

The Literature of Art

Raphael's 'Julius II'

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TEN years after the spectacular discovery that the *Portrait of Pope Julius II* in the National Gallery, London is an original by Raphael this picture has been made the focus of a monograph which has three chapters, an epilogue, references and an index.* In the preface the authors (an art historian and a historian), conscious that 'the range of scholarly specialization has become too small' (p.xvii), declare three aims of their investigation: i) an analysis of Raphael's *Julius II*, ii) a case study in the content and context of High Renaissance portraiture, and iii) an essay in cultural history.

The findings of chapter 1 ('Raphael's *Julius* and Renaissance Individualism') are that 'Raphael's *Julius* was conditioned by a Renaissance stock of motifs and forms, ideas about a creative process in art, modes of perception, and circumstances of what it meant to be a painter and a pope' (p.41). Two conventions of papal portraiture, an antique prototype of the 'enthroned and angled central figure' and the tradition of secular portrait painting (starting from the kings of fourteenth-century France via Florence and Leonardo up to Raphael's early portraits) are identified as factors influencing the London portrait. From these influences the authors conclude that Raphael produced 'a creative synthesis' (p.12), a quality which is then discussed in the light of the famous contemporary literary controversy on imitation between Gianfrancesco Pico and Pietro Bembo. Information is given about the Renaissance understanding of a person's physiognomy as indicative of character, about the veneration of a pope as office holder, and about the social status of Raphael.

Chapter 2 ('Roles of a Renaissance Pope') comes to the following conclusions: 'A sense of trial but of deep-seated faith in blessings soon to come would very nearly describe the characterization of Pope Julius by Raphael' and 'What we can suggest, and see in the papal roles reflected in Raphael's portrait, is the pressure of historical circumstances and aspirations' (p.73). Starting from an analysis of certain motifs in the London panel (the unusual temporary beard of Julius II, the white cloth in his right hand, the rings, and the heraldic acorns of the della Rovere coat of arms surmounting the back of the chair) the authors give a panoramic view of Julian culture showing the variety of panegyric and propagandist thinking

* *A Renaissance Likeness. Art and Culture in Raphael's Julius II*. By Loren Partridge and Randolph Starn, xix + 159 pp. + 1 colour-plate + 40 b.&w. + 5 text figs. (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1980). £7.95.

during his pontificate, which the authors also see reflected in the Vatican decorations: Christian allegorising of antiquity, plans for a crusade against the Turks, apocalypse and millenarianism; Julius II as secular prince, antique emperor, and Christian priest; as Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Trajan, and Constantine the Great; as Expulsor of Tyrants, and Author of Peace; as New Adam, Aaron, high priest, and Holy Bridegroom of the Church. It is this cultural climate of a 'synthesizing kind of spirituality' (p.67) which makes the authors believe in a similar 'multi-levelled conception' (p.67) of the pope's portrait when analysing certain motifs in it.

Chapter 3 ('The Setting and Functions of a Renaissance Portrait') is an attempt to reconstruct the original context of the London panel. The argument is based on evidence dating from September 1513, which tells us that the portrait was given to S. Maria del Popolo in Rome by Julius II and exposed on its altar for eight days in September 1513 attracting a multitude of spectators. The close relationship between S. Maria del Popolo and Julius II, who was both worshipper of the Virgin and patron of the church's construction and decoration, is discussed in detail as well as the political ceremonies that took place in this building. In the context of its choir, built and decorated under the patronage of Julius II, the function of the London panel is described as that of a portrait of patron and donor. The authors also establish a link between the miraculous icon of the Virgin of the Popolo and the portrait of Julius as the Virgin's donor and devotee, and moreover favour an old speculation of Raphael scholars that the London panel may have been composed in order to form a pair with Raphael's *Madonna del Velo* (Chantilly, Musée Condé), thus both flanking the high altar of S. Maria del Popolo. 'It is the functional logic of an encounter of patron and protectress, vicar and vessel of divinity, which supplies a missing motive' (p.103).

In the epilogue ('The Julian Image and High Renaissance Culture in Rome') 'synthesis and culmination' are emphasised as the main characteristics of Julian and of the London portrait. As already in chapter 2 the authors once again accept as historical reality the idea of a 'fullness of time' as shaped by contemporaries of the Julian pontificate and regard this as confirmation of the Vasarian paradigm of a High Renaissance culmination. With some more general remarks on the basic structures of culture the book comes to an end.

The authors have no new source material or findings for Raphael's *Julius II* to offer; instead they attempt to give an interpretation of this portrait against its cultural background. With just slight exaggeration one may say that the London panel serves only as a pretext for outlining the cultural panorama of the pontificate of Julius II. This is no doubt a legitimate approach that has its merits. Problems of method arise, however, when more than once the authors emphasise that the variety of Julian culture is also present in Raphael's portrait: for example p.6 'contemporary testimony (concerning the appearance and character of Julius II) and our first impressions converge'; p.34 Raphael's *Julius* is an 'image . . . of charismatic papal leadership'; p.48 Julius II was 'regal in life, and in Raphael's portrait'; p.54 'Emperor in the imagination and in life, Julius was imperial too, as we could only expect him to be, on the London panel'; p.59 'Prince, king and emperor – Julius was all these in the context of his culture, and his portrait'; p.76 (with regard to the prayers said by Julius II in S. Maria del Popolo) 'prayers in which downcast passion and expectant faith must have been mixed – as they seem to be in the closely contemporary London portrait'; and p.81 (at the oration of Giles of Viterbo given in S. Maria del Popolo in the presence of the pope on 25th November 1512) 'Light contrasted with the dark, despair close to deliverance, authoritative traditions adapted creatively to the present, a pope made out to be the special object and the summation of divine providence once and for all time – the words of Giles and brush of

Raphael worked strikingly similar effects.'

Again and again the question comes to mind to what extent the portrait can provide visual evidence for these statements, and the suspicion prevails that we are confronted with the interpreters' *projections into* the portrait rather than with *deductions from* it. To justify this suspicion we must examine some of the aspects of the London panel which the authors take as evidence for their interpretation. Doubts arise, for example, whether the various traditions of portraiture before Raphael, which classifying modern scholarship has discerned, can be regarded as effective factors of influence upon the London portrait, which then confirm the sixteenth-century remarks on Raphael's synthesising creativity. It is difficult to see why the ubiquitous motif of the obliquely seated figure should derive from representations of Roman emperors as well as of kings of France. Konrad Oberhuber (*THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE*, 1971, p.129) has already pointed out that this very motif is also common in representations of the pope in manuscripts of the *Decretum Gratiani*. Next the authors declare that this formula is iconographically significant and has a fixed meaning (p.49, 55): 'with Raphael's imperial sources, then came the imperial allusions' – and thus we are led to the inevitable conclusions that Raphael's portrait shows the pope as 'a new emperor'. Hardly more convincing are the connections with the portrait of Julius's uncle Pope Sixtus IV by Justus of Ghent (formerly at Urbino), to which the authors ascribe a programmatic significance (p.11, 49ff.). The pretended links between the green tapestry behind Julius II and the cloth of honour in representations of French monarchs appear in quite a different light, if one remembers that tapestries interwoven with the papal coat of arms, as we see them on the London panel, were common wall decoration either *in natura* or in painted imitation in many rooms of the Vatican Palace. A reference given by John Shearman to the *anticamera* of the papal apartment in the Vatican Palace which had Julian hangings (*Proceedings of the British Academy* 57, 1971, pp.372f. – unfortunately disregarded by the authors) seems a hint in the right direction.

Another warning against learned overinterpretation of detail in the London picture is provided by the possibility that the acorns of the della Rovere coat of arms on the back of the *Sede camerale* may have been a reality of papal furniture (cf. the *Medici-palla* in Raphael's *Leo X with two cardinals*). If so one wonders to what extent the acorns in the London panel are susceptible to the manifold meanings given them in the elaborate contemporary exegesis on the della Rovere acorns and oak-tree.

The white cloth in the right hand of the pope is regarded as both a *mappa* indicating consular rank and a ritual cloth of contemporary marriage ceremonies, which distinguishes Julius as the Holy Bridegroom of the Church. It would need the corroboration of contemporary texts on this cloth to make this imaginative interpretation convincing.

Since Raphael's portrait of Julius II is so unpretentious and informal it provides only very few visual clues for the far-reaching interpretation which the authors favour above a clarification of some seemingly minor details which are, however, essential for any further interpretation.

Nowhere in the book does the reader find a clear exposition of the dilemma that it is the inconsistency of the evidence related to the London panel – sure to last until new source material is dug up from the archives – which prevents us from freeing many of our comments on this portrait of their hypothetical character. Up to the present there seems to be no clear answer to the interrelated questions of the date and purpose of the London panel. How sure is it, for example, that the London portrait can be dated within the period in which Julius II wore a beard in Rome (between 27th June 1511 and early March 1512)? After all it is only in September 1513 that we hear of the portrait's display on the altar of S. Maria del

Popolo, where it attracted the attention of a large crowd.¹ Does not this information compel us to assume that in those days the picture was to be seen in the church for the first time? If, indeed, the London panel was completed before March 1512 it was not necessarily painted for S. Maria del Popolo. Most of the arguments in chapter 3 may therefore have nothing to do with the pope's or Raphael's intentions. There is, however, the other possibility, which so far cannot be ruled out, that the London portrait was completed in 1513, perhaps after the death of Julius II (20th/21st February 1513). If this were so the representation of the *bearded* pope (who had appeared clean-shaven again since March 1512) would be of particular significance; perhaps indicating a memento of his political vow connected with the fight against France.

There are other questions worth asking, which may have some bearing on the problem of the portrait's origin and initial function. How many versions of the London portrait did exist? The authors refer only to one (bearded?) portrait which Julius himself gave to S. Marcello in Rome in December 1511. We are in no position to assume – as the authors confidently do – that this portrait was not by Raphael nor that it 'was probably one of many copies after Raphael' (p.101). On the other hand no mention is made of another version in the Uffizi, which until 1631 had belonged to the della Rovere duke and therefore for a long time was held in great esteem. After the picture's cleaning it came as a surprise that in both the London and the (inferior) Uffizi panel '*le distanze delle traverse si corrispondono al millimetro*' (Paolo Dal Poggetto, *Capolavori degli Uffizi restaurati nel 1975*. Firenze 1975, n.7), whatever this may mean.

Given the high ambitions put forward by the authors in the preface, critical remarks on some further details cannot be suppressed, since details are the fundamental elements of scholarly precision and crucial for the strength of an argument. It may seem pedantic to complain that no mention is made of the panel's size, and the reader must fall back on Cecil Gould (*Raphael's Portrait of Pope Julius II*. London 1970) in order to learn the reasons which after all justify the assumption that the London panel is likely to be identical with the portrait which a document of 1513 mentions as a gift of Julius II to S. Maria del Popolo. Instead of notes accompanying the text the authors give references arranged according to chapter and subject-matter. These include well over 300 bibliographical items which are in themselves a stimulating mine. But what at first glance seems to be an advantage for the readability of the book turns out to the disadvantage of anyone who in the future will want to use the book for his own research. In more than one case it is impossible to identify the quotations from contemporary source material (e.g. pp.5, 65, 67f.). Often the reader has the choice between eight or even more literary references, if he wants to know the author of a particular statement. Discussing the rings worn by Julius II the authors mention 'a book on protocol dating from 1516' (p.61). I guess that this is

the *Liber caeremonialis Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae* of Augustinus Patricius de Piccolominibus and Johannes Burchardus which was completed in 1488 and published by Christophorus Marcellus under the title *Rituum ecclesiasticarum sive sacrarum S.R.E. libri tres*, Venetiis 1516, but there is no way of finding confirmation for this in the book. One will have to check on each of the eleven items given on pp.143f. in order to get – one hopes – the precise reference.

All quotations from the sources are given in English only and mostly in an abbreviated form. This makes it impossible for the reader to tackle the problems himself. In these cases the lack of notes even tends to conceal a weakness of method. It is disquieting and almost misleading to put side by side two statements and apply them to the London panel as if both were made with reference to it (p.103). In fact they are taken from completely different contexts: one statement is Vasari's admiration of the Julian likeness in Raphael's portrait ('as if he were alive'), the other ('he was adored as if he were a saint') has nothing to do with the portrait of Julius II; it comes from a contemporary commenting on his death.

The paraphrase of a passage in Piero Valeriano's *Pro sacerdotum barbibus* (p.46) gives the wrong impression that Valeriano had *expressis verbis* made reference to Raphael's likeness of the bearded Julius II, although it was only the conjecture of Mark J. Zucker (*Art Bulletin* 59, 1977, p.532) which suggested a connection with Raphael.

Another instance of carelessness in applying source material and thus encouraging acceptance of the conclusions reached appears on pp.96 and 102f., where a note in the *Ricordo di alcuni più famosi monumenti d'arte in Roma, scritto negli anni 1544–1546* of the Anonymous Magliabecchianus is taken as evidence that the portrait of Julius II and Raphael's *Madonna del Velo* once formed a pair flanking the high altar of S. Maria del Popolo. It is worth while to recall the original wording of the document and to remember that it appears in the context of an inventory of *famosi monumenti d'arte in Roma* in order to assess its evidence: '*In detta chiesa [S. Maria del Popolo] vi sono 2 quadri, dipinti di mano di Raffaello da Urbino, che s'appichono per le solennita a certj pilastrj: Che in uno [i.e. quadro, not pilastro!] v'è una meza Madonna . . . , et nell'altro v'è la testa di papa Julio con la barba a sedere in una sedia di velluto . . .*' (Vincenzo Golzio, *Raffaello nei documenti . . .* Città del Vaticano 1936, p. 174).

Altogether the book is symptomatic of the present promising tendency to broaden the approaches of art history and to bring our discipline into contact with the field of cultural history. With their threefold target quoted above the authors provide a welcome stimulus to continue thinking about the methodological problems involved in this process. The future will tell, however, to what extent precision of historical method and a sense of pragmatic humility, in the face of the obvious limits of what can be visually demonstrated in a work of art, will remain the indispensable foundations of our discipline.²

¹ This document, always referred to but, almost never given *verbatim* in the Raphael literature, is worth quoting: '*Di Roma, di sier Vetor Lipomano, vidi letere, di 12 [Septembrio 1513] . . . Scrive come il papa Julio si fe retrar e lo dete in Santa Maria in Populo, qual lo someja molto natural, e fu posto su l'altar, e stara cussi 8 zorni; tutta Roma core a vederlo, par uno jubileo, tanta zente vi va.*' (*I Diarii di Marino Sanuto*. Vol. xvii, Venezia [1886], 60).

² I am very grateful to John Shearman, who kindly improved the English of my manuscript.