

CLIFFORD M. BROWN and GUY DELMARCEL, with the collaboration of Anna Maria Lorenzoni, *Tapestries for the Courts of Federico II, Ercole, and Ferrante Gonzaga, 1522–63*. College Art Association Monograph on the Fine Arts LII. Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1996, 232 pp., 132 illus., 10 in colour, notes, bibliography, index, ISBN 0-295-97513-x. \$50.00 US.

With this volume Clifford M. Brown enlarges upon the distinguished contribution he has already made to scholarship on the court of Mantua in the sixteenth century, and here as before he presents meticulous documentation on the collection, commissioning and use of works of art by the Gonzaga family. His collaborator, Guy Delmarcel, is one of the foremost authorities on sixteenth-century Flemish tapestry, and the present volume ranks with recent contributions by Nello Forti Grazzini and Sharon Fermor in revealing the art of tapestry to be a topic worthy of greater scholarly attention. The publication is important in another sense, in that it focuses attention upon the neglected patronage activity of two important personalities of the mid-*cinquecento*, the younger sons of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga: Cardinal Ercole, Regent of Mantua following the death of his brother Duke Federico in 1540 and subsequently Papal Legate to the Council of Trent; and Ferrante, Lord of Guastalla, Vice-Regent of Naples and Governor of Milan.

These Gonzaga princes, considerably less well known than their forebears or brother Federico II, manifest a number of surprising characteristics that would confound many generalizations about the mentality, taste or intellectual horizons of Renaissance patrons. Ercole Gonzaga combined a reformatory zeal, under the influence of Carafa and Contarini, with an interest in heterodox religious ideas, as is manifest from his library and from his collection of "ritratti de signori tedeschi et luterani." While active in bringing the Catholic Reformation to Mantua, he was a liberal in matters of religious art, and admired Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* ("The work is of such beauty," wrote his agent in 1541, "that your excellency can imagine that there is no lack of those who condemn it."). Ferrante Gonzaga was a soldier for the Emperor, who dispassionately engaged in several notorious military enterprises, such as the Sack of Rome and the assassination of Pier Luigi Farnese; he was accused of despising intellectual pursuits, yet apparently cultivated his own brand of what might be called "warrior humanism," of which one remarkable and perplexing visual record is examined in this book.

The lack of attention to these figures largely arises from a dearth of famous works of art associated with their patronage, despite their employment of Giulio Romano, Cellini, Titian, Tintoretto, Orlando de Lassus and Leone Leoni. Unlike their

Farnese rivals, these Gonzaga did not have a significant power-base in Rome, and their art collections are long dispersed. While Federico inherited several Gonzaga residences, Ercole and Ferrante lacked a permanent or stable ancestral seat. The authors of this study, by devoting attention to the acquisition of tapestries by all three Gonzaga brothers, manage to throw light on their concerns and priorities as patrons. Tapestries were prestigious objects identified with the feudal rulers of Northern Europe; they were appraised for the quality of their workmanship, far more labour-intensive and expensive than painting. They served the needs of patrons like Cardinal Ercole and the warrior Ferrante because, unlike their brother Federico, these princes maintained mobile courts and needed to produce at least the occasional effect of a courtly environment in battle encampments, conquered fortresses, during temporary residences in Rome or on Papal Legations. The authors show that the correspondence of Ercole with Cardinal Granvelle, who obliged him as an artistic advisor in Brussels in the 1560s, provides some insight into the standards of judgement and criteria for purchase of these luxurious works of art. Granvelle praises the Flemish for their production of decorative borders and landscapes, but both he and Ercole echo a typical Italian prejudice by finding them wanting in the making of human figures. While the Gonzaga clearly purchased readymade tapestries designed by Northern artists in the style of Bernard van Orley, they also followed the example of the Papacy and their Este relatives in having their own court artists produce designs – among them, Giulio Romano. This was facilitated by Federico's establishment in 1539 of a tapestry works in Mantua itself under Nicholas Karcher, who also served the Este and the Medici. The concern with Italian design was more than an aesthetic prejudice, because the tapestries commissioned by the Gonzaga were more than just an extravagant form of decoration. In the wake of Raphael's designs for the Sistine Chapel, a new era of figurative tapestry flourished at the Italian courts as an elaborate and monumental form of princely self-imaging, in which the compositional, gestural and spatial language of High Renaissance narrative painting is brought into dialogue with the two-dimensional patterning conventions of the textile medium; the Gonzaga had their own set of tapestries made from Raphael's Sistine cartoons (Ferrante and his mother Isabella notoriously salvaged pieces of the original series during the sack of Rome) and some of the series examined by Brown and Delmarcel can be seen as the response by Giulio and other designers (as well as by their patrons) to the pre-eminence of Raphael's *disegno*. This is not to say that the Gonzaga tapestries do not also pursue effects which might be identified as the specific province of the medium of tapestry itself and as a definitive test of the weaver's workmanship: I would suggest that the two series known as the *Puttini* stage an elaborate *paragone* between the surface effects of

the weaver and the perspective devices of the painter. Weaving is thematized in a marvellously complex tangle of oak branches, grapevines and athletic infants, which gives way below to a Peruzzian setting for a satyr-play: receding avenues of trees and occasional cityscapes viewed in the painter's perspective. The courtly audience would have appreciated such self-reflexive wit, along with the allusions to the work of an earlier Gonzaga court artist – the Bacchic prints of Andrea Mantegna. The *Puttini*, essentially a set of Children's Bacchanals, are imitations of an *ekphrasis* by Philostratus which was most famously given visual form by Titian (the *Realm of Venus* for Alfonso d'Este, now in the Prado), and hence can be seen to draw upon a tradition of *mythological* imagery which had come to be identified with the Este and Gonzaga families and in which Bacchic and erotic themes had become predominant. The authors correctly identify the presence of a humanist programme here, although more on the context and tradition of mythological imagery at the Este and Gonzaga courts would have been desirable.

The authors are aware of the extraordinary nature of the subject-matter of certain tapestries, such as Ferrante's *Fructus Belli* or *Life of Moses*, and here again it becomes apparent that such imagery will be meaningfully discussed in studies of a broader scope which transcend differences of medium, and for which the present work provides a first step. Recent studies of Renaissance triumphal imagery and of art and warfare completely ignore these images; the *Fructus Belli* is, on one hand, a product of "warrior humanism" at the European courts which attempted to make the study of letters indispensable to the practice of arms; on the other, it is a chilling series of images in which the familiar iconography of military triumph, of corrective and distributive justice, is presented alongside tableaux of refugees fleeing a burning city, mercenaries paid with plunder, provisions extorted from civilians, bound captives and slain soldiers. Another series, the *Life of Moses*, was amplified by two scenes to accentuate in a similar manner the violence and rapacity of military victory. What are we to understand when a

Renaissance warrior prince like Ferrante Gonzaga adopts such an unflinchingly frank and anti-panegyric mode of self-presentation? The authors see evidence of a late, humane disenchantment with the practice of arms on Ferrante's part, but this perhaps runs the risk of remaking Ferrante in our own image; they reproduce the Stoic, "Aurelian" profile of Leone Leoni's bronze statue of Ferrante in Guastalla, but not the full work which shows him brutally trampling upon an enemy. It remains to be determined whether the tone of such imagery is to be taken as Stoical, defiant, "pacifist" or ironic; we are reminded, however, that Ariosto's great military epic of sixteenth-century court society is heavily ironic in character (bitterly so in the case of the *Cinque canti*) and that the contemporary plays of Giraldi Cinzio associate the world of the prince with unrelenting violence; militarism and the pursuit of virtue were not easily reconciled.

This is a scrupulously and well-produced book which deserves the attention of a wider readership than might at present concern itself with tapestry. A minor complaint would be that the authors could have more actively solicited this audience: by, for instance, including a synthetic essay which might have dealt with the state of research on Renaissance tapestry, setting tapestry in relation to other forms of artistic production for princely households; details of monetary evaluations and expense are sometimes included, but it would have been interesting to know how these figures compare with those for expenditure on other artistic commodities. The really important information here is generally presented in the form of biographical tables, catalogue entries, transcriptions of documents – more sustained interpretative comment would have been helpful, as well as interesting. Yet on the other hand, it could be held to be a virtue of this book that it suggests many directions for future research.

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