

L'IMPRESA DI ALFONSO II. SAGGI E DOCUMENTI SULLA PRODUZIONE ARTISTICA A FERRARA NEL SECONDO CINQUECENTO

Edited by **Jadranka Bentini and Luigi Spezzaferro**

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Scholarly work on late sixteenth-century Ferrarese painting is surprisingly meagre. There seem to be two reasons for this. First, the reversion of Ferrara to papal rule following the extinction of the Este dynasty in 1597 caused a major upheaval in the social and cultural patterns of the city. In the following years most of the art in Ferrara was displaced, dispersed or destroyed. As a result, our understanding of Ferrarese art is necessarily based on the piecing together of a very limited body of disparate and fragmentary evidence. The second reason is that the art itself has never been deemed worthy of study. Art historical tradition has placed a higher value on the period from around 1460, especially the work of Tura, Cossa and Ercole de'Roberti, to the first half of the sixteenth century and the paintings by Garofalo, the Dossi and Gerolamo da Carpi. Vasari, for example, ends his history of Ferrarese art with Dosso. Venturi, Gruyer, Berenson and Longhi all follow suit, virtually ignoring anything produced after 1550. This imbalance was slightly alleviated by the series of monographs published during the 1960s and 1970s concentrating specifically on establishing the *oeuvre* of such masters as Bastianino, Bononi and Scarsellino. But these books, for all their pioneering spirit, were still inadequate, primarily because they focused on the works of each painter in isolation and failed to address the larger issue of the artistic milieu of late sixteenth-century Ferrara.

L'Impresa di Alfonso II goes a long way towards surmounting this problem. In essence, it is the second volume (in that it follows so closely on the catalogue accompanying the 1985 exhibition '*Bastianino e la pittura a Ferrara nel secondo Cinquecento*') in what one hopes will become a series of studies edited by Prof. Jadranka Bentini and her colleagues. The major distinction of *L'Impresa di Alfonso II*, setting it apart from most recent studies on Ferrarese art, is that each contri-

butor seems to have recognized the importance of investigating the mechanism of patronage and the basic conditions of artistic production during the reign of Alfonso II d'Este.

The most illuminating section of the book is the essay by Luigi Spezzaferro and the accompanying appendix of documents edited by Giulio Marcon and Giuliana Marcolini. It has long been recognized that Pirro Ligorio, the *Antiquario* of Alfonso II from 1568 or 1569 until his death in 1583, was responsible for the design of the decorative complexes of the Camera dello Specchio (known today as the Sala dell'Aurora), and the Salone and Saletta dei Giochi in the Castello Estense. The attribution of the paintings themselves, however, remains unresolved. In an attempt to deal with this problem an intensive study of forty-four registers of the Munizioni e fabbriche of the Camera Ducale preserved in the Archivio di Stato in Modena was undertaken. The result is a staggering list of nearly 450 new documents dating between 1559 and 1596. Conclusions drawn from such a vast amount of new information are necessarily tentative, but as Spezzaferro points out, this material not only brings to light the importance of the hitherto unnoticed master, Ludovico Settevecchi, but also suggests that art production at the court of Ferrara was radically different from other contemporary Italian centres in its heavy reliance on workshops, whose members were expected to paint, gild, do stucco-work, construct ephemeral decorations for pageants and plays, and maintain and repair works of art already held in the ducal collection. The concept of the specialized 'artist' may have existed, but in practice the local painters were still regarded as mere craftsmen.

L'Impresa di Alfonso II also contains a series of good essays about Ligorio—on his draughtsmanship, his designs for festivals, pageants, masques, architectural decoration and furniture, and on his series of genealogical portraits of the Estensi, which were subsequently painted in the *cortile* of the Castello. There is an interesting study on the Estensi as collectors of antique sculpture and a number of further essays on architecture, sculpture, iconography and post-tridentine picture frames.

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