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Dosso Dossi. La pittura a Ferrara negli anni del ducato di Alfonso I. By Alessandro Ballarin. Regesti e apparati di catalogo, edited by Alessandra Pattanaro and Vittoria Romani. 2 vols. 533 pp. incl 204 col. pls. + 1059 b. & w. ills. (Bertoncello Artigrafiche, Cittadella Padua, 1994–95), L.It. 850.000.

The two massive volumes under review are only a fragment of a much more ambitious plan, that is a history of renaissance painting in Northern Italy between 1480 and 1540. The first contribution to this monumental project gathers the texts of two lectures delivered by Alessandro Ballarin in Cremona in 1990 ('Attorno a Giorgione l'anno 1500: Boccaccio Boccaccino') and in Bologna in 1987 ('Osservazioni sul percorso del Dosso') as well as his catalogue entries on Dosso Dossi written for the exhibition catalogue *Le siècle de Titien*, published in Paris in 1993. This brief description could convey the misleading impression that the book lacks homogeneity: in fact, the three texts form a coherent whole because Ballarin's intention is not only to reconstruct a plausible chronology of Dosso's controversial career, but also to sketch a history of Ferrarese painting in the age of Alfonso I d'Este In other words, this is not a monograph on Dosso Dossi *tout court* because the author implicitly reminds us that artists never work in isolation. In this sense Ballarin is one of Roberto Longhi's most faithful and gifted followers. Longhi wrote in the first issue of *Paragone*: *'L'opera d'arte, dal vaso dell'artigiano greco alla Volta Sistina, è sempre un capolavoro squisitamente "relativo". L'opera non sta mai da sola, è sempre un rapporto. Per cominciare: almeno un rapporto con un'altra opera d'arte.'*[1] Ballarin has studied Longhi's '*manifesto*' in earnest and his scholarly activity has been constantly inspired by Longhi's aphorisms. If I interpret Ballarin's method correctly, he is not particularly interested in the traditional art historical monograph: his penchant for chronological minutiae does not principally lead to the compilation of comprehensive *catalogues raisonnés* but is above all a way of reconstructing an historical scenario through a series of detailed *visual* relationships. It is therefore impossible to understand Boccaccino without comparing his paintings with the works of Leonardo, Bramantino, Boltraffio, Giorgione and Giovanni Agostino da Lodi (the *paragone* between colour plates XXI and XXII is one of the best points of the book). The different phases of Dosso's career are similarly clarified by analysing the painter's visual dialogue with Giorgione, Titian, Raphael, Altdorfer, Michelangelo and Giulio Romano. The principal goal of Ballarin's research is not therefore to compile a philologically accurate catalogue of Boccaccino and Dosso. The core of his enterprise is instead the reconstruction of a complex web of stylistic which is to say historical relationships.

It should be noted that the reconstruction of this context is principally but not exclusively based on visual material. The images interact with the archival data of the *regesto* edited by Alessandra Pattanaro: the two series support each other, but at the same time they serve to check the results reached by each series independently. Once again one cannot help thinking of Longhi's model, recalling, for example, a passage from the *Officina Ferrarese* (1934), a book which has deeply influenced the author's project: '*Chi rammenti, infine, che la guerra fra Venezia e Ferrara scoppiò duramente già nel 1509 e rese poco praticabili le comunicazioni fino al '13, concluderà plausibilmente che il viaggio veneziano del Garofalo dovette avvenire verso il 1505–'08, quando l'arte di Giorgione era precisamente al vertice.*'[2] Matters of style cannot be separated from the archival and historical data, but the latter be they contracts, sources about the patrons or historical events are investigated only insofar as they help explain the questions raised by an art historical pursuit.[3]

The primacy of the image is central to Ballarin's method, so much so that the second volume of the book, which includes the black-and-white illustrations, was published as an independent contribution in 1994. This mute text is perhaps the most exciting aspect of the entire publication: only those who have the book in their hands can fully appreciate this point. It is only necessary to glance at figures 4 and 5 (Giorgione's *Apollo* in Vienna and Boccaccino's *Shepherd*, a detail of his *Holy family* in Modena) or at figures 25 and 26 (Boltraffio's *Portrait of a young man* in Washington and Boccaccino's *Soldier*, a detail of his *Way to Calvary* in London) to admire the intelligence of the author's associations as well as the complexity of his montage, because these images narrate many different stories. It would be pointless to list the numerous rewarding examples,

but it should not be forgotten that some of these plates, such as those dedicated to Julius II (figs.367–69), also tell historical tales.

The first volume, which was published a year later in 1995, reproduces in colour many paintings already illustrated in monochrome in the second volume. This is an expensive but useful repetition because Ballarin seizes the opportunity to suggest different but equally interesting montages. It is however legitimate to point out that in his essays the author seems to have problems in translating into words the entire gamut of his visual intuitions: it is possible to adopt Longhi's method and to correct or improve his conclusions, but his unrivalled ekphrastic talent cannot be easily matched. Some passages in Ballarin's prose are unforgettable and his verbal ability to render the different nuances of the colours used by Giorgione's followers is indeed outstanding, but his sentences are often burdened with the weight of the meticulous demonstrations which are necessary to support the chronology. The texts of the lectures should have been rewritten and restructured. A lecturer can move his slides forward and backward; he can point to important details and show many images in a matter of seconds: Ballarin himself has used four projectors for one of his almost legendary happenings. A book, however, is a different tool: only specialists can follow a text of one-hundred pages which is illustrated with more than 1,250 photographs and has no references to the plates. It is irritating to have to jump from volume one to volume two, from the colour plates to the black-and-white illustrations in order to find the visual material to which the text refers. This history is certainly not planned as a didactic instrument.

As far as the author's method is concerned three main points deserve discussion: (1) the assumption that a major artist's invention (what Kubler calls a prime object) is immediately assimilated and replicated by his colleagues; (2) the creation of rigid chains of associations that can easily break down when one element is altered or removed; (3) the assumption that an artist's production can be logically organised in a strictly chronological sequence *ad annum*. I would like to make clear that I do not intend to contest Ballarin's usually convincing arguments, conclusions and datings; only that some of his methodological assumptions need to be tested.

One of Ballarin's strongest qualities is his capacity to let the images speak for themselves as they are compared on the screens of the lecture-room. It is obvious that Dosso's Da Varano altar-piece in Ferrara (vol.II, fig.294) was inspired by Raphael's *St Cecilia* altar-piece (vol.II, fig.293), which, according to Ballarin, reached Bologna in 1514. Does this prove that Dosso's painting was also painted in 1514? Is it reasonable to assume that the young Dosso was so quick to forget his beginnings in Titian and Giorgione and to embrace such a revolutionary scheme? Is it not too much of a coincidence that his first known altar-piece should have been commissioned exactly when Raphael's work arrived in Bologna? Would it not be more plausible to date Dosso's painting one or two years later, as Volpe suggested? Of course, Ballarin's argument is much more sophisticated and does not confine itself to comparing the two paintings; his analysis is instead based on a multiple series of comparisons which involve other artists. Yet it is my impression that in Ballarin's view what Kubler calls 'replicas' usually react almost immediately to the prime object.

The chronological chain is also a risky strategy. In this book the works of many painters, not only those of Dosso and Boccaccino, but also those of Giovanni Bellini tend to be dated early (Bellini's *Madonna del Prato* in London is dated to the last decade of the fifteenth century in the lecture on Boccaccino and to c.1495–1500 in the caption of the illustration, while the Giovanelli *Sacra conversazione* in Venice is dated to the last years of the fifteenth century). These are necessary steps to support his chronology of Giorgione's works developed in the late 1970s and confirmed in these lectures: the *Judith* is dated c.1498, the *Allendale Nativity* is dated c.1499, the *Castelfranco altar-piece* is dated c.1500, and so on. A method based on the close interaction of mutual influences may be coherent in itself, but it must be revised in its entirety if one piece is moved to another square of the board. During the recent symposium on *Dosso Dossi and His Age* at the Getty Center (May 1995) Salvatore Settis convincingly argued that the object at the base of the throne of the Castelfranco altar-piece is a porphyry sarcophagus: this detail would confirm the probable funerary connotations of the altar-piece and give credibility to the traditional dating of this work since Matteo Costanzo, the son of Giorgione's patron, died in 1504. If Settis's interpretation is correct, his observation has important consequences for Giorgione's chronology and its corollaries.

The third point concerns the idea that we can put in a clear chronological sequence the production of an artist without taking into account the function of his works, the taste of the patrons who commissioned them or the conventions of the geographical areas or typologies concerned. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that an artist can work on the same painting, above all an altar-piece, for many years. This point is well illustrated by Ballarin's discussion of three major works by Dosso: the altar-pieces for Codigoro (c.1517, vol.II, fig.420), for S. Agostino in Modena (c.1519, vol.II, fig.515) and for the cathedral in Modena (1522, vol.II, fig.620). Before Ballarin's brilliant analysis these three paintings were discussed as a coherent group belonging to the same period around 1522, the documented date of the altar-piece for the cathedral in Modena. It is a great merit of the author to have demonstrated that these paintings show three very different facets of Dosso's art: the altar-piece for Codigoro is a reflection of Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura and *Madonna di Foligno*, the altar-piece for S. Agostino is an answer to Raphael's late works, and the third panel has a Michelangelesque flavour. A recently discovered document has, however, revealed that the altar-piece for the Cathedral in Modena was commissioned on 5th January 1518. Of course, this does not mean that Dosso began to work on the panel immediately after signing the contract. In this case Ballarin's stylistic analysis is so impeccable that the documented enterprise 1518–22 must be interpreted more as 1521–22. This example however should put us on our guard. An artist could remain engaged on an important commission for many years, and the clear chronological arrangement of Dosso's altar-pieces suggested by Ballarin is more the exception than the rule. Much more common is the situation in which stylistic 'influences' seem blurred, as the controversy over Giorgione proves. Indeed, it seems that Ballarin's method works well only for those artists who are highly receptive and at the same time exceptionally inventive, and that this approach fails to achieve the same degree of historical accuracy when it deals with prime objects.

It is obvious that these observations do not put into question the important results of the author's research. The memorable 'double pages' of the second volume are too numerous even to be listed, but one should at least mention that the book also contains new attributions to Aspertini, Boccaccino, Raphael, Ortolano, Dosso and Battista Dossi. Moreover, Ballarin reminds us of the important presence of Sodoma in Ferrara and of the arrival in that city of one of Raphael's cartoons for the Stanza dell'Incendio, probably the cartoon for the *Fire in the Borgo*. Equally important are his observations on the studiolo of Alfonso d'Este (it contained six and not five paintings) as well as his hypothesis concerning the provenance of the so-called *Bacchanal* in Castel S. Angelo, which was perhaps painted for Francesco Gonzaga's Palazzo di S. Sebastiano in Mantua.

For those willing to persevere and to come to terms with the unstructured format in which all these important findings and proposals are presented in these lavishly illustrated volumes (and one should not forget the extensive catalogue entries on many Ferrarese artists of the high renaissance compiled by Vittoria Romani who has collected much new information on the provenances of the paintings, such as Dosso's *Fortuna* for Isabella d'Este now in the Getty Museum in Malibu), this work will offer a rewarding amount of new knowledge. But even those who confine themselves to looking at the pictures will immediately realise that the consistent very high quality of the colour and above all black-and-white plates represents a major contribution of this punctilious author to our understanding of renaissance painting in North Italy.

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[1] R. LONGHI: 'Proposte per una critica d'arte', *Paragone*, I [1950], p.16.

[2] R. LONGHI: *Officina Ferrarese 1934 seguita dagli Ampliamenti 1940 e dai Nuovi Ampliamenti 1940–55*, Florence [1956] (Edizione delle opere complete, V, Florence [1968], p.78).

[3] On Longhi's historical method see C. GINZBURG: 'Datazione assoluta e datazione relativa: sul metodo di Longhi', *Paragone*, CCCLXXXVI [1982], pp.5–17, reprinted in *Indagini su Piero*, revised edition, Turin [1994], pp.149–61.