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Evelyn Lincoln

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Branca's "Signature Piece"

Boccaccio visualizzato. Narrare per parole e per immagini fra Medioevo e Rinascimento, ed. Vittore Branca, 3 vols, Torino: 1999, Einaudi

The publication of *Boccaccio visualizzato* represents the culmination of an enterprise of overwhelming scope: "to catalogue the illustrated manuscripts of the works of Boccaccio (that contain well over 7,000 illustrations); the works of art up to the late Renaissance inspired by Boccaccio's writings (more than a century); [and] portraits of the author (almost 300)..."¹ Although this project was shaped by a loosely knit international and interdisciplinary team over the course of fourteen years, it is really in many ways a lifetime preoccupation of the literary scholar and philosopher Vittore Branca. Victoria Kirkham, a founding member of that team, rightly called it "a signature piece, unique and monumental."²

Branca's three-volume set takes its place alongside other comprehensive picture atlases, at once interpretive and archaeological, such as Phyllis Bober's *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture*, and the Warburg Institute's computerized census of antiquities.³ Branca in fact credits the inception of his project to precisely the same tradition of scholarship, writing in an *avvertenza* to the book that the idea first took shape in 1949, when he held a fellowship at the Warburg Institute. The project has therefore the most illustrious possible art historical pedigree: Branca grounds his approach in the atmosphere of the Warburg in the 1950's, growing in dialogue with the ideas of Gertrude Bing, Frances Yates, and Ernst Gombrich, although he expands the list to include the founders of the Annales School of historical study, art historians at the Getty Institute and the Institute of Advanced Study including of course Erwin Panofsky himself, the father of iconology and its practical tool, iconography, with which these volumes are largely concerned. The point of departure is the Warburgian corpus of iconographic studies and collections of pictorial and emblematic motifs and subject dictionaries, dedicated to the transmission of styles and motifs in art, and to decoding the arcane hermetic symbolism of the Renaissance scholars and writers who Aby Warburg believed exchanged ideas fluidly with the artists who translated them into visual code. Medals, coins, cosmic diagrams, memory maps and horoscopes all provided material for these early historians of visual culture, and so the Institute gathered historians of ideas, of philosophy, of sci-

¹ Vittore Branca, "Boccaccio visualizzato" in *Studi sul Boccaccio* 15 (1985–86) 85.

² Victoria Kirkham, "Festschrift for Vittore Branca" in *Italian Quarterly* 143–46 (Winter-Fall, 2000) 14.

³ Phyllis Pray Bober and Ruth Rubenstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources*, London: Oxford University Press, 1986, and the Warburg Institute's "Census of Antique Works of Art and Architecture Known to the Renaissance", published as a CD-ROM.

ence, and of images into scholarly colloquia based on a rigorous study of the classical tradition.

In that vein, Branca's enormous work, comprising books and manuscripts, frescoes, paintings and sculptures, also mobilizes a group of historians (the *BV* team, as they call themselves): literary historians, art historians, and historians of the book, some of whom had already been publishing preliminary contributions to the project in Branca's annual *Studi sul Boccaccio* from 1985 onwards. In that year, under an entry that gave the project its name, Branca set forth a preliminary list of distinguished collaborators that included Paul Oskar Kristeller, Irving Lavin, and André Chastel, to name a few, besides the three founding directors (himself, Paul Watson, and Victoria Kirkham). In that first operation of making public work that he had already been involved with for many years, Branca offered "Un primo elenco di codici illustrati da me compilato", along with two other tentatively titled contributions by Watson and Kirkham: "A Preliminary List of Subjects from Boccaccio in Italian Paintings" and "A Preliminary List of Boccaccio Portraits from the 14th to the mid-16th Century", respectively, and readers were urged to contribute further relevant information and pictorial examples.⁴ Branca explained his choice of the word "visualizzato" as taking into account those works that were proper illustrations and those created in relation to Boccaccio and his narratives but in the absence of accompanying text, although in the book itself the word is used in both straightforward and metaphorical ways. To talk about the corpus of images as visualizations, Branca said in 1986, was to express the dynamic relationship that existed between the works and the texts; the term "autonomous" for works of art that did not appear alongside text was too detached from the written or spoken word for Branca's taste, this way "next to intertextuality there could now be revealed interexpressivity" as well, a theme he picks up in an entire article in the first volume of *Boccaccio visualizzato*.⁵ Given his intellectual formation, Branca would naturally be predisposed to allot equal weight to frescoes, religious paintings, decorative arts, prints, maps, plaquettes and manuscript illustrations, each ultimately providing in its way valuable information for the literary scholar about the transmission of Boccaccio's stories into different traditions and in different contexts. Branca quite clearly characterizes his interests as philological, and sets about cataloguing and classifying the images related to Boccaccio, apologizing in part for his lack of art historical knowledge and ignorance of the technologies of image-making. Had he begun his studies a quarter century later, he might have thought of his inclusive approach to Boccaccio-related imagery in terms of visual culture. The methodologies in the various articles that form the substance of the books reflect the diversity of the contributors, as Branca says, but these volumes remain rather innocent of late 20th-century art historical methodologies, sticking closely to the spirit of the original taxonomic task.⁶

⁴ *Studi* op. cit. (1986) 86.

⁵ V. Branca, "Interespressività narrativo-figurativa e rinnovamenti topologici e iconografici discesi dal 'Decameron'", in *BV*, v. I, 39–74.

⁶ In the book and in book reviews by team members or followers, space is reserved for definitive and understandable contempt for a book that plagiarized Branca's title (*Visualizing Boccaccio*) and added insult to injury by being both inaccurate and feminist, sins that unfortunately seem to go together in the minds of the *BV* folk (see: Jill M. Ricketts, *Visualizing Boccaccio. Studies on the Illustrations of The Decameron, from Giotto to Pasolini*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Branca addresses the matter in a quarter-

Volume One takes the form of a general overview, looking at visual interpretations of Boccaccio and his stories in art, architecture, and sculpture from the middle ages to the end of the twentieth century. The other two volumes focus in on regional visualizations of Boccaccio; the second volume is given over solely to Italian works on the themes of Boccaccio's texts divided into regional schools, while Volume Three is dedicated to explaining the reception of Boccaccio among artists in the rest of Europe, with special attention to France and the Netherlands. Volume Three also contains four separate indexes to the material.

Branca's introductory essay introduces Boccaccio as an author/illustrator for whom illustrations were an important accompaniment to his immensely visual textual descriptions, diffusing the tales to non-literate audiences who might have heard them rather than read them.⁷ In this case, the illustrations of manuscript texts performed the office of widening the audience, of popularization even past that accomplished by the choice of language.

For Branca, the pictures that emphasized certain characters and details of the plot exerted a strong influence on the way the tale was understood. Likewise, the stories themselves provided vivid themes for Renaissance artists. For the Florentine furniture painters who made *spalliere*, *cassoni* and painted *deschi* this is certainly the case, and Boccaccio's themes, familiar to Florentine patrons through text and pictorial interpretation, appear often on domestic painting of the 15th century. This is not the place to look for a nuanced discussion of what this might have meant for the men and women who lived among the images, although Cristelle Baskins, Susanne Wofford and others have productively discussed these issues in books and articles devoted to pictorial interpretations of particular Boccaccian subjects.⁸

For Branca, Boccaccio's work of popularization and modernization was magnified through the addition of images, and he makes a strong case for Boccaccio as personally involved in the illustration of his own manuscripts, as "author-interpreter" and designer who exerts authorial control through orchestration of the text and image. This claim is extended by Maria Grazia Ciardi Dupré dal Poggetto in an incisive essay on Boccaccio and Tuscany that appears in Volume Two along with an illustrated catalogue of extant manuscripts from that region from the 14th and 15th centuries.⁹ After discussing autograph manuscripts and their illustration, Branca's own discussion moves to later manuscripts, and then to Florentine domestic painting, staying close to the notion of images as illustration, noting when an image departs from the events of the text. He ends with panel paintings in the ducal courts that bring the plebian Boccaccio into the realm of the chivalric and aristocratic by virtue of

page footnote in *BV*, vol. 1, p. 35, see also reviews by Victoria Kirkham in *Renaissance Quarterly* (1998) 1352–53, and Piermario Vescovo in *Studi sul Boccaccio* 25 (1997) 400–01. In fact, there is much feminist Renaissance art history that is both accurate and analytical (see, for example, note 4 below), and one might have hoped that this book had not come to symbolize the field in its entirety for Branca and company.

⁷ V. Branca, "Introduzione. Il narrar boccacciano per immagini dal tardo gotico al primo Rinascimento," *BV*, v. I, 3.

⁸ Cristelle Baskins, *Cassoni Painting, Humanism and Gender in Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge & NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998, and Susanne L. Wofford, "The Social Aesthetics of Rape" in D. Quint, ed. *Creative Imitation*, Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992.

⁹ *BV*, v. I, 7, and for Maria G. C. Dupré dal Poggetto, see v. II, 2–152.

courtly taste for precious imagery that reflected the late-Gothic decorative tastes characteristic of many courts into the last part of the 15th century.

As an art historian it occurs to me that for Branca, a motivating force behind the project was the strength of Boccaccio's visual descriptions of action and of characterization that cause the stories to have an impact on memory and imagination comparable to that of a strongly colored image. This would account in part for the fact that in most cases the images are treated here as secondary to the texts that give them their subject. Nonetheless, the book will be an important resource for both art historians and literary scholars. The prodigious catalogue information will help researchers to locate both manuscripts and monumental images, not only physically, in terms of their locations, but also in the texts from which their subject matter derives. The illustrations will be important resources not only for iconographers, but also for art historians interested in narrative and the transmission of styles through different media and genres of painting. In the mix, particular essays stand out for their methodological approach to the material, among them the essay by Brigitte Buettner in Volume Three, dedicated to manuscript imagery beyond Italy.¹⁰ Buettner deftly places French illuminated copies of Boccaccio in the context of merchant culture in Renaissance France, taking into account the materials of manuscripts and their illuminators, as well as the division of labor involved in manuscript illumination, in discussing the taste for luxurious illuminated secular texts in merchant households. It is followed by a richly illustrated catalogue of the texts she discusses, including the famous French version of *De mulieribus claris* in the British Library. The catalogues that make up the bulk of Volume Three (texts in, primarily, French and Latin, produced in France, England, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands) provide essential and difficult-to-find information for the currently re-ignited question of the cross-currents in art and style between Italy and the North. It is in the end these finding-lists of illustrations, individual catalogue essays and relevant bibliographies that makes *Boccaccio visualizzato* such a valuable resource for researchers in any field looking for information on the diffusion of Boccaccio's texts and subjects in word and image.

EVELYN LINCOLN

BROWN UNIVERSITY

¹⁰ Brigitte Buettner, "Il commercio di immagini: I mercanti, I Rapondi e il Boccaccio in Francia," *BV*, v. III, 19–28.