

Court Life at Ferrara

The castello d'estense, "the most impressive sight which Italy offers in this genre," was built in 1385 by Bartolino da Novara, also the architect of the Gonzaga fortress at Mantua. Rising out of the flat marshy plain of the Polesina, the gigantic citadel, with its four square towers and moat, was originally designed for the Obizzi lords as a refuge against popular risings, and stands in dramatic contrast with the white garden-city beneath, its straight network of roads and dignified palaces such as "Diamante" or "Schifanoia," where Borso d'Este went into villegiatura. For only during the fifteenth century did the courtly civilization of Ferrara come to fruition. After a barbarous period of bloodshed and family feuds, the natural sons of Niccolo III, Lionello and Borso d'Este, and after them dukes Ercole and Alfonso, encouraged in Ferrara a humanist and artistic flowering equal to that of Mantua under the Gonzaga, Ravenna under the Malatesta and Urbino under the Montefeltro. This city-culture of the Italian Renaissance was based upon the romantic enthusiasm with which the civilization of Greek and Roman antiquity was absorbed by scholars and burghers, and fostered by princely wealth and patronage. Niccolo III, by no means a paragon of learning and of virtue, inherited, together with the more ruthless qualities of his race, a sense of curiosity and adventure which not only took him as a pilgrim to the Holy Land, but prompted him to search for the most gifted humanists at home. It was thanks to his efforts that Guarino da Verona and Giovanni Aurispa settled in Ferrara as princely tutors and teachers at the University. Within ten years, Greek studies had become so flourishing, that Pope Eugenius III summoned the universal council to Ferrara, there to meet the Eastern Emperor, John Palaeologus, and the Patriarch of Byzantium. Niccolo himself belongs to a more barbarous age. This prince, who had over twenty natural children and who gave to the Ferrarese the stamp of his own facial type—Di qua e di la del Po, tutti figli di Niccolo—murdered his own wife and son on suspicion of their illicit relationship, and shortly afterwards married for the third time. At his death in 1441, he declared Lionello to be his most deserving successor.

Though his father's violence must have overshadowed his youth, Lionello proved himself an impeccable ruler, who shunned violence and excelled in the arts of peace. As a boy, he had spent two years in the camp of the condottiere

Braccio at Perugia. But he longed for a classical education, and for five years became the pupil of Guarino, who in the manner of Vittorino at Mantua united scholarship with religious and knightly exercises. With Lionello dawned the golden age of Ferrarese humanism, of Socratic conversation in the Este Gardens, of art-patronage and the cult of Latin verse. Leon Battista Alberti was attracted to the prince, and Niccolo Pisano stayed at Ferrara and painted the duke's likeness, grave beyond his years, with steep brow, firm mouth, and proud set features. During these last years of Lionello's life, Piero della Francesca too worked in the palace; and from the Flemish north came Roger van der Weyden to paint a triptych for the duke and the portrait of Meliaduse d'Este. Thus did the foremost artists of the age leave their mark on the Ferrarese school of Tura and Cossa.

But, if the outlines of Lionello's life are dim and diffused like the heraldic pattern upon his sleeve, those of Borso his brother and confidant, who inherited the Este lordship from him, are as bright as daylight. That is not due to richer historical documentation, but to the unique monument which records, in a number of mural paintings, the pageant of leisure and luxury which was Borso's lot. For in the Palazzo Schifanoia, the "Gloria d'Este" which Borso built for himself as a summer house just outside the town, he appointed the best painters of the old Ferrarese School to perpetuate, "in a great genre-like astrological and allegorical whole," a detailed account of his daily pursuits.

Duke Borso was not a scholar; he had little Latin and no Greek. Nor was he noted for deeds of war. As a statesman he had a certain repute for worldly wisdom, and acted as arbiter between his warring neighbours Milan and Venice, so that Pope Paul II could say of him "he wages war without a blow and without cost, when he rides out with his falcons, and this with more profit than another with 5,000 men-at-arms." Yet if humanism declined, if the rule of Latin was over, if the lingua volgare and French Romance prevailed over Roman poets, if Tristan and Lancelot were preferred to Virgil and Ovid, and if Borso aspired after the paladini perfetti of the Round Table, he none the less supported the University, where Guarino and Aurispa kept their chairs. Borso's passion was more for building than for letters; he laid the foundation for the Certosa of Ferrara and built many palaces. The decorative arts were best suited to his ample and extrovert personality, bent upon the spectacular and the *mise en scene*. He always wore silks and brocades and a necklace worth 70,000 ducats; and it is significant that his finest achievement, the frescoes at Schifanoia, was one of self-commemoration. But if he was vain, he was neither forbidding nor tyrannical. Only one conspiracy is recorded during his reign, that of Pio da

Carpi. On him and his family he wreaked bitter vengeance, imprisoning eight of his brothers and killing two.

Only three events stand out in his twenty-one years as a ruler; and they were all designed to enhance his prestige. In 1452 the penurious would-be Emperor Frederick III stopped at Ferrara on his way to Rome, willing to sell to Borso the coveted title of Duke of Reggio and Modena; for Ferrara itself was a fief of the Church and not his to bestow. For ten days and nights he was entertained with banquets and tournaments, and given fifty of Borso's finest horse and falcons. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, bishop of Siena, addressed the people. Then, according to custom, Borso toured his realm in triumph.

Seven years later, Aeneas, now Pope Pius II, stayed at Ferrara on his way to the Council of Mantua, where in 1459 he preached the crusade against the Turks. Borso made a strenuous effort to persuade the Pope to crown him Duke of Ferrara. He went to meet him in a magnificent Bucentaur upon the Po; white-robed, flower-wreathed children welcomed him to the jubilant city, and Borso promised him the fabulous sum of 300,000 ducats. The Pope walked in procession through the torch-lit town under a peal of bells, but firmly declined to grant Borso's wish. He must needs wait another twelve years until Pope Paul II, a friend of the Este, granted him the desired title. Then, in the last year of his life, 1471, Borso went to Rome with a splendid retinue of five hundred courtiers, there to be clad in the ducal mantle and pointed mitre *per nostra honorificentia et gloria*. The vainglorious ambition of a life-time was at last triumphant. But Borso was not to enjoy it for long. After a month of ceremonious feasting in Rome, the Duke caught a fever and died on his way back to Ferrara.

Rarely can the Renaissance thirst for fame, and the desire to leave an individual mark of distinction, have been so strong as in Borso. It produced the quaintest pictorial cycle ever painted to hold up to posterity the riches, the splendour, the costumes and the persons, of a prince and his courtiers—a unique cultural and historical document still preserved in the noble ruin of the Schifanoia frescoes.

It is not a family picture like Mantegna's work in the Camera degli Sposi in neighbouring Mantua, glorifying the dynasty of the Gonzaga. Borso remained unmarried and favoured the company of young men, of courtiers and falconers. Nor has the historical Este Court a religious setting, as the Medici cavalcade in Gozzoli's journeying Kings at the Palazzo Riccardi. It is simply a pictorial record of Borso's worldly life as a dispenser of justice, a huntsman, a gracious and jovial prince—a secular epic with an astrological super-structure and a thin

varnish of allegory to please the learned taste of his time. This painted "Encyclopaedia" is comparable to the court poet Tito Strozzi's *Borsiada*, a fragmentary and flattering account of the Duke's reign and person.

Of the work of Tura, who submitted cartoons for the paintings of the Months at Schifanoia, no certain traces remain. Nor was he present at Ferrara during the time of their execution (1469–70). The only recognizable section in the vast rectangular hall is the east wall, where Francesco del Cossa was in sole charge of March, April and May. The Seasons had been a favourite subject with the medieval sculptor who, in the symbolical shorthand of single figures, represented grape-picking or corn-cutting peasants.

During the early years of the fourteenth century the Limbourg brothers in their elegant miniatures of the *Tres riches Heures du Due de Berry*, at Chantilly, created the courtly canon of the pictorial calendar, where the labours of the year are depicted alongside the pursuits of lords and ladies, in a medieval setting of walled town and turreted castle. The most famous of them is the "Cavalcade" where, to the sound of tuba and horn, the company is riding to hounds in a formalized thicket beneath the towering city. Peasant-genre and chivalry combine in this Franco-Flemish *Book of Hours* by Paul de Limbourg, who had certainly been to Italy, and whose example may have fired the imagination of the Ferrarese artists.

Yet Borso's principal concern was not with the Seasons, but with the splendid display of himself and his court. The lower sections of the wall, therefore, painted at the level of the eye, are the richest in historical narrative, where Borso metes out justice to his people under the triumphal arch or gives money to his favourite dwarf, Scocola. He alone and the ducal cousins are clad in glittering gold brocade, while even his first councillor, Calcagni, wears a plain red tunic. This is the only scene reflecting affairs of state. Domestic justice was Borso's pride; and as he stands in the temple of "Giustizia," giving a patient hearing to the burgher who, with bared head and eloquent gesture of hand, argues his case, the flattery lies in the contrast of the illustrious presence with the deference and humility of the people: the peasant striding in from the field, the poor widow and child waiting their turn by the column. Beneath the wreath of flowers and fruit, held suspended over the ducal crest, by joyful putti, Borso appears as the ideal prince, approachable by all and enhanced by the *jeunesse doree* around him, erect in their stiff pleated dresses and tight hose, displaying an extravagant sense of station.

The business of the morning done, the duke can indulge his pleasure-loving nature and ride out with his friends and falconers. A continuous epic is represented, regardless of time and topographical probability. Here the ducal party, firmly ensconced on their splendid mounts, legs stiffly apart, and with set profiles, presents an amazing array of courtly youth. Piero della Francesca, who worked for a time at Ferrara, comes to mind. In his battle frescoes at Arezzo the throng is equally close and the faces equally determined. Two types compose the duke's following, one aquiline and aggressive, the other straight-nosed and sphinx-like, hard, square, roughly-hewn all of them, a male society whose natural centre is the duke, himself fuller of mien, richer of gait, more human and more affable. As he talks with generous gesture of hand and smiling face to the falconer at the head of the hunting-party, he seems a born leader of men.

No very obvious link joins the Justice-Temple to the gay cavalcade, unless it be the pretty page with his monkey, who turns away from the ceremonious court to watch the antics of his pet; or the ruined arch through which the rear of the duke's party are seen following the train: the same stern and sturdy physiognomies of the Ferrarese type, with their high cheekbones, protruding chins and tight lips. The arid landscape is hardly relieved by a vista here and there through the arch; it is a world of flint like Mantegna's, a rocky escarpment with stone-steps leading up to the trellis, where white-robed labourers are cutting trees. This is the only hint at the season. It is March; the trees are bare, and the farm-hands trail branches for the arbour. At the lower edge of the wall is a duckpond, where a hound watches a frightened bird, and here a falconer rides into the picture on a rearing steed; a groom is washing down his horse.

This falconer, who with his right hand pulls the horse's bridle to swing the hunt around, and on his stretched-out left holds the bird delicately poised, is a most intense and characteristic figure, in tortured mien and spindly shape reminiscent of Tura's St. George with his heraldic horse and steely limbs. Just above his head the elegant greyhound is racing the hare as in Gozzoli's cavalcade of the Medici princes, giving a new sense of direction to the hunt. Over on the second wall the lay-out follows the same pattern. In a sumptuous Renaissance Hall of variegated marble Duke Borso, decked in a golden doublet with an elaborate black arabesque, rewards his soavis-simo istrione. Next to him, in ostentatious robes of similar texture, are his familiars. To his right, bold-faced, Calcagni stands in a lively group of youths and men, gazing and listening, with tall caps and flowing manes, starched, coneshaped tunics and coloured hose. Marmoreal greyhounds lie or mingle at the courtiers' feet. Through a central arch opens a wide vista of receding rocks, and in its apex a

huge heron is attacked by a falcon. This fine bird with its wings spread, the sinuous curvature of its neck, the straightened legs and clawing feet, is again Tura-like in its pent-up energy and heroic suspense. The tall and indolent falconer beneath looks up at the airy battle; another sits straight upon the edge, his legs dangling down the wall, to dress and release his bird, while duke Borso rides into space on a splendid charger, followed by his men.

Thus Cossa rendered “the holiday-life of his time” and, to do full justice to the sporting instincts of the duke, inscribed on a narrow rectangular frieze above, a race of horses and men and women-runners, which the duke watches from outside the palace building. As he sits enthroned by the double arch, beneath the balconies from which the damigelle, the ladies of the court, are “stretching their lovely necks,” the nimble figures file past in continuous action. “No Greek bas-relief or vase,” wrote Bernard Berenson, “can show a design more swift.”

In the middle zone, above the hawking parties of duke Borso, the signs of the Zodiac—well spaced emblems of Ram, Bull and Twins upon a blue background—herald the months of the year. These are crowned in the upper fields by triumphant chariots of gods and goddesses, drawn by fabulous beasts and surrounded by appropriate groups representing Ferrarese life and pleasure—scholars who accompany Minerva’s train or humble weavers and embroiderers busy at their loom, watched over by the ladies of the court. Above the sign of the Bull, a naked man, holding a large key, opens the season of Spring. Here Venus upon her float, drawn by swans, with Mars kneeling in golden armour at her feet, stirs the artist to his most original flight of fancy. He has painted a Garden of Love with lute-playing and amorous youths in an elysian landscape of meadows and orange groves. It is an island of Cytherea, to which the Goddess of Love, robed in white with roses in her hair, has brought her devotees from the distant city beyond the water. Two fantastic purple rocks frame the passage; and, on either side on the narrow escarpment, lovers stand in leisurely groups, embrace or recline, holding flutes and stringed instruments, presided over by the Three Graces.

Nowhere in the paintings of the early Renaissance before Botticelli has the Realm of Venus been so innocently described, or with such unabashed delight. It is not to be wondered at that the painter of this enchanting “Garden-comedy of Life” bore the duke a grudge for not rewarding him better than his meanest assistant; and that, when Borso, who was not distinguished as a connoisseur, asked his kinsman Baldassare d’Este to paint out some of Cossa’s portrait-

heads at Schifanoia, in order to give them greater verisimilitude, Cossa should have left the court in despair, never to return.

For Borso was above all else a showman. He had the same impassioned desire, which Dante imputes to the souls of the Inferno, for remembrance among the living. This prompted him to place his own seated figure by the side of the equestrian statue of his father Niccolo in front of the Palazzo del Podesta, and inspired his building-activities and the decorative work at Schifanoia. Hedonist though he was, Borso developed the arts of peace to perfection. He saw to it that the town was made unassailable, that the coffers were full to overflowing—though mainly from state-monopolies and sale of office—that scholars and soldiers were paid on time, and that in his realm there was an ample show of Justice. This was his special preoccupation. He would arrest in person a defaulting councillor, or have himself fined in court for failing to give artisans their due. He would walk in funeral procession behind the body of a trusted servant, weeping, and black-robed. It is well known how Borso pardoned an offender who had slandered him in Venice and had then appeared before him, contrite and with a rope around his neck. This man was nearly stabbed in court by an over loyal citizen, and condemned to exile and confiscation only that the magnanimous prince might pardon him. In all public functions Borso strove after the ideal of the perfect prince, and Burckhardt sums up the feeling of the Ferrarese towards their dynasty as “a strange compound of silent dread, of the true Italian sense of well calculated interest and of the loyalty of the modern subject: personal admiration was transformed into a new sentiment of duty.”