

Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann. *Arcimboldo: Visual Jokes, Natural History, Still-Life Painting*.

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Few artists are as recognizable yet as misunderstood as Giuseppe Arcimboldo. The late sixteenth-century painter seems to simultaneously defy categorization and provide much scholarly musing and amusement. His best-known works, allegorical personifications and court portraits that use fruits, vegetables, and other still-life materials to compose heads both grotesque and comical, long have been dismissed either as simple visual jokes or, anachronistically, seen as precursors to such modern movements as surrealism.

Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann's latest book takes a serious and thorough look at the artist and his milieu, producing a biography and exposition that will become a standard reference for anyone interested in late Renaissance court art and early developments in the empirical sciences. In addition to numerous color illustrations of Arcimboldo's composite heads, Kaufmann also introduces, for the first time, a number of hitherto unpublished drawings that place the artist firmly within nascent developments in both still-life painting and natural history.

The first two chapters present an overview of Arcimboldo's biography. The artist's early career saw him working on fairly standard commissions for the cathedral of Milan, such as designing stained glass and painting organ shutters. The second chapter unravels the chronology of Arcimboldo's earliest paintings of composite heads and his first contacts with the imperial court. The social context of court life and the artist's humanist contacts provides important background for the subsequent chapters, where Kaufmann insists on a more nuanced reading of Arcimboldo's fantastic heads.

In chapter 3, Kaufmann connects Arcimboldo to the Milan literati, underscoring the argument that his paintings are not simply visual jokes, but need to be viewed in the context of humanist and poetic practice. Arcimboldo's cycles of composite portraits, such as the *Seasons* and the *Elements*, were thoroughly grounded in Erasmian ideals, clever wordplay, and the vogue for emblems. Dedicating poems to paintings became a common practice in the sixteenth century, but in Arcimboldo's case, it appears to have been an integral part in their making and in their reception.

Chapter 4 situates what Kaufmann terms Arcimboldo's "serious jokes" within the imperial court culture of Maximilian II. He discusses the value placed on wit in the art of rhetoric and ties humanist discourse on humor to classical writers such as Cicero and Aristotle. The ideal ruler possessed urbanity and wit according to many ancient sources, an ideal that Kaufmann argues can be found in the many composite heads presented to the emperor. The grotesque heads are allegories of the ruler's dominion over nature and expressions of his refinement, providing both pleasure and instruction. This is especially true in the case of Arcimboldo's famous portrait of Emperor Rudolf II as Vertumnus, where the ridiculous or ugly exterior hides a beautiful interior, resulting in Kaufmann's "serious joke."

Kaufmann provides new attributions to Arcimboldo of a number of drawings from the Dresden Kupferstichkabinett, as well as numerous flower studies in Vienna. In addition to the interest that these works will hold to drawings experts and students of natural history, they also support one of Kaufmann's central themes, detailed in chapters 5 and 6, that Arcimboldo plays an important role within the developing history of still-life painting. While at court, the artist was called upon to provide drawings from nature to such prominent collectors as Ulisse Aldrovandi in Bologna. Kaufmann here weaves intriguing connections between art and early modern sciences such as astronomy and physiognomy. Arcimboldo's work thus belongs squarely within the tradition of the universal collection that brought together art and nature, the exotic and the marvelous. In the final chapters, Kaufmann argues that the artist played a progenitive role in the cultivation of natural history at the imperial court, especially within the context of the imperial *Kunstkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities.

Kaufmann's book presents compelling new material for a far more nuanced reading of Arcimboldo than has yet been available while also contextualizing him within the vibrant intellectual culture that was coming out of the imperial court at Vienna, and later Prague. Because Arcimboldo's work on the surface appears to be the sort of negotiation between artifice and fantasy associated with mannerism, his role in the emergence of still-life painting often has been downplayed. Kaufmann goes beyond merely dissecting the iconography of Arcimboldo's fantasy heads that has marked earlier studies of this artist. Instead, he provides a rich study of court culture, humanist issues, and the beginnings of the natural sciences.

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