

Dennis Geronimus. *Piero di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 366 pp. index. append. illus. map. chron. bibl. \$75. ISBN: 978-0-300-10911-5.

Piero di Cosimo's paintings, especially his spellbinding secular ones, have secured his status as one of the most inventive and original artists of the Renaissance. At the same time, however, he is also one of the least-documented artists of the period and the chronology of his paintings is far from established. Inevitably, the critical appraisal of his paintings — some sixty have survived — and the later perception of his career have been persistently influenced by Vasari's biography of the artist, included in his *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori* (1550 and 1568).

Unfortunately, as Geronimus points out in the introduction, Vasari was more concerned with rhetoric and warning the reader against social misconduct than with historical reliability, delighting in weaving information of art historical interest with provocative anecdotes about Piero's objectionable character and life. The well-known picture of Piero di Cosimo as a Renaissance eccentric is therefore largely due to Vasari. Geronimus is clear from the outset: by getting the facts straight — benefiting from the information yielded by newly discovered documents, close scrutiny of the paintings and drawings, and conservation related findings — while confronting Vasari's idea that art must necessarily reflect character, he aims to destigmatize Piero. While the historical record available today does not render Piero's personality less elusive, the author makes a sustained effort to correct the prevailing image of the artist by portraying him as “a real man doing real things” (1). In the first chapter, dedicated to Piero's biography, Geronimus is able to shed new light on Piero's life — for example, his precise birth date, his membership in the Compagnia di S. Luca at the age of twenty, and his hitherto unknown early activity as a manuscript illuminator — thereby vivifying the artist's personal and professional history.

The paucity of firmly dated works by Piero and his stylistic variability — in the past often related to his supposedly erratic temperament — render any attempt to reconstruct his oeuvre based on a chronological ordering extremely difficult.

Wisely, Geronimus has chosen for a different approach to the monograph format as he subdivides Piero's painted oeuvre into classes of different pictorial types: decorations for public spectacles (of which nothing has survived), portraits, mythologies, and images of veneration for private and church settings. This approach allows the author to focus attention on each individual genre and its specific context, while making interconnections and larger overviews thereby avoiding to fragment Piero's career.

Fascinated by the artist's unfettered imagination, artistic diversity, and technical excellence, elements Vasari had singled out for praise, Geronimus approaches his paintings as individual manifestations of an inventive genius who was given the opportunity by his venturesome patrons to explore new and capricious ways of storytelling. It is precisely the seeming paradox between Piero's allegedly outlandish lifestyle and his ability in cultivating a circle of highly regarded supporters of his art that led Geronimus to investigate not only the artist's social skills and professionalism, but also the culture that demanded and appreciated his highly unconventional imagery.

Particularly revealing are the discussions of the unconventional *Fantasy Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci* and the "incident-filled" enigmatic myths occurring on richly painted horizontal wall panels (*spalliere*) for the domestic settings of learned, well-to-do lay patrons. Geronimus explains Piero's highly personal and innovative visual interpretation of the literary sources that relate these myths as a deliberate attempt "to puzzle even the most tutored observer" (82). In thus successfully satisfying his patrons' desire for sophisticated visual rebuses *all'antica*, Piero, according to Geronimus, anticipated the incipient traits that are usually associated with Mannerism.

Throughout this well-written and beautifully illustrated book, Piero's paintings are not only painstakingly scrutinized, but also examined in relation to his working process, their intended function, the local artistic tradition, contemporary and older literature, symbolic language, a patron's intellectual and economic aspirations, and the broader context of social and cultural conventions. All this allows Geronimus to recapture further Piero's peculiar and highly original visual interpretation of his sources, especially in the case of his mythologies, while concluding that no matter how unusual his pictorial language may have been, Piero's art remains firmly rooted in the culture of late Quattrocento and early Cinquecento Florence.

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