CHAPTER 2

Issues and Forms

Certain issues in the literature of art are related in a significant manner to technique, a link which has rarely been a subject of study, as art theory, and this also in the intentions of the authors, was central to the debate in the sixteenth century. However, the stimulus provided by the theoretical debate did not omit to influence the practice of artists. An attempt to re-examine the technical practices of the time, dipping into the ambitions and preferences guiding the choices of artists, can also help to throw light on the formal qualities that they were aiming for through these choices.

Following the thread of the interaction between theory and practice, the subjects we will engage with in this section will only allow a partial overview of the theoretical debate, which is not intended to be exhaustive, as such a broad aim would require a separate study, far more detailed than the one we can attempt here. The examination of the studies conducted on the literature of art was also directed with this purpose in mind. In many cases, fundamental voices of art literature have been used as sources, after having been analysed throughout the twentieth century from a theoretical perspective: these testimonies have been here considered in their relationship with art practice, and the selection of studies has been limited to the most appropriate sources for such a purpose, and to a bibliography specifically dealing with the issues under examination.

Each issue which is dealt with here, finds more contextual references from the perspective of artistic practice in the two following sections. Drawing technique, for example, closely connected to the subject of invenzione, to which the first paragraph is dedicated here, will be analysed in detail in the third section through the examination of the tools, materials and methods, whereas in the fourth section we will be examining the process of the realisation of the work, as described by the authors and exemplified in paintings by Raphael, Giulio Romano, Polidoro, thanks to the technical investigation that allows one to add the analysis of the underlying drawing to that of preparatory drawings, which is a further step in the creative process.

The examination of Vasari and Armenini’s positions in relation to two significant aspects of technique, finish and speed of execution, expressed in the categories of diligenza and prestezza, highlights the contrasting attitude of the two artists-writers, focusing at the same time on a number of issues related to disegno, but also on the organisation of tasks in workshop practice;
Vasari, whose custom was to amply delegate work to his assistants, could indicate as his model the efficient organisation of Raphael's workshop. These issues will also surface in the following sections, tracing back in the treatises the description of the practice of painting, structured into two distinct steps of execution—bozze and finiture—that allowed the possibility of delegating part of the execution to the pupils, whilst taking care in person of the final retouching; in the fourth chapter, the Madonna del Divino Amore and the Madonna della gatta, alongside certain paintings with a similar subject kept at the Prado, are representative of the complicated intertwining of contributions (at times impossible to unravel) of pupils and Master in the activity of the workshop.

Glue-tempera (guazzo), a technique much praised by Vasari and unpopular with Armenini, the close relationship of which to drawing should be noted as also the praise of prestezza and virtuosity of the artists who practiced it, is examined in detail in its procedure in the chapter on tempera (3.5.2.), before being exemplified in such a singular painting as Parmigianino's Sacra famiglia (4.4.).

Examining the different implications stimulated by the comparison between painting and sculpture (a central issue in the sixteenth-century theoretical debate) in terms of the practice of art, a relevant element emerging from the controversy is the importance of the use of three-dimensional models as a guide for the execution of paintings, whilst drawing, generally considered to be part of painting, is at the heart of the sculptors' work. But the debate also helps to highlight all the potentialities of painting, and many of the technical aspirations that cross the whole of the sixteenth-century, are born of the desire to affirm the superiority of painting by improving the tools of the craft. Thus, the new way, the nuovo modo, of painting on stone introduced by Sebastiano del Piombo was in addition a response to the demand for durability resulting from the paragone debate: the detailed description provided by Vasari of the technical process will be commented in detail in the third chapter, and a direct examination, both visual and scientific, will then be dedicated in the last section to the works kept at the Capodimonte Museum, which are highly representative of this artist's work. The old argument between the seduction of colour appealing to the uncultivated and the austerity required of a work suitable for the expert eye, emerges variously throughout the century, setting the primacy of painting as artifice over the easy pleasures of beautiful colours. In this context, the mysterious substance Pliny described as adopted by Apelles as a finish for his paintings, probably stimulated the imagination of sixteenth-century artists who tried to imitate its prodigious qualities. This subject is related to the issue of varnishes and glazes, never absent in 'cleaning controversies', to