INTRODUCTION

THE HOCKNEY-FALCO THESIS:
CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

SVEN DUPRÉ
Ghent University

A recent article in Art Bulletin comments: “Not unreasonably, modern historians of Netherlandish painting have evinced little sympathy for a treatment of artistic reform apparently so rooted in technological determinism.”¹ The object of the art historians’ scorn was Giorgio Vasari’s attribution of the alleged discovery of oil paint to Jan Van Eyck and his argument that this discovery lay at the basis of the great leap forward in pictorial verisimilitude. As it turns out, oil paint had been around long before Van Eyck took up his brush, and so there is little historical ground for Vasari’s attribution and the argument that it wants to support. Artists’ notorious secrecy—in particular as it comes to technical recipes—forms part of the conventionalized fabric of artistic biography. Is David Hockney’s claim in his recent book Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters (2001) that secret optics was at the basis of the sudden rise of realism in Netherlandish art just the latest version of a centuries-old convention?

“Optics don’t make marks,” Hockney warned in Secret Knowledge, wishing to stress that his grand thesis that optics was at the basis of the rise of realism in European art did not want to downplay the genius of the artist.² His observation was not made without a reason. In a review of Philip Steadman’s Vermeer’s Camera: Uncovering the Truth behind the Masterpieces (2001), the art historian Walter Liedtke had thought it necessary to remind the reader of a warning, almost half a century old, to the effect that

² This is the full quote: “It is worth repeating here, I think, that optics don’t make marks—they only produce an image, a look, a means of measurement. The artist is still responsible for the conception, and it requires great skill to overcome the technical problems and to be able to render that image in paint.” David Hockney, Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters (London, 2001), 131.
“one of the obvious dangers that investigations of the mechanical aids, such as the camera obscura, face in art history is that the genuine artistic impulses and aims of the painter may be lost to view while the pseudo-scientific connections and gadgetry lore are played up.”

By contrast, reactions by historians of science tended to be more friendly. In a review of Hockney’s *Secret Knowledge* Patricia Fara commented, for example, that “it seems sacrilegious to challenge the genius of great artists. By rejecting this reverence, and restoring artists to their former status as master craftsmen …, Hockney allows interesting themes to be explored.” The Hockney debates have involved various disciplines with different ideas concerning what the right questions are and what counts as evidence. This volume contains prevalently reactions of historians of science, and it explores some of the science and art historical themes that Hockney’s thesis in *Secret Knowledge* has brought to the foreground. My introduction aims to clarify the issue being debated. It will also show how the various contributions to this volume are interrelated.

**The Hockney-Falco Thesis**

In January 1999 Hockney visited the Ingres exhibition at the National Gallery in London. Impressed by the “accurateness” of Ingres’ portrait drawings and raising a question typical for a fellow artist, namely how these drawings had been done, Hockney became convinced that “Ingres used some form of optical device in his art, probably a camera lucida.” However, Hockney’s quest soon brought him to look at earlier paintings. Juxtaposing reproductions of these paintings on the Great Wall in his Hollywood studio allowed him “to see, with one sweep of the eye,” the sudden rise of realism in European art around 1420. Hockney was convinced—had he read Vasari’s *Lives*?—that a secret tech-