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The Craftsman's Handbook: "Il Libro Dell' Arte"



Synopsis

This is D. V. Thompson's definitive English translation of *Il Libro dell'Arte*, an intriguing guide to methods of painting, written in fifteenth-century Florence. Embodying the secrets and techniques of the great masters, it served as an art student's introduction to the ways of his craft. Anyone who has ever looked at a medieval painting and marveled at the brilliance of color and quality of surface that have endured for 500 years should find this fascinating reading. It describes such lost arts as gilding stone, making mosaics of crushed eggshell, fashioning saints' diadems, coloring parchment, making goat glue, and regulating your life in the interests of decorum — which meant shunning women, the greatest cause of unsteady hands in artists. You are told how to make green drapery, black for monks' robes, trees and plants, oils, beards in fresco, and the proper proportions of a man's body. ("I will not tell you about the irrational animals because you will never discover any system of proportion in them.") So practical are the details that readers might be tempted to experiment with the methods given here for their own amusement and curiosity. Today artists are no longer interested in specific directions on keeping miniver tails from becoming moth-eaten. The Craftsman's Handbook, in which these are ordinary parts of the artist's work, appears quaint and naive to us. And that is much of its charm. But when we remember the magnificent mosaics, paintings, and frescoes these methods produced, the book takes on an even greater value as a touchstone to another age. "Recommended to the student of art." — Craft Horizons. "Obviously of great merit." — Art Material Trade News. "Delightful flavor." — New York Herald Tribune. Recommended in Harvard List of Great Books on Art, Shaw's List of Books for College Libraries.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Art, genuine art, is a pleasure not only in the thrill of color and line but in its procedure and materials. In fifteenth-century Florence, an artist named Cennino d'Andrea Cennini compiled a handbook for contemporary and future painters to consult in their drawing and painting from the beginning, in choosing their ingredients, mixing their paints and preparing their paper or cloth for painting on. Unlike the making of sausage, the elements of creating art are a delight. Here are some how-to's excerpted from this wonderful little book (translated by Daniel V. Thompson, Jr., 1933, reprinted numerous times by Dover), still vibrant five hundred years after it was composed. The details also unwittingly reveal something of contemporary everyday life, where the art came from. To paint on a panel, you start with a little boxwood panel nine inches square, washed with clear water and rubbed and smoothed down. "And when this little panel is thoroughly dry, take enough bone, ground diligently for two hours, to serve . . . take less than half a bean of this bone, or even less. And stir this bone up with saliva. Spread it all over the little panel with your fingers; and, before it gets dry, hold the little panel in your left hand, and tap over the panel with the finger tip of your right hand [presumably Cennino was right-handed] until you see that it is quite dry. And it will get coated with bone as evenly in one place as in another." Wondering where to find the bone? "You must know what bone is good. Take bone from the second joints and wings of fowls, or of a capon; and the older they are the better.

When exactly Cennino Cennini put together his famous handbook is not clear. It must have been quite early in the fifteenth century, for although his stated intention is to provide advice "for the use and good and profit of anyone who wants to enter this profession" (1), he has only very little to say about oil painting and seems unaware of the latest developments of that exciting new medium in the early decades of the century. (It was enough, though, to disprove the contention of Giorgio Vasari and others that oil painting had been invented by Jan van Eyck.) In any case, it is absolutely a book intended for the professional, for the active practitioner, the working artist, and one can note that most of the reviewers on this site have praised it for the practical advice it provides. It has also been reported that it was an important source-book and wellspring of useful technical information for Eric Hebborn, the notorious English art forger and author of his own handbook ("The Art Forger's Handbook," 1997), who is reputed to have employed Cennini's technique of using egg-white to

simulate the appearance of aged varnish. I am not an artist and have never painted anything but some old furniture, a couple of book-cases and a dog house--and I must confess to never even having forged a Renaissance masterpiece--so to me this book is of no practical use, but it is greatly entertaining as well as historically informative. Just to realize the huge amount of preparatory labor a fourteenth- or fifteenth-century artist had to accomplish in order to get ready to work adds a humbling perspective to the art we so easily admire on the walls of our museums.

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