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Kern, Ulrike. *Lexicographie artistique : formes, usages et enjeux dans l'Europe moderne/ Artistic lexicography : forms, uses and issues in Early Modern Europe: The Art of Translating Foreign Art Terms.*

2018

Published Work

To cite this version:

Kern, U. (2018). *Lexicographie artistique : formes, usages et enjeux dans l'Europe moderne/ Artistic lexicography : forms, uses and issues in Early Modern Europe* (pp. 423–435).
https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_644313

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Available at: https://commons.warburg.sas.ac.uk/concern/published_works/ks65hc20t

Publisher's URL: <https://www.pulm.fr/>

DOI: 10.26530/OAPEN_644313

Date submitted: 2020-03-27

The Art of Translating Foreign Art Terms ¹

Ulrike KERN

Kunstgeschichtliches Institut—Frankfurt am Main

An essential part of the translator's business is to find words for the translation which correspond to those used in the original language. The possibilities for dealing with the problem range from word-to-word renderings to "free" translation, conveying the sense of the source text.² Early modern translators of art treatises were concerned with a particular difficulty. They had to find matching words in their own language for artistic terms, which carried all the connotations of the foreign word without losing any aspect. The first authors who translated art literature or took up parts of foreign art treatises into their own writings were well aware of this complexity. They reported their difficulties in translating art terms. At the same time, the authors could use translations to their advantage, as they could use them to enhance and spread an artistic vocabulary in their native language. More often than not they kept or modified the foreign form of an art term and used it in order to introduce a new word to an artistic language. In these cases the meaning of the foreign words still had to be explained to the reader and words with synonymous connotations to be found in their own language.

1. I wish to thank Marty House for correcting my English.

2. For John Dryden's well known distinction of three sorts of translation (metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation), see William FROST, *Dryden and the Art of Translation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1955, p. 31. For more about the problem in Renaissance times, see Theo HERMANS, "Metaphor and Imagery in the Renaissance Discourse on Translation", in T. HERMANS (ed.), *The Manipulation of Literature. Studies in Literary Translation*, London-Sydney, Croom Helm, 1985, p. 103–135. For a historical account of translation theories, see Hans Joachim STÖRIG (ed.), *Das Problem des Übersetzens*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973.

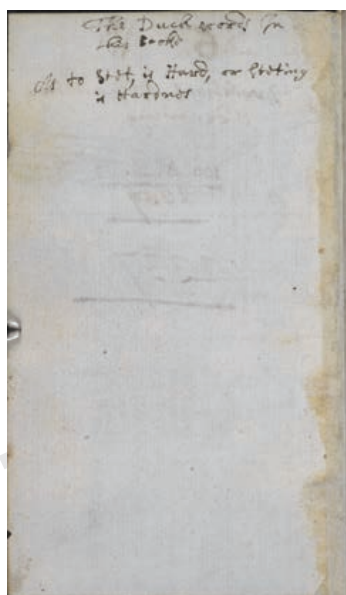


Figure 1 – Anonymous author, *Directions for Painting and Drawing*, late 17th century, British Library, MS. Harl. 2337, fol. 1 vº. © British Library.

Translations were increasingly supplemented with glossaries. They offered the readers artistic terminology at a glance but also helped the translators to organise the art terms used in the text. The difficulties with compiling lists of art words were related to those of translating them. With no textual context in the glossary a general meaning had to be identified that included each of the specific uses of the term in a particular context.

Early modern art glossaries varied in length, though many of them were rather short and some of them perceivably incomplete. The shortest one that is known to me is a display of a single word in an anonymous English manuscript of the 1660s (Fig. 1). The author must have intended to add a list of Dutch words, since he used the plural and left space for more words: “The Dutch words in this Booke As to stet, is Hard, or steting is Hardness.”¹

The word “stet” is related to the Dutch “*stooten*”, “to push”, and the author used it in the manuscript on a number of occasions.² Apart from this manuscript I am not aware of this word or any related form

1. London, British Library, ms. Harl. 2337, fol. 1 vº.

2. See *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, “stete”. The word is marked as obsolete in present-day English, and does not appear to have been recorded after the 14th century. I thank Carole Biggam for discussing the word with me.

in Dutch or English writings on art. The content of the anonymous manuscript suggests that the author had insights into the language and practices of contemporary artists, and it seems likely that this word was used in artists' workshops. If the word "stet" was passed on via oral tradition, it disappeared again without ever having been used in written art language. The anonymous author may have had more words like this in mind, but in the text of the manuscript, "stet" is the only word that seems to be perceivably unusual and hard to understand. He might have felt less need for explanations of art terms than he had thought initially.

The opposite is true for the glossary that Anton Ashley Cooper (1671–1713), the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, compiled in the early eighteenth century. The list of art terms, an unfinished project terminated by the death of the Earl, was to become a more copious dictionary of artistic and aesthetic terms. It is already obvious at this early stage that Shaftesbury had difficulties deciding on the best translation for each of the words he listed.¹ For instance he extended in his glossary the five parts of painting by Roland Fréart de Chambray (1606–1676) to more than sixteen terms in total. Shaftesbury stated his aim of giving "... a kind of prefatory dictionary of terms of art, or new coined (with apology), after the manner of Monsieur Fréart de Chambray, but in the reverse of his insolent way".²

Fréart, in his *Idée de la perfection de la peinture* of 1662 devoted to each of the five parts of painting a whole chapter, but his glossary is a list of only six terms of art from the Italian.³ There is nothing insolent in it, but Shaftesbury might have taken offence at the Frenchman's comment that "*ce seroit une espece de Pedanterie de gloser ainsi par tout*".⁴ Shaftesbury's intended dictionary of art terms was just such a kind of pedantry, although he must have considered the possibility that Fréart

1. Shaftesbury's *Plastics*, part four of his unfinished *Second Characters*, includes an appendix with the title *Dictionary of art terms*, also unfinished. The *Dictionary* lists a mere forty-three terms.

2. Anthony Ashley COOPER, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, *Second Characters*, ed. by B. RAND, Cambridge, University Press, 1914, p. 7–8.

3. The six terms are: *estampe*, *tramontain*, *élève*, *esquisse*, *attitude*, *pellegrin*, which Evelin returns into their Italian, or seemingly Italian, form: *stampi*, *tramotano*, *elevato*, *schizzo*, *attitudo*, *pellegrino*.

4. Roland FRÉART DE CHAMBRAY, *Idée de la perfection de la peinture*, Le Mans, J. Ysambart, 1662, *Avertissement au lecteur*, "Pellegrin", n.p.; see Roland FRÉART DE CHAMBRAY, *An Idea of the Perfection of Painting*, ed. by J. EVELYN, London, 1668, *An Advertisement to the reader*, "Pellegrino", n.p.

only said this to justify the almost trivial scope of his glossary of six words.

The example of Fréart and Shaftesbury suggests that the problem of translating art terms is not merely a linguistic but also a cultural one. The respective readership relied on different local traditions of art, and the translators, too, came from a different background than the authors of the original writings.¹ Many of the authors of art treatises were artists, but there were hardly any artists among the translators. Translating art terminology was thus a problem not only of transferring notions of art terms from one language to another, but also one of transferring art vocabulary from artists' workshops to a more sophisticated language of art lovers and connoisseurs. The problem becomes more complex as some of the art terms were translated more than once.

The part and function that translations can have in the process of shifting the meaning of art terms will be illustrated with the help of an example, the word "attitude". This word is an important term of figure-painting, referring to the posture, bearing and movements of a figure in a work of art. Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), to my knowledge, was the first writer to discuss the word in more detail in art literature. He wrote that the attitude of human figures should be rendered in the parts of the body and that the intention of mind should be visible in the attitudes.² Attitudes seem to differ from mere postures of figures in the respect that they indicate movement not only of the body but also of the soul. Leonardo linked the word to movements and actions of human beings when he stated that painters should observe attitudes and motions of human beings (*"l'attitudini e li moti delli huomini"*) while they arise, rather than trying to make someone pose for impulsive actions such as weeping.³

It would extend the scope of this paper to go into detail about subtle shifts of the word *attitudine* in its use in the Italian language. The word was widely used in the mid Cinquecento, many times for instance by

1. For a discussion of shifts of cultural functions of "source" and "target texts", see Christina SCHÄFFNER and Helen KELLY-HOLMES (ed.), *Cultural Functions of Translation*, Clevedon, Multilingual matters, 1995, p. 1–2.

2. Leonardo DA VINCI, *Treatise on Painting*, ed. by A. Philip MCMAHON, Princeton, Princeton university press, 1956, fol. 115 r^o–v^o (399), 2 vols.

3. *Ibid.*, fol. 115 v^o (404).

Vasari.¹ Cosimo Bartoli (1503–1572), who made an Italian translation of Leon Battista Alberti's Latin *De Pictura* in 1568, added the term which was neither mentioned in the Latin nor the vernacular versions of the original treatise.² For example, variety (*varietà*) in histories, in Alberti's words, was best achieved with the help of postures and motions ("*status atque motus*") of bodies differing greatly.³ In Bartoli's translation, variations in their postures and attitudes ("*le positure e le attitudini*") were the important elements for displaying *varietà*.⁴

Around 1600, the first translations of Italian writings were made. Since other languages did not have an art vocabulary as extensive as the Italian one, translators reasonably took over art terms into their own language as loan words. This could be done in different ways. Richard Haydocke (active from 1588 to 1605), a physician, engraver and somnambular preacher, for instance, translated the first five chapters of seven of the *Trattatto del'arte* by Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538–1600), about fifteen years after its publication in 1584. Haydocke explained that he would adopt and keep some of the artistic words from the Italian in his translation and describe their meaning in a marginal note: "all such termes of Arte or other difficulties, as I deemed worth the standing on; I have opened with briefe notes in the margent."⁵

1. Unfortunately, the relevant studies on Vasari's art terminology ignore the term and its origins; see Roland LE MOLLÉ, *Georges Vasari et le vocabulaire de la critique d'art dans les "Vite"*, Grenoble, Ellug, 1988; Giorgio VASARI, *Die Anfänge der Maniera Moderna. Giorgio Vasaris Viten. Proemio, Leonardo, Giorgione, Corregio [...]*, ed. by Kunstgeschichtliches Institut der Universität Frankfurt am Main, Hildesheim, Olms, 2001.

2. Bartoli made his translation from the 1540 Latin edition, without being aware that a vernacular version existed, see Rosso SINISGALLI, *Il nuovo De Pictura di Leon Battista Alberti/The New De Pictura of Leon Battista Alberti*, Rome, Kappa, 2006, p. 36.

3. "*Sed in omni historia cum varietas iocunda est, tamen in primis omnibus grata est pictura, in qua corporum status atque motus inter se multo dissimiles sunt*". In Leon Battista ALBERTI, *Opere volgari*, ed. by C. GRAYSON, Bari, G. Laterza, 1973, vol. III, p. 71 (40). The vernacular reads "*i corpi [...] posari molto dissimili*"; see Rosso SINISGALLI, 2006, p. 205 (40.128).

4. "*Ma essendo in qualunque historia, gioconda la varietà, quella pittura nondimendo è grata a tutti, nella quale le positure e le attitudini de corpi sono fra loro molto differenti*". In Cosimo BERTOLI, *Opuscoli morali di Leon Batista Alberti*, Venice, Francesco Franceschi, 1568, p. 340.

5. Giovanni Paolo LOMAZZO, *A Tracte Containing the Artes of curious Paintinge, Carvinge and Buildinge*, ed. by Richard HAYDOCKE, Oxford, J. Barnes, 1598 [1st ed. Giovanni Paolo LOMAZZO, *Trattatto dell'arte della pittura, scoltura, et architettura*, Milan, Paolo Gottardo Pontio, 1584), n.p. (sig. 5 r^o).

Rather than as this note suggests, Haydocke rarely made use of his method. As the words he considered “worth the standing on”,¹ he picked some names of pigments and terms related to perspective. The term “*mezzo rilievo*” on the other hand, although highlighted as a foreign or an art term by italic font in the text, is not explained either in the text or in a marginal note.²

While Haydocke does not seem to have been consistent in highlighting relevant art words from his Italian model, he was not all that disorganised. When translating from Lomazzo, Haydocke subsumed artistic vocabulary used by the Italian in order to create a more constant notion of art terms in English. The word *attitudine* for instance, a word that Lomazzo used but did not deal with as a particular art term is not mentioned by the Englishman. He translated the word either as “actions” or “gestures”, but these translations are not used exclusively as English forms for *attitudini*. The title of the second chapter, for instance, in the Italian “*Libro secondo, del sito, positione, decoro, moto, furia e gratia delle figure*”, reads in the English as: “*The second booke, of the actions, gestures*”, and lists the rest of the terms in smaller font.³ Haydocke translated *positione* as “actions and gestures”, listed these qualities first, and made them the most important terms of the chapter. The subject of the second book in Haydocke’s translation is easier to grasp than in the Italian original.

Another example from the time around 1600 is the Dutch poet and painter Karel van Mander (1548–1606) who borrowed from ancient and Italian writings in his *Schilderboeck* of 1604. Regarding words from literary sources in foreign languages, Van Mander explained that he continued to use foreign words in artistic matters because they were part of the subject terminology and difficult to be put in other words: “*Wtheemsche woorden heb ick niet heel vermijdt, om dies wille datse in onse dinghen somtijt soo ghenoeemt, en anders qualijck gheseyt connen worden.*”⁴

1. See e.g. Giovanni Paolo LOMAZZO, 1598, I, p. 34, II, p. 8, 17, 20, 101–102, 155, 189, 196, 197–198, 199, 214, 217. [N.B. The pagination begins with the preface to the end of the First Book, and begins anew with the first page of the Second Book continuing to the end of the Fifth Book. To avoid confusion, the first set of pagination is marked as I, the second as II.]

2. *Ibid.*, V, p. 189.

3. Giovanni Paolo LOMAZZO, 1584, p. 105, and the English translation Giovanni Paolo LOMAZZO, 1598, II, p. 1.

4. “I have not entirely avoided [to use] foreign words, for this reason that sometimes they are called like this in our matters, and can hardly be expressed in any other way”. In Karel VAN MANDER, *Het Schilder-boeck*, Haarlem, P. van Wesbuch, 1604,

What Van Mander did in most of such cases was to add a Dutch word in order to help his readers to understand the foreign word. For the Italian *attitudine*, he used as a loan word *actitude* and added an alternative term in Dutch.¹

In Vasari's biography of Filippino Lippi, the Italian original reads that the painter made the figures of St John the Evangelist being boiled in oil by the Romans "*con belle e diverse attitudini*" (Fig. 2).² Van Mander added "actions" (*werken*) to Vasari's "beautiful and various attitudes", so that it reads in Dutch "*met schoon en verscheyden actituden oft werckinghen*".³ Else where he complemented the Italian *attitudini* either by using the Dutch *werkinge* or the loan word *actien*.⁴ Both additions can function as explanatory terms but not as synonyms.⁵ Van Mander's intention was to introduce *actitude* as an art term into his language, but his juxtaposition of two words with different meanings also made the descriptions of the paintings more illustrative. The figures around St John being boiled in the kettle are indeed particularly diverse and active in their postures and actions.

Later in the century Fréart included the word *attitude* in his glossary of six art terms. He remarked that he had difficulties, while looking for translations for Italian art terms, to find words that are "*purement françois*" and that would express their meanings "*aussi fortes que celles de ces Barbarismes, que l'usage a comme naturalisez parmi tous les Peintres*".⁶ Fréart thought not only was it hard to find words that would convey the same meaning to his language but also to find a more sophisticated term with the same notion as the one used in artists' everyday talk. A simple translation of the relevant terms would not have been sufficient for his purpose, they had to be explained in more detail.

Fréart might have had another reason for discussing the meaning of the word "attitude" in his glossary: his understanding of the term was different from the use of the word in Italian art language. In Filippo Baldinucci's *Vocabulario toscano dell'arte del disegno* the word *attitudine*

Voor-reden, op den grondt der edel vry Schilder-const, fol. 5 r°.

1. See WNT (*Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*), The Hague-Leiden, Nijhoff-Sijthoff, 1864–2001, "attitude", 1b.

2. Giorgio VASARI, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. by G. MILANESI, Florence, G. C. SANSONI, 1878, III, p. 472 [1st ed. Florence, I Giunti, 1568].

3. Karel VAN MANDER, 1604, fol. 109 v°.

4. See e.g. *Ibid.*, fol. 137 r°, 140 r°.

5. See WNT, "werking", 2a.α.

6. Roland FRÉART DE CHAMBRAY, 1662, *Avertissement au lecteur*, n.p. (sig. ē2 r°).



Figure 2 – Filippino Lippi, *Martyrdom of St John the Evangelist*, Strozzi Chapel, north wall, ca. 1487–1502, Fresco, Florence, Santa Maria Novella. © Public domain.

is, as in our earlier examples, associated with the words *atto*, *azzione* and *gesto* of a figure, and linked to movement and expressions.¹ Fréart elaborated on the traditional connotation of the word. He compared attitude to the words “action” and “posture” but argued that the former would be more expressive, because neither of the two alternative words could be used to describe dead bodies: not action, because there is none in a dead body, and nor posture, as it would be rude and not even the language of painters to say “this Figure is in a beautiful Posture”:

J’ay employé en quelques endroits de ce Discours le nom d’Attitude, quoy que nous ayons les mots d’Action et de Posture, qui sont en quelque façon la mesme chose: mais neantmoins en certains rencontres il semble que le Terme d’Attitude est plus expressif; car outre qu’il est plus general, il signifie mieux encore, et plus noblement beaucoup de choses que ne feroit pas celui

1. See Filippo BALDINUCCI, *Vocabolario toscano dell’arte del disegno*, Florence, Per Santi Franchi al Segno Della Passione, 1681, p. 17.

*de Posture, ou celui d'Action; par exemple, le mot d'Action ne conviendrait pas à un corps mort qui n'a plus d'action; et il faudra dire aussi l'Attitude d'un corps mort, plustost que la Posture d'un corps mort, car ce Terme est trop grossier; et ce ne seroit pas mesme parler en Peintre que de dire, Cette figure est en une belle Posture; il faut dire, Cette figure est en une belle Attitude.*¹

It may be difficult to grasp by today's standards what exactly Fréart found inadequate about using the word "posture" with human figures, although there is little doubt that "attitude" would be the more elegant word to use. Fréart's discussion may be illustrated with the help of Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving of the *Descent from the Cross* after Raphael, a work which is also mentioned in the treatise though in a different context (Fig. 3).² The action is around the dead body of Christ being carefully taken down from the cross by his disciples, and postures are more easily recognised in the more static group of weeping women at the foot of the cross. Fréart would describe the body of Christ which can eventually fall into a more peaceful position after the drastic suffering by "this figure is in a beautiful attitude", and this seems to be an apt description. If we expand on Fréart's question and try to imagine which position a dead body has to be in to create a beautiful attitude, we encounter another problem. With regard to our example the attitude of dead Christ is linked to the actions of the disciples around him, an interdependence that can be observed in most depictions centring on the subjects of the deposition from the cross entombment of Christ. The same is true for many other subjects involving dead bodies such as battles or massacres. To display in a painting a dead body in a "beautiful attitude" involves compositional decisions as much as artistic ones.

The diarist and writer John Evelyn (1620–1706) whose translation of Fréart's treatise into English was published six years later might have made similar observations. He suggested the word "disposition" as a term to be used together with "attitude" for describing dead bodies, so one would say: this figure is "in a graceful *Disposition* and *Aptitude*".³ "Disposition" was a word used in architectural theory, referring to the

1. Roland FRÉART DE CHAMBRAY, 1662, *Avertissement au lecteur*, "Attitude", n.p.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 50–53.

3. Roland FRÉART DE CHAMBRAY, 1668, *An Advertisement to the reader*, "Attitudo", n.p.



Figure 3 – Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, *Christ's Descent from the Cross*, ca. 1515, engraving, 40,6 × 28,4 cm, London, British Museum.
© London, British Museum.

arrangement of several parts of a building.¹ Evelyn had discussed the term four years earlier, in 1664, in the supplement by his own pen to his translation of another of Fréart's treatises, *A Parallel of Antient Architecture with the Modern*: "Whereas *Diathesis*, Disposition, is where all the Parts and Members of a Building are assign'd their just and proper Places, according to their Quality, Nature, Office, Rank and Genuine Collocation."²

When Evelyn introduced the word "disposition" into the discussion of "attitude", he added to the traditional associations with action and posture the problem of arranging figures in their compositional context. There are no further references to be found of "disposition and attitude" of dead figures in paintings, but the fine distinction between "attitude" and "posture" appears to have been privy to persons who were familiar with an artistic vocabulary. The poet, playwright and translator John Dryden (1631–1700) was not, and when he translated the influential Latin poem *De arte graphica* by Charles Alphonse Dufresnoy (1611–1668) into English in 1695, he missed this point. The work that Dryden translated was the 1668 edition that was published posthumously, supplemented with a French translation and a commentary by Dufresnoy's friend, Roger de Piles (1635–1709).³ Dryden translated the Latin "*positure*" as "posture" but he also used "posture" to translate "*attitude*" both from De Piles' French translation of the poem and from his commentary.⁴ Experienced in the translation of classical literature, Dryden probably intended to get as close as possible to the original Latin form and failed to recognise that the word "attitude" conveyed a different notion to an art-literate readership. Before the second edition of the English *De arte graphica*/*Art of Painting* went into print in 1716, it was given to the painter and translator Charles Jervas

1. Henry WOTTON, *The Elements of Architecture*, London, J. Bill, 1624, p. 10, 16, 78 [=86]. See also *OED (Oxford English Dictionary) Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 7 September 2016, "disposition", I.1d.

2. John EVELYN, "An Account of Architects and Architecture, together with a Historical, Etymological Explanation of certain terms", in R. FRÉART DE CHAMBRAY, *A Parallel of Antient Architecture with the Modern*, ed. by J. EVELYN, London, T. Roycroft, 1664, p. 12 [1st ed. Roland FRÉART DE CHAMBRAY, *Parallele de l'Architecture Antique et de la modern*, Paris, E. Martin, 1650.] Fréart's original does not use the term *disposition*.

3. Charles Alphonse DUFRESNOY, *De arte graphica*, ed. by R. DE PILES, Paris, N. Langlois, 1668.

4. Charles Alphonse DUFRESNOY, *De Arte Graphica. The Art of Painting . . .*, ed. by J. DRYDEN, London, J. Heptinstall, 1695, p. 12, line 78; p. 16, line 103; p. 20, p. 64, line 470; p. 118, 131, 134, 145, 215.

(ca. 1675–1739), an Irishman who had settled successfully in London. Jervas corrected Dryden's misunderstanding and changed "postures" for "attitudes" throughout.¹

In the discussions of the word "attitude" in the glossaries by Fréart and Evelyn we can observe how the two writers' intentions to define a general (though artistic) meaning of the word was reversed by making exclusions in its use and how the broad meaning became narrowed down again. Haydocke and Van Mander, at the turn of the seventeenth century, simply used descriptive words as translations of art terms with the aim of introducing novel terminology. Their publications were amongst the first writings on art in their countries and were made for a readership that could not draw on an extended vocabulary of artistic terms. By the second half of the seventeenth century it appears that an art-interested public was more at ease with an artistic vocabulary. Whereas art words had to be explained earlier to make them accessible, they could now be discussed and theorised. Sophisticated discourses of art terminology grew into a specialist language. The snags with an art language of this kind were recorded by the English physician, writer and diplomat William Aglionby (1641–1705). In a dialogue between a traveller and a friend, Aglionby lets the traveller argue that it would be demanding for painters to execute art, while beholders would only need a superficial knowledge of the "first principles of art". The friend replies with resignation:

That Superficial Knowledg of the Principles which you speak of, is wrapt up in such a company of hard Words, and crabed Terms of Art, that a Man must have a Dictionary to understand them, and a good Memory to retain them, or else he will be at a loss.²

Though hyperbolic, this statement makes clear that art terminology had proceeded into a language of its own. Aglionby's talk of "hard Terms of Art" not only indicates that the terms could not easily

1. Charles Alphonse DUFRESNOY, *De Arte Graphica. The Art of Painting*, ed. by J. DRYDEN, London, B. Lintott, 1716, sig. A4 v^o-A5 r^o [2nd ed. in English]. See Charles Alphonse DUFRESNOY, *De Arte Graphica (Paris, 1668)*, ed. by C. ALLEN, Y. HASKELL, F. MUECKE, Geneve, Droz, 2005, p. 130, n. 84. Contrary to Walter Scott's account, this misunderstanding was not caused by Dryden following too closely the French version of *De Piles*; see John DRYDEN, *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. by Sir W. SCOTT, London, Miller, 1808, XVII, p. 281 (18 vol.).

2. William AGLIONBY, *Painting Illustrated in Three Diallogues*, London, J. Gain, 1685, p. 4–5.

be understood and used.¹ This expression also describes uncommon English words, many of them with foreign origins.² Aglionby's dialogue indicates that numerous foreign art terms had been integrated successfully into the English language. In England and in other European countries the importance of translations for advancing, spreading and defining artistic vocabulary cannot be overestimated.

1. See also *Ibid.*, sig. b4 v^o.

2. See *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 7 September 2016, "hard word", 2. See also the *OED*'s reference to "hard word" dictionaries, building on the first monolingual English dictionary, Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall* of 1604, "conteyning and teaching the true writing, and understanding of hard usuall English wordes, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French". For more about the readership of the *Table Alphabeticall*, see Richard W. BAILEY, *Images of English. A Cultural History of the Language*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1991, p. 36.