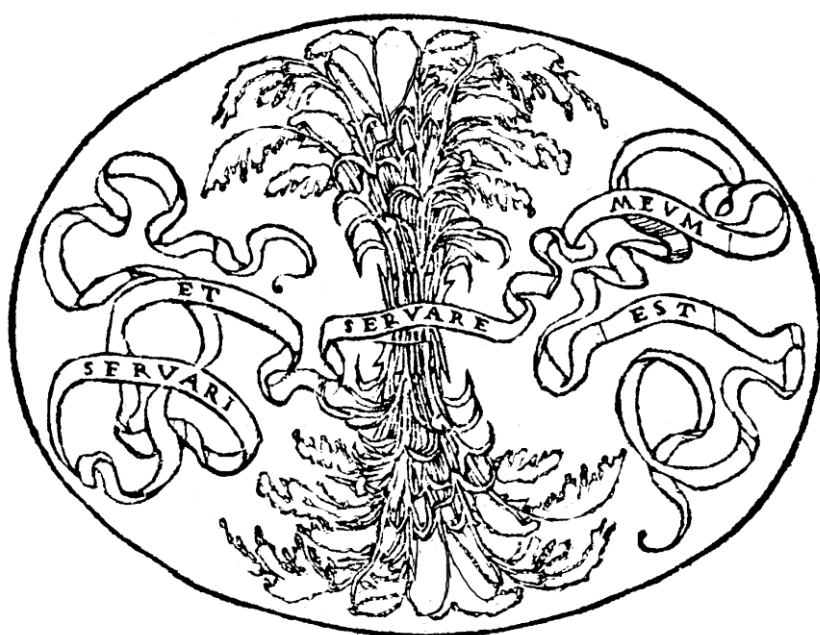


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***PRECETTI:***  
**REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN**  
**ARTISTIC PRACTICE AND THEORY**

In memoriam *Charles Dempsey (1937-2022)*

Up until relatively recently, art history has operated with a strict binary opposition between the concepts of artistic practice and art theory, which considers art treatises and artworks as being informed by different sets of artistic concerns. One result of this distinction has been to separate the knowledge published in treatises from that based on experiences from artistic action, as «living thought and experience»<sup>1</sup>. Such a strict theory-practice divide has informed the work of several prominent art historians focusing on early modern art history, such as Donald Posner or Denis Mahon<sup>2</sup>. In response, Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey were the first to argue for an understanding of artistic practice in conjunction with art-theoretical concerns<sup>3</sup>. More recently, studies by Pamela H. Smith, Angela Cerasuolo and Christina Neilson have explored overarching questions regarding the relationship between artistic practice and theory and between the handling of materials and ideas<sup>4</sup>. Cerasuolo highlights that artistic technique is a «no-man's-land, [...] lying between art theory and practice»<sup>5</sup>. The author underscores further that in order to understand the relationship between artistic practice and theory we need «to retrace the phases in the making of a painting»<sup>6</sup>.

Important stimuli regarding a revision between our concept of the relationship between theory and practice come from current studies in the history of science. For example, Matteo Valleriani has offered guidelines for organizing elusive practical knowledge. He advocates for the consideration of the differences between artistic knowledge published in treatises and in artworks not as opposing concepts of *episteme* and *techné* but as a variation in externalization of the «same» knowledge in «artefacts such as models, drawings, and texts»<sup>7</sup>. Another study helpful in rethinking the relationship of practice and theory is Pascal Dubourg Glatigny's and Hélène Vérin's book *Réduire en art. La technologie de la Renaissance aux Lumières*. These two editors consider the act of codifying practical knowledge as an essential characteristic of early modern culture. They also suggest that the «réduction en art» (codification of practical knowledge) is a rewriting and reformulating of practice<sup>8</sup>.

Against the backdrop of the current recalibration between the realms of theory and practice, in this paper I think through the concept of artistic *precetti*, a building block of early modern artistic pedagogy.

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I would like to thank Mariaceleste Di Meo, Unmil Karadkar, and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their comments on and help with the text.

<sup>1</sup> For a groundbreaking and early study on the problem of relating artistic theory to practice as one of the central problems of art history, see the *Introduction* of DEMPSEY 2000, pp. VIII-IX.

<sup>2</sup> MAHON 1947. Posner doubts that the Carracci were «conscious performers from the beginning» (POSNER 1971, I, p. 4). His suspicion of the «intellectual pretensions» of Agostino and Annibale Carracci prompted Charles Dempsey to write his book on *Annibale Carracci and the Beginnings of Baroque Style* (DEMPSEY 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Cropper deepened this approach of considering artistic theory and practice as inseparable categories in CROPPER 1971 and in her book CROPPER 1984. See also CROPPER–DEMPSEY 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Pamela H. Smith, in a series of studies that shifted the field of art history, highlighted many cases of artistic practice in its intersections with artistic production. See for example SMITH 2004. See also CERASUOLO 2017 and NEILSON 2019.

<sup>5</sup> CERASUOLO 2017, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> See the *Introduction* of *THE STRUCTURES OF PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE* 2017, p. VI.

<sup>8</sup> See the *Introduction* of *RÉDUIRE EN ART* 2008, pp. 13, 20-23. The editors also highlight that the «réduction en art» is not a simple means of conservation of knowledge, but a reorganisation.

But what are *precetti*, *principes* or *precepts* exactly? The term usually means instructions given verbally, «Principio o regola di condotta, norma, dettame, sentenza stabile, autorevole, indiscussa (che nasce dalla ragione o dalla coscienza morale o deriva dai fondamenti costitutivi di una scienza, di un'attività, di una dottrina, ecc.); ammaestramento pratico»<sup>9</sup>. Dubourg Glatigny and Vérin define precepts as the establishment of a body of rules that guide artistic practice, passed on from experienced artists to their students. Such an understanding of the term becomes also evident from Vasari's use of this word, when he describes the artists flocking into Masaccio's Cappella Brancacci: «a imparar sempre a questa cappella, et apprendere i precetti e le regole del far bene da le figure di Masaccio»<sup>10</sup>. *Precetti* therefore describe a body of artistic habits, a system of rules and therefore distinguish themselves from individual *consigli*<sup>11</sup>. However, since *precetti* are part of any teachable field of knowledge, they have been overlooked as an art-theoretical source.

### Leonardo's «precetti»

Perhaps, the best-known use of the term and concept of *precetti* is in Leonardo da Vinci's *Libro di pittura*, known till its first print-publication in Paris in 1651 as «Libro, Discorso, Opinioni, Precetti, Scritti, Aphorismi e Regole»<sup>12</sup>. Leonardo's *precetti* are indeed not written in the format of a coherent treatise, but they are short 'aphorisms' or longer passages on theoretical or practical aspects of painting which had a lasting impact on early modern artistic production and culture. Although the term *precetti* served as a *pars pro toto* for the whole treatise, Leonardo's *Libro di pittura*, compiled by Leonardo's student Francesco Melzi, lists only about 30 headings of the original *Libro di pittura* entitled *Precetto* or *Precetti*<sup>13</sup>.

Can we distinguish the nature of *precetto* in the *Libro di pittura* from other categories of text? An interesting example in this respect is a text passage whose title in the manuscript *Urbinas Latinus* 1270 gets converted from *Notizia* to *Precetto*<sup>14</sup>. Under the heading *Notizia del giovane disposto alla pittura*, the text mentions that many young men feel a desire to practice *disegno*, but profoundly lack the disposition for this art. This becomes already evident in boys those who draw without diligence and ever add shadows to their drawings. A hand, different from Melzi's and which Pedretti identifies as 'editor' of Melzi's manuscript, adds the heading *Precetto* further down in the text<sup>15</sup>. While some of the *precetti* directly address the reader or student of painting, others take an impersonal tone. Therefore, direct address to readers

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<sup>9</sup> See *precetto* in *GDLI*.

<sup>10</sup> VASARI/BETTARINI-BAROCCHI 1966-1987, III (1971), p. 300.

<sup>11</sup> Such as given, for example, by Cennini (CENNINI/SERCHI 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Up to the publication of Leonardo's *precetti* as a treatise in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, its titles varied as mentioned in FARAGO-BELL-VECCE 2018, p. XVI. The *Codex Urbinas Latinus* 1270 in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana with the title *Libro di pittura di messer Lionardo da Vinci pittore et scultore fiorentino* is considered the earliest extant version of Leonardo's notes on painting compiled by Francesco Melzi (see LEONARDO DA VINCI/PEDRETTI-VECCE 1995). On the history of the manuscript see also LEONARDO DA VINCI/MILANESI 1890 and *THE LITERARY WORKS OF LEONARDO DA VINCI* 1977, I, pp. 12-14.

<sup>13</sup> Usually the titles for each of the text passages are short resumés of the text's content. See, for example: «9. Come il pittore è signore d'ogni sorta di gente e di tutte le cose. Il pittore è padrone di tutte le cose che possono cadere in pensiero all'uomo [...]» (LEONARDO DA VINCI/MILANESI 1890, p. 7).

<sup>14</sup> «Noticia del giovane disposto alla pittura: Molti sono gli homini ch'anno desiderio et amore al disegno [...]» (see Francesca Fiorani's site *Leonardo da Vinci & His Treatise on Painting*, [www.treatiseonpainting.org](http://www.treatiseonpainting.org) <September 12, 2023>, *Libro di Pittura* T0051). On the history of the *Codex Urbinas Latinus* 1270 see also *THE LITERARY WORKS OF LEONARDO DA VINCI* 1977, I, pp. 12-14; «Manus 1. Precetto: Non è laudabile quel pittore che non fa bene se non una cosa sola [...]» (for this text passage see also LEONARDO DA VINCI/PEDRETTI-VECCE 1995, II, p. 170. Pedretti and Vecce, however, do not mention the change of title and its implications).

<sup>15</sup> *THE LITERARY WORKS OF LEONARDO DA VINCI* 1977, I, pp. 12-13.

within the text is not a required indicator of a *precetto*. However, passages entitled with *precetto* are true to the definition of this word as revealing a fundamental truth about the profession of the painter or basic technical details connected to the art of painting. On the other hand, the word *notizia* could be translated as ‘information’ and, in the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, is defined as a synonym of ‘cognition’<sup>16</sup>. This cognitive aspect of the *notizia* reduces the more universal and philosophical nature of *precetti*<sup>17</sup>. I suggest that *notizia* relates to *precetto* in the same way as does the Aristotelian concept of history to that of poetry<sup>18</sup>. For example, in his *Poetica* Aristotle underscores that «poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history»<sup>19</sup>. In Aristotle, while history focuses on particular, individual facts, poetry and philosophy focus on universals. In his *Poetica*, Aristotle highlights that the historian concentrates on ‘what has happened’ but the poet should say «what sort of things might happen, that is, the things possible according to likelihood or necessity» (Arist., *Poetica*, 1451a 36-38)<sup>20</sup>. *Precetti* reveal the deep, returning and relevant patterns of the art of painting, combining painterly action and judgment as universal rules of painting, which serve as the foundation of Leonardo’s *scienza della pittura*. Leonardo underscores that with his *Libro di pittura* he uses his proficiency as a writer to author a treatise of painting similar to the literary genre of *Poetica* for poetry: highlighting the nobility of painting, investigating its rules<sup>21</sup>.

From the seventeenth-century reception of the *Libro di pittura* it is evident that it was read true to its aphoristic structure as a list of *precetti*. Such a mode of reading is documented by Nicolas Poussin’s fragmentary treatise or by the natural philosopher Vincenzo Viviani’s mention of the leonardian work as «precetti del Vinci»<sup>22</sup>.

Leonardo defines the relationship between theory and practice as: «Study the science first, and then follow the practice which results from that science»; and «The painter should study methodically and not leave anything without fixing it in memory»<sup>23</sup>. Leonardo’s passage also clarifies that he associated *precetti* with the Aristotelian category of science and not with that of theory, tying it closely to its ‘demonstration’ in the form of an artwork. Thus, the intended role of the *precetti* is to guide the student/artist in his realization of the necessary goal of demonstrating the science-art.

Giovan Battista Armenini’s treatise *De’ veri precetti della pittura* (Ravenna 1586) states that *precetti* could be communicated detached from witnessing the act of artistic production. He recounts a collaboration between Taddeo Zuccari and Daniele Porri da Parma as based entirely on *precetti* or «descritte regole essendo derivate dalle bocche di chi fece le opera buone»<sup>24</sup>. Daniele da Parma, who was commissioned to decorate a church in Alvito but was

<sup>16</sup> «Quello che risulta dal conoscere» (*VOCABOLARIO DEGLI ACCADEMICI DELLA CRUSCA* 1612, p. 560).

<sup>17</sup> While the heading *notizia* appears only in that particular case in Leonardo’s treatise, the various text passages entitled *precetti* or *precetto* focus on fundamental attitudes and habits of the universal artist, for example: «Quel pittore che non dubita, poco acquista» (LEONARDO DA VINCI/MILANESI 1890, p. 38); «Precetto, che il pittore non s’inganni nell’elezione della figura» (ivi, p. 52); «Precetto del comporre le istorie: O tu, componitore delle storie, non membrificare con terminati lineamenti [...]» (ivi, p. 74).

<sup>18</sup> HEATH 2009.

<sup>19</sup> See ARMSTRONG 1998, p. 447, and HEATH 2009, p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> See in particular ARMSTRONG 1998, p. 447.

<sup>21</sup> See LEONARDO DA VINCI/MILANESI 1890, pp. 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> For the affinity between Poussin’s *Notes on Painting* and Leonardo’s treatise see COLANTUONO 2000. See Filippo Baldinucci’s *Notizie di Matteo Rosselli* (BALDINUCCI/RANALLI 1845-1847, IV (1846), p. 173) for the reference to Vincenzo Viviani’s *Quinto libro degli Elementi d’Euclide* (Florence 1674). See also the first print publication LEONARDO DA VINCI/FRESNE 1651.

<sup>23</sup> LEONARDO DA VINCI/McMAHON 1956, I, p. 47. McMahon mentions that another hand added to the first *precetto* «quello che prima si de’ studiare, o la pratica o la scientia»; while to the second sentence has been added: «Studio del pittore giovane». The idea of practice as science is changed in Giorgio Vasari’s still very little studied *teoriche*. For an important remedy of this situation see CERASUOLO 2017, pp. 41-53; see also COLLARETA 2010. More often than the term *precetti*, Vasari employs the word *preceitore* for master.

<sup>24</sup> ARMENINI/GORRERI 1988, pp. 258-259.

not a great painter, took along Taddeo Zuccari (who excelled in *disegno* with soft outlines), «insegnandogli così con le parole tutto quello ch'egli teneva in mente»<sup>25</sup>. Taddeo painted following the instructions provided by Daniele. Armenini was fascinated by the possibility of words alone directing artistic production, as he clarifies in another example described in his conclusion: Michelangelo instructed a stonemason in such detail that the latter was able to complete a sculpture he alone would never have been able to create<sup>26</sup>. These examples of the possibility of effective artistic instruction through words alone is also Armenini's main motivation behind the writing of his treatise.

Artists rarely recorded their *precetti* in writing. Pamela H. Smith states that capturing the experience of art production into words was often perceived as difficult or inadequate by artists<sup>27</sup>. However, *precetti* were also a key part of a workshop's artistic capital and therefore were often subject to secrecy<sup>28</sup>.

*Precetti* are always diegetic, which means that they are connected to a named authority, and often imagined as verbal instructions given by the master to his students. Leonardo's widely circulating and later published *precetti* are words removed «from the temporal and ephemeral dimension of oral communication»<sup>29</sup>. Leonardo's words describe and prescribe actions that turn into «things, [...] into an artificial product that will endure through time and that can be taken apart and analyzed»<sup>30</sup>.

*Precetti* may, however, also be embedded in a work of art, so that the able eye can reverse the process of artistic production and reconstruct the *precetti* that went into the work's production. Through attentive analysis, a work of art therefore can be retransformed into the actions and artistic decisions that originally have contributed to its creation and turns again into a body of artistic *precetti*. In this metamorphosis from image to artistic action, three aspects become essential: the intrinsic association of artworks with the practice that produced them, the meta-temporality of *precetti*, and the student's storage of *precetti* in his memory. The complex temporal nature of *precetti* suggests that we have to understand them within Aristotelian categories of experience, *habitus*, and memory as important preconditions for artistic production<sup>31</sup>. They are an expression of experience that can be deciphered through a series of sensory perceptions, which inscribe themselves into memory and over time form the artist's *habitus* as a trained disposition, as something that will condition his/her behavior in the future<sup>32</sup>. But in addition to these general connections with Aristotelian mechanisms of rationalization of experience, Leonardo's *precetti* were attributed to a named author. This attribution therefore also encapsulated the concept of autoptic (first-hand) observation, 'seeing for oneself' – as the way to convey authentic and authoritative knowledge. The combination of experience, autoptic observation and memory that informs Leonardo's concept of the *precetti* also becomes evident in their reception, for example in the fragmentary treatise, that Giovan Pietro Bellori relays to us, by Nicolas Poussin, *Osservazioni di Niccolò Pussino sopra la pittura*<sup>33</sup>. Poussin's «avvertissements» (that's how he called them in a letter from 1650) were supposed to «compilare un libro di pittura, annotando varie materie, e ricordi secondo leggeva, o contemplava da se stesso con fine di ordinarli»<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 258.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> See for example *WAYS OF MAKING AND KNOWING* 2017.

<sup>28</sup> For example, famously André Félibien's *Des Principes de l'Architecture, de la Sculpture, de la Peinture* were motivated by the secrecy of artisans and artists about their artistic practice as the author deplores in his *Préface* (FÉLIBIEN 1676, p.n.n.).

<sup>29</sup> BOLZONI 2001, p. 238.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> About the Aristotelian concept of experience see GREGORIĆ–GRGIĆ 2006.

<sup>32</sup> On the concept of *habitus* in art theory see STRUHAL 2020, pp. 99-103.

<sup>33</sup> BELLORI/BOREA 2009, pp. 478-481.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.



The connection of Leonardo's *precetti* to autopsy also reveals parallels with the epistemic practices of early modern natural philosophical developments in observation. In particular, Gianna Pomata highlights the early modern conceptual connections between observation and experiment, between «*experimenta et observationes*»<sup>35</sup>. Matching the general development of the epistemic genre of *observationes* delineated by Gianna Pomata, Leonardo's *precetti* and Poussin's *observationes* were not anonymous compilations of observations but were made by an identified author/observer, and formed a bridge from the small community of teacher-student relationship to a much wider audience. In fact, if we situate Leonardo's and Poussin's concept of the *precetti* in Aristotle's discussion of experiences, as acts establishing memory, they become part of degrees of knowledge rather than forms of knowledge presentation. As Aristotle states in *Metafisica* (981a 7-12): «art comes about when one universal judgment about similar things is produced from many thoughts of experience»<sup>36</sup>. However, that Leonardo recorded his *precetti* alludes to their meta-temporal nature in his thinking and suspends their ephemeral status in orality. In doing so, Leonardo's *precetti* are elevated to a body of permanent, analyzable, academic and humanistic knowledge; I therefore suggest that *precetti* are not only situated between theory and practice, but that the association of *precetti* with experience can help us conceptualize them within a hierarchy of cognitive practices that art and science share.

#### *A 'museum' of artistic practice: Giovan Battista Armenini's De' veri precetti della pittura*

Already the title of Giovan Battista Armenini's *De' veri precetti della pittura* alludes to Leonardo's *precetti*, which at that point were unpublished but widely circulating in the artists' workshops. In fact, Olszewski suggests that Armenini studied Leonardo's treatise during a stay in Milan<sup>37</sup>. Leonardo's impact also becomes apparent in Armenini's focus on the art of painting alone, the art most esteemed by Leonardo. Yet, while Leonardo's *precetti* are informed by the concise brevity that lends credibility to their embeddedness in the context of orality and workshop practice, Armenini's create a voluminous, humanistic treatise. The theorist's belief in the importance of teaching art through *precetti* and *regole* is unbendable and he has unflinching faith in the power of language to be able to convey even those elements of artistic practice that originally would be based on the master's practical demonstration only within the workshop. Armenini also believed deeply in the power of 'writing' to enable him to reach a pan-regional audience across Italy. He promotes the *precetti* as solid anchors of artistic quality, as «fundamentally unchangeable rules [...] of the art of painting» onto which the theorist entrusts the fate of this art before the backdrop of its decline<sup>38</sup>. Armenini claims that he had searched for these rules and precepts with the greatest diligence and study, travelling all over Italy to record the *regole* of different masters, and his main goal is to form a compendium of the rules «scattered as in a forest in order to collect them in a single volume»<sup>39</sup>. Even more explicitly than in Leonardo's case, in Armenini's art-theoretical system the idea of the *precetti* is intrinsically connected to the idea of memory. In fact, it is «the written word, which spreads throughout the world, not only are the arts rendered easier and less wearisome, but they are

<sup>35</sup> POMATA 2011, p. 46.

<sup>36</sup> Cit. in GREGORIĆ–GRGIĆ 2006, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> ARMENINI/OLSZEWSKI 1977, p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> Ivi, p. 72. For the Italian formulation («alcune regole e precetti, i quali sono come fondamenti immutabili dell'arte») see also the edition ARMENINI/GORRERI 1988, p. 10. In its commentary, Marina Gorreri underscores the *precetti's* negative side effect of inhibiting and regulating artistic genius and understands the repression of *precetti* as part of a process of professional and intellectual codification of the work of artists.

<sup>39</sup> ARMENINI/OLSZEWSKI 1977, p. 72; ARMENINI/GORRERI 1988, p. 11.

also preserved more firmly and alive in the memory of posterity»<sup>40</sup>. The reorganization of artistic *regole* from a «forest» into a «volume» recalls Lina Bolzoni's fascinating analysis of the association of «places of memory» and «topical places» in the early modern era<sup>41</sup>. By rendering his treatise accessible all over Italy, Armenini aims for the development of a pan-regional foundation of art, promoting a style that combines the best elements of the best masters. The treatise therefore turns into a 'museum of artistic practice', a 'place of memory'.

The aim of the text is to form the «vero pittore» to be able to produce «vere pitture» and to help artists to acquire a «bella e dotta maniera» through his descriptions of *precetti*<sup>42</sup>. The *vero* occupies an essential part in Armenini's thinking.

Armenini states that it is necessary to teach painting through «insegnamenti, [...] modi e [...] avvertimenti» more than any other art; every art has a «principio, mezzo e fine»<sup>43</sup>. Armenini's intention is to demonstrate the «mezzi e modi veri» reforming the «debole principi» of bad artistic pedagogues<sup>44</sup>. *Precetti* for Armenini are therefore «mezzi e modi veri» to achieve «fini eccellenti»<sup>45</sup>. Armenini upholds the didactic model of Raphael, who showed his students how to become excellent painters<sup>46</sup>. Yet, in case a young student does not end up with a good master, there are few means of improving his style. For example, Vasari's *Lives* are of no use to young artists, but Armenini's compilation of the unchanging and unchangeable *precetti* for good artistic practice aims to guide students and help them<sup>47</sup>. Much of Armenini's treatise is written in the first person, impersonating the voice of the experienced advisor that also informs Leonardo's *precetti*, with the goal of assembling the fundamentally unchangeable rules and precepts of the art of painting in a concise, written form. He puts these rules in an «ordine vero» with the aim of helping students develop their artistic skills step-by-step<sup>48</sup>. It is interesting that artistic practice, which we consider so elusive a field, is to Armenini the solid rock on which art renews itself.

### *Federico Zuccari and the decline of precetti*

Despite the important legacy of Leonardo's *precetti* in late sixteenth-century Italy, Federico Zuccari's slightly later treatise, *L'Idea de' Pittori, Scultori, et Architetti* (Turin 1607), expresses a negative view of this concept. The author mentions Leonardo's *Libro di pittura* together with Albrecht Dürer's *Underweysung der Messung* (Nuremberg 1525):

Parimente di poco frutto fu, e di poca sostanza, altra regola che lasciò disegnata con scritti alla rovescia un altro pur valent'uomo di professione, ma troppo sofisticato anch'egli, in lasciare precetti pur mathematici a muovere e torcere la figura [...]. Dirò bene che queste regole mathematiche si devono lasciare a quelle scienze e professioni speculative della geometria, astronomia, aritmetica e simili, che con prove loro acquietano l'intelletto. Ma noi altri professori del disegno non abbiamo bisogno d'altre regole che quelle, che la natura stessa ne dà, per quella imitare<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> ARMENINI/OLSZEWSKI 1977, p. 94; ARMENINI/GORRERI 1988, p. 34.

<sup>41</sup> BOLZONI 2001, pp. 188-191.

<sup>42</sup> ARMENINI/GORRERI 1988, pp. 15-16.

<sup>43</sup> Ivi, p. 256.

<sup>44</sup> Ivi, p. 257.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, pp. 257-258.

<sup>48</sup> Ivi, p. 22.

<sup>49</sup> ZUCCARI 1607, book II, p. 31.

In a true misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Leonardo's *precetti*, they become associated exclusively with mathematics and geometry and a mechanization of the arts that the 'professore del disegno' should avoid.

Ma dico bene, e so che dico il vero, che l'arte della pittura non piglia i suoi principi, né ha necessità alcuna di ricorrere alle mathematiche scienze ad imparare regole e modi alcuni per l'arte sua, né ancho per poterne ragionare in speculazione: però non è di essa figliola, ma bene sì della natura e del disegno. L'una le mostra la forma. L'altra gl'insegna ad operare<sup>50</sup>.

For Zuccari, Leonardo's *precetti* are based on mathematics, a science at odds with the painter's obligation of following nature because, as speculative science, mathematics is only interested in the realm of immaterial ideas. However, what Zuccari means when he talks about the imitation of nature is not naturalism *per se* but an analysis of the «natura commune» of objects and beings of the same category, as he explains with the representation of a lion, whose «forma spirituale» the artist must represent<sup>51</sup>.

Even though Zuccari eschews Leonardo's *precetti* as too mechanical, he still upholds the importance of artistic practice<sup>52</sup>. In fact, Zuccari situates *precetti* at the nexus between theory and practice, as mediator between the «disegno speculativo» and the «disegno pratico»<sup>53</sup>. He underscores the importance of artists of being able to work according to the rules of «precetti and regole», by paralleling them to doctors who draw on theoretical knowledge of medicine in order to know which medications to choose for patients' treatments: «non sarà mai perfetto pittore, scultore o architetto, chi non sa porre in esecuzione le regole e i precetti imparati in teorica»<sup>54</sup>. He repeats this message by drawing on the story of Jacob's two wives from the Old Testament – associating the beautiful but barren Rachel with theory and the less attractive but fertile Lea with practice: «così le scienze pratiche, sebbene non sono così belle, sono però feconde»<sup>55</sup>.

Zuccari's uneasiness about associating artistic practice solely with *precetti* is reflected in Filippo Baldinucci's *Notizie* as well. For example, in the life of Albrecht Dürer, Baldinucci reveals that the artist refuted *precetti* that were tied too closely to mathematical rules:

Questo sublime intelletto, per poter assegnare una certa ragione di ogni sua opera e per facilitare a chi si fosse il conseguimento di ogni perfezione nell'arte, si era messo con intollerabil fatica a ordinare il libro della simetria de' corpi umani, nel quale ebbe questa intenzione di ridurre il buon disegno in metodo e in precetti<sup>56</sup>.

Baldinucci further explains that Dürer recorded his universal *precetti* with a good intention of guiding artists in avoiding major mistakes: «Ha però insegnato l'esperienza, che la vera, più corta e più sicura regola per far bene si è l'aver l'artefice, come diceva il Buonarroto, le seste negli occhi»<sup>57</sup>. Like Zuccari, Baldinucci also positions himself against a pre-established set of artistic rules and shifts the focus to individual artists' judgment.

Nevertheless, theoretical reflection on artistic practice is an essential aspect of Baldinucci's art-theoretical thinking. This becomes apparent from the Life of Matteo Rosselli,

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>51</sup> For the formulation of «natura commune», see ZUCCARI 1607, book I, p. 31; for the ideal of the «forma spirituale» explained through the example of imitating a lion, see *ivi*, p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> PFISTERER 1993, pp. 251-252.

<sup>53</sup> ZUCCARI 1607, book I, p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>56</sup> BALDINUCCI/RANALLI 1845-1847, II (1846), p. 17.

<sup>57</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 17-18.

who instructed his students through wonderful *precetti*. For Rosselli *precetti* were tightly linked to his specific artistic practice as illustrated in the following anecdote: when a student tells Rosselli what he had read in Leonardo da Vinci's treatise, Rosselli dismisses the boasting statement of his student saying «Quello che io so fare fare, l'intendo; quello che io non so fare, non l'intendo, essendo una stessa cosa appresso di me il non saper fare ciò che s'intende, quanto il nulla intendere»<sup>58</sup>. He continues: «poco vale la teorica che mai giunge la pratica», thereby inverting the theory-practice hierarchy present in Zuccari's text<sup>59</sup>. Yet, like Zuccari, he compares the relationship between artistic theory and practice to that of other professions. This becomes evident from a long quote of Galileo's *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo* (Florence 1632), in which he again refers to the «precetti del Vinci» which do not vouchsafe that, if a painter knows them, actually is able to paint<sup>60</sup>.

This shift towards viewing art through the lens of its practice lies at the foundation of Baldinucci's *Vocabolario toscano dell'Arte del Disegno* (Florence 1681) in which the author presented an overview of artistic practice by including terms from art-theoretical literature as well as those belonging to the colloquial usage of artists and connoisseurs<sup>61</sup>. Baldinucci's *Vocabolario* is both a monument to the complex and diversified language of Florentine artistic practice and a means of enabling connoisseurs to broaden their linguistic terminology – it is a sea of *precetti* that no longer are formulated to produce art, but to widen the audience that understood artistic production and appreciated art. By transforming the authority of a single artist – as evident from Leonardo's *precetti* – into the collective, yet also anonymized voice of all the Florentine artists he heightens their authority. However, although the *Vocabolario* describes artistic actions, it no longer prescribes them, thus significantly changing the nature of artistic *precetti*.

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<sup>58</sup> BALDINUCCI/RANALLI 1845-1847, IV (1846), p. 172.

<sup>59</sup> *Ivi*, p. 173.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>61</sup> STRUHAL 2020, p. 58.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the overlooked art-theoretical category of *precetti*, verbal or written instructions by a master to students of painting. More specifically, it analyses their epistemic structure and their complex position between theory and practice, by tracing at the same time their evolution from Leonardo's *Libro di pittura* to Giovanni Battista Armenini, Federico Zuccari and Filippo Baldinucci. *Precetti* combine the theory and practice of painting in a complex way, laying open the artist's decisions for the trained eye, even long after the work of art has been created.

Il presente lavoro si concentra sulla categoria teorico-artistica, oggi poco o nulla analizzata, dei *precetti*, da intendersi come istruzioni verbali o scritte da parte di un maestro nei confronti degli studenti di pittura. Più nello specifico, il saggio analizza la struttura epistemica e la complessa posizione di tali istruzioni fra teoria e pratica, tracciandone al contempo lo sviluppo a partire dal *Libro di pittura* di Leonardo sino a Giovan Battista Armenini, Federico Zuccari e Filippo Baldinucci. I *precetti* combinano in modo complesso teoria e pratica della pittura, mettendo le decisioni dell'artista a disposizione dell'occhio esperto, anche in un tempo di molto successivo alla vera e propria creazione dell'opera d'arte.