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# The Craftsman's Handbook: "Il Libro Dell' Arte"



## Synopsis

This is D. V. Thompson's definitive English translation of *Il Libro dell'Arte*, an intriguing guide to methods of painting, written in fifteenth-century Florence. Embodying the secrets and techniques of the great masters, it served as an art student's introduction to the ways of his craft. Anyone who has ever looked at a medieval painting and marveled at the brilliance of color and quality of surface that have endured for 500 years should find this fascinating reading. It describes such lost arts as gilding stone, making mosaics of crushed eggshell, fashioning saints' diadems, coloring parchment, making goat glue, and regulating your life in the interests of decorum — which meant shunning women, the greatest cause of unsteady hands in artists. You are told how to make green drapery, black for monks' robes, trees and plants, oils, beards in fresco, and the proper proportions of a man's body. ("I will not tell you about the irrational animals because you will never discover any system of proportion in them.") So practical are the details that readers might be tempted to experiment with the methods given here for their own amusement and curiosity. Today artists are no longer interested in specific directions on keeping miniver tails from becoming moth-eaten. The Craftsman's Handbook, in which these are ordinary parts of the artist's work, appears quaint and naïve to us. And that is much of its charm. But when we remember the magnificent mosaics, paintings, and frescoes these methods produced, the book takes on an even greater value as a touchstone to another age. "Recommended to the student of art." — *Craft Horizons*. "Obviously of great merit." — *Art Material Trade News*. "Delightful flavor." — *New York Herald Tribune*. Recommended in *Harvard List of Great Books on Art*, *Shaw's List of Books for College Libraries*.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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This book was recommended to me a year ago at a scribal arts meeting for illuminators and I was intrigued. A year later I bought the book to get my "free shipping" and I'm kicking myself for waiting! It is filled with exactly what it says...historical drawing techniques as well as recipes and keen insight into the materials used by the great masters. This is a wonderful book for those of us who are medieval re-enactors, and who are wanting to teach and demonstrate the authentic methods to a modern audience. As an added bonus for SCAdians, this is a primary resource since it is an actual translation from a medieval manuscript. BIG cha-ching!

When exactly Cennino Cennini put together his famous handbook is not clear. It must have been quite early in the fifteenth century, for although his stated intention is to provide advice "for the use and good and profit of anyone who wants to enter this profession" (1), he has only very little to say about oil painting and seems unaware of the latest developments of that exciting new medium in the early decades of the century. (It was enough, though, to disprove the contention of Giorgio Vasari and others that oil painting had been invented by Jan van Eyck.) In any case, it is absolutely a book intended for the professional, for the active practitioner, the working artist, and one can note that most of the reviewers on this site have praised it for the practical advice it provides. It has also been reported that it was an important source-book and wellspring of useful technical information for Eric Hebborn, the notorious English art forger and author of his own handbook ("The Art Forger's Handbook," 1997), who is reputed to have employed Cennini's technique of using egg-white to simulate the appearance of aged varnish. I am not an artist and have never painted anything but some old furniture, a couple of book-cases and a dog house--and I must confess to never even having forged a Renaissance masterpiece--so to me this book is of no practical use, but it is greatly entertaining as well as historically informative. Just to realize the huge amount of preparatory labor a fourteenth- or fifteenth-century artist had to accomplish in order to get ready to work adds a humbling perspective to the art we so easily admire on the walls of our museums. And there are some wonderful insights into the times, too, such as the use of chicken bones: the older the better, "just as you find them under the dining-table" (5) and, while giving "the exact proportions of a man," dispensing with those of a woman, "for she does not have any set proportion" (48). There is practical advice here for almost anything a contemporary artist might have been called upon to do, from drawing for embroiderers to waterproofing a wall with boiled oil, but behind it all is Cennino's sense of his profession as having the dignity of a calling and requiring a measured life-style, "just as if you were studying theology, or philosophy," and he admonishes the fledgling artist to eat and drink moderately and, in order to ensure an unwavering and unflattering hand, to avoid "indulging too much in the company of woman" (16). Obviously, times have changed, and that makes up a great deal of the charm of this book for one like myself, who is not about to enter the profession but who nevertheless also found in it much "use and good and profit."

Very interesting insights into how art processes got to where they are. A bit hard to read with all the footnotes and archaic language and sentence structure, but worth the effort. A book for the more scholarly student of art or someone who just likes to know why.

If you're an artist or art lover you'll enjoy reading how artists made brushes, paints and enhanced their craft many centuries ago.

This book was exactly what I needed! I was working as a propmaster for a play set in Italy during the 16th century, and needed to make historically accurate brushes. There are scarce few pictures of art supplies during that period, so this book was an amazing find. I was able to make brushes by following the instructions fairly easily, and learned so much about different art techniques during that period in history. A fantastic book, whether you need it for a reference, love history, or love art. I would definitely recommend this book.

This book has it all for the scribal enthusiast. Written in Latin and later translated into English, this book holds the secrets and techniques of the great masters. It served as an art student's introduction to the ways of the scribal craft then as it can for you today. This is a must for the creative person who appreciates the artisan masters of 15th century Florence and wants to learn from their experience.

I absolutely love this little book. So charming. Lovely to connect with an author from the Renaissance.

Interesting history.

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