artisan" status for his entire life, and who, in this print, willed that battle to subsequent generations of artists.

The Body of the Artisan is a handsome book, replete with stunning color plates. However, its message is blunted by ponderous, obfuscating theoretical prose, and the author's seeming lack of familiarity with the literature of the history of art. The book's strength lies in the recognition of alchemy as a serious intellectual tradition, a status that few historians outside the history of science and medicine grant it. Readers will find Smith's intellectual contributions better presented in her earlier study, *The Business of Alchemy: Science and Culture in the Holy Roman Empire* (1994).

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