NEW RESEARCH ON ART AND ITS HISTORY

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The secrets of a revolutionary portrait

A sculpture for Isabella d'Este | Ter Brugghen's 'Roman Charity' discovered | With Sargent in the Alps
Late Gothic in Berlin | The Medici in New York | The Museum of the Home in London

3. *Meeting of Augustus and the sibyl*, by Domenico Ghirlandaio. 1483–85. Fresco. (Sasseti Chapel, S. Trinita, Florence).

Orsini palace in 1482–85, by the supporters of the Colonna family. Some decades later twelve Sibyls were shown alongside Old Testament prophets foretelling episodes of Christ's life, reflecting the contemporary popularity of biblical typology; Baccio Baldini's engravings (c.1470–75), for example, included twelve sibyls and twenty-four prominent Old Testament male figures. Throughout, Augustyn demonstrates his in-depth knowledge of sibylline iconography in France and Italy, a topic on which he has written previously.[4] An exhaustive chapter on representations of the legend of the *ara coeli,* according to which the Tiburtine Sibyl announced the coming of Christ to Emperor Augustus, depicted for example in Domenico Ghirlandaio's fresco in the Sassetti Chapel, S. Trinita, Florence (Fig.3), deftly traces every aspect and nuance of the tale.

Augustyn's impressive scholarship encourages further research. For example, it would be important to identify the source of the illustrations in a block book preserved in a single copy (c.1468–70; Abbey Library, St Gall, BB L IV 8), which could have served as a model for late fifteenth-century French Sibyl cycles, such as the Hours of Louis de Laval (1470–75; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, MS Latin 920) and manuscripts that derived from the Hours, such as Codex 414 in Munich (c.1490–1500; Bavarian State Library).Curiously, Augustyn hardly mentions the Byzantine Coptic Sibyls, although the first examples of sibylline images in an eschatological context are found, for example, in such late antique Egyptian monasteries as Bawit.[5] Like others before him, the author cites the eleventh-century paintings in S. Angelo in Formis, Capua, as first appearance of a sibyl associated with the Last Judgment,[6] but other eleventh-century examples can be adduced, such as the Romanesque paintings of S. Andrea al Celio, Rome,[7] or the recently rediscovered paintings in the cathedral of Poitiers.[8]

Augustyn's survey of twenty centuries of sibylline presence in images and texts demonstrates that prominence was first attached to to these pagan seers in Christian art. By the time they appeared next to Old Testament prophets on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the sibyls were already mainstream figures in Italian Renaissance art.[9] Yet Michelangelo did not simply follow a descriptive text or lean on the rich iconographic tradition that Augustyn describes with such insight. Instead, as Vasari observed, he painted them 'inventively and with miraculous judgment'.[10] This book should be the starting point for anyone working on the iconography of the Sibyls.

1 M. Caccamo Caltabiano: 'Sibyllae', in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae,* Zurich 1994, VII, 1, pp.753–57; and VII, 2, pp.547–49.
2 L. Giuliani: *Ein Geschenk für die Kaiser: Das Geheimnis des Großen Kameo*, Munich 2010, p.24.
3 P. Bracciolini: *Epistolarum familiarium libri secundum volumen (Lettere, 3)*, ed. H. Harth, Florence 1987, p.282.
4 W. Augustyn: 'Zur Bildüberlieferung der Sibyllen in Italien zwischen 1450 und 1550', in K. Bergdolt and W. Ludwig, eds: *Zukunftsvoraussagen in der Renaissance*, Wiesbaden 2005, pp.365–435; W. Augustyn: 'Vom Inhalt zum Dekor: der französische Sibyllenzyklus in Handschriften und Drucken', in *idem* and U. Söding, eds: *Original - Kopie – Zitat: Kunstwerke des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit; Wege der Aneignung – Formen der Überlieferung*, Passau 2010, pp.405–38. See also R. Raybould: *The Sibyl Series of the Fifteenth Century*, Leiden 2017; and C. Dempsey: 'Civic ritual I: Cardinal Orsini's paintings and Baccio Baldini's engravings of the sibyls: humanist learning and vernacular drama', in *idem*: *The Early Renaissance and Vernacular Culture*, Cambridge MA 2012, pp.117–206.
5 A. García Avilés and A. Martínez Ruipérez: *Las profecías de las sibilas*, Madrid 2019, pp.272–80.
6 See recently, M. Castiñeiras González: 'Da Virgilio al Medioevo: postille sulla rinascita della Sibilla in Campania (XI–XIII secolo)', *Arte Medievale*, NS 4, 6 (2016), pp.97–110.
7 A. Acconci: 'L'oratorio di Sant'Andrea al Celio: Alcune note sul dipinto medievale nel sottotetto', *Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* 42 (2015/2016), pp.35–68.
8 R. Favreau: 'Les peintures murales du rond-point à Notre-Dame-la-Grande de Poitiers: un programme iconographique et épigraphique très élaboré', *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 60 (2017), pp.139–54.
9 E. Wind: 'Michelangelo's prophets and sibyls', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 51 (1965), pp.47–84; and the skeptical review by L.D. Ettlinger in *Italian Studies* 23 (1968), pp.169–72. See also C. Gilbert: 'The proportion of women', in *idem*: *Michelangelo: On and off the Sistine Chapel*, New York 1994, pp.64–89.
10 G. Vasari: *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, et architettori*, Florence 1550, II, p.968.

Piero della Francesca and the Invention of the Artist

By Machtelt Brüggen Israëls. 368 pp. incl. 94 col. ills. (Reaktion Books, London, 2021), £15.95. ISBN 978–1–78914–321–8.

by **GIULIO DALVIT**

To quote Aldous Huxley, scholars have written 'sufficiently often and sufficiently badly' on Piero della Francesca to make it unnecessary 'to bury that consummate artist any deeper under layers of muddy comment'.[1] Pace Huxley, the book under review must be spared any such excoriating judgments. Elegantly written, it combines close looking with documentary precision

4. *Nativity*, by Piero della Francesca. Mid-1480s. Oil on panel, 124.4 by 122.6 cm. (National Gallery, London).

and technical insight. Each of its ten differently-paced chapters – titled 'Pupil', 'Traveller', 'Rhetorician', 'Master', 'Citizen', 'Devotee', 'Courtier', 'Scientist', 'Patron' and 'Monarch' – focuses on a different aspect of Piero's art. By virtue of this organisation, Machtelt Brüggen Israëls's monograph cuts across preconceived schemes of inquiry, not least the tacit tenet of traditional monographs that an artist's life and work can be presented, if not judged, as a linear totality. By contending that Piero adapted his self-fashioning in parallel with his technical abilities, Brüggen Israëls concentrates on different facets of the artist, resulting in a more prismatic than linear approach to Piero's life and work.

Although she pays attention to the many connoisseurial questions about Piero's chronology, the author emphasises the importance of what she calls 'relative time', the relational nature of any chronology both to our present and to other pasts, as well as the 'inventiveness of the fifteenth-century artist [that] transcends simple art-historical ideas of stylistic influence between masters or precedence between centres' (p.22). Given the author's methodological acumen, it is surprising that such ambiguous conventional concepts and terms as 'create', 'Gothic' and 'Renaissance' creep into the text, threatening to derail the otherwise impeccable rigour of the project.

Brüggen Israëls offers a panoply of new evidence and ideas, especially in relation to the original location of both the *Flagellation* (1456–57; Palazzo Ducale, Urbino) and the *Montefeltro Altarpiece* (1469–71; Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan) and Piero's architectural and social ambition in masterminding the decoration of his own home.[2] Although it is impossible to do justice to Brüggen Israëls' profusion of new material in the context of this review, it is worth considering certain instances where her arguments question the mainstream interpretation of Piero's *œuvre*.

The author re-examines Piero's stylistic and technical relationship with Flemish art. She asserts that it was in Ferrara that Piero learned a trick typical of Northern European artists, exposing underlying gesso preparations along the contours of his figures, a technique that finds a parallel in Ferrarese draughtsmen's tendency to leave the thinnest margins of their figures free from hatching to imbue them with a luminous vibrancy. As Brüggen Israëls points out, Piero's consistent use of oil binders, certain iconographic borrowings and the use of atmospheric landscapes indicate further engagement with Netherlandish art. In this context, it is worth remembering that in Siena and Urbino Francesco di Giorgio was then pursuing similarly experiments with atmospheric effects in his bronze reliefs, something Piero would have known of.[3]

For Brüggen Israëls, although Florence was an 'artistic greenhouse', Piero 'never took root there' (p.34). Against Luciano Bellosi's influential interpretation of Piero's Florentine schooling, the author argues convincingly that Ferrara was the main centre for Piero's earliest formation as an artist.[4] Conversely, the author's hypothesis that the young Piero spent some time in Rome is flimsy. The similarities between figures in Piero's earliest work, such as the *Baptism* (c.1442-45; National Gallery; London) and those known from drawings after Gentile da Fabriano's and Pisanello's lost cycle of frescos at the Lateran attest only to the wide circulation of those motifs. The same figures also appear, for instance, in Masolino's frescos at Castiglione Olona and in the understudied frescos with stories of St Stephen in S. Pietro at Terni.[5]

Brüggen Israëls agrees, however, with a tenet of 'Longhian' scholarship on Piero – that his art had a transformative influence on Giovanni Bellini. Attributing such a wide-ranging impact to Piero is to a degree at odds with the perception of him, shared by many scholars, as an artist who was bound to his native Borgo Sansepolcro. In fact, Brüggen Israëls is right to insist that Piero, that artist-traveller, visited at least Florence, Naples, Ferrara, Modena, Bologna, Ancona, Rimini, Arezzo, Perugia, Rome and Urbino. But mobility also governs the space of the picture field. Although Piero's art is often characterised as still and symmetrical, Brüggen Israëls reminds us that a calculated off-centredness is, in fact, a key element of his art, which 'presents the essential moment [as] indicative also of what

preceded and will follow. Piero's art is *the* still' (p.103).

Importantly, the book brings us closer to bridging the divide between Piero the 'realist' and Piero the abstractor; the heart-warming poet versus the cold mathematician. According to Brüggen Israëls, the tools with which Piero observes and repurposes reality in his paintings, far from confronting viewers with abstract compositions, draw them into the picture, if only by adopting their viewpoint with precision. Although, as the author argues, such tools produced a 'trademark' style, they represented in their perpetual replicability, a 'last argument against personal style', as Joost Keizer put it.[6] It could be argued that it was because Piero's tools were not slavishly adopted by following generations, that he, who may have had no ambition to be recognised as the author of his art, has paradoxically become most recognisable. Be that as it may, Piero crafted a formula that blended idealising abstraction with reality-driven observation. The figure of Joseph in the *Nativity* (Fig.4) encapsulates such aporias: is his pose that of a *spinario* or, as Alan Bennett felt, like any guy holding his leg would sit, or both?[7]

In line with the style of the series 'Renaissance Lives', in which the book is published, the text is sparsely footnoted, which, together with the author's overly modest signposting of her own interpretations, makes it hard sometimes for the non-specialist reader to position the book within broader scholarly debates. Nonetheless, Brüggen Israëls's book is equally attractive to newcomers and veterans of Piero studies. It may leave some questions unanswered, but little is left unasked. Like Piero's art, it is as approachable at first sight as it is rewarding over time.

1 A. Huxley: 'The best picture', repr. in J. Pope-Hennessy: *The Piero della Francesca Trail*, New York 2002, pp.5–11.
2 Partly anticipated in M. Brüggen Israëls: 'The first known record of Piero della Francesca's "Flagellation of Christ" and the question of its inscription', THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE 161 (2019), pp.488–91.
3 N. Penny: 'Non-finito in Italian fifteenth-century bronze sculpture', in A. González-Palacios, ed.: *La scultura: studi in onore di Andrew S. Ciechanowiecki*, special issue of *Antologia di Belle Arti* 48–51 (1994), pp.11–15.
4 L. Bellosi, ed.: exh. cat. *Una scuola per Piero: Luce, colore e prospettiva nella formazione fiorentina di Piero della Francesca*, Florence (Gallerie degli Uffizi) 1992.
5 See G. Bolli: 'Il maestro di Narni del 1409 a Narni e a Terni', *Indagini C.E.S.T.R.E.S.* (1993), pp.31–41.
6 J. Keizer: *The Realism of Piero della Francesca*, London and New York 2018, p.10.
7 A. Bennett: 'Going to the pictures', in *idem*: *Untold Stories*, London 2005, pp.472–73.

Lettera a Leone X di Raffaello e Baldassarre Castiglione

By Francesco Paolo Di Teodoro. 72 pp. incl. 32 col. ills. (Olschki, Florence, 2020), €23. ISBN 978-88-222-6677-4.

by **PETER HICKS**

Italians are the leaders in cultural heritage preservation. It is so important for them that it is enshrined in the Italian Constitution (1945), where it is higher up the batting order even than observance of international treaties. Raphael was in the avant-garde of this movement. Together with the humanist and translator Fabio Calvo, and under the benevolent gaze of Leo X, he developed a project that was nothing short of the renewal of architecture via the preservation and imitation of the glory that was ancient Rome. The volume under review presents an edition of the famous letter to Leo X, which the author firmly attributes to Raphael. Baldassare Castiglione is an 'assistant', bringing literary quality and a sensitivity to antique sources to the letter, but the inspiration for it goes back to Raphael 'the technician, the architect'. The book is a precursor of Francesco Paolo Di Teodoro's forthcoming critical edition of Raphael's writings, honouring the 500th anniversary of Raphael's death in 1520.[1]

The document known generally as the 'Letter to Leo X' was the dedicatory text to a projected architectural treatise. The treatise was to comprise an ichnographic plan of ancient Rome, a general text and a series of drawings of the most noteworthy buildings in plan, elevation and section (in that order). As Di Teodoro points out in his excellent and detailed introduction, contemporaries had got wind of the project but no one really knew how much had been completed by the time of Raphael's death; most of it – if it was ever produced – would seem to have been lost. The map of Rome appears to have been executed '*regio*' by '*regio*', following procedures laid out by Leon Battista Alberti a century earlier in the so-called '*Ludi matematici*', in Book IX of the *De re ædificatoria*, and in the *Descriptio urbis Romæ*. As for the lost architectural drawings, Di Teodoro maintains that they emerge as a sort of éminence grise behind Palladio's *Quattro Libri*.

The book offers transcriptions of two manuscript versions of the letter: one entirely in the hand of Castiglione (Archivio di Stato, Mantua) and one copied by Angelo Colocci (1474–1549), Apostolic Secretary to Pope Leo X (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich). A full critical apparatus for all the texts in the tradition is promised in Di Teodoro's forthcoming edition. There are some stern but fair criticisms of two earlier editions of the letter.[2] In his account of the history of the manuscripts, Di Teodoro springs two significant surprises on the general reader. The first is a new manuscript (in a private archive in Mantua). It predates the printed version of 1733, although it resembles that edition in almost all respects; the discovery was published for the first time in 2015.[3] The second is a rejection of the final folio of the Munich manuscript (87 recto and verso) as spurious and not written by Raphael. He bases his argument on two extremely jarring features in the text. First, it suddenly recommends the perspectival visual rendering that had been specifically rejected in the immediately preceding section and, second, it offers 'too' precocious a use of the term '*ordine*' (making it the first known use) instead of the more usual Latin and Italian words for the Classical orders in 1519, namely '*opera*', '*genus*', '*ratio*' or '*mos*'.

Short sections of erudite commentary follow the history of the text. The first of them sets the scene for the writing of the letter through the works of Fabio Biondo, Poggio Bracciolini, Giulio Pomponio Leto, Angelo Colocci and Fra Giocondo. Their emphasis on the sacred ruins and relics of Rome was picked up by Raphael and Castiglione, who maintained that antique Rome should be protected and restored – indeed, Di Teodoro calls the letter a founding document in the history of cultural preservation. The following section details Raphael's selection process in the choice of the exemplary antiquities, eliminating recent and barbarous Gothic constructions. The next two sections discuss the instrument that Raphael used for surveying the city as well as the method he used to draw his ichnographic map of antique Rome and the most significant buildings therein. Di Teodoro quotes Filippo Camerota, whose diagram of a reconstruction of the surveying instrument and its use is usefully reproduced at the end of the book, although not clearly mentioned in the introduction, and adduces a Venetian source for this instrument.[4] Another short section discusses the crucial dichotomy between the accuracy required for architectural drawings and the unsuitability in this context of beautiful painterly renditions. Raphael proposes the three Vitruvian types of architectural drawing,