
Scholars interested in the late medieval and renaissance world of preaching will know Debby’s essays on the use of the visual arts by fifteenth century preachers, as well as her book-length study Renaissance Florence in the Rhetoric of Two Popular Preachers: Giovanni Dominici (1356–1419) and Bernardino da Siena (1380–1444) (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001). In the present richly illustrated work, she continues a research angle broached for the first time in her 2002 article ‘Patrons, Artists, Preachers: The Pulpit of Santa Maria Novella (1443–1448)’ (Arte Cristiana 81:90 (2002), 261–272), but now pursued more broadly as well as in a more interdisciplinary fashion.

Debby’s new book presents the renaissance pulpit as an architectonic and sculptural genre or ‘type’ that should not just be interpreted from an art-historical perspective, but should be placed in and interpreted from the angle of preaching, using a variety of analytical tools to examine its patronage, its geographical location, its functions and the chronological development of its phenomenology. The author’s main thesis is that the nature and content of religious preaching shaped the renaissance pulpit, and that the pulpit as ‘type’ and medium employed specific techniques embedded in the world of sacred oratory.

To argue her case, Debby combines a general survey of pulpits in Tuscany with a close analysis of five specific examples, each with a complex and rich iconographic programme, and presented by her as the most exquisite and impressive monuments of their ‘type’. The pulpits in question are Calvacanti’s and Brunelleschi’s pulpit in the Santa Maria Novella (Florence, 1441–1443), Benedetto da Maiano’s Santa Croce pulpit (Florence, 1472–1485), the pulpit made by Pasquino da Montepulciano, Mino da Fiesole and Antonio Rossellino for Prato cathedral (1469–1473), Donatello’s and Michelozzo’s external pulpit for the same cathedral (1433), and Donatello’s double ambones in the San Lorenzo (1466–1472). Debby further argues her case with reference to a number of other pulpits in Tuscany in Fiesole, Lucca, Siena, San Gimignano, Milan and elsewhere.

In her introductory first chapter, Debby speaks at length about the need to study the renaissance pulpit as a genre or ‘type’ rather than as one (relatively minor) item within the corpus of works of a given artist. She takes the opportunity to discuss various art-historical approaches towards ecclesiastical monuments since the times of Burckhardt’s Kunstgeschichte nach Themen und Aufgaben, evaluating the respective value of iconographical (Panofsky),
functional and contextual (Baxandall, Henderson et al.), and ‘new art history’ (Blake McHam, Moskovitz et al.) approaches for her purpose. Debby maintains that in none of these approaches the pulpit has figured prominently, and that the connections between pulpits as a genre and the world of sacred oratory have been largely overlooked. In the second half of this chapter, Debby insists that the pulpit was a tool used by preachers, that it existed within a ‘preaching mentality,’ and that its development (shape, decoration, situation) should be read with recourse to the nature and context of religious preaching. She consciously builds on the work of Lina Bolzoni (The Web of Images) and Stephen Murray (The Gothic Sermon), but now for bringing the insights of such scholarship to bear on the pulpit itself, as a monument and genre linked directly with sermons and preaching.

Chapters two to four set the stage for Debby’s analysis of her chosen pulpit exemplars. Hence, in chapter two she provides a general overview of the pulpit tradition in Tuscany up to 1400, with special attention to the Pisani pulpits in Pisa (baptistery), Siena and Pistoia, to provide a backdrop to explain further developments in the period thereafter, when the positioning of pulpits was changing. Chapters three and four focus respectively on the patronage of pulpits and their function as commemorative monuments, and on the possible function differentiation of pulpits situated within the church and in the piazza in relation to the mendicant preaching effort.

The central chapters five to eight concentrate on Debby’s five selected pulpits, discussing their iconographic programmes, their connection with specific cults, the usage of pulpits in religious performances and drama (and the influence of those on pulpit design), and the connections between the pulpit’s visual rhetoric and the developments in sacred oratory (notably the changes from scholastic preaching to homiletic oratory in the renaissance, and further changes in preaching forensics in the period thereafter). There is much of interest in these chapters, and her analysis is frequently to the point. Debby’s suggestion in chapter five (pp. 102–103), that the decision to represent Innocent III on Maiano’s Santa Croce pulpit was connected to crusade sentiments, doesn’t convince me, however. I would rather argue that Innocent III’s presence would have been motivated by the fact that his oral confirmation of the Franciscan order and its ways of life in 1209 was essential, in view of latent accusations that the order’s rule had not been approved prior to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which forbade the introduction of new religious rules.

The short chapters nine and ten move beyond the fifteenth century. Chapter nine connects a new conception of the pulpit – as illustrated by Tibaldi’s