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G. Ruff

# CASVA

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## Prints and People: Carlo Cesare Malvasia's Catalog of Bolognese Prints Rediscovered

During the past decade, the Dean's research project at CASVA to publish a critical edition, translation, and historical annotation of Carlo Cesare Malvasia's *Felsina pittrice* (Bologna, 1678) in twenty or so richly illustrated volumes has established itself as an ambitious venture of international importance. The text, first published in two dense volumes dedicated by its author to King Louis XIV of France, is devoted to the history of painting in Bologna (whose ancient Etruscan name was Felsina), from the thirteenth century through the Renaissance, up to a final flourishing in Malvasia's day of such disciples of the Carracci school as Guercino,

Guido Reni, and Elisabetta Sirani. The *Felsina pittrice* is a notoriously difficult text, but an essential one for the history of art, inspired to some extent by Giorgio Vasari's *Lives* (Florence, 1550 and 1568), which was republished in Bologna in 1647. Malvasia respected Vasari for his account of the development of painting from Cimabue to Michelangelo, but he also rejected and even reviled Vasari's unapologetic admiration for Tuscan art.

In the course of putting together his new history of the Bolognese school, Malvasia turned to other sources, pursuing the facts through forensic comparison in a way that befitted his position as a professor of law at the University of Bologna. He consulted many printed works on art by such authors as Francesco Scannelli, Carlo Ridolfi, and Antonio Masini, but he also read and frequently quoted contemporary poetry about the works under discussion. Malvasia prided himself on saving information found in artists' letters, which he collected, and on recording anecdotal evidence from servants and family members. More interested in oral testimony than in producing a deceptively authoritative narrative, Malvasia wanted to write memoirs, or *memorie*, not history—or rather panegyric, as history was then often understood. Most important of all, for Malvasia, was the evidence of his own eyes. He knew that Vasari, who is still known as the father of

art history, had made up descriptions of works he had not seen, following the ancient rhetorical conventions of ekphrasis, and found this unacceptable. Malvasia allied himself with the moderns; for him, what he termed “ocular inspection” was essential to all fields of knowledge, not limited to the practice of astronomy as represented by Galileo, and natural history, for which Bologna was famous. Careful looking was necessary for the strict connoisseurship that went hand in hand with the establishment of documentary fact.

This new interpretation of the value of Malvasia's approach runs against the conventional view, fostered for centuries, that he was a biased source who even fabricated his material. In fact, the reverse is true. He was remarkable in his day for consulting and quoting as many sources as possible, and for paying close attention to works of art. He remained, however, dedicated to *Felsina pittrice*, and was no more impartial than other contemporary writers on the schools of Venice, Genoa, Rome, and Naples.

The first two volumes in the CASVA series, *Early Bolognese Painting* (volume 1) and *Lives of Domenichino and Francesco Gessi* (volume 13), appeared in 2012 and 2013 respectively (published by Harvey Miller/Brepols). They made available new historical and visual material, in addition to the English text and the critical edition, and set the pattern for volumes to come. The most recent volume published in 2017, *Life of Marcantonio Raimondi and Critical Catalogue of Prints by or after Bolognese Masters*, is an exceptional production



Fig. 1. Marcantonio Raimondi, *Giovanni Filoteo Achillini*, c. 1504/1505, engraving, Rosenwald Collection

that radically alters the understanding of Malvasia as a connoisseur and cataloger, not of paintings but of prints. His careful listing and description of at least one thousand prints in a proto-catalogue raisonné comes as a surprise to collectors and curators alike.

Edmé-François Gersaint's listing of the prints by Jacques Callot in the collection of Quentin de Lorangère, published in 1744, is generally held to be the first such catalogue raisonné. In her introduction to the CASVA volume, Naoko Takahatake establishes the prior importance of Malvasia's 1678 catalog of Bolognese prints as a precedent for this and its further value for the French dealer and connoisseur Pierre-Jean Mariette as he cataloged the collection of Prince Eugene of Savoy in Vienna in 1718. The great multivolume print catalog by Adam Bartsch subsequently published in Vienna (1803–1821) was a direct descendant of Malvasia's endeavor, and remains an authoritative source. Malvasia's contribution, by contrast, has generally been ignored in the world of old master prints, probably because it is contained within a text devoted to painting and because it concerns Italian rather than French material.

Malvasia carefully listed the dimensions (in Bolognese *once*), subject matter, technique, and inscriptions of the prints he identified, organizing them according to paper size and artist, and as original works or reproductions by others. He was prompted to do this by various considerations. Firstly, he was frustrated by the limitations of the rather vague and incomplete list of engravings by the Bolognese Marcantonio Raimondi provided by Vasari. Secondly, while he was in agreement with Vasari's view of the importance of Marcantonio's reproductions of inventions by Raphael, he challenged the idea that Marcantonio had needed to be trained in Rome. Malvasia also wanted the much wider contribution

of Bolognese printmakers to be better known. Thirdly, he was inspired by the growing number of print collections throughout Italy, but especially in Bologna, where he personally identified, measured, and described each print in the catalog, following his principle of ocular inspection. Malvasia himself owned only a modest number of works and relied heavily on the collection of his friend Giovanni Fabbri, which he described as "the most abundant and complete not only in Bologna, but in all of Italy."

Malvasia and Fabbri were pioneers in the exciting new field of print collecting, the importance of which for the diffusion of visual culture in early modern Europe paralleled the importance of printed books for the spread of ideas and texts. As Gregory Jecmen establishes in his profile in this *Bulletin*, Lessing J. Rosenwald was one of the most passionate collectors of both books and prints in the twentieth century. Like his predecessors, he saw print production as a source of both beauty and information, and this view aligned with his rare dedication to education and literacy. Several outstanding prints by Marcantonio (fig. 1) from Rosenwald's collection appear in the CASVA volume. His interest in seventeenth-century Italy was not strong, but his extraordinary donation inspired subsequent collectors with different tastes. Seven prints by Annibale Carracci (fig. 2) from a group given to the Gallery by Kate Ganz in 2008 are included in the Malvasia volume. To find high-quality examples for nearly nine hundred images the project had to turn to multiple repositories, especially those, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, that share the National Gallery's policy of open access.

The research team's work on the Malvasia project has helped to advance the training and knowledge of an emerging generation. Naoko Takahatake, formerly an Andrew W.



**Fig. 2. Annibale Carracci after Agostino Carracci, *Madonna and Child*, 1590/1593, etching and engraving, Gift of Kate Ganz**

Mellon curatorial fellow at the National Gallery, is now a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Mattia Biffis, a research associate on the project, has joined the Norwegian Institute in Rome. Carlo Girotto has been appointed lecturer at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle–Paris 3. Nathaniel Silver and Jamie Gabbarelli have joined the curatorial ranks of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and the Rhode Island School of Design, respectively. Jonathan Bober, Andrew W. Mellon senior curator of prints and drawings, provided much guidance and advice for this volume. It has been a pleasure to collaborate with this group as well as with Lorenzo Pericolo of the University of Warwick, who continues his indispensable work as senior research associate and coordinating editor.

• Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*