RECENSIONI

The Cambridge Companion to Piero della Francesca, ed. Jeryldene M. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xvi, 268; 94 ill.. ISBN 0-5216-5254-5. (hardback), 0-5216-5472-6. (paper). US. \$75 (hardback), US. \$28 (paper).

The often romanticized interest in the art of Piero della Francesca goes back, as so many things do, to Giorgio Vasari, who decried the so-called theft of Piero's mathematical theories, lamented the loss of so many of his major paintings, and bemoaned his later blindness. Vasari, of course, favoured Piero as a sort of adopted Aretime, thanks to his True Cross cycle in Vasari's hometown of Arezzo. This romanticism was revived in nineteenth-century England, where a new interest in Piero led to a number of publications and the acquisition of several important paintings for enthusiastic London institutions. By the early twentieth century, Post Impressionist taste found much to like in Piero's emphasis on structure and form, increasing his popularity in both Europe and the United States. Since 1927, Roberto Longhi's largely formalist study of the artist has overshadowed much of our understanding of Piero's place in art history. Longhi's evocative book found sympathetic followers in Bernard Berenson, Kenneth Clark, and others, thereby vaulting Piero to the ranks of the most important Renaissance artists. As a painter who spent his entire career as a resident of Sansepolcro, executing his greatest work outside the major centres of Florence and Rome, Piero was an odd choice for such an apotheosis.

This important new volume, edited by Jeryldene M. Wood, goes a long way to dispel many of the resulting assumptions and misconceptions about Piero's art. He is examined with care and in context, using a wide range of methods and bibliographic sources. This volume considers not only Piero's paintings, but also his place in Italian Renaissance art and history. Nine of the ten essays are published here for the first time, although several are based on earlier essays by these same authors. Taken together, they give us an interdisciplinary way to look at Piero, moving away from both romanticism and formalism to a more comprehensive understanding.

Jeryldene M. Wood begins with an introduction to Piero's life and works, establishing the basic chronological parameters and pertinent issues. This is followed by four essays dealing exclusively with Piero's religious paintings. The first, by Diane Cole Ahl, tackles the *Misericordia Altarpiece* (Sansepolcro), placing it firmly within the religious and civic context of the town of Sansepolcro and the charitable confraternity responsible for its commission. Timothy Verdon broadens the perspective to look at Piero's spiritual world more comprehensively, using the *Misericordia Altarpiece* as well as two other early works, *Girolamo Amadi Kneeling Before Saint Jerome* (Venice) and *The Baptism of Christ* (London). Jeryldene M. Wood examines the role of the Franciscan friars in the commission of the True Cross cycle in Arezzo, emphasizing their local history and missionary role. And Marilyn Lavin, in an updated version of a 1995 essay, describes *The Adoration of the Child* (London) as an intensely personal work that reflects aspects of Piero's otherwise hidden personality.

Moving away from this strictly religious focus, the next six essays cover a wider variety of paintings. Jane Bridgeman reinterprets several well-known works through their painted costumes, suggesting new or additional meanings revealed by these seemingly insignificant details. Joanna Woods-Marsden provides an overview of the portraits of *Sigismondo Malatesta* (Paris), *Federigo da Montefeltro* (Florence), and *Battista Sforza* (Florence) within the genre of court portraiture. Philip Jacks looks at the enigmatic *Ideal City* paintings (Urbino, Baltimore, and Berlin) as products of the circle of Florentine intarsia artists working at the Urbino court, dissociating them both from Piero and from contemporary theatrical design. Margaret Daly Davis and J.V. Field discuss Piero as an intellectual and the author of three surviving mathematical treatises, *Trattato d'abaco*, *Libellus de quinque corporibus regularibus*, and *De prospectiva pingendi*, all in the abacus school tradition. The volume ends with Anne Barriault's analysis of Piero's impact on modern art historians, artists, and poets, effectively making us reconsider our own understanding of the artist and the conditions which shape it.

Especially illuminating, to me, was Bridgeman's essay on the ways in which Piero deliberately manipulated his depiction of costume and accessories to further his narratives. For example, according to Bridgeman, the use of white cloth-of-gold for the costume of both Sigismondo Malatesta and Saint Sigismondo in the fresco in the Tempio Malatestiano (Rimini) denotes royalty, since the fabric had long associations with rulers. Bridgeman dates the *Brera Altarpiece* (Milan) to the late 1450s, rather than the more traditional date of circa 1472-74, because of, among other things, the style of Federigo's armor and the absence of his later emblems and awards. And, furthermore, Bridgeman demonstrates how Piero's incorporation of contemporary Greek clothing, especially in the Arezzo frescoes, metaphorically denotes Christian antiquity. Through these observations, Bridgeman opens a window into Piero's compositions which we would not have otherwise. But the lack of any color reproductions, or even black and white details, is problematic, since so much of her discussion depends on close attention to the paintings.

Indeed, it is a shame that this new appraisal of Piero is not accompanied by better reproductions. All illustrations are black and white, and the placement of 29 plates at the front of the volume and additional figures in each article necessitates a great deal of flipping back and forth as one reads. This did not keep the price down, although, fortunately, there is a less costly paperback edition. The volume is part of Cambridge University Press's exemplary Companion series, which thus far covers, in addition to Piero, Masaccio, Delacroix, Velazquez, Vermeer, Giotto, Titian and Giovanni Bellini. These volumes provide accessible overviews of major artists for both art historians and students alike, and serve as a convenient place to find some of the most recent scholarship. But unless something is done about the reproductions and the cost, these important volumes will not make the impact they could.

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