

Levin, William R. *The "Allegory of Mercy" at the Misericordia in Florence. History, Context, Iconography, and the Documentation of Confraternal Charity in the Trecento*. Dallas: University Press of America, 2004. viii, 180 pp, 20 b/w illustrations. ISBN 0-7618-2768-4

As they met for worship or work, members of Florence's Misericordia confraternity could not ignore the image of Mercy that towered over them on the west wall of the *audiencia*. At first sight it appears a variation on the familiar image of the Madonna della Misericordia, with the central figure hovering over the city and flanked at the base by receding ranks of kneeling supplicants: male and female, lay and clerical, young and old, rich and poor. Yet the central figure is not Mary, but Mercy herself. Her hands are not outspread to gather the devout under her cloak, but are firmly closed in prayer so that the large roundels running down the surplice can be seen clearly. Each of the eleven roundels offered a lesson on charity for the frescoed supplicants on the wall and the spellbound supplicants in the hall.

In this short book, art historian William Levin analyzes this compelling fresco of the *Allegory of Mercy* and uses it to explore the broad range and civic significance of confraternal charity in late medieval Florence. Together with the confraternities of Orsanmichele and S. Maria del Bigallo, the Misericordia grew from thirteenth century origins to become one of the pillars of Florentine charity and lay piety a century later. The three together were the confraternal mainstays of the city's civic religion, wealthier by far than all others and charged by legators and city government alike with dispensing charity to needy groups in the city. Cosimo de Medici engineered a union of the Bigallo and Misericordia in 1425 and though this was overturned a century later, the Bigallo retained the Misericordia's former quarters on Piazza S. Giovanni in the heart of Florence where the *Allegory of Mercy* can still be seen on those days – all too rare – when the museum is open.

Levin follows Howard Saalman and Hannah Kiel in dating the fresco to 1342 and ascribing it to a first or second generation follower of Giotto's student, Bernardino Daddi. In five chapters, he considers iconographic and contextual issues: the historical context for confraternal charity in Florence, the question of attribution and dating, the iconography of the central image, the border details, and the efforts of the Misericordia confraternity to exercise the seven works of mercy (which are named and depicted in the roundels). While his analysis does not break new ground or initiate controversy, Levin's archival scholarship and ample footnotes do round out our picture of the Misericordia's activities in the mid-fourteenth century. He underscores the close reciprocation of art and charitable activity in the creation of the confraternity's identity and community, and demonstrates that the lay people who animated both possessed considerable theological awareness and even sophistication.

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