

BOOK REVIEW

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The Altar and the Altarpiece: Sacramental Themes in Early Netherlandish Painting by Barbara G. Lane. New York: Harper and Row, 1984. 180 pp.

IN THE FIFTEENTH century, northern European religious thought underwent a decisive transformation. The Church had dominated all other institutions throughout the middle ages but corruption and extravagance fostered its decline beginning in the fourteenth century. Consequently, the public began to mistrust many religious leaders. It is not surprising, then, to find that a new movement arose in the fifteenth century to counter the Church's mismanagement. Advocated by Thomas à Kempis in his widely read *Imitatio Christi*, the *devotio moderno* called for an individual contemplation of the faith and a mystical union with God. The religious paintings of the period are a barometer of these changing attitudes. A study of the meaning of certain Netherlandish images can be of value to our understanding of the disposition of fifteenth-century Northern worshipers toward their faith.

It is precisely the meaning of fifteenth-century religious pictures that Barbara Lane discusses in her book. She studies some of these early Netherlandish paintings and proposes that they "explained the rituals celebrated at the altars they adorned" (p. 1), specifically the sacrifice of the mass. For Lane, paintings of a variety of subjects were closely connected with the liturgical rituals of the Catholic Church and, moreover, reiterated the importance of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

At times, Lane can be convincing as she tries to prove that fifteenth-century Northern religious pictures allude to the sacrament of communion. She sees the enthroned Virgin and Child in the central image of Jan Van Eyck's 1437 *Dresden Triptych* as a symbol for

the altar, where the mass takes place. Based on the sixth-century legend of the *Ara Coeli*, medieval theologians advocated the connection between the Virgin and the holy table. Published in the thirteenth century in the widely read *Legenda Aurea* and later in the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, the *Ara Coeli* tells the story of the Emperor Augustus to whom the Tiburtine Sibyl revealed a vision of the Madonna and Child. The Sibyl told Augustus that the Virgin is the Altar of Heaven. As might be suggested by the legend, Lane sees a parallel between the rigid posture of the Virgin in Van Eyck's image and the angular composition of the altar. The seated Madonna holds the Christ child over a white cloth which Lane compares with the corporal, the fabric that rests on the altar and upon which the priest places the Host after Transubstantiation. Furthermore, Jan set the figures in a curved church apse, the customary location for the altar. The image of the enthroned Virgin and Child in the *Dresden Triptych*, then, is a metaphor for the altar and the sacrifice of the mass.

At the same time, Lane suggests that the Virgin in Van Eyck's c. 1434-35 *Lucca Madonna* also symbolizes the altar and that the image is, moreover, the most representative example of the theme: "rarely . . . was this theme so effectively dramatized as in the *Lucca Madonna*" (p. 23). The angular posture of the Virgin and the placement of the Christ child upon a white cloth at first seems to suggest a parallel with the altar. But the space surrounding the figures is no longer clearly ecclesiastical; the square compartment in which Jan places the Madonna cannot be mistaken for an apse. Given the uncertainty of the setting, to propose that the *Lucca Madonna* is the best example of the theme of the Virgin as the altar is unconvincing.

Lane further insists that ". . . no matter where they were located . . . these radiant panels had to explain the meaning of the church ceremonies they were commissioned to illustrate" (p. 9). We cannot, however, demonstrate that worshipers actually commissioned these many paintings to allude to the Eucharist. At the time, the public was actually so indifferent to the sacrament that the clergy finally withdrew the cup from the laity in 1415. Moreover, in *Eucharistic Faith and Practice*, Yngve Brilioth says that the medieval texts which give instruction for the Eucharistic rite almost never mention communion for the public. Since the typical fifteenth-century worshiper, then, did not express a particular reverence for the sacrament, Lane's proposal that patrons of the time always insisted that religious paintings allude to the Eucharist is problematic.

Furthermore, the means by which some late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth century Northern Europeans commissioned works of art suggests that the patron, and perhaps even the artist, might not have

seen a complex liturgical meaning in the images. In *Northern Renaissance Art*, James Snyder has suggested that a number of important religious pictures of the period originated from workshops where artists, such as Gerard David and his assistants, turned out large numbers of panels which were alike in subject. According to Lorne Campbell in "The Art Market in the Southern Netherlands in the Fifteenth Century," it is likely that artists painted these pictures at the request of clients who simply selected themes and motifs in which they took pleasure, from an existing stock on display in the painters' studios. Given the repetitive nature of the images in early Netherlandish art, whether because of workshop practice or patron's wishes, our evidence does not permit us to define the average patron's motivations in selecting themes.

Despite some flaws, Lane's study still serves a valid purpose. Rather than address a scholarly audience, Lane writes for the novice in the field and thus makes her study accessible to all. She introduces the reader to the major religious themes in early Netherlandish painting and reviews the appropriate recent literature on the subject. She includes a glossary of liturgical and art historical terminology and provides a brief biography of the artists she mentions. Approximately ninety large, black-and-white plates allow sufficient examination of the images. The ample bibliography will be useful to the student of religion and early Renaissance studies.

Lane's book, then, should be read with discrimination. But further attempts to find meaning in fifteenth-century religious images could indeed be valuable for our understanding of the change in religious thought of the period. Similar studies, if produced with greater caution, will enhance our understanding of the relationship between liturgy and image.