

Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture Edited by Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels

Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011
(ISBN: 978-1-4443-3902-4). 200 pp.

Lucy Weir (University of Glasgow)

The disciplines of visual art and theatre, while distinct mediums, have throughout history shared a companionable, mutually beneficial relationship, with practitioners of each area regularly having experimented in the parallel field. Consider that both forms manifest themselves within a defined space, boundaries between the scene and the observer established by the frame, curtains or wings of the stage. Both require, and play to, the spectator; in fact, the presence of an audience is a required dynamic for the products of art and theatre. Both make use of visual tricks to provide an impression of reality, albeit a performed reality, contained within clearly observable borders. Finally, the viewer's eye is – hopefully – directed by the visual cues established by the artist or dramaturge responsible for the individual artwork. It is perhaps not surprising that parallels between visual art and performance have been explored in detail in the postmodern context, yet to date there has been almost no detailed discussion of early modern interdisciplinary influence.

This collection of essays promotes itself as the first methodical examination of artistic exchange between visual arts and the theatre; such an investigative project is indeed long overdue in the field of art history. The extensive history of relations between theatre and architecture is outlined here in Caroline van Eck's opening chapter, where she makes the important point that incorporating theatrical elements into visual art is rarely simplistic – methods of portrayal are highly technical and complex, in order to avoid

slipping into pure narrative storytelling. Much of Baroque visual art deals with theatrical subject matter that could not have appeared on the physical stage. Defining the term ‘theatricality’ is a tricky starting point; as van Eck states in her introduction, which also functions as an overview of the book as a whole, it is a rather ambiguous term. Yet this publication is concerned with more than simply exploring the parallels between early modern art and theatre; rather it seeks to create a bridge between these separate mediums, indicating that cross-currents of influence and interest lead to an understanding of a more hybrid form of art.

Van Eck and Bussels’ volume is richly illustrated with beautiful colour reproductions; its overall aesthetic presentation is excellent and attractively bound; however, a hardcover edition would perhaps have been more desirable given the detail of images contained within, allowing greater range of motion without having to crack the spine. The thirteen individual essays in this publication cover a wide range of subject areas, including tapestry, painting, architecture and statuary, as well as a broad expanse of locations and time periods. There is certainly, however, a predominance of essays on Italian examples; it would certainly have been interesting to include discussion of German carnival tradition, for instance, though contributions on Netherlandish artistic traditions are well-represented. It is impossible to provide an in depth analysis of the variety of subjects raised in this publication, so for the purpose of brevity an overview of different contributions will be made. Chapters such as Stijn Bussels’ commentary on the rise and fall of *tableaux vivants* in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries root their subject matter in social as well as cultural history, underlining the very real significance of these art forms in their contemporary climate. Meanwhile, Emmanuelle Hénin’s piece discusses the history of the painted curtain, both in visual art and theatre, and the wider topic of pictorial illusion or the *trompe l’oeil*. This detailed but digestible analysis

also forms links with surrounding chapters, creating a logical link from Bussels' preceding section on the *tableau vivant*.

As Marc Bayard points out in his chapter, there is a paradigmatic shift at play in this early modern period. As the object itself is no longer an item of worship (as in the icon tradition), works of art sought to elicit an emotional, empathetic response in the viewer; they were a key to worship rather than a devotional icon. Yet Bayard also raises perhaps one of the most important points in a volume concerned with the topic of theatricality – he asserts that academic over-reliance on theatre terminology in the discussion of painting can in fact be a counter-productive endeavour. While Baroque painting (the primary focus of his essay) sought to bring to life its subject matter, it did not do so in a performed manner, and thus to use 'theatricality' in such discussion is fundamentally quite unhelpful.

Elsje van Kessel, in her analysis of theatricality in sixteenth century Venetian painting, addresses the concept of spectacle in a thought-provoking and detailed manner. She makes use of rich illustration and contemporary criticism to feed her concept of the very 'performed' nature of the spectacle, and the close relation between theatre-going society members and (visual) art appreciation. She is also the first writer in this volume to include discussion of the concept of ritual, employing Richard Schechner's conception of the term in a new and fascinating context – it would have been even more interesting to include an extended version of her argument. Wendy Heller combines art, dance and theatre history in a study of 'dancing statues' in seventeenth century Venice, and Hanneke Grootenboer explores the concept of theatrical display in self-portraiture. Sigrid de Jong's essay approaches the formidable task of defining the parallels between theatre and architecture, a comparison she rightly identifies as largely unexplored in critical detail, and Bram van Oostveldt contributes a fascinating article on 'garden theory' and the gap

between theatricality and naturalism.

There is no doubt that the essays included here cover vital, yet for the most part, uncultivated arenas of knowledge. Van Eck and Bussels' volume contains a wealth of information, beautifully presented, on a subject that is all too easily relegated to the sidelines of art historical discussion. At the same time, information is here conveyed in such a manner that this text could easily be of benefit to academics working in different fields, particularly from a theological or historical point of view. For researchers involved in such interdisciplinary research, this compendium provides a strong basis for understanding the deeper nature of inter-form exchange; that is, it avoids focusing narrowly on a straightforward model of influence. The writers of this volume assert, in very different scenarios, that the links between art and theatre in the early modern period run deeper than surface similarity, and in fact that the two art forms have informed one another at a more complex level. Hopefully, the publication of this collection this will form the starting point of further and more intense study of a subject area that has much potential for on-going, rigorous, academic analysis.

The Kelvingrove Review
www.gla.ac.uk/tkr