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Arachne: Weaving and the Origin of Technè in the Renaissance

During the Renaissance, the spider, as well as its mythological double Arachne, came to represent a form of technical exemplarity doubled by a form of practical intelligence. Some artists, such as Joris Hoefnagel and Tintoretto, made the spider a figure of artistic subtlety, allowing them to situate art in an intertwining of making and thinking. But how could the activity of an insect become an artistic paradigm? What imaginaries could have favored this assumption? Under what conditions could a figure as vile and disturbing as the spider or as negative as its mythological double Arachne be set up as examples to follow? This essay attempts to answer these questions by bringing together mythological representation, emblematic thought, and natural philosophy.

Keywords: Arachne; spider; technè; paradigm; ingenium

The art of weaving is topical. Just have a look at the number of works summoning this medium which were recently exhibited at the 59th Venice Biennale. From the large monochromes of Rosemarie Trockel to the abstract compositions of Igshaan Adams and the small figurative paintings of Britta Marakatt-Labba, weaving (as much as other textile handicraft techniques, such as knitting in Trockel’s case) is at present one of the most used and most inventive mediums. Nobody would deny the status of work of art to these various objects, even if they borrow from a technique traditionally linked to craft.

However, this has not always been the case. To take the example of the Renaissance that interests us, the insertion of textiles into the field of art was not without difficulty, both for the artists and theorists of the time and for the art historians who subsequently studied their production. Weaving has generally been classified among the techniques belonging to the artes mechanicae. And as such, tapestries and ornamented draperies were considered highly valuable art objects, but never received in the early modern period the theoretical nobilization as “liberal arts” that painting and sculpture did. Like finely crafted objects, woven works are referred to their materiality and, consequently, their value as objects. Confronted with the Beaux Arts system that has been shaping museums since the nineteenth century, most of the artifacts made with this technique are now kept in collections of objets d’art, in museum departments dedicated to furniture objects, or in museums of decorative arts.

And even today, apart from a few period rooms, few concrete comparisons are proposed between painting and tapestry or between drawing and liturgical ornaments. Moreover, the inclusion of weaving within the practices of the decorative arts corresponds to a certain way of perceiving Renaissance art since the nineteenth century. For many art historians, the “modern” art of painting or sculpture – i.e., the art that we usually connect to the writings of Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, or Giorgio Vasari – would have been detached from any craft practice because of its intellectual foundations or the new social ambitions of its practitioners. Artistic work would no longer be considered a manual labor, but a mental activity involving
spirit and invention. The artist would draw his dignity not from his know-how but from his aptitude to think, to judge, and to produce a “smart” piece of work. But if this more or less Neoplatonic coloration of the art of the Renaissance art is partly founded—many artists and theorists put the emphasis on the empire of the idea and the role of the intellect or of judgment in the constitution of the work of art—it was also amplified, probably beyond measure, by modern historians. First classical theorists, and then the art historians, wanted to free the art of the Renaissance from its material and manual condition in order to retain its conceptuality only.\(^6\)

However, other models of Aristotelian or Epicurean inspiration also quite widely imposed themselves in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A number of studies by Ernst Kris, Robert Klein, or, more recently, Georges Didier-Huberman and Patricia Falguières, to mention only a few, have shown that Renaissance art was not solely riveted to the principle of idealization, dear to the Neoplatonists, but also to the observation of the mechanisms of nature (\textit{generation and corruption}) linked to Peripatetic physics and its Epicurean corrections.\(^7\) As Aristotle postulated, “art completes what nature is unable to carry to a finish; or art imitates nature” (\textit{Physics}, II, 8, 199a 15).\(^8\) This invitation to the imitation of the \textit{natura naturans} would impose itself rather largely in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. With Alberti, in the \textit{De re aedificatoria} and in the \textit{De statua} in particular,\(^9\) but also with Benedetto Varchi, Vincenzo Borghini, or Francesco de’ Vieri, art is thought about within its relation to natural processes, forbidding in particular the establishment of a strict opposition between theory and practice, or between manual and intellectual parts.\(^10\)

Now, in accordance with this approach between art and nature, certain natural phenomena have been set up as paradigms for thinking about artistic practice.\(^11\) It is one of these models that I propose to study here: the spider weaving its web.\(^12\) Indeed, this animal activity, in its natural as well as its mythological version, proposes a form of technical exemplarity doubled by a form of practical intelligence, enabling a conception of art as an intertwining of the making and the thinking.

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In order to problematize straightaway my previous remarks, I would like to begin with a series of questions: how could the activity of an insect become an artistic paradigm? What imaginar\-ies could have favored this assumption? In what way has this paradigm of the making of the spider’s web been able to migrate and irrigate that of the artistic practice, in particular the poetic and the pictorial? And finally, under what conditions could a figure as vile and disturbing as the spider or as negative as its mythological double Arachne be set up as examples to follow?

To answer these questions, I believe it is necessary to bring together mythological representation, emblematic thought, and natural philosophy. Consequently, I will progress step by step while trying to tie some knots between these different fields of the intellectual and the sensitive experience.

\section*{The Fable}

Because Arachne became the tutelary figure of weaving very early on, it makes sense to start with the account that Ovid gave us of her story in book VI of his \textit{Metamorphoses}.\(^13\) The poet tells us that Minerva heard about the incomparable weaving talent of a young Lydian woman named Arachne. To judge it, she went to see, but disguised as an old woman in order to not be recognized. Arachne let herself be fooled, and boasted that she owed nothing to Minerva. Although the old woman advised her not to fall into \textit{hybris} and to respect the hierarchy of divinities and mortals,
Arachne redoubled her pretensions and, while weaving, let it be understood that in any case the goddess would not dare to judge her. Furious, Minerva revealed herself and proposed a competition. Arachne accepted, and an artistic battle followed in which each competed with ingenuity and dexterity. Minerva weaved Olympian scenes in which the gods punish the mortals; Arachne chose the love affairs of Jupiter, showing her disrespect once again by representing the adulterous love affairs of her father.

When the hour of the verdict rang, even before the nymphs selected the work of Arachne as the most perfect, Minerva perceived her failure and, out of her mind, tore the tapestry, broke the loom, and punished Arachne by striking her on the forehead with her spindle. Arachne, desperate, outraged, hanged herself before Minerva mercifully saved her by transforming her into a spider.

The Spider as a Negative Symbol

Like other tragic metamorphoses, the Ovidian myth has been widely interpreted in moralizing and emblematic ways, especially in the corpus of Moralized Ovids. Arachne becomes, in turns, a symbol of excess, of pride, of passion, or of a lowly sensory life. Many representations of the myth of Arachne underline this negative character. Arachne is certainly a virtuosa, but she does not use her reason, therefore reducing the practice of her art to pure technical agility. This is what Georg Pencz seems to underline (fig. 1) when, in his Five Senses series, he chose to personify the sense of touch (tactus) in the guise of Arachne. She is active on her loom, riveted to her instrument by a simple tactile relationship. And when Arachne’s talent is nevertheless recognized, the weaver appears too sophisticated and subtle to be fully honest. In De remediis fortuna (I, 7), Petrarch thus wrote about the dangers of ingenium:

Nothing is more hateful to wisdom than too much sharpness, nothing more bothersome to the serious thinker than a sophist, and, for that reason, the ancients invented the spider “hated by Pallas” whose work is delicate, with fine webs, but fragile and useless. A sharp mind should be like a sword, which pierces but comes to a stop at the hilt and goes no farther.

The animal hypostasis of Arachne, in other words the spider, has no less served as a topos for the moralizing discourse. In the emblematic register, for example, it serves as an emblem of inequality before the law. In Claude Paradin or Theodor de Bry, the overly subtle and imperfect
nature of her work becomes the symbol of a law that applies only to the weak, incapable as it is of restraining the strong.  

It is interesting to note that a certain permeability exists between these different types of literature. We observe, for example in the work of Joris Hoefnagel, that pre-scientific illustration can be nourished by these symbolic readings by combining both the requirements of naturalistic representation – its precision, its proportional relationships – and the codes of the emblematic – its relation to the interpreting inscriptions. In an illustration (fig. 2) from the manuscript *Ignis: Animalia rationalia et insecta*, Hoefnagel carefully depicts a European hornet (*vespa crabro*) escaping from the fine web of a spider by piercing it to visualize the motto *Lex exlex*.  

2 Joris Hoefnagel, *Spiders*, fol. XXXVII, ca. 1575–1580, watercolors and gouache on parchment, 14.9 × 19.5 cm. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, KdZ 4816

A Natural Model

The question that arises when facing these various moralistic representations is whether the spider and its mythological double Arachne have always been perceived as negative figures in the Renaissance? The answer, of course, is no. But then, how did their transformation into a positive model occur? To answer this question, let us turn to natural philosophy, for it is in this specific corpus that the wonders of nature will become lessons for men.  

If we come back to the idea quickly sketched in the introduction that *natura naturans* could have constituted a model for the arts, it is important to underline that among these natural phenomena showing movement, transformation, and generation, an-
imal actions are at the top of the list. It is the animals that deliver the clearest lesson about the mechanisms and processes used to bring into being, and thus, by extension, to produce images.\textsuperscript{21}

In the eyes of Aristotle, the spider, for example, is an architect. In his History of Animals (IX, 39), the Stagirite describes its activity as a spinner as follows:\textsuperscript{22} “It weaves by first stretching thread to the extremities in every direction, then it lays down the radii from the middle (it takes the middle with fair accuracy) and on these lays down the woof, so to speak, and then weaves them together.”\textsuperscript{23} By these complex interweavings, the insect thus provides a motif or pattern to imitate. This is also what Plutarch defends when he explains that the spider teaches the art of weaving to men: “[T]he labor of the spiders,” he writes in On the Intelligence of Animals (10, 966), “seems as pattern [arkhetupon] for the threads that women spin and the nets that are used in hunting.”\textsuperscript{24}

This idea is also present in the Renaissance. In his Essays Montaigne writes “that most of the arts we have were taught us by other animals: as by the spider to weave and sew; by the swallow to build; by the swan and the nightingale music; and by several animals to make medicines.”\textsuperscript{25}

This recourse to animal constructions as models comes from the idea that animals are endowed with a form of intelligence, and that they are as ingenious as men. Fascinated by the work and the power of invention of the Alcyone, Plutarch in Bruta animalia ratione uti explains that animals use reason like men: “I do not believe,” he writes, “there is such difference between beast and beast, in point of reason and understanding and memory, as between man and man.”\textsuperscript{26} Endowed with ingenium and knowledge to produce, the animals appear from then on as our first masters. For Montaigne, who refers precisely to this passage from Plutarch in his Essays,\textsuperscript{27} the lessons offered by animals are the proof of their intelligence:

I say then (to return to my subject) that there is no probability to induce a man to believe, that beasts, by natural and compulsory tendency, do the same things that we do by our choice and industry; we ought, from like effects, to conclude like faculties, and from greater effects greater faculties, and consequently confess that the same reason, the same method by which we operate, are common with them, or that they have others that are better.\textsuperscript{28}

This idea of an animal intelligence nevertheless stirred debates in antiquity as in the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{29} For Aristotle, there is no real animal deliberation (De anima, III, 11, 434 a 5–21; History of Animals, I, 1, 488b, 21), man being the only one among the animals to possess reason (Politics, VII, 13, 1332b).\textsuperscript{30} Therefore, if the spider weaves, it is not by reflection or reason, but by natural impulse. In Physics (II, 8, 199a 21), just after having exposed the idea that “art completes what nature is unable to carry to a finish; or art imitates nature,” he explains that nature achieves its ends through the organs of animals: “This is strikingly evident in those other animals who do not act by [conscious] art or experimentaion or deliberation, which is the reason why some people debate whether or not spiders, ants and the like work by intellect or something else […]. Hence, if it is both by nature and to an end that the swallow builds its nest and the spider spins its web […] it is evident that there is such a factor [as an “end”] in natural processes and beings.”\textsuperscript{31}

This same idea is still present in Thomas Aquinas’s thought in the Middle Ages: “Even in dumb animals there are fixed ways of obtaining an end, wherefoere we observe that all the animals of a same species act in like manner. But this is impossible in man, on account of his reason, which takes cognizance of universals, and consequently extends to an infinity of singualrs.”\textsuperscript{32} Or, during the Renaissance, in Marsilio Ficino’s Platonic Theology (1489): “The rest of the animals live either without an art or skill or just with a single
one to whose deployment they do not [freely] be
take themselves but to which they are drawn by
the law of fate. An indication of this is that they
never improve over time in doing what they do.”
And again in Varchi who, while appreciating the
art of the spider or the swallow, considers that
this art is not really one, because it is not the fruit
of reason but of a natural instinct:

[A]rt is a factual habit, with true reason, of those
things which are not necessary, and the principle
of which is not in the things which are made, but in
him who makes them. […] I say “with true reason”
for by means of those words he excludes and ex-
tracts from it the art by which the spider webs warp
their marvelous webs, and the swallows and other
animals make their nests, and many other things,
which appear to him to be well done artfully, but
in truth they are not, for since they are not done
by reason but by natural instinct, they cannot be
called arts truly.14

Unlike men, animals are not endowed with a
cogitative reason, but with an estimative reason
that only allows them to have a knowledge of the
particular.

Reversal

In response to these distinctions, some defend-
ers of animal intelligence did note, however, that
animals sometimes surpass human capacities,
because they can combine several aptitudes. The
spider, according to Philon (Alexander, 17–18),
has a form of technical superiority over humans
in that it spins as well as it weaves, two opera-
tions that humans usually separate:

It seems to me that the friends of truth are not at
all concerned about the beautiful and do not ac-
knowledge unanimously that the faculty of reason
is implanted in every creature endowed with a soul.
[…] Is not the spider very proficient in making var-
ious designs? Have you not observed how it works
and what an amazing thing it fashions? For who
else works as hard at spinning or weaving? I am not
talking ironically but comparatively. Who rates
second in art? Even those who from childhood are
neither listless nor careless in their pursuit of art
are actually surpassed or outdone. Taking a useless
substance, as though it were wool, it fashions it in
a very skillful and artistic manner. First it spins it
very thin, as though by hand. Then by stretching
and intertwining, spinning and weaving so won-
derfully, it is capable of creating a fine piece of art
to make an open space look like lace. There is an-
other amazing thing about the spider which cloth
makers are unable to imitate because they divide
their skills. Those whose task it is to spin do not
weave and those who weave do not spin. Moreover
the spider contains within itself all that it needs. It
produces in a most perfect manner every single
thing without the aid of a co-worker.15

Despite the reservations of Aristotle and some of
his descendants, these discourses on animal in-
 genuity offer the conditions for a transformation
of the spider into a positive model.16

But how do we now move from discourse to
art? How do the spider and Arachne become ex-
emplary figures in the artistic field? It is the use
of metaphor and the recourse to analogy that al-
low this transfer.

The intertwining of philosophical, poetic, and
artistic registers operated by the image (as a
trope) exposes the basso continuo of the world
and reveals the similarities beyond the differ-
ences. The metaphorical image serves, then, as
Hans Blumenberg writes, as a substitute for a
“logical perplexity.”17

First, the reversal is realized in literature. As
Sylvie Ballestra-Puech wrote in her study of the
myth of Arachne, “weaving is, since Homer and
the Greek lyricists, a privileged metaphor of the
poetic creation.”18 This one rests in particular on
the imaginary proximity between the loom and
the lyre, and more particularly between the shut-
tule and the plectrum, whose action is expressed in Greek by the same verb.

On this basis, not only could the poetic arrangement, stitching, and assembling appear to be close to the arachnean weaving, but the writing, in its very form, could be brought closer to the work of the spider.

The calligraphic pattern book (Mira calligraphiae monumenta) of the humanist and imperial secretary Georg Bocskay as illustrated by Joris Hoefnagel between 1591 and 1596 for Rudolf II offers a remarkable example of this link between animal and human technê. Looking closely at some of these magnificent illustrations, the spider seems on several occasions to literally weave the text. In the illustration representing Damsel-fly, Imaginary Insect, Tulip, Spider, and Common Pear (fig. 3), for example, Hoefnagel sets the work of the insect and that of the man on an equal footing. Hanging from a thread connected to the last word sanitatem, the spider seems to have just completed its weaving operation. The writing is then like a thread which, by entanglement, knots and crossings, runs from word to word and gives the language its texture. Like a spider in motion, the writer weaves and seizes the space of the page. He makes his pen run on the surface of the sheet and gradually builds a web of words that is then offered for reading.

This operation of writing as weaving is based, as we know, on the Latin etymology of the word text (textus), which shares the same root as weave (texere). This word is moreover a paradigmatic example of the shift of meaning from one field of experience to another and of the process of normalization of the metaphor. The image of writing as an operation of weaving has been erased to make text, in everyday language, the word that designates the sum of written letters and words.

In addition to the assimilation of natural and artificial operations carried out in the pages of the Mira calligraphiae monumenta, the use of the spider in some of Hoefnagel’s illustrations also seems to postulate a form of artificiality of natural action (and we are here far from the simple “instinct” evoked by Aristotle or Varchi). In the plate with Butterflies, Moth, Spider, and English Daisies (fig. 4), the ductus or conduct of the line gives a well-determined form to the letters, and confers its style to the calligraphic writing. Yet, by appearing in an imaginary way at the origin of these writings, the spider comes to appear as endowed with a style or a manner of its own. According to the illustrator, the spider could vary the forms of its weaving; and its work would not be mechanical, as it is usually said, but rather inventive, creative.

As all natural philosophers have agreed since Aristotle (History of Animals, IX, 39), the spider weaves its web according to a well-determined
goal: that of catching its prey. But to achieve this, the insect does not always weave its web in a regular way. To surprise the prey, it can just as well adapt to the circumstances and the environment in which it finds itself, favoring irregular shapes to produce a deadly trap. This idea is once again brought to life by Hoefnagel (fig. 5) in his illustration of Damselfly, French Rose, Spanish Chestnut, and Spider. The spider uses its environment to weave its web, placing its threads in interstices, tying the thread to the stem of a rosehip, then to the bud of a chestnut, all to surprise the insects the arachnid enjoys.

This work, which is at first the fruit of a natural instinct, becomes the product of a properly artistic stratagem when it extends to the empire of the text. The spider that weaves its words here is neither more nor less than setting a trap for the reader. And the schism or caesura of the writing in folio 96 (fig. 4) mimics the trembling of a spider’s web vibrating under the effect of the catch. The reader places his gaze on the text, as on the web; he reads and his eye is caught in the grip of the writing. Calligraphy is therefore a means of capturing, imprisoning, gluing the reader to the page.

4 Joris Hoefnagel and Georg Bocskay, Butterflies, Moth, Spider, and English Daisies, 1561–1562, illuminated between 1591 and 1596, watercolors and gouache on parchment, 16.6 × 12.4 cm. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. 20 (86.MV.527), fol. 96

5 Joris Hoefnagel and Georg Bocskay, Damselfly, French Rose, Spanish Chestnut, and Spider, 1561–1562; illuminated between 1591 and 1596, watercolors and gouache on parchment, 16.6 × 12.4 cm. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. 20 (86.MV.527), fol. 10
Tintoretto

Let’s move, now, to the exploration of the arachnean motif and model in the field of painting. The example of Tintoretto’s representation of *Minerva and Arachne* (fig. 6) offers, I believe, an opportunity to see how a certain understanding or reconfiguration of the myth may have served as a defense of art as a *technē* originating from manual labor.43

This painting, now in the Uffizi, was probably painted around 1570 for the ceiling of a Venetian palazzo.44 It shows Arachne, on the right, and Minerva in a completely new configuration since the attitudes of the heroines do not strictly coincide with any of the passages in the Ovidian text. Represented as a young woman, Minerva does not echo the first part of the story. Moreover, as she is neither weaving nor punishing the unfortunate weaver, Minerva does not fit in with either the rivalry test or the final episode of punishment. The goddess, against all expectations, contemplates, as if speechless and from outside the loom, the work in progress of the young Lydian.

This way of transforming the confrontation between Minerva and Arachne suggests that the scene, beyond its moral significance, was intended to be the terrain for a meta-pictorial reflection. This iconographic originality seems to be the symptom of a completely personal investment on Tintoretto’s part, which most certainly stemmed from the connections that he could establish between his own condition as art maker and that of Arachne. Indeed, Tintoretto could not ignore the details of the Ovidian story, just as he could not fail to be sensitive to the way the poet evokes Arachne’s origins at the beginning of his narrative:

Neither for place of birth nor birth itself had the girl fame [Non illa loco nec origine gentis clara], but only for her skill [sed arte fuit]. Her father, Idmon of Colophon, used to dye the absorbent wool for her with Phocaean purple [pater huic Colophonius Idmon Phocaico bibulas tinguebat murice lanas]. Her mother was now dead; but she was low-born herself, and had a husband of the same degree [Occiderat mater, sed et haec de plebe suoque aequa uiro fuerat]. Nevertheless, the girl, Arachne, had gained fame for her skill throughout the Lydian towns, although she herself had sprung from a humble home and dwelt in the hamlet of Hypaepa. [Lydas tamen illa per urbes quaesierat studio non men memorabile, quamuis orta domo parua paruis habitabat Hypaepis].

Daughter of a dyer, the talented weaver could thus appear as the female alter ego of Tintoretto, because, like her, Jacopo Robusti was born to a dyer. And like her, he transfigured his modest origins through his talent. By choosing to be known as the “little dyer,” Tintoretto, Jacopo Robusti never ceased to claim his particular genealogy and his membership in the artisan class.

In The Miracle of the Slave, for example, Tintoretto signed his canvas as Iacomo Tentor to emphasize the possible analogy between the art of painting and the art of dyeing. By placing his signature between two manifestations of his talent as a painter, i.e., between a red purple back and a coat of mail with a thousand reflections, Tintoretto positions himself against the claims of nobility of some of his peers more adept at drawing. Moreover, he emphasized the manual and technical basis of painting, which operates, in the Miracle of the Slave as in Minerva and Arachne, by subtle interweaving of touches and tones. Seen from a distance, these interlacings create the illusion of a smooth passage, of an imperceptible continuity between colors. These are subtleties similar to those highlighted by Ovid when describing the work of weaving of Arachne:

There are inwoven the purple threads dyed in Tyrian kettles, and lighter colours insensibly shading off from these. [Illic et Tyrium quae purpura sensit aenum textit ur et tenues parvi discriminis umbrae.]

As when after a storm of rain the sun’s rays strike through, and a rainbow, with its huge curve, stains the wide sky, though a thousand different colours shine in it, the eye cannot detect the change from each one to the next [qualis ab imbre solent percus-sis solibus arcus inficere ingenti longum curvamine caelum; in quo diversi niteant cum mille colores, transitus ipse tamen spectantia lumina fallit; usque adeo, quod tangit, idem est; tamen ultima distant].

In Tintoretto’s Minerva and Arachne, this claim to technical mastery also seems to pass through a rapprochement between the web of the spider, the textile woven by Arachne, and the canvas painted by Tintoretto, which would all be designated in Italian by the term tela. This play of permutation might be suggested by the way Tintoretto has depicted the web woven by Arachne and the spider’s web placed between the right-hand post of the loom and the right-hand edge of the frame, even though the latter has been cut. By appearing parallel to the picture plane, they both seem to hug the surface of the canvas (tela dipinta). Furthermore, though this is no longer directly visible today, due to its material conditions and its probable location on a ceiling, it is believed that the canvas was originally of octagonal shape. Consequently, given that this shape is close to the orb webs of most spiders, are we not justified in hypothesizing that this format allowed Tintoretto to present his painting as a work analogous to that of the spider? And, in so doing, to bring the work of Arachne closer to the work of the painter? As Ovid states in his description, Arachne weaves stories that equal the most complex painted compositions: “There, are inserted lasting threads of gold, and an ancient tale is spun in the web” (VI, 69). Further on in his account, the poet qualifies the tapestry as neither more nor less than a painted work (VI,
130–131 “Non illud Pallas, non illud carpere livor possit opus: doluit successu flava virago et rupit pictas”; VI, 23 “seu pingebat acu”).53

That the production of a painted *storia* can be assimilated to weaving is first supported by the humanist and artistic tradition. In *De claribus mulieribus*, for example, Boccacio compares Arachne’s technique to that of a painter wielding a brush: “Some think that in her time Arachne held first place in the art of weaving and that she was so skilled in this that with her fingers, thread, loom, and other tools for such occupations she did what a painter does with his brush.”54 And in the middle of the sixteenth century, in a letter addressed to Benedetto Varchi (1547), Pontormo can use, in an ironic way, the image of cotton fabric (*panno*) to speak about painting: “Pensomi dunche che sia come del vestire, che questa [scultura] sia panno fine, perché dura più [et] è di più spesa, e la pittura panno acotonato dello inferno, che dura poco et è di manco spesa, perché, levato che gli ha quello ricciolino, non se ne tiene più conto.”55

But, above all, this connection between weaving and painting is suggested by the presence in the painting of mythological figures emerging on the strip of cloth held and worked by Arachne. The figures that we contemplate, whether Minerva, Arachne, or the onlooking nymphs, figurations of our own condition as spectators, are all analogous to the figures woven by the young woman. In both cases, the figure emerges from a work of interweaving and superposition of colors. Painting and weaving are thus comparable.

The Purple

Tintoretto does not stop there. To underline the noble nature of this practice, despite its manual dimension, Tintoretto chose to adorn Minerva with a suit woven of purple. This color echoes the verses of Ovid, first the purple of Arachne’s father who “dyed the absorbent wool purple, with Phocaean murex,” then “the purple passed through the Tyrian cauldron” with which the young Lydian weaves her tapestry. Because it is a very expensive pigment to produce, purple was a mark of the highest distinction, hence reserved for the powerful, the gods and the highest offices.56 Consequently, if Arachne is perhaps a little too sure of her talent, her talent nevertheless allows her to put herself at the service of the great and to gain their recognition.

Let us recall here that some artists emphasized Arachne’s technical superiority. When
Battista Franco stages the opposition of Minerva and Arachne, it is clearly Arachne’s production (fig. 7) the nymphs recognize as superior. The moral? It doesn’t matter if the artist is of less noble birth than his patrons. If he has talent, he will make himself indispensable.

Sylvie Ballestra-Puech has shown in her study devoted to the Arachnean myth that Ovid had probably constructed his story to criticize the powerful, first and foremost Augustus, for not recognizing the freedom of artists and the independence of their poetic work. In Ovid’s poem, the ferment of the recognition of Arachne’s talent is not based on lineage, but on the technè or know-how which alone allows an artist to transfigure an inherited condition.

This recognition of the artist’s talent is staged by Tintoretto not only by disregarding the Ovidian narrative as we have seen above, but also by focusing on what Arachne’s work produces, its effect. Minerva is in a meditative position, indicated by her head resting on her left hand. This specific position, which is also the one adopted by the meditative humanist contemplating the fly caught by the spider in John Heywood’s comedy The Spider Being Returned to the Fly (fig. 8), belongs to the tradition of the representation of intellectual meditation and melancholy. In Tintoretto’s painting, Minerva admires the work in progress, and by admiring, she places the technical work in the rank of activities that produce knowledge and arouse intellectual curiosity. The production becomes worthy of admiration because it pleases the senses as much as the intellect.

Here again, we must remember that the spider could serve as an emblem for the representation of ingenium, that specific form of intelligence that lies at the heart of the making process. Federico Zuccaro visualizes this in one of the vignettes accompanying the illustrated Vita of his brother Taddeo (fig. 9). Art oscillates between the power of Minerva and that of Arachne, between the shield of Patientia or Sapientia in which Medusa is reflected, and that of Industria on which the spider spins its web. In this register of manual activity becoming an object of thought, if we look closely at the illustration produced by Hans Weiditz to accompany a 1532 edition of Petrarch’s De remediis fortuna (fig. 10), we can ask ourselves whether intelligence is only on Minerva’s side. Who is trapped here? Is it Arachne, whom Minerva transforms into a spider and makes regress to an animal state, or is it Minerva, screened from our side by the gigantic web Arachne spun?

Finally, if we consider Paolo Veronese’s representation of Industria as a young woman contemplating a spider’s web against the blue of the sky in the Sala del Collegio of the Doge’s Palace, ca. 1575–1577, doesn’t the work of weaving become a pattern or model in which the intellect can immerse itself?
9 Federico Zuccaro, *Two Spiritelli Symbolizing Wisdom and Industry (or Diligence)*, ca. 1595, pen and brown ink, brush with brown wash, over black chalk, 17.3 x 42 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, acc. no. 99. GA.6.11

Art and Generation

To return to Tintoretto’s painting, one thing has not yet been noticed despite its obviousness: Arachne is a female model. Tintoretto, if he makes the Lydian maiden his alter ego, does so by choosing to assimilate not only to a woman, but also to a technique largely associated with women. Weaving as well as spinning have been since antiquity activities specific to the female world, as Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux has notably shown: Ariadne, Penelope, Helen, and even Mary are spinners, weavers.63

Is Tintoretto saying something about pictorial practice? Thanks to the work of Mary Pardo, Philip Sohm, and Fredrika Jacobs, we know that the Renaissance theory of painting was indexed to gender.64 Drawing was masculine, color feminine. And this distinction, linked to a division of qualities since Aristotle, associated color with seduction and therefore with the feminine, while it made drawing the medium of firmitas and reason, and therefore of the masculine.65

By assimilating painting to weaving, was Tintoretto demonstrating his adherence to a feminine conception of painting? This seems quite possible, especially if we judge by the way he represented Arachne. The femininity of the young weaver is indeed the object of particular attention: her chest is largely bare and the pearls she wears around her neck, in her ears, and in her hair place her under the empire of Venus and therefore of femininity. Moreover, the association of the art of weaving with femininity is reinforced by the contiguity between the young woman’s breast and the woven band of cloth. Her left breast is as close as possible to the fabric winding on the roll. While the right breast, hidden by the strip, is visually substituted by the woven figures. Since Ulrich Pfisterer’s book Kunst-Geburten, in particular, we know the importance of the imaginary of the female breast and lactation for the metaphorical figuration of creative generation.66 Here, we can assume that Tintoretto has taken this plastic proximity into account in order to make a similar connection. The visual connection between the breast and the emergence of the woven web could also be suggested by what natural philosophers have said about the production of thread by the spider. Indeed, for Democritus, Plutarch, Philo, or Johannes von Cuba, the spider secretes its thread from the inside and expels it from its abdomen.67 Isn’t that, on a purely visual, plastic level, what Arachne does?

One thing is certain among all these hypotheses, and I will conclude on this remark: Tintoretto shows by this singular rewriting of the myth that a figure as depreciated and criticized as Arachne can be projected towards more positive horizons. He thus points out that certain models can radically change their appearance depending on the point of view adopted. This is perhaps what we can call a paradigm shift: what we think we know about an era, about a way of doing or thinking, often hides other faces, other motives that are just waiting to be reinterpreted.

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2 On the different techniques linked to textile production, and on the imaginary which accompanies it, see Anika Reineke et al. (eds.), Textile Terms: A Glossary, Berlin 2017.

3 Things were different during the Middle Ages when the “minor” arts were not distinguished from painting or sculpture. Their dignity, notably because of the materials used, was no less than that of the three drawing arts. Weavers were still called artists in the sixteenth century; see, for example, Giovanni Antonio Tagliente, Opera nuova che insegna a le donne a cuscire, a raccammare, & a disegnare a ciascuno, et la ditta opera sara di molta utilita ad ogni artista, per esser il disegno ad ognuno necessario laquel e ititolata esempio di racammini, Venice 1527.


10 See Falguières 2004 (as in note 7).


On the moral qualifications (vain, hypocritical, etc.), see Ulysse Aldrovandi, *De animalibus insectis libri septem, cum singulorum iconibus ad vivum expressi*, Bologna 1602, 626–627 (“De Araneis”). Erasmus makes Arachne a figure of vanity and pride: Erasmus, Aranearum telas texere, in: *Adagiorum Chilias prima* (Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami, vol. 2.1), Amsterdam 1993, 446. On this adage, see Aldrovandi 1602 (as above), 630; Ballestra-Puech 2006 (as in note 12), 109–110.


15 On the moral qualifications (vain, hypocritical, etc.), see Ulysse Aldrovandi, *De animalibus insectis libri septem, cum singulorum iconibus ad vivum expressi*, Bologna 1602, 626–627 (“De Araneis”). Erasmus makes Arachne a figure of vanity and pride: Erasmus, Aranearum telas texere, in: *Adagiorum Chilias prima* (Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami, vol. 2.1), Amsterdam 1993, 446. On this adage, see Aldrovandi 1602 (as above), 630; Ballestra-Puech 2006 (as in note 12), 109–110.


20 For the abilities of the industrious spider, see, for example, Aldrovandi 1602 (as in note 15), 611–612.


(ch. 12, Apology for Raimond de Sebonde). See also ibid., vol. 1, 254 (ch. 30, On Cannibals).

26 Plutarch 1878 (as in note 24), vol. 5, 233 (Bruta animalia ratione uti).


28 Montaigne 1877 (as in note 25), vol. 2, 166 (ch. 12, Apology for Raimond de Sebonde).

29 On a philosophical level, see Elisabeth de Fontenay, Le silence des bêtes: La philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité, Paris 1998, 88–131, 145–151. Aldrovandi collected most of the views expressed on the ingenium of the spider from Aristotle to Cardan, including Democritus, Pliny, Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine, Aelian, Lucretius, Plutarch, etc. See Aldrovandi 1602 (as in note 15), 611–614.


31 Aristote 1961 (as in note 8), 37.


34 My translation of Benedetto Varchi, Lezione nella quale si disputa della maggioranza delle arti e qual si a più nobile, la scultura o la pittura ([1549]), in: Paola Barocci (ed.), Trattati d’arte del Cinquecento, 3 vols., Bari 1960–1962, vol. 1, 9–10 (“L’arte è uno abito fattivo, con vera ragione, di quel che non sono necessarie, il principio delle quali è non nelle cose che si fanno, ma in colui che le fa. La quale diffinizione, per meglio essere intesi da ciascuno, dichiararremo a parola a parola. […] Dicesi ‘con vera ragione’ per due cagioni: prima, perché tutte l’arti sono infallibili, ciò non errano mai e sempre conseguiscano l’intendimento e fine loro; poi, perché mediante quelle parole se ne esclude e cava l’arte colla quale i ragnateli ordiscono le loro maravigliose tele, e le rondini et altri animali fanno il nido, e molte altre cose, le qual i paiono bene fatte artifiziosamente, ma nel vero non sono, perciocché, non essendo fatte per ragione ma per istinto naturale, non si possono chiamare arti veramente”).


36 Alongside the tradition of the moralized Ovid, a philological tradition arose which give Arachne a more positive place. For example, Raphael Regius (1440–1520) granted Arachne a partial return to favor. See Ballestra-Puech 2006 (as in note 12), 107–123.

37 Hans Blumenberg, Paradigms for a Metaphorology, trans. by Robert Savage, Ithaca 2010, 12: “Our analysis must be concerned with detecting the logical ‘perplexity’ for which metaphor steps in, and an aoria of this kind is most conspicuously evident precisely where it is not ‘admitted’ by theory in the first place.”


40 This impression is retrospective since in reality the illustrations postdate the calligraphic production.


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In the absence of precise documentation, the dating is contested among specialists whose assessments oscillate between 1540 (Schulz, Pallucchini, Rossi, and Blanc) and 1580 (Pittaluga, Bercken, De Vecchi, and Paolucci). Most recently, Tempestini dated the painting between 1575 and 1585.

Ovid 1977 (as in note 13), 288–289 (Metamorphoses, V1, 7–13). In the 1553 Trasformationi of Ludovico Dolce, the origins of Arachne are evoked as follows: “Era nata costei d’ignobil grado in Lidia entro a un Castel povero e humile” (Le trasformazioni di Ludovico Dolce: il Rinascimento ovidiano di Giovanni Antonio Rusconi, ed. by Giuseppe Capriotti, Ancona 2013, 124).


Cf. Cassegrain 2010 (as in note 46), 66.


This technique of interweaving can be brought closer to a logic of painting as braiding; see Hubert Damisch, La peinture est un vrai trois, in: id., Fenêtre jaune cadmium ou Les dessous de la peinture, Paris 1984, 275–305.

Ovid 1977 (as in note 13), 292–293 (Metamorphoses, V1, 61–68).

See Maria Grazia Albertini Ottolenghi (ed.), Tela picta: tele dipinte dei secoli XIV e XV in Italia settentrionale. Tipologie, iconografia, tecniche esecutive, in Arte Lombarda 153, 2008; Stefan Neuner, Canvas, in: Reineke et al. 2017 (as in note 2), 29–32; Michel Hochmann, Colorito: La technique des peintres vénitiens à la Renaissance, Turnhout 2015, ch. 3. Hochmann specifies that “painted canvases […] were for a long time an economic substitute for tapestry” (“les toiles peintes […] furent longtemps un substitut économi que de la tapisserie”, ibid., 107). One can also think of the thread devices used to paint, such as the “intersecting veil” invented by Alberti (De pictura, II, 31), which was “loosely woven of fine thread, dyed with whatever colour you please, divided up by thicker threads into as many parallel square sections as you like, and stretched over a frame,” and must be placed “between the eye and the object to be represented, so that the visual pyramid passes through the loose weave of the veil” (Alberti 1972 [as in note 9], 68–69).

See Schulz 1968 (as in note 43), 124; Tempestini 2018 (as in note 43), 121.

On this comparison of painting and weaving in Ovid, see Krieger 2002 (as in note 43), 558, and Cieri Via 2019 (as in note 13), 173.


Varchi 1960 (as in note 34), 69: “I think, therefore, that it is the same as for clothing, that this is fine cloth, because it [sculpture] lasts longer [and] is more expensive, and the painting is cotton fabric of hell, which lasts little and is of less expense, because, once the curl has been removed, it is no longer taken into account.” Cf. Hubert Damisch, Théorie du nuage: Pour une histoire de la peinture, Paris 1972, 57–58, 319: “Pontormo considère [ait] la peinture comme une manière de tissage qui ne se distinguait pas, sinon par la valeur relative qui s’y attache, du tissage de la toile elle-même” (“Pontormo regarded painting as a kind of weaving that was indistinguishable, except for the relative value attached to it, from the weaving of the canvas itself”).

On purple, see the essays collected in Oddone Longo (ed.), La porpora: realtà e immaginario di un colore simbolico, Venice 1998.


Ballestra-Puech 2006 (as in note 12), 29–45.

Klein 2017 (as in note 4), ch. 7. Marcel Détienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant have shown that the paradigm of the mêtis (or cunning intelligence) is the woven trap (net, web, etc.); Marcel Détienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Les ruses de l’intelligence: La mêtis des Grecs* [1974], Paris 2009, 49–57. See also Gambino Longo 2004 (as in note 7), 173–174.


Schulz 1968 (as in note 43), 106; Giessmann 2016 (as in note 43), 82–84.

Frontisi-Ducroux 2009 (as in note 12).


Sohm notes, however, that according to Marco Boschini (*La carta del navegar pittoresco*, Venice 1660, 678), Tintoretto’s colorito is properly masculine; see Sohm 1995 (as in note 64), 798.


Johannes von Cuba, *Hortus sanitatis, quatuor libri haec quae subsequuntur complectens*, Augsburg 1536, fol. 6v.