Chapter Seven

Time, Virtuousness and Wisdom in Giorgione’s Castelfranco Fresco

Concurrent with the versions of triumphant Time illustrating Petrarch’s poetic allegory, artists were introducing concepts of time in didactic and scholarly contexts. Salient examples are the studiolo programs, such as those of Federigo da Montefeltro at Urbino and Gubbio, executed in intarsia (ca. 1476), and the Castelfranco fresco attributed to Giorgione.1 Their messages were conveyed by objects, arranged as illusionistic still-life compositions rather than personifications, and inscriptions or maxims that were enigmatic or nebulous, thus creating an intellectual challenge for the educated spectator.

Fantasia per mostrare l’arte

Vasari, who was bewildered and impressed by the incomprehensibility of Giorgione’s Fondaco dei Tedeschi frescoes, wrote that the artist painted

“secondo la sua fantasia” or “a sua fantasia per mostrare l’arte”.

When reading through more recent literature on the undocumented fresco at Castelfranco one receives the impression that this “fantasia” or poetic license has sometimes been applied to the interpretations. It has been generally accepted that the series of objects depicted in this fresco of the Casa Marta-Pellizzari represented the liberal and mechanical arts, but maxims inscribed in the fresco clearly indicate that more is involved. Based on the assumption that Giorgione’s subject matter is, by definition, veiled in a cloud of mystery, some writers have proposed iconographic theories based on what appears to be an arbitrary choice of texts or on a selective study of part of the images, to the exclusion of the rest. Several of the valuable ideas set forth have remained speculative. Lack of evidence to support one or another theory has left us with many open questions. Even Giorgione’s authorship is in doubt.

The fresco of Castelfranco is a unique visual document of Venetian humanism at the turn of the century. It represents, as I intend to demonstrate, a transitional stage between the concepts of late medieval humanism, with its theocentric orientation, and the more secular self-conscious attitudes of the Quattrocento studia humanitatis. The fresco preserves

---


4 The maxims were first studied by Adriano Mariuz, “Appunti per una letteratura del fregio giorgionesco di Casa Marta Pellizzari,” Liceo ginnasio Giorgione, Castelfranco Veneto, 1966, 49–70, followed by Padoan, 1981 (as in note 3).