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Agnolo Bronzino: The Muse of Florence

Review of *Agnolo Bronzino. The Muse of Florence*,
edited by Liana De Girolami Cheney,
New Academia Publishing, Washington, 2014,
612 pp.; 82 b/w ills., \$34.00; ISBN 9780991504770

The volume, dedicated to the memory of Professor Craig Hugh Smyth, aims to shed a new light on the figure of Agnolo Bronzino, an important artist at the court of Cosimo I de' Medici, and his wealthy patrons.

This wide collection of essays is a tribute to Craig Hugh Smyth (1915-2006), to whom Professor Liana De Girolami Cheney has dedicated a brief but accurate biographical profile. The brilliant director of Villa i Tatti from 1973 to 1985, Smyth was one of the "Monument Men" after the Second World War. He was a passionate scholar of the Italian Renaissance and in particular of Agnolo Bronzino, whose *Pygmalion and Galatea* Smyth helped recover in Munich as one of the works stolen by the Nazi leader Hermann Goering.

The book follows the path of a renewed interest in the Mannerist painter after an exhibition held in Florence between 2010 and 2011 (curated by Antonio Natali and Carlo Falciani)¹; Andrea Gáldy recently published an anthology² and Antonio Geremicca a monograph³ on the artist, by renewing strands of research usefully outlined by Janet Cox Rearick⁴ and then analyzed by Deborah Parker and Elizabeth Pilliod⁵.

The essays in this volume are grouped into three main sections: a general introduction focused on the figure of the artist (*Part One: Introduction to Agnolo Bronzino*), in which the curator outlines a brief biography of the painter (pp. 3-21) and translates the passage dedicated to him in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives* (pp. 23-31); a second section (*Part Two: Religious and Devotional Painting*), that examines Bronzino's works about religious themes (pp. 33-333) and a final one (*Part Three: Secular Paintings, Portraits, and Allegories*), where his profane art works are addressed (pp. 335-526).

The thread connecting many of the essays of the second section is the desire to carry out a systematic dismantling of the thesis which has so far enjoyed broad credit that Bronzino was in close relationship with patrons strongly linked to religious heterodoxy (the Panciatichi above all) and that he himself was the creator of works reflecting such unorthodox beliefs. Lynette M.F. Bosch (*Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Agnolo Bronzino's Paintings for Bartolomeo and Lucrezia Panciatichi*, pp. 35-130) and Elena Aloia (*Culture, Faith, and Love: Bartolomeo Panciatichi*, pp. 131-174) resituate Bronzino's patrons within religious orthodoxy, referring to documentary texts that suggest their limited involvement in unorthodox practices and to an in-depth reading of the artist's works, that reveals sacred iconographies closely adhering to the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church. As stated with clarity and firmness of purpose with clarity and firmness of purpose by Bosch: «[...] the Panciatichi paintings are more orthodox than heterodox, based on internal evidence found in the paintings that links them explicitly and implicitly to the dogma, liturgy, and devotional practices of the Catholic Church» (p. 37). And she concludes: «In art as in life, in the end, the Panciatichi preferred the comforts of orthodoxy to the perils of spiritual experimentation» (p. 105).

Another important issue examined in the book is the role of Eleonora of Toledo as patron of the Chapel located on the second floor of Palazzo Vecchio in Florence: the achievement of the first series of oil paintings on canvas on the back wall is interpreted as the result of a direct participation by Cosimo de' Medici (also because of the side panels – no longer *in situ* – representing *St. John the Baptist* and *St. Cosmas*), while the fulfillment of the paintings (with another *Deposition* – instead of the one donated by the Duke to Nicolas Perrenot de Granvelle – flanked by the *Virgin* and the *Announcing Angel*) depends on Eleonora's will, now fully master of her own roles and tasks at the Medici Court, as Lynette M.F. Bosch highlights in her essay (*"A Room With Many Views": Eleonora de Toledo's Chapel by Agnolo Bronzino in the Palazzo Vecchio*). Bosch finds another proof against the thesis of a Valdesian interpretation of the chapel in the fact that the powerful Pierfrancesco Riccio, the major-domo of Duke Cosimo I, is portrayed as Eleazar in the fresco with the *Crossing of the Red Sea*: «Riccio's depiction as Eleazar, the priest of impeccable orthodoxy, accords with the interpretive approach employed in this chapter, which analyzes the chapel's decorative program from the perspective of the Roman and Mozarabic liturgy» (p. 246).

On the other hand, in the *Crossing of the Red Sea* Bronzino also shows his refined culture by painting the figure of an observer, a quotation from a passage of *De Rerum Natura* by Lucretius (Book II, verses 1-2) according to Massimiliano Rosi's essay (*"The Bystander" in the Chapel of Eleonora: a Lucretian Image in Bronzino's*

Work, pp. 321-333). Here, Rossi explains the Lucretian quotation by the Florentine painter: «Bronzino, without minimally altering the 'letter' of the biblical text depicted, or its typologically Eucharistic worthiness, has taken the opportunity to offer a further meaning, exploiting the analogy between the shipwreck and the drowning, perfectly comprehensible or peacefully avoidable depending on skills and, above all, not in any way conflicting with the encomiastic declension – so many times underlined – of the Stories of Moses» (pp. 325-326).

Rossi's essay acts a hinge to the next section, which analyzes Bronzino's profane paintings and his stylistic and compositional languages, full of references to erudite (and extremely complex) iconographic themes, as the essays by Leatrice Mendelsohn (*The Devil in the Details: Ornament as Emblem and Adage in Two Male Portraits by Bronzino*, pp. 395-470) and by Liana De Girolami Cheney (*Bronzino's "Pygmalion and Galatea": the Metamorphosis of a Muse*, pp. 471-494, and *Bronzino's "Triumph of Felicity": A Wheel of Good Fortune*, pp. 495-526) well demonstrate. Professor Mendelsohn's essay aims to emphasize the fundamental role of the details in Bronzino's paintings as a symbol of chosen literary references, from classical texts to Sixteenth Century Petrarchism: «Attentive observation of Bronzino's use of detail in his portraits reveals a substratum of ideologies and moral intentions that were not meant to be accessible outside of a select Florentine circle and that even now continue to confound connoisseurs and scholars» (p. 395). Her excursus into the beauty and meticulousness of Bronzino's portraits with their keen layering of classical and Christian references unveils their extraordinary inventiveness and erudition, thus creating a sort of a framework for her essay: «In a painting, the imaged ornament substitutes for a word or saying or idea and becomes what we might call a *visual metaphor*» (p. 406). Professor De Girolami Cheney's first essay also reflects on the «ornament as methaphor» (p. 404) in her analysis of beauty and meticulousness in Bronzino's paintings. She pays close attention to «the complex history and symbolism of [...] *Pygmalion and Galatea*» (p. 471), dated 1530, which «covered Pontormo's *Portrait of Francesco Guardi*, also called the *Halberdier* of 1529» (p. 472). These artworks belonged to the Medici family and were then in the Barberini collection: both of them «were confiscated by Hitler» (p. 472), but only the *Pygmalion and Galatea* was recuperated by Italian State while in 1989 the *Portrait of Francesco Guardi* was «purchased by the Getty Museum at a Christie's sale in London» (p. 472). Professor De Girolami Cheney recognizes in Pontormo's and Bronzino's works political and cultural references to war, love, and desire for beauty, and her interpretation tries to relate the two paintings as a representation of «the duality of the public and private function of a Florentine man: in time of war, he publicly acts as a soldier, attending to military affairs; while in time of pe-

ace, he engages as a citizen in caring for the land and his private daily activities» (p. 480).

In her second essay (*Bronzino's "Triumph of Felicity": A Wheel of Good Fortune*, pp. 495-526) she makes a depth analysis of the work realized by Bronzino for Francesco I de' Medici in occasion of his marriage to Joanna of Austria, in 1565 (but completed only in 1567). The small painting (an oil on copper) presents a complicated symbolism, which Professor De Girolami Cheney decodes by following «the iconographic interpretation» of Graham Smith⁶. In the center of the composition is the figure of Felicity, with a standing Cupid on her right, surrounded (in a right-to-left reading) by Fame (with a trumpet), Justice, Fortune, Deceit, Envy, Folly, Time, Prudence and Virtue. Not only De Girolami Cheney explains the attributes of the divinities as a product of Bronzino's great iconographic culture (by assimilating the connection between the pictorial and symbolic world) but also probes the complexity of his creative mind: «In the *Triumph of Felicity*, Bronzino reveals at the abstract level the success of art over nature and the ability of art to advocate for and portray notions of beauty, love and truth in nature. [...] *The Triumph of Felicity* is also a pictorial triumph, painting over sculpture. Thus, it constitutes Bronzino's poetical and visual response to Varchi's *Due lezioni*» (p. 509). It should be remembered that Bronzino was one of the artists consulted by Benedetto Varchi for his investigation on the *Maggioranza delle arti* (that is the *Paragone* debate) in 1547, which led to the publication in 1550 of *Due lezioni, sulla prima delle quali si dichiara un sonetto di M. Michelangelo Buonarroti. Nella seconda si disputa quale sia più nobile arte, la scultura o la pittura, con una lettera d'esso Michelagnolo e più altri eccellentissimi pittori e scultori sopra la questione sopradetta*, printed in Florence by Torrentino⁷.

Although her analysis of the *Triumph of Felicity* is clearly not intended to be a conclusive study of Bronzino's various ideations, De Girolami Cheney's essay is especially efficacious in highlighting as a leitmotif of the importance of Bronzino's cultural relationships and the richness of his artistic language: «The intellectual and visual tension is part of the Maniera conceit as well as Bronzino's astute jocular interplay between the visual imagery and its meaning. This intellectual playfulness is also found in his poetry» (p. 500).

Her interesting selection of essays, comprehensive of articles by Thomas MacPherson (*A Color Inventory of Selected Paintings by Agnolo Bronzino from 1540 to 1546: the Panciatichi Paintings and the Chapel of Eleonora de Toledo*, pp. 301-320), Michael J. Giordano (*Bronzino's Art of Emblazoning: The Young Man with a Book, Lucrezia Panciatichi, Saint Bartholomew and Laura Battiferri*, pp. 337-370) and Donna A. Bilak (*Decoding Bronzino's "Portrait of Eleonora di Toledo" (c. 1539):*

An Iconography of Jewels and Dress, pp. 371-393), makes the point on Bronzino's art and tries to illustrate his refined painting, expressed with an elegant style and marked by a fine erudition.

The essays collected by Prof. De Girolami Cheney definitely confirm the role of Bronzino as a painter well inserted into the Medici court in Florence: he was also able to interact, thanks to letters rich of polite flattery (published by Detlef Heikamp), with the powerful ducal major-domo, Pierfrancesco Riccio, while he was painting the portraits of Cosimo I's children⁸.

Finally, the book on Bronzino edited by De Girolami Cheney can exalt further paths of an expanded investigation into ducal patronage of Medici family. Some just-started new researches about the complex system of payments in the Medici court⁹ will shed further light on the commissions to Bronzino by the Duke Cosimo and, more generally, on the role of the Florentine painter, thanks to whom Craig Hugh Smyth made his masterly investigations on Mannerism and *Maniera*.

- 1 *Bronzino. Pittore e poeta alla corte dei Medici*, exhibition catalogue (Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, 2010-2011), ed. by C. Falciani and A. Natali, Florence, 2010.
- 2 *Agnolo Bronzino. Medici Court Artist in Context*, ed. by A.M. Gáldy, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013.
- 3 A. Geremicca, *Agnolo Bronzino. «La dotta penna al pannel dotto pari»*, Rome, 2013.
- 4 J. Cox-Rearick, *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, Berkeley, 1993.
- 5 D. Parker, *Bronzino. Renaissance Painter as Poet*, Cambridge, 2000; E. Pilliod, *Pontormo, Bronzino, Allori. A Genealogy of Florentine Art*, New Haven-London, 2001.
- 6 G. Smith, *Bronzino's Allegory of Happiness*, in «The Art Bulletin», 66, 1984, pp. 390-399.
- 7 See L. Mendelsohn, *Paragoni. Benedetto Varchi's "Due lezioni" and Cinquecento Art Theory*, Ann Arbor, 1982.
- 8 D. Heikamp, *Agnolo Bronzinos Kinderbildnisse aus dem Jahre 1551*, in «Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz», 7, 1955, pp. 133-138.
- 9 E. Fumagalli, *On the Medici Payroll: at Court from Cosimo I to Ferdinando II (1540-1670)*, in *The Court Artist in Seventeenth-Century Italy*, ed. by E. Fumagalli and R. Morselli, Rome, 2014, pp. 95-136.

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Liana De Girolami Cheney, ed.