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Libina, Marsha. Sebastiano del Piombo and the Sacred Image: Mediating the Divine in the Age of Reform

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Libina, Marsha.

Sebastiano del Piombo and the Sacred Image: Mediating the Divine in the Age of Reform.

Arts and the Sacred 7. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022. Pp. 266 + 121 col. ill. ISBN 978-2-503-59475-0 (hardcover) €125.

Sebastiano del Piombo (1485–1547) is rarely considered on his own merits, which is perhaps understandable when the artist's career is so inextricably tied to Michelangelo's. While Michelangelo still serves as a leitmotif in Marsha Libina's study of Sebastiano and devotional imagery, her use of the framework of mediality is the driving force in her assessment of the artist's work. This allows her to recentre Sebastiano and his contributions to sixteenth-century art in Rome. The decades prior to the Council of Trent were marked by anxiety over the efficacy and theological correctness of religious imagery, particularly the ways in which devotional images implied unmediated access to holy figures. Libina argues that Sebastiano del Piombo explored this unease by pointedly visualizing the space between the mortal and the divine in what Libina calls "meta-pictorial strategies of devotional painting" (20). While mandating authorized and controlled access to sacred truths has long been accepted as a central tenet of Counter-Reformation doctrine, Libina calls into question when and how those concerns first appeared in devotional art.

Libina clearly outlines the parameters of her study, which examines Christological works from Sebastiano's Roman period (1510–27) in which he used drawings from Michelangelo as references. The author explains her exclusion of Sebastiano's best-known painting—the *Raising of Lazarus* (1517), painted for Cardinal Giulio de' Medici in conjunction with Raphael's *Transfiguration* (1516–20) for the same patron—by citing both the extensive scholarship on the duelling commissions and the lack of connection with her theme of mediation. Following a lengthy introduction that astutely contextualizes the artist, his connections with Michelangelo, and the ways in which early sixteenth-century artists engaged with religious reform prior to the Council of Trent, Libina presents her argument in four case studies. Each chronologically ordered chapter is centred on a painting or group of paintings by Sebastiano.

In the first chapter, Libina addresses the pointed disconnection between the Virgin and Christ in Sebastiano's Viterbo *Pietà* (c. 1512–16). Previous scholarship discussed the painting as a failed attempt to incorporate Michelangelo's

figure drawings into Sebastiano's own inventions, but Libina offers a refreshing new reading of this work and convincingly argues that this was not a failure; rather, it was an exploration of a new type of devotional image in keeping with Augustinian reform championed by Giles of Viterbo and the patron of the painting, Giovanni Botoni. This chapter sets the pattern that the author will follow in the subsequent three cases: a close reading of Sebastiano's work; comparisons to paintings by contemporary artists that demonstrate Sebastiano's alterations to standard iconographies; and an investigation of theological texts and debates from early sixteenth-century reform movements that grappled with what Libina calls "the problem of divine inaccessibility" (20).

Libina's second chapter, which takes the Borgherini Chapel (1516–24) in San Pietro in Montorio in Rome as its subject, is the strongest of the four chapters. Libina describes the chapel program as a "pronounced statement on the relationship between word and image as vehicles for the revelation of truth" (101). She situates Sebastiano's references to visual and textual interpretation as intimately linked to contemporary anxieties around prophetic preaching and popular devotion, which provides a compelling argument for Sebastiano's unusual iconographic approach. The third and fourth chapters, which address a series of four paintings of *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1510s–30s) and the Úbeda *Pietà* (1533–39), both delve more deeply into what the author positions as Sebastiano's reflection on the ability of images to suggest and substitute for divine presence: through the denial of physical connection in the third chapter, and through the juxtaposition of relics and Christ's body in the fourth.

Libina reassesses Sebastiano del Piombo and his work, not by divorcing the artist from the shadow of Michelangelo that has hung over the former artist's career, but by problematizing assumptions regarding how artists engaged with religious reform in the first decades of the 1500s. Libina marshals powerful evidence using Sebastiano's art as a primary source, and the extensive illustrations in the volume support her claims. Her use of Sebastiano's drawings in comparison to his completed works to demonstrate ways Sebastiano worked through both Michelangelo's visual influence and contemporary theological debates is especially strong. Throughout, Libina takes what is known about Sebastiano del Piombo and provides new readings based on a bolstered connection to the contextual complexities of early sixteenth-century Rome. She does her best work when she is engaging with past scholarship and returning to primary sources, both visual and textual, to complicate established readings

of Sebastiano's paintings. Rather than shying from paintings that do not fit comfortably into scholars' expectations of early sixteenth-century art in and around Rome, Libina uses this as a point of departure in a way that not only enhances our understanding of Sebastiano del Piombo's oeuvre but also gives us an alternate entry into a complicated period of religious reform.

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