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The Pope's Elephant

Silvio A. Bedini
J.S. Sanders and Co. (Nov 25, 1998)
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This engaging history of the young white elephant that King Manuel I of Portugal gave to Pope Leo X in 1514 explores far more than Hanno's brief life as a darling of the public and a catalyst to the burgeoning interest in natural history. Bedini also opens a window on a brilliant papal court of the High Renaissance, threatened by both France and Germany and burdened with the allocation of title to lands claimed by Spain and Portugal in the New World and beyond.

Power politics are only one thread of the story. Bedini deals with the complex logistics of pachyderm transportation by land and sea and with Rome's instant adoption of the prestigious beast. Hanno, as he was named, became a celebrity whose public appearances gave rise to serious crowd control issues. Poets and pamphleteers scribbled his praises, high-ranking buffoons tried to ride him, promoters schemed to rent him for events, and writers mined antiquity for elephant lore.

Bedini contrasts Leo, born a Medici and by inclination a humanist and aesthete, with the problems he faced. The papal administration (both spiritual and lay) was hopelessly corrupt—building the new St. Peter's basilica drained its finances—while the feuding of French and German rulers threatened papal authority and security.

Hanno predeceased his master, dying young and much mourned in 1516. Hanno's physical life was brief; his life in art continues. Bedini takes the reader on a far-ranging iconographic tour—Hanno memorialized in "fresco, oils, water colour, chalk, crayon, pen and ink, stucco, marble, intarsia and majolica." Raphael, Rom-ano, da Udine, Brile, d'Ollanda, van Heemskerck and others turned their talents to capturing Hanno's image—still the subject of research.

The Pope's Elephant is the product of rigorous research and impeccable scholarship. The narrative, enhanced by some 65 contemporary illustrations and supported by a daunting bibliography, provides a detailed but clear account of a moment in European history when wealth and imagination joined hands. Any student of history, art, the role of gifts and the practice of prestige will be delighted by the many threads of this rich, finely woven tapestry.
PETER SKINNER (August 16, 1998)

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