

David Ekserdjian. *Parmigianino*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. x + 304 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$75. ISBN: 0-300-10827-3.

Parmigianino was one of the most innovative painters in sixteenth-century Italy. He was also a prolific draftsman (nearly 1,000 sheets have been attributed to him) and one of the first artists to experiment with etching. All these aspects of his life are well-known to art historians, but they are rarely integrated in a single monograph. David Ekserdjian has set this as his task in this beautifully illustrated and deeply researched book. As a result Parmigianino emerges as an artist with a rich, complex, and varied body of work.

Rather than dividing his book into chapters that follow the development of the artist's career — an organization that would privilege the painting commissions — Ekserdjian begins with a compact but detailed overview of his development. The second chapter on influences shows that Parmigianino looked at everything: Roman statues as well as details of classical ornament, prints by Mantegna and Dürer, and Michelangelo's work. His greatest influence, though, was Raphael, which came by way of prints as well as direct observation of originals in towns near Parma or in Rome. Of special interest is Parmigianino's relationship to Correggio, which Ekserdjian characterizes as a dialogue. Neither student nor follower, Parmigianino is a sometime collaborator, sometime rival. His extraordinary portraits, for example, appear to exploit a market that Correggio avoided.

The next three chapters focus on subjects and genres: religious art, mythology and eroticism, and portraits. Each of these is organized chronologically, so there is considerable back-and-forth movement and some repetition. Still, each chapter stands well on its own. The chapter on mythological works best achieves Ekserdjian's goal of fully integrating the various media in which Parmigianino worked. Here, too, Ekserdjian treats with scholarly care the often-avoided pornographic prints and drawings. Ekserdjian's expertise in drawings is very evident in these chapters, but in a separate chapter devoted to drawings he is able to demonstrate Parmigianino's range of interests and show how an artist's development can also be traced through choice of materials and drawing styles. This is also where Ekserdjian draws attention to remarkable drawings done for unusual purposes or no purpose at all: drawings that emulate (but are not copied from) engravings, and drawings of dead mice and crabs, made, it seems, simply because of their visual interest.

Nonspecialists will most likely turn first to the chapter on Parmigianino's most famous painting, *The Madonna of the Long Neck*. Here, Ekserdjian again focuses on the preliminary drawings to help explain some of the mysterious features of this work. For example, the small "prophet" is decidedly identified as St. Jerome, and the enigmatic foot beside him the beginnings of St. Francis. The gradual diminution of these two saints is clearly traced through the drawings, and corresponds to a shift in emphasis related to patronage — at first commemorating the deceased Francesco Bairdo, and later celebrating his wife Elena. There is still room for more discussion of this intriguing painting, but Ekserdjian very convincingly shows that the design evolved in thoughtful ways, and that its lack of finish is due more to Parmigianino's perfectionism than to any trauma caused by historical events or some personality flaw.

While the placement of the final two chapters on prints and decorative arts reinforces the notion that they treat "minor" art forms, Ekserdjian's consideration of them is full and imaginative. The chapter on prints includes a discussion of Parmigianino's copies from prints as well as his designs for other printmakers and his own etchings. Parmigianino's importance as an etcher is well-known to specialists: it is good to see his involvement with prints being given such complex treatment within a more accessible monograph. Similarly, the concluding chapter on Parmigianino's ideas for frames, decorative arts, sculpture, and architecture reveals close observation of details from paintings as well as evidence from drawings to fill in this aspect of Parmigianino's working life.

Ekserdjian seems consciously to avoid categorizing Parmigianino's work as "mannerist." The term *maniera* does come up, not as a style category, rather as a designation of his individual approach to realism (98). After much debate over what mannerism does and does not mean, it is refreshing to see Parmigianino celebrated as the unique individual he was.

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