scribes as personification’s “delicate balancing act” (653) between reality and artifice, between materiality and immateriality. And again and again we find appreciations of what Jeremy Tambling here names as the “desire” (92) at the heart of personification: this figure’s way of impelling human bodies toward larger orders of being, toward each other, and toward the enactment of our own complexly significant, and often invisible, forms of life.

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_L’amour de l’art: Erotique de l’artiste et du spectateur au XVIe siècle._
Lise Wajeman.

Today, it seems unremarkable for an individual to be identified as an “art lover,” or for us to imagine a painter’s work to be a labor of love. But the idea of “love of art” as a sociological phenomenon is a distinctly modern one. Lise Wajeman argues in _L’amour de l’art_ that at its origins, the love of art, whether in the making or in the viewing, traveled through the erotic, in a newfound eroticism of art emerging in the European Renaissance.

With a primary focus, as her title suggests, on the sixteenth century, Wajeman studies the erotics of the artwork with reference to the literature of three countries—England, France, and Italy—and to examples of visual art that are largely Italian, but also French, German, and Dutch. It is a vast corpus. Wajeman assembles numerous sixteenth-century examples of the erotics of visual art, studying such key literary figures as the triad of Alexander, Apelles, and Campaspe; the story of Pygmalion; and diverse representations of the figure of Venus. Along the way, she touches on questions of idolatry and iconoclasm, the love of the antique, pornography, the Medusa-like powers of art to petrify the viewer, and the effects of image viewing on pregnant women, among other topics. One of the book’s major contributions, particularly in the discussion of Alexander, Apelles, and Campaspe, is to bring English material into dialogue with Continental material that might have seemed far afield, and literary material into dialogue with visual arts.

Wajeman begins with a discussion of the trope of love itself as a visual art that paints or engraves the image of the beloved on the heart or in the imagination. From the very start, representational arts and illusion are at issue. At the same time, the distinction between love caused by the sight of a beloved and love caused by the sight of a representation is not always clear (because female beauty and paintings can both be aestheticized, does this mean that “a painting is a woman”?). To what extent is there an eros of skillful creation regardless of the attractiveness of the represented bodies? To what extent should
we understand the developing capabilities and representational conventions of the visual arts in the Renaissance as the source of the new eroticism?

Wajeman suggests many subtle associations with the reading of ancient texts, the unearthing of antique nudes, the phenomena of idolatry and iconoclasm, and the widespread distribution of prints. She could have gone further in tracing precise historical relationships that account for different sociocultural contexts. Is anxiety about eroticism especially pronounced when tensions over the sacred image run high? Does antiquarian interest in nude sculpture precede or follow an erotics of the image? Where do we place other kinds of desire associated with art—those that are not expressly erotic, such as the possessive desire of the collector, the patron’s desire to be remembered, the scholar’s desire to know?

The book implicitly makes a very ambitious claim: that the very possibility of a “love of art” is at the very center of the modern definition of art itself. If a late medieval altarpiece is doing its job, you don’t love the painting; you love God. But this (perhaps overly implicit) claim raises a new question that the scope of the book cannot address: if an eroticism of the image (bound up with notions of the efficacy of the image that we have tended to refer back to “medieval” ways of thinking about visual art) guides a turn toward the modern notion of autonomous art, should we see the modern, ostensibly nonsexual “love of art” as a chastening development out of or against the eroticized love of art, or are they really one and the same?

It’s worth noting that the erotics of art here are represented as distinctly heterosexual. Though there is no space in this short review to delve into a full set of arguments about this topic, I wish Wajeman had consulted more recent work in feminist and queer art history and allowed them to open questions about the gendering of the artwork and model as female and the artist as heterosexual male. I also question the broad organizational principle that (loosely) divides painting and sculpture between the eros of making and that of beholding, where painting falls mainly on the side of the maker (where making is a proxy for possessing) and sculpture on that of the beholder (thus, we are really not speaking of beholders, but of an audience—and a participatory one at that). Wajeman attends to the making of sculpture and the viewing and acquisition of paintings, so the division does not seem entirely warranted.

That the Renaissance set in motion new ideas about the erotics of making and viewing artworks is not a new idea, but this book, in the comprehensiveness of its references, its deft interpretations, and its suggestive and important claims, will provide readers interested in the topic with much food for thought.

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