

**Corinne Mandel, *Sixtus V and the Lateran Palace*. Rome, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1994, 278 pp., 16 col. and 160 black-and-white illus., L. 180,000**

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# Book Reviews

## Comptes-rendus de livres

CORINNE MANDEL, *Sixtus V and the Lateran Palace*. Rome, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1994, 278 pp., 16 col. and 160 black-and-white illus., L.180,000.

In this substantial study Corinne Mandel endeavours to interpret the programme of one of the most extensive and, at times, cryptic fresco cycles of sixteenth-century Rome. Under the patronage of Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590) a team of artists, directed by Cesare Nebbia and Giovanni Guerra, decorated approximately 10,000 square metres of the mural and vault surfaces of Domenico Fontana's new Lateran Palace. The imagery of this cycle reflects, as Mandel so thoroughly elucidates, both the personal iconography of the patron and the major themes of Roman Catholic Reform. This programme warrants recognition as an important visual manifestation of papal ideology in the immediate post-Tridentine period – one that merits comparison, as Mandel rightly acknowledges, with Cesare Baronio's monumental history of the Church, the *Annales Ecclesiastici*.

Notwithstanding the enormous size of the project and the historical importance of its location, this painted imagery has not, until now, received the comprehensive analysis it deserves. The reasons for this relative neglect are interesting in themselves and worthy of attention. Fontana's sober design for the palace facades eschews even the application of the orders except at the central portals. This restraint, which borders on the monotonous, perhaps reflects the seriousness of the patron's purpose in his enterprise of reform and reaffirmation of the apostolic role of the papacy, but the austere effect has been off-putting for scholars and casual visitors alike.

Even the subsequent fate of the palace has contributed to the neglect. Although conceived to house the pope, cardinals and curia during functions at the adjoining basilica, the palace never served as papal residence for any extended period and remained, for centuries, a building in search of a function. The sundry uses subsequently fulfilled by the palace (as pilgrims' hostel, pest house, granary, poor house, museum and bureaucratic seat) have contributed to the obscurity of its painted cycle. Except for a brief period in the 1960s and until just recently, the palace has been difficult of access and the frescoes have suffered from being out of sight.

The style of the Sixtine cycle adorning the interior of the palace, notwithstanding its decorative extravagance, avoids strong aesthetic self-assertion and cedes attention instead to the message with which it is so elaborately freighted. Sixtus V had no Michelangelo or Raphael at his disposal, nor can we be confident he would have engaged such strong artistic personalities for his projects. His artists

worked in teams and with speed. As a result the late-Mannerist stylistic mode evident in the cycle is not only anonymous but homogeneous, even bland, and conveys the impression of an obsessive *horror vacui*. Although the sought-after effect was one of overall opulence, the viewer with the patience to scrutinize the details could no doubt discern a weighty intellectual content in the programme. As Mandel puts it, the cycle is "more didactic than pleasure-giving." Despite the primacy of content, the ideological and encomiastic import of the imagery has scarcely been examined. This meaning behind pictorial splendour is the focus of attention in Mandel's book.

Mandel concerns herself primarily with the painted rooms of the palace *piano nobile* where the reigning pontiff was to conduct his official duties as both secular prince and high priest. If we add to these rooms those of the pope's private apartment on the same level, there is a total of seventeen rooms with painted walls or vaults. This imagery ranges from the portraits of popes, apostles and emperors (Christian and pagan) to narrative scenes of the Old Testament prophets and kings. From landscapes with hermit saints to the heraldic and emblematic devices of the papal patron. The author identifies the subjects of all the narrative scenes, accompanying personifications, and emblematic images, providing in an appendix a complete list of images together with the numerous Latin mottoes that often serve as key to identifying and interpreting the sometimes enigmatic scenes. This in itself is a noteworthy achievement of Mandel's book, for it offers the historian of Counter-Reformation Rome a compendium of the period iconography.

The author is at her best in the explication of the primary meaning of the devices and emblems unique to Sixtus' personal imagery. These derive their components from two main sources: the pope's heraldry (lion, pears, star, *monti*) and Egyptian obelisks and Roman imperial columns. These latter monuments are the ones Sixtus moved, erected, modified, exorcised, consecrated or otherwise manipulated to serve as urban symbols of the perennial efficacy of Divine Providence and the rededicated vitality of the Church under renewed papal authority at Rome. Mandel holds that the heraldry and, particularly, the devices contain the key to the programme of the entire cycle: "The Sixtine 'obelisk and column' devices ... are strategically placed signposts which enable the viewer to piece together the fundamentally diachronic view of history being extolled in the palace." Ancient Hebrew, pagan Egyptian and Roman, Early Christian and Medieval Franciscan history and imagery are bound together in a grand syncretistic tapestry displaying the verity of God's intervention in human affairs – all to

the credit of the reigning pontiff who is the ultimate manifestation of this divine force at work in the world.

Readers of Mandel's study are likely to be persuaded by much of her analysis and in particular of her overall assessment of the programme's meaning and of her belief that the pope himself had a hand, if at a distance, in the formulation of some of the iconography. Her proposal of Pompeo Ugonio as the principal intellect behind the programme, too, is plausible. Mandel's contribution thus constitutes a welcome advance in our understanding of the Sixtine pontificate as both culmination of Renaissance traditions and harbinger of later Baroque developments in image making in the service of papal ideology.

Some readers, however, may wish there had been a still greater effort beyond that made by the author to examine issues of use and accessibility. Lacking is a more down-to-earth context for the iconographic abstractions and ideological conceits behind the images. The monofocus on the programme overlooks factors of import to the interpretation of the painted scenes. Frescoed imagery is bound with the architectural unit it surrounds or covers and must be understood in that specific spatial context. The rooms of the Lateran Palace, like those of secular palaces, were designed in functional sequences and with different purposes in mind according to size, location within the sequence, and siting within the overall plan of the building. Knowledge of these practical architectural factors provides insight into the selection and meaning of the painted imagery.

Even a superficial look at the plan of the *piano nobile* at the Lateran Palace reveals the anomalous inclusion of two major *saloni* (the *Sala dei Papi* and the *Sala di Costantino*). Neither Palazzo Farnese, the supposed model for the Lateran Palace, nor other secular palaces of the period contain two comparable spaces. This arrangement suggests a special requirement at the Lateran, or at least in papal palaces, that may be reflected as well in the painted programme.

Awareness of room function will help identify the likely target audience of any pictorial component of a given spa-

tial unit, and knowledge of the rank of the intended viewer will aid the historian in establishing parameters for the interpretation. It is important to keep in mind, for example, that, notwithstanding the supercharged Counter-Reformation rhetoric of the Lateran cycle, it can hardly have been conceived for Protestant eyes. A more precise and detailed identification of room function and the status of persons admitted to each room therefore remain desiderata to be integrated with the analysis of the fresco cycle.

Mandel's interpretive assumptions call to the fore an important issue confronting the student of meaning in the imagery of the Renaissance and Baroque. That painted programmes in this period, especially those generated in courtly intellectual circles, might be read on many levels at once is a common claim, although documented examples remain rare. Undeniably, the heraldic and emblematic imagery, as deployed throughout the Lateran cycle, conveys a primary meaning well beyond its literal one (of a lion standing on three abstract mountains, for example). Mandel, however, argues for a "polysemous reading" that allows many complementary meanings for each individual image, each room of images, and for the entire cycle. Thus the ubiquitous obelisks, columns and heraldic lions can refer not only to Sixtus but also to Moses, Samuel, Elijah, John the Baptist, Constantine and St Francis all at once, although only one or, sometimes, none of these personages is visibly present in the scene (p. 172).

We cannot rule out that some learned contemporary of Sixtus, or even the pope himself, might have engaged in a multilayered reading that widely exceeded the limits of the actual imagery apparent to his eyes. Can, however, the historian who seeks to build a persuasive argument supporting the exegesis of an image fruitfully explore a speculative realm remote from the visual evidence? Will it not prove more judicious and profitable for the interpreter to adhere, instead, to the primary, pictorially verifiable meaning?

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KATY DEEPWELL, ed., *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1995, 201 pp., 65 black-and-white illus.

NORMA BROUDE AND MARY D. GARRARD, eds, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970's, History and Impact*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1994, 318 pp., 118 colour plates, 152 black-and-white illus.

Has feminist art criticism transcended its traditionally sanctioned peripheral publishing boundaries? The small-print

books and anthologies with few or no reproductions which are produced by under-financed independent publishing houses? The academic art journals which have an interest in the "new art histories" and view feminism as one of the many "marginalized" subject positions from which to write? Specialized journals and magazines with feminist agendas which may include a section on the "arts"? And perhaps sporadically, a depoliticized text from a large publisher which allows them to state that they produce "feminist" publications!<sup>1</sup> Into this publishing "colony" enter two re-