Books

Jean Guillaume, editor
Demeures d’éternité. Eglises et chapelles funéraires aux XVe et XVIe siècles

Jeanette Kohl
Fama und virtus. Bartolomeo Colleoni Grabkapelle
Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004, 379 pp., 18 color and 184 b/w illus. €79.80, ISBN 3050037180

These two books take the reader to the cutting edge of European art historical scholarship on Renaissance burial chapels. Rigorous, international, and highly specialized, both books are about visual rhetoric—about an architectural and sculptural language developed in the Renaissance to honor and memorialize the powerful and assure their salvation.

Demeures is the tenth in a distinguished series of publications, De Architectura, comprising the acts of conferences on Renaissance architecture held at the Centre d’études superrieures de la Renaissance in Tours. Preceded by a magisterial overview by Guillaume, Demeures consists of articles by fifteen authors (six in French, four in English, three in Spanish, and two in Italian), who discuss many architectural and sculptural monuments from several countries. Alain Erlande-Brandenburg writes on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century French royal funerary chapels. Julien Noblet discusses French collegiate churches with funerary functions founded between 1450 and 1550. Fernando Marias and Amadeo Serra explain the Chapel of Archbishop Gil de Albornoz and other tomb chapels in the Cathedral of Toledo, with reference to Castilian royal and ecclesiastical chapels elsewhere. Felipe Pereda links the Capelas Imperfeitas in the Monastery of Santa Maria de la Victoria de Batalha to the Chapel of Don Alvaro de Luna in the Cathedral of Toledo. Alfonso Rodríguez G. De Ceballos describes and interprets the funeral chapel de los Velez in the Cathedral of Murcia. Christoph Frommel surveys sepulchral churches and choir mausolea of Renaissance princes and popes. Luisa Giordano focuses on the Sforza tomb for Santa Maria delle Grazie. Howard Colvin summarizes the foundation of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century chantry chapels by the English and Scottish landed gentry. Krista de Jonge elucidates tomb sculpture and its architectural placement for the nobility of the Lowlands in the sixteenth century. Christian de Merindol discusses the typology and dynastic iconography surrounding the royal tombs in the convent of Brou. Sylvie Deswarte-Rosa explicates the Portuguese royal tombs in the monastery church of Santa Maria de Belem near Lisbon. Catherine Wilkinson Zerner elucidates the Habsburg royal Pantheon at the Escorial. Monique Chatenet examines the funeral ceremonies of French royalty in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Anne-Marie Sankovich applies the metaphor “archive” to burials in parish churches in late medieval Paris. And Nigel Llewellyn analyzes royal burial chapels in Westminster Abbey circa 1600.

The well-organized book reads more like a consciously collaborative monograph than a collection of papers by separate authors. The contributions are complementary and facilitate comparisons conducive to an overview of the diverse topic. Recurring themes are the concern for the lasting fame of the deceased, the Christian hope for salvation, and dynastic continuity and legitimation of rulers. Recognition of these concerns is not new, but the great contribution of this book is to provide a broad range of related examples, analyzed by authoritative specialists, with copious footnotes referring to important documentation and essential earlier literature. Anyone studying these or similar monuments in the future will find useful insights and perspectives here.

The royal funerary monuments discussed are meaningfully related. The monarchs of France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and the Low Countries intermarried extensively, so they were familiar with the monuments of their ancestors and contemporary relatives, and they understood the architectural and sculptural language that these monuments established. This language includes the following principles: prestige is conferred by placing a tomb as close as possible to the main altar or on the main axis of the church, preferably in the apse or the choir; the axes of the transept and the aisles are also prestigious; symmetries are significant, so that placing one tomb opposite another invites comparison and implies equality; references to antiquity imply greatness, as, for example, recurring octagonal vaults, classical orders, allusions to triumphal arches, or sculpture and ornamentation in Greco-Roman style; grand scale, expensive materials (marble, bronze, gold, painting), and fine craftsmanship imply prestige. Besides prestige, these chapels were concerned with salvation and dynastic perpetuation.
Thus, it is best to be buried in a church, monastery, or chapel of one's own foundation or financial support, to have one's tomb in a choir where properly endowed priests or monks will pray for one's soul in perpetuity, to make allusions to one's heroic and virtuous acts, and to decorate the tomb or chapel with religious iconography. The concern for dynastic continuity also results in members of a royal family being buried in one chapel, or in symmetrically located chapels, or clustered together in some orderly way.

The chapter by Giordano is the finest available interpretation of the documentation on the Sforza tombs for Santa Maria delle Grazie, convincingly showing that the unfinished tomb was intended to be installed in the square bay under the octagonal vault at the apse end of the church. This solution echoes that of the fourteenth-century Albernoz-San Ildefonso Chapel in the Cathedral of Toledo, discussed by Marias and Serra, and the “cori-mausolei” explicated by Frommel. Although not qualified to make so sweeping a commendation of the articles outside the Milanese Renaissance, I found useful international comparisons for Lombard Renaissance monuments in many articles. For example, Noble's discussion of collegiate churches puts the Collegiata at Castiglione Olona in perspective, and the recurring discussion of octagonal funerary chapels (Marias and Serra, Pereda, Frommel, Giordano, and Wilkinson Zerner) sheds light on the Portinari Chapel and the Colleoni Chapel. All the articles on chapels in church apses are relevant to the problem of the original placement of Giangaleazzo Visconti's tomb in the Certosa di Pavia.

Demeures has the weakness of its strength: specialization. When experts range outside their field of specialization, they are apt to make mistakes. For example, Frommel errs by calling Santa Marie delle Grazie a “chiesa francescana” (82): it is Dominican; and he refers to the tomb of Francesco Sforza at the Certosa di Pavia: it is Giangaleazzo Visconti's tomb. In a compilation such as this, specialist readers may find small errors, but that does not detract from the overall quality of the work.

By contrast, Jeanette Kohl's book is entirely devoted to one monument. A historian of sculpture, particularly interested in iconography, she gives a comprehensive account of all aspects of the Colleoni Chapel and the tomb of Bartolomeo Colleoni. It includes a biography of the founder; a biographical sketch of the architect and leading sculptor, Giovanni Antonio Amadeo; a chronology of the work from its beginnings, about 1470, through the restorations of the twentieth century; an analysis of the architectural type and civic site; an iconographic interpretation of the façade program; an interpretation of the iconography of the tomb, closely articulated with that of the façade; and a discussion of the ceremonies and funeral orations associated with Colleoni's entombment. These aspects are touched on by the various authors of Demeures, but Kohl's more exhaustive treatment illustrates how broad, complicated, and difficult the interpretation of a funerary monument can be.

The Colleoni Chapel is one of the first full-blown Renaissance buildings in Lombardy, and as such, it has been much discussed in early and recent literature; but it has been misunderstood as an architectural aberration and an example of merely superficial decoration. Kohl demonstrates, with meticulous references to documents and architectural and sculptural comparanda, that the chapel can be integrated into that view of the Renaissance that is more commonly understood for Florence, Venice, and the countries whose funeral chapels are discussed in Demeures. She particularly shows that the structure of the chapel, essentially a cube surmounted by an octagonal drum and an octagonal cupola, joined to a smaller domed cube that constitutes the choir, is related to Brunelleschi's Sacrestia Vecchia in San Lorenzo, the Portinari Chapel in Milan, and the Chiesa di Villa in Castiglione Olona. It departs from these prototypes, and from all of the chapels discussed in Demeures, in its elaborately decorated façade and the fact that it is an Eigentümerkirche, a church of Bartolomeo Colleoni's exclusive foundation, attached to but not accessible from the Church of S. Maria Maggiore.

One strength of Kohl's book is that it solves, or partially solves, problems (such as the chronology of the construction of the chapel and the tomb, the attribution of both the architectural design and the sculpture to Amadeo and his associates, later modifications to the chapel, the logic of the urban site, and numerous iconographic problems) in a thorough and convincing manner, coming to conclusions when the evidence supports them, but leaving matters open when the evidence is inconclusive. Another strength is that the author has digested all the published documentation and supplemented it with new documents from the archive of the Luogo Pio Colleoni; especially fruitful are the Libri terminazioni that record decisions and expenditures regarding the chapel from the late fifteenth century until the nineteenth and are useful for the history of the chapel after Colleoni's death in 1475. Kohl has articulated the contributions of the older literature, such as Meyer, Belotti, Meli, and Piel, with the more recent studies of the chapel.2

Particularly important for her overall interpretation of the façade and the tomb is the recognition of the large oculus as a wheel of fortune, dominated by a statue of Alexander the Great, who is seen as an antique prototype of the Condottiere Colleoni. Similarly, the busts of Julius Caesar and Trajan represent prototypes to which Colleoni is comparable. Moreover, the references to Hercules in the façade reliefs and in a statue on the tomb characterize Colleoni as a kind of “Hercules novus,” and the many numismatic medallions on the façade and the tomb refer to Colleoni as a modern emperor: not only a great general but also a virtuous ruler.

Also important is Kohl's discussion of Colleoni's armor and standard, which were displayed on the tomb until the seventeenth century. She shows that the impress on the standard depicted Colleoni

Books 281
grasping the hair of Fortuna/Occasio, and this she neatly ties to the wheel of fortune on the façade and the statues of David and Judith on the tomb, both of which originally showed a heroic figure grasping the head of a defeated foe by the hair. Kohl explicitly relates the imagery of the chapel and the tomb to rhetoric by showing many similarities between the art and two funeral orations (references to antique and biblical heroes and emphasis on themes such as Virtus, Fortuna, and triumph), one of which is published in an appendix. Overall, she interprets the iconography of the chapel and the tomb as reflecting the same concerns for fame and salvation as recurred in Demeures, but a concern for dynastic continuity was not relevant for Colleoni, as he had no sons who could succeed him and his grandsons were not military men who could have held his domain together.

The concept of “Amadeo’s Werkstatt,” which recurs throughout the book, needs to be more carefully studied. One sense of “workshop” is a place where work is done, but another is the relationship between a master and his assistants and associates. Regarding the architecture, it is difficult to say, as Kohl points out, whether Amadeo was frequently on the site, actually supervising the construction, or whether his role as architect was more limited—say to making designs and models—while the actual construction may have been largely done by local artisans in Bergamo. Kohl uses the concept of “werkstatt” as an attributional strategy, according to which sculpture similar to the style of Amadeo is attributed to his workshop. It is likely that the Colleoni sculpture was made primarily in Binasco, Pavia, or Milan, and this has important implications for interpreting the documents (or lack thereof) about Amadeo’s presence in Bergamo and the attribution of the sculpture.

In sum, this is by far the most useful study of the Colleoni Chapel and the most thorough, insightful study ever done on the iconography of a Lombard Renaissance sculptural monument. Publication of an English edition would provide an opportunity to further refine the arguments, correct some minor errors, and make this important book available to a wider audience.

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Notes

Valeria Cafà
Palazzo Massimo allo Colonne di Baldassare Peruzzi, storia di una famiglia romana e del suo palazzo in rione Parione


The Palazzo Massimo allo Colonne, designed by Baldassare Peruzzi and built in the mid-1530s, has always been recognized as an important but enigmatic monument of the Roman Renaissance. The first private palace to be constructed after the devastating Sack of Rome in 1527, the Palazzo Massimo’s design is entirely novel. When the notion of Italian Mannerism gained currency in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Peruzzi’s palace was hailed as a paragon of mannerist design. The building’s formal elements seemed to fly in the face of canonical classicism: its curved, rusticated façade with Doric pilasters on the lowest level but nothing above; the ground-floor portico supported by robust Doric columns; and the strange, small windows of the upper stories that have been described as “floating” across the expanse of rustication without any architectural anchor. The Palazzo Massimo is no less intriguing even as Mannerism has become less fashionable. Valeria Cafà’s important monograph on the building, awarded the James Ackerman Prize for Architectural History in 2006 by the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura Andrea Palladio, succeeds in shifting discussion about the building from formal analysis to a contextual reading of the palace and offers a nuanced interpretation that weaves together the patron’s needs, his economic and social position, the significance of the building’s site, and the politics of the city at a time of enormous civic stress.

Cafà’s is a densely packed and layered study divided into nine chapters. The author begins with a capsule portrait of Rome in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and then moves in discrete sections through the history of the Massimo family, its roots and rise to social and economic prominence, and its property holdings in Rione Parione. Cafà does not come to the architect, Peruzzi, and his project to rebuild Pietro Massimo’s residence until chapter four. There she interprets the chronology of the surviving drawings for the palace, and in the case of Uffizi 128A (U128A), reaffirms a problematic attribution to Peruzzi himself. Cafà saves a detailed discussion of the building for the book’s penultimate and longest chapter. This structure is telling. The social and urban context of the Palazzo Massimo is so crucial to the author’s argument that she withholds an analysis of the palace itself until the end of the book.

The Massimo did not belong to the oldest class of landed aristocracy but made their fortune in trade as recently as the early fifteenth century. The family’s welfare was thus tied to what Cafà calls