

## Reviews

Laura Carlevaris

***L'Ottica di Claudio Tolomeo nella storia della Prospettiva***

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Laura Carlevaris's volume *L'Ottica di Claudio Tolomeo nella storia della prospettiva* (Claudius Ptolemy's *Optics in the history of perspective*), published in 2024 by Edizioni Quasar of Rome –specialized in the fields of Antiquities and Archaeology– has been available since 2024 on the digital platform Torrossa, in digital format [1]. It is a volume of 182 pages, with a *Presentation* by Riccardo Migliari, in which the implications of the work of the Alexandrian author are taken into consideration not only on the origins of the so-called 'ancient perspective' but also on its Renaissance (re)foundation.

Those (like the writer) who do not deal with these topics daily but have found themselves dealing with issues related to the history of perspective even marginally during their studies, immediately realize the complexity of the topic addressed. As with any thoughtful and conscious dive into the historical foundations of the disciplines of Drawing, the choice of the research topic proves to be courageous and requires one to grapple with radical questions, whose sources of reference become discontinuous and fragmentary and with respect to which even the meaning of terms still in common use is confronted with such a distance of meaning as to require the patient interpretation of documents

and procedures, separated from us by a sort of frosted glass that clouds our perception, blurs the profiles and leads us onto slippery ground that only the exercise of the most subtle knowledge together with a thoughtful philological approach can thin, realigning our aim.

The familiarity necessary to tackle the drafting of a monograph on topics of this kind is developed only with the patient application refined over the course of years –decades in this case– guided by a passionate curiosity that slowly clarifies the contours of the questions, allowing us to identify a vaunted system of references that can serve as cornerstones for scientific exploration. This volume by Laura Carlevaris is prepared by a series of other works that investigate similar themes or close topics, such as –among others– the two articles published in *Disegnare. Idee, Immagini/Drawing. Ideas, images* in 2003 and 2006, the essay dedicated to the Hall of Masks published in *Ikhnos* in 2006, the most recent writing of 2015 on the perspective 'expedients' from Antiquity to the Renaissance [2]. As the author shows us with her work, topics of this kind require patience and tenacity, together with the willingness to get involved in the terrain of comparison explored by scholars of different disciplines in which studies are organized on

other methodological tissue, sometimes very distant from those that characterize historical studies on Representation. In his dense *Presentation* to the volume, Riccardo Migliari emphasizes how even today there is no organic study available on the History of Representation, whose object of investigation does not coincide, if not partially, with the history of Descriptive Geometry or some figurative arts. The History of Representation is an intrinsically interdisciplinary field that, moreover, can be profitably explored only by those who are able to understand its essential issues well and these can be fully identified only by those who possess the most suitable tools, that is, in short, by those who know how to draw. Precisely for this reason, Migliari continues, Carlevaris' volume can rightfully be considered the first chapter of this History, yet to be written, a piece to which many others can be added, maintaining an open and inclusive approach. On the other hand—as this monograph demonstrates by continuously referring to knowledge of geometry, physics, physiology, literature, history, cartography—it appears increasingly evident that, although this may seem paradoxical, the central nucleus of each discipline is clearly defined only by crossing its frontiers and crossing over into the closest ones, rather than by entrenching itself in its presumed uniqueness. While we explore the new frontiers of technology, our discipline is (again) re-establishing itself, acquiring new operational tools, slowly reconsidering the value of research paths that appeared to be priorities or others that seemed to us to be exhausted and that now show us all their urgency. The volume is organized into five chapters. The paper opens with a *Introduction*, in Italian and English, which clarifies the themes that the study deals with,

namely the question of ancient perspective—probably destined to remain open and partially unresolved—, the repercussions of ancient geometry in Renaissance perspective, the relationships that, in much more recent times, all this has had with the practice of photography and with the instances that have determined its development. In the chapter *Ottica, prospettiva, scenografia* (*Optics, perspective, scenography*), the connections between vision and perspective in the ancient world and in the Renaissance are discussed, the relationships with the practice of theatrical scenography and the openings that on these topics are determined in the eighteenth century following the archaeological discoveries that overturn the knowledge acquired until then. In the chapter *L'ottica antica e il modello euclideo* (*Ancient optics and Euclidean model*), the different conceptual models relating to vision developed in the ancient world are examined. In the chapter *L'ottica di Claudio Tolomeo* (*Claudius Ptolemy's optics*), the influence of the Alexandrian author's work is studied, also retracing the reflections of other scholars, including those of Vladimir Valerio. Furthermore, the structure of Ptolemy's treatise is clearly examined, making its contents accessible, with measure and critical sense, even to non-specialists. At the end of this part, Titus Lucretius Carus' contribution to the theme of vision is addressed. In the *Conclusions*, also in Italian and English, a summary of Ptolemy's contribution to the theory of perspective is drawn, showing how consistent this is even though in Optics he dealt with vision and not with representation. The volume closes with various apparatus, including a specialist bibliography that gives an account of the breadth and intensity of the path taken.

Despite the vastness of the topics and ideas, Laura Carlevaris' book is a book that maintains brevity that, together with the clarity and pleasantness of the writing, allows the reader to access complex areas that he or she would hardly be able to explore independently. This probably also happens thanks to a precise narrative strategy, to the choice of putting information and reflections in order using an effective and original structure, expertly stitching together fragments, dissecting phenomena, sharing opinions. In analogy with the topic covered, the writing selects and alternates points of view, combines them in a clever game of mirrors, exploits their reflections, influences, transparencies, almost as if it borrowed from the language of vision an arsenal of concepts and dialectical devices that in this writing are transformed into a precise narrative mode, welcoming the complexity of the research topic with clear and essential choices. On the other hand, as the author writes on page 15, "When history is involved, the direction we take is undoubtedly crucial". Few other topics like that of perspective have taken on an emblematic value in showing the perception that modern Western culture has developed with respect to itself. Its profound connection with the idea of presence and identity, both personal and collective, has ended up transforming what could have been simply a device for the production of images into one of the most fertile areas in which to express and compare thought and self-perception. Twenty years ago, on the pages of *Ikhnos*, at the height of the spread of computer drawing, with the maturing of profound questions on the meaning and the very survival of traditional drawing methods, Riccardo Migliari in a stimulating and passionate essay asked himself "Does perspective have a future?" [3]. Today

the work of Laura Carlevaris, precisely by addressing questions that have their roots in the ancient world, contributes to providing an answer to that question, showing once again how the history of perspective innervates the very history of scientific, artistic and literary culture that supports the sense of our identity and our actions.

### Notes

[1] The volume is available at <<https://www.torrossa.com/it/resources/an/5756664>> in .pdf format (consulted in May 2025).

[2] Carlevaris, L. (2003). La prospettiva nell'ottica antica: il contributo di Tolomeo. In *Disegnare. Idee, Immagini*, n. 27, pp. 16-29; Carlevaris, L. (2006). La questione della prospettiva antica: oltre Panofsky, oltre Gioseffi. In *Disegnare. Idee, Immagini*, n. 32, pp. 66-81; Carlevaris, L. (2006). La Sala delle Maschere nella «questione» della prospettiva antica. In AA.VV. *Ikhnos. Analisi grafica e storia della rappresentazione*, pp. 11-42. Siracusa: Lombardi; Carlevaris L. (2015). Progettare la terza dimensione. Espedienti prospettici dall'antichità al Rinascimento. In Stefano Bertocci, Fauzia Farneti (a cura di). *Prospettiva, luce e colore nell'illusionismo architettonico. Atti del Convegno Quadraturismo e grande decorazione nella pittura di età barocca*, 9-11 giugno 2011, pp. 21-30. Roma: Artemide.

[3] Migliari, R. (2005). Ha la Prospettiva un futuro? (Has Man a future?). In AA.VV. *Ikhnos. Analisi grafica e storia della rappresentazione*, pp. 133-160. Siracusa: Lombardi.

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