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Jean K. Cadogan, Christina Lamb Chakalova, Keith Christiansen, Gerardo de Simone, Christa Gardner von Teuffel, Eric R. Hupe, Fredrika H. Jacobs, Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Timothy McCall, Catarina Schmidt Arcangeli, Gail E. Solberg, Barbara Wisch

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Edizioni ETS

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info@edizioniets.com

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 Celebrating *Magnificenza*:
Studies in Italian Art
in Honor of Diane Cole Ahl

Edited by Barbara Wisch



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Diane Cole Ahl: A Biographical Sketch

Diane's engagement with Renaissance art originated at Sarah Lawrence College, where her mentors included Debra Pincus, Joseph Campbell, and Charles Trinkaus. Seminars, tutorials, and self-directed research laid the foundation for a scholarly career while the College's proximity to New York City provided access to museums, concerts, and opera, her great passion. The turning point in her education came with the Sarah Lawrence Summer Program in Florence. The profoundly moving experience of studying Italian language, literature, and art *in situ* determined her decision to pursue graduate study in Italian Renaissance art.

In 1971, Diane entered the Ph.D. program at the University of Virginia, where her professors included Frederick Hartt and Paul Barolsky. The university attracted those who became longtime friends and important scholars in the field, including Andrew Ladis, whom she met on the first day of classes, Anne Derbes, Fredrika H. Jacobs, Julia I. Miller, and Jeryldene M. Wood. Her dissertation on the early works of Fra Angelico emerged from Frederick Hartt's course on Quattrocento painting and drew upon her travels through Europe to study all of the painter's work. Fellowships from the University of Virginia and the Renaissance Society of America sent Diane to Florence, where she studied paleography with Gino Corti. A Fulbright Fellowship to Italy supported her research and brought her in contact with scholars and conservators with whom she still maintains close friendships. While working in the Archivio di Stato in Florence, she found the only known document of Fra Angelico's presence in Cortona, a discovery that upended traditional notions of the painter's chronology and work in that city. Her publication of this document in 1977 exemplified the rich contextual approach that has characterized her scholarship ever since.

In 1977, Diane joined the faculty of Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, a premier liberal arts and engineering undergraduate institution. Her career at Lafayette spanned 41 years. She taught a wide range of courses, originated independent study classes, and supervised Honors theses and internships in museums and cultural institutions in the United States and abroad, including those with Save Venice in Venice, established in her honor by her former student, Mary E. Frank '79 (Ph.D. in Art History, Princeton University, 2006) and Howard Frank. Beginning in 1980, Diane co-led January and summer courses in Austria

and Italy, introducing generations of students to the art and architecture of each site as well as to opera. Collaborating across disciplines, she co-organized conferences on Leonardo da Vinci's Sforza Monument Horse (1991), Nazi-looted art (2011), and nanotechnology and cultural conservation (2015) that attracted international participants and audiences. An inspiring lecturer and mentor, Diane received numerous awards for superior teaching, service, and scholarship. She served as Department Head and co-directed the College's center for innovation and entrepreneurship, collaborating with engineers and scientists at the College and in Italy. In 1998, she was appointed the Charles A. Dana Professor of Art History and became the inaugural Arthur J. '55 and Barbara S. Rothkopf Professor of Art History in 2001, a chair she held until her retirement. Diane's brilliance as a teacher and dedication to her students are legendary. Among her students are museum directors, Ph.D.s in art history, painting conservators, historic preservationists, architects, artists, engineers, physicians, and scientists. In 2021, Lafayette College will dedicate a new art history classroom in her honor, funded through the donations of students, trustees, and colleagues.

The importance of Diane's scholarship has been recognized internationally. She has received fellowships and publication grants from the American Philosophical Society, National Endowment for the Humanities, and John Paul Getty Foundation. She was appointed the Hetty Goldman Scholar at the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton (2006) and was the James S. Ackerman Scholar-in-Residence at the American Academy in Rome (2012). She was invited for three terms as a Visiting Scholar at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (2007, 2013, 2017). Diane has curated and served on the scientific committees of exhibitions in the United States and Italy, including a groundbreaking exhibition on Benozzo Gozzoli in Montefalco (2002). She has lectured and delivered papers internationally and has chaired and co-chaired sessions at major conferences, where participants have praised her generosity as a mentor. She was a founder, vice-president, and president of the Italian Art Society, which honored her with a lifetime achievement award in 2017.

Diane's publications – books, articles, conference proceedings, exhibition essays, catalogue entries, reviews, and encyclopedia entries – reveal her deep engagement with Renaissance culture and persistence as a scholar. They demonstrate a highly informed interpretation of archival and primary sources, a thorough examination of historic context and the literature, and a close study of objects, whether on the walls of museums and churches or alongside conservators in the laboratory and on scaffolding. Here we can highlight but a few.

Inspired by her friendship with Ellen Callmann, the renowned scholar of domestic art, Diane's article on Renaissance birth salvers (1981-1982) involved the systematic study of hundreds of fifteenth-century Florentine inventories, the investigation of *catasti* (cadasters), and the review of payments in the account ledgers of the Monte delle Doti (dowry fund). She was able to ascertain the patronage and date of the *Judgment of Solomon* in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and, moreover, provided a disciplinary model for future investigations.

Her magisterial publications on Benozzo Gozzoli include her award-winning monograph (1996), several articles, and essays in exhibition catalogues. Challenging prevailing opinion, Diane proved Benozzo's importance in Quattrocento art by recovering the contexts of his works, including the historical circumstances and patronage underlying his commissions. She demonstrated his attentiveness to technique by identifying his innovations, his receptivity to local artistic and iconographic traditions, and his transformative influence. She also published *sinopie* (underdrawings) and an unfinished manuscript illumination in Pistoia, one of his last works, as well as impressive digital reconstructions of damaged and dismembered works well before such demonstrations became the norm.

Published in multiple languages, Diane's monograph on Fra Angelico (2008) is a comprehensive study of the painter written three decades after her dissertation. Encompassing his entire career, it proposed new theological and historical sources for his iconography and analyzed his stylistic and technical development from the perspective of conservation science.

Diane's forthcoming book, *"This splendid, noble art": Fifteenth-Century Painting in Italy*, will be a *summa* of her lifelong study, love, and profound knowledge of the breadth, diversity, and richness of Quattrocento visual culture across the Italian peninsula. Her critical eye and insightful interpretations expressed in eloquent prose promise new perspectives that will reframe our understanding of this remarkable century. We look forward to that publication with utmost enthusiasm.

Edizioni ETS
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info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com
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