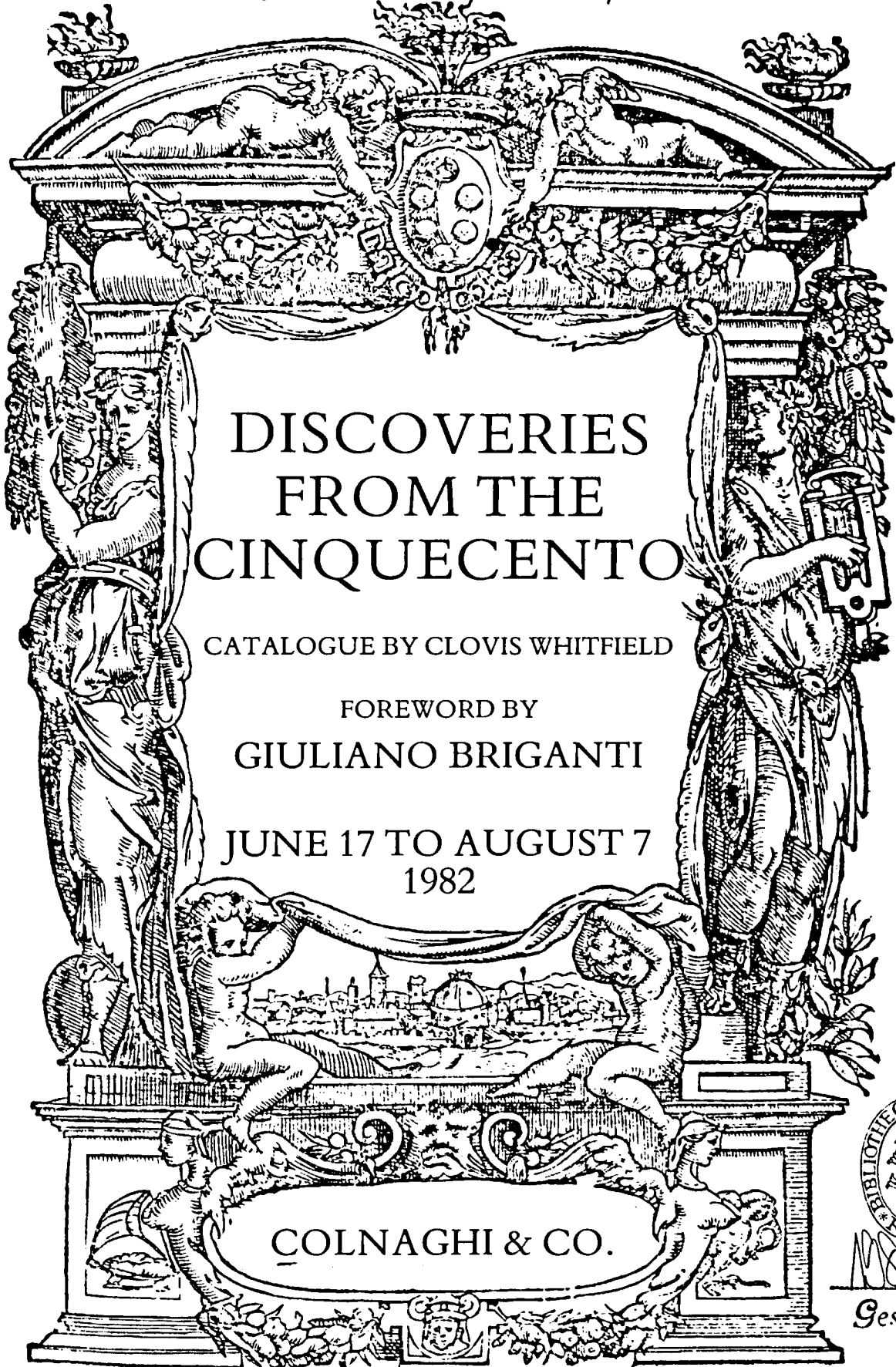


Kat V - COL 4825 - 5821



DISCOVERIES FROM THE CINQUECENTO

CATALOGUE BY CLOVIS WHITFIELD

FOREWORD BY
GIULIANO BRIGANTI

JUNE 17 TO AUGUST 7
1982

COLNAGHI & CO.



1982.1500

Geschenk

(1982)

FOREWORD

Not since classical times did Italian art achieve such high prestige as in the Cinquecento. And yet, despite the sycophantic effusions of those who acclaimed the beginning of a new golden age, the more percipient soon recognized the signs of 'finis Italiae'. New and profound problems compounded the ills already present, and the sixteenth century undoubtedly saw the beginning of a social, economic and political decline, marked as it was by the disavowal of national unity. At its start, during the first decade, Italy could still seem to be the most advanced country in Europe in terms of the richness of its intellectual life and social framework. But at the same moment there is already apparent an inherent contradiction between this prestige and the incapacity of the Italians to employ the moral and intellectual forces behind it to sustain a collective political force. In other words, we can recognize here the failure to achieve self-government, which was to be the single most important common denominator in Italian political life during the centuries that followed.

These ideas are commonplace; but I believe that by employing a more subtle investigative method that goes beyond the schematic definitions of the sociology of art, it is possible to gain an understanding of the association that lies between this very marked decadence and the artistic prestige that was acclaimed throughout Europe. In fact it is during the course of the traumatic events beginning with the long and difficult Italian wars and ending with the Spanish occupation (embracing the Sack of Rome and the siege of Florence), in an ever worsening economic climate leading to the loss of financial stability, and while the effects of the Reformation were more and more rigorous, that Italian art conquered Europe. But at what price? The matter becomes much clearer if we consider that the '*stile italiano*', as the expression of the humanist tradition of which it was the most complete expression, was regarded as the most suitable vehicle by the ruling classes of a Europe that was still half Gothic and half Byzantine, and full of new and extraordinary ideas that were quite foreign to humanist thinking, but which nonetheless were contributory to it even though they were not patrician in origin and substantially contrary to the ideas of the Renaissance. The '*stile italiano*' or *maniera* was most appropriate to the external forms and public image of the new political powers which came into existence in Europe after the coronation of Charles V in Bologna in 1530.

At the very beginning of the century, the 'secret' of Italian art, which was no secret at all but lay in the mystery of the proportion of human figures, allied to the science of perspective, inspired the creations of Dürer, who understood what hitherto had only been realized by Italian artists. But the guidelines constituted by principles of proportion and the rules of perspective, intrinsic to Italian art, could only be disseminated through the courts of Europe when these very principles were seriously questioned and had been supplanted by a new concept, the '*modello di stile*'. This style was what Vasari saw as '*maniera*', and it was what enabled Francis I to transform French taste away from her Gothic heritage to a sophisticated modern aesthetic. To quote Roberto Longhi, he drove out Ariel and Caliban from the Celtic forest of Fontainebleau and filled it instead with nymphs and satyrs, creating the love of Italy celebrated by Etienne. In the same way Philip II materialized his Italian dream at the Escorial, and Emperor Rudolph in the castle at Prague.

It is undoubtedly true that the atmosphere of impending doom that hung over Italy because of the failure to secure any political continuity was a constant backdrop to the new artistic developments. The spiritual uncertainty that informs them is a reflection of a difficult and hostile world. Already during the reign of Leo X, which Vasari nostalgically recalled as 'the last golden age', questions were raised about the conventional notion of classicism, which up till this point had been considered the highest achievement of the '*bella maniera*'. It was just this moment of perfect harmony attained by a patrician and conservative society whose ideals were characterized by stability and continuity, that served as the stylistic models for those new European powers. They, however, possessed the means to achieve what the Italian states had never been able to do in terms of stability and continuity.

At the same period, there emerged a concept of Italy that was not limited to Florence, but included other parts like Venice, Padua and the South. This national sense was founded on Roman and Florentine models, and was particularly personified by Michelangelo. And whatever the ups and downs of his fame in periods of classical revival, it is certainly true that the artistic prestige reached during the period of the High Renaissance was never forgotten, nor did the fortunes of painters like Raphael and Titian, and the legendary grace of Parmigianino's paintings ever suffer the slightest eclipse.

This is not the place to give even a summary account of the diffusion of the Italian artistic tradition throughout Europe during the sixteenth century; at the same time this note may appear even too long as the accompaniment to the observations prompted by this beautiful exhibition devoted to the Italian and Italianate Cinquecento. It seems incredible that it is still possible to find outside the walls of museums so many paintings from a period so closely studied, that are either completely unknown or have been seen so little. It is, for instance, astounding that this is the first time that the major Parmigianino has come to light; a masterpiece not only in the artist's oeuvre, but in the whole Italian *maniera* tradition.

GIULIANO BRIGANTI

Colnaghi & Co. are grateful to Professor Federico Zeri and Professor Giuliano Briganti for their invaluable assistance, to Mr David Jaffé for additional research on the catalogue, and to Dr Peter Cannon-Brooks for his helpful suggestions regarding the Maso da San Friano.