

Reviews

Alessi, Cecilia. *La Confraternita ritrovata: Benvenuto di Giovanni e Girolamo di Benvenuto nello Spedale Vecchio di Siena. The Rediscovered Confraternity: Benvenuto di Giovanni and Girolamo di Benvenuto in Siena's Spedale Vecchio*. Quaderni della Soprintendenza per il patrimonio storico, artistico e demotnoantropologico d Siena e Grosseto, 1. Asciano (SI): Ali Edizioni, 2003. 127 pp., 92 illustrations (48 in color). ISBN 88-88769-04-8. _ 28,00.

This volume is part of a new series intended to make the research activities supported by the Soprintendenza of Siena accessible to a wider audience. The focus in this case is a monochrome fresco cycle of Old Testament patriarchs and prophets discovered three years ago during structural renovations in the crypt of the Ospedale of Santa Maria della Scala. Alessi is the first to study these fascinating paintings and is to be commended for all she has already discovered about their history. This includes, perhaps most importantly, the identification of the patron, the Compagnia di San Girolamo, a flagellant confraternity that met “sotto le volte” of Santa Maria della Scala.

Art historians have long been aware of extant documents that record payments made between 1499 and 1504 to the Sienese painter Girolamo di Benvenuto for frescoes in the oratory of the Compagnia di San Girolamo. Indeed, these documents are frequently cited as evidence for the earliest known activity of the artist. In exchange for twenty-nine fiorini, Girolamo di Benvenuto embellished the choir of the oratory with thirteen “figure di Testamento Vecchio.” Until now, these paintings have always been deemed lost, but Alessi convincingly argues that remnants of the Old Testament cycle are precisely what were uncovered in 2000.

In addition to Girolamo di Benvenuto's frescoes, the oratory of the Compagnia di San Girolamo once included choir stalls, an altarpiece representing the Virgin and Child with Saints Jerome and Bernardino, wooden moldings carved by Lorenzo di Mariano (il Marrina), and a ceiling painted by Bastiano di Francesco. All that remains of the ensemble today are four of the thirteen Old Testament stories on the walls, identified by Alessi as: *Samson carrying the gates of Gaza*, *Abraham with the sacrificial knife*, *Aaron with his blossoming rod*, and *Moses kneeling barefoot in front of the burning bush*. These scenes are set within landscape vistas, each framed by painted pilasters that create the illusion of a portico. Alessi suggests that this program of images was devised by a member of the Franciscan Observant convent of the Osservanza near Siena, whose prior also served as the priest of the Compagnia di San Girolamo. She does not posit who the other nine figures in this series might have been, but Gideon, Ezekiel, David, Joshua, and Noah were probably among them.

Alessi divides her study of the frescoes into five chapters. The first, entitled “The Documents,” focuses on the archival evidence for the paintings. A brief history of the Compagnia di San Girolamo is also provided here, as is an

explanation of the many structural and decorative transformations of its oratory in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In the second chapter, the author relates Girolamo's biblical Heroes to other Sienese works of art, including the republican Virtues sculpted by Antonio Federighi on the marble benches under the Loggia della Mercanzia, the Roman Heroes frescoed by Taddeo di Bartolo in the Palazzo Pubblico, and the numerous painted cycles of allegorical Virtues that decorated private interiors. Alessi also compares the San Girolamo cycle to the *grisaille* frescoes painted a few years earlier in the Cappella Bichi by Luca Signorelli and the workshop of Francesco di Giorgio. She concludes that the San Girolamo frescoes, too, are highly sophisticated in their iconography, format, and technique.

In the same chapter, Alessi suggests that the San Girolamo complex set a new standard for the decoration of meeting halls of Sienese confraternities and thus probably served as the model for the even more exquisite Oratorio di San Bernardino near the church of San Francesco. The author might have gone farther and considered how the frescoes relate to paintings that lined confraternity chambers in other Italian Renaissance cities. For example, how does this scheme compare to those Carpaccio executed for Venetian scuole at much the same time?

The last three chapters are dedicated to the authorship of the frescoes. Girolamo di Benvenuto is documented as the painter of the series; nevertheless, Alessi attributes the most dynamic and elegant figure, *Samson*, to Benvenuto di Giovanni, a generally more talented artist who was also Girolamo's father, master, and frequent collaborator. This argument is less than convincing. All the frescoes bear the hallmark of Girolamo's best independent productions: large, weighty figures influenced by Pietro Orioli and non-Sienese artists such as Signorelli. Benvenuto, like his own master Vecchietta, lacked any sense of monumentality, even when working on a grand scale (see, for example, Benvenuto's own frescoes of Old Testament prophets that line the drum of the cupola of the Siena Cathedral). In my opinion, Girolamo di Benvenuto painted the San Girolamo frescoes with little, if any, help from his father.

Alessi's text, presented in Italian and English, is accompanied by numerous colour illustrations, which are all the more important because the frescoes are not on view to the public. More information about the recent treatment and present condition of the paintings would also have been useful.

There is a surprisingly brief bibliography at the end of this study. Its most important omissions should at least be noted here. The author does not cite any of the earlier studies of the Compagnia di San Girolamo,¹ and also a recent article by Victor

1 These include, but are not limited to, M. Bertagna, "La compagnia di San Girolamo," in *L'Osservanza di Siena*, Studi Storici 1 (Siena, 1964), pp. 141–144; D. Gallavotti Cavaliero, "S. Girolamo," in *Lo Spedale di Santa Maria della Scala in Siena, vicenda di una committenza artistica* (Pisa, 1985), p. 405; and P. Turrini, "Religiosità e spirito caritativo

Schmidt that is the most in-depth account of Girolamo di Benvenuto's career to date.¹ The latter lacuna is particularly grave, as Schmidt actually transcribed payment records for the Compagnia di San Girolamo frescoes and noted that the confraternity purchased a painted crucifix by Girolamo di Benvenuto in 1502.

Much more work remains to be done before we will understand better the career and *oeuvre* of Girolamo di Benvenuto. Fortunately, the discovery of this beautiful and well-documented series of frescoes should stimulate more interest in the painter and his ambient. Indeed, the fascinating images painted by Girolamo di Benvenuto in the oratory of the Compagnia di San Girolamo are likely to engage scholars interested in Renaissance art and religion for years to come.

Trinita Kennedy
New York University
New York, NY

L'archivio della Misericordia di Rapolano. Inventario della Sezione storica, ed. Doriano Mazzini. Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 1997. 58 pp.; *L'Oratorio della Misericordia di Rapolano Terme. Vicende storiche e artistiche*. Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 2000. 63 pp.; Mazzini, Doriano. *Gli statuti della Misericordia di Rapolano Terme*. Siena: Edizioni Cantagalli, 2002. 166 pp.

The Pia Confraternita della Misericordia in the Tuscan town of Rapolano Terme has recently published three volumes documenting its history, drawing the information from documents found in the archives of the town. The confraternity currently serves as volunteer centre providing emergency first aid and other social services for the less fortunate. The present sodality is an 1864 amalgamation of two previous confraternities, each with their own oratory: Santa Maria delle Nevi and San Sebastiano, both from Rapolano. The former was located within the city walls and the latter on the outside. Of the two, Santa Maria delle Nevi was more prominent since it possessed a fair amount of land.

The two earlier confraternities had been suppressed in 1785 when Grand duke Peter Leopold banned all such lay religious organizations. Their records and property were then surrendered to the diocese. When Peter Leopold returned to his native Vienna to assume the throne left vacant by the death of his older brother, the ban on confraternities was partially lifted. Two years later the two confraternities of Santa Maria delle Nevi and of San Sebastiano were once again re-established. However, having lost all their property, they were unable to rebuild on

a Siena agli inizi della reggenza lorenese: luoghi pii laicali, contrade e arti" *Annuario diocesano* (1996–1997), pp. 245–248. These studies also provide references to documents and early manuscript sources on the confraternity.

1 V. Schmidt, "Bemerkungen zu zwei toskanischen Tafelbildern der Renaissance im Stadel," *Stadel Jahrbuch* 16 (1997), pp. 207–226.