

The Names of Fame

Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Se faire un nom. Une anthropologie de la célébrité à la Renaissance*, Éditions Arkhè (EHESS)

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Artists make a name for themselves thanks to their works. But what name? During the Renaissance, artists are usually designated by their first name or by a patronym. But to become famous, painters have often endeavoured to invent the names with which they wanted to achieve fame.

A first name, sometimes two or three; a so-called “family” name—the “husband’s name” for women; and for the latter, possibly the remainder of the original name, which is the “name of the father”: the patronym. Or, since the adoption of a recent law, the association of the mother’s name and the father’s name or the replacement of the latter by the former. Such is the structure of people’s names in the West today.

Since the late 1970s, Christiane Klapisch (the name of the person who was her husband)—Zuber (the name of the family from which she comes, which was made famous by her great-grandfather, the painter Henri Zuber) has been examining kinship, transmission and names in the Italy of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. A useful subject, since, as we are vaguely aware, the naming system that we have described follows rules that influence the fate of the individual, but we hardly know where they come from: i.e., *how*, *when*, and precisely *why* they were established. The point of the historian’s recent book is to apply her investigation to a specific corpus: that of the painters, sculptors and architects named in the *Lives* written by Giorgio Vasari in the middle of the 16th century. Thanks to her chosen title—“Making a Name for Oneself: An Anthropology of Fame in the Renaissance”—the author’s aim is explicit. This time, it is not matter of examining the way in which a first name and possibly a surname pass from one generation to another, but rather of observing situations of rupture—the circumstances in which such and such a name is lost and

such and such a name is acquired, as need be, several times over the course of a life—and studying how these ruptures, whether merely accepted or actively sought out, reveal types of behaviour that are proper to those who will soon be called “artists” in the Italy of the 14th to 16th centuries.

The Origins of the Name

To demonstrate the novelty of the phenomenon that she highlights—this possibility of “making a name for oneself” thanks to a sort of work that is increasingly distinguished from that of the craftsperson—Christiane Klapisch-Zuber begins by recalling the established findings of anthroponymy: i.e., the branch of onomastics, or the study of proper names, that deals with persons.

In Italy at the end of the Middle Ages, she reminds us, most individuals are known by their first name. This first name is regarded as their “true name” (*nomen proprium*), even if, being borne by many other people given the limited stock of eponymous saints, it is also regularly drawn from family history: often being the name of a dead relative who one thus “recreates” (*rifare*).

Nonetheless, it sometimes came to pass that the first name was followed, via the preposition “di”, by another or several other first names: that or those of the father, of the grandfather or of more distant paternal ancestors. This sort of system is still in place in Iceland today, where the artist Gudmundur Gudmundsson, in order to have a career in France, decided it was prudent to choose the pseudonym Erro, whereas Olafur Eliasson has remained “Olafur, son of Elias”.

The collective family name, the *cognome* in Italian, only appeared much later and initially it only concerned the superior social groups: the nobles or important merchants. Think of the Medicis or of the Sforzas. Sometimes, however, a nickname was given to persons of a lower social status and it stuck: an aptonym related to their trade (Vittore Carpaccio: Victor, son of the leather worker), a designation tied to place of origin or a sobriquet tied to one’s physique (Masaccio, “the massive guy”; Lo Scheggia, “the tidbit”, brother of Masaccio), to an affective tendency (Paolo Uccello, for the taste that the painter had for birds) or a sexual one (Il Sodoma). It could be passed on to sons and grandsons or also to daughters and granddaughters, so long as they were not married.

The Corpus: The Names of Artists in the *Lives* of Vasari

So, what happens, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber asks, with the artists of Vasari's *Lives*? The question she raises is that of the possibility, for those whom the biographer does not yet call *artisti*, but whose talent and grandeur he affirms, to invent for themselves and impose new, chosen names, which will be used for them instead of the first name received at baptism or the name, or names, inherited from their family.

In a context in which it was aristocrats and bourgeois with *cognome* who placed the orders, the book begins by recalling the advantage that being able likewise to cite a collective name, and to construct a myth of prestigious origins around this name, represented for the painters, sculptors and architects. Benvenuto Cellini, Michelangelo Buonarroti and Baccio Bandinelli were thus able to cite ancient and fantastic genealogies on their behalf, whereas Giorgio Vasari was ridiculed for his humble origins: his patronym, derived from *vasellario*, the potter, left no doubt about his recent vintage. The most novel and remarkable fact is that certain artists, who have the advantage of a suitably respectable patronym, consider and accept exchanging the latter for a new name, which is personalised, but which in the best case is beneficial for them: a mononym that becomes a patronym. Thus, after having built a convent in the village of San Gallo outside Florence, the sculptor Giuliano di Paolo Giamberti accepts becoming Giuliano da San Gallo and, then, for short, Il Sangallo. In his eyes, pride in having “made a name” for himself—a name that his sons and even his brother and his nephews will assume—must have compensated for the loss of his family name, of the first name of his father and of his own first name.

The fact of being responsible for a work that leads to being given a name can, moreover, also have less favourable consequences. For a certain time, Andrea del Castagno (a denomination linked to his village) was called Andrea degl'Impiccati (“of the hanged”) for having magnificently painted a notorious image: viz. a fresco depicting an execution in absentia. Likewise, we can recall that Daniele da Volterra—another denomination of geographical origin—is known to posterity as *Il Braghettone*, the breeches-maker, since it was his job to put pants on the naked figures in Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel.

Aesthetic Family Versus Biological Family

A historian of kinship, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber links the history of the name to that of families. She convincingly shows how in the milieu—to go quickly—of artists of the Renaissance, abandoning an identity based on blood relationship does not only occur via the

invention of a novel personalised name, but also via the appropriation of existing foreign patronyms: i.e. via the pre-empting of names of other artists, in order symbolically to construct stylistic filiations—or, in other words, a kinship substitution, the chosen aesthetic genealogy being preferred over the accidental biological genealogy.

Klapisch-Zuber shows that these anthroponymic transfers for the most part take place in the context of master-student relationships. When he joins the workshop of a master and remains for a long time, the disciple ends up by accepting to be known, no longer by his cognome or with the series of names of the ancestors from which he descends, but rather by his first name followed by the name of the person who trained him. The change of name happens almost inevitably if the student inherits a workshop and/or he is adopted by the master—this even though adoption in the Italy of that time has an ill-defined status or even indeed no status whatsoever. Thus, in Padua in the second half of the 15th century, Marco Di Antonio di Ruggeri changes his identity over the course of his life or at least ends up by accumulating identities: first known professionally by the nickname of Lo Zoppo (the Lame One), because of his limping, he becomes Lo Zoppo di Squarcione, because he is adopted by the embroiderer and head of a workshop, Andrea Squarcione, who was also for a certain time the teacher and adoptive father of Andrea Mantegna.

But, as Christiane Klapisch-Zuber notes, it can also be the case that the filiations are imaginary and almost fraudulent and that they serve to affirm artistic continuities that are in fact dubious. Thus, for example, around 1400, when the painter Cennino Cennini presents himself in his *Book of Art (Il Libro dell'arte)* as, so to speak, a direct heir of Giotto via his master Taddeo d'Agnolo. Thus too when, to describe the Florentine school, whose virtues and great autonomy he emphasises, Vasari constructs his account in the form of genealogical trees going back to a few rare ancestors: first and foremost, of course, Cimabue and Giotto.

Today, the Names of Artists...

Se faire un nom shows how Italian painters, sculptors and architects, at a time when they were beginning to see themselves and to be perceived as different from simple craftspersons, were able to make use of their names, in order both to mark their solidarity as a group and to designate exceptional achievements within it. At several points, the book underscores that the Christian family was the model that allowed this to be accomplished. Just as aesthetic ties took the fictive form of genealogical ties, so too the relations between masters and their students were intellectually conceived as a function of paternal and filial duties: i.e., as based on reciprocal love and respect, but also, for the disciple, with the possibility or even the imperative of “doing better” than the master who trained him—or, in short, prolonging a style, while improving it and using it to bring about greater achievements.

Although rooted in the cultural and social reality proper to the 14th-16th centuries, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's book is, nonetheless, able to make us think about the situation today. For the personal identity that is strictly fixed by modern laws cannot prevent artists from playing tricks with the name that they are supposed to bear. It is undoubtedly in order to differentiate himself from his father, the academic painter José Ruiz y Blasco, that Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Mártir Patricio Ruiz y Picasso—a very long and complicated name, it is true—chooses, at the beginning of the 20th century, to sign his work simply with his mother's name. It is also surely because his patronym made a career as a painter at the end of the 19th century very difficult that the French Neo-Impressionist Henri Edmond Joseph Delacroix anglicised his name as Henri-Edmond Cross. But why then, when the architect Bruno Giacometti and the sculptors Alberto and Diego Giacometti maintained the “name of the father”, did the siblings known by the names and pseudonyms Marcel Duchamp, Jacques Villon, Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Suzanne Duchamp make the opposite choice? The study of the anthroponymic choices of recent artists, using the methods imposed by our century and the last, certainly remains to be undertaken. For this reason as well, *Se faire un nom* is a book that deserves to be read far beyond the circle of historians of late-medieval and Renaissance Italy.

First published in *laviedesidees.fr*, 27 September 2019.

Translated from the French by Tiam Goudarzi with the support of the Institut français.

Published in *booksandideas.net*, 31 October 2019.