Manu propria: Thoughts and By-thoughts

Recently I was pleasantly taken in by a reproduction of Fragonard's painting *Chiffre d’amour*, from the Wallace Collection in London. It depicts a lovely, half-concealed young girl, who, with a serious face, is carving the shape of her heart into the bark of the tree. This too is *manu propria*, I told myself. Another one of Fragonard's allegories of love. And he was truly a great master of those; his pictures are full of temptation, they disturb and distract the viewer, so the question arises: Do the contents of this enigma have any connection to the painter, the commissioner, the owner, or the young girl herself? At first glance it seemed as if the tree trunk bore only half of the heart's shape, but a closer look reveals that it bears the illuminator's initial. The curved line, which fools the eye, is in fact an “f,” for Fragonard. An enticing curve with a double meaning. Devoting the very centre of the image to such an expressive symbol, the illuminator set it on a mysteriously blurry field, a crossing of light's contrasts. At the same time he subverted the individuality of the author's – that is, his – signature, by placing the act of the artist's self-confirmation in the hand of a young girl in love.

Fragonard's trickery invites the question, whether this game of replacement with the initial of an amour and the author is not merely a form of the illuminator's elusiveness? Showing with just the hint of a smile how little he cares for the aura of artistic immortality? Using a completely different expression and result, this elusiveness of an existential answer was tackled by Michelangelo: next to a hand-written sonnet he drew himself, as a naked man, while painting the image of a man on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling, a man with scarecrow hair, not a holy person or – God forbid – God himself. A humorous scene, at a glance, but from, looked at from another side: Who am I? I am naked, naked before my maker and the world. His mood is restless, questioning and introspective, though the emotion is versified in the 5th sonnet, where this image appears: *I’ho già fatto un gozzo in questo stento …* The image is a metaphor for what the sonnet is about, and the sonnet is a metaphor of his existence.

An artist can present himself in infinite ways and forms. There are many verbal and graphic deviations from the standard, yet through the author's hand expresses him as a thoroughly individual presence. All such signs, relating to his working process, etc., are external expressions that can be used by the author to ‘mark’ his work. We often follow them from a great distance in time, and with varying degrees
of success we determine authors’ work with analytical processes of different scientific disciplines. We try to do this sceptically and precisely. In his voluminous dissertation on art and artists from Giotto to his own time in the mid-16th century, Giorgio Vasari formulated his own thoughts in such a way that an attentive reader could understand his position: when dealing with anything from the past, we must be careful, as in our present time we can believe those works and data; we can compare and verify them, but we were not present at the event. Vasari was able to present the works of painters, sculptors or architects vividly and attractively, as if we were there, standing in front of the achievement described. And what was created? A sort of an internal musée imaginaire, and through Vasari’s words internalized images, as he was led by a supremely visual memory; he equipped the works under discussion with anecdotes and facts of matter, with literature, music, and theatre. In all of this, as befits an imaginarius and the imaginary, he was led by a vicarious passion for the artist’s intentions. It was about the artist’s “writing,” the way he drew the brush or the pen, the way the chisel travelled, and about the very particular composition, unique to the artist through the confluence of the topic and the emotions of what is the appropriate form, and, ultimately, the artist’s ingenio, the essence of his hand. In literary form, thus, Vasari presented the power of the artist’s hand; he was the first on this path, and so his description of the lives and works of artists signifies a breakthrough in the search for the stroke of the creator.

A scientific monograph on the various forms of authorial signatures was published some two hundred years after Vasari had finished his text. In 1747, Johann Friedrich Christ from Leipzig published a dictionary in which, its subtitle declares, he included monograms, codes, initials, logogryphs, rebuses and similar forms with which painters, graphics and illustrators signed themselves. In this pioneering work he encompassed everything available to his eyes in the form of actual works and printed facts. His exemplary system was later followed across Europe. With it a new branch of documenting data began and signatures reproduced in this way were of great assistance for identifying works and their authors. Back when I was only beginning my studies at the university, I began using a lexicon by Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker with the astounding title Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler: Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart etc., and the latest book, the 37th at the time, was dedicated to “Masters with temporary names and monogramists.” A fairly large volume was dedicated to artists who signed their works and left their initials, but otherwise never introduced themselves. This was only one type of signatures, which had been collected by J. F. Christ earlier, though in various other volumes of the lexicon also many other artists were “revealed,” along with their signatures. In them one can feel either burning passion or careful calm in the movements of their hands, and they display one or another kind of
kinetics, as well as of course the consideration, the decision, of which form of signature will show authenticity. Some artists were represented by their signature symbol, or one of them – among which are also some rather humorous ones: who would not giggle at the alternative signature of Paul Bril, who for a particular type of cabinet paintings used an image of reading glasses, an allusion to his surname?

The Thieme-Becker’s lexicon was the result of systematic labour lasting for many years, with collaborations involving numerous authors from many countries. It seems the time was ripe for research into a number of aspects of history – artistic, literary, linguistic, musical, social, the history of science, mentalities, etc. – which nearly always relate to each other. Scientific areas suddenly found themselves in this tangle of findings, scientific techniques and methods of treatment, analyses and syntheses, where they reached for new horizons in their search for new perceptions. These questions, namely, of how the literary or scientific topics were transmitted in previous centuries, were not new, but only now did scholars consider them seriously and in great detail, looking at spheres of the individual, and only now did they begin researching the dynamic relationships between the artists, the writers of complex programmes and bearers of ideas, the commissioners and owners, and the readers, or the spectators. Just half a century earlier such questions would have had a romantic accent, but now they demanded a concise understanding of the mechanisms of the creative process and research into the transmission of ideas, circumstances and the audience’s response. At the side lines of this interest remained a field that still awaits its full disclosure; these are the writings of scientists, the sketches and studies, that show the individualism and thoroughness of a researcher. This naturally belongs to the history of scientific thought and various disciplines that are (withstanding the aesthetics – for example, Leonardo’s – of architectural, anatomical, technical and mechanical drawings) important witnesses on the winding road from the first spark of imagination to the scholarly end result.

Along with known postulates on the character of art in this or another century, the question (which was never completely forgotten) arose again as to the role of those who chose the artistic achievements at the turning points, for example, at the turn from older cultural traditions towards Christianity (the selective role of librarians in the library of Alexandria before it was burned down by Theodosius the Great, is quite characteristic), or, on a more technological level, at the turn from a tradition of manuscripts to printing, and of how many authentic authored works were thrown away in the process of selection, and why we know so many of these authors only by their re-told names, not by their works, what happened to objectivity, what happened to the memory, the recollection, and mirroring of the old in new forms of visual narrative, what was the perception of such achievements, what form self-promotion too, and the
elimination of competition (which is difficult to re-integrate into the richly inhabited space of our, Slovene and European history). Dilemmas, which remain topical to this day, with the expulsions of Jewish citizens, the Counter-Reformation, the disavowment of our nobility and sacral traditions, the exclusion of the doubting, the unbelieving, of those who knew something more.

The articles that follow present certain forms of the author’s celebration of his own work, in verse, or with a characteristic stroke, a signature of one kind or another – not only manu propria, per manu mea, etc. – and they tell of a the author’s personal decision to acknowledge his own work or possession. Let us not forget that works that were created incidentally, without a particular purpose, usually do not bear signatures. Authorized creations are therefore those special proofs that allow us to compose a greater whole from the documented and anonymous parts of an opus. These are sketches, drafts, the “fabrics of thought,” which are shaped by the automatism of the hand at a stage when the final form of the creation is still unclear. As a man of many talents, Vasari knew of the imaginary and spiritual potential of these documents of the artist’s deliberation, of his search, which are – seen through time – like steps from point zero to the finished work. He therefore presented the idea to Cosimo I de’ Medici, for the patrician house to become an example to others, and to keep records on the history of geniuses by collecting their works, sketches, studies for sculptures and anything else used in the preparatory phases. He recommended that the drawings and programmes for spectacles and famous intermezzi be saved. This was the beginning of the institution known as Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, where a more or less private academy became a great university of the fine arts, whose first rector (though only in his final year of life) was none other than Michelangelo. It was also a time when the admiration of an artist received a new dimension, thanks to portrait galleries, and when Justus Lipsius published a booklet on libraries (1602) he included in his odes to famous personae also the thought of how appropriate it is to decorate the libraries with images of important authors. With this, he revived on the northern side of the Alps Poggio Bracciolini’s (De nobilitate, 1440) thought of how appropriate the habit of Romans and other cultivated circles in Antiquity was, namely, of presenting the images of famous people in public and private spaces, as an eternal memory of their excellent qualities and a reminder to pursue labore et constantia (the motto on the front page of Lipsius’ book), and how appropriate it was to approach their example.

The artist’s appearance is, regardless of the veracity of the depicted face, at least partial information about the creator. It replaces, and sometimes also indicates, the spark of his spirit. We can think back to the alley of Slovene musicians whose statues adorn Vega Street in Ljubljana: not only was each one of them an important link in
the chain of great men of the nation, but the community of musicians is in itself a
telling materialization of musical development. And their own musical notes float
down from the conservatory classrooms into the park, to the statues, and to us, who
walk past them.

There were many treatises published on the spontaneity of the artist’s work and
the creative process, and with them many horizons were opened toward new areas of
research and theoretical foundations. Of course, there is no unified view on creativity.
Along with systematic study reviews of various disciplines on the processes of ideas
and implementation, the analyses of selected examples are still of crucial importance,
as each parsing doesn’t mean only the discoveries of new unknowns and with it the
broadening of knowledge, but is also a contribution to new methods of treatment,
and the development of methodologies. Interdisciplinary, cultural-historical, and
psychological considerations, as well as considerations of the creative-process, are
mostly gateways to different viewpoints and positions which in the totality of all
forms of treatment and within individual disciplines have their perfect value, even
if the positions of various scientific disciplines diverge. After all, such interwoven
investigation is a relatively new field in the understanding of authors, with the
omnipresent danger of over-interpretation, of putting more than was intended into
the creator’s thoughts and strokes.

We experience the external strokes first: in Le Plaisir du texte, a book entirely
devoted to verbal and literary insights, Roland Barthes wrote: Texte veut dire Tissu,
the text is a fabric, a tissue that obscures the meaning, the truth. A look at the pages
of his travel journal about China (which returns us to Barthes’ seminar Written
traces – traces écrites), which by its nature is quite private, practically intimate, as
a text, introduces the generating of a cognition (!), not just the contents of a text.
The texture of the verbal fabric changes through its many corrections, crossed-out
words, inserts and additions into a construction of sorts, one that disappears as
soon as the text is transliterated and printed: the corrections, glosses and vehement
strokes, all of it expresses a dynamism that is unwillingly tamed by the sameness of
the printed letters.

It is relatively easy for art historians to “understand” also those expressions
that could be said to be imaginary forms of communication: the narrative and the
image, or word content and visual presentation are interconnected. While we read
these messages on the interplay of directed gazes, gestures, settings and emotional
expressions, one only need call to mind the statues on the façades of churches, palaces
and town squares, with their own roles in the area of contact between the written
and the latently present visual message. These are the external strokes of the artist’s
“handwriting.” With his inspiration – *mente propria* – he expresses why his hand created in the way it did: *manu propria*. If we understand the artist’s inclinations, we also know the formulations of design belonging to him only, though from time to time it does happen that our recognition of an artist’s gesture, its typical kinetics and ductus, allows us to add to the catalogue of recognized authorial achievements a work that was hitherto anonymous. This was the case recently, on the occasion of a statue of Cupid what was accepted into the circle of indisputably authored works; the statue was described as “a virtuoso, completely autographical work, which essentially explains the technical and expressive dimensions of a young Michelangelolo” (Joannides, 2014, 193).

**Nine contributions**

The following pages bear the contributions of nine authors, with the common parole being *manu propria*, where in one way or another they establish a dialogue with persons whose own gestures are discerned from the contents, the image, the document, etc. During World War II, when André Malraux was in the process of forming the idea of an imaginary museum as a complete memory of achievements, without the mutilation of memory because of the concealed, from a European perspective, “unworthy” cultures, this passionate love for the created became one with exploration, accepting became one with giving, old techniques with new ones in photography, print (and now digital culture). This “Museum without walls” is given to those who want it. So the “Malraux effect” is latently present. With the experience and memory of war’s destruction, he wrote that art has the power to preserve the spirit of those who are missing and lost, along with what remains. The trails of research written here supplement the current knowledge on the chapter called the history of intellect and creation.

The author’s “seal,” which is often synonymous with his signature and is included in the text itself, is presented by Marko Marinčič in the broad span of time from Hesiod to the Augustean age. The selected examples raise the question of what the *sphragis*, the seal, really is: is it a safeguard from theft, from the alteration of one’s work, or perhaps a metaphor? The central part of the discussion is given to Theognis of Megara and the songs he wrote for Kirn; the songs express doubt about the inviolability of the author’s work, developing the motif of the author’s seal all the way to the poets in Augustus’ time.

The study by Martin Wagendorfer discusses the early-14th century reader and his reading marks. The text does not address the modern reader, who also adds his own
comments or drawings on the margins next to an exciting text; suddenly Ambrosius of Heiligenkreuz becomes our contemporary, with his memorisation and reading techniques, while he devotes himself to a text on St. Severinus written by Eugippius. Along with calling attention to mechanisms of reading, the article is an interesting analysis of a situation in which a late-Antiquity text of the life of a saint became a possible tool for political propaganda.

It is very hard to delineate between an illuminator’s active movements of his hand and the aesthetic and functional decisions regarding how a page should be designed, where the leafy frames go, and how or why the contact between horizontal and vertical border-lines is transformed into a space for witty marginalia. In his analysis of decorative structures of an Arthurian manuscript from cca. 1300 Miha Zor brings to our attention the fact that the lovable grotesques have more to tell than we “hear” at first glance: there are two sides to the creator’s contribution, marked on one side by _manu propria_ (his own work) and by _mente propria_ on the other (a painter’s consideration and decision).

Epistolary literature is not only fiction; in the Middle Ages it was both a politically and historically important genre: the Archbishop of Prague, Jan of Jenštejn, was preparing the edition of weighty epistolary documents that were a part of his collection of correspondence with notable people of the time. Zdeňka Hledíková devotes herself to the preparatory process, presenting Jan transcribing the lot, and selecting important letters while excluding others, and adding technical notes, stylistic corrections etc. The epistolarium is a very rare form of manuscript, even more so due to its nature of being preserved in a sequence of working phases, where Jan of Jenštejn and his secretary cooperated, revealing themselves through different handwriting.

How do we read the messages from the Slovene Middle Ages, and how do we understand the signatures of copyists on the final pages of long texts? The contribution by Nataša Golob tackles these questions, that is, of what separates the author’s autograph from the copyist’s. Three professional copyists, Martin of (Škofja) Loka, Matjaž Jurčič of Kapela, and Herman Talner of Trebnje, are presented as highly educated professionals from the mid-15th century who were versed in multiple languages and types of writing. Along with basic data found in colophons, we can gain interesting glimpses of their life and work from their short concluding messages.

The impact in our collective memory made by Hartmann Schedel, with his _Weltchronik_, is well known, but above all he was a great Humanist and an excellent physician, who took great care of his library. He himself copied medical texts, which meant a great deal to him. Outi Merisalo has contributed with her insight on Schedel’s interests and special gestures in the design of manuscripts, which show him as
a modern scientist in the age of Humanism. His studies at the university in Padua also influenced his style of writing and decisions for the aesthetics of the book, as he switched the Gothic script common in his hometown of Nurnberg for the Humanist style all’antica.

So far we have encountered barely any analyses of proprietary or similar markings of provenances entered in books by their owners. Thanks to research done by Sonja Svoljšak, we can encounter the bibliophile and intellectual personality of Gašper Žitnik, otherwise a lawyer and notable politic. His handwritten entries into books changed through the years and became more telling, including many details from his own life. Through the prism of his library, Žitnik comes to life as a notable Humanist and a man versed in a wide array of subjects; the study is accompanied by a list of 94 books kept in the National and University Library in Ljubljana.

With a quote from Dante’s Divine Comedy in the title, Miklavž Komelj uses the image of the shuddering hand to introduce us to an essay on the intertwining of the author’s gesture and his thinking, and his emotions. The discussion is an outflowing of Komelj’s thoughts on the author’s intentions into manuscript form: in this way we are shown the examples of autographs by Vojko Gorjan, Jere Detela and Karl Destovnik Kajuh. Komelj analyses the involvement of the authors in various events, and their reaction to historical realities, as they deal with experiences during the restless periods. In another great assembly of thoughts on the hand of the author, Komelj focuses on the surrealistic “systems of writing” by Fernando Pessoa, and the automatisms of the creative hand of Djuna Barnes.

What was our thinking regarding the author’s hand in the ethnological or ethnographical material up until now? While Božidar Premrl never puts it so bluntly, nevertheless, as we read his documentary narration on the stonemasons of western Slovenia, and as we are taken in by the mason’s decision to carve the point in the shape of a butterfly, or to finish his work with the chiselled outline of a heart, we cannot deny that this is but a mirroring of these stone-masons’ complete autonomy.

A heartfelt signature – this is what returns us to the visual expressions of Fragonard, but the message is not the same, it is not fleeting. There is no flirting, there is love. Truly.

We give our thanks to the authors – next to whom we would have liked to have set several hundred other views on the author’s personal relation to his own creation – for calling our attention to these overlooked details.

Prevedel Jernej Hočevar
Bibliography

Sources


Literature


