

Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby. *Il pulpito toscano tra '300 e '500.*

Rome: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato. 202 pp. index. illus. bibl. €60. ISBN: 978-88-240-1152-5.

Pulpits, however intrinsic they may be to the function and furnishings of a Christian church, are often overlooked, unless they happen to be especially noteworthy in terms of size, placement, or decoration. Occasionally studied as individual objects, but rarely treated as a separate sculptural type, Italian Renaissance pulpits are long overdue for systematic, synthetic study. Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby sets out to fill this void with her book, originally published in English as *The Renaissance Pulpit: Art and Preaching in Tuscany, 1400–1550* (2007).

Debby undertakes a broadly interdisciplinary approach to her subject, moving well beyond the catalog compiled by Piero Morselli in his 1978 dissertation, “Corpus of Tuscan Pulpits,” and other scholars’ studies of individual monuments. Historical analysis, sermon studies, and art history are employed, as she examines pulpits and explores their interrelationships with the sermons that issued from them. In her attempt to locate the pulpit both in its historical cultural context and within the Church, she acknowledges her affinity with Geraldine Johnson’s desire to

reintegrate individual sculptural projects into their original physical and cultural contexts and to place special emphasis on fifteenth-century viewers' physical and cultural positions (19). Some of her most interesting contributions derive from her exploration of the connections between the rhetoric of a sermon and the rhetoric of the pulpit as a work of art, and among preaching, pulpits, and theatrical performance.

The study covers a period at once broader and narrower than its respective titles suggest. The title of the Italian edition is somewhat more accurate, referring to the span from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries. If the book's actual frame of reference to Tuscan pulpits is closer to 300 years, at its heart lie a handful of pulpits completed over barely half a century, from the 1430s through the 1480s, in Florence and the neighboring town of Prato.

The book vaunts a meticulous overall organization. After a foreword by Giorgio Ortolani, new in this edition, a substantial introduction and brief conclusion bracket eight intervening chapters, each of which ends with its own set of conclusions. Chapter 2 surveys the tradition of Tuscan pulpits to 1400; chapter 9 more briefly treats the Tuscan pulpit in the first half of the sixteenth century, some church interiors in the second half of the sixteenth century, and Carlo Borromeo's views on pulpits and preaching in Tridentine Italy. Between them are chapters devoted to patronage and commemoration in the Renaissance church; location and function of the pulpit; form and content of the Renaissance pulpit; the pulpits of Santo Stefano, Prato; performance, spectacle, and the Renaissance pulpit; and Donatello's San Lorenzo pulpits.

It is in its midsection that the book's organizational rigor flags somewhat under the attempt to combine a generalized survey with a close focus on six specific pulpits, chosen because they are exceptional (77) and the most exquisite and impressive monuments of this type (12). Fortunately, those pulpits — by Brunelleschi and il Buggiano in Santa Maria Novella, Florence; Donatello and Michelozzo on Santo Stefano, Prato; Donatello in San Lorenzo, Florence; Pasquino da Montepulciano, Mino da Fiesole, and Antonio Rossellino in Santo Stefano, Prato; and Benedetto da Maiano in Santa Croce, Florence — provide ample grist for Debby's analytical mill, despite a certain amount of repetition from one chapter to another. Readers from a variety of disciplines will profit from the breadth of evidence marshaled in her discussion of the pulpit's location and function and its position in relation to the male/female division of the church in chapter 4. Similarly interesting are the links drawn among between preaching and performance, pulpits and dramatic spectacles, and pulpit decoration and theatrical performances in chapter 7.

Despite the two-year distance in their publication, several errors in the English edition remain uncorrected. Given the prominence of Benedetto da Maiano's pulpit in Santa Croce, the original omission of Doris Carl's fundamental study of the artist (*Benedetto da Maiano: A Florentine Sculptor at the Threshold of the High Renaissance* [2006]) should have been remedied in the Italian edition. Minor but repeated misspellings of scholars' names are a distraction (Dunkelman, not

Dunkelman; Cassidy, not Cassidi; Frederick, not Frederich, Hartt; Joachim, not Johachim, Poeschke). A few new misspellings have crept in (Creighton Gilbert, not Giebert), but some previous ones happily have been corrected (Francesco Nori, for Norri; Vincenzo, for Vinceze, de Bartholomaeis). The translation of "Primary Sources" as *Fonti bibliografiche principali* is somewhat misleading, but on the whole this edition is well-produced and faithful to the original. The large-format paperback is sturdily bound. Footnotes have less conveniently become endnotes in this edition, but the main text is large and easy to read. Partially offsetting the loss of the previously extensive list of black-and-white figures, twelve sharp new color plate illustrations of all the major pulpits under discussion have been added.

This book belongs in all serious art history collections. Only the Italian text might render it less than fully accessible to some readers. Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby's diligent approach to her subject draws together several decades of scholarship and offers a number of new observations and insights. It makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the pulpit as art object and integral part of sacred oratory in late medieval and early Renaissance Tuscany.

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