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Sonia Maffei. *Le radici antiche dei simboli. Studi sull'Iconologia di Cesare Ripa e i suoi rapporti con l'antico.*

Naples: La Stanza delle Scritture, 2009. 653 pp. index. illus. €130. ISBN: 978-88-89254-03-5.

Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, first published in Rome in 1593, enjoyed an extraordinary popularity during the following century. An alphabetical encyclopedia of allegories from Abundance to Zeal, the *Iconologia* presented these abstractions as persons adorned with elaborate costumes and suitable attributes. Baroque artists including Rubens and Bernini accepted Ripa's book as a manual for composing images of virtues and vices, and restorers followed it when adding limbs and accessories to ancient statue fragments. Much of Ripa's success was due to the author's assurance that his personifications were based on ancient authority, copied from Greek and Roman statues, reliefs, and coins. In the eighteenth century, however, the *Iconologia* sank into obscurity after Winckelmann dismissed these images as inauthentic and fantastical, modern inventions of no interest to the student of classical antiquity.

In her exhaustive analysis of the literary and visual sources of the *Iconologia* Sonia Maffei places Ripa at the end of a series of Cinquecento humanists whose goal was to re-create the world of antiquity in the form of pictures rather than texts. This was an activity of great importance in determining our modern approach to the historical past, as Francis Haskell demonstrated in *History and Its Images* (1993). The Renaissance program to pictorialize antiquity was motivated by a belief that the visual remains of the ancients — architectural ruins, sculpture, and especially the ubiquitous coins — could “teach many things that books never told,” in the words of the antiquarian Johannes Sambucus. The “many things” included lessons in morality and virtue, and esoteric truths about the operation of the cosmos, thanks to the power of symbols to penetrate the soul more thoroughly than mere words.

Among other evidence of an increasing visual literacy in the sixteenth century reported by Maffei we read of the *gioco de' rovesci*, a kind of party game where young gallants competed in creating allegorical figures for imaginary medals symbolizing the finest qualities of their ladies (and some qualities not so admirable). In a chapter titled *Capolavori nascosti* (“Hidden Masterpieces”) Maffei shows that many of Ripa's allegories were based not on real statues but on lost monuments, mentioned by ancient writers, that no Renaissance connoisseur ever saw. These include the archaic Chest of Cypselus displayed at Olympia, decorated with elaborate battle scenes and allegories described in detail by Pausanias.

In the early modern cultivation of visual literacy the coins of ancient Greece and Rome, and the many sixteenth-century books about them, played a crucial role, investing the pictorial program with antique authority. The principal literary sources for Ripa's *Iconologia*, as Maffei demonstrates, were numismatic manuals, especially Guillaume Du Choul's *Discourse de la religion des anciens romans* (1556), Sebastiano Erizzo's *Discorso sopra le medaglie* (1559), and Antonio Agustín's *Dialogos de medallas* (1587). These authors devote considerable attention to

images of minor deities on Roman coins in the form of personified abstractions like Pax, Concordia, and Pietas, and many of their explications were copied verbatim and without credit by Ripa.

Maffei notes, however, that Ripa had little interest in the coins themselves except as vehicles for the images, and the iconologist shows no curiosity about their original historical context or their material function as currency among the ancients. Unlike the earlier numismatic writers who regarded the coin images as precious testimony of the intellectual and social life of antiquity, Ripa treats the pictures as independent entities, “dematerializing” them from their original context and function. Beginning in 1603, when the first illustrated edition of the *Iconologia* appeared, the allegories are depicted as isolated figures with minimal background or scenery. Maffei proposes that Ripa’s process of *smaterializzazione* belongs to a tendency observable in other works associated with the Counter-Reformation in Rome, in which images were regarded as useful weapons in the arsenal of rhetoric, serving the modern needs of partisan and sectarian indoctrination and persuasion. By divorcing the image from its original political and material setting, the motif becomes universally adaptable for artists to reproduce in any medium or scale, and for preachers to add vivid adornment to any homily or argument.

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