

Pamela H. Smith

Art, Artisanship, and Alchemy



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When I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I had just finished a summer's research in the archives of Leiden and Amsterdam and was eager to begin working through the episodes and information gathered from notarial records. To my amazement, because of the marvellous assistance of Barbara Sanders and the wonderfully efficient work of the entire staff of the library, I was able to spend almost no time on the problems of quotidian existence and very little time in running from library to library, and could simply indulge my enthusiasm for my new project from almost the first day in Berlin. This project was new for me in several senses: a new language (Dutch), new sources (notarial archives in Holland), and a new historiographical tradition (combining history of science and art history). At the most general level, I wanted to explore artisanal ways of thinking about their own acts of making and creation and how those attitudes were incorporated into the new science (or, natural philosophy) of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. I see the emergence of the new natural philosophy as part of a larger long-term change in attitudes to the material world in Western Europe which brought about a new view of nature, based on an epistemology that posited the use of the senses to engage actively with nature, and which had as its aim the representation of the material world as observed by the individual.

In this project, I focus on one source of these new attitudes to the natural world — namely, artisanal understanding of the materials they worked and of their own processes of creation. Over the year, I have developed a general interpretative framework that posits a dynamic between artisanal self-consciousness about the process of representing nature and Renaissance humanist interest in artisans that resulted in a new epistemology in the sixteenth century. This epistemology, which I characterize as "doing is knowing", and which I see as typically artisanal, advocated the idea that nature itself must be actively engaged with in order to gain knowledge of the natural world — knowledge that claimed to "imitate" nature. This epistemology became established in the seventeenth century and eventually was called the new empiricism of the scientific revolution.

As a way to approach this topic, I selected figures from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries who provide a view into artisans' understanding of their own work and the relationship between artisans and new philosophers. Stimulated by the work of Hans Belting, I took notice of the emerging self-consciousness among panel painters in Flanders in the early fifteenth century that led to an articulation of their own process of creation and of knowledge of nature. When I began this project, I thought I had left the history of alchemy behind me, but it kept popping up, even, or especially, in the work of panel painters in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. My conversations with Caroline Bynum and Karine Chemla also kept it present in my consciousness, and I found that alchemy seemed to provide a language used by both scholars and artisans to describe the process by which *ars* is produced. The articulation by artisans and scholars of this process of creation was formed into a new epistemology employed both by new philosophers and artisans in the sixteenth century (here I focus on the work of Paracelsus as well as that of goldsmiths in Nuremberg and the French potter Bernard Palissy). The next figure whom I examined was the chemist/apothecary, Johann Rudolf Glauber (1603/4-70), liminal between scholars and artisans, who I believe represents a moment of transition in which the new epistemology was incorporated into a new discourse about nature. Finally, helped by the observations of Elisabeth de Bièvre, Arnold Davidson, Hans Medick, and Jean-Claude Schmitt, I focused on the scholarly work and painting collection of the Leiden professor of practical medicine, Franciscus de le Boë, called Sylvius (1614-72), as an example of how, by the seventeenth century, the new epistemology had become well-established and distanced from its artisanal origins while vestiges of these beginnings still remained in the practices and interests of the new scientists.

The time at the Wissenschaftskolleg has thus given me the opportunity to work through much of the art historical literature and produce three long papers on Flemish artists and Nuremberg artisans, on J. R. Glauber, and on Franciscus de le Boë, which will form the basis of the second, third, and fourth chapters of the book in which this project eventually will appear. If only the "year" at the Wissenschaftskolleg lasted not 10 but 18 or even 24 months!

The stimulus given to my project from my fellows at the Kolleg as well as from Berlin colleagues in art history and the history of science was invaluable in helping me to shape the shapeless mass of information with which I arrived in Berlin. The ritual lunches fostered a hearty comradeship, but most important were the less formal meetings with other Fellows and their spouses on walks and bicycle rides through the Grunewald and exhilarating evenings at the Komische Oper and the Staatsoper. Watching the daily business of the unification of the city of Berlin was fascinating in itself, and we were helped greatly in this by Eva Hund's "field trips" and discussions in German class. Just observing the city (and going to the opera) would have filled a wonderful year in Berlin, if only there wasn't so much else to do...