

A MYSTERIOUS MASTERPIECE: THE WORLD OF THE LINDER GALLERY

edited by Michael John Gorman.
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A Mysterious Masterpiece: The World of the Linder Gallery introduces the *Linder Gallery* painting to a broad audience through an *in situ* conversation of six specialists and generalists who discuss the work in the living room of the owner (Ron Cordover). Thus, it is an unusual book about an unusual painting that was virtually unknown until now. The decision to use a lively conversation instead of a dry, scholarly narrative approach (with all of its annotations, footnotes and a long bibliography) makes the volume accessible and adds a measure of appeal to the ideas as well, because the participants draw out each other's knowledge as they talk.

What is perhaps most exciting about the book is the subject matter itself. Although the walk through the details of the piece is rudimentary, this quick survey does expose how many facets of a unique moment in the history of ideas are contained within its parameters. As Gorman and Bradburne note in their introduction:

This is . . . a world looking Janus-like both forward to Boyle's "chymistry" and Newton's physics, and backward to Nostradamus' astrology and Sendivogius' alchemy. The 1620s was the world of Rubens, Brueghel, Van Dyck and Galileo, but it was also only recently the world of Shakespeare and Tycho Brahe. It was a world that stood at the threshold of the Thirty Years' War. It was a world alive with experiments and exploration, but also a world that remembered the Wars of Religion and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, the Spanish Armada, and the assassination of Henry IV. This painting is a document that holds the clue to understanding the political, intellectual, artistic and scientific ferment of the first half of the seventeenth century (p. 12).

What I found particularly fascinating is the way this painting speaks of how science added a secular element to paintings that was particularly evident in Northern European work. The book proposes that the *Linder Gallery* was probably commissioned in the 1620s and offers c. 1622–1629 as the painting's date. Since Kepler's *Rudolphine Tables*, one of the objects depicted

in the work, was published in 1627, I think it is accurate to say the composition itself shows how it is a part of the contemporary scientific conversation of its period. In addition, the painting is representative of a 17th-century genre that was created in Antwerp, that of the "cabinet painting" or "gallery interior." Typically, these objects were filled with allegorical wall paintings and elements, elegant interiors, people, objects and instruments. As a whole, the conglomerate of images spoke to social, political, artistic and scientific issues of the time. While images of the contemporary world constantly bombard us with competing ideas, in earlier times works such as gallery interiors would bring many competing ideas into focus.

In the case of the *Linder Gallery*, three people conceived the specific theme of the work. One was the unknown painter. One was a wealthy German merchant, Peter Linder, living in Milan in the early 1620s, who commissioned the *Linder Gallery*. In addition, Muzio Oddi, an Urbino mathematician and architect, played a key role in informing the selection of elements that comprise the pictorial commentary. The composition itself is centered around the intellectual understanding of the cosmos through measurement and mathematics, although there are many other threads evident, particularly in the allegorical works on the wall. Still, it is the cosmological specifics that are most striking because they separate this work from other gallery interiors of the 17th century. While the gallery interior genre itself frequently includes scientific instruments, maps, globes, etc., most of these paintings do not include explicit references to the actual cosmological debates of the era.

In the *Linder Gallery*, the central table is particularly alluring in how it accentuates the cosmological theme. Renderings of a large astrolabe by Gualterus Arsenius and the celestial globe, probably by Jodocus Hondius the Younger, are fascinating examples of the period. More compelling from an intellectual standpoint is a paper bearing the three cosmological systems that were competing at that time. These include the earth-centered Ptolemaic view, the sun-centered Copernican framework and the composite system of Tycho Brahe, in which the inner planets orbit the sun and the outer planets revolve around the earth. Beneath the diagram are the words "ALY ET ALIA VIDENT," which is translated "Different people see it dif-

ferently" or "Others see it differently." The three books on the table further accentuate the importance of the cosmological discussion at this time. Two are by Kepler (*Harmony of the Worlds* [1619] and *Rudolphine Tables* [1627]); the third is John Napier's *Description of the Admirable Tables of Logarithms* (1614).

In trying to think of a comparable statement in our time, nothing seemed quite as comprehensive and enticing. It is not difficult to find correlates for the scientific creativity, as in Einstein's five exceptional papers of 1905 or in the work of the quantum physicist. My attempts to think of an artistic commentary that included scientific disputes were less successful. Perhaps the power of objects grows when people look back retrospectively, and thus fertile pairings are less evident in their own time. If this is the case, our works today will become more powerful when others look back at how our minds were grappling with the information at hand.

Another aspect of the *Linder* conversation that I found quite illuminating was the discussion of the preparatory drawings, now in the Royal Collection in Windsor Castle. A pen and ink rendering with wash over graphite seems to offer a wonderful entry into the painting's evolution. While the pen and ink drawing and the final painting are similarly conceived, there are striking points of deviation. For example, the drawing does not have the same vaulted ceiling and has a door on the left side rather than a window. The scale is also different, but some of the paintings on the wall seem to match those in the *Linder* work. As the book's commentators note, what stands out is that the oddly shaped table in the painting, which appears out of perspective, is quite unlike the accomplished perspective table of the drawing.

From my viewpoint, one of the most intriguing aspects of the work is that its striking content is matched by an extraordinary story. In this case, the work was a part of the Rothschild collection in Vienna and was confiscated by the Nazis at the beginning of the Second World War. The Nazis kept it in a salt mine in Salzkammergut, where they stored many paintings taken from museums and collectors. We now know that this work was among those intended for the Führermuseum in Linz. Cordover states that when he and his wife bought the painting, much of its history was unknown. He was attracted to its level of detail, its special

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character (it is executed on a copper substrate) and the subject matter.

The discussion in this book shows that much information about the work's origins has been gathered in the last few years.

Overall, I liked the conversational tone of the book. It was strikingly rich in ideas and yet created a sense of one of those memorable conversations with friends that come about when discussing a marvelous work that stimulates on many levels. In the book, this casual conversational tone was often stimulating, although it was a bit trying when some of the smaller works on the wall of the interior were discussed. The illustrations in the book were not always easy to find. Rather than sift through the volume trying to figure out which part of the painting is being discussed and where the best illustration is, I would recommend that readers begin by familiarizing themselves with the list of 74 identified features at the end. Better still is the website, <www.mysteriousmasterpiece.com/>, which allows a reader to zoom in and out. As with many books that focus on readability rather than scholarship, it is fun to read the book but hard to go back to find discussions that focus on specific details afterwards. The lack of an index, for example, left me frustrated many times when trying to pull together my thoughts for this review.

Finally, and perhaps it goes without saying, it is the contributors to this innovative discussion who are responsible for the breadth of material and for looking at the work in a way that remains stimulating to those of us who "listen in" remotely: Lawrence Wechsler, who has written about Robert Irwin, David Hockney, Athanasius Kircher and *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet*, is also the Director of the New York Institute for the Humanities. Pamela Smith is a professor of history at Columbia University, and her book *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* demonstrates how much early modern science owed to artists and artisans. Also present in the room was Alexander Marr, a lecturer in art history at the University of St. Andrews, who specializes in early modern art and the history of science and technology. Michael John Gorman, who is now the Director of the Science Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin, edited the volume; he has participated in many projects that bring art and science together. James Bradburne, the Director General, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, and the

owner of the piece, art collector and businessman Ron Cordover, were also involved.

All in all, this is a fine volume for art historians, generalists students of the history of science, and anyone who is interested in the history of ideas. The book also includes many reproductions of scientific material of the time that are not included in the painting. These images aid the reader in contextualizing the period's thought and discoveries. In my case, I was impressed with the depth of detail in what is basically a fairly cursory work. For example, in my last *Leonardo* review [1], I mentioned that I did not think Kepler did the frontispiece of the *Rudolphine Tables* but I was not able to find who did the work. Ironically, *The Mysterious Masterpiece* unearthed the information that Georg Celer was the artist. While I do not know that everyone will find a nourishing tidbit like this, I do think this book is a nice supplement to the art/science/technology diet, particularly for those who yearn for more historical information.

Reference

1. See <www.leonardo.info/reviews/june2010/ione_becker.php>.