

# “A radical relationship with the world of nature”.

## Natural history collecting in the Modern Age

Oreste Trabucco

University of Bergamo, oreste.trabucco@unibg.it

Book review of Giuseppe Olmi, *Arte e scienza lungo la via Emilia. Storia naturale, illustrazioni e collezioni nell'età moderna*. Firenze: Edifir, 2022.

### How to cite this article

Trabucco, Oreste. “A radical relationship with the world of nature.’ Natural history collecting in the Modern Age”. *Galilæana XX*, 2 (2023), 191-196; doi: 10.57617/gal-34.

Giuseppe Olmi has usefully collected some of his essays published over the past twenty years in an elegantly printed and richly illustrated book (*Arte e scienza lungo la via Emilia. Storia naturale, illustrazioni e collezioni nell'età moderna*, Florence, Edifir, 2022). Olmi himself tells us with his usual and elegant modesty about his recent book:

I respond to the repeated and affectionate solicitations of my friends and colleagues Cristina De Benedictis and Arturo Fittipaldi [...] to publish a collection of my old essays [...] I thought it opportune to reprint here some of the works concerning personalities and facts of the modern age belonging to my region, Emilia Romagna. The fundamental themes are those that have for the most part distinguished my activity as a researcher, namely those of collecting and illustrating nature.<sup>1</sup>

These themes, which are widespread today, were certainly not such when Olmi started to devote himself to them half a century ago. Olmi dedicated himself to this subject on the basis of very characterised historiographic premises. It is no coincidence that the book we are discussing is dedicated to the memory of Paolo Prodi, Olmi's teacher. But let's go step by step.

Olmi dedicated – and never stopped – his energies as a young scholar to Ulisse Aldrovandi. Olmi collected the results of his first research on Aldrovandi in a small book published in 1976, in the introduction of which he declared:

<sup>1</sup> Olmi, “Nota introduttiva”, in *Arte e scienza...*, 7.

### Copyright notice

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0).

When, a few years ago, I began the exploration of the manuscripts of the Bolognese naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi, I did so with objectives that were overall precise and clearly delimited. What interested me then – and which, moreover, still interests me today – was to deepen an aspect that is anything but secondary in the activity of our scientist, that of his attitude towards the figurative arts.<sup>2</sup>

Where did Olmi’s interest in Ulisse Aldrovandi come from? This question can be effectively answered with the words of an illustrious scholar, a pupil of Roberto Longhi and then of Francesco Arcangeli, and a key figure in the history of art in Emilia Romagna in the second half of the twentieth century: Andrea Emiliani. Celebrating the seventy-five years of Paolo Prodi with pages included in a volume edited by Gian Paolo Brizzi and Giuseppe Olmi, Emiliani wrote:

The *Teorica delle arti figurative nella Riforma cattolica* was published as a pre-printed extract in 1962 and, immediately after, in the *Archivio italiano per la storia della piet * in 1965 [...] I still think that it was useful to contribute precisely to the knowledge of the fundamental issues of our work in relation to a decisive age like the second half of the sixteenth century. Those issues were identified especially in the context of that research which, in those days, was fervently activated and invested the problem of a conscious historical cataloguing and not only of archiving the artistic and cultural heritage in the Italian churches and, in this case, in the churches of Emilia-Romagna [...] Prodi’s work project was [...] to move in the direction of Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti. The direction proved decisive to nourish in depth the visual prospecting that the figurativeness of the images, and in particular those of Ludovico [Carracci], allowed in an increasingly explicit way [...] Even Giuseppe Olmi, in 1977, in the interpretation given to the theme, in itself very relevant, of *Osservazione della natura e raffigurazione in Ulisse Aldrovandi* published in Trento, could enter into a consciously public historical dimension of a science offered to the life of man; and it was also his path parallel to the world of artists and Ludovico Carracci in particular.<sup>3</sup>

The long essay published by Prodi to which Emiliani referred to was precisely the one entitled *Ricerca sulla teorica delle arti figurative nella Riforma cattolica*. This essay will be republished in 1984 and Paolo Prodi will accompany it with a dense afterword. Prodi described the character of his research as follows:

What I believe I have discovered in cardinal Gabriele Paleotti’s papers is that his goal was to go far beyond the catechetical-pastoral concerns for the instruction of the illiterate people.

<sup>2</sup> Olmi, “Premessa”, in *Ulisse Aldrovandi*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Emiliani, *Paolo Prodi...*, 95, 98.

In drawing up his treaty [*Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre et profane*] he wanted, with the collaboration of intellectuals and artists, develop a theological thought and a spirituality capable of support the reform of the Church and society. Beyond a specific collaboration, which I tried to illustrate in my first publications, this translates into the attempt to create a naturalistic-historical culture that could support painters in the leap of cultural promotion which leads to the conquest of the autonomy of their “art” and to intellectual ascent [...]. The figure of Ulisse Aldrovandi is particularly significant for the relationships it tends to build between the new classification of nature, the biblical theology and the representation techniques. What is interesting to emphasize is the development of a new cultural awareness of the distinction between the world of nature, which must be investigated with reason and senses, and the divine world, whose knowledge comes from faith and the revelation that Church preserves and transmits from generation to generation. The problem that is posed is not simply that of consequences of this approach in the representation techniques, but of the presence for the scientist and the artist of two books, that of nature and that of the Bible, which must be read with different methods and between which it is necessary to find harmony.<sup>4</sup>

In 1984 Prodi also wrote, together with Olmi, the essay *Gabriele Paleotti, Ulisse Aldrovandi e la cultura a Bologna nel secondo Cinquecento*. Here we read words that are fundamental to understanding Olmi’s decades-long research: the naturalistic museum of Aldrovandi “was intended to encourage research and teaching. Aldrovandi remembers continuously and proudly this public function of his museum. This feature is further reaffirmed in his will, where he declares to leave to his city, after his death, what he laboriously collected and sorted”.<sup>5</sup>

History of natural history collecting became in the following years a very fortunate subject of study; Olmi’s research has not only had an international scope, but has played a masterful role. However, it is important to remember that Olmi’s long work cannot be restricted to the perimeter of the history of collecting; his many essays preserve the original motivation born from the historiographical enterprise that Olmi shared with Paolo Prodi since the Seventies of last century.

*Arte e scienza lungo la via Emilia. Storia naturale, illustrazioni e collezioni nell’età moderna* consists of six essays: “I Cappuccini emiliano-romagnoli e la scienza nell’età moderna” (9-72); “*Il nobile caos di un picciol mondo: arte e natura nelle collezioni estensi di Modena*” (73-109); “Bologna nel secolo XVI: una capitale europea della ricerca naturalistica” (111-132); “Lo studio della natura a Parma nel tramonto dell’antico regime” (133-172);

<sup>4</sup> Prodi, *Arte e pietà nella chiesa tridentina*, 26-27.

<sup>5</sup> Olmi and Prodi, *Gabriele Paleotti, Ulisse Aldrovandi e la cultura a Bologna nel secondo Cinquecento*, 95, 98.

“Lodovico di Borbone, aristocratico *cultor prestante de’ naturali e chimici studj*” alla fine dell’Antico regime” (173-205); “Padre Cesare Majoli, *uomo laboriosissimo per la storia naturale*” (207-239).

It is noteworthy to recall that the first essay was originally published in the volume, edited by Giovanni Pozzi (himself a Capuchin and a distinguished scholar of the history of literature) and Paolo Prodi, *I cappuccini in Emilia-Romagna. Storia di una presenza* (2002). We know how important the role of naturalistic collections and pharmacies in the convents of monastic orders has been in the modern age. Olmi shows the importance of the contribution made between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries to the study of natural history by the Capuchins of Emilia-Romagna. Through little-known sources and unpublished documents, Olmi reconstructs the profile of some Capuchins such as “the friar Gregorio da Reggio [...] certainly a protagonist of that extraordinary impetus with which, at the beginning of the modern age, the study of nature was approached” (10). The knowledge of many places, facilitated by the wanderings caused by his religious activity, allowed friar Gregorio to explore the territory of Emilia Romagna and to build a vast network of relationships. Friar Gregorio had relations with the greatest contemporary naturalists: suffice it to mention Ulisse Aldrovandi among the Italians, Charles de l’Éscluse among the foreigners. Thanks to a large and rare documentation, Olmi highlights the relationship between the spiritual activity of the Capuchins and their dedication to naturalistic research:

Because of his commitment to research and his preparation, friar Gregorio must certainly be considered, in the field of natural history, what today we would call a true professional. In the course of the modern age and, in particular, in the seventeenth century, however, there were also numerous Capuchins who, without being able to boast of specific skills, made significant contributions to the knowledge of the world of nature. We allude to those friars who worked as missionaries in distant and hostile lands and who, in the daily struggle for survival and amid the difficulties encountered in spreading the Gospel message, found the time and strength to observe the environment around them and to transmit news about it to Europe. (26-27)

On the basis of unpublished documents and a fascinating iconographic set, Olmi, in all the essays collected in the volume, guides us along the Emilia to discover characters, places, and cultural relationships. Olmi shows us the importance of naturalistic museums and the activities that are connected to them: the direct observation of nature and the reproduction of the specimens studied in order to establish a stable and shared knowledge.

Bologna is at the centre of Olmi’s historical investigations. It is the city of Ulisse Aldrovandi, who makes it a European capital of naturalistic research. Aldrovandi created a very rich private collection, but he did even more: “Aldrovandi deployed all his skill [...]

in creating a dense network of relationships and collaborations, which made his museum and more generally Bologna not only a crossroads for scholars and artists, but also a point of arrival and departure of dried plants, seeds, animal and mineral finds, illustrations, information and opinions” (117). But Bologna is not the only object of study by Olmi. Olmi studies the history of a clearly recognizable area of Italy under the ancient regime in a doubly polycentric perspective. The relationships between art and natural history that we discover through Olmi show us a territory made up of several centers, such as Modena (the Estense Gallery) or Parma (the University, the Museum of Antiquities). And cultural relations also show us how these centers interacted with other centers in Italy from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Olmi constantly combines cultural history with political history. Olmi never forgets that history is *histoire à part entière*.

Olmi's favourite historiographical objects are letters exchanged between naturalists, naturalistic museums, iconographic documents. Krzysztof Pomian, one of the founders of the history of collecting, wrote many years ago that one cannot examine objects independently of the men who give them specific functions and that men and their behaviors could not be analyzed without the objects that determine their social position. Since then, the number of books published on art and nature collecting has become colossal. But few books link artistic and naturalistic collecting to the history of the men of a region (always studied taking into account its relations with other Italian and European regions) as Olmi's book.

## References

- Emiliani, Andrea. “Paolo Prodi e la sua *Ricerca sulla teorica delle arti figurative nella Riforma cattolica* (1962)”. In *Dai cantieri della storia. Liber amicorum per Paolo Prodi*, edited by Gian Paolo Brizzi and Giuseppe Olmi, 87-101. Bologna: Clueb, 2007.
- Olmi, Giuseppe. *Ulisse Aldrovandi. Scienza e natura nel secondo Cinquecento*. Trento: Libera Università degli Studi di Trento, 1976.
- Olmi, Giuseppe. *Arte e scienza lungo la via Emilia. Storia naturale, illustrazioni e collezioni nell'età moderna*. Firenze: Edifir, 2022.
- Olmi Giuseppe, and Paolo Prodi. “Gabriele Paleotti, Ulisse Aldrovandi e la cultura a Bologna nel secondo Cinquecento”, in *Nell'età di Correggio e dei Carracci. Pittura in Emilia dei secoli XVI e XVII*, 213-235. Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1986; reprinted in Paolo Prodi. *Arte e pietà nella chiesa tridentina*, 264-311. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Pomian, Krzysztof. *Sur l'histoire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1999.
- Prodi, Paolo. *Arte e pietà nella chiesa tridentina*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014.