

‘Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino: Diverging Paths of
Mannerism,’ Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy
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Exterior view of Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino: Diverging Paths of Mannerism, Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy, 2014. Image Courtesy of the Author

Presented at Florence's Palazzo Strozzi March 8 – July 20, 2014, the exhibition *Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino: Diverging Paths of Mannerism* offered an illustration of the equally divergent approaches taken by European and American scholars to the often controversial study of Mannerist painting. While American scholars frequently characterize the artifices of Mannerism as a diversion from (or even perversion of) Renaissance ideals, exhibition curators Carlo Falciani and Antonio Natali instead sought to establish Jacopo da Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino's individual and divergent approaches to the Mannerist aesthetic, exclusive of any reference to the normative ideals of Renaissance art. Viewing the exhibition freed from the traditional need to justify or rehabilitate Mannerist art was refreshing, and allowed this American viewer to concentrate completely on the works at hand.

The large exhibition presented the works of the titular artists chronologically, with multiple works by Pontormo and Rosso hung side-by-side in each room in an attempt to demonstrate their differing approaches to the Mannerist aesthetic. Works by contemporaries such as Fra Bartolommeo and Andrea del Sarto, with whom both Pontormo and Rosso trained, were sprinkled throughout. The artists' drawings and painted portraits were presented in rooms dedicated to each individual artist, which offered the viewer an alternative means of comparison. Ultimately, however, the curators did not successfully prove their thesis that Pontormo and Rosso exercised consciously or even appreciably "divergent" paths to Mannerism. While the wall text continually sought to demonstrate the differences between the contemporary artists'

styles, patronage, and theoretical approaches, the paintings themselves simply did not support this argument visually.

Regardless, the exhibition offered an extensive overview of the *oeuvres* of both Pontormo and Rosso, demonstrating both the aesthetic appeal of the artists and the degree to which their production varied in quality. Rosso's magnificent *Ginori Altarpiece*, representing the marriage of the Virgin, and sweetly charming *Musical Angel* exhibited his powers of brilliant colorism, while Pontormo's portraits, including *Cosimo de' Medici il Vecchio*, and red-chalk drawings evinced subtle psychological characterization of his figures. Nor did the exhibition shy away from the unevenness of both artists' production, allowing the viewer to make his or her own judgment regarding quality. Hastily finished or incomplete works by both artists were displayed alongside masterworks, including the potent *Madonna of the Harpies* by their master del Sarto. Even when displaying glaring visible problems, the unfinished works offered insight into the artists' working processes, and the inclusion of multiple works by del Sarto demonstrated, perhaps unwittingly to the curators given their thesis, how closely both artists followed the colorism and figural tendencies of their teacher.

As a major exhibition on Mannerist painting, *Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino: Diverging Paths of Mannerism* deserves credit for presenting the work of these two important artists in a fresh atmosphere. Viewers who perused the exhibition without paying undue attention to the extensive didactic materials were able to reach their own conclusions about the relative merits of Rosso and Pontormo, both in their own day and in the history of art. Placing these two artists in juxtaposition, both with one another and with the work of the generation before them, this exhibition presented the artists as deeply human – “born from the same rib” of their teacher del Sarto but equally striving to find their own place in the world. [1] Viewers of the exhibition, or readers of the catalogue or exhibition album, can judge for themselves the relative success of each artist's endeavor.

Exhibition Schedule: Florence Palazzo Strozzi, March 8, 2014-July 20, 2014.

Endnotes:

[1] Carlo Falciani and Antonio Natali. *Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino: Diverging Paths of Mannerism*. Florence: Mandragora, 2014, 15.