The academization of art

A practice approach to the early histories of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca

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Introduction

Throughout their history academies of art have had an ambivalent reputation. On the one hand, they have been praised for their contributions to the elevation of the status of the visual arts, insofar as they underlined the theoretical foundations of the arts and the intellectual abilities of artists. The emphasis on theory was instrumental for transforming the image of these activities from mechanical crafts to fine arts (*belle arti*). Academies of art have also been credited for helping talented students to develop their artistic identity and to become creative and innovative artists by providing an education that is based on excellent craftsmanship, theoretical reflection, and tradition. On the other hand, in the wake of nineteenth- and twentieth-century avant-garde movements, art academies have been criticized precisely because they were thought to hamper artistic development and innovation. By teaching fixed rules and focusing on the paradigmatic examples of canonical artists they have been said to go against the creative nature of the artist and to lead to a uniform style that is pejoratively called 'academic art'. Adding to this negative view of academies of art are their financial and bureaucratic ties to the state, which supposedly lead to political and artistic conservatism and ensure that the works of academic artists reflects the ideology of the ruling class.

The above-mentioned characteristics were, to some extent, already present in the Accademia del Disegno in Florence and the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, which were founded in 1563 and 1593, respectively. Since Nikolaus Pevsner's seminal study on the phenomenon of the art academy, *Academies of Art: Past and Present*, first published in 1940, the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca have been commonly seen as the first official academies of art in Europe, functioning as models and sources of inspiration for all subsequent art schools. [1] In the scholarly literature published after Pevsner's book, especially two aspects of these academies are emphasized, the innovative approach to art education with the resulting rise in social standing and the institutions' representative or cultural-political function.

With regard to the first aspect, the foundation of the art academies at the end of the sixteenth century in Italy entailed that, for the first time in history, painters, sculptors, and architects received a theoretical education in addition to a practical training in an institutional

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[1] Pevsner 1940/1973.

setting. This qualifies the term 'art' that is used in this context. The Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca were the first *art* academies insofar as they were founded specifically for practitioners of the three professional activities that would later become known as the 'visual' or 'fine' arts.[2] The idea that painting, sculpture, and architecture belong together was by no means evident at that time; their alliance was argued for in theoretical treatises that originated in the context of the art academies. In such texts, the common ground of these activities was found in the notion of *disegno*, which could stand both for a physical drawing or sketch and for a design in the artist's mind. Although in reality the union of the three visual arts was not as strong as articulated in the theoretical treatises – especially the role of architects in both institutions was meager – the foundation of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca constituted the institutionalization and legitimation of this idea of the unity of painting, sculpture, and architecture. As such, these institutions also stood at the basis of later, especially eighteenth-century, developments in art theory concerning the ideas of artistic progress and aesthetic autonomy.[3]

Turning to the cultural-political function, the second aspect that is emphasized in the scholarly literature, the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca constituted the first *official* academies of art insofar as they were sanctioned and supported by the political rulers, i.e. the Medici grand dukes in Florence and the popes in Rome. This official and public recognition was lacking in earlier artistic academies, such as those of Leonardo da Vinci in Milan and Baccio Bandinelli in Rome and Florence.[4] The Accademia del Disegno became an official institution of the Florentine state when its incorporating statutes were approved by Cosimo I de' Medici, who had been the second duke of Florence since 1537 and who would become the first grand duke of Tuscany in 1569. Popes Gregory XIII and Sixtus V sanctioned the foundation of the Accademia di San Luca in two bulls in 1577 and 1588, respectively. The Roman academy started to function under Clement VIII in the early 1590s. Because of the formal ties to the Medici family and the papacy, the art academies have been interpreted as state institutions, which served

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[2] Unless explicitly indicated otherwise, in this dissertation the terms 'art' and 'artist' refer to the three visual arts and their practitioners. The critical discussions of the theorization of the arts of *disegno* in this dissertation are intended to balance and justify the anachronistic use of the term 'art'.

[3] See for these later developments, for instance, Doorman 2003 and Heumakers 2015.

[4] Besides some engravings attesting to the existence of these academies, very little is known of them. Leonardo's academy probably consisted of informal gatherings of professional and amateur scholars at the court of Milan around 1500. Bandinelli's academies probably refer to discussions among artists in his studio in Rome in the 1530s and in Florence around 1550.

the interest of the political rulers by helping them to develop and express an official ideology and a national or religious cultural identity.[5]

Before the foundation of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca, artists had occasionally belonged to earlier academies, such as the Accademia dei Rozzi in Siena (1531) and the Accademia degli Umidi in Florence (1540). Members of the latter type of organization studied and practiced literature, poetry, opera, theatre, visual art, and natural philosophy and natural history. Because of their broad interests, these latter organizations are referred to in this dissertation with the – admittedly anachronistic – name 'cultural academies'. [6] The foundations of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca were part of the wider academic movement in Italy in the sixteenth century and they shared certain features with cultural academies. However, these institutions differed from each other in one important respect. Whereas the activities of the cultural academies were deployed as leisure for their members, the art academies were professional organizations that took over the functions previously carried out by the guilds, such as adjudicating in professional disputes and carrying out appraisals for works of art produced in the city. Therefore, in addition to constituting an institutionalization and theorization of art education and to serving the cultural-political interests of the rulers, the foundation of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca also entailed a professionalization of the arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture.[7]

Although not completely ignored, this guild function of the art academies is generally obfuscated in the literature. The same holds for yet another function that the art academies assumed, namely that of a religious lay confraternity. The tasks performed by the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca in this capacity included the organization and celebration of religious feasts – especially that of their patron, Saint Luke the Evangelist – and handing out charity to unfortunate members.

The manifold of purposes that was carried out by the art academies has been perceived both as the cause for the academies' limited effectiveness and as an obstacle to a clear and comprehensive understanding of their activities.[8] On the one hand, it is argued that in

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[5] See for instance Rossi 1980 and 1984, Kempers 1992, Beltramme 1990, Salvagni 2008 and 2009, Barzman 2000, and Van Veen 2006.

[6] See for a similar use of the term 'cultural academy' Goudriaan 2015.

[7] See for the professionalization of the arts, especially painting, and the role of the Accademia del Disegno in this process Kempers 1992.

[8] According to Dempsey (1980, 553), already in the sixteenth century people were confused about the nature of the Accademia del Disegno. The reason for this was that it combined some of the traditional functions of confraternity and guild with the new one of an academy. See also Hughes 1986a. Rossi (1980, 161-162) points to a fundamental

their early years the academies' different branches – art school, guild, and confraternity – struggled for authority and that these conflicts hampered their development and efficacy.[9] On the other hand, historians lament that the functions are not always clearly distinguished in contemporary documents.[10] Thus, it remains unclear how the education of young artists, the professional and juridical protection of professional practitioners, and the confraternal activities should be understood in relation to each other. In addition, it is still to be determined how the activities of the Italian art academies were related to similar ones in other institutions, such as cultural academies, as well as in Florentine and Roman society at large.

　　　This dissertation aims to elucidate these issues by conceiving the academies as crossing points of *social practices* that already existed in Florentine and Roman culture and that underwent transformations at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries. Is it possible to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca by conceiving their different functions and activities as social practices that came together, and sometimes conflicted with each other, within their walls? The main difference with existing studies about the early Italian art academies is precisely this emphasis on social practices. Placing social practices at the center of the interpretation – rather than, for instance, the

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contradiction in the very idea of an art academy, namely between its bureaucratic, administrative function and its role in the elaboration of the autonomous cultural ideals of the academicians. According to him, the Florentine academy did not succeed and became an artist's guild in part because of this internal contradiction. Rossi adds that the death of the two protagonists, i.e. Vasari and Cosimo I (both in 1574), was also important in this respect. Goldstein (1996, 25) argues that the Accademia del Disegno was an academy in name only, because just a handful of the incorporating statutes deal with the organization of teaching, and the rest with governance and confraternal activities. See, for a critical discussion of the views of the last two authors, the following chapters.

[9] See, for example, Pevsner (1940/1973, 50) about the contradiction between conceptions of academy and guild in the Accademia del Disegno and see Rossi (1984, 385), Roccasecca (2009, 138), and Cohen (2009) about the strife between the different branches of the Accademia di San Luca. The tripartite division of both institutions was expressed by their official names. The Florentine academy was called '*Università, Compagnia ed Accademia del Disegno*', referring to its functions as guild, religious confraternity, and art school, respectively. The same and similar terms – such as *arte* and *corporazione* for guild, *compagnia* and *societas* for confraternity, and *collegio* for academy – were also used to describe the Roman institution in official (and unofficial) documents. See, for example, ASR, TNC, uff. 11, 1593, pt. III, vol. 27, fol. 385r: '…Venerabilis societatis Sancti Lucae de Urbe Universitatis Pic[t][l]or[um]…' and ASR, TNC, uff. 11, 1596, pt. II, vol. 38, fol. 96r: '…nel'academia de li pitori…'. *Universitas* was the medieval Latin word for a corporation or self-governing body of practitioners of the same trade or craft. See Grossi/Trani 2009, 24. Unless indicated otherwise, the translations in this dissertation are are from the author.

[10] See, for instance, Hughes 1986a, 4 and 9.

individuals involved, the institutions, or the whole culture or period in which they originated – entails the application of insights developed in 'theories of practice' to a cultural-historical research object. Therefore, this study can be seen as part of the so-called 'practice turn in contemporary theory' that has been underway in various scholarly and social science disciplines since the 1970s.[11]

The application of theories of practice entails adopting certain conceptions of culture, subjectivity and the meaning of objects and artifacts that together constitute a social ontological interpretative framework. From a practice-theoretical point of view, culture is conceived of as comprised of a plurality of smaller units – i.e. social practices – that have their own goals and logic, which can overlap but also conflict with each other. Moreover, culture is seen as fundamentally dynamic and in flux. The term 'academization' in the title of this dissertation underlines this processual aspect of culture and institutions.[12] Concerning subjectivity, individual agency and identity are related to the social practices, in which someone has been trained and in which she or he is currently participating. A similar view is adopted with regard to objectivity: the meaning of objects and artifacts depends on their role or function in a social practice.

Most importantly, the use of a practice approach to the early history of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca implies de-essentializing the art academy. By focusing mainly on the educational and cultural-political functions of the art academies, at the expense of the religious and guild activities, and by implicitly taking current art academies as models, previous scholars have employed reductionist and essentialist strategies in trying to understand the art academies. One of the central methodological imperatives of this study is to refrain from such totalizing interpretations and from ascribing fixed essences to the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca. This means that, although this dissertation is about the first official art academies in their early years, it does not conceive these institutions as the source or origin of their successors in a metaphysical sense, i.e. as containing the essence and *telos* of the 'art academy'. Instead, the goal of this study is to offer a more comprehensive account of the activities performed during the first decades of their existence, which can function

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[11] This is a reference to the title of a volume of essays on different aspects of theories of practice. See Schatzki/Knorr Cetina/ Savigny 2001.
[12] As such, it is comparable to Norbert Elias's conceptualization of 'civilization' as a process and to Anthony Giddens's notion of 'structuration', which is meant to convey the idea that social structures are not fixed but that they are always in flux. See Elias 1939/1969 and Giddens 1984.

as objects of comparison for later developments in academies of art, as well as for other cultural phenomena.

By applying the insights and concepts of theories of practice to a new type of research object and a new historical period – i.e. the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries in Italy – an attempt is made to further develop theories of practice. This is the second objective of this study, in addition to improving the understanding of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca in the early years of their existence.

The practice-theoretical interpretative framework that is adopted in this study is explicated and related to previous interpretations of the art academies in Chapters One to Three. The aim of these chapters is to provide a historiographical overview of the literature on the art academies and to give an initial justification of the application of a practice approach to the academization of art. Chapter one focuses on three methodological innovations in the literature that have been carried out since Pevsner's *Academies of Art* and it explains how the application of practice theory can be seen as a next step in this development. A more critical stance toward the past interpretations of the art academies is put forward in Chapter Two. Here, the general and common features of theories of practice, such as a pluralistic notion of culture and the deconstruction of the relationship between theory and practice, are contrasted with previous studies of the academies, especially with their essentialist and reductionist tendencies. Chapter Three presents in more detail the interpretative framework that is used in this dissertation by going into some of the major differences that exist between theories of practice. The main protagonists of this chapter are Pierre Bourdieu and Theodore Schatzki – and to a lesser extent Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault. In this chapter, their conceptions of social space, the organization of practices, power and the process of modernization are compared to each other, and this comparison functions as the basis for the interpretative framework employed in this dissertation.

In order to achieve the first objective of this study, the social practices that were carried out within the walls of the art academies are reconstructed. This reconstruction is performed with the help of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century published and archival sources, such as artists' biographies, art theoretical treatises, the academies' statutes, minutes of meetings, and account books. [13] Most of the archival and

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[13] The main body of the archival documents is housed in the Florentine State Archive (ASF), the National Library in Florence (BNCF), the Historical Archive of the Accademia di San Luca (AASL), and the Roman State Archive (ASR).

published sources that are analyzed in this dissertation have already been studied by other scholars. This means that the main contribution of this study does not consist in the discovery and analysis of new documents – although some new documents have been unearthed and others have been analyzed for the first time in relation to the Italian art academies. Rather, the main contribution of this study consists in a fresh reading of the known sources with the help of the questions and concepts of theories of practice. Instead of approaching the archive with preconceived notions of the academies and looking specifically for certain artists or for particular aspects of these institutions, which has been the strategy of past interpreters, this study takes a more open stance towards the archival material, by using it as the starting point and source for the selection and reconstruction of the practices that were carried out in the academies.

This approach has led to the identification and selection of religious-confraternal, guild, educational, patronage, and literary-theoretical practices as the relevant social practices performed by the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca in their early years. The reconstruction and analysis of these practices is carried out in Chapters Four to Ten. Compared to previous studies, more attention is given to the religious and guild functions of these institutions. The analysis of these practices constitutes more than a simple addition to the repertoire of activities that have already been studied in the past, because it also shows how these practices were related to each other in the art academies. Therefore, it provides a different and more extensive understanding of these institutions. The practice-theoretical framework also proffers new interpretations of the academies' activities that have been traditionally studied. The focus on the relationship of theory and practice in the academies allows for a different understanding of the educational practices that were carried out in the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca, for instance by comparing these practices with those of cultural academies. For the analysis of the functions of the art academies in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century patronage practices the practice-theoretical interpretative framework is augmented by concepts from literature on patronage studies. In particular, the notion of *cultural broker* makes it possible to analyze the fluidity of patronage relationships and the change of functions of the academies.[14]

In addition, this dissertation presents for the first time an elaborate and sustained comparison of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca. This is possible because of the use of

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[14] Since the 1980s, there has been growing attention for art and cultural patronage in patronage studies. See, for example, Kent/Simons/Eade 1987, Kempers 1992, Biagioli 1990 and 1993, Roeck 1999, Van Veen 2006, De Beer 2013, and Goudriaan 2015.

practice-theoretical concepts, which allow for a detailed analysis of the above-mentioned practices. Such an approach has repercussions for the geographical and temporal boundaries of this study. Given the level of detail required and desired for the reconstruction of the social practices that were carried out on their premises, only the Florentine and the Roman art academies are compared with each other. It has been unfeasible to include other sixteenth- or seventeenth-century art academies in the analysis, such as the Accademia del Disegno of Perugia (founded in 1573), the Accademia degli Incamminati of the Carracci family in Bologna (founded around 1582), or the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in Paris (founded in 1648).[15]

With regard to the temporal demarcation, the first forty years of the Accademia del Disegno and the Accademia di San Luca are analyzed. This means that about two generations of artists who frequented these academies are covered in this study. Such a time-span provides a substantial basis not only for determining the organization of the practices that were employed in these institutions but also for comparing these practices with those of other academies and cultural phenomena in future research projects. The Conclusion provides a methodological reflection on the use of the practice-theoretical framework in this study. In addition, it also offers suggestions for future investigations. To name just one example, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century practices that are reconstructed in this dissertation can be used as objects of comparison for the current academization of art and the debate surrounding it, i.e. the development that art academies and universities together offer PhD programs in artistic research for practicing artists.[16] Not only is the complexity of the debate, which deals, among other things, with the ontological, methodological, and epistemological status of artistic research comparable to the discussions that were carried out by the artists and humanists in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, but this also holds for the ambivalent status of art academies today.

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[15] Moreover, the Perugian and Bolognese academies suffer from a lack of sources, which would have made for an unbalanced comparison with the Florentine and Roman institutions. See for the Carracci academy Dempsey 1989.

[16] A comprehensive study concerning this topic is Borgdorff 2012.