

E. H. Gombrich, Review of John Pope-Hennessy, Italian Renaissance Sculpture, Apollo, Vol. 68, 1958, pp.228-9 [Trapp no.1958D.1]

Italian Renaissance Sculpture.

By John Pope-Hennessy. Phaidon Press, London, 1958

Mr Pope-Hennessy's beautiful book on Italian Gothic sculpture published by the Phaidon Press three years ago was planned as the first volume of three to provide an Introduction to Italian Sculpture from the XIIIth to the XVIth century. The high hopes that were raised by the initial volume are amply fulfilled and indeed surpassed by the weightier centrepiece of the trilogy designed to present and interpret the revival of classical ideals in sculpture, starting with Brunelleschi and Donatello in early Quattrocento Florence and culminating in the classicism of the Lombardo family in early Cinqueto Venice and Padua.

Like its predecessor the book is built round an anthology of exceptionally fine and telling full plate photographs (144 in all) which will appeal to any lover of sculpture because of their freedom from tricks and the concentration on plastic values. All the information and source material (in original and translation) is to be found in the appendix of Notes which will serve as the perfect reference book for all students of this period. The plates are preceded by an introductory essay which, in its turn, is illustrated with smaller text figures interspersed on plates throughout the first part. Obvious as are the advantages of this separation of comment from fact, information from appreciation, it must be admitted that this arrangement sometimes imposes a strain on the reader who must leaf through the book backwards and forward in search of the Figures and Plates frequently referred to. It is to be hoped, though, that no-one will be deterred from reading the introductory essay with this constant attention to the works discussed and illustrated. For this is not one of those perfunctory introductions thrown off to meet a publishing convention. Based, as it is, on the author's lectures delivered during his term as Slade Professor of Fine Art in Oxford it presents by far the most lucid and authoritative conspectus of the masters and themes of Renaissance sculpture available in any language. Rarely, if ever, have the bronzes and marbles of the Renaissance been discussed in a text that matches their own clarity and precision without loss of depth. One is happy to find words like beauty, skill and dignity restored to their pristine meaning by a writer who knows how to be reverent without gushing, critical without condescension. Here is a genuine appraisal that would have been understood and respected by the artists themselves no less than by their humanist friends.

The author often makes felicitous use of quotations from contemporary sources and there is only one such reference which this reviewer found less illuminating; the mention of Pico della Mirandola's so-called speech on the Dignity of Man in connection with the Renaissance portrait bust. If Mr. Pope-Hennessy rereads this mystic summons to seraphic love he may come to agree that he, like earlier scholars, was somewhat misled by the posthumous title of that famous oration. Perhaps it is no accident that this trace of a XIXth century misunderstanding occurs in this section. The problem of the quattrocento portrait bust seems still to be bedevilled by the quest of XIXth century collectors for the alleged individualism of Renaissance man that was largely a projection of their own desires. It was a demand that resulted in a notorious supply of forged or worked-up quattrocento portraits and the author's treatment of this tricky material is perhaps a shade over-confident. Naturally it is not possible, within the context of this review, to discuss the problems of attributions raised by the author, notably this tentative assignment of the best work at Rimini to Matteo de'Pasti. This is one of the few

instances where the admirable principle is abandoned, of confining the plates to well-documented attributions. However, even where one remains unconvinced one knows precisely what the author's arguments are. Those who will want to contest his conclusions will first have to marshal and master the evidence with equal assurance. Indeed it is one of the author's many services to scholarship that he has thus imposed new and exacting standards on the debate that will, one hopes, continue. Lovers of art and teachers of art history owe Mr Pope-Hennessy and the Phaidon Press a real debt of gratitude for a work that will retain its value when the flashier kind of fashionable picture books will look ripe to be pulped.