

## Reviews

*Actas II congreso internacional de la Vera Cruz*, eds. Mariano García-Esteller Guerrero and Diego Marín Ruiz de Assín. [Caravaca, 12–15 October 2000]. Murcia: Ediciones Myrtia, S.L., 2001. 432 pp., b/w illustrations. ISBN 84-95549-12-3

The cross, as the quintessential symbol of Christianity, heralds every material and ritual gesture of the Roman Church. The long list of scholarly titles that deal with the historical and artistic transcendence of this Christian sign is thus not surprising. Most of these works, however, pay attention to the institutional dimension of the cross, exploring mainly iconographic, theological and liturgical aspects, based on the official prescriptions laid out in Church documents. The social dimension of this crucial symbol, that is, the cross as an object of popular devotion, remains an unexplored issue. Few studies have examined the material presence of the cross within the ritual practices and the religious lives of early modern communities. One of the most direct ways to approach this issue is to study the confraternities devoted to the Holy Cross, the Crucifixion and the Passion of Christ, and this is precisely one of the commendable tasks assumed by the organizers of the Congresses of Holy Cross Confraternities.

Before the first congress celebrated in Seville, from March 19<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1992, there were few publications that focused on the regulations and practices of Holy Cross confraternities in Europe. In 1996, their first publication brought together a vast amount of research about this type of institution in several regions of Europe and Latin America. Now, this year, the proceedings of the Second International Congress of Holy Cross Confraternities, celebrated this time in Caravaca de la Cruz, Spain, between October 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, 2000, have become available to scholars around the world, thanks to the efforts of Mariano García-Esteller Guerrero and Diego Marín Ruiz de Assín.

There could be no better choice for the location of a congress about Holy Cross confraternities than Caravaca de la Cruz, which hosts a sanctuary internationally renowned for its relic of the True Cross. As a consequence, six out of the nineteen papers gathered in this collection deal with the historic and artistic relevance of this particular relic, and of the confraternity that takes care of it. This section is in my opinion the most relevant contribution of this volume. Particularly commendable is the archival research done by Diego Marín Ruiz de Asín, who reconstructs the history of the confraternity and its devotional practices, and by Francisco Fernández García, who discusses the uses of the relic against epidemics, plagues and natural disasters, based on the records of the confraternity's sessions from 1545 and 1800. In addition, María Griñán Montealegre and Antonio Rubio Simón explore the political dimensions of this particular devotion, studying its expansion in the city of Caravaca itself and in other frontier settlements.

This local dimension of the second congress, however, does not overshadow its geographical and thematic scope. On the one hand, the congress preserves its

international coverage by including studies from other areas – two papers on Italy, one about Portugal and one about colonial Latin America, along with papers about Holy Cross confraternities in other Spanish provinces. On the other hand, the volume shows a real interdisciplinary dialogue, placing papers from different fields side by side, such as religious studies, art history, and cultural history. Preceding all of these different approaches, a comprehensive article by José Sánchez Herrero presents the theological basis of the devotion to the Holy Cross from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The volume lacks a coherent introduction, however, that makes sense of the diverse contributions made from so many angles, and that places the papers in their proper historiographic context. Also, the overall arrangement of the different topics eludes any consistent sequence. Despite all these organizational problems, the articles as a group collect invaluable documentary material that would be of use for any scholar interested in the local and general developments of Holy Cross confraternities during the early modern period.

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*The Cambridge Companion to Piero della Francesca*, ed. Jeryldene M. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pp. xvi, 268; 29 ill. ISBN 0-521-65254-5 hardback, 0-521-65472-6 paperback.

This collection of 10 essays comprises a set of diverse approaches to the Quattrocento painter Piero della Francesca. Editor Jeryldene Wood notes in her introduction that she has employed “authors from several fields to consider Piero's pictures from a range of historical perspectives” (12). While some essays focus upon traditional art-historical issues such as iconography and devotional practice, others take a more unorthodox approach, investigating Piero's mathematical treatises and his popularity among twentieth-century artists. The volume thus forms a wide-ranging and stimulating compendium.

Two essays in this volume discuss Piero's confraternal commissions, the first by Diane Cohl Ahl and the second by Timothy Verdon. Ahl's essay, “*The Misericordia Polyptych: Reflections on Spiritual and Visual Culture in Sansepolcro*,” focuses upon Piero's altarpiece, which was commissioned in 1445 for the confraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia in Sansepolcro. This altarpiece of the *Madonna of Mercy* is Piero's earliest surviving work and was commissioned for a confraternity to which Piero and his family belonged. Ahl discusses the iconography of the altarpiece, and its relation to practices of the confraternity such as self-flagellation, charity towards the poor, and care for victims of the plague. Ahl also explores painted and sculpted precedents for the *Madonna of Mercy* that Piero may have drawn upon, as well as the commissioning of the altarpiece by the Pichi family.

Timothy Verdon, in his essay “The Spiritual World of Piero's Art,” discusses several of Piero's early paintings: *Saint Jerome with a Disciple*, the *Misericordia Polyptych*, and the *Baptism of Christ*. Verdon's analysis of the *Misericordia Polyptych*