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REVIEWS

ANNE DERBES, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy: Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xvi, 270 pp.

Nearly seventy years ago, Evelyn Sandberg-Valalà documented the most significant features of Italian Passion imagery from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries. She described the iconography of the period as "a reconciliation of arid themes with heated sentiment and sympathy, a humanization of sacred drama....Italian art [of this era] left its imprint most distinctly in its manner of presenting certain themes, especially the Infancy, the Pietà, and the Crucifixion. There was not a theme which was not subjected...to this process of humanization."¹ Sandberg-Valalà's work made an important and lasting contribution to the study of Passion iconography and is still considered a staple for scholars working in the field. Yet over the past sixty years or so, the study of iconology ('iconology' referring to the intellectual constructs which shape the way in which images with predetermined meanings—such as the Mother and Child—are presented) has taken its rightful place alongside the study of iconography (the study of images with predetermined meanings, such as a mother and a child).² This fresh approach to the study of images, in conjunction with the growing desire among scholars in the humanities to produce interdisciplinary works, has led to a new type of art-historical study. This type of study, exemplified for instance by H. Belting's *The Image and Its Public in the Later Middle Ages* and Boskovits's *Immagini da meditare*, identifies the image's most significant informants as the

¹E. Sandberg-Valalà, *La croce dipinta italiana e l'iconografia della Passione* (Verona, 1929), 64.

²I. Panofsky, "Iconography and iconology. An introduction to the study of renaissance art," in *Renaissance and Renaissances* (London, 1970). For the argument that iconology has been replaced by social history and, more recently, "contextualism," see K. Moxey, "The politics of iconology," in *Iconography at the Crossroads* (Princeton, 1993), 27–31.

historical and intellectual contexts out of which it is created, rather than its iconographic precedents.³

At one time, it was rare for historians to employ images in their studies and for art historians to contextualize the images about which they were writing and to discuss how society responded to them. Yet appreciating the results produced by each other's methods, historians and art historians over the past few decades have increasingly crossed the boundaries of their own fields in attempts to produce works that combine historical, cultural, and intellectual contextualization with art-historical analysis. Success rates for both the historians and art historians continue to improve with time, but the pitfalls inherent in such studies remain difficult to avoid. In her new book, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy. Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant*, Anne Derbes illustrates both the benefits of attempting an interdisciplinary approach and the challenges that are present when working in a field that is not one's own.

In her study, Derbes scrutinizes duecento images of the Passion and assesses them from both an iconographic and iconologic point of view. The dual-task she set for herself was daunting. In the first place, she challenges well-established theses by such renowned art historians as Otto Demus, Ernst Kitzinger, and James Stubblebine, all of whom argued that Italian artists of the duecento adopted Byzantine images of the Passion indiscriminately and without modification, and, as a result, Italian art of this period remained static and formulaic compared with the art of the following century.⁴ This is essentially a debate over iconography. The second part of her thesis accounts for the changes which occurred in duecento painting. This is an iconologic argument. Identifying Franciscan spirituality and in particular its emphasis on the suffering incarnate Christ as the primary stimuli behind the use of the new duecento images, she attempts to account for the "process of humanization":

Italian painters' assimilation of Byzantine images did not stem from the 'magnetic pull' of these models, nor from 'authority of a privi-

³H. Belting, *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion*, trans. M. Bartusis and R. Meyer (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1990); M. Boskovits, *Immagini da meditare. Ricerche su dipinti di tema religioso nei secoli XIII-XV* (Milan, 1994).

⁴O. Demus, *Byzantine Art and the West* (New York, 1970); E. Kitzinger, "The Byzantine Contribution to Western Art of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 20 (1966): 25-48; J. Stubblebine, "Byzantine Influence in Thirteenth-Century Italian Panel Painting," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 20 (1966): 85-102.

leged form'. These painters took much from Byzantium, particularly when Byzantine images corresponded to ideas that their employers wanted to promote. The compatibility of Franciscan spirituality and Orthodox tenets is important here. But Byzantine images did not inevitably fit the needs of the Franciscans; when they did not, duecento painters employed by the Order adapted distinctly non-Byzantine forms instead. (33-4)

The scene-by-scene format Derbes used in her study is reminiscent of earlier iconographic studies of the Passion, such as those by Louis Réau and Gertrude Schiller;⁵ like theirs, her chapters are ordered chronologically according to Passion scene. In each chapter, she discusses the Italian forms which appeared in the duecento, their Byzantine predecessors, the modifications introduced by Italian artists, and, finally, the ideologies behind the older Byzantine images and the newer Western ones. It is in the first three sections of each chapter that Derbes uses her capabilities to the greatest result. Her expertise in identifying influences, sources, and even the slightest alterations in the images she presents is extraordinary. In her second chapter, "The Betrayal of Christ," she identifies the key figures of the scene, the figures who unlock the scene's ultimate message: not Jesus and Judas, but Peter and the servant Malchus. Depending on how and where these figures were depicted in Betrayal scenes, viewers of these images understood the scene, and the entire Passion, in various ways. While her iconologic analysis of the scene could have benefited from a greater understanding of Western scholastic theology, and especially the ideologies of intentionality and sacred violence, it is a credit to Derbes that these two figures have been given the consideration that they need.

In the fourth section of each chapter, the section in which she attempts an iconologic analysis, Derbes is less convincing than she is in the first three. For each Passion scene, she provides a basic background of Franciscan spiritual thought which corresponds to the scene under examination. Her use of Franciscan texts is good, but she ascribes too much ideology to the Franciscans, which was, in fact, not Franciscan in origin. While she states that the Franciscans were drawn to ideologies which already existed, she rarely discusses from where or whom these ideologies first originated, often leading the

⁵L. Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1957); G. Schiller, *The Passion of Christ*, vol. 2 of *Iconography of Christian Art* (Greenwich, Conn., 1972).

reader to the impression that innovation, rather than assimilation, was occurring in Franciscan circles at the time.

While Derbes's study of the iconographic similarities and dissimilarities between Byzantine and Italian Passion images is sufficiently comprehensive to support her claims over Demus, Kitzinger, and Stubblebine, her iconologic arguments, though valid to a certain extent, at times tend to be weak and lay more emphasis with the Franciscan order than is perhaps deserved. For example, in discussing the "process of humanization" which many duecento Passion scenes underwent, Derbes focuses primarily on the ideas of Francis and his followers. Only fleeting mention is made of Bernard of Clairvaux or Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm's theology of the Incarnation is not discussed, nor are the ideologies of other pre-mendicant theologians who did much to shape later Franciscan ideas about the Passion, such as Peter Abelard, Rupert of Deutz, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Peter Damian. By excluding from her study any discussion of the scene of Christ's Flagellation, Derbes reveals her weakness as an intellectual and cultural historian. She states that "although it is almost ubiquitous in duecento Passion programs, this study has not considered the theme; it is almost unknown in Byzantium at this date, and thus could shed no light on Italian painters' uses of eastern sources" (164). Yet the act of, and ideology behind, penance and asceticism in the West, and particularly in central Italy, is a subject so vast and important for understanding late medieval society that to omit it from her study does a disservice to her readers. Considering, especially, the significant Franciscan connection to the flagellants and the flagellant confraternities of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the exclusion of this topic is indeed surprising.

Finally, Derbes's examination of the compatibility of Franciscan ideologies and Orthodox tenets could have probably benefited from a greater analysis of Byzantine religious history and doctrines. While it is true that the Franciscan order was active in the Levant and probably benefited significantly from the importation of books and relics in the decades following the sack of Constantinople in 1204, there is little discussion as to what concrete connections existed between central Italian Franciscans and Byzantium. In explaining Byzantium's shift from depicting the living Christ on the cross (*Christus triumphans*) to the dead Christ (*Christus patiens*), a shift which Italian painters subsequently copied, Derbes refers to the Iconoclast Con-

trovery of the eighth and ninth centuries.⁶ Eastern iconodules used the image of the dead Christ, she argues, in order to advance their cause: in the dead, Jesus Christ the invisible God becomes visible man. While she is correct that the iconodules stressed the humanity of Christ, it was not, however, the image of the dead Christ, specifically, which advanced their cause; rather, iconodules claimed that the incarnation was the warrant for the visible representation of God in human form. Moreover, details of the later Monophysite theology, which included an outright rejection of Christ's humanity, and the reaction on the part of Orthodoxy to the Monophysite heresy, should have been included in the discussion of Orthodox tenets. For it was in this period, and not the period of the iconoclasts, that the image of the *Christus patiens* was first widely used in the East.⁷

Anne Derbes has composed a well-written, interesting, and scholarly account of the transmission and reception of Eastern images in duecento art. Moreover, the book has great cohesion and reads quite easily. Derbes herself has an exceptional eye for noticing what has previously gone unnoticed in medieval artistic representations. Her knowledge of both Byzantine and Italian images is impressive, and in light of this study duecento Passion iconography will have to be considered in new ways. It will certainly stimulate debate and introduce new avenues for investigation, and for that reason alone it is worthy of reading. Undoubtedly, it will form an important part of the corpus of literature on Passion iconography. Yet it remains primarily an art-historical work, even if it can serve as a useful accompaniment to studies on medieval ideologies of the Passion.

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⁶Perhaps in this, Derbes was following the argument of J. R. Martin, "The Dead Christ on the Cross in Byzantine Art," in K. Weitzmann, ed., *Late Classical and Medieval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.* (Princeton, 1955), 192.

⁷L. H. Grondijs, *L'iconographie byzantine du crucifié mort sur la croix*, 2nd ed. (Utrecht, 1947). Grondijs dates the widespread appearance of the *Christus patiens* in the East to the early eleventh century. While there is evidence to show that the *Christus patiens* was known in the ninth century, it was not widely known or popular. Thus it cannot be argued that the Iconoclast Controversy stimulated the image's creation and widespread use.