

Pamela Smith, *From Lived Experience to the Written Word*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022, 346 pp., ISBN: 9780226817231.

Pamela Smith's *From Lived Experience to the Written Word* appears at first sight as an unusual book. The volume has an almost square format (ca. 23 x 25 cm) that invites the reader's curiosity and gives an attractive framing to a rich series of illustrations. These are printed in high quality on fine glossy paper, providing an essential part of the book's evidence. Endnotes, references, and a detailed index complete a volume that is at the same time an important piece of scholarship and a beautifully crafted object.

Together with its unusual material features, the book also has a paradoxical subject matter. In line with other recent studies in the history of early modern science, Smith explores the key contribution of artisans and other practitioners to the emergence of new forms of knowledge in early modern Europe. The main sources employed in the book are so-called “books of arts,” a kind of documentation that appeared in Europe from the late middle ages. In these texts—the author contends—artisans and practitioners took to the written word for the first time in European history. In so doing, these author-practitioners made a new kind of knowledge emerge in written form. However, as the author discusses at length, this “practical knowledge” can only imperfectly be expressed in words. This argument gives the book an oxymoronic nature, placing it, so to speak, three times removed from its object of enquiry. First, because the authors of books of arts were able to transfer their knowledge only partially into the written medium; second, because several centuries separate their words from the analysis of the historian; and third, because the historian's reconstruction is bound yet again to be imperfectly conveyed into words.

Studying this kind of knowledge is a challenging task, as it calls historians, who are deeply immersed in text-centred societies and text-centred scholarship, to think outside and beyond written texts. In the author's own words, “this book is about producing, codifying, transmitting, theorizing, and studying practical knowledge” (p. 251). The book is at the same time a work of historical scholarship and a methodological reflection on how to practice, think about, and reconstruct the history of practical knowledge.

Together with an introduction and an epilogue, the book comprises 10 chapters, divided into four main parts. The first part, titled “Vernacular Theorizing in Craft,” outlines the features of the knowledge that emerged in European artisans' texts. Using


metalworking as its main source of evidence, this part of the book reconstructs a form of knowledge that was deeply entwined with practice, and involved specific attitudes towards action, problem solving, and learning-by-making. The second part, “Writing Down Experience,” introduces books of art. It discusses to what extent these sources can be considered as reflecting the knowledge of artisans, in what sense they attest practical knowledge, and how scholars may approach these texts. Engaging with insights from cross-disciplinary literatures, Smith shows how these texts attest a kind of knowledge that simultaneously involved the mind and the hand, the cognitive exploration and the process of making with natural materials (“*Kunst*” < “*können*”). Smith argues that recipe-like books do not reflect coherent knowledge systems developed by individual authors, but rather the surfacing of a collective body of knowledge, whose codification responded to local interests and needs. The third part—“Reading and Collecting”—investigates the circulation, readership, and uses of these books. It discusses the role of the circulation of artisanal texts in reshaping hierarchies of knowledge, and the intersection of this knowledge with structures of power. The fourth part—“Making and Knowing”—is a reflection on how today’s scholars, who are often deeply entrenched in text-based practices and theoretical-knowledge-first cultures, might gain insights into the study of practical knowledge by directly engaging with craft skills and hands-on investigation.

Throughout the book, Smith introduces a diverse series of characters, objects, and voices. The writings of Albrecht Dürer, Vannoccio Biringuccio, Wenzel Jamnitzer, and Michael of Rhodes feature in several passages of the book. A disparate list of objects—natural, artificial, and curious combinations of both—are displayed not just to show the material manifestations of practical knowledge, but also how practitioners devised “material imaginaries” in their process of making and theorised about the properties of the world by actively engaging with it. In other cases, Smith refers to the voices of anonymous artisans. The most important of these is the author of MS. Fr. 640 at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the real centrepiece of the book. This manuscript has been studied extensively during the *Making and Knowing Project* by Smith and a group of collaborators and practitioners. This project led to a digital edition of the text, and allowed to directly engage with its recipes, seeking to reproduce them and gain direct experience of the knowledge recorded by the anonymous author-practitioner. Particularly memorable is the reconstruction of the processes of life-casting, a technique that made practitioners “think with” natural creatures and materials.

Together with the investigation of practical texts, Smith refers to a wide set of studies, gathering insights from anthropology and sociology of knowledge, cognitive psychology, neurosciences, and philosophy. In urging her readers to think beyond the written text, Smith shows how the textual sources we are most familiar with may appear, when we look at them from the perspective of practical knowledge, deeply alien. Smith’s book is a contribution to a growing scholarship that understands the emergence of knowledge as a socially distributed process. Within this framework, textual sources appear as the local emergence of a wider and collective phenomenon, shifting the focus from “authors” and “designers” to collaborative processes and

distributed cognition. In the author's words, the perspective of practical knowledge implies “a new focus on movement and routes instead of originary moments, or ‘roots’” (p. 253).

From this perspective, one may argue that *From Lived Experience to the Written Word* presents a contradictory element, which could suggest interesting directions for further research. As the title of the book makes clear, the main contribution of this volume lies in bringing forth practical knowledge as a subject of enquiry for scholars interested in the history of knowledge. It provides a full set of theoretical tools to think about, describe, and study this kind of knowledge. It outlines the features of this practical knowledge, and discusses the extent to which it is possible to reconstruct and communicate it. In its attempt to clarify what we should understand with “practical knowledge,” however, the book is bound to provide a mainly static picture of its object. For example, in more than one passage the author argues that European artisans took to the written word “about 1400.” While the amount of extant manuscript sources shows that this process predated the introduction of printing, it also suggests that it would be possible to study the dynamics of the emergence of practical knowledge in greater detail. There are hints to suggest that this knowledge did not emerge at the same time and at the same rate across late medieval and early modern Europe. If it is true—as Smith argues—that historians need to focus on motion as a key element for the emergence of knowledge, her book may be the foundation for new research exploring the dynamics of practical knowledge across geographical, temporal, and social contexts. This is just one example of the several avenues this book can open with its rich reservoir of evidence, approaches, and theoretical frameworks.

Raffaele Danna  0009-0000-9331-9958
European University Institute, Fiesole, Italy
Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa, Italy
rd533@cantab.ac.uk