Giorgio de Sepi

The Celebrated Museum of the Roman College of the Society of Jesus: A Facsimile of the 1678 Amsterdam Edition of Giorgio de Sepi's Description of Athanasius Kircher's Museum. Ed. Peter Davidson. Trans. Anastasi Callinicos and Daniel Höhr. Annotated by Jane Stevenson. Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2015. Pp. 172, 28 illustrations, 7 folio-size foldouts. Hb, \$120.

In 1678, the German polymath Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602–80), author of numerous bulging baroque encyclopedias on Egypt, China, magnetism, music, acoustics, optics, volcanology, universal languages, history, and antiquities, was nearing the end of his long and storied career. A professor of mathematics at the Roman College, Kircher arrived in Rome shortly after the unhappy conclusion of the trial of Galileo, a refugee from his native region torn apart by the Thirty Years' War. He almost immediately earned a reputation as a curious and inquiring mind, knowledgeable (to what degree no one was really sure) in eastern languages, possessing arcane manuscripts, and capable of making marvelous machines that harnessed nature's occult forces. Until 1651, the fruits of this dizzying erudition remained in his private quarters at the Roman College, where he had long ceased to teach in order to pursue research and publishing. That year, however, the secretary to the Roman Senate Alfonso Donnino donated his collection of paintings and antiquities to the Roman College. This material, combined with Kircher's curiosities and other interesting artifacts that generations of Jesuits accumulated in the flagship education institution of the Society of Jesus, became the Roman College Museum, with Kircher as its first curator. Over the next few decades, the museum grew in popularity among visitors to the Eternal City, both learned and powerful, and Kircher's reputation grew with it. He was known as the impresario of one of the best spectacles in Rome; in the next century people remembered the museum not as a Jesuit institution but as Kircher's collection.

In 1678, the otherwise obscure Giorgio de Sepi, described as Kircher's "assistant in the construction of mechanical devices" (116), presented himself as the putative author of a lavishly illustrated catalogue of the museum. There is no doubt that Kircher played a large role in shaping the content while his publisher in Amsterdam gladly recycled images of numerous artifacts from earlier books. By contrast, the famous frontispiece depicting Kircher greeting two visitors in a gallery whose ceilings seemed to reach to the heavens themselves, dwarfed by the replicas of the many Roman obelisks he had interpreted and seen installed in key locations throughout the city, was entirely original. This was indeed a signature opportunity to represent the experience of the Roman College Museum for eternity. The introduction makes manifest Kircher's

concerns—ventriloquized by de Sepi—about the fate of the museum after he was no longer there to ensure its vitality. The catalogue was a virtual museum, not only for contemporaries who might never see it in person but for posterity.

This modern edition, edited by Peter Davidson and translated by Anastasi Callinicos and Daniel Höhr with notes by Jane Stevenson, includes a facsimile of the Latin original, an annotated English translation, and an essay on Kircher and the museum. While the facsimile is somewhat darker than readers might ideally like this, may either be a reflection of the condition of the original in the ancient Jesuit college at Stonyhurst (Lancashire, UK) or an artifact of the book's production. Nonetheless, it is a great pleasure to have an accessible bilingual edition that also gives readers a feel for the original, including the large foldout illustrations of the obelisks “decoded” in Kircher's many works of Egyptology, the Nestorian stele feature in his 1667 book on China as testimony to the antiquity of Christianity in Asia, and many images of foreign animals, idols, and machines including iconic curiosities such as Kircher's Delphic Oracle and magic lantern. This is a book one wants to linger over, in order to absorb the totality of its effect, indeed, take a tour with the mind's eye. About a decade ago, Eugenio Lo Sardo temporarily reassembled surviving artifacts of the Roman College Museum in Palazzo Venezia for an exhibit. The history of Kircher and his collection also inspired David Wilson to install a permanent exhibition in the Museum of Jurassic Technology (Culver City, CA), and most recently have led to the creation of a *Wunderkammer* in Liceo Visconti, a high school in the original building that once housed the Roman College.

The translation is generally serviceable, without always being as smooth and polished in the English as one might ideally like, but the presence of the facsimile makes it possible for a reader to work between both effectively. Davidson's afterword introduces readers unfamiliar with the Roman College Museum to its essential history, providing additional bibliography. While not a work geared for specialists, it is nonetheless a pleasure to think that students curious about what a museum was like, hundreds of years ago, can now look and read about this famous collection without needing to know Latin. In this spirit, it is a welcome addition to Kircherian studies.

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