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Ilaria Serati

Giacomo Carrara 1714–1796 e la letteratura artistica

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During the eighteenth century, correspondence emerged as the predominant medium of communication, enabling the maintenance of long-distance relationships and the formation of new intellectual networks. For artists and connoisseurs in particular, letters served as a crucial space for critical debates. The circulation of ideas and information encouraged the development of new research and stimulated publishing initiatives. In Italy—where the cultural landscape was defined by strong polycentrism—this phenomenon was especially evident. Even in smaller towns, scholars reconstructed local art histories and made visible painters, sculptors, and architects who were previously excluded from critical discourse. In Bergamo, Giacomo Carrara emerged as the central figure. A collector and patron of the arts, he is best known for founding a school of painting in 1794, to which he donated his gallery of paintings in 1796; the institution later became the Accademia Carrara. Art historian Ilaria Serati devoted her book, *Giacomo Carrara (1714–1796) e la letteratura artistica*, to this figure.

In accordance with the spirit that animated the *République des Lettres*, Serati structures her book around the correspondence. The transcription of the letters occupies roughly two-thirds of the book, underscoring their pivotal role in its structure. The decision is primarily driven by pragmatic considerations. Carrara’s decision to never publish under his own name makes the manuscript material the primary source for understanding his artistic perspective. The letters provide evidence of Carrara’s extensive network of contacts with artists and connoisseurs throughout the peninsula: Francesco Maria Tassi and Francesco Bartoli in Bergamo, Giovanni Gaetano Bottari in Rome, Tommaso Temenza in Venice, Luigi Crespi in Bologna, and Carlo Bianconi in Milan to name a few. Serati employs Carrara’s “epistolary geography” as the organizing principle of the book. This choice effectively highlights the centrality of the correspondence as a tool for building and consolidating scholarly connections and Carrara’s position as an essential hub of these circuits. While the correspondence spans five cities, Serati restricts her analysis to Bergamo, Venice, and Rome, leaving Bologna and Milan aside. The exclusion of Milan is justified by the fact that the extant material did not allow for a dedicated chapter. Regarding Bologna, Serati excludes it arguing that the Carrara–Crespi correspondence had already been extensively studied by art historian Giovanna Perini Folesani. Nevertheless, even acknowledging this prior scholarship, the absence of a dedicated chapter on Bologna seems to be a missed opportunity. Examining the Carrara–Crespi relationship specifically from Carrara’s perspective, even in a synthetic or compilatory form, would have provided a more comprehensive depiction of his intellectual and social milieu, as well as a clearer understanding of his connections with the city of Bologna.

Commencing in 1911 with historian Angelo Pinetti, an expanded corpus of archival studies has led to a deeper comprehension of Carrara over the decades. Serati adds a substantial body of unpublished letters, including those in the *Custodi* collection at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. These letters provide fresh insights into Carrara’s professional relationship with Bottari, illuminating their collaborative method in compiling the volumes of the *Raccolta di lettere* (Collection of Letters). Carrara’s recommendations and the documents he transmitted to Bottari attest to the collective nature of the project. Yet the Carrara–Bottari correspondence also underscores the gaps that remain in the epistolary. Despite Serati’s significant discovery, a considerable number of letters remain lost. Regarding this point, *Giacomo Carrara (1714–1796) e la letteratura artistica* offers a valuable point of departure for future research—not only on Carrara himself but also on his wider network, particularly on the lesser-known correspondents such as Francesco Brembati, Giuseppe Gavazzoli, and Giovanni Francesco Gallantini.

Despite its familiarity among scholars, the Carrara correspondence was marked by significant fragmentation. The opportunity to read all his currently known letters together would have in itself justified publication. However, Serati goes further, using the correspondence to retrace and refine the history of several publishing initiatives in which Carrara played a central role. Beyond Bottari, who sought his expertise in editing the seventh volume of the *Raccolta*, Francesco Maria Tassi, Tommaso Temenza, and Carlo Giuseppe Ratti turned to him for assistance in compiling biographical collections. Furthermore, Francesco Bartoli requested Carrara’s advice for his guidebook, *Le pitture, sculture ed architetture delle chiese e d’altri luoghi pubblici di Bergamo* (1774). Serati reconstructs the working methods behind these projects with precision. While ultimate responsibility lay with the named authors, archival consultation, site visits, and the cataloging of artistic sources were often collaborative. From this angle, the letters stand as tangible evidence of the collective labor that underpinned these works. It was here that Carrara’s role as a prominent actor in the eighteenth-century “epistolary machine” became most apparent.

Carrara’s active involvement in numerous publishing projects testifies to the high esteem he enjoyed in the cultural landscape of eighteenth-century Italy. This prompts further inquiry into his perspective on art. For Serati, Carrara was a quintessential eighteenth-century figure, perpetually poised between erudition and connoisseurship. This is not a simplistic judgment, but a carefully weighted conclusion emerging from close analysis of primary sources. Carrara paid meticulous attention to stylistic elements, systematically evaluated the techniques employed by individual artists, and proposed personal attributions that, on occasion, were subsequently validated. He clearly understood the importance of visual analysis in defining the “manner” of individual artists. Nevertheless, he consistently privileged documentary evidence. Serati’s exemplary case study is that of Emilio Salmazzi, a nonexistent painter born from a misreading of the signature on a painting in San Paolo Converso in Milan. The artist is indeed Emilio Salmeggia, often referred to as the “Raphael of Bergamo.” Despite his status as the preeminent painter in his city, Carrara did not identify his style and remained steadfast in his adherence to the documentary evidence.

Giacomo Carrara (1714–1796) e la letteratura artistica is an invaluable resource for scholars and researchers interested in eighteenth-century Italian art. In line with the studies conducted by art historians Emanuele Pellegrini on Innocenzo Ansaldi and Giovanna Perini Folesani on Luigi Crespi, Ilaria Serati delineates Carrara’s intellectual profile by considering the similarities and differences between him and his contemporaries. Though often working in the shadow, Carrara contributed significantly to the rediscovery of Bergamo’s art history. The collection of letters serves as an important research instrument. Viewed from different angles, this material consistently yields illuminating perspectives and opens new avenues for exploring artistic themes and debates within the critical discourse of the period. In a time when the study of networks, the circulation of knowledge, and material culture is increasingly central to scholarly debates, Serati’s book demonstrates how epistolary sources can reshape our understanding of both local and national artistic narratives. By reconstructing Carrara’s intellectual exchanges, she highlights the permeability of scholarly communities and encourages reflection on the ways on how cultural authority was negotiated through collaboration, trust, and documentary practice. More than an archival recovery, this book is an invitation to reflect on the methodological frameworks that continue to shape art historical research in the twenty-first century.

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