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Periferie
Dinamiche economiche territoriali
e produzione artistica

a cura di Giuseppe Capriotti e Francesca Coltrinari

Recensioni

Cobianchi R. (2013), *Lo temperato uso dele cose. La committenza dell'Osservanza francescana nell'Italia del Rinascimento*, Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, («Medioevo francescano: Arte», 2), XXIII + 187 pp.

In the year 1457, the General Chapter of the Franciscan Observants in Milan approved a decree according to which every newly erected edifice should be supervised by a building committee. This decision was made because of the constant expansion of the Franciscan Reform branch and is an evident indication of a major dilemma: the wish to follow St. Francis' Rule of Poverty on the one hand, and to yield to the desire of private donors for splendour and abundance on the other. In this respect, the concept of a «temperato uso dele cose» (or «usus moderatus», set out in the *Constitutiones Bernardini* of 1440, p. 8), which the title of this publication refers to, represented a useful arrangement allowing the building committees a certain degree of freedom in their approach to private commissions. This «usus moderatus», here referring to the difficult compromise the Observants

had to find between obedience to the Rule and opportunism concerning important benefactors, is a leitmotif running all the way through this study. In fact, right from the beginning the author indicates that his book will not demonstrate a linear coherence in the art politics of the Reform Franciscans, but rather will show their exceptional pragmatism.

Roberto Cobianchi's study investigates the artistic patronage of the Franciscan Observants in the Quattrocento until the official division of the Order in 1517. The book is based on his doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Warwick in 2004, which earned the Paul Sabatier-Prize from the Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani, Assisi in 2006. The research focuses on the Observant settlements in the Province of Bologna, which approximately corresponds to present-day Emilia-Romagna but in the 15th century was divided into numerous minor territories. However, the author does not allow himself to become bogged down in analyzing the “periphery” but continually sets his results in the context of Observant churches all over Italy. Beginning with an overview of the

architectural features and the spatial liturgical arrangement of churches in the Italian Provinces, Cobianchi zooms in to scrutinize those of the Bolognese Province. He then broadens his view to take the pictorial decoration of Observant churches in Italy into account and finally elaborates on frescoes, altarpieces and certain painters active in the Province of Bologna.

In doing this, Cobianchi undoubtedly fills an academic void. So far, art-historical research has concentrated mainly on different aspects of mendicant architecture of the 13th and 14th centuries¹. As for the Quattrocento there have mainly been studies on specific topics such as iconographical strategies in the cult of Bernardino of Siena². Despite the growing interest in 15th century Franciscan Observance in recent times³, there has

been little comprehensive research (geographically and in terms of artistic genres) into Franciscan artistic patronage apart from monographic studies⁴.

Cobianchi's approach is neither chronological nor does it monographically trace the individual sites. Rather, he assembles different complexes of ideas that the topic offers. Methodologically, the study is based on an analysis of documentary record, mainly the legislation (*Ordinationes*) of the Bolognese Province, which is exceptionally well preserved for the period 1458 to 1525, and additional sources such as chronicles. The quantity of the material examined suggests further studies of other Provinces of the Order in Italy and beyond. Quite conscious of the problem of the scarcity of information available on pictorial decoration, the author chooses the approach of comparative iconographic analysis for this aspect of his study.

The central thread of the book already becomes evident in the first chapter with a discussion comparing the macro-

¹ For a current review of research on Franciscan (excluding Assisi) and Dominican architecture of the Due and Trecento in its context see Bruzelius C. (2012), *The architecture of the mendicant orders in the Middle Ages: an overview of recent literature*, «Perspective», 2, pp. 365-386.

² See, amongst others, Cobianchi R. (2009), *Fashioning the imagery of a Franciscan Observant preacher*, «I Tatti studies», 12, pp. 55-83; Israëls M. (2007/2008), *Absence and resemblance. Early images of Bernardino da Siena and the issue of portraiture*, «I Tatti studies», 11, pp. 77-114.

³ See, for example, Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani, a cura di (2013), *I frati osservanti e la società in Italia nel secolo XV*, Atti del XL convegno internazionale in occasione del 550° anniversario della fondazione del Monte di Pietà di Perugia, 1462 (Assisi-Perugia, 11-13 ottobre 2012), Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo (Atti dei convegni della Società Internazionale di Studi Francescani e del Centro Interuniversitario di Studi Francescani: Nuova serie, 23); Pellegrini L., Varanini G.M., a cura di (2012), *Fratres de familia: Gli insediamenti dell'Osservanza*

minoritica nella penisola italiana (sec. XIV-XV), Caselle di Sommacampagna, Verona: Cierre (Quaderni di storia religiosa, 18).

⁴ One of the pioneer studies is Nova A. (1997), *Konservative Theorie und innovative Praxis bei den Franziskaner-Observanten als Auftraggeber der bildenden Künste*, «Zeitsprünge», 1, pp. 7-21; see also Guidi R. L. (2010), *Dentro e attorno alla chiesa francescana del Quattrocento italiano*, «Archivum Franciscanum historicum», 103, n. 1/2, pp. 95-143. For an example of a monographic architectural study on an Observant church see Marksches A. (2001), *Gebaute Armut. San Salvatore e San Francesco al Monte in Florenz (1418-1504)*, Monaco: Deutscher Kunstverlag (Aachener Bibliothek, 2). A most profound exemplary account of an Observant high altarpiece is Israëls M., a cura di (2009), *Sassetta. The Borgo San Sepolcro altarpiece*, Firenze: Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (Villa I Tatti, 25), 2 voll.

situation of the Italian Observance with micro-patterns of specific phenomena and examples in the Bolognese Province. Cobianchi starts with a general historical introduction to the situation of the Franciscan Observance during the 15th century, focusing on the Order's legislation and its principal decisions on artistic production. He then, in a kind of close-up, continues with a brief presentation of the twenty-five Observant convents in the Province of Bologna (only fourteen of which have survived) based on the records of the Bolognese *Ordinationes* and following the overall dynamics of the settlements.

In the second chapter, the author introduces some early Observant churches from different Provinces, analyzing their architectural typology and the disposition of liturgical space inside them. For the mid-Quattrocento, he is able to conclude that, despite the relativization of the ideal of absolute poverty, churches were built following a common single-nave scheme with a rood screen and choir stalls placed behind it but in front of the high altar. In contrast to what has just been claimed to be the norm, we are then confronted with an exception. Newly constructed as a «chiesa reliquiario» (p. 42) for Saint Bernardino, the basilica of San Bernardino at L'Aquila includes a dome and therefore clearly breaks with the dictum of «usus moderatus». The chapels flanking the nave of the church of San Bernardino near Siena (known as the *Osservanza*) and the cupola added later are similarly uncommon elements in the Observant architectural typology and thus earned harsh criticism from the confreres. Although there had been minor protests against the sumptuous Aquilano edifice (not, as is stated, none at all), one can absolutely agree with Cobianchi's deduction that this church achieved an accepted

singular status as the mausoleum for the Franciscan Observants' first canonized friar. The exceptional phenomenon of other supplementary cupolas added later to Observant buildings (Pesaro, Venice, Urbino) is convincingly explained by the funerary function of these churches honouring distinguished donors.

Architecture and decoration in the Province of Bologna come into focus in the third part of the book. The architectural principles of the Province's early Observant churches can generally be summarized as a single-nave church with a vaulted choir chapel, a rood screen and choir stalls, although divergent tendencies persisted. Cobianchi's careful examination of his sources permits a profound contribution to the debate on the placement of the friars' stalls in their churches: they were almost always positioned in front of the high altar.

Due to the increasing demand for family chapels from the mid-15th century onwards, they began to be tolerated and were successively attached to churches. However, stylistic decisions about the decoration of these chapels seem to have been little influenced by the friars. The outside appearance of churches was often characterized by gabled façades and porticoes, the latter being used as burial sites.

Cobianchi identifies a group of late-Quattrocento churches (Busseto, Cortemaggiore, Cotignola), built on a more spacious scale with several aisles, frequently flanked by chapels and with articulated solutions for apses and vaulting. In fact, a document from the 1493 Chapter in Imola proves that cross vaults were considered standard in the whole Province.

One of the most important findings in this volume is the early presence of confessionals in the sphere of Observant

influence⁵. In most of the churches of the Bolognese Province, «confessoria» (p. 66) were part of the permanent furnishings. Distinct masonry confessional compartments with a grill facing the convent zone (surviving at Santa Croce at Villa Verucchio for instance) granted an effective separation of the sexes. Here, moreover, Cobianchi offers a stimulus for gender research.

Conflicts regarding the plan for the restructuring of San Nicolò at Carpi, which was to be altered into a centrally-planned dynastic mausoleum for Alberto Pio III, demonstrate the challenging relationship between demanding lay patrons and the Observants, who were bound by the Rule of Poverty while wanting neither to obstruct their patron in principle nor to give up their authority. The fourth chapter is dedicated to painters and painting in the Italian Observant Provinces. Internal decorations that are still largely intact can be found in the Observant churches in Montefalco and Verona. Both possess high altarpieces with Mariological motifs, which can be regarded as an expression of the Franciscan devotion to the Virgin.

A section on the richly decorated and privately financed library in Verona emphasises the problem of the impossibility of identifying the originator of the library frescoes even if the iconographic programme was doubtlessly developed by the Observants.

With a change in perspective towards the producers of works of art, the two painters Marco Zoppo and Carlo Crivelli are introduced, who on several occasions

worked for the Observance in the Marches. Crivelli's iconic representations of Observants who had either died in an odour of sanctity or recently been canonized served to promote cults of friars and were extremely widespread in the third quarter of the Quattrocento.

Starting from a discussion of Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Coronation of the Virgin* in Narni, Cobianchi elaborates on the predilection for this motif, which becomes almost an indicative element of the Umbrian Observance's churches. At the same time, he points to the iconographic control in the Umbrian Province, where in some cases reference to Ghirlandaio's painting was explicitly requested. However, he also indicates modifications which merge the specific iconographic formula invented by Ghirlandaio with the *Assumption of the Virgin*.

For the mystery of the Immaculate Conception, which became a controversial issue at the end of the Quattrocento, painters mostly opted for previously established scenes enriched with eloquent details or inscriptions. Only at the turn of the Cinquecento did the Observants promote more original iconographies, but they did not neglect paintings that would have been adequate for the Conventuals as well. On the other hand, there were also cases of "iconographic antagonism" between the two Franciscan branches with the aim of reciprocally surpassing each other. This can possibly be found in the obvious similarities of the altarpieces by Giovanni Bellini for the Conventuals at San Francesco in Pesaro and Marco Zoppo's altar painting for the Observants' church in the same town.

While mentioning the particular but well-studied case of the *tramezzi* painted with scenes of the passion of Christ in the Lombardy and Piedmont regions, Cobianchi stresses that at a certain

⁵ See also Cobianchi R. (2006), *The practice of confession and Franciscan Observant churches: new architectural arrangements in Early Renaissance Italy*, «Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte», 69, 3, pp. 289-304.

point the Observants gave initiative to completely new decoration typologies.

In the final chapter, the discussion returns to the Province of Bologna and deals with the pictorial decoration of church interiors there. Unfortunately, few frescoes have been preserved, particularly those on the, originally often painted, façades. At the end of the Quattrocento, pictorial series of the clipei of important members of the Order were widespread (examples survive in Cortemaggiore and Ravenna).

An interesting aside explains the Bolognese Observants' attitude to conservation matters. Detaching a painted lunette by Correggio at Parma (c. 1546) saved the painting from demolition and seems to have been motivated by esteem for the artist, who had recently died, and the mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna were protected during a vast reconstruction project (1514-1520), probably because of their status as time-honoured relics from an early Christian past.

Mariological subjects dominate the Bolognese Province's high altar paintings with a marked preference for the *Coronation of the Virgin*. Particular iconographic details (like a flying infant Jesus in Santissima Annunziata, Bologna) can be traced back to the influence of the Observants. Occasionally there are representations of Observants as donors (as can be reconstructed for the predella of the high altarpiece at San Paolo in Monte, Bologna), which testify to an immediate contribution by the friars to the commission and choice of the subject matter of works of art.

The high altar painting in San Nicolò at Carpi (*Lamentation over the Dead Christ with Francis and Bernardino* by Cima da Conegliano, 1495/97), which was most likely commissioned by Alberto III Pio, demonstrates once more the

interesting role of lay patrons. The subject of the painting fits well with Observant spirituality, while the tendency to enrich the *Lamentation* scene with non-biblical figures indicates the influence of the patron. Sculptural terracotta *Lamentation* ensembles, which were very popular in the Bolognese Province at the time, occasionally seem to have integrated portraits of their commissioners integrated (see, e.g., Guido Mazzoni's terracotta group at Santa Maria degli Angeli, Busseto, 1476-1477). In the case of the high altar panel at Santissima Annunziata in Parma, which was commissioned by Rolando Pallavicino of Roccabianca, the Observants seem to have affected the choice of the artist Francesco Zaganelli, who, together with his brother Bernardino, frequently worked for the Observance in the Bolognese Province. A cautious interpretation of his discoveries protects Cobianchi here from rash generalizations, which is also true for the other parts of the book. He therefore leaves open what cannot be unequivocally resolved, for instance whether the preference for the Zaganelli brothers, or even earlier for Andrea della Robbia, can be explained by a conscious decision of taste or rather by patterns of tradition.

Cobianchi's concluding remarks are kept relatively short; this depends on the fact that each chapter already closes with a succinct summary and is probably also conditioned by the comprehensive yet concise foreword (in English) by the dissertation's scientific supervisor, Julian Gardner, who provides many additional stimulating ideas and outlooks. About 170 figures in black and white adequately accompany the text even though in some cases further illustrations or coloured details would have been useful (e.g., the less well-known frescoes of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Covignano/Rimini). The

volume is supplemented by an appendix of important sources, a very helpful index and an extensive bibliography, which is extremely valuable for anyone dealing with the art, architecture and artistic patronage of the Reform Franciscans in the 15th and early 16th centuries.

In conclusion, Cobiانchi's publication is a crucial contribution to research on Observant art and architecture as well as on the corresponding control measures of the Provincial legislation. In particular, the problems of private patronage in the sphere of Italian Reform Orders during the Quattrocento are exemplarily demonstrated by the increasing influence of local rulers and dynasties on the interior decoration of churches in the Province of Bologna. In relating his study of an individual region to phenomena in and the documentary records of other Italian Provinces, the author finds the golden mean between the periphery of the «Provincia Bononie» and the situation in the remainder of the Franciscan Provinces. Correlations with cautiously chosen analogies from other areas of Observant influence thus assure the broad significance of the results of this study.

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