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The Didactic Potential of the Accademia's Collections and Library

Susan Nalezyty

A distinct group by 1624, this portrait collection's inception date remains shadowy. A 1625 apostolic visit to the church of San Luca and Martina references the portraits, underscoring that viewership comprised not just students and faculty, but also high-ranking church officials and other visitors.¹¹ Examining the three inventories of the Accademia's collection taken within a decade of one another is like looking through the keyhole of a door to an early modern classroom for teaching art. In general, inventories as documentary evidence provide a sort of eyewitness for displayed works. An inventory writer's words are often summary, yet they can disclose the relationship between the things described and the people describing them. Some inventories are organized by the topography of the space in which the works were displayed, or objects might be listed in categories assigned by the writer. These lists can convey hierarchies of value for the names of artists listed, the most highly regarded usually receiving pride of place at the top.¹² Incentives for initiating an inventory can take a variety of forms, such as when the owner dies or when objects are moved from one location to another.¹³



Figure 1.2 Anonymous, *Portrait of Antonio Tempesta*, before 1633, oil on canvas, Accademia di San Luca, Rome

At the Accademia on October 20, 1624, the newly appointed *principe*, Simon Vouet, initiated an inventory because the decision had been made to consign all things that were in the academy to the *principe*.¹⁴ Five days later, an inventory of the contents of a room above the church of San Luca—likely the *fiatile* (hayloft)—was taken.¹⁵ Here many items were stored, among which were nine “portraits of ancient painters” set in round, gilded frames. There were also 53 “portraits of painters and sculptors” mounted in black frames. The studio had originally been one large room, but by 1625 the physical space seems to have expanded into two rooms. The largest had many chairs, something like a lecture hall. The other space held sculptural fragments and casts, suggesting that this was the studio.¹⁶ In 1627 the current *principe*, Ottavio Leoni, initiated another inventory of the contents of the *armoire* in the studio above the church. There were by then 58 “portraits of several dead painters,” all but three of them in black frames.¹⁷ Six years later, the *principe* Francesco Mochi asked for a more detailed inventory of two rooms contiguous to the church.¹⁸ There we learn that nine round portraits of painters with black and gilded frames were observed. Further down the list are other “portraits of illustrious painters.” Important here is that these artists are described not as being “ancient” or “dead,” as in the previous inventories. In 1633 they are “illustrious.” This adjectival change acknowledges their didactic potential: the sitters were respected for their achievements, they had become models for the students to follow, and their number had grown from 58 to 69.¹⁹

The earliest of these artists was Simone Martini. Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian were the first three listed on the inventory, which conveys their fame and significance. Caravaggio and Annibale Carracci—though not easily traceable as academicians—were included, as was Agostino Carracci, who painted and made prints, like Antonio Tempesta (fig. 1.2). Girolama and Leonardo Parasole had often copied Tempesta’s work to make book illustrations and prints. Girolama’s, Tempesta’s, and Carracci’s portraits paralleled three northern European printmakers included in this hall of fame: Albrecht Dürer, Hendrick Goltzius, and Lucas van Leyden. A portrait of the iconographer Cesare Ripa was also included, and noted in later inventories of 1656 and 1658. But by the late 17th century, a subsequent inventory of the collection documents that it was no longer displayed with the group, and it is missing today.²⁰ Francesco Villamena, whose portrait also hung at the Accademia, must have based his engraved portrait of Ripa on that missing painting, because its format closely resembles his many surviving portraits (fig. 1.3). It was subsequently used in the front matter of the 1625 Paduan printing of his emblem book, *Iconologia*.²¹



Figure 1.3 Francesco Villamena, *Portrait of Cesare Ripa*, engraving, The British Museum, Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

These portraits were part of a larger assemblage of books and objects that served as reference material and pedagogical tools.²² Some artists with portraits displayed at the Accademia also had their written works represented in the library. Although the editions of these books were not noted, Dürer’s *Four Books on Measurement* (1525) was there, as were two copies of Ripa’s book (first edition, 1593; first illustrated edition, 1603). Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* was on hand to consult for composing classical subjects. Sebastiano Serlio’s treatise, *Seven Books of Architecture* (1537–1575), was on the bookshelf, as was Leon Battista Alberti’s *On the Art of Building* (1443–1452). Giovanni Lomazzo’s *Treatise on the Art of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture* (1585) provided a theoretical text for studying visual art, and Baldassare Castiglione’s *Courtier* (1528) provided advice for interacting in a courtly context.

An often-overlooked impact of early modern collections is their value as indicators of the means of educating artists. These three inventories show that fragmentary plaster casts of legs, arms, and torsos, as well as a model of the church of San Luca, were also available for study. There were plaster heads of Bacchus, Seneca, and a gladiator, as well as a torso of Venus. There was a copper copy of the figures from Michelangelo’s chapel, which could have been a printer’s plate. And available for study was an autograph Michelangelo sculptural fragment of a shoulder and part of a torso.

Accademia members also donated paintings: an allegory of *Virtue* by Baglione, a landscape by Paul Bril, an *Assumption* by Ottavio Leoni, and an *Eve* by Baldassare Croce, all of which are thought to have been lost. These assembled items resemble a museum's beginning, works that seeded the robust collection that survives today.²³ They were images and objects to be viewed and to be handled, like today's museums, which preserve permanent and teaching collections. These items would have contributed to the Accademia's educational mission. Peter M. Lukehart has established the evolution of the Accademia's pedagogical approaches that gained focus with Pope Gregory XIII's 1577 brief in which it was declared that the academy's mission was to "instruct studious youth in the practice of the arts." A fully realized statement and accompanying statutes with its foundation followed on March 7, 1593. A look at the school's teaching materials, then, can serve to fill in the gaps of understanding left by the rich documents of the Accademia's *congregazioni* (meetings), which provide little insight into the theoretical or practical training for students. Romano Alberti's *Origin and Progress of the Academy* (1604), however, provides a critical source for understanding the shape that instruction took during Zuccaro's time as the first *principe*.²⁴

Studying this text, Pietro Roccasacca has inferred the Accademia's didactic objectives, which had been conceived of as two entities: the academy and the studio, the latter of which was dedicated to educating young artists. These youth were ranked from beginner, to aspiring academics, and finally to studied academics, who could eventually participate fully in the intellectual life of the institution. From the ranks of senior members, instructors were chosen annually to hold a temporary position to instruct younger students, and every two weeks academicians presented *discorsi* (lectures) to peers and men of letters.²⁵ Within the academy's pedagogical context, then, the sculptural fragments and casts would have been deployed for hands-on instruction in the studio. The books would have been source texts for theoretical content, which might have been discussed in lectures. And all the while, the "illustrious" faces of the portraits silently gazed upon students and instructors who taught and learned in the school's spaces.

Visual art's ability to inform young minds had long been acknowledged within a domestic context. The early 15th-

century Dominican preacher Giovanni Dominici had written a treatise in which he advised mothers to display pictures of the Virgin and Child for moral instruction to the children in their homes.²⁶ The casa/studio of the 17th-century painter Elisabetta Sirani operated as a domestic space, a place for socializing with patrons, and a studio for training artists. Inventories of this family workshop list drawings, prints, and plaster casts by Dürer, Carracci, and Michelangelo, and its small library shelved books by Ovid and Ripa.²⁷ The same artists and authors documented at the Accademia in Rome were being gathered as teaching resources in Bologna. In Rome, elite palatial interiors were spaces that anticipated public museums, some even attracting a viewership not associated with the family, including students of visual art.²⁸ Carefully chosen and thoughtfully organized things can form hierarchies and convey narratives that guide and teach the viewer. Gail Feigenbaum has observed that the history of art was worked out on the domestic walls of Roman collectors, who promoted artists' works as much as Vasari had in the pages of his *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*.²⁹

This approach of display as a method of canon formation by a pedagogical institution shows how the Accademia di San Luca was seeking to define artists' education in a largely undefined field. The school's walls were decorated somewhat like a Roman palace, the portraits engendering a formal and institutional atmosphere within modest spaces. This hall of fame originates from the custom of exhibiting *illustrium imagines*. Ancient Romans exhibited portraits as homage to their ancestors, and this impulse was renewed with more attention to Petrarch's writing, especially his *On Illustrious Men*.³⁰ Arranging chronological biographies was the organizing concept that Vasari had chosen for his 1550 *Vite*. Under Vasari's influence, the 1563 ordinances of the Florentine Accademia delle Arti del Disegno declared an intention to display works of art in a frieze to document artists, beginning with Cimabue. And in 1568, Vasari illustrated the second edition of his *Vite* with artists' portraits, each framed in *all'antica* architectural borders.³¹ The Accademia portraits follow a similar, albeit more austere, painted format, and Baglione, who modeled his *Vite* after Vasari's, referenced many of them to document their existence as well as to justify his own choices to include or exclude artists in his book of biographies.