Review of The Young Leonardo: Art and Life in Fifteenth-Century Florence by Larry J. Feinberg

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Filippo Focardi, however, Italian collective memory continues to remember the Italian occupation of the Balkans in terms of a benign rule in spite of historical evidence of sweeping repressive measures. While John Ramsden and Mark Connelly deal with the myth of the Blitz and the prominence of the Second World War in British discourse, Pierre Le Goïc tracks the experience of aerial bombing in the town of Brest in two ego-documents. Philippe Buton analyses post-war voting patterns to show how the French Communist Party benefited from the myth of the Résistance. Dietmar Süß, Axel Schildt and Dorothee Wierling analyse in three chapters the persistence of the air war and of victim discourse in West and East Germany respectively. However, while one can agree with Richard Bessel that the history of the war has become, ‘in large measure, a history of its victims’ (231), the case of Great Britain in particular throws doubt on his conclusion that we have witnessed ‘a turn away from the glorification of war’ (230). The jingoism of the recently unveiled Bomber Command Memorial in London’s Green Park is a case in point. While the volume would have benefited from a more focused engagement with the mediatization of the Second World War, as a whole it offers a multifaceted perspective on the memory of World War II in much of Europe today.


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Larry J Feinberg’s The Young Leonardo: Art and Life in Fifteenth-Century Florence offers a visual analysis of Leonardo da Vinci’s artistic production prior to the artist’s departure from Florence to Milan around 1482. The book has a chronological, biographical focus; nevertheless, Feinberg also weaves in an overarching argument – despite the unfinished nature of most of Leonardo’s oeuvre, Leonardo was instrumental in creating the ‘High Renaissance’ style through innovations in the portrayal of landscape, organization of space, and depictions of human emotion (183). Feinberg is to be commended for including so many finished and unfinished works from Leonardo’s early period, now scattered across multiple countries, some even in private collections. This book will appeal to a broad audience, although it is much heavier in its emphasis on art than life in fifteenth-century Florence.

The book is made up of 28 short chapters that collectively offer an artistic biography of Leonardo da Vinci over his first 30 years of his life (1452–1482). The first few chapters contain basic descriptions of life and politics in mid Quattrocento Florence. Lacking specific sources on Leonardo, Feinberg uses this context to paint a probable picture of Leonardo’s earliest upbringing and experiences, first in Vinci and then in Verocchio’s workshop. The chapters dedicated to Leonardo’s time in the workshop explore themes ranging from his inability to free himself from flawed contemporary paradigms about the organs of the body to his probable homosexuality. From Chapter 12 on works from Leonardo’s pen, brush and perhaps even chisel become more abundant in the historical record. Hence, the
remaining chapters tend to focus on a single work of art or a specific theme from Leonardo’s notebooks. For example, Chapter 12 examines the *Virgin and Child with a Carnation* (c. 1476–78), with much of the discussion focused on the Virgin’s emerald brooch and fifteenth-century conceptions of that stone. Unfinished works like the *Madonna of the Cat* (c. 1478–80) receive a chapter, as do well-known portraits such as the *Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci* (c. 1478–80) and the *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani (Lady with an Ermine)* (c. 1485). Each chapter situates the piece of art in a context of ideas or studies present in Leonardo’s notebooks or probable fifteenth-century conceptions of a part of a piece of art. The book’s final chapters shift towards arguments about Leonardo’s impact. Chapter 21 argues that Leonardo’s unfinished *Adoration of the Magi* created a new ‘High Renaissance’ style of art through its joint focus on the expressions of individuals and how they all fit together in the composition. Subsequent chapters discuss Leonardo’s innovations, with the ‘spiraling form of contrapposto’ (162) so common in mannerist art of the sixteenth century, attribute Giorgio Vasari’s famous tripartite periodization scheme to Leonardo, and claim that Leonardo created the ‘new genre of half-length, beautiful-lady pictures’ by handing out some of his preliminary sketches on the topic in the early sixteenth century.

Feinberg has assembled a beautiful book that attempts to correct several common misconceptions about Leonardo da Vinci, while also giving readers a taste of fifteenth-century Florence. It is copiously illustrated and a delight to read. However, to an historian, the book seems far more dedicated to examining Leonardo’s early artistic style and works than establishing the context in which Leonardo lived and worked. For example, Leonardo’s relationships with other Florentines are hinted at, but usually through the lens of artistic influences. Leonardo’s father appears repeatedly in the book, but usually in cameo appearances related to the probable origin of an artistic commission. The vibrancy and social fabric of Florence in the 1460s and 1470s likewise makes appearances—often in fascinating pages devoted to dissecting a portion of a painting or drawing—but these snapshots add up to a book more about Leonardo’s early artistic production than Leonardo’s interactions with the world around him. The reader without a background in the history or art history of Renaissance Florence will find in this book a welcoming introduction to the production and some styles of Renaissance art in the later fifteenth century. Specialists too can find here an introduction to the early artistic production of Leonardo da Vinci, but they will undoubtedly seek out more specialized studies to fill in Leonardo’s social context as well as for details on particular works of art.


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Porcelain tea cups and golden snuff boxes not only equipped the average nineteenth-century royal household, but, from a certain perspective, can also be