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## FEDERIGO DA MONTEFELTRO, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ARCHITECT

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Geographically, politically and economically, the Quattrocento city-state of Urbino provided Federigo da Montefeltro with an almost ideal setting for a Renaissance Prince. Situated high on rugged, hilly terrain, the walls of Urbino were practically impregnable. Politically, there were few states to threaten Urbino: its larger counterparts like Florence, Milan and Venice were occupied with defending their own borders and in the intricate web of papal and state politics. They did not have time to consider uprising a smaller state like Urbino, where the financial and military investment was not worth the gain. Urbino's only potential menace came from nearby coastal Rimini, which may have hoped to increase its territorial holdings on the interior. Economically, the potential gain in acquiring a city-state like Urbino was minimal; it had little to offer in the way of agricultural riches or land suitable for development. Thus, Urbino remained in the hands of the Montefeltro, thanks to Federigo, who managed to bring it prosperity and a sizeable income by cleverly operating in the role of *condottiere*.

In addition to this favorable set of circumstances, Federigo, who personified the ideal Renaissance prince, was particularly suited to make Urbino the ideal Renaissance court. Federigo's education epitomized humanistic training; he was sent to study at the Casa Giocosa in Mantua under the direction of the famed Gonzaga family tutor, Vittorino da Rambaldoni da Feltre.

Although Federigo was the bastard son of Guidantonio he was legitimized and accorded all the privileges of Guidantonio's true heirs. In this environment, Federigo learned the severity of discipline, a trait which characterized his behavior throughout his life. Simultaneously, the children were taught the values of relaxation and healthy physical exercise which accompanied mental exercise: horseback riding and fencing comprised their balanced education. Music and drawing rounded out the program, which was the model education for this elite group. Likewise, while Federigo was held hostage at Venice (an 8-year-old pawn in a papal ploy), he was a member of the *calze*, a fashionable

circle of learned elite, so called for their attire.

The integral importance of these formative years to Federigo's character cannot be overestimated — for it was in Mantua, at that rare academy, in that intense close-knit circle of learning, that Federigo developed the humanistic traits which were to have a profound impact not only on the rest of his life, but on the court life at Urbino.

As important, however, as Federigo's formation as a humanist is his parallel development as a *condottiere*. For it was Federigo's skill as a military leader which earned him the opportunity to pursue his humanist interests, as we shall see. When it was time for young Federigo to learn the ways of war, he apprenticed with the successful *condottiere* Nicolò Piccinino, from whom he learned the art well. At the time, the powerful military man Francesco Sforza was combining forces with archenemy Sigismondo Malatesta, thereby alienating Federigo da Montefeltro. This was shortly after Federigo's first marriage in 1437 to a woman we know little about — Gentile, daughter of Bartolomeo Brancaleone of Mercatello Durante. She died after 20 years of marriage without producing an heir. In the beginning Federigo spent most of his time tending his wife's lands.

In 1442, Federigo's father Guidantonio died. His legitimate heir, Oddantonio, acceded and in 1443 acquired the status of Duke. Oddantonio was quickly assassinated that same year, however, and the designation of Duchy lapsed. Federigo did not succeed in reacquiring it until 1474, 30 years after his own succession to the position of Count of Montefeltro and Urbino.

The first 20 years of Federigo's reign were fortunate ones: the Peace of Lodi in 1454 assured the *condottiere* an easy life. In effect, he was paid *not* to exercise his skill, *not* to fight. This rare prosperity allowed Federigo great liberty in pursuing his passions: architecture, learning and art.

When Federigo's great military teacher Piccinino died, Federigo offered his services to the Pope Eugenio IV. The pope refused, however, and thus Federigo aligned himself with Alessandro Sforza, lord of Pesaro and brother of the mighty Francesco. (Later, Alessandro became the father of Battista Sforza, who became Federigo's second wife, when she was only 13 years old). In 1446, Federigo was excommunicated by the pope for his involvement in protecting Alessandro Sforza, and for placing political and secular issues above religious ones.

Shortly thereafter, when Francesco Sforza acquired the status of Duke, he offered Federigo the condotta for Milan, a fact which secured Federigo's income. In 1450 Federigo briefly left the Sforza and went to the aide of the King of Naples. This change in alliance was precipitated by Sigismondo Malatesta, who was also engaged in service for the Sforza of Milan. This

legendary rivalry surfaced time and again in the Quattrocento political scene. Borso d'Este tried to mediate the situation in 1457 by bringing the two together at Ferrara. He failed. Pope Pius II tried again in 1459 at the meeting in Mantua. He too was less than successful. In a letter to Federigo, Pius sided with him and called Sigismondo "that accomplished master of treason and wicked plotter of profanity, Sigismondo Malatesta, a true son of perdition . . . profligate and faithless. . . ." The surest sign of approval from Pius came in 1460 when he engaged Federigo as *condottiere*. A last attempt at reconciliation came from Sigismondo in 1463 when the two met at Sinigaglia; Federigo rejected the false offer of friendship with Pius' approval. By 1463, a weakened Malatesta with reduced landholdings, was finally reconciled, or better yet, resigned.

After Pius' death in 1464, Federigo was named *gonfaloniere* (flag-bearer) of the church, and awarded the papal *impres*e of a white banner, gold keys and the *baldacchino* (canopy), as well as the golden keys of Saint Peter with the pope's triple tiara above. Some of Federigo's other devices and *impres*e are a unicorn, a lion, a panther, a bear, a muzzled dog (for fidelity), a black eagle, the Sforza-given brush, three suns, acorns, the Ermine of Naples, the Order of the Garter, or: a white ostrich with a horse shoe or an arrowhead in its mouth with the German motto 'ich an vordait ein grossers' (I'd like a larger.)<sup>2</sup>

The political climate of the peninsula changed drastically in the years between 1464 and 1468. With Francesco Sforza's death in 1466, political power struggles became more apparent and easy successions less feasible. Accordingly, Federigo went to Milan immediately upon the Duke's death and remained there until a successor could be ascertained. Two years previously, in 1464, Cosimo de' Medici had died, and two years later in 1468 Sigismondo Malatesta left his lifelong rival finally in peace. We can only try to imagine how Federigo must have felt seeing the 'giants' of his generation pass away, and facing the uncertainty of the future political situation.

In his private life, Federigo's quiet marriage to his second wife, Battista Sforza of Pesaro in 1460 reflected the serious and religious nature of the man. There are few records of any pomp, circumstance or festivity — an obvious gap when compared to extensive reports of celebrations of other such marriages between high-powered Renaissance families. Information about this marriage can be inferred from the commemorative diptych commissioned by Federigo from Piero della Francesca. More concretely, we know that after 11 years of marriage and 8 daughters, the Duchess finally produced an heir, son Guidobaldo in 1472. (Legend has it that it was only after imbibing all sorts of potent remedies and fertility concoctions — Machiavelli's ideas for la Mandragola seem less farfetched and obviously had some basis in the folkloric tradition of the period). In the same year, Battista died — a fact which

considerably saddened Federigo as reflected in the numerous letters he wrote describing the event and in the art he commissioned after 1472.

A look at the particulars of Federigo's economic situation enables us to better judge his role as patron. According to Clough's economic analysis, Federigo received an average of 50,000 ducats annually *not* to fight. This compares to the Doge of Venice's salary of 3,000 ducats, or a few cardinals who earned 20,000 ducats. Considering that the profits from the Medici bank averaged 20,000 ducats annually during the period 1442-1451, we see that Federigo's situation was particular. Due to a tremendous amount of liquid capital, he became the Renaissance prince who spent the most in the shortest period of time.<sup>3</sup>

How did Federigo allocate his resources, where did his emphasis lie? Certainly he spent more on the visual arts than on humanistic endeavors, for the former were more expensive. Proportionately, Federigo spent 10,000 ducats on scholars and over 100,000 ducats on art.<sup>4</sup> In his treatise on architecture, Francesco di Giorgio points out that Federigo offered inducements to learned men; he is known to have spent 1,500 ducats in Florence on men of letters.<sup>5</sup> He also gave a gift of 1,000 ducats to Campano, professor of Belle Lettere at Perugia in 1445. Federigo's apparent benevolence is in fact self-interested, since Campano was to aid him in manuscript collection, in developing the court library.<sup>6</sup> This pursuit was of utmost importance to the Duke, as attested to by the fact that he spent over 30,000 ducats for books, employed 34 scribes and valued excellent bindings.<sup>7</sup> In the decorative arts for example, Federigo spent 10,000 ducats for 11 Flemish tapestries by Jean Grenier depicting the battle of Troy — a significant and symbolic theme for a successful *condottiere*.<sup>8</sup> While these tapestries are important, they are by no means the largest or most important commission for Federigo in the area of visual arts.

In an examination then of Federigo's patronage, we turn first to the Palazzo Ducale, center of court life and cornerstone of Federigo's reign. As Baldassare Castiglione states in *The Courtier*, one generation later:

Among his other laudable deeds, he built on the rugged site of Urbino a palace thought by many the most beautiful to be found anywhere in all Italy and he furnished it so well with every suitable thing that it seemed not a palace but a city in the form of a palace. . . .<sup>9</sup>

There is no one architect of the Palazzo Ducale; rather there is a synthesis of several stylistic elements from the northern courts. While the origins of these components can be traced to Michelozzo's Palazzo Medici or the Palazzo Rucellai, the signature is Federigo's. Obviously through his humanist training

and much study, the Duke had acquired more than an appreciation of architecture; he was skilled in it. According to Vespasiano:

As to architecture, it may be said that no one of his age high or low knew it so thoroughly . . . though he had his architects about him, he always first realized the design and then explained the proportions and all else.<sup>10</sup>

The palace was begun at mid-century, between 1447-1455. The first phase was complete by 1466. It is only after this date that we have any documents pertaining to architects and persons involved with its construction. One such document dates from 1468 and designates Laurana as head architect.

Noi aveno elletto et deputato il detto m.ro Lutiano per Ingegniero et capo di tutti li maestri che lavoraranno alla detto opera . . . Dando al detto maestro Lutiano pieno arbitrio et potestà et libera bailia et possanza, . . . et tutte l'altre cose fare le quali s'appartiene ad un Architetto et Capo maestro deputato ad un lavoro. . . .<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to note that the word "ingegniero" is used, which could imply a much more functional/operational supervisory capacity and not the true planner. Later, the word "architetto" is also used, however its meaning is ambiguous, especially in the context when used with "capo" of the other workers. Historical context and usage make a clear interpretation of the job performed very difficult. Attributed to Laurana's design is the high vaulted ceiling in the anachronistically named Sala del Trono. The decorative elements are a later addition completed by Francesco di Giorgio.

A look at the floor plan of the Palazzo reveals a three-part design: two areas of symmetrically arranged main court rooms and in between the two towers and loggia. The loggia is a typically humanist feature, linking both sides of the palace and encouraging a conversational gathering place. The asymmetrical placement of the apertures on the rusticated facade does not remind us of the Medici or Rucellai palazzi; whereas the symmetry of the inner courtyard is a typical feature of the Quattrocento palazzo. In particular, the courtyard at Urbino has reached a higher level of perfection, if we consider Alberti's theories on the harmonious placement of columns.

The principal ornament in all Architecture certainly lies in the Columns; for many of them fit together to embellish porticoes, walls and all manner of apertures, and even a single one is handsome, and adorns the meeting of several streets, a theatre, an open square. . . .<sup>12</sup>

The originality of Alberti's thought is revealed later:

These things I do not find committed to writing by any of the Ancients but I have gathered them by my own industry and application from the works of the best masters. All that is to follow may be for the most part referred to the proportions of the lines already treated and will be very delightful and of great use, especially to the improvement of Painters.<sup>13</sup>

This could refer to the study of the Ideal City, by an unknown artist, or to any architectural background in painting. The aforementioned graphic study of perspective does indeed reflect Alberti's principles as expressed in his architectural treatise, *De re aedificatoria*. Since Leon Battista Alberti was the architect of the Tempio Malatestiano at Rimini, we can imagine that he exerted his influence in Urbino as well. As mentioned previously, Federigo was in strict competition with his rival Sigismondo Malatesta throughout his life and certainly some of that carried over into town planning and architecture.

The Duke's own apartments reflect his, the patron's, concerns, as well as the architect's and perhaps even those of his close friend and advisor Alberti. In the *studiolo*, Federigo's presence is felt most strongly. The *intarsia* reflects his humanistic interest in liberal arts. His love for geometry and arithmetic and other precision "arts" is shown in the document dated 1468, the same which designates Laurana as architect. Here Federigo states:

. . . it is the virtue of architecture, based on the arts of arithmetic and geometry, which are among the seven liberal arts and the principal ones, because they are in *primo gradu certitudinis*. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the *Uomini Famosi* painted frieze by Justus of Ghent, which was hung above the *intarsia*, further exemplifies Federigo's syncretic nature. Combining secular and sacred, Federigo has given us a glimpse into himself, his moral, political and intellectual aspirations.<sup>15</sup> This is his personal choice, reflecting once again his individual humanistic education and preferences. Allegory was a favorite device of Federigo's, as we can see in the portraiture and other decorative arts commissioned by him.

Perhaps the most famous portrait of a Renaissance prince is that of Federigo da Montefeltro by Piero della Francesca. Completed between 1472-1474 it is actually a part of a diptych which shows Federigo's wife Battista as well and, on the reverse sides, the Triumph of Federigo and the Triumph of Chastity. The work, it should be remembered, was commissioned after Battista's death, a fact which is supported by the use of the past tense (*tenuit*) in the inscription on

her panel.<sup>16</sup> The profiles, especially that highly recognizable one, recall the numismatic models of antiquity, especially since there is an allegorical representation on the reverse side. Federigo's Triumph depicts the four cardinal virtues of Justice, Temperance, Prudence, and Fortitude as he rides into Florence after the victory at Volterra. This victory was actually two-sided: Federigo the *condottiere* was the indisputable winner, yet the blemish lies in the brutal sacking of the beaten hill town which followed the military conquest. Could the allegorical representation be an attempt on Federigo's part to justify the battle, to show it in a better light? The triumph theme would undoubtedly be linked to Volterra by virtue of the date — 1472. Federigo's intentions in commissioning the portraits are multiple, and subject to question. How were the portraits displayed, and for whose benefit? Were they in public view, free-standing so that visitors could observe both the allegorical side as well as the straight portrait, or were they intended for Federigo's private delight?

It is interesting to note here, that while Federigo did glorify himself and his military prowess, he never erected an equestrian commemorative, either in monument or fresco form, as was the custom of some other courts in honoring their *condottieri* (Colleoni, Gattamelatta, Francesco Sforza, etc.).

In the Justus of Ghent portrait, Federigo's exemplar father figure is depicted in both the personal and the political sense. Here Federigo graphically demonstrates his intellectual capacities as he and his son Guidobaldo listen to an oration. The prominence of the architectural setting is a recurrent topos in art commissioned by Federigo. In the *Flagellation* by Piero della Francesca the portrait of the Duke to the extreme right is of secondary importance, yet the architectural setting is prominent. The flagellation theme is a favorite of Federigo's, as exemplified by the Francesco di Giorgio bronze where once again architecture plays an integral part of the composition.<sup>17</sup> The apparent emphasis on architecture, adhering to Alberti's and Piero's principles on perspective, underline Federigo's preference for this art.

Finally, in the Pedro Berruguete portrait and in Piero's Madonna and Saints and Angels and the Duke, we find Federigo portrayed in his *condottiere's* armor, despite the incongruity of this habilement in the subject matter. These paintings bear out the multifaceted nature of Federigo's personality: *condottiere*, religious man, patron, father, humanist. If the pose of reading (most likely a copy of the Bible he himself commissioned) in armor seems strange, it should be remembered that Federigo embodied many of the virtues associated with a Renaissance prince, from war to wisdom.

Of the two court painters, Piero della Francesca may have produced fewer works, but he did contribute to Federigo's library with his treatise *De prospettive pingendi* presented to the Duke sometime between 1474 and 1477. This



was certain to please Federigo, who employed 34 scribes strictly for the purpose of increasing the size of his library. Books in Greek and Latin, Hebrew and the *Volgare* Italian were given equal attention: subjects ranged from philosophy to theology, histories and commentaries, books of ethics, etc. The classical authors were represented along with more contemporary authors such as Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. A glance at the scheme for the Studiolo's *Uomini Famosi* tells us more about the library's contents. As Vespasiano put it: "No other library can show the like."<sup>18</sup> There were over 1000 volumes by Federigo's death in 1482. It is estimated that at least 50 percent of these were purchased from Vespasiano. Undoubtedly this accounts for some of Vespasiano's high praise for the Duke of Urbino. There was not a printed book in the library, for as Vespasiano states: "It would have been ashamed in such company."<sup>19</sup> The bindings were also of excellent quality, elegant and rich. One has only to peruse the Bible of Federigo to see the elaborate illumination to know how important these acquisitions were to him. This undertaking is as well representative of the highly religious aspect of Federigo's life.

In viewing Duke Federigo as political leader and patron it is important to have a clear understanding of his socio-cultural context, that is, of court life at Urbino. There are many legends which naturally surround a historical figure of Federigo's magnitude; anecdotes concerning his jaunts into the countryside and his rapport with the peasants and countryfolk. Federigo was famous for his daily walks and rides, his wit and his *virtù*. It is reported that his diet was austere, without sweetmeats and that he drank only fruit wines and cider.<sup>20</sup> We can suppose that the discipline and regimen which produced the expert general in the field, carried over into personal habits as well.

However, there are much more concrete and measurable indications of Federigo's court's life. For example, an inventory of the members of the court and their designations reveals much about the activities there.<sup>21</sup> Federigo employed 7 ambassadors, a sizable number for a court of Urbino's dimensions, with virtually no foreign or interstate policy. Five architects and engineers were needed to keep up with Federigo's demands, also reflecting the preferential treatment he gave this field. Eight singers/choristers, two organists, and two dancing masters indicate more than a passing interest in music. In fact, it is said that Federigo was quite fond of music and it should be remembered that it was a fundamental part of his education. Accordingly, he kept six trumpeters and two drummers listed along with the captains and colonels, thus forming a part of the military retinue. One keeper of bloodhounds and one keeper of the camel-leopard allude to an exotic interest in hunting, a sport which is not frequently mentioned in relation to Federigo in contrast to many of his contemporaries. Yet in 1475, Francesco di Giorgio designed an enormous

stable for Federigo large enough to house 300 horses, the description of which is given in Francesco's treatise on architecture. All told, more than 350 employees attended Federigo's court, making for a highly sophisticated environment.

History speaks well of Federigo, or at least the chroniclers of his day do. Vespasiano and Santi record his deeds in eulogistic terms. Santi's account is particularly rich in information, despite its rhyming format. These glowing reports of Federigo's actions are to be expected, however, when one considers the sources. Vespasiano, as bookseller, and Santi, as court bard, depended on Federigo for livelihood and had little reason to criticize.

Federigo's seminal contribution to Urbino's court life produced Castiglione a generation later, who in turn, summarized many of Federigo's viewpoints and qualities in his depiction of the ideal Renaissance man in *The Courtier*. While Federigo was born to the role of the Prince, he did not merely preside over the court of Urbino or limit himself strictly to the governing of his state. In an active and conscious manner he cultivated and embodied the Renaissance ideals of military prowess, humanist learning and patronage of the arts. He thereby provided the paradigm for exemplary court participant, as Castiglione later depicts in his treatise. Federigo's intentions are obvious in an examination of his legacy, as we have seen in this article.

Federigo is the architect of more than just the Palazzo Ducale, although that edifice serves as a metaphor for him. During the period of exceptionally long reign, he constructed an ideal court, bridging secular and sacred, spanning medieval notions of defense and Renaissance ideals of perfection in art, literature and philosophy.

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## NOTES

1. Dennistoun, p. 138.
2. Dennistoun, Appendix V, p. 420.
3. Clough's article furnishes these comparative sums.
4. Clough, p. 719-720.
5. Dennistoun, p. 216.
6. Dennistoun, p. 220-222.
7. Ibid.
8. Clough, p. 725.
9. Castiglione, p. 13.
10. Vespasiano, p. 100.
11. Heydenreich, p. 3 note 8: "We have elected and delegated the aforementioned Master Lutiano Engineer and head of all the skilled workers who will work on the above-mentioned project . . . We assign to the aforementioned Master Lutiano full and absolute power and freedom to decide and to do all the things which pertain to the work of an Architect and delegated Head skilled worker of a project. . . ."
12. Alberti Book VI, Chapter XIII.
13. Ibid. Alberti's treatment of columns is extensive. It applies to the courtyard of the Palazzo Ducale in particular when he speaks of intercolumnation (VII,5) and in Book IX, chapter 7 Of the Invention of Columns, their Dimension and Collocation. As to the correspondence of the colonnaded sides of the courtyard, we understand from Alberti Book IX (p. 201) that the sides are to be identical: ". . . the very first thing we are to take care of must be that every part, even the most inconsiderable lie duly to the level and plum-line, and be disposed with an exact correspondence as to the number, form and appearance; so that the right may answer to the left, the high to the low, the similar to the similar so as to form a correspondent ornament in that body whereof they are parts."
14. Heydenreich, p. 3 note 8.
15. Cheles, p. 2.
16. Clough, p. 722.
17. Brinton, p. 41-49. Here there is a discussion of three Francesco di Giorgio bronzes. The artist is himself enigmatic and virtually unchronicled, therefore it is unclear as to when or for whom these works might have been done. However, in the *Deposition* which is now in Venice, the bas-relief *schacciata* reveals portraits of the onlooking Federigo, Battista and little Guidobaldo. The *schacciata* architectural background may be taken as just as indicative a sign of the patron, perhaps, as the portrait.
18. Vespasiano, p. 104.
19. Ibid.
20. Vespasiano, p. 108.
21. Dennistoun, p. 143.

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