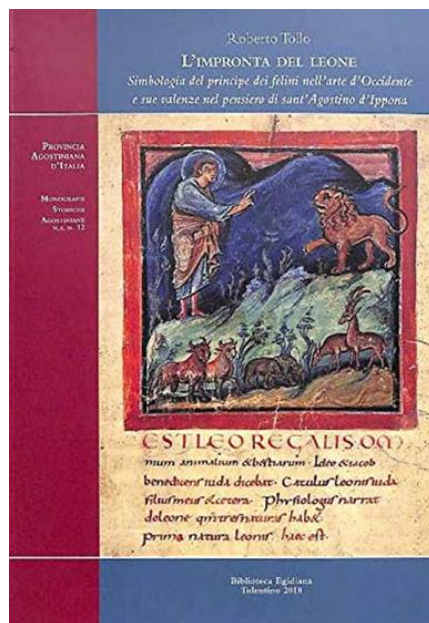


The Lion's symbolism in European art reflected in the studies of Dr. Roberto Tollo

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Roberto Tollo, *L'impronta del Leone. Simbologia del principe dei felini nell'arte d'Occidente e sue valenze nel pensiero di sant'Agostino d'Ippona*, Biblioteca Egidiana, Tolentino, 2018, 138 pages.



The book to which we dedicate this review investigates the iconological roots of the lion theme (*Phantera leo*, Linnaeus, 1758), starting from its fame in the ancient world to subsequent adoption by the Christian religion, underlining the authority of Master Augustin of Hipona and of Girolamo di Stridone.

Structured in ten thematic fascicles, the volume benefits from a competent introduction, signed by the priest Pasquale Cormio and also has an inspired preface written by the author. Illustrated with several dozen photos of case studies presented and analyzed, accompanied by four appendices with the necessary notes and added explanations, the present study is completed with an essential bibliography, complementary illustrations and a topographic index of the Romanesque sculpture workshops.

Despite the difficulties caused by the seismic events that, since August 2016, have reached the regions of Lazio, Umbria and Marche, with devastating effects for the church of San Nicola, the “Egidian Library” of the Augustinian community of Tolentino has continued the cultural activities, including the present monograph by Dr. Roberto Tollo. The collaboration between the author and the Egidiana editorial house includes several books dedicated to the historical-religious and iconographic research on the patrimony of the Augustinian communities, with international resonance.

In this context, Dr. Tollo coordinated the work of hundreds of scientists involved in the elaboration of iconographic studies on works and artists in the service of St. Augustine’s Order, including a large number of case studies

and syntheses of artistic and spiritual phenomena, between the 13th and 18th centuries.

In the current volume, that has a highly suggestive title “The mark of the Lion. The symbology of the prince of felines in Western art and its valencies in the thinking of Saint Augustine of Hipona” the author proposes an ample investigation into the historical sources of the lion’s representations, presenting biblical, patristic and medieval themes in order to highlight the great interest this symbolic motif has gained in the ancient world, as well as the reasons for its subsequent takeover of the Italian Christian culture and art (sculpture and painting) from the Middle Tyrenian area.

This book is expanding on a previous study, entitled “The thorn in the paw. The transmigrations of an iconographic subject”, published by Dr. Roberto Tollo in 2014. Throughout the net of countless case studies invoked, the author presents the multiple and complementary valencies of the lion, an ancient and complex zoomorphic figure, loaded with positive symbolic attributes, such as defender of high moral and spiritual values, but also the expression of evil, infernal realities. Inspirational references to sacred texts show us the lion having the profile of power and greatness, identified with the Christ-Leo of the tribe of Judas, the one who rose from death by trampling over death¹. When invested with the attributes of the fierce beast, the lion identifies itself as the opponent, who kills, terrorizes and drives away the baptized Christians from the path of faith.

The same ambiguous hypostasis is attributed to the lion also in depictions of texts that narrate episodes from the lives of the holy monks or the great hermits such as Antonie the Great, Macarie or Pavel Tabeul. We can add our remark on the fact that countless projections of this symbolism attributed to the lion in Western Christian literature and art are found in a similar or even identical manner in Eastern Christian culture.

Resuming the thread of our review, the Romanic iconography illustrated in this book, with sculptures or paintings of manuscripts, depicts Christ symbolized by a lion that protects a lamb, a deer or even a human figure, between its paws. Again, ambivalently, when the lion is depicted as biting from human heads and bodies, it’s identified with the one who strikes the sinners with death, as exemplified by the 13th-14th century sculpture at St. Nicholas Cathedral in Bari.

A famous representation in the Romanesque iconography, to which the author pays special attention, is the one whose literary source tells us about the slave Androclus. He extracted a wooden splinter from a lion’s paw. The huge feline would remember the slave’s charitable gesture, and when Androclus was thrown to the beasts in the arena of the Maximus Circus in

¹ Roberto Tollo – “The mark of the Lion. The symbology of the prince of felines in Western art and its valencies in the thought of Saint Augustine of Hipona”, pag.19

Rome, the lion -participant in the judicial show - spared the doomed benefactor and defended him from the attack of a panther. The scene, chronicled by many ancient authors, such as Pliny the Elder, Seneca, Aulus Gellius or Claudio Elliano, retained an exceptional symbolic reverberation, so it was converted into moralizing stories in the early centuries of Christian literature and perpetuated in the following millennium. Roberto Tollo follows in this volume a rich series of renderings of the Roman legend, transpositions in pen drawing, engravings in various specific techniques, sculptures and plaster reliefs, each providing an interpretation of the ancient literary sources of the story.

The lion is depicted in countless hypostases, among which with prevalence and recurrence are those of the defender of truth and the righteous faith. Very often sculpted at the entrance of churches and cathedrals, flanking the sumptuous entry gates in the edifices or defending the sarcophagi from the attack of malignant spirits, the lion is illustrated as an unflinching guardian, or as a fierce assailant of some prey that he either overwhelms or bites, among the victims the dragon is often present, as is the case of the the pulpit made between 1158 and 1161 by Master Guillielmus for the Cathedral of Pisa, which was subsequently taken down and reassembled at the Cagliari Cathedral.

Alongside the lion, the symbolic apparatus of the Romanesque art includes a vast array of beasts, gentle or ferocious, which are also laden with well-defined symbolic functions and are most often plastic projections of the texts of some important Western medieval Christian authors, such as the Fathers of the Church, saints Augustine and Ambrose. The lamb and ram are always the symbol of Christ – The Lamb of God, while corresponding or complementary hypostases accompany the zoomorphic projections of patristic teachings. The dragon is the fantastic beast that embodies the enemy of the Son of Man, the bull symbolizes the sin of pride, the horse as well, the hypostasis of splendour. The stag is also accused of vanity while the bear, who “dies” at the beginning of the winter, to be “reborn” at spring, becomes an insulting competitor of Christ. Books with moralizing stories, endowed with exorbitant bestiaries, are sources of inspiration for the sermons of those times, as well as medieval treaties, often fantastic, of natural history.

The author concludes his historical periplus in iconography dedicated to the King of felines and the ancient or medieval, pagan and paleo-Christian sources, reaching the boundaries of the XVIIIth century. Roberto Tollo, resumes – in a symbolic cyclicalloop – the same pagan motif of the slave Androclus, that would bind a secret friendship with his lion saviour. This time we find him as the Saint Jerome who helped, as well, ridding a lion in the desert of the pain caused by a thorn in its paw. In the end, the author finds a few modern directions in which the symbolic role of the lion resurges,

Donizetti's opera music, G.B. Shaw's theater, or in academic painting², reaching the spirit of the postmodern era, when a character like the zoologist Kevin Richardson suggests a warmer approach to the gigantic felines, whom he finds to be docile, even affectionate before a man laden with good intentions, such as the ancient Androclus.

The historic periplus, culturally expanded, suggested by the art critique Roberto Tollo, on the fascinating symbolic identity of the lion, developed over millennia in European art, focusing especially on those made in the Augustian Patristic spirit, is also a source of inspiration for the cultural explorers, theologians, art historians and contemporary artists, who recognise the fact that symbolic structures are perennial and immutable withing their inner essence, reclaiming their function when times demand it.

² *Idem*, page 42.