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Signorelli seems to have picked up the reputation of being one of the more eccentric artists in the history of Renaissance Italian art. This may well be because his major public commission, although well-known (indeed who could ignore it) is situated in Orvieto cathedral.

Orvieto is not Florence, nor is it Venice or Rome; consequently Signorelli, although given quite a bit of attention in Mrs Jamieson's pioneering books, was not given much by Ruskin and not very much by Burkhardt. I haven't been able to check with Sir Kenneth Clark, but I lay a bet that he has put Signorelli fairly far down the list. It may have arisen to the (almost certainly) English cognoscenti, that Orvieto simply wasn't as important as Siena, Florence, Venice and Rome; hence its being largely ignored. Consequently the art to be seen there would be thought not of the first importance.

How wrong everybody has been. This magnificent book, fully illustrated, by Tom Henry and Lawrence B. Korner gives us, for the first time in art history, a superb over-view of Luca Signorelli, who turns out to have been one of the most important painters of the early Renaissance.

Signorelli was far more inventive and capable than Ghirlandaio, or even Benozzo Gozzoli. One of the reasons why he has been so consistently overlooked and underestimated is simply his age. Dying at the age of 82 (as is thought) in the year 1523, some seven years after Leonardo da Vinci, he had already outlived his age. Signorelli's style is anterior to that of Botticelli (Ob. 1504) because he was trained before Botticelli in the workshop of Piero della Francesca himself. In spite of his training in such circles, to the uninitiated (and who was not so before this book was published?) his style seems almost derivative of that of Botticelli.

But the moment this book is read with attention it is obvious that Signorelli's mastery of the nude and complex composition with figures was a trigger for the far more sensitive painting of Botticelli. The contrast between the two artists is enlightening. Whereas Signorelli was primarily a consummate designer and painter of frescoes, probably finished carefully al secco, but leaving a fair trail of

easel-pictures behind as well, Botticelli was only tangentially involved in fresco cycles, (as in the Sistine Chapel- where Signorelli was paintings copiously as well) and was mostly a painter of altar-pieces, panel paintings, cassone, and the theatrical grand-presentations of 'The Birth of Venus' and 'La Primavera'.

Apart from his inherent quality of genius this last fact may explain why Botticelli was far more the subject of study in the nineteenth century. It was a question of the art-market. There were, come to think of it, far more Botticelli pictures to move about, and get to know, and make a profit from, than there ever could be with an artist most of whose art was permanently attached to a wall, such as Signorelli. Cognoscenti concentrated on moveable art; should one blame them?

Signorelli's extraordinary qualities as a draughtsman are brought out to the full in the coloured reproductions of the frescoes at the Capella Novain Orvieto Cathedral. His mastery over limbs, nude or

clothed, and his beautifully organised and clear drawing of drapery are the first things one notices. It is only after that that one notices his authority in the drawing of hands and faces of character comes to the fore. In many cases the perspective is such that one feels Signorelli has taken courage as a result of having looked at the frescoes of Mantegna. We are given a good coverage of the frescoes in Monte Oliveto with the figures (though much neglected and mutilated in time) of the white-robed Olivetan monks which make an original composition, and most beautiful subdued colour harmonies which succeed in escaping from the more conventional colour-schemes, deriving from Florentine practice, of his larger frescoes.

Altogether this book is an achievement. It is not likely to be superseded for at least the next fifty years. It is well worth acquiring for the committed library, either private or public.

Patrick Reyntiens is an internationally acclaimed stained glass artist, who writes a wide range of reviews on books and exhibitions in the UK. He has work in cathedrals and churches in the United Kingdom, and the USA

A Bad Book Review? You Aren't Doomed. Here's Why.

By Laura Hickey

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