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The Library Shelf

Lorenzo Ghiberti

By E.H. Gombrich

Lorenzo Ghiberti by Richard Krautheimer, in collaboration with Trude Krautheimer-Hess, Princeton University Press and Oxford Press

It used to be said that our generation of specialists lacked the will, and indeed the capacity, for tackling great themes; the extensive monograph on great artists in the tradition of J.A. Symond's *Michelangelo* or Horne's *Botticelli* appeared to have given way to the learned article or the picture book with an introductory essay and, at the most, a catalogue raisonné. In recent years, though, a number of books have been published, notably in America, which belie this pessimistic view. Panofsky's *Durer*, Tolnai's *Michelangelo*, W. Friedlaender's *Caravaggio Studies* have established a new genre of academic monographs to which format and layout give an air of finality. These important works have now found a worthy successor in the monumental book on Ghiberti, written by Professor Krautheimer of the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, in collaboration with his wife, after some twenty years of intensive research. Like the other volumes it was produced by the Princeton Press with all the apparatus of footnotes and appendices that mark the learned publication. Let it be said at once that this book will prove an indispensable tool for Renaissance studies for many years to come. For this very reason, though, it is hard to suppress a sigh that it should be such an expensive and slightly unhandy tool. The price of twelve pounds must appear daunting to many a library which will yet be incomplete without this great contribution, and the sheer weight of the volume (nearly seven pounds) will prevent all but the most athletic students from taking it home and reading it, as it deserves to be read, in the privacy of their studies. Could not the publishers at least have produced it in two volumes with 334 pages of text being separated from the equal bulk of appendices and plates? This would have much facilitated reference to the bibliography, documents and plates. These plates by the way, which illustrate all Ghiberti's documented bronze works (but not all stained-glass windows and no attributions of terracotta Madonnas) are informative rather than appealing. One wonders what Ghiberti, that lover of delicate surfaces and balanced arrangements, would have felt about them.



It must be admitted that nothing is harder than to bring the qualities of the perfect craftsman to the sympathetic attention of a XXth-century public. There is nothing sensational in Ghiberti and the sheer

beauty of his handiwork does not yield itself to a hurried glance. Even in Florence we are rarely minded to brave the *vespas* and study the Baptistery doors as they are meant to be studied, in the words of a quattrocento humanist, “while the days glide away”. Perhaps only those of us who are lucky to catch the moment when, after the war, the doors could be seen lying in the courtyard of the *Soprintendenza* where they emerged in their pristine gilding, could quite appreciate that inexhaustible wealth of invention that forms the subject of this book.

There is something strangely timeless about the work of the master-craftsman which makes him a stumbling-block to conventional appreciation. Reiner van Huy’s brass font in *Liège* of 1118, Nicolas of Verdun’s Klosterneuberg altar of 1181 belong to this tantalizing category of masterpieces which refuse as stubbornly as do Ghiberti’s doors to be pigeon-holed. The XXth-century art-lover has been brought up to distrust smooth perfection and insinuating beauty. Moreover, our whole art-historical apparatus is geared to the study of the forward march of styles in monumental art. Indeed, this insistence on innovation and the depreciation of sheer technical skill became all but inevitable when the Renaissance took over the idea of artistic progress from classical antiquity and Vasari turned it into a coherent story of discoveries. It is a story easily remembered and easily appreciated and it serves the historian’s purpose sufficiently well to have found nearly universal acceptance. One of the few scholars who worried about its applicability happened to be Professor Krautheimer’s only predecessor in the field of Ghiberti studies, Julius von Schlosser, whose adherence to Croce’s aesthetics has made him distrust stylistic categories. The authors, who generously acknowledge their debt to Schlosser’s researches, scarcely do quite justice to this hesitancy when they attribute it to hero-worship. It was rather a perplexed and almost paralysing awareness of the incommensurable character of personal idiosyncrasies which made Schlosser seek refuge in purely subjective analogies with the music of Bellini. Perhaps our attitude towards Haydn would provide a more illuminating comparison. Despite the fame which “Papa Haydn” enjoyed in his lifetime, this very epithet reveals a touch of condescension towards a master who appears to be pleasing rather than exciting – till we come sufficiently close to him to realize that his mastery encompassed possibilities which we call “revolutionary” in his pupil Beethoven.



The authors bravely face up to this difficulty. Time and again they remind us of the progressive nature of Ghiberti’s work in this time. They show most interestingly how often he was abreast of events in his adoption of International Gothic or in his early response to Renaissance tenets. But

would Ghiberti himself have understood this form of praise? His own *Commentarii* make us doubt it. For the difficulties of coming to terms with a master of Ghiberti's stamp are precisely that he seems to elude the historian's categories. The very concepts with which he operates, "medieval", "modern," "Late Gothic", "Early Renaissance", imply that he knows "what happened next" and that he looks at developments from outside, as it were, as if from the vantage point of aspired omniscience. This book, indeed, with its 563 items of bibliography and 302 digests of documents, its handlist of antiques known to Ghiberti and its discussion of Ghiberti's calendar of Olympiads comes as close to the work of the recording angel as human endeavour is every likely to get. But it implies no ingratitude to state that this wealth of historical knowledge stamps the book as a chapter of art history rather than as a monograph in the traditional sense. The second part, entitled "Renaissance Problems" frankly acknowledges this bias. The first does not always escape the temptation of putting Ghiberti in his place. But to the biographer, it may be argued, this place matters less than the man himself. He should not strive after omniscience so much as after freedom from hind-sight; an innocence for which the past is still a future fraught with infinite creative possibilities which never came to fruition. When writing on Ghiberti's first door, for instance, the biographer would approach it imaginatively from the past, he would judge it by the standards of works Ghiberti may have seen and admired. As historians, the authors take a different road. They analyse the individual scenes in terms of style to establish their probable sequence within Ghiberti's *oeuvre* and postpone their illuminating discussion of "Ghiberti and the Trecento" to a later chapter of the book. This chapter, by the way might perhaps have included a reference to the sculpture of the Orvieto façade and the Giottesque "Life of Christ" in the Lower Church of Assisi. The "Presentation in the Temple" there shows surprising affinities with the "Queen of Sheba" panel of the "Gates of Paradise".

The biographer, perhaps, would also have been more intimately concerned with the task with which the artist grappled. In the detailed comparison between the Gothic character of "St John" of Or San Michele and its Renaissance successor, the "St Matthew", this simple human element is strangely omitted. We learn that the body of the latter is "solider...his shoulders squarer...the exaggerated boniness...of the "St John" has given way to smoother and fuller volumes." No doubt. But then St Matthew never lived on locusts. And could a biographer have passed over the dramatic moment when Ghiberti, some thirty-five years after his triumph with the competition relief, had to return to the theme of "Sacrifice of Isaac"? The authors single out this part of the relief as assistant work. This in itself would be psychologically interesting, but is it really a convincing verdict? Is not the hieratic conception of the obedient Patriarch and his submissive son a most telling revision, one further step away from Brunelleschi's impetuous interpretation which, by the way, may owe more to Giovanni Pisano than the authors indicate? And how, exactly, have we to picture Ghiberti's search for antique motifs to which the authors devote their greatest effort? They have spared no pains to uncover borrowings from Roman sarcophagi and have unearthed similarities of great interest – but by and large the dissimilarities, the transformations which these motifs undergo are even more suggestive. Could it not be said that the antique, for Ghiberti, became a standard rather than a storehouse of quotations? Like his friends among the humanists who gradually eliminated from their Latin usage all "barbarisms" which were unworthy of the tongue of Cicero, Ghiberti sifted the heritage of the past in a slow but persistent winnowing process till what was left appeared to him to conform to the beauty and suavity of those ancient masters like Lysippus of whom Pliny could tell such wonders. It is an approach to the ancients which Ghiberti could have absorbed in the company of Niccolò Niccoli and Ambrogio Traversari without specific artistic guidance. After all, did not Brunelleschi himself approach the architecture of the past in a very similar spirit?

When the authors postulate that Ghiberti must have been converted to Renaissance ideals by Leone Battista Alberti the history of styles may again obtrude itself too much – most of all when they suggest

that this conversion may have taken place in Rome where the two *might* have met and talked at a time when the presence of neither is documented in the Eternal City.

When Ghiberti's contemporary, the traveller Ciriaco d'Ancona, was asked why he took so much trouble with antiquarian research he gave the memorable reply: "To wake the dead". The humanist Alberti has answered the summons of his fellow scholars. He comes to life in some of the most beautiful pages of this book. And if the spirit of Ghiberti did not always respond to the necromancer's call, it will surely look with approval at this stupendous monument to his fame, *mira arte fabricatum*.