

delight



RENAISSANCE MEN COULD BE BOTH SOLDIERS AND SCHOLARS, BUSINESSMEN AND HUMANISTS. THEY COULD COMMAND SOME OF THE BEST ARTISTS AND CRAFTSMEN EVER SEEN. NOWHERE MORE SO THAN AT GUBBIO.

Duke Federico da Montefeltro was the best general in bloody and turbulent mid-fifteenth-century Italy. He was a *condottiere*, a contract soldier, who hired out this very skilful army (mainly to the Pope) to make his little state much richer than its natural resources could have allowed.

Federico's first capital (before he moved his headquarters to Urbino) was at Gubbio. Here, he enhanced the palace, making careful modern distinction between public and private rooms. The most magical of the smaller spaces must have been the duke's *studiolo*, his private cabinet, completely lined with intarsia representations of a Renaissance gentleman's scholarly apparatus. After Federico's death in 1482, the palace treasures were gradually dispersed (helped for instance by the sack of Montefeltro by Cesare Borgia in 1502).

After many vicissitudes, the *studiolo* panels turned up in New York just before the Second World War and were acquired by the Metropolitan Museum. Exhibited there for many years, the *studiolo* was extensively repaired, and reopened in 1996. Now, it and the

restoration are splendidly explained in a new book.¹ Suggested designers of the panels have ranged from Piero della Francesca to Francesco di Giorgio, but the authors attribute them to the craftsmen of the north sacristy of Florence Cathedral. Whoever was responsible had wonderful command of the newly invented art of perspective and unrivalled manual skills.

Half open cupboards are crammed with musical, mathematical and astronomical instruments, the English Order of the Garter, books, weapons, a whisk broom (symbolic of good order), pens and a parrot in its cage (heraldic height of luxury). What a strange place it must have been to work in, surrounded by a fictive world that so closely resembled the real one, yet forever unattainable. But Federico must have enjoyed it, for he had a similar *studiolo* built at Urbino, which happily remains in the palace to this day. P.D.

1 Raggio, Olga, Antoine M. Wilmering and others. *The Gubbio Studiolo and Its Conservation*, Yale, London, 2001, two volumes, £85