



A NEW BOOK ON SIGNORELLI



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by ALISON WRIGHT

THE AUTHOR OF this book¹ has been living with Signorelli on and off for some two decades and has encouraged others to engage with the *vita* by forming an archive of all known Signorelli documents on the web.² A good number of these have been found by Tom Henry himself, and it is this familiarity, together with a profound first-hand knowledge of his large surviving painting production in fresco, on panel and on canvas, that lends extra weight, in every sense, to this generously illustrated monograph. There are no hurried judgments to upset the even-handed and well-paced narrative. Space is given not only to Signorelli's astounding works of the late 1480s to early 1500s, but also to the claustrophobic, sometimes impressive, but less than lovable devotional images that were his staple for the last ten years of his life (1513–23). Like Signorelli, Henry draws freely on his own earlier work, but is not afraid to revise his ideas.³ On the tricky ground of Signorelli's 'early' works, which Vasari claimed to be indistinguishable from those of his master, Piero della Francesca, Henry now tentatively admits two works on which he had hitherto disagreed with his one-time co-author, Laurence Kanter.⁴ He also maintains, quite rightly in my view, his resistance to moving a number of heterogeneous works attributed to Bartolommeo della Gatta to Signorelli's *œuvre*.⁵ Clearly, what constitutes the limits of 'Signorelli' continues to try connoisseurship.

Signorelli's larger legacy scarcely raises the same ethical-aesthetic excitement that it once did for John Addington Symonds, whose opinions, and those of such critics as Berenson and Fry, Henry considers in a fascinating account of the painter's *fortuna critica*. Awareness of Signorelli as a literary creation does not, however, inhibit Henry in the central claim of the book, namely that to understand the art you must excavate the life. This positivist belief risks explaining paintings in biographical terms and suggests one can clear a path to the 'facts', a claim contested in art history since the 1970s. It is true that our understanding of Signorelli's career and social standing is enriched by establishing, as the book does, his major civic commitments to his home town of Cortona, his movements in central Italy, the range and character of his patronage and affiliations; it is also touching to think that the tender, sumptuous *Virgin and Child* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) may have been the painting described as a gift to his daughter. On the down side it seems highly doubtful that personal family loss should have conditioned changes in his approach to painting as a professional activity, and even less plausible that his figures' bulging calf muscles were suggested by watching fellow citizens straining up the steep Umbrian streets.

The relation of works to life was asserted from the earliest moment by Vasari's story in the *Lives* that Signorelli had

33. *Virgin and Child*, by Luca Signorelli. c.1490. Panel, 170 by 117.5 cm. (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence).

mourning his son's death by stripping his corpse and drawing it from life for a painting of the *Lamentation*. This is Vasari's way of affirming a properly Florentine investment in the 'true' observation of the nude male body, an investment that goes back at least to the mid-fifteenth century and to which Signorelli himself was exposed when he practised in Florence in the 1480s (perhaps, as suggested here, in the circle of Verrocchio). Signorelli's brilliantly inventive and influential Medici *Virgin and Child* is a testament to his understanding of the cultural caché attached to the relief figure and male nude at

¹ *The Life and Art of Luca Signorelli*. By Tom Henry. 472 pp. incl. 130 col. + 170 b. & w. ills. (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012), £50. ISBN 978-0-300-17926-2.

² <http://archive.casanovaumbria.eu>.

³ T. Henry and L.B. Kanter: *The Complete Paintings of Luca Signorelli*, London 2002.

that time (Fig.33). With its use of the tondo form, of ancient reliefs and 'sculpted' figures in the round, it surpasses Verrocchio or Bertoldo on Florentine terms. The lasting impact of Florentine design practice is also present in Signorelli's great visions of the resurrected, damned and elect at Orvieto Cathedral. It is manifest in the repeated, almost programmatic use of the Florentine-antique '*gnudo della paura*' pose as a dynamic model displayed from many angles and it is prefigured in the unmotivated naked man, seated *garzone*-like in the fresco of the *Testament of Moses* in the Sistine Chapel. Henry argues convincingly that Signorelli designed as well as painted this scene, in haste and with some assistance, in about 1482, and it is characteristic of a gender bias in his art that all the women and children were apparently delegated to Bartolommeo della Gatta while Signorelli focused on the grey-beards and virile youths. But it still needs to be emphasised that both his drawn and painted figures remain distinct from the anatomical rigours of Pollaiuolo and Verrocchio. Their abstractions are quite different, and the surface of the body is teasingly eroticised through viewpoint, colouring and veiling, as we find in the figures gratuitously divesting themselves of clothes in the surviving fragments from the Bichi Chapel altarpiece.

While *disegno* and *colorito* interpenetrate in Signorelli's drawings as well as in his painting, the relation of the one to the other is dramatised in Signorelli's depiction of contemporary soldiers, whose posturing, arrogant bodies are abstracted and divided by skin-tight livery colours that disrupt consistent modelling. A different kind of book on Signorelli might treat the fleshing out and colouring of his figures in terms of the moralised body, incarnation and corruption: flesh tones range from crepuscular greys for aged penitents to the demonically mutating tints of the tormentors and gleaming nudity of the Blessed at Orvieto. Henry is more at home with readings of Signorelli's approach and style understood in terms of influence and iconography, and his appreciative observations on Signorelli as a colourist emphasise technical handling and questions of contemporary dress as much as expressive effects or the creation of sacred splendour. The latter is surely one motivation for his distinctively coloured and variegated marble pavements and for his extensive gilded highlights, first adopted in the Sistine Chapel, that arguably respond to the effects of mosaic.

Particular strengths of the monograph are the emphasis given both to recent technical evidence for understanding Signorelli's art and to the painter's ambitious treatment of subject-matter. Predella panels are accorded almost as much attention as fresco programmes and, with an eye to likely literary sources, the author shows how Signorelli frequently enriched his principal narratives with references to earlier and later episodes in the story. The most elusive iconography of them all, that of the *Court of Pan*, destroyed in 1945, is treated not as an elaborate puzzle to be decoded but as a *poesia* attuned to the literary and aesthetic tastes of Lorenzo de' Medici for whose villa at Spedaletto Henry suggests it may have been painted. The plausibility of a Medici patron for the canvas seems to be heightened by the figures' numerous debts, amounting to citations, to Donatello's bronze *David*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, cat. no.4, *Virgin and Child with angels* (Christ Church Picture Gallery, Oxford); and cat. no.5, *Presentation* (private collection, Rome).

⁵ The facial type of St Simeon in Signorelli's *Circumcision* altarpiece (National

34. *Portrait of a man*, by Luca Signorelli. c.1492. Panel, 50 by 32 cm. (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin).

The characteristic and powerful tension in Signorelli's work between the intensely physical and the strongly abstract is one that the book's high production qualities manages to capture, even when the spatial daring of his chapel and sacristy designs is inevitably lost. What makes this book fitting to a giant of painting is not its 'comprehensiveness', which stretches to a list of documented works and a handy chronology at the end, nor the evidence for Signorelli's life, but the advocacy of the work. Here is a painter whose stature is fully realised not just at Orvieto or in his immediate impact on Raphael and Michelangelo, but in the uncomfortable brilliance of the Vagnucci altarpiece or the Berlin *Portrait of a man* (Fig.34). Observed *and* abstracted, commanding the body *and* accessing the imagination, the portrait's rhetoric itself proposes as its subject the fraught relationship of mental and material, art and life. The sitter's identity is lost, but even if we could recognise in it the humanist Cristoforo Landino, as Henry temptingly suggests, the painting would still be no more and no less than the most penetrating Italian portrait of the fifteenth century.

Gallery, London) is certainly close to Bartolommeo della Gatta, but the crisp, busy drapery structure with metallic highlights found in the *Assumption* (Museo Diocesano, Cortona) is unlike anything in Signorelli's later work.