

Federico Borromeo. *Sacred Painting; Museum.*

The I Tatti Renaissance Library 44. Eds. Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr. and Pamela M. Jones. Tr. Kenneth S. Rothwell, Jr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010. xxvi + 298 pp. + 10 b/w pls. index. append. illus. bibl. \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-04758-7.

A 2005 exhibition in Milan entitled *Carlo e Federico* celebrated Carlo (1548–1608) and Federico Borromeo (1564–1631), members of a powerful family in the city, who were hailed by their contemporaries as twin champions of Catholic Reform. Of the two, the hawkish Carlo was the militant hero, whose victories over heresies earned him his sainthood. His baby-faced nephew Federico was quietist and focused on spiritual reform as a way of life for devout Christians in post-Reformation society. The younger Borromeo left copious writings in the archives of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, which, with the adjoining Pinacoteca and an art academy, was his great gift to the city of Milan. Iconophile to the marrow, he assigned great importance to the role of imagery in the daily practice of Christian life and promoted the idea that secular imagery, such as landscapes and still-lives, could be rallied to quicken the spirit and attain Christian wisdom. He essentially promoted a version of the Christian neo-Stoicism that was becoming fashionable among Christian humanists across Europe. Two of his treatises, *Sacred Painting* (*De Pictura Sacra* or *DPS*, 1624) and *Museum* (1625), are now available here. Pamela Jones, author of *Federico Borromeo and the Ambrosiana* (1993), adds an introduction and a rich apparatus of notes to the carefully edited Latin texts and Kenneth Rothwell's lively translations. Ten black and white plates help the reader to follow Borromeo's major arguments on key works of art. An appendix, *The Rules of the Academia del Disegno*, completes the triad of Borromeo's writings on art.

In her introduction Jones argues that “no other European figure of the time” combined so successfully the defense of sacred art with the perceptions of artistic connoisseurship (x). The texts are generally viewed as complementary, with the two books of *DPS* focusing on the rules and iconography of religious imagery and *Museum* with its seventy-nine brief paragraphs presenting case studies of art criticism and other artistic concerns including preserving works of art from the tooth of time. The precepts in *DPS* are subordinated to the overriding principle of decorum, which tempers excess, helps to identify impurities or impels to observe a dress code: don't dress beggars in Babylonian garments or envelop the Virgin Mary in billowing clothes! Book 2 treats the divine mysteries, which in the spirit of the Council of Trent must be depicted in images that are both traditional and impervious to Protestant detractors. Borromeo uses the debate on the nails of the

cross (celebrated relics in the Duomo of Milan) as an example of arriving at historical truth by castigating errors.

Museum is a special treat. Borromeo invites his readers for a tour of the Pinacoteca, which to this day has changed little from the time Borromeo laid it out in the early seventeenth century. Not unlike a modern museum docent he dwells on his favorites and skips others. Using the literary device of ekphrasis he reserves the longest paragraph for Leonardo's *Last Supper*, on display in a copy by Vespino, as the epitome of the *affetti*. He allows much room for praise of his beloved Fleming, Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625), whose natural imagery invites a comparison between artistic and natural artifice, with the premise, of course, that art always trails nature.

A couple of very minor points: the page number in n1 (223) should be xxxv. It seems to me that the phrase “herbarum viriditas” refers to verdure, the greenness of the stems and leaves of plants, rather than “grass that is conspicuously green” (182–83). In the description of the *Allegory of Fire*, it is because of the element's sterile voracity that the painter could not draw on the wealth of nature, “naturae copiam” (31), and had to resort to everything that is forged by an ingenious Cyclops. Borromeo's insouciant banter, I would venture, gives us greater access to the quick assessments that form in the heads of art lovers as they confront pictures than the learned tracts of academicians and theologians. With these superbly presented texts now available in English and the grandiose 2006 catalogue of the Ambrosiana paintings at hand we are better equipped than ever to assess the effect of pictorial images on early modern viewers.

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