Late Medieval Self-Portraiture and Patronage in Pietro da Pavia’s Ambrosiana Pliny

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Abstract

In the late Trecento Fra Pietro da Pavia, a miniaturist in the court-city of the dukes of Milan, illuminated a copy of Pliny’s Natural History for Pasquino Capelli, a famous bibliophile and one of the most powerful chancellors to Duke Giangaleazzo Visconti. In the illuminated letter M that begins book XXXV, which contains Pliny’s discussion on ancient artists, Fra Pietro signs and dates the manuscript Frater Pietro da Papia me fecit, 1389. Within the framing curves of the letter the illuminator further commemorates his involvement in the manuscript’s creation by means of a small but exquisitely detailed self-portrait in which Pietro shows himself industriously at work.

Although created in an era in which art patrons possessed and sometimes exercised the right of refusal should a commissioned work of art not meet their standards, this self-portrait has hitherto not been interrogated for either the purpose behind its presence or how its original audience might have understood it. This essay attempts to shed light on both issues by examining the historical context surrounding the creation and format of Pietro’s self-image, and by considering Pietro’s signature inscription in relation to Pliny’s discourse on the meaning behind the use of the word “fecit” in an artist’s signature. It further considers the influence exerted by Francesco Petrarca [Petrarch] on the Milanese court in order to suggest that the presentation of Fra Pietro’s self-image drew upon Petrarch’s model of authorial identity in a way that the illuminator’s important patron would have appreciated and perhaps encouraged.

Author Biography

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Azar Rejaie is an assistant professor of art history at the University of Houston-Downtown. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh in 2006. Her primary research interests include Italian Renaissance self-portraiture and signatures.

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Current Issue

Self Portrait in Hunting Costume, 1562 Paolo Veronese (Caliari). Hunt Costume, Renaissance, Self, Costumes, Portrait, Artwork, Artist, Painting, Period, Work Of Art, Dress Up Clothes, Headshot Photography, Painting Art, Portrait Paintings, Repeating Decimal, Fancy Dress, Portraits, Costume, Men's Costumes. Phoebus Interiors by Toby Alleyne-Gee. Italian Portraiture. Medieval Self-Portraits. by Medievalists.net. May 6, 2015. In his new book The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History, James Hall examines how this style of art emerged and developed over the last thousand years. While self-portraits did exist in ancient times, Hall explains that “in the Middle Ages self-portraiture becomes very much a Christian concern, connected with personal salvation, honour and love. The two medieval legends of St Veronica and King Abgar, in which Christ presses his face to a piece of cloth, leaving an imprint, posited Christ as a self-portraitist. Pietro da Pavia illustrates Pliny with a series of initials highly refined in their decorations and colours and in the use of gold leaf. In the pages of the Ambrosiana codex we also find in the margins grotesques and drôleries, fantastical animals or monstrous beings, born of the illuminist’s imagination and capable of distracting and amusing even the most attentive of readers. You may be also be interested: In the same date.