

Leone Leoni and the Status of the Artist at the End of the Renaissance. By Kelley Helmstutler Di Dio. 250 pp. incl. 64 b. & w. ill. (Ashgate Publishing, Farnham, 2011), £65. ISBN 978-0-7546-6234-1.

Reviewed by ALESSANDRO NOVA

THIS BOOK IS an excellent, well-informed introduction to the art and life of one of the most original personalities of the sixteenth century. Leone Leoni was not only a superb medallist, cameo engraver and sculptor, but also a sort of diplomatic agent, an alleged criminal who was chained to an oar of a papal galley, and a fine collector of books, plaster casts and paintings by the foremost artists of his time, including Titian, Correggio and Parmigianino. Leoni's life reads like a picaresque novel, very much in the spirit of the autobiography of his arch-rival, Benvenuto Cellini. The latter, describing an attempt to murder him when he was in jail in Rome, indignantly wrote: 'Messer Durante [da Brescia] entrusted a diamond of trifling value to one of the guards; and it is said that a certain Lione, a goldsmith of Arezzo, my great enemy, was commissioned to pound it', so that it could be mixed with Cellini's food, apparently in order to cause a slow death, which fortunately did not happen.

The adventurous lives of these artists inflamed the imagination of the Romantics, and by the end of the nineteenth century the French art historian Eugène Plon had already published two massive volumes on Cellini (1883) and the Leoni family (1887) respectively. However, what was then interpreted as artistic bohemian behaviour is now seen in its more appropriate historical context: violence was not only a brutal means to attain certain goals; it was also a way to demonstrate power and noble origins. Artists such as Cellini, Leone Leoni, Caravaggio and Salvator Rosa, to name but a few, carried sword and dagger because it was a way to claim a higher social status. Indeed, Di Dio's book does not really deal with Leoni's works of art, which are neither analysed stylistically nor iconographically, but is instead a study of the social status of the artist at the end of the Renaissance, as the title of her volume reveals. The author has already published important inventories of Leoni's collection, which was housed in the octagonal room of his elegant palace in the centre of Milan, and the entire book is constructed around the figure of an artist who was constantly striving to reach a higher social status through an astutely organised network of illustrious friends (Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle *in primis*, Pietro Aretino, Anton Francesco Doni, Celio Malespini, Michelangelo, Titian, Vasari) and very distinguished patrons such as Ferrante Gonzaga, the Emperor Charles V and Philip II of Spain. Leoni was a man who achieved great success thanks to his social competence, intelligence, education, erudition (he owned several copies of Andrea Alciati's *Emblemata*), artistic skill and

an enviable capacity for seizing the propitious moment.

On a critical note, all too often the book reads like a dissertation, and its frequent irksome redundancies and repetitions could have been eliminated by rigorous editing. Furthermore, the author never really addresses the artist's style. In the preface we are told that 'Leoni's style came to be paradigmatic of the Habsburg' (p.xiii), but nowhere in the book is his style critically analysed and described. Moreover, we read in the last chapter that 'Charles V and Philip II brought artists from Italy to Spain to produce paintings, sculptures, and architecture in the Italian style' (p.167). One can understand what Di Dio means, but were the styles of, say, Pellegrino Tibaldi, Federico Zuccaro and the Leonis the same thing? It is genuinely open to doubt whether any such thing as an 'Italian style' actually existed in the sixteenth century. And this observation helps us to see the gap between Di Dio's book and other publications which have dealt with similar topics in recent times: for example, Michael Cole's monograph on Benvenuto Cellini (*Cellini and the Principles of Sculpture*, Cambridge 2002). Whereas Cole reframed well-known facts in the light of Renaissance and contemporary theoretical discourse, thus giving us a completely new picture of Cellini's art and efforts, Di Dio's volume is very strong on describing facts but is lacking in intellectual sophistication. For instance, she could have done much more with Leoni's extraordinary letter on the Paragone, which is instead relegated to a footnote in the first chapter.

Notwithstanding these critical observations, Di Dio's book deserves praise as a reliable and well-rounded introduction to the subject. Her pages on Leoni's relationship to Stoicism are masterly, and her volume will remain essential reading for all those interested in the relationship between artists and patrons, collecting and display and word and image in the early modern period.