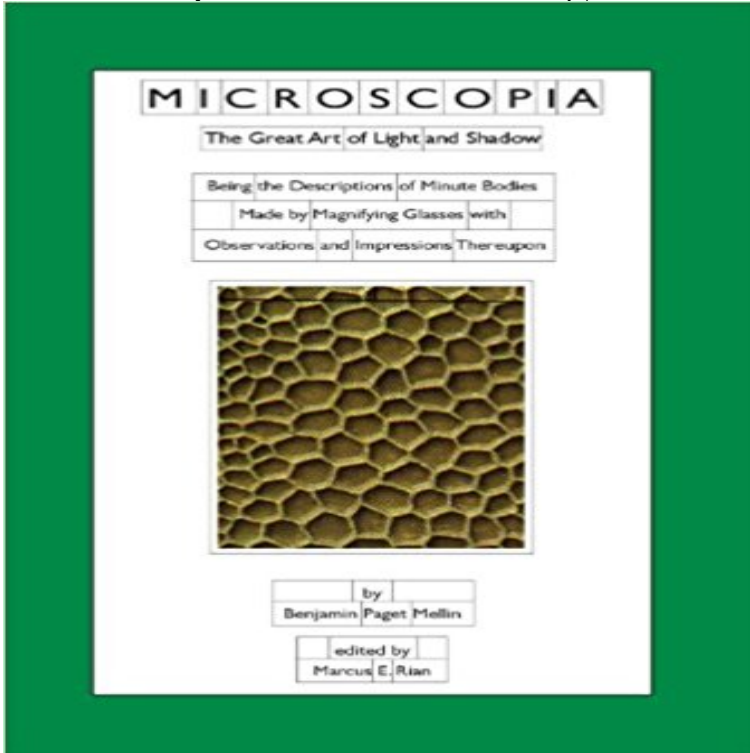


Microscopia: Great Art of Light & Shadow



Being the Descriptions of Minute Bodies Made by Magnifying Glasses with Observations and Impressions Thereupon. Benjamin Paget Mellin published his studies with the microscope on 13 April 1674. This date is of interest because it is synchronous with two earlier dates: Giovanni Fabri coined the word *microscopia* on 13 April 1625, and Robert Hooke designated the box-like structure of cork as cells on 13 April 1663 before the Royal Society. The recent discovery of these edited and published parts of the lost manuscript reveal little more concerning Mellin than is now known. There is no record of his birth, schooling, work, associations, or death. Beyond these fragments we have only Nehemiah Grew's comments from 1680 that his lenses were the best I ever saw. Nevertheless, we may assume that Mellin was a classically educated man of leisure, swept by the novelty and popularity of the microscope into searching for interesting things. He correctly gauged the importance of this fashion for science, and published with his observations, opinions that otherwise might have remained in obscure notebooks. In spite of the phantasmagoria described, his observations reflect a good scientific method; no literary genius could have invented beings as fantastic as those remotely observed beneath the lens. Mellin, in repeating and verifying the work of others, incorporated their observations into his own conclusions. His ideas and hypotheses, however, are uniquely his own. His theories evolve throughout his studies; after proceeding from the mechanical model of the universe to an organic model and almost a mystical view, he synthesizes parts of all of them into a poetic whole. Mellin tries to expand the clarity of Descartes into a metaphysics of nature. Science demands rigor and precision; the microscopist tries to be definite about what he sees, but should not be limited to what is

clear. As long as the focus is clear, one can observe structure, but beyond the focus is a vague and amorphous something for which clarity cannot be attained. Mellin refers to the slop of life, and endeavours to describe it as well. Structure is only the focus for thought, not the frame. Scientific research in the narrow sense ends with the something that changes, but Mellins vision is cosmic; he strives for comprehension above clarity. The eye cannot focus on everything; there is a peripheral region that always exists, and flows back when the focus moves.

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