

This image is available
in the print version of
Christian Reflection.

**Stradano's THE PRACTICE OF THE VISUAL ARTS provides a
fascinating glimpse into the life of the Accademia
del Disegno, one of the first training schools for
artists in the western tradition.**

*Jan van der Straet (1523-1605), Design for the print THE PRACTICE OF THE VISUAL ARTS (1573).
Fresco, 437 x 239 mm. London, British Museum. Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum.
Used by permission.*

A School for Artists

BY HEIDI J. HORNİK

Today we think of artists, like other professionals, as going to a school to learn their craft and develop their style. But this is a peculiarly modern phenomenon in the western tradition. In the medieval era, an aspiring artist would apprentice with a master artist in a professional guild in order to learn the master's techniques and approach. Not until the sixteenth century did young artists attend more formal academic institutions that not only offered technical training but also encouraged a more theoretical approach to studying the goals and methods of art. Stradano's *The Practice of the Visual Arts* provides a fascinating glimpse into the life of one of the first academies, or training schools for artists, in the western tradition—the Accademia del Disegno founded in 1562 in Florence, Italy.

Among the leaders of the Accademia del Disegno was the artist and architect Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), who is often considered the first art historian because he wrote the first biography of artists in 1550 (revised in 1568).¹ Cosimo I de' Medici made Vasari his main consultant for renovating and updating Ducal Florence in the mid 1560s. Along with painters Agnolo Bronzino and Michele Tosini and sculptor Montorsoli, Vasari convinced Duke Cosimo to support an art school in which the curriculum would be based on *disegno*, or draftsmanship. Skill in drawing, they believed, is fundamental to good work in painting, sculpture, architecture, and other artistic media.

Unlike its local predecessor, the Accademia Fiorentina, this new academy was not intended to promote a vernacular style. Instead, it taught a range of techniques and theory in an organized curriculum ordered by its elected officials through statutes, and was funded by membership taxes. Initially it was something of a cross between a confraternity and a university studio art class, for more seasoned artists served as officers and the academy resembled a Christian men's group with a common goal of sharing their skills.² As the centuries passed, it developed solid academic tradition of combining the humanistic disciplines within a curriculum of art that was based on the ability to draw from nature.

Jan van der Straet (1523-1605) moved from his birthplace in Bruges, Flanders, to study art in Rome when he was twenty-two. In 1557 he settled

in Florence, where he was called by his Italian name, Giovanni Stradano. He was elected as an officer in the Accademia del Disegno during its first year, and again in 1586 and 1591. His leadership position in the new academy shows the full acculturation of this Flemish artist into the Florentine community.

In *The Practice of the Visual Arts*, Stradano depicts the complexities of studio training as the skeleton, several nudes (both live and sculptural), a model of a horse, a female figure dressed as Virtue, and a male figure posed as a river god are positioned to become part of the students' drawings.³ This work, in both its theme and form, represents the curriculum of the Accademia del Disegno. Its theme is the centrality of drawing to the education of artists at the Academy, where students were trained to be more than craftsmen or skilled laborers, but to study shared principles of design and representation of nature. And, of course, Stradano's work is itself an example of such drawings from life.

As I have taught art history in the Art Department at Baylor University the past nineteen years, the importance of young artists mastering the foundational techniques of art has become increasingly clear. This is true, even though the concept-driven contemporary art scene can seem devoid of traditional methodology. Of course, Baylor's studio drawing classes are a bit less chaotic than the one Stradano depicts, but they still advance the goals of the great masters in schools like the Accademia del Disegno.

NOTES

1 Giorgio Vasari, *Le Opere di Gorgio Vasari: Le Vite de' più eccellent pittori, scultori ed architettori scritte da Giorgio Vasari pittore Aretino* (1568), edited by Gaetano Milanesi, 9 volumes (1568; reprinted Florence, Italy: Sansoni, 1885).

2 This phenomenon can be illustrated by the transition during this era of the Compagnia di San Luca—a guild of painters and miniaturists named after Luke, the patron saint of painters—into the Accademia di San Luca, an organization that trained lay people and was oriented toward works of piety.

3 Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Passion and Resurrection Narratives in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Painting*, volume 3 (New York: T&T Clark International, 2007), 97-100.



HEIDI J. HORNİK

is Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.