

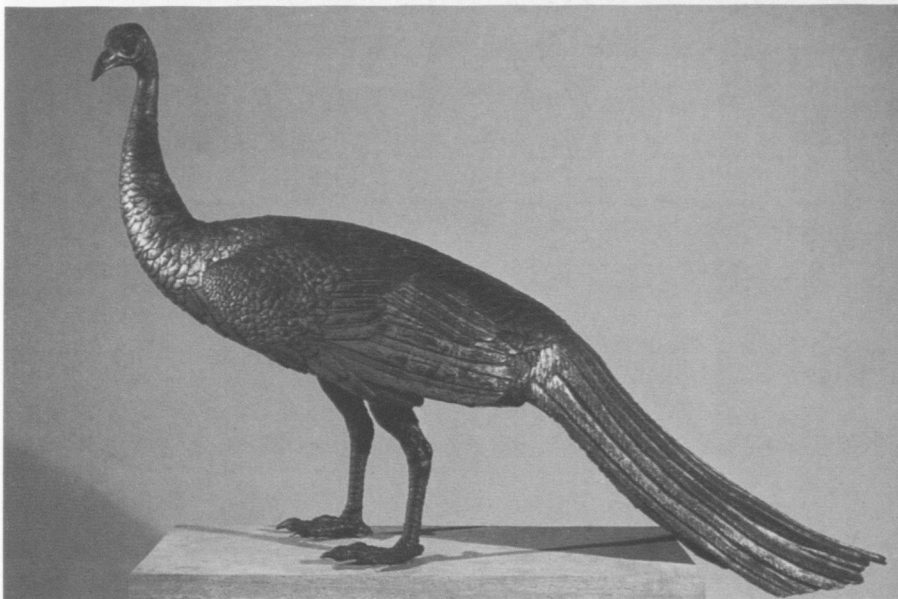
## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

# Art and culture in Papal Rome

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The Kunst-und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn recently presented an amazing and rare exhibition of Italian high renaissance art. Major works by Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Giulio Romano, Michelangelo, Sebastiano del Piombo, Titian, Jacopo Sansovino, Valerio Belli, Cellini and many others attracted a large number of visitors who seized the opportunity to see one of the most ambitious exhibitions of recent times. Its principal goal was nothing less than that of recreating the historical context and the learned atmosphere which informed the outstanding patronage of the high renaissance Popes from Julius II (1503-13) to Clement VII (1523-34). It is intended that it should be the first exhibition in a series of three designed to document the history of the papal collections to the present day.

Both the very informative catalogue, which has been written by the most prominent scholars in the field, and the exhibition were organised in four sections. Part I (*The Popes and their age*) dealt with the life and political events of the first four Popes of the sixteenth century (Julius II, Leo X, Hadrian VI and Clement VII) and of such contemporaries as the Emperor Maximilian and Martin Luther. While this first section was a straightforward historical account in the most traditional sense of the word (biography, patronage and political history including the tension between the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformation movement), Part II (*Rome and the papal court*) was a stimulating survey of some aspects of renaissance life which interacted with the production of art: Arnold Esch drew with his proverbial finesse, which is based on his unrivalled knowledge of renaissance Rome, a most lively portrait of the city's daily life outside the court; Bernhard Schimmelpfennig offered a digest of his studies on the ceremonial of the papal court; and Adalbert Roth wrote an essay on liturgical music in the service of the *maiestas papalis*. Part III (*Art and culture in the Vatican*) was the art historical section: if many of the objects were familiar, this was because the organisers of the exhibition were successful in obtaining some outstanding loans from all over Europe. A catalogue of this kind is perhaps not the place where one expects to find new information, but the articles by Pier Nicola Pagliara on the Vatican Palace, by Paolo Liverani on the Cortile del Belvedere



1 Peacock, South German, 117-38 AD. Bronze, remains of gilding, ht 112 cm. Braccio Nuovo, Vatican Museums, Rome

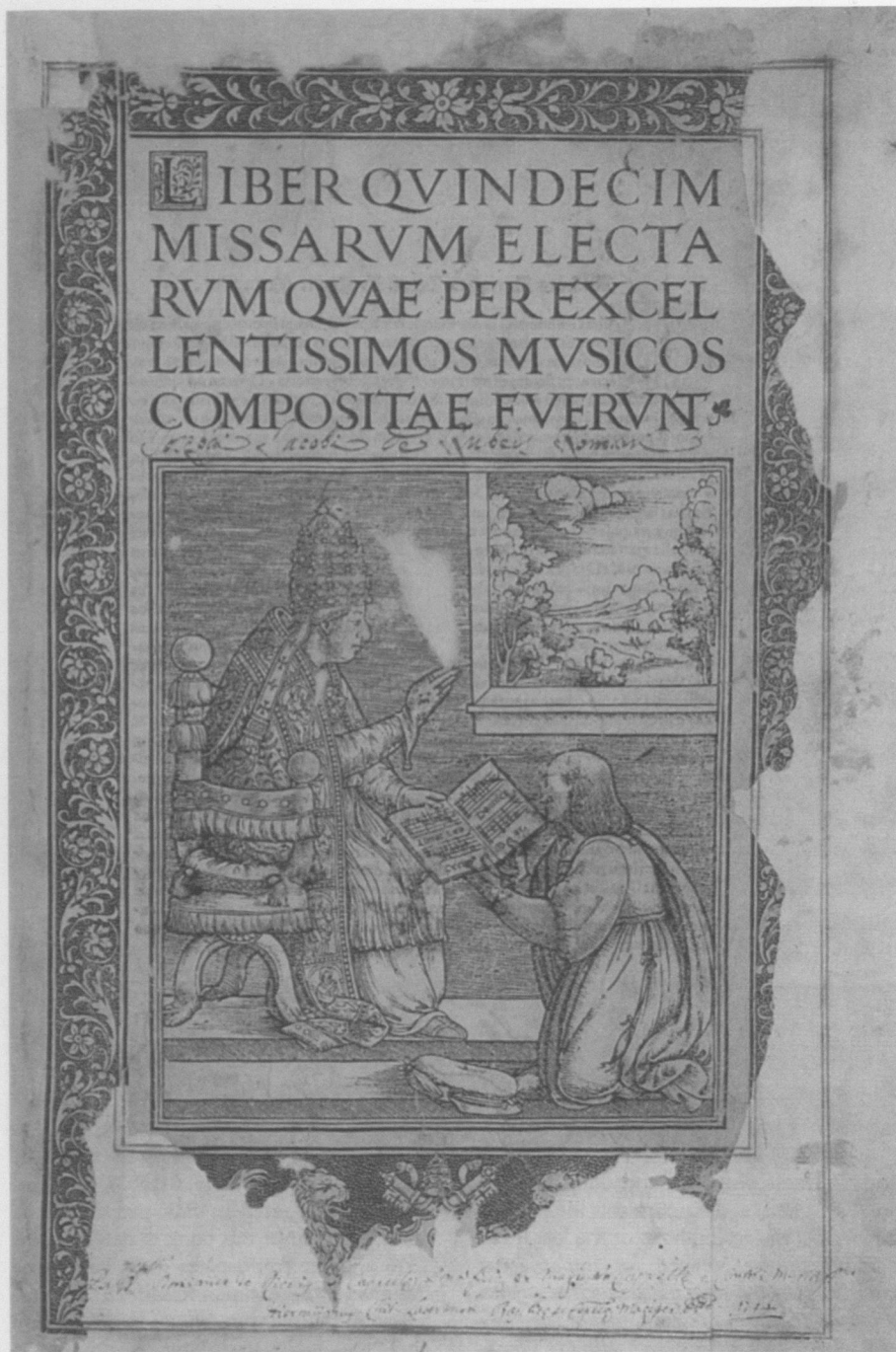
and the collection as well as the restoration of antique statues, by Arnold Nesselrath on the fresco cycles by Michelangelo, Raphael and his assistants, by Horst Bredekamp on the papal tombs and by Tristan Weddigen on the Sistine Chapel tapestries are much more than mere summons of previous research and offer new insights. Particularly valuable are Nesselrath's discussion of the consequences of the restorations of the last three decades in the Vatican for our present knowledge of the high renaissance as well as his attribution to Giorgio Vasari of the copy of Raphael's portrait of *Leo X with two Cardinals* in Holkham Hall (no. 22): this must be the copy commissioned by Ottaviano de' Medici in 1537.

The three hundred and eight-nine items of the catalogue are not all celebrated pieces however. One is especially grateful for the presentation of many little-known manuscripts and printed books, among which there are even discoveries to be made. For example, in his entry on Andrea Antico's *Liber Quindecim missarum electarum quae per excellentissimos musicos compositae fuerunt* (no. 205), a choir-book dedicated to Leo X, Adalbert Roth points out the outstanding quality of the woodcut-frontispiece (Fig. 2). Indeed the present writer thinks that it should be attributed to Amico Aspertini: if this is correct, as Antico's portrait in profile,

the North-Italian hat in the foreground, the Dossesque landscape on the right and the Aspertinesque figures on the Pope's cope seem to suggest, then Marzia Faietti's hypothesis that Amico Aspertini visited Rome between the Spring of 1515 and the Spring of 1518, (in addition to the generally accepted stay around 1500-1503), when he is not documented in Bologna, would be confirmed,<sup>1</sup> since the book is dated 9 May 1516 and the frontispiece must have been designed by Aspertini in Rome.

For all the many merits of the exhibition and its catalogue, two points remain open to debate: the notion of interdisciplinary research and the use of *simulacra*.

As far as the first point is concerned, one feels that history and art history were kept on two separate levels. The first part of the exhibition was strictly documentary and masterpieces such as Raphael's portrait drawing of Julius II from Chatsworth were often reduced to mere illustrations. This sheet was exhibited, as was the case with many other items, not to discuss a problem of attribution or some other art historical issue, but as a mere illustration of the Pope's features. This problem was particularly acute in the section dedicated to portraits of cardinals and humanists, a gallery of 'mugshots' of decidedly uneven quality. This historical perspective was so extreme that sometimes



2 Frontispiece to *Liber Quindecim missarum*... here attributed to Amico Aspertini (1474/75-1552), 1516. Woodcut, 39.5 x 26.5 cm. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Rome

it verged on fetishism. The wonderful 2nd century AD peacock (Fig. 1), from the fountain once in the atrium of Old St Peter's (no. 123) had already been seen in Germany as recently as 1993 at the impeccable exhibition devoted to Bernward von Hildesheim: was it really necessary to expose this very rare work of art to the risks which travel always entails simply to show the signs left by the bullets of the Spanish soldiers during the Sack of Rome? This was not an isolated example either, but it is more important to stress that an exhibition of this kind should be transdisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary. Works of art are historical documents,

and they should not be presented to the public as mere illustrations of historical events.

The second point concerns the possible dangers posed by the *simulacra*. The computer animation which reconstructed the Renaissance ceremonial way through the Vatican Palace gave a new meaning to Bramante's architecture and Raphael's frescoes: it was one of the most innovative aspects of the Bonn exhibiting. Alas, the public was more gripped by this display than by Leonardo's *St Jerome* nearby. Of course one cannot exactly blame the organisers because their creative use of new technologies

attracted more attention than a painting by Leonardo, but there is something deeply wrong if the public prefer to sit comfortably in front of the splendid projections of Michelangelo's restored Sistine Chapel frescoes rather than stand in front of Raphael's moving double portrait of Navagero and Beazzano on the opposite wall. This canvas is not always visible at its best in the Doria Pamphilj: to confront the two humanists face to face – as Pietro Bembo originally did – was a rare privilege, but one by no means every visitor took advantage of.

A final point, which is in part linked with the last observation, should be made. What was the goal of this exhibition? To encourage wider enthusiasm for the achievements of the high renaissance in Rome does not require any excuse. Nor does the Vatican's desire to advertise the stunning results obtained by its laboratories and its internationally renowned *équipe* of researchers. However, it is not too much to ask for more critical distance. The title on the white cover of the catalogue is printed in gold letters as a metaphor for the golden age of the high renaissance, but this is an oversimplification. In her masterly introduction to the reprint of Craig Hugh Smyth's classic *Mannerism and Maniera*, Elizabeth Cropper wrote:

Such notions of Classicism, in the tradition of Winckelmann, Burckhardt and Wölfflin, cannot be taken for granted any more...it is not Mannerism that is under scrutiny but the very idea of the Renaissance itself.<sup>2</sup>

It is perhaps a telling sign that the golden letters of my copy of the catalogue are already fading. One should not be overcritical, however. The frontispiece of the *Quesiti et inventioni diverse* by the celebrated Brescian mathematician Niccolò Tartaglia is decorated with his portrait leaning on a parapet. The inscription on the parapet reads: 'Le inventioni sono difficili, ma lo aggiorgervi è facile.' (Inventions are difficult, but adding to them is easy). The same might be said of this show. It was a real delight for the connoisseur and it did succeed in giving a complex and articulated picture of the culture of the time. Above all, it made it clear that one cannot understand Michelangelo and Raphael's achievements if one does not embed them in the larger political, cultural, liturgical, ceremonial and religious issues of their age.

<sup>1</sup> Marzia Faietti and Daniela Scaglietti Kelescian, *Amico Aspertini*, Modena, 1995, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Cropper, 'Introduction', in Craig Hugh Smyth, *Mannerism and Maniera*, Vienna, 1992, pp. 19-20.

*The exhibition 'Hoch Renaissance im Vatikan 1503-1534. Kunst und Kultur der Päpste 1', was at the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, from 11 December 1998 to 11 April 1999. The catalogue was published by the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle, Price 78DM*