

Remaking an Ancient Poetic Theory into a Modern Aesthetic Thought: Girolamo Mei's System of the Arts

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This paper deals with the classification of the arts that appears in Mei's letter no. 28, written to Vettori on January 20, 1560. We first discuss in what context and with what intention it was composed, then describe its characteristics as a system of the arts. However, we must make it clear in advance that this theory of Mei's is independent of its contemporaneous and subsequent trends of thought. Moreover, the letter that contains it probably had no reader other than its addressee, Pier Vettori, who does not seem to have used it to develop his own theory.

1. The modern concept of "art"

In order to be able to identify the characteristics of Mei's classification of the arts, we must first ensure a standard of comparison. In his landmark essay on the modern system of the arts, P. O. Kristeller defines it as consisting of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry. He applies it as a diachronic standard for gauging how many writers from antiquity to the eighteenth century approached the modern conception of art.¹ To us present-day scholars, who know the diverse conditions of today's art, this model looks historical, because few will now agree to speak of a system of the arts. We must remember that Kristeller wrote this essay in the mid-twentieth century, however, when this traditional concept of a system of the arts was still considered trustworthy. That is why he refers to eighteenth-century theories as simply discussing "the system of the arts."

Some points about this model for a "system of the arts" need to be considered. First, the inclusion or exclusion of certain genres in such a system will depend on the general artistic conditions of the period or geographical area, as well as the particular situation of each genre. Apart from the obvious omission of cinema from theories of art prior to the twentieth century or of Japanese *ikebana* (flower arrangement) from most European ones, some genres (such as theatre) may be less prevalent than others (such as dancing) in certain parts of the world. Such fluctuations may result in these genres' inclusion or exclusion. Even in Batteux, the formulator of the modern system of the arts, the quasi-inclusion of rhetoric among the *beaux-arts* comes from the historical conditions of his day, in which rhetoric was considered more or less

* This paper is based on the Japanese version printed in *Bigaku* LXIX, No. 1 (2018): 13-24, published by the Japanese Society for Aesthetics.

¹ Kristeller (1951, 1952) 497. In a more recent study, Shiner (2001) approaches the same subject. It offers a highly interesting point of view in which the conceptual history of art is linked with that of social systems.

autonomous or practiced for its own sake. Moreover, some theorists consider the theatre to be a separate genre from (dramatic) poetry, and others do not. Thus, there is no unconditional comparison of art genres between different periods and areas. Some adaptation of each theory is necessary, in order for it to be compared according to a common diachronic standard.

Second, even if one genre is included among the arts, not all its sub-genres will automatically be. If we distinguish between mythico-historical painting and landscape or still life, between verse and prose literature, between vocal and instrumental music, or between mimetic and formal dancing, only the one part, say, mythico-historical painting or mimetic dancing, may be included in a system of the arts and the other not. Even if imitation, which Batteux regards as the key concept in grouping the *beaux-arts*, somehow applies to vocal music, much explanation will be needed for the inclusion of instrumental music, since it is far from easy to imagine a reasonable justification of how and what formal dancing imitates. In such cases, if we speak of dancing or music at large, we are relying on the rhetoric of *pars pro toto*, which is logically false. Such inexactitude or flexibility is inevitably involved in a model of the arts.

Third, in contrast to the second point, what appears from one point of view to be one and the same activity may be divided into two separate genres from another. Poetry is an apt example. It is evident that what Kristeller calls poetry includes prose literature. Even within poetry proper, the epic, which in antiquity was usually recited with instrumental accompaniment and even the rhapsode's gestures, had much in common with tragedy, except for its basic form of performance in narration (διήγησις) as distinct from impersonation (μίμησις). Both fell under the same category of poetry in antiquity, whereas they may belong to different genres today, one to literature and the other to the theatre. In such cases, we must find as much agreement as the model in question can have with Kristeller's model.

The method of examining the genres grouped together as an indicator of the established system of the arts must cope with such difficulties. We must remember any such system is a theoretical abstraction or even simplification of actual artistic activities. Yet, in view of such a system's great convenience for comparison, we may be justified to use it as a theory.

One remarkable feature of Kristeller's model is the equal ontological status that each genre shares in the system. No one genre subsumes or is subsumed by another. This results from the model's unitary principle of classification, that is, the medium. The genus art is distinguished into species or genres of art by the differentia of the mediums they employ. Painting is the art made by means of line and color, sculpture of swelling and hollowing out, music of scale notes, etc. Modern discussions of the arts from *Laokoon* to medium specificity have also taken this for granted.

To conclude our preliminary survey of the modern concept of art, let us have a glimpse of its intension or connotation. In the *Principles of Art*, published in 1938, R. G. Collingwood defines art as something by which artists become conscious of what they wanted to express in order to free themselves from their emotional charge, only when they have succeeded in expressing it.² In this conception, artistic expression is not only free from any external end but is also from any fixed plan: expression is for expression's sake both teleologically and strategically.

² Collingwood (1938) 274 etc.

However, this full-grown, fully autonomous view of art put forward towards the expiry of the concept better applies to romantic art than classical art, which more or less follows some established forms. Strategical autonomy is thus optional for the modern concept of art, whereas teleological autonomy is mandatory.

2. Mei's Classification of the arts

In the aforementioned letter to Vettori, who asks if *χρώμασι καὶ σχήμασι* (by colors and shapes) in *Poetics* 1 (1447a18-19) can be taken as a reference to sculpture and painting (We shall henceforth refer to these two as sculpture-painting.), Mei answers in the negative.³

Now this [sc. that Aristotle does not refer to painting and sculpture] resulted because these sorts of imitation [sc. sculpture and painting] do not in any case agree with poetry, because sculpture and painting are imitations primarily of the body and accidentally of the action, while all the aforementioned imitations [sc. the epic, tragedy, comedy, dithyramb, and the auletic and kitharistic arts] in which poetry is mixed imitate oppositely, or, if you like, *ἀντεστραμμένως* [conversely], because they imitate actions as their principal object and accidentally *τοὺς πράττοντας* [persons in action]. In short, the former imitations [sc. sculpture and painting] represent directly to the sense, be it the sense of vision or of touch, and in the second place, to intellect via imagination, while the latter [sc. the epic etc.], on the contrary, have intellect as their direct object and accidentally [represent] to the sense, be it the sense of hearing when heard and said, or the sense of vision when read and represented. Since the former [sc. sculpture and painting] therefore have nothing altogether in common with poetry but are totally different and as [different] as the body is from the soul, it would have been excessive to include these too. Aristotle therefore left aside all those sorts of imitation, because they are different in genus and manifestly do not have any correspondence but *ἀναλόγως* [analogically].⁴

By “aforenamed imitations” he refers to the genres of poetry which Aristotle cites in *Poetics* 1 (1447a13-15), namely, the epic, tragedy, comedy, dithyramb, the auletic and kitharistic arts. Mei has listed these in the preceding passage. Likewise, *τοὺς πράττοντας* [persons in action] is a

³ Palisca (1977) 44-45, Palisca (1985) 335-337, and Restani (1990) 176-178 are the only scholars who have discussed this passage, both providing the diagram of classification of the arts but no in-depth analysis.

⁴ Mei's Letter 28, BL MS Add. 10268, fol. 206v 5-19=Tsugami (2015) 194: hor questo nacque perche' queste maniere d' imitazionj non conuengon' in caso alcuno con la poesia . perche' la scultura e' la pittura son' imitazionj propriamente de' corpi , e' accidentalmente de' l' azzione : doue tutte l' imitazioni soprannominate tra' le quali e' mescolata la poesia imitano contrappostamente o' uolete *ἀντεστραμμένως*. perche' esse di principal' intento imitano l' azzionj e' accidentalmente *Τοὺς πράττοντας*. e' insomma quelle imitazionj si rappresentano dirittamente al senso o' de' la uista o' del tatto e' nel secondo luogo per immaginazione a' l' intelletto . doue queste per contrario hanno per loro intento dirittamente l' intelletto , e' per accidente al senso o' de' l' udito ne' l' esser' ascoltate e' dette , o' de' la uista nel leggerle o' esser' rappresentate . Non comunicando addunque queste in modo alcuno con la poesia, ma essendo diuersissime al tutto e' di tanto quanto e' dal corpo a' l' animo , sarebbe stato di superchio abbracciare anche queste . lascio' addunque Aristotile da' parte quella tutte maniere d' imitazionj per esser' differenti di genere , e' manifestamente non hauer' conuenienza insieme senon *ἀναλόγως*.

pointed reference to 1448a1. What stands out is the ambiguous expression “in which poetry is mixed.” He probably had in mind Aristotle’s inexact expression “most [part] of the auletic and kitharistic arts” (1447a14-15). Although the Philosopher counts these among the genres of poetry, the reason for this is far from clear, especially as only a few lines later (1447a23) they are named as examples of the arts that use tune (ἄρμυρία) and number (ῥυθμός) alone, without words.⁵ The ambiguity of the expression “in which poetry is mixed” seems to have been Mei’s way of avoiding such a difficulty.

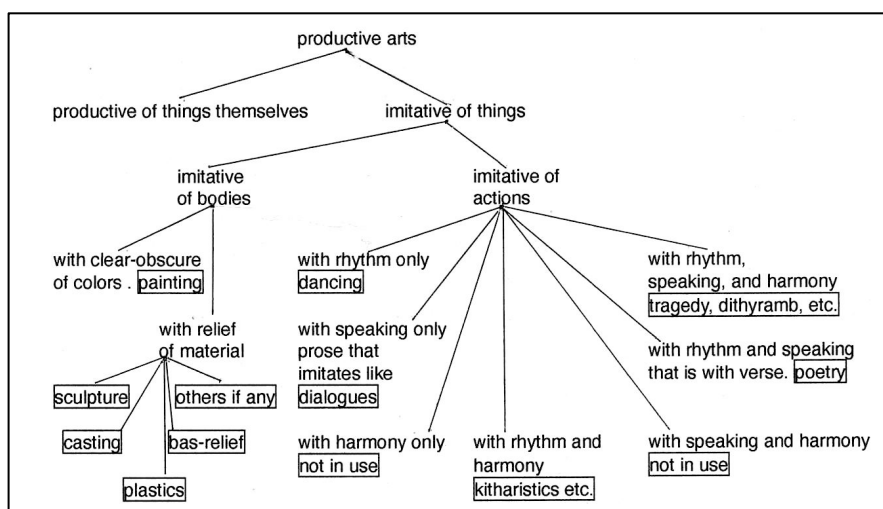
He says “analogically” because both sculpture-painting and poetry are concerned with the body and action (mind), and with the sense (body) and intellect (mind). While a strict analogy for this would read (sculpture-painting) : (poetry) = (body/mind) : (body/mind), the actual words run (sculpture-painting) : (poetry) = (body/mind) : (mind / body). However, if an inverse proportion is a kind of proportion, this analogy holds. This can be expressed as the following table.

Diagram 1. Body and mind in sculpture-painting and poetry

	sculpture-painting	poetry
body	primary object of imitation	accidental object of imitation
	↓	↑
	← inverse →	
action (mind)	accidental object of imitation	primary object of imitation
sense (body)	direct target of representation	accidental target of representation
	↓	↑
	← inverse →	
intellect (mind)	accidental target of repr.	direct target of representation

Next, Mei develops this theory into the following diagram, subsequently referred to as the “Classification (of the arts).”

Diagram 2. Mei’s Classification of the arts⁶



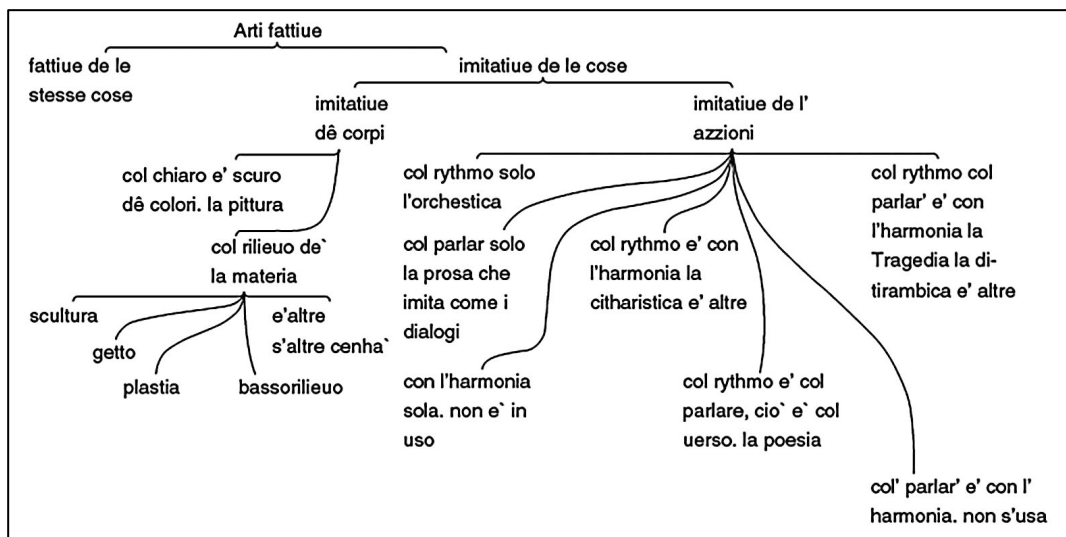
⁵ For this obscurity and Mei’s interpretation, see Mei’s Letter 27, BL MS Add. 10268, fol. 203r10-17=Tsugami (2015) 182.

Before analyzing this Classification, we should remember that this appears in the context of Mei's interpretation of *χρώμασι καὶ σχήμασι* (1447a18-19). In the right-hand block of "[the arts] imitative of actions," or the narrative arts, he is concretizing Aristotle's discussion of the means of poetry in *Poetics* 1.

In this diagram, the first stage of distinction (productive of things themselves /imitative of things) results from the different natures of arts, the second (imitative of bodies /imitative of actions) from their objects of imitation, and the third (with clear-obscure of colors /with relief of material; with rhythm only /with speaking only /with harmony only /with rhythm and harmony /with rhythm and speaking /with rhythm and harmony /with rhythm, speaking, and harmony) from their means of imitation. Further, sculpture, casting, plastics, and bas-relief are enumerated as the arts that are "imitative of bodies" "with relief of material." A double meaning of *scultura* is at work here. *Sensu stricto*, it denotes the art of carving (*scolpire*), but *sensu lato*, it embraces the whole solid representation including casting, plastics, and bas-relief. It stands to reason that Mei keeps to the former usage, because he is distinguishing the means of imitation. While this could be designated as the fourth stage of classification, it rather defines the wide extension of sculpture *sensu lato* within the framework of the three-staged distinction, since such specifications of the means of imitation as present in the third stage (with clear-obscure of colors or with rhythm only, etc.) are lacking here. We shall henceforth refer to the sum of sculpture, casting, etc., as simply "sculpture."

So far, the species of the art of imitation have been identified as painting, sculpture, dancing, prose, kitharistics and its like, poetry, and tragedy and its like. As seen in Chapter 1, we must adapt these to conform to the diachronic standard of the arts. First, imitation in prose or prose story can be subsumed into Kristeller's inclusive category of "poetry" together with poetry in verse. Second, "kitharistics etc.," which Mei describes as using rhythm and harmony without words, may be categorized into modern instrumental music, because the *kithara* is a guitar-like stringed instrument. It is true that we have scruples about taking kitharistics as "music" unconditionally, especially considering Mei's sixteenth-century context in which instrumental

⁶ Mei's Letter 28, BL MS Add. 10268, fol. 209r11-25 = Tsugami (2015) 214-215.



music was only first becoming a new genre and was hard to compare with vocal music. However, where vocal music is placed next to and distinct from poetry in a classification of the arts, it ought not to be seen from the aspect of the words, but of the pitch and value of tones, just like instrumental music. For this reason, and due to our aim to conform to Kristeller's system, we may here consider "kitharistics etc." to correspond to "music."

Similarly, what Mei calls "dancing (*orchestica*)" needs to be commented on, because it is said to imitate human actions with rhythm only and without music. Modern dancing, which is performed to music and in regular steps, is not captured by this concept. We thus count Mei's "dancing" as a separate species of art, in deference to him.

Finally, "tragedy, dithyramb, etc." is said to use "rhythm, speaking, and harmony." Since these three means are substantially the same as dancing, words, and melody, this species of imitation corresponds to the modern opera or musical. We could categorize it separately as the theatre, disregarding the part that overlaps with music, but we would rather fit it into Kristeller's system and label it as drama in the wider sense, which is a part of poetry.

Through such an adaptation, five species of art appear in this classification: painting, sculpture, poetry, music, and dancing. It contains no other species. They correspond to Kristeller's five species, except that Mei's Classification contains dancing instead of architecture, which Kristeller's does. Next, we see what Mei's Classification owes to tradition and what is novel to it.

The first distinction of the "productive arts" into those "productive of things themselves" and those "imitative of things" is no doubt based on Plato. In the *Sophist* 265a-268d, he sorts the human "productive art (ποιητική τέχνη)" into that "of making the thing itself (αὐτοποιητικόν)" like "the art of building (οἰκοδομική)" and that "of forming images (εἰδωλοποιικόν)" like "the art of painting (γραφική)" or the art "of imitation (μιμητικόν)" in its narrower sense of mimicry.

Regarding the second stage, poetry (including the epic and tragedy) is often paraphrased in the *Poetics* as an "imitation of the action (μίμησις πράξεως)."⁷ A comparison of poetry with painting appears in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 1371b6-7 as "that which imitates, like painting, sculpture, and poetry," as well as in many passages of the *Poetics*.⁸ The next question, what painting and sculpture imitate, has been answered with "the body" by, if not an ancient author, Benedetto Varchi.⁹ This answer is important, because the definition of sculpture-painting *qua* imitation of something secures it a position in the Classification analogous to poetry *qua* imitation of actions.

At the third stage, painting is identified on the left-hand side of the diagram, among the arts "imitative of bodies," as the one using bright and dark colors (*chiaro e' scuro de' colori*). This pictorial technique originated in thirteenth-century Italy and was conceptualized in the fifteenth-century theories of art. Alberti spoke of "oscuro e chiaro" of colors in the Italian edition of his

⁷ Cf. Kassel (1965) index graecus, s.v. πράξις.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, s.v. γράφειν, γραφεῖς, γραφή, γραφική.

⁹ Varchi (1549) 113-114 brings out the contrast between poetry and painting as between an imitation of the inside or the soul (*anima*) and an imitation of the outside or the body (*corpo*). Cf. Lee (1967) 60. His expression "pare che sia tanta differenza fra la Poesia, e la pittura quanta è fra l'*anima* e'l *corpo*" is close to Mei's "essendo diuersissime al tutto e' di tanto quanto e' dal *corpo* a' l'*animo*." According to Kristeller (1951) 511. n. 92, Castelvetro conceived poetry as taking part in the soul, as distinct from the body, in 1576.

Della pittura (1435), section 9¹⁰, and Leonardo frequently used the expressions “lume e ombre (light and shade)” and “oscuro e chiaro (dark and light)” in his *Trattato di pittura*, vol.1.¹¹ The first printed book to contain this term is Castiglione’s *Il cortegiano*, 1528, 1, fol. G. iijj.

Why does Mei resort to such a modern concept, especially shortly after he mentions Plato’s *locus classicus* (*Cratylus* 423D-424A) in the same letter (28:207v13) to the effect that the painter imitates by color (χρῶμα) and shape (σχῆμα)? We must again keep in mind the context in which the Classification appears. Mei is arguing against Vettori, who wants to understand χρώμασι καὶ σχήμασι in *Poetics* 1 (1447a18-19) as a reference to painting. A concession to this would cause damage to Mei’s interpretation of ῥυθμός (rhythm) as dancing, which would in its turn affect the whole group of the narrative arts on the right hand of the Classification. Thus, he is forced to relate color and shape to some other genre and find another means to classify painting. This is why he utilizes this modern concept. Viewed in this way, this somewhat surprising choice supports his whole Classification.

Sculpture is listed next to painting, as the art that uses relief of the material. Leonardo observes in his aforementioned book that sculpture “has relief that produces dark and light by itself.”¹² Moreover, Crusca reports, “we talk of the statue as a figure in relief”¹³ and the word ὄγκοι (bulk or bodies) occurs in Aristides Quintilianus (*De musica*, II, 4, 56, 26) in connection with sculpture. It is clear from all this that Mei depends on conventional theories regarding sculpture.

On the right-hand side, the classification of the arts “imitative of actions” according to the three means of poetry (rhythm, words, and melody) and their combinations, based on Aristotle’s statement in *Poetics* 1, results in seven species. By eliminating the two that the Philosopher does not mention and that Mei does not think exist, five are individually identified with the existing genres. Mei bases this on the detailed analysis of Aristotle’s words that he has made in the same letter (28:207v18-32=Tsugami (2015) 202-204).

Mei names, with the reservation “though [it is only] in my opinion (secondo però il giudicio mio),” “dancers (saltatorj)” as the performers of the art using “rhythm only,” which the Philosopher calls “the art of the dancers (ἡ τῶν ὀρχηστῶν).” Likewise, Mei cites “kitharistics etc.” (in distinction from poetry) as the art using “rhythm and harmony” (without words), while Aristotle is ambiguous about whether he considers “the auletic and kitharistic arts” (1447a24) to be part of poetry (with words) or separate arts (without words). Finally, the art using “speaking only” (1447a28-29) is designated as prose, whereas the Philosopher leaves it unnamed. Thus, where Mei looks *prima facie* as if he were faithfully following the discussion of *Poetics* 1, he is actually developing it according to his own interpretation.

It is to be noted that the arts that are “imitative of actions” are not called “poetry.” Although Mei could have used “poetry” in its wider sense to subsume various poetic genres, he does not. This is important because “poetry” in this sense would include dancing and what we consider to

¹⁰ Alberti (1568) 80.

¹¹ The most typical expression is “varî colori, cioè chiaro e scuro” (Leonardo (1947) 1, §39).

¹² Leonardo (1947) 1, §35.

¹³ Crusca (1612) s.v.

be music (“kitharistics etc.”), thus subordinating music and dancing to poetry. This interferes with what we have observed as a characteristic of Kristeller’s system, namely, the equal ontological status of the genres.¹⁴ On the contrary, all the genres recognized in this classification share an equal, mutually independent ontological status. Besides, Mei restricts himself to the medium of imitation as the sole criterion for his third division, unlike Aristotle in *Poetics* 3, who also uses the object of imitation to distinguish between tragedy and comedy. We can conclude from this that Mei’s Classification also agrees with Kristeller’s in its unitary principle of classification.

The ontological independence of the genres corroborates Mei’s view of ancient tragedy. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁵ he thinks it had a strong emotional effect on the audience because it involved music and dancing. If, then, these are ontologically independent from poetry, they will be endowed with separate powers. That is why, in his opinion, ancient tragedy as it was performed on stage with music and dancing affected the audience greatly.

It is worthwhile to consider why Mei lists the genres of art not in words but in a diagram. His Classification resembles a family tree, in that lines connect each member to the members on the next lower level, and these members to those on the following level, etc. Such a family tree makes clear not only that member X and member Y descend from the same ancestor, but also whether they belong to the same generation, as in the case of siblings, cousins, or second cousins and, if they do not, at how many removes there are. The Classification plainly shows that poetry, music, and dancing are siblings and that they are cousins of painting and sculpture, all being of the same “generation”—that is, ontological status. One other great advantage of the tree-like representation lies in its emphasis on the methodical derivation of the members, leaving no uncertainty about their inclusion or exclusion. A closed group in which the members are clearly connected to each other is a system. With the Classification in diagram, Mei is presenting a system of the arts.

When he, in the second stage of classification, describes what we consider to be five arts as “imitative of things,” he is defining them by their intension of being imitative. In what way does this relate to the modern concept of art, whose intension or connotation we have identified as expression for expression’s sake? Since imitation is set in contrast with the actual production of things in the Classification, it does not produce usual things that serve external ends. It serves ends that are intrinsic in the art itself. Put differently, imitation is teleologically, if not strategically, autonomous. Thus, Mei’s description of the imitative arts also agrees with the modern concept of art in regard to its intension.

Summarizing these considerations of the Classification, we can point out the following five points: (i) imitation of bodies is placed on the same level as imitation of actions, (ii) four out of five genres of modern art are included, with dancing in place of architecture, (iii) these genres have an equal ontological status, (iv) the nature of the system is discernible, and (v) they are defined by teleological autonomy. We may conclude from these that Mei’s Classification can

¹⁴ According to Kristeller (1951) 511, Castelvetro (1576) 13 actually regards music and dancing as part of poetry.

¹⁵ Tsugami (2016) Chapter 1.

safely be considered a modern classification of the arts.

3. Mei's view of the work of art

In the same letter, Mei presents a remarkable conception of the work of art itself. He argues as follows.

That is because when the philosopher [that is, Aristotle] considers the work of the poet not as a work but as something that exists for some end, that is, imitation, it becomes all together, both its material and form, an instrument. But when he speaks of it as a work of art, this [sc. instrument] does not intervene, but it [sc. the work] is considered according to the nature of [its] essence distinctly as a material and form.¹⁶

We can ascertain that the term *opera* had, roughly in Mei's day, the meaning of "work" in the sense of a piece of composition, as distinct from that of labor, from Crusca (1612), which cites from Boccaccio its usage for a writing or building.¹⁷ Three points stand out in the quoted passage.

- (1) The expression "work of art (*opera dell'arte*)" is used.
- (2) The poet's work has imitation as its end.
- (3) The "work of art" can be regarded as a substance (material plus form), independently of any teleological consideration.

This view seems to agree with the modern conception of art, in which the work of art is an autonomous entity free from the teleological or utilitarian nexus. Since we have seen in the previous chapter that the imitative arts are given a teleologically autonomous status in Mei's Classification, our next task is to verify that he actually thinks of the end of imitation as inherent in the work. A significant comment follows the passage quoted above.

For the sculptor makes his imitation in marble, in bronze, in wood, or in others [which he uses] as his material and leaves it made in them; the poet [makes his imitation] in verses and leaves it made in them.¹⁸

Let us pay close attention to the expression "leaves it made in them." In this phrase, "it (la)"

¹⁶ Mei's Letter 28, BL MS Add. 10268, fol. 207r22-27=Tsugami (2015) 200: Perche` quando il filosofo considera l' opera del poeta non come opera , ma come cosa che sia a` qualche fine , cio` e` a` l' imitazione , tutto insieme tanto la materia quanto la forma d' essa seco diuenta strumento : doue quando egli ne parla come opera de` l' arte , questo non interuiene, ma si considera secondo la natura de` l' essenza distintamente per materia e' forma.

¹⁷ Crusca (1612) s.v. opera: "E OPERA a qualunque cosa fatta dall' operante, come: scrittura, fabbrica, e simili. Lat. opus."

¹⁸ Mei's Letter 28, BL MS Add. 10268, fol. 207r30-32=Tsugami (2015) 200: perche` lo scultore fa` l' imitazione sua in marmo , in bronzo , in legnio o` in altro come in sua materia e' in quellj la lascia fatta ; e' il poeta nê' uersi , e' in quelli la lascia fatta.

refers to “his imitation” and “them (quellj)” to materials. What is the “imitation” that is left in the material? It can only be the form. Thus, the phrase undoubtedly describes the situation in which the artist gives form to the material, and imitation is, after all, the action of forming a work. However, there is more to understand from the expression “leaves it made.”

Because the sculptor or poet “leaves” his imitation in the material in the state of having been “made,” the work contains in itself the action of imitating as carried out. At first glance, this seems true of all kinds of production. When, for example, a carpenter builds a house, the action of building is left in the house *qua* product. This is certainly an action of giving form to the material. However, in this case, the form given is not self-determining, but subservient or instrumental to an external purpose, such as the safety or comfort of the inhabitants. Even the most sophisticated form would not be accepted, if these inhabitants did not judge it to be useful. In this case, form does not constitute the completion of the production. On the other hand, in the cases of sculpture and poetry, the action of imitating is finished as long as the work resembles its model in its form. The completed form *qua* the end of imitation is “left” in and as the work. This consideration allows us to add one more characteristic of Mei’s view of the work of art:

- (4) It is teleologically autonomous. His conception of the arts thus agrees with the modern conception also in regard to intension.

4. Mei in the history of the concept

Our final consideration about Mei’s Classification of the arts is historical—namely, what position should it occupy in the history of the concept of art? In the absence of contemporaneous interactions and later reverberations, as noted at the beginning of this paper, we can focus exclusively on the Classification’s novelty.

Palisca, the first scholar that introduced it to the academic world, states it is “the clearest and earliest grouping of the imitative arts known to me” (Palisca (1985) 335). This calls for a revision of Kristeller’s view that “hardly anyone among them [sc. people in the second third of the sixteenth century] is trying to establish the ‘imitative arts’ as a separate class” (Kristeller (1951, 52) 512). This statement was perhaps reasonable in 1951, when the name of Mei was only beginning to be known in musicological studies. However, in his criticism of Kristeller (1951,52), Young (2015) maintains that the ancients, including Aristotle, already had some systems of the arts akin to Batteux’s, and that such sixteenth-century authors as Glarean (1547), Vasari (1550), Bartoli (1567), and Castelvetro (1576) refer to all or some of the five species of art. Nevertheless, these writings are far less sophisticated than Mei’s, because they provide no justification for the lists they contain, and recent research by Liberti (2016) does not name any historical thinkers with systems comparable to Mei’s. We may thus conclude that Mei’s Classification was far ahead of his time. In that case, when is it that a comparable theory finally appeared? The most likely candidate is the theory by Charles Batteux, often considered to be the first formulator of the modern concept of art.¹⁹ In his 1746 book *Les Beaux-arts réduits à un même principe*, which

¹⁹ Kristeller (1952) 20 describes him as “the first to set forth a clear-cut system of the fine arts.”

was enormously influential across Europe through its repeated reprints and translations into many languages, he defines the arts in the following way.

It is easy now to define the arts of which we have been talking so far... We shall define painting, sculpture, and dancing [as] imitations of beautiful nature that are expressed by colors, by relief, or by attitudes; and music and poetry [as] imitations of beautiful nature that are expressed by tones or by metrical discourse.²⁰

This is similar to Mei's Classification in many ways. First, both consider the fine arts to comprise the arts of imitation. Second, in the first stage of distinction, they divide the arts into two categories. Third, they list the same species of arts, excluding architecture.²¹ Fourth, they distinguish the arts according to the means of imitation. Fifth, they grant ontologically equal status to each species.

However, there are also some dissimilarities. First, Batteux groups dancing with painting and sculpture to form what we may call the "visual arts," whereas Mei groups it with the narrative arts. Second, while Batteux explains his exclusion of architecture and rhetoric through the essential nature of their utility (103-104), Mei is totally silent about them. Third, Batteux uses the term "sculpture" for several things that Mei considers separately, that is, sculpture, casting, plastics, and bas-relief. Fourth, unlike Batteux, who defines *les beaux-arts* as having pleasure as their end, Mei emphasizes the autonomous character of the work in the fine arts.

As soon as we allow for the necessary adaptations seen in Chapter 1, however, the trivial nature of these dissimilarities is clear. For the most part, the first difference results from the historical change in artistic practices of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when dancing began to be accompanied so exclusively by musical instruments and performed with such regular and abstract motions that its connection with words was no longer obvious. The second difference results from the non-imitative nature of the excluded genres (namely, architecture and rhetoric), no matter whether this exclusion is explained (by Batteux) or not (by Mei). In any case, this has nothing to do with the extension or denotation of the genus art. The third point has already been discussed in Chapter 2. Regarding the fourth difference, making something for pleasure—not to be confused with the pleasure obtained from the product, in which case the action of making affords no pleasure in itself—is equivalent to making for making's sake, which is another name for autonomy.

Viewed in this way, Mei's Classification clearly contains nearly all the factors that Batteux presents in his definition of the arts. In addition, its diagram form shows that it is a system. This means Mei's Classification is a "system of the arts" in a fuller sense than Batteux's.²² This is astonishing. Batteux was so blessed with knowledge of earlier theorists such as Crousaz, Du Bos,

²⁰ Batteux (1746) 41-42.

²¹ According to Kristeller (1952) 23, architecture was first included among the species of art by D'Alembert in his *Encyclopédie* (1751-72).

²² Referring to Morin (1995) 129, Di Liberti (2016) 30 stresses the necessity for a system to be integrated into a larger system, as in Batteux's case, in which the system of the arts is part of the system of aesthetics or the Newtonian system of nature. In Mei's case, this larger system is probably the Aristotelian system of knowledge.

and Voltaire, to name a few²³, and with social conditions such as the establishment of the Academies in France, that the conditions seem to have been ripe for him to develop the system of the arts. In contrast, Mei had few such external helps to invite him to such a system, apart from the sporadic and incomplete lists of the arts that Weinberg details.²⁴ With hindsight, Mei looks as if he were foreseeing what to come in two centuries.

He constructed a modern theory, not only by basing it on classical theories, but also by supplementing them with additional ideas, both ancient and modern. The result is a system marked by the high intelligibility that characterizes his theories.

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²³ Cf. Kristeller (1952) 17-20.

²⁴ Weinberg (1961) Ch. 1.

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*An early abridged version of this paper, entitled "Two Centuries Ahead of Batteux: Girolamo Mei's System of the Arts," was read at the 20th International Congress of Aesthetics held in Seoul, 2016 and contained in the *E-book Proceedings of ICA 2016*, Seoul National University, 2017, pp. 469-473. A slightly different text of the present paper forms Chapter 8 of my book: *Girolamo Mei: A Belated Humanist and Premature Aesthician*. Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 2021, ISBN 978-4-326-80063-6.