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REVIEWS OF EXHIBITIONS

Pisanello: Le Peintre aux sept vertus, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 6 May–5 August 1996, and Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona, 7 September–9 December 1996; Catalogue, *Pisanello: Le Peintre aux sept vertus*, edited by Dominique Cordellier, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris, 1996, 518pp. ISBN 2-7118-3139-6, 390 fr.

Throughout most of the fifteenth century Antonio di Puccio da Pisa, or Pisanello, was one of the most admired artists in Italy. His work was in great demand by numerous Renaissance princes, including Alfonso V of Aragon, Leonello d'Este, Lodovico Gonzaga, and Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, and his fame was such that he appeared as the subject of numerous prose and verse panegyrics written by humanist scholars. Bartolomeo Facio, in his *De viris illustribus* (1456), describes Pisanello as 'regarded in the matter of depicting the forms of things and of expressing feeling, as being endowed with an almost poetic genius, but in painting horses and other animals, in the opinion of experts, he surpassed all other painters' ('in pingendis rerum formis, sensibusque exprimendis ingenio prope poetico putatis est. Sed in pingendis equis, ceterisque animalibus peritorum judicio ceteros antecessit'). The Florentine Leonardo Dati awards him the victor's palm in his *In laudem Pisani pictoris* (*c.*1448), saying that Pisanello had bettered Prometheus himself and that 'when I see our heroes brought to life, and horses and animals of every genre as living, I am stupefied' ('ipsum | nostros heroas video deducere vivos, | vivos alipedes, civum genus omne ferarum | torpidus o(b) stupeo'). Guarino da Verona, in a poem of 1427, wrote that Pisanello's merit would allow him to surpass artists of every epoch and, with a Phoenix-like rebirth, he would maintain the youth of fame throughout the centuries ('Pro meritis, Pisane, tuas, ut vividus omne | Exuperes aevum, sic post tua fata superstes | Pubescas servesque novam per saecla iuventam, | Qualiter accenso post se iuvenescere fertur | Assyrium phoenica rogo et de morte renasci'). Tito Vespasiano Strozzi, in his *Ad Pisanum pictorem praestantissimum*, proclaimed that neither Zeuxis nor Apelles could match Pisanello's skill in depicting men, animals, birds, running rivers, or the edges of a stream, washed by the waves ('Quis, Pisane, tuum merito celebrabit honore | ingenium praestans artificesque manus? | Nam neque par Zeuxis, nec par tibi magnus Apelles, | sive velis hominem pingere, sive feram. | Quid volucres vivas aut quid labentia narrem | flumina cumque suis aequora litoribus?'). Porcellio and Basinio da Parma wrote in similar strains of praise. Even a generation after Pisanello's death, in his *Italia illustrata* (1482), Flavio Biondo remembered him as the foremost artist of the era ('ma vive hoggi Pisano primo pittore del nostro secolo, del qual ha Guarino scritto'). By the dawn of the next century, however, Pisanello's fame had waned. He merits barely a line in Pomponio Guarico's *De sculptura* of 1504 and shares scarcely more than a paragraph with Gentile da Fabriano in Vasari's *Vite*, in which his Christian name is misrecorded as Vittorio.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writings on Pisanello are universal in their distinct lack of generosity. Lanzi recognizes that he may have been 'highly

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celebrated' in his day, but is amazed that 'some had been so biased in his favour that they had given him, rather than Masaccio, the credit for having advanced art ('alcuni troppo di lui parziali lo hanno preferito a Masaccio nel merito di avere avanzata l'arte').[1] Schlosser dismisses Pisanello as dependent on old-fashioned, 'churchy' art ('endlich zeigt sich seine Abhängigkeit von der älteren Kunst in kirchlichen Typen'),[2] and Venturi describes him as 'less accomplished in drawing figures' ('meno erudito nel disegnar le figure') than Gentile da Fabriano, relying on 'conventional male forms'.[3] Crowe and Cavalcaselle, while noting contemporary praise for Pisanello's painting, observe that 'the high-flown character of this eulogy contrasts most curiously with the bare reality of Pisanello's early style'.[4] Even Berenson offers little in the way of praise, stating that, even though Pisanello is observant and subtle, he 'betrays no essential difference of intention or spirit' from his precursors.[5] Berenson expounds his views on Pisanello at some length, and they are interesting for the modern art historian as they clearly record the perspective from which Berenson and, one assumes, many of his contemporaries viewed fifteenth-century painting.

For Berenson, Pisanello was the 'the last scion of a noble lineage . . . most happily fitted to hold up an idealising mirror to a parallel product of social evolution, the sunset of Chivalry'.[6] His paintings are described as 'distinctly court pictures, and their subjects bear witness to his interest in a courtier's mode of life'.[7] Pisanello's *Portrait of Leonello d'Este* in Bergamo is neatly packed away with the observation that it depicts 'of course, a great gentleman'.[8] Fundamentally, Berenson finds Pisanello's work lacking because it does not partake of 'the inspiration of the real Italian Renaissance'; Pisanello 'draws more accurately, he paints more delightfully than his Florentine contemporaries', but he remains a 'little master'.[9] When pressed for a cause to account for Pisanello's failings, Berenson proposes geography: Pisanello (although admittedly born in Pisa) is by training and temperament a northern Italian, and 'the trouble with Northern painting was that, with all its qualities, it was not founded upon any specifically artistic ideas'.[10] The credit of the achievement in modern Europe was due to Florence [and] there alone the task was understood in all its bearings'.[11] Berenson may have been the only scholar to be quite so specific, but one senses that similar reservations based on shared concepts of what did and did not represent the Renaissance 'achievement' is reflected in the judgements of other art historians of the period.

This series of quotations scanning 450 years of the critical history of Pisanello's works presents the modern art historian with something of a dilemma. Put at its simplest, the vicissitudes of Pisanello's esteemed worth provide a perfect study in the history of taste. Beyond this, however, judgements of Pisanello's work appear to be inextricably bound up with changing definitions of the aims and parameters of Renaissance art. It seems clear that Pisanello's immediate contemporaries believed with sincere conviction that he was the finest artist of his generation; and it seems safe to assume that this admiration stemmed from the fact that his work spoke directly of and to the concerns of that generation. One of the greatest humanist scholars of the age, Guarino da Verona – a man whose contribution to the formation of what we recognize as 'the Renaissance' has never been doubted – was so impressed by Pisanello's artistry that, in his poem, he resorted to the literary convention of claiming that his verse is unequal to the task of describing its greatness ('Si mihi par voto ingenium fandique facultas | Afforet et magnum redolerent pectora Phoebum, | Labraque proluerent pleno cratere Camenae,| Versibus aggrederer dignas extollere laudes . . . Pisane'). The jaundiced reader could cite this passage as merely reflecting the conventions of the age. Guarino wrote poetry about a living artist to conform with contemporary literary expectations and Strozzi, Basinio da Parma, Dati, and Porcellio were simply mimicking Guarino's poetic lead. The sceptic would argue that these poems have less relevance to art or to individual or common perceptions about a specific artist's skills than to the fifteenth-century humanist exercise of writing Latin verse – the underlying assumption being that the appropriate context for these verses is literary, and not art-historical. Whereas there is certainly some truth in such a view, the characterization of the fifteenth-century humanist as being quite so blind does obscure two crucial pieces of information: Pisanello is the only artist of his generation who is honoured by his contemporaries in this manner and to this extent, and he was also an artist whose work – in all media – was in constant demand, not only by Renaissance princes, but by the humanists themselves. It is extremely difficult for modern art historians to appreciate the scope of Pisanello's *oeuvre*, as all of his extant larger-scale works are in fragments, and two of his grandest commissions, the paintings in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio in the Palazzo Ducale in Venice and the decoration of the nave of the basilica of San Giovanni Laterano in Rome, were destroyed centuries ago. Admittedly, it is unlikely that the survival of these works would have changed our view of Pisanello's style, but one worries that it has proved a bit too easy to categorize Pisanello as a minor artist when all that we have to judge him by are a small clutch of highly finished panel paintings, some drawings of uncertain authorship, some medals of varying quality, and damaged fresco fragments. With such feeble resources, is it wise to wage war on the opinions of the great art historians of a previous generation? Berenson assures us that Pisanello fails to make the grade as a great artist because he failed to understand what the Renaissance was all about. Nevertheless, contemporary evidence suggests that fifteenth-century princes and poets were nearly universal in their appreciation of Pisanello's skills. Whom should we believe?

It would be fair to say that the Paris exhibition of Pisanello's drawings, paintings, and medals owed less to Pisanello's greatness as an artist than to another twist in the tale of his critical history. None of the material presented in the exhibition or in the catalogue is new to scholars. The so-called *Codex Vallardi*, a collection of 318 drawings which formed the core of the exhibition, has been associated with the work of Pisanello since the 1870s; his medals were well catalogued by Hill in his *Corpus of Italian Medals of the Renaissance before Cellini*;[12] and the major rediscovery of his series of Arthurian frescos in the so-called Sala di Pisanello in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua was made during the 1960s. But, whereas Pisanello himself (as it were) seems not to have changed much during the last thirty years, our perceptions about him and, more specifically, about the world in which he worked, have undergone a dramatic shift since Berenson's day. In particular, our notions about the shape and scope of 'the Renaissance' have changed.

Within the past fifteen years there has been a great surge of interest in two areas directly related to Pisanello's *oeuvre*: the art and culture stemming from the early Renaissance courts and the history of the portrait medal. Starting, perhaps, with Werner Gundersheimer's publication, *Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism*,[13] a number of scholars began to reconsider the historical assumptions of previous writings on the group of Italian cities often generically linked as 'the north Italian courts' – namely, Ferrara, Mantua, Urbino, Milan, Rimini, and, by extension, Naples (coincidentally, Pisanello was employed by the rulers of four of these cities). A number of art historians followed suit, making 'court studies' one of the prime concerns of the late 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, the 1990s have also witnessed a growing interest in the creation, manufacture, distribution, and significance of the portrait medal, a medium whose origins also can be traced to these courtly centres. The volume of essays *Designs on Posterity: Drawings for Medals*[14] and the travelling exhibition entitled 'The Currency of Fame: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance'[15] bear witness to the reinvigorated study of the portrait medal. Significantly, both the book and the exhibition catalogue open with chapters devoted to Pisanello – the putative inventor of the medium. The new sense is that Pisanello is not only a fully qualified 'Renaissance' artist, but, more significantly, that he is one of the rare and elusive breed of early fifteenth-century artists who might be called 'humanist artists'. Far from dismissing Pisanello as 'medieval' or lacking in 'intellectuality', a number of scholars now find themselves hungry to understand his art and to discover exactly why he was so revered by his contemporaries throughout Italy. Their hope is that Pisanello is the key to a new understanding of a neglected chapter in the history of art and culture.

The Paris exhibition[16] played directly to this audience by styling Pisanello as 'le peintre aux sept vertus', a reference to the seven letters on the reverse of Pisanello's portrait medal 'F.S.K.I./.P.F.T.', which most scholars accept as the first initials of the seven virtues (*Fides, Spes, Karitas* [*sic*], *Iustitia, Prudentia, Fortitudo*, and *Temperantia*). The specifically humanist context for what is, essentially, a medieval canon of virtues is claimed by citing a section from Guarino's poem to Pisanello, in which the artist's virtues are listed: 'Prudens, gravis atque modestus,| Munificus propriis, alienis, fidus amicis, | Moribus ornatus pulchroque insignis amictu | Maxima Veronae reddis praeconia nostrae'). Some may doubt that this is an altogether warranted leap, but most readers willingly follow, hoping that complicity might bring its own reward. Given such a lead-in, however, one expected the Paris exhibition to raise a number of issues directly related to the current concerns of historians and art historians working on early humanism and the north Italian courts: Why was Pisanello so popular with the humanists and their patrons? What were his working methods? How did his fame spread from court to court? How were his drawings used – by him and by his colleagues and followers? Where did the concept of the humanist portrait medal come from? What was the dynamic between the early humanists and their *ut pictura poesis* brethren? Was Pisanello an arbiter or a follower of fashion? And so on . . .

The Paris exhibition and accompanying catalogue brought together a truly astonishing array of material. Over 300 objects were examined, reconsidered, and presented with great diligence and sensitivity. It was a rare pleasure to be able to see so many fifteenth-century drawings displayed together and, normally, one would welcome such an opportunity as a once-in-a-lifetime chance to come to one's own conclusions about an artist and his work. In the case of the Paris exhibition, however, the drawings and medals may have shone, but the personality of Pisanello, let alone the extent of his 'autograph' *oeuvre*, or his working methods, remained disturbingly obscure.

There are two major problems one faces in presenting Pisanello. The first is one which, for the sake of convenience, could be called 'connoisseurship'. If one compares the catalogues of the three or four major authorities on Pisanello's drawings, one will find only the slimmest margin of agreement as to which drawings are by Pisanello himself or, for that matter, what graphic traits should be regarded as the hallmarks of his style. This is not a case of the expanding and contracting *oeuvre*, such as one finds with an artist like Giorgione. There is a fundamental discordance amongst those scholars who know intimately a very large body of drawings as to what is or is not by the hand of Pisanello. It does appear that Cordellier and his colleagues have a certain view of who they think Pisanello is. It is a view, however, that is marginally less convincing than that held by Degenhart and Schmitt,[17] and wholly less convincing than that offered by Fossi Todorow.[18] One's hesitation in accepting this most recent attempt at connoisseurship stems from the fact that it is extremely difficult to get a sense of the artistic personality behind the large and diverse body of work which Cordellier and his colleagues propose as being by Pisanello's hand. Degenhart, Schmitt, and Fossi Todorow have all stated the criteria by which their choices have been made – and, rightly or wrongly decided, one is always able to follow the logic of the argument. With the exhibition compilation, however, no such criteria were readily apparent. A somewhat vaguely defined quality of draughtsmanship seemed sufficient to merit autograph status, regardless of whether the drawing in question was a delicate silverpoint, an impressionistic *sfumato* portrait, a scratchy pen-and-ink perspective study, or a hyper-real and highly coloured watercolour wildlife composition. One's instincts lead one towards rejecting a number of Cordellier's attributions. For example, the attribution of a number of faintly drawn and somewhat smoky portraits (the delicate *Head of the Madonna*, Paris, inv. 2590/cat. no. 38; the *Studies of a Man*, somewhat ambitiously identified as Guarino in the catalogue, Paris, inv. 2336 and 2338/cat. nos. 251 and 252; or the *Portrait of a Man in a Hat*, Paris, inv. 2480/cat. no. 122) seems unlikely, as does that of several of the roughly drawn animal sketches and many of the series of horse studies (e.g. *Horse's Head*, Paris, inv. 2405/cat.

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[1] *Storia pittorica della Italia dal Risorgimento delle Belle Arti fin presso al fine del XVIII secolo* (Bassano, 1789); the quotation is taken from the 1968 edition, II, 17.

[2] 'Ein veronesisches Bilderbuch und die höfische Kunst des XIV. Jahrhunderts', *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, 16 (1895), 114–230, esp. p. 210.

[3] See his notes to vol. I of Vasari's *Vite* (Florence, 1896), p. xi.

[4] *A History of North Italian Painting* (London, 1912), II, 156.

[5] *North Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (London and New York, 1907), 7–22.

[6] *Ibid.* 8.

[7] *Ibid.* 9.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.* 15.

[10] *Ibid.* 18.

[11] *Ibid.* 22.

[12] London, 1930.

[13] Princeton, NJ, 1973.

[14] Ringwood, Hants., 1994.

[15] New York, 1994.

[16] I refer to the Paris exhibition and catalogue throughout this piece because the Verona exhibition and its catalogue were much reduced in scale. It is difficult to tell whether this was because of the Louvre's inability to lend a number of its drawings to Verona, or whether the smaller display in Verona reflected a different vision of Pisanello's *oeuvre*. Whatever the cause, however, it might be noted that the Verona version of the exhibition provided a much more consistent view of Pisanello as an artist. The selection of drawings was coherent and, in most cases, convincing. Having said that, however, the Verona exhibition remained a connoisseur's show, and very few questions about purpose or direction were raised, let alone answered.

[17] See the relevant sections in their multi-volume *Corpus der italienischen Zeichnungen, 1300–1450* (Berlin, 1968–90), or, most recently, their *Pisanello and Bono da Ferrara* (Munich, 1995).

[18] See especially *I disegni del Pisanello e della sua cerchia* (Florence, 1966).

no. 115; *Two Horses' Heads and a Nose*, Paris, inv. 2354/cat. no. 132); other animal studies (*Camel*, Paris, inv. 2399/cat. no. 117; *Two Bears*, Paris, inv. 2414/cat. no. 185); the sketches for mill-wheels (cat. nos. 108–11); and many of the Neapolitan drawings for the portrait medals of Alfonso V (cat. nos. 296, 297, 301, 302, and 308). As for the delightful series of highly finished coloured drawings of animals and birds, which for many formed the heart of the exhibition – is there any reason to think that these are by Pisanello, save that contemporary humanists praised him for his ability to draw birds and horses? Perhaps alone in my view, I came away from the Paris exhibition less convinced that I had the faintest idea of what a drawing by Pisanello was supposed to look like, nor did I feel that I had been provided with any means by which to gain one.

As difficult as connoisseurship of north Italian drawings might be, the real obstacles towards understanding Pisanello's *oeuvre* are the serious lacunae in our knowledge of how Pisanello worked. For example, the Paris catalogue repeatedly refers to the 'atelier de Pisanello' – but is it possible to speak of an 'atelier' for an artist as peripatetic as Pisanello appears to have been? One sees the model of the well-established, family-based Venetian or Florentine workshop attached to an artist who patently did not operate in that manner. Could Pisanello have had an atelier? We know that he regularly worked with other masters, but did he have pupils? How does their work differ from Pisanello's? What did he teach them? Certain assumptions about working methods can be developed from slightly later evidence concerning the habitual practice of at least one court. In Ferrara, for example, evidence seems to suggest that there was a group of talented local artisans whose success lay in their willingness to carry out any number of menial decorative tasks, and in their chameleon-like ability to shift their painting style to that of the most prominent itinerant master of the moment. Regardless of whether it was Piero della Francesca, Rogier van der Weyden, Titian, or Pirro Ligorio that was visiting, these artisans adapted and flourished. Recent work by Birgit Blass-Simmin concerning Pisanello's influence on Ferrarese miniaturists seems to support such a view. Pisanello arrives in Ferrara with his notebooks full of collected artistic motifs and, before you know it, identical motifs appear in the marginalia of the *Bibbia di Borso d'Este*. It may not seem a very sophisticated question, but how does this process take place? Who decides what is fashionable? How is this visual or decorative language passed from artist to artist? What is Pisanello's role in the diffusion of these motifs throughout the courts of Italy? Is he the inventor of these designs, or is what we consider 'Pisanello' merely a collection of motifs borrowed from the model books of other artists, such as Giovanni de'Grassi, Michelino da Besozzo, or any number of less well known Lombard masters? As I have argued elsewhere, the concept of 'authorship' (let alone connoisseurship) in such an environment is not only vexed, it may just verge on being inappropriate.[19]

Intellectually, structuring both the exhibition and the catalogue roughly according to the original notebook groupings was inspired. It provided a clear sense of what sort of material might be contained within a single notebook. It also provided the perfect springboard for further investigation of the role and significance of these notebooks in fifteenth-century north Italian art. Unfortunately, however, this arrangement also meant that the visitor's (or reader's) first encounter with 'Pisanello' was via the medium of nearly forty remarkably mediocre 'atelier' drawings. The organization fostered an unfair impression that Pisanello had sprung, beautifully formed, from a quagmire of ugly pen sketches. Whereas the drawings themselves were admirably displayed, the medals fared less well – having been impossibly lit from either the top or the bottom, which completely distorted or obscured the features of the sitters. The hanging of the panel paintings also seemed awkward. In particular, it did seem perverse to bring together Pisanello's *Portrait of Leonello d'Este* and Jacopo Bellini's *Madonna and Child with Donor (Leonello d'Este?)*, only to hang them in such a way that it was actually impossible to make a comparative study of the two. As the competition between Pisanello and Jacopo Bellini to paint a likeness of Leonello d'Este is one of the more important symbolic moments for art historians interested in the culture of the north Italian courts, one could not help but feel that, despite the aspirations of its title, the Paris exhibition had lost sight of Pisanello the painter.

The Old Royal Observatory, Greenwich — Kristen Lippincott

L'Età di Savonarola: Fra' Bartolomeo e la scuola di San Marco, Florence, Palazzo Pilti e Museo di San Mario, 25 April–28 July 1996. Catalogue edited by S. Padovani, Giunta regionale toscana, Marsilio, Venice, 1996, 345 pp.; Lit. 74,000. ISBN 88 217 6413 6; L'Età di Savonarola: Fra' Paolino e la pittura a Pistoia nel primo '500, Pistoia, Plazzo Communale, 25 April–28 July 1996. Catalogue edited by C. d'Afflitto, F. Falletti, and A. Muzzi, Giunta regionale toscana, Marsilio, Venice, 1996, 261 pp., Lit. 64,000. ISBN 88 317 6412 8.

The exhibitions in Pistoia and Florence devoted to the work of Fra Bartolomeo and his circle formed part of a larger celebration of the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola on the 500th anniversary of his death. Characterized as a figure of religious, social, and cultural dimensions, the Ferrarese preacher acted as the focus of various related events, including an itinerary of Savonarolan sites in different parts of Tuscany. The *assessore* (regional heritage adviser) directed these celebrations. It seems appropriate that Fra Bartolomeo's loyalty to Savonarola, which nearly cost him his young life, should have given him fresh life as a practitioner of what in Italy has come fashionably to be called the *maniera moderna*.

And so it was not just Fra Bartolomeo but the group of artists trained and influenced by him – the so-called School of San Marco and *pittori savonaroliani* – that featured in the various exhibitions. Although he never expressed a theory of art, it is possible to reconstruct the stylistic qualities Savonarola might have preferred from a reading of his sermons, and to juxtapose this with the work of Fra Bartolomeo and his followers and imitators: their paintings should be idealized, non-naturalistic, gracefully simple, and lacking in any formal artifice or distracting ornament. There can be no doubt that the art of Fra Bartolomeo is best understood in a Dominican context, and much remains to be done on that front, but the crucial question implicitly posed here is how far any of the works produced by these artists in the period following Savonarola's execution in 1498 correspond to such a prescription.

Unfortunately, this issue is not much addressed by the catalogues, with the important exceptions of the essays by Piero Scapecchi on Fra Bartolomeo and by Andrea Muzzi on Fra Paolino. Otherwise, a rather vague notion is expressed that the art of these painters was one of religious reform and a prelude to the Counter-Reformation.

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[19] See my 'Gli affreschi del Salone dei Mesi ed il problema dell'attribuzione', in R. Varese (ed.), *Atlante di Schifanoia* (Modena, 1989), 111–39.