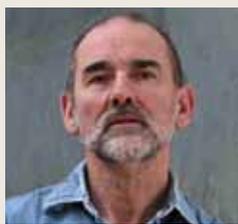




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My favourite room

Christopher Le Brun, the President of the Royal Academy, is entranced by the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini

I first visited the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini when I was still a student. I had been reading Adrian Stokes's books *The Quattro Cento*, so I knew something of the history of the place, but what I didn't know was how I would feel.

What I found was a perfect synthesis of architecture, carving and light. At this particular period in time, you can see classical values balanced with Christian virtue – it's a beautiful moment and very rare. In the case of the Tempio, there is an added, intangible quality that comes from its unfinished character. Its patron, Sigismondo di Malatesta, was excommunicated in 1460, and the building was never completed.

The building is, in effect, the tomb of Isotta degli Atti, Sigismondo's mistress and later wife, and the fact that it is incomplete particularly touched me. The whole edifice is an expression of his love for her in what is really just the shell of a Christian temple. It's hard to imagine

the effect at the time, but the overall impression is profoundly un-Catholic.

For instance, a lot of the images are of the planets – essentially pagan imagery. The panels, carved in the 1450s by Agostino di Duccio, show astrological figures: Aquarius wading through water, Mercury standing among clouds, Venus in a chariot drawn by swans. Pope Pius II declared it "full of pagan gods and profane things", and had Sigismondo

“Pius II declared it full of pagan gods and profane things and had Sigismondo burned in effigy for heresy”

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I used to have a picture book of large-scale illustrations of the panels from the Tempio on the wall in my studio and perhaps they have influenced my painting, because I'm interested in how you embed images in paintings, rather than describe. Stokes makes the point about the difference between carving

and modelling: with modelling an artist creates from nothing and by definition it is in high relief. With carving, you address the formal property of the material and enhance its implications, which is the way I think about painting. I don't force the image onto the painting; I try to bring it out.

The Quattrocento, is I think, an almost perfect period in art history. It is a balance of material, imagination and memory – a blossoming of intellect and philosophy. It is a beautiful point of innocence in a very sophisticated old culture, and the Tempio Malatestiano is one of its glories.

Christopher Le Brun is President of the Royal Academy of Arts.

The Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy runs from 10 June to 18 August. Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BD