

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Suthor, Nicola. Bravura: Virtuosity and Ambition in Early Modern European Painting**

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Volume 44, numéro 3, été 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085867ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38041>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Stanivukovic, G. (2021). Compte rendu de [Suthor, Nicola. Bravura: Virtuosity and Ambition in Early Modern European Painting]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(3), 331–334.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38041>

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**Suthor, Nicola.**

***Bravura: Virtuosity and Ambition in Early Modern European Painting.***

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. 304 + 89 colour ill., 46 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-691-20458-1 (hardcover) US\$65.

The choice of the subject and the original critical perspective in this thoroughly researched book are bound to leave a deep imprint on art history criticism, and hopefully will influence early modern literary study as well, because of a new critical viewpoint on the technique and result of composition. This pioneering book—about the delicate complexity of the craft and technology of painting which made Renaissance visual arts captivatingly intelligent and endlessly intriguing—moves away from the study of connoisseurship and instead analyzes a specific strategy, or a rhetoric, of artistic composition. This edition is a substantially revised and “supplemented English-language” (240) version of a study originally published in German. Nicola Suthor extends this focus on a property of art internal to the technology of artistic execution, and the effect it has on the viewer, in a significantly new direction and explores a compelling new topic. An equally sensitive reader of art theory and of painting, Suthor had already established a critical interest in the mechanics of artistic authenticity and their result, demonstrated brilliantly in her previous book, *Rembrandt’s Roughness* (Princeton, 2018). In her new book, she has produced a comprehensive and original modern analysis of bravura, weaving together, in ten substantial chapters organized according to topic and concept, theoretical writing about and practical evidence of bravura. The book begins in early sixteenth-century Italy and ends by considering Picasso’s and Braque’s views on the impact and appearance of bravura as a painterly affectation.

The opening chapter introduces the book’s theoretical concepts and establishes the grounds for the definition of bravura. But theories and definitions of bravura continue to develop and transform throughout this book, as individual paintings reveal nuances, and new meanings and uses, of bravura. Bravura is a “painterly style” (1), but it is also the intent created by a technology employed in achieving style, and the effect that style produces on the viewer. This style, however, is not the result of a consonance between “effect and matter” (1) but the energy and dynamism of the artistic gesture that produced style. Furthermore, bravura is a contrived and a “pretended” (9) negligence that shows how “attitude becomes form” (9). As such, bravura

is not a heuristic property of art technique in the first instance. Rather, it is a demonstration of ability. Etymologically, bravura links with bravado, and both to boldness. This connection is not only ideological but also social, as many anecdotes of painters' ostentatious ways of life bled into the intensified perception turned into their art, as Suthor demonstrates. The joint purpose that bravura and bravado share with the notions of a venturesome and brave manner, or technique, of manifesting behaviour includes also a connection with the idea of the manipulation of "painting materials and techniques" (1).

Seventeenth-century theorist Filippo Baldinucci elaborated the association of bravura with "painterly virtuosity" (6) by linking it to boldness, quickness, decisiveness, spontaneity, and ingenuity; he connected bravura to an attention-demanding manner of turning spirit into a daring and dazzling, and sometimes subtle but strong, performance of form. All these meanings of bravura are only a sample of a cluster of descriptions of this property of art technique, which Suthor presents in detail in her lively analysis. As Suthor reminds her reader (with the help of Adorno), the term bravura originated in music—where it describes the virtuoso performance of especially difficult passages that move the audience to call out "bravo"—but bravura can serve literary analysis, too, since Renaissance painting and poetry were sister forms, as theories of art and poetry attest abundantly.

The first chapter examines the emotional effect on viewers of, and their responses to, bold presentations of violence and slaughter, especially in battle scenes. According to Suthor, bravura animates these paintings. It is evident in the stylized movement of figures and armed crowds; in the centrally-located representations of dying men; in details such as drops of blood trickling down wounded and dead bodies; and in the execution of the eyelashes. In the next chapter, Suthor emphasizes how this "technically demanding element" (73) requests "considerable erudition" (73) to be used, in order to represent boldly the impact that a painted figure is intended to make. The subject of chapter 3 is spatial bravura: a composition painted on domes and flat architectural spaces. The excellent analysis of Caravaggio's *Jupiter, Pluto, and Neptune* on the curved roof in Casino Boncompagni Lodovisi in Rome demonstrates Suthor's admirable analytical skill in showing how bravura is created by the way in which architectural shapes enable a play of colour and shade in the representation of the bodies of these three figures. The intellectual foundation of bravura in experimental mannerism leads to the fourth chapter, which explores bravura

as style, or *sprezzatura*, or a clever play with an idea. Tintoretto's "intense engagement with extreme perspective" (128) is one instance of this use of bravura. In chapter 5, Suthor turns to interpreting the bravura of small forms and the relationship of bravura with time. Here, the author's method is a phenomenological analysis of how brevity, not longevity, turns into a technique that "defines bravura" (134), for instance, as brushstrokes. The subject of chapter 6 is the relationship between "the economy of visual representation" (155) and the financial consideration—how much a buyer is willing to pay for a painting—that conditions "the artistic labor" (155). This chapter illuminates the curious, defining, and fascinating connection between economics and the painting of bravura.

Chapter 7 focuses on feminizing bravura and on exploring the bold application of colour in representing the female body. Another engrossing and illuminating analysis, this time of Titian's *Rape of Europa*, demonstrates the critical adroitness with which Suthor illuminates details and their assemblage within a composition. The brilliant chapter 8 is devoted to an analysis of the recurring figure of the endangered youth caught in emotionally fraught moments and acts, such as conversion or the demonstration of Midas's "fatal gift" (190) of turning to gold anything he touches. Reading this chapter, the reader is rewarded not only by the originality of the topic but also by the illuminating exactness with which Suthor explains every step and moment in the craft and technology that result in bravura. The nature and brevity of such acts test bravura's daringness to turn such moments into a focused and intense drama of technique and colour. In the penultimate chapter, Suthor explores the academic response to the notion of rapidity associated with bravura as "bold facility" (213, another meaning of bravura) and with the "bravura brushstroke" (215). The final chapter, in which Frans Hals serves as a case study, discusses a transformation of the original idea and intent of bravura to make the most of the accident as its subject matter, by interpreting those techniques that least appear to reflect the original intent of bravura but end up being material for it. Among the painters examined are Preti, Piazzetta, Rubens, Rainondi, Gentileschi (daughter and father), Romano, Raphael, Tintoretto, March, Schiavone, Tempesta, Correggio, Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo, Hals, Bassano, van Dyck, Giordano, Régnier, Donduci, Titian, Goya, Manfredi, Cesari, Teste, Boucher, and Fragonard.

Overall, this brilliant and well-illustrated book confirms that bravura was one of the most cognitively demanding techniques of Renaissance painting. The brilliance of Suthor's analysis lies in her fresh terminology and perceptive language of description of even the smallest and most easily overlooked details of composition, and in her critical ability to relate such intricacies to larger issues taken up in paintings and in criticism. She writes in engaging, precise language, and makes persuasive connections with contemporary art criticism and modern aesthetics and cultural theory. Her book's relevance to literary criticism is clear, too. Instead of focusing on themes and topics that contextualize a painting from outside the work itself, Suthor shows us virtuosity and ambition at work in individual elements that create a rhetoric of painting. This same approach applies to the verbal art of the period. By zooming in on rhetorical techniques used in crafting literary works, instead of describing their external contexts, we can see the virtuosity and ambition that helped create complex, rhetorical compositions.

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<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38041>

**Vessey, Mark, ed.**

***Erasmus on Literature: His Ratio or "System" of 1518/1519.* Translated with commentary by Robert D. Sider. Foreword by Anthony Grafton.**

Erasmus Studies. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. Pp. xx, 358 + 4 b/w ill. ISBN 978-1-4875-0269-0 (hardcover) \$92.49; 978-1-4875-2210-0 (paperback) \$39.95.

This book is built around an English translation of Erasmus's *Ratio verae theologiae* (Guide to true theology) first published in 2019 as part of volume 41 of the *Collected Works of Erasmus*. *CWE 41* is immensely learned, indeed it is immense: too large to carry and too expensive to assign as a text. *Erasmus on Literature* makes it possible for the *Ratio* to revive as an independent book, one worth study: a book with things to say about history, the Bible, and its interpretation. Erasmus first published the *Ratio* separately and it sold well. He