

BOOK REVIEW

Pamela H. Smith, *From Lived Experience to the Written Word: Reconstructing Practical Knowledge in the Early Modern World*

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To what extent can reading give access to the ‘lived experience’ of artisanal practice? Pamela Smith first approached the problem of recovering embodied knowledge in *The Body of the Artisan* (2004), drawing on written accounts of artists like Albrecht Dürer, or the goldsmith Wenzel Jamnitzer, whose ‘life-casts’ of plants and animals were displayed in palaces across Europe. As Smith acknowledges, such sources offer only glimpses of a system of knowledge that is theorized, yet non-verbal. But how can historians access this way of experiencing the world without replicating the artisan’s long apprenticeship?

Smith revisits Jamnitzer and Dürer in *From Lived Experience to the Written Word*, alongside many other early modern practitioners who sought to elevate their art and personal status by writing about it. Their written records now provide the starting point for Smith’s rich engagement with experimental reconstruction: a methodology increasingly employed in recent decades to evaluate past texts and practices. Smith herself has worked at the forefront of this approach within the Making and Knowing Project, the multi-year, interdisciplinary project she ran from Columbia University’s Center for Science and Society. There, students and researchers followed instructions left by the French ‘author–practitioner’ of BnF Ms. Fr. 640, seeking to reconstruct an array of practices from making burn salves and fake coral to casting rosebuds in silver. The results of their labours furnish the book with some of its most insightful case studies, and – thanks to lavish colour photography – illustrations. *From Lived Experience* marks the long-awaited culmination of this project: as such, knowledge of practice is both the subject matter of the book, and one means by which it is explored.

While fascinating and instructive for participants, what are the intellectual stakes? In Part 1, Smith supplies analytical heft by mining artisanal notebooks to argue that early modern craft knowledge ‘was not just productive but also investigative’ (p. 74). Through their experience of handling ‘meaning-laden’ substances like coral, mercury and gold, artisans learned to situate materials within a web of active virtues and relationships: a knowledge system that Smith terms the ‘material imaginary’. This system represents a kind of theorizing about the world, accomplished not through discourse and debate, but through practice and experience. As artisans selected and worked their materials, they gained insight into the transformative powers of nature – the desires and appetites of specific substances, the idiosyncrasy of their interactions and the associations that bound them (Christ, blood, gold, vermillion). To grasp the experiential quality of these insights, first

extracted from materials and then painstakingly worked into finished products, historians must 'read' material objects for their makers' intent, including elaborate artworks in stone and metal that have come down to us without the benefit of explanatory labels.

In Part 2, Smith investigates how material insights that, almost by definition, cannot be set down adequately in writing were acquired and recorded. In the workshop, apprentices learned their craft 'by unobtrusive observation and imitation' (p. 129), absorbing knowledge even as they pumped the bellows or swept the floor. Constant exposure and relentless repetition led, eventually, to mastery: a skilled intuition manifested in split-second decision making, even in the face of the unexpected. Reacting to sensory information illegible to non-experts, the master understood 'when to seize the moment, discerning patterns through long experience, despite the varying circumstances and state of the materials' (p. 134). Smith contrasts the handworker's knack for the particular with the goals of natural philosophy or mathematics, which sought to reduce single instances to universal causes or Euclidean proofs. Unlike those fields, craft knowledge – or *Kunst*, Smith's suggested term of art – resisted translation into words alone. The greatest artisans might lack the skill to set down their procedures in writing, although this did not, of course, prevent some from trying. Smith assembles intriguing evidence from recipes and 'books of art' (*Kunstabücher*) to show how authorship enhanced the status of both art and artisan – for instance, by linking craft practices to geometry – even if, as guides to actual practice, their writings fell short.

Part 3 brings us into territory familiar from book history and patronage studies: assessing how books of art were read, and by whom. As craft knowledge left the makers' hands, it became an object of interest to scholars and patrons, who increasingly linked practical knowledge with power. Samuel Quiccheberg devoted an entire class of objects to artisanal tools and machines in his 1565 *Inscriptiones*, a guide to populating the ideal princely *Kunstkammer*. As the print market heated up, scholars and artisans sought to 'reduce' crafts into sets of teachable principles – to distil an apprenticeship into written form, as a technical manual or step-by-step process. Through studying these books and products of art, Smith claims, readers 'absorbed and disseminated a new epistemology – a mode of gaining knowledge about nature' that 'became central to the "new philosophy" or the new active science of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' (p. 197). She does not pursue that insight further, although I wonder whether closer engagement with learned societies and academies – whose members often cultivated hands-on experience of medicine, alchemy or instrument making – might have supported her argument even more powerfully.

Paradoxically, the success of how-to literature eventually contributed to a more dismissive attitude towards the practice of handwork, as distinct from its verbal expression. Yet anyone who has ever tried to learn complex crafts from written guides will grasp the limitations of this method. Smith addresses this problem in her final section, 'Reconstructing practical knowledge'. These chapters offer an exemplary survey of methodologies of reconstruction, introducing the rationale that underpins these methods and some of the most salient work conducted in this area by historians, archaeologists and art conservators. By becoming a practitioner herself, Smith uncovers a knowledge system invisible (or intangible) to those lacking direct experience of the interface of hand and matter. In scholarship, it is a matter of course to interrogate the nature of a text by reading it. Reconstruction lets us explore the nature of practice by doing it. Smith's book is all the more valuable for engaging with both.