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Review: *Paolo de Matteis: Neapolitan Painting and Cultural History in Baroque Europe* by Livio Pestilli

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Livio Pestilli. *Paolo de Matteis: Neapolitan Painting and Cultural History in Baroque Europe*  
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Livio Pestilli. *Paolo de Matteis: Neapolitan Painting and Cultural History in Baroque Europe*.

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Paolo de Matteis, if included within the general history of Italian painting — in Rudolf Wittkower's Pelican volume he merited only a footnote — is remembered most for his painting of the allegory of Hercules at the crossroads, done at the request of Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury. But there is more to tell; and in this lavishly illustrated volume, Livio Pistelli, basing his narrative on his own careful researches and materials available since Wittkower's magisterial history, sets de Matteis in a firm position within the account of painting in Naples and in the other European centers for which he produced paintings: Rome, Genoa, Paris, Madrid, and Vienna.

Of his authority within Naples itself there is no question, for he worked on many of the most striking commissions for many of the important churches there. But in his behavior, according to his first biographer Bernardo di Dominici, he displayed boastfulness and vainglory, and this account, whether justified or not, led to a far less sympathetic biographical tradition than that accorded his rival Francesco Solimena. But history is often recuperation, and here Pestilli is concerned both to reaffirm the place of de Matteis within Neapolitan painting at the end of the seventeenth century, and through his work to trace the artistic tastes and aspirations of the society in which he lived. It was Ferdinando Bologna, writing in 1958 in a study of Solimena, who began the modern account of de Matteis. And, in the years since, scholars from France, Germany, Spain, and Italy — Pestilli included — investigating archives and drawing collections in centers where de Matteis worked, have been able to lay out a chronology of his commissions and define a secure corpus of paintings and drawings that allows a firm account to be made of his career.

The study here is divided into three main sections. The first discusses the biographical and literary traditions that, for many years, defined what was said of de Matteis and his works. The second section, focusing on de Matteis's paintings,

speaks of his artistic development and the decline of his later years and investigates a series of subjects he was often engaged with — allegories, self-portraits, and larger decorative schemes, produced for his many secular and religious patrons. And if Pestilli repeats the familiar account, that in his grandest schemes de Matteis moved away from the grand drama of Baroque painting to a tender style closer to the Rococo, he offers here a richly sensitive and detailed description of the pictorial language de Matteis used. The last part tackles what Pestilli calls the thorny issue of de Matteis's drawings and, from this, what he sees as the frequent misconceptions of his evolution as draftsman and painter. Finally there are two appendixes, some sixty pages in all, laying out a checklist of his works by title and by chronology, both of which, so Pestilli hopes, will help other scholars in their future research.

This is, in many ways, a conventional study, as Pestilli acknowledges when he thanks his editor for having a belief in a book that falls outside what he sees to be current publishing trends. And indeed Ashgate is to be congratulated for producing, in these straightened days, a volume so attractively printed and so richly illustrated. The result is a study to be set beside those by scholars like J. T. Spike, Judith Colton, and Evonne Levy, who, in their various ways, have begun to reintroduce the anglophone world to a period of art in Naples still unfamiliar and distant.

But to return to the allegory of Hercules at the crossroads, here given its own chapter. Francis Haskell described de Matteis as being bewildered by the visual and philosophical implications of this theme, few of which could be represented in the resulting picture, stiff and academic as it seems. But the story of the commission, reconstructed from preliminary drawings and various letters between de Matteis and other friends of Lord Shaftesbury, is full of details that, like this study as whole, serve to tell us much new about the picture itself and the culture in which it was conceived and executed.

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