
The most striking story in this beautifully illustrated volume bringing to light the state of the art in research on the Hungarian Renaissance is by far the much publicized controversy regarding the attribution of a fresco of the “Virtues” placed in the Studiolo of the Archiepiscopal Palace at Esztergom to Sandro Botticelli (ca. 1445–1510). Jolán Balogh, one of the key figures of Hungarian art history—who has been duly awarded an entire chapter in the present volume—had observed in an article from 1948 that the frescos could be the work of a Florentine “Magister Albertus” known to have worked in Esztergom in 1493–94. The fascinating essay in the volume authored by Mária Prokopp and Zsuzsanna Wierdl proposes, however, that at least one of the Virtues (Temperance) was painted by Botticelli during a trip to Hungary that has not been otherwise recorded. The authors, in charge of the campaign for restoration work in the Palace, base their claim on the initials “MB” (Mariano Botticelli) found near the said fresco supposedly representing the name of Botticelli’s father.

Before the start of the conference that initiated the present volume (held at Villa I Tatti, Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, on 6–8 June 2007), the two authors held a press conference in Hungary where they presented their hypothesis and caused a series of strongly skeptical reactions from the scholarly community. In fact, one of the editors of the volume, Louis A. Waldman, published a critique of their claims in Élet és Irodalom (July 2007), and reiterates his arguments here under the title “Commissioning Art in Florence for Matthias Corvinus” (427–501). Given the controversial nature of this subject, it would have been enough of a pretext for publishing this volume to focus on relevant aspects of Renaissance art history, such as authorship, transnational humanist networks, court patronage of the arts, etc. These overarching themes do feature throughout the book, despite the fact that it appears to be dedicated to Italian-Hungarian political-cultural relations. The editors themselves, surprisingly, introduce the debate as an important reminder of the close connections between the two countries and cultures, reiterating the role of Hungarian research at the Italian center. However, luckily for the enthusiasts of humanism and Renaissance art, the volume extends beyond this subject.

Hungary is singled out as the first country outside the Italian peninsula to nurture and receive the Italian Renaissance, apart from the parts of Dalmatia held by Venice at the time. It is also true that the court of King Matthias Corvinus hired many Italian artists and hosted one of the largest humanist libraries in Central Europe (Bibliotheca Corviniana). However, like many of the European courts of the period, this court was also remarkably “international,” allowing the flow of books and artifacts of various origin in accordance with the good practice of humanism. For this reason the insistence on a particularly strong connection between Italy and Hungary as a remarkable feature of the epoch, emphasized by the active relationship between Italian and Hungarian researchers and academic initiatives, seems to be slightly overstated, especially now that transnationality and global encounters supersede a focus on national histories or historiographies.

In any case, this minor side effect of the title is the only flaw the present reviewer could point out in an otherwise very pleasantly ornate and richly documented volume that offers interesting facts thus far secluded in specialized art history collections or journals, making a rich and fascinating historiographical tradition available to the English- and Italian-speaking
scholarly community. The international readership is informed about the progress of research in Hungary and the major debates initiated in the late 1930s, when excavations started at the palace of Esztergom (leading to the discovery of the controversial frescoes first attributed to Filippino Lippi). Following these first major archeological discoveries, within a few years the story of Hungarian Renaissance was irrevocably altered by new excavations at the palace of Buda following the damage caused by the Second World War. Work on the site continues to this day, and archeologists have uncovered numerous architectural fragments from the late medieval and Corvinian palace complex that had dominated the city before the Turkish conquest. The architectural discoveries greatly compensate for the lack of documentary sources from the period. Therefore, the subject matter of the present volume is quite important for contemporary research in the fields of Central European art history and European Renaissance studies.

Organized into four distinctive parts, the volume reflects the structure of the conference from Italy, namely themes from early Renaissance historiography in Hungary including: exchanges and encounters between writers and humanists; the court, palaces, and library of Matthias Corvinus; the artists and agents commissioned by the king; and the impact of Italian sculpture in Hungary. An essay by the vice-president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Ernő Marosi, illustrates the use of Renaissance culture and the relationship between the court of Matthias and Italy during the said period for building the national identity of Hungarians in the late nineteenth century. This is complemented by the article by László Szőrényi who offers a synthesis of recent trends in research on Hungarian Renaissance humanism and its historical setting after the death of Tibor Klaniczay (1923–1992), a prominent figure of the field in Hungary and the founder of the Department of Renaissance Studies within the Hungarian Academy's Institute for Literary Studies. The first part of the volume is concluded with a paper by Gyöngyi Török dedicated to the above-mentioned outstanding figure of Hungarian Renaissance studies, Jolán Balogh, and a survey of the last two decades of research on early Renaissance art in Hungary by Péter Farbaky. With the aid of these last two essays we learn about the most significant shift in Hungarian Renaissance historiography: while Jolán Balogh (1900–1988) had looked at the roots of the Renaissance style in the dynastic-political contacts between Matthias and various centers in Italy, the work of Rózsa Feuer-Tóth (1928–1985) turned the attention to the role of humanism on the art produced at Matthias's court.

The second section of the volume dealing with the exchange of ideas and texts between Italian and Hungarian humanists starts with the studies by Klára Pajorin, who traces the Corvinian interest in humanism back to the first half of the fifteenth century, and by Valery Rees, who unravels the role of Marsilio Ficino in the diffusion of Platonic thought at the Hungarian court and his friendship with Janus Pannonius, the bishop of Pécs. Furthermore, Ágnes Ritoók-Szalay analyzes the only account about a double portrait of Janus Pannonius done by Laus Andrea Mantegna, namely Pannonius's poem from 1458. Since most of the monumental paintings and sculptures made in Italy for Hungarian patrons have been lost, the literary sources are valuable for tracing this particular heritage of Renaissance art. Next, Sándor Bene criticizes the canon of Hungarian Renaissance literature by looking at a figure, the Carthusian monk of Hungarian origin Andreas Pannonius (1420?–1472?), who has been marginalized by scholarship. László Jankovits writes about another humanist named Jacubus Piso who came from Transylvania, but worked in Italy. He was in Rome between 1504 and 1515 and was acquainted with such notorious Renaissance figures as Erasmus of...