Review Essay

Papal Power and Largess
Two Books Consider Images, Rhetoric, and Strategies of Papal Representation

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For fourteen hundred years, from the end of the Roman Empire in the fifth century to the founding of the Kingdom of Italy in the nineteenth, Rome and the papacy were almost inseparable. The seventeenth-century Baroque, with its grandiose and emotionally charged works by such artists as Bernini and Pietro da Cortona, was perhaps papal Rome’s most splendid period, and baroque extravagance serves as a kind of foil for the art that engages the writers of these two books, published by Penn State University Press. Jan de Jong studies the preceding Renaissance, and in particular fresco paintings of papal doings. Christopher Johns studies the Age of Reason, after the Baroque. Both writers are well-published and respected scholars. Both are concerned with documents and objects and avoid flights of theory. Their books, however, are radically different. The virtue of the first lies in the narrowness of its focus, of the second, in the variety of subjects that are treated.
Jan L. de Jong’s *The Power and the Glorification* is above all a detailed examination of five sets of frescoes made in or near Rome, with an emphasis on those with scenes from the life of a current or recent pope. As such it is excellent. Renaissance popes claimed authority over secular rulers equal to that of their medieval predecessors, but their actual power was very much restricted after the fourteenth century. The later popes still had a great many ways of having their presumed authority expressed in art. Julius II, for example, commissioned Michelangelo to make a vastly over-life-size statue of himself for the Cathedral of Bologna and a gigantic tomb, and flattering allegorical paintings on the Sistine ceiling.

Rather than deal with all the varieties of papal propaganda, de Jong analyzes a few narrative frescoes. He is attentive to discrepancies between their representations of history and the actual historical events that inspired them, and he is happiest when the event is well-documented and took place shortly before the painting so that those discrepancies are most clear. In a loggia next to the Castel Sant’Angelo (1495–1496), for instance, in which Pinturicchio depicted the meeting between Pope Alexander VI and King Charles VIII of France, de Jong plays the evidence of the frescoes, destroyed but carefully described, against an eye-witness account. Thus, while Pinturicchio showed Charles performing the traditional ritual of kissing the pope’s foot, in fact Charles did not because Alexander was anxious to avoid offending the king. The paintings, then, did not show what actually happened when a young invader met a relatively weak pontiff anxious for the encounter to go as smoothly as possible, but rather what ought to have happened when a respectful monarch visits his superior, the pope.

What ought to have happened rather than what did happen: this understanding is de Jong’s theme throughout the book. In dealing with the Hall of Constantine in the Vatican (c. 1519–1524) by Raphael and assistants, he uses Aristotle’s conception of the poet, who tells how things would have happened ideally, as a higher and more philosophical approach than that of the mere historian, who only tells what did happen. So, like an inspired poet, Raphael situated Constantine’s vision of the Cross on the very spot where Saint Peter’s Basilica was to be built and thus associated the sign that brought the emperor military victory with the ultimate triumph of papal Christianity.

Most of the scenes that de Jong discusses were designed both to illustrate specific accomplishments of individual popes and to serve as a general model for ideal behavior. This procedure begins with the author’s earliest example, illustrating various people paying homage to Eugenius IV on Filarete’s bronze doors for Saint Peter’s (1433–1445); it includes Taddeo Zuccaro’s frescoes celebrating Paul III in the Villa Farnese (1562–1563); and it concludes with the Sala