

Artist's Culture or Literary Erudition? A Recent Book on Leone Leoni

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**Leone Leoni and the Status of
the Artist at the End of the
Renaissance.** Farnham/Burlington,
Ashgate 2011. 250 p., b/w ill.
ISBN 978-0-7546-6234-1. £ 65,-

Sculptor to Charles V and Philip II of Habsburg and die-engraver to Duke Ercole II d'Este and Pope Paul III Farnese, Leone Leoni (c. 1509-1590) has found new significance in recent scholarship. The wide scope of his visual culture (developed over his time in Venice, Rome, Genoa and Milan, his adoptive city) and the stunning universality of his technical skills (also applied to works such as medals, gems and armor) make him quite a respectable representative of the possibilities of a Renaissance artist trained in the arts of goldsmithery (*figg. 1, 2*). His activity in the Holy Roman Empire and the early dissemination of his works across Western Europe reflect the impressive framework of cultural exchange that marked Italian sculpture in the second half of the 16th century.

Since the appearance of Eugène Plon's fundamental monograph in 1887, Leoni's œuvre has been the topic of at least two exhibitions, two symposia, three dissertations, three *tesi di laurea*, several articles (some of which present new archival discoveries) and even a novel. Additionally, research and exhibitions on the patronage of Charles V and Philip II have recently made Leoni's works the focus of scholarly attention. Yet, no comprehensive monograph on the artist has appeared thus far.

Kelley Helmstutler's book is not intended to be a catalogue of Leoni's œuvre, nor a digest of the documents concerning his life and activity. Keeping the focus of her 2000 Ph.D. dissertation (*"To Demonstrate the Greatness of His Spirit": Leone Leoni and the Casa degli Omenoni*, Rutgers, State Univ. of New Jersey, UMI microfilm), this book rather aims to re-assess Leoni's „reputation as one of the best, most important and most intriguing artists of the Early Modern period“ through a biographical overview (chap. 1), an articulate analysis of his political connections and achievements in terms of social status (chap. 2), a vivid account of his artistic rivalries in „art and crime“ (chap. 3) – much in the wake of Rudolf and Margot Wittkower's *Born under Saturn* (London 1963) –, and a broad discussion of Leoni's strategies of self-representation, the key elements of which are identified as the Milanese artist's house (chap. 4, *fig. 3*) and his art collection (chap. 5). The latter chapter summarizes previous articles where Helmstutler discussed in greater detail the inventories of the possessions of Leoni's heirs. In chapter 6, she illustrates her very expansive concept of Leoni's „influence“ through examples ranging from Jacques Dubroueucq to Gian Andrea Biffi. Most of these artistic relations are presented in terms of „dependence on Leoni's style“ (an expression also used problematically with regard to quite original sculptors such as Pompeo Leoni and Annibale Fontana, 159-161), yet the handling of formal problems remains often overly generic.

Stemming from on-site archival research, Helmstutler's book deserves respect for the interest in primary evidence and for the attempt to bring the results of recent scholarship on Renaissance Milan to the attention of a larger audience. However, her evaluation of Leoni's social rise and her thesis about

his recognition as a man of „erudition“ raise more than one controversial issue, in part due to disputable interpretations of documents, and in part to disregard of the debate on the degree of education of 16th-century artists and of some of their patrons. Even more problematic is the omission of important research and material that has emerged in particular in the last decade of Leoni scholarship.

AN EXCEPTIONAL CASE?

In charting the „leap in status from poverty to great health“ seen in Leoni’s career, the author shows a tendency to overemphasize some aspects of his profile. On one hand, Leoni’s birth and first steps in the field of art remain more obscure than the book claims. Helmstutler’s highly conjectural reconstruction of Leoni’s origins rests on the baptismal record (1516) of one Francesco Maria „di G(iovan) Batt(ista) di Leona“ and on the death record (1522) of a – perhaps different – „Francesco Maria figliuolo di *maestro* Leonis Lombardis [*sic*] muratoris“ (in which case it is unclear whether „Leo“ is the last name of the individual or the first name of a member of the Lombardi family). It is true that „Leo“ the mason lived in the same parish of Arezzo where a certain, yet perhaps distant, relative of our sculptor was a Benedictine monk in the 1550s. Yet, what proves that this Lombard „*maestro* Leo“ was the „magnificus *dominus* Battista“ (quite a higher social rank) mentioned as the sculptor’s „Aretine“ father in his 1590 will? Finally, even if we accept that „*maestro* Leo“ and „*dominus* Battista“ may be the same person, there is no evidence that Leone was born in poverty as assumed in the book.

On the other hand, the claim that Leone Leoni was granted a title of nobility „long before it became common for artists to receive them“ (1) is also questionable, as any reader of Martin Warnke’s *Hofkünstler* (Cologne 1985) well knows. After the painter Dello Delli was knighted in Spain in 1446, and before Leoni was created „*eques caesareus*“ in 1549, dozens of artists working for non-Italian rulers obtained titles of nobility. To limit ourselves to Charles V, we may note the cases of Baccio Bandinelli (Knight of St. Peter, 1530), Titian (*Comes*

Palatinus, 1533) and Sodoma (*Comes Palatinus*, 1535), while several others were ennobled at the imperial court shortly after Leone.

Nor does Leoni’s famous original house (see *fig. 3*) seem to reflect a concern for „camouflaging his artist profession“ (58), the tools of which were proudly represented in the metopes of the courtyard. It is true that Leone’s foundry was separated from his *casa*, yet this solution could have been adopted simply in order to provide convenient isolation from the smell, heat and fire produced during the casting process – a circumstance documented in 1558 by the complaints expressed by the parish priest of S. Martino in Nosigia, a church that bordered Leone’s workshop.

Helmstutler’s non-comparative arguments neither persuade that his Milanese palace outdid other quite respectably decorated 16th century artist’s houses, nor that its decoration can be considered as „a visual document“ of his „philosophical pretensions“ (159). One may also note that the first inventory of the Milanese goods of Leoni’s heirs (1609) describes the bulk of their art collection in the studio and *camerino* of one „Cavagliero Aretino“, whom Helmstutler identifies with Leone Leoni. Yet, as the title was inheritable, it remains unclear whether this „Cavaglier“ was Leone (died in 1590), Pompeo (died in 1608 and named as „Cavagliero Pompeo Aretino“ in the very heading of the inventory) or his son Giovan Battista (died in 1615). More crucially: what guarantees that Pompeo Leoni (an art agent and also a collector) had not integrated the decoration of those rooms with new paintings after his father’s death? As a consequence, the composition and display of the art collection at Leone’s time appear less secure than stated in Helmstutler’s works.

A WORLD OF ERUDITION

Another disputable argument in Helmstutler’s reconstruction is that a major asset in forging Leoni’s career was „the respect he gained for his erudition“ (46). According to the author, such „learning“ facilitated the sculptor’s ability to establish

Fig. 1 Leone and Pompeo Leoni, Charles V of Habsburg Restraining Fury, 1549-64. Bronze. Madrid, Museo del Prado (Photo: Archive Walter Cupperi)

„friendships with prominent men of learning and of politics“, as well as to attract patrons such as Charles V, „an exceptional learned man, with a deep appreciation for art, literature and history“ (54). Additionally, Leoni’s participation in the activities of the Accademia dei Fenici „suggests that he, like the other members, had to present discourses every month on various intellectual topics that were not directly related to art“. Thereby Helmstutler concludes that “in Leoni’s case, it does not

appear that being an artist was the primary factor he was included“ in the academy (48). On the contrary, we know that the Fenici often discussed topics concerning visual perception and emblematic inventions, as testified by Luca Contile’s *Discorso sopra li cinque sensi del corpo* (Milan 1552) and Girolamo Ruscelli’s *Discorso intorno all’inventione delle imprese* (in: *Ragionamento de Mons. Paolo Giovo sopra i motti et disegni d’arme et d’amore*, Venetia 1556, 535). As a



medalist, Leoni could certainly speak on the invention of *imprese* and the relationship between vision and love. Moreover, several members of the academy took part in the poetic celebration of Philip II’s marriage with Mary Tudor (1554) by composing sonnets on Leoni’s bronze statue of the king, which was unveiled on that occasion.

Leoni’s admission among the Fenici had little to do with his supposed erudition and did not stem from the obliteration of his professional background



Fig. 2 Mint of Milan (die by Leone Leoni), obverse: Charles V of Habsburg, reverse: The Fall of the Giants. Silver scudo, 44,5 mm. Milan, Civiche Raccolte Numismatiche

and the consequent emergence of a new identity. On the contrary, his ennoblement and his acceptance as an academician recognized his competence as an artist and an *inventor*. Such specific knowledge – based on a range of manual and intellectual skills, of theoretical and empirical notions – had undergone a significant epistemological shift during the 15th-16th century. Of course such knowledge presented several points of intersection with the liberal arts, yet in Leoni's case it did not owe much to a bookish background.

From this point of view, instead of perpetuating Panofsky's tenets in assuming that the most representative High Renaissance artists had in common with Leonardo an erudition bridging natural science and humanism, and shared with Cellini the ability to compose vernacular poetry and hold academic discourses, it would have been worth considering the more balanced perspective put forward by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann in his recent *Arcimboldo: Visual Jokes, Natural History, and Still Life Painting* (Chicago 2009) where he argues that the recognition of Arcimboldo at the Imperial court and his involvement in the inventions for the royal entry of Maximilian II in Vienna (1563) can be seen as a „reflection of his rhetorical concerns“, namely of his ability to apply „literary principles to the visual arts“ (76-77). As a consequence, Kaufmann's emphasis is cast on the „significance of the two groups' [humanists and artists] collaboration and mutual impact“ (72) more than on

the idea that all Milanese painters and sculptors were as *universali* as late 16th-century art theorists such as Lomazzo and Comanini recommended them to be.

As for Leoni's education, his vivid and yet comparatively modest efforts to mimic the most impressive examples of 16th-century epistolary prose bear little trace of erudition in the strictest sense. In the few letters where Leoni explains his inventions for medals and statues (*fig. 1*), the literary references may well have been found with the assistance of advisers such as his friends Girolamo Muzio and Giuliano Gosellini. Moreover, Leoni's citations of classics (Vergil, Pliny) and of the Bible are picked from frequently quoted passages that he may also have learned through attendance in church and learned circles, since they are not always reported correctly. Finally, Leone does not seem to have had a full understanding of Latin.

As far as Charles V's „exceptional“ learning and „deep appreciation for art“ is concerned, it may be useful to remember that even his most enthusiastic biographers refrained from crediting him with more than an interest in painting based on his notions of geometry, drawing and military engineering, „which he esteemed necessary for warfare“ (Lodovico Dolce, *Vita di Carlo V*, Vinegia 1567, 172). Scholars such as José Luis Gonzalo Sánchez-Molero have demonstrated that the Emperor's

education was focused on history and genealogy, but was lacking in other fields. As for Charles' attitude toward the arts, Earl E. Rosenthal argued that Charles limited his commitment in the arts to the fulfillment of his „institutional role“ and implied no personal involvement. According to Rosenthal, Charles' art patronage, marked by „limited aesthetic sensibilities“, usually relied on the first impetus coming from his vassals and advisers, relinquishing „to other matters of specific form and style“ (in: *Cuadernos de Arte Univ. de Granada*, 23, 1992, 105-106).

INTEGRATIONS

While bibliography can certainly be selective, significant publications should not be neglected in a book claiming to have „put together for the first time Plon's information with the research of the last 122 years“ (XII). Among the important documentary contributions neglected by Helmstutler one may list that of Maria Teresa Franco Fiorio and Anna Patrizia Valerio (*La scultura a Milano tra il 1535 e il 1565*, in: Mercedes Garberi [ed.], *Omaggio a Tiziano: la cultura*

artistica milanese nell'età di Carlo V, Milano 1977, 122-131), who first published a document presented as unpublished by Helmstutler (37, n. 59), but also older literature such as Edoardo Martinori (*Annali della Zecca di Roma*, Roma 1917-30) and Jean Babelon (*Jacopo da Trezzo et la construction de l'Escorial*, Bordeaux 1922). Reference to repertories such as Giuseppe Toderi/Firenza Vannel, *Le medaglie italiane del XVI secolo*, Firenze 2000 would also have helped to



Fig. 3 Leone Leoni and Antonio Abbondio (called l'Ascona), Casa degli Omenoni, 1563-66. Milan, Via degli Omenoni (Milan, Civiche Raccolte Grafiche e Fotografiche)

avoid perpetuating old unjustified attributions. As for the questions raised by Helmstutler about Michelangelo's medal by Leoni, they have already been answered convincingly by Philine Helas (Michelangelo pellegrino: zur Bildnismedaille von Leone Leoni für Michelangelo Buonarroti, in: Nicole Hegener/Claudia Lichte/Bettina Marten [eds.], *Curiosa Poliphili. Festgabe für Horst Bredekamp zum 60. Geburtstag*, Leipzig 2007, 70-77). Indeed, several results that have emerged in the last decade of Leoni scholarship (especially the reassessment of Mary of Hungary's patronage: cf. Bertrand Federinov/Gilles Docquier [eds.], *Marie de Hongrie: politique et culture sous la Renaissance aux Pays-Bas*, Morlanwelz 2008) are neither reported nor discussed, and reference literature concerning Antoine Perrenot (Krista De Jonge/Gustaaf Janssens [eds.], *Les Granvelle et les anciens Pays-Bas*, Leuven 2000), Ferrante Gonzaga (Nicola Soldini, *Nec spe nec metu. La Gonzaga: architettura e corte nella Milano di Carlo V*, Firenze 2007), as well as Charles V – Leoni's most important patrons – seems to have been overlooked. This may have had an effect on Helmstutler's artist-centered vision of Leoni's art production and *modus operandi*. Finally, a glance at Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Das Künstlerhaus*, Braunschweig 1990, might have been useful in the chapter on the Casa degli Omenoni.

Because of the considerable amount of inaccurate information, unproven statements and uneven updates, Helmstutler's book is not always a reliable instrument for scholarly use. Overlooking even the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (64, 2004, 594-598, which also provides a bibliography of 16th-century literary celebrations of Leone Leoni) lead the author to the perpetuation of quite a few old mistakes and the flourishing of new ones. E.g., Pompeo Leoni finished the Habsburg portraits commissioned by Charles V from his father in 1572, and not in 1564 (160), as demonstrated by the date inscribed on the marble statue of Empress Isabella (Madrid, Prado). Additionally, after a double-check of Leoni's correspondence, a supposed medal of Princess Isabella Villamarina (5) turns out to be the medal of a „Duchessa“ (likely that of Elisabetta Gonzaga, Duchess of Urbino).

All these reservations, however, do not preclude the pleasure of enjoying Helmstutler's concise and vivid narrative. Without losing sight of the features of her specific subject, her approach to the topic makes more thought-provoking her „insight into the possibilities of the ‚Renaissance man‘“ (1) by opening the discussion up to topical themes of social networking and social equalization – as in the passages where quite complex and hierarchical relations of patronage and cultural mediation become informal „friendships“ (46), or where Leoni's roguish rhetoric leads to the „demonstration“ of his „self-perceived parity with his patrons“ (103, note 91).

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