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**Magdalena Görtner.** *Römische Basiliken in Augsburg: Nonnenfrömmigkeit und Malerei um 1500.* Augsburg: Wiener Verlag, 2002. 304 pp. EUR 28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-89639-351-7.

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The great strengths of art history as practiced in Germany (generally speaking) can be found in a stringent analysis of archival evidence and a highly detailed and disciplined treatment of the work itself as material object. Magdalena Görtner's book is a fine example of the latter strength. In her book, a revised edition of her dissertation originally completed in 1998 at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Görtner examines six paintings belonging to a cycle of images executed between 1499 and 1504. Görtner's analysis of the individual paintings is rigorous and meticulous and her work provides a substantial contribution to a surprisingly thin body of scholarship on the subject.

The paintings (oil on panel) are the work of three different artists: Hans Holbein the Elder (c. 1465-1524), Hans Burgkmair (1473-1531) and Monogrammist L.F. All together, the images provide a representation of the seven main basilicas in Rome. The one and only painting by Monogrammist L.F. depicts two of the basilicas, S. Lorenzo and S. Sebastiano; the other paintings (two by Holbein, three by Burgkmair) depict only one basilica each (hence the number of six paintings for seven basilicas). The paintings' patrons were four Dominican nuns from the St. Katherine's convent in Augsburg (one nun commissioned two paintings, while the other three commissioned one each) who ordered the images to decorate their newly constructed chapter hall. The basilica cycle (as these six paintings are referred to in art historical scholarship) comprises an important body of work; two of Augsburg's most important fifteenth- and sixteenth-century artists contributed to this iconographically complex and highly unusual (although, as Görtner effectively demonstrates, not entirely unprecedented) cycle. Furthermore, the cycle's patronage and the original

viewing context are firmly established, and thus its functions can be speculated upon with a strong degree of confidence.

Nonetheless, the art historical scholarship dealing with the cycle is disappointingly meager. The reasons for this paucity might include the fact that, with so much known about the cycle, art historians have perhaps (erroneously) concluded that we already know everything about it and thus that the interpretational problem, as it were, has already been solved. In addition, the larger-than-life figures of other German artists—particularly as constructed by art historical scholarship—such as Albrecht Dürer, who vigorously embraced Italian Renaissance aesthetics, and Hans Baldung Grien, who produced such startlingly unique works, overshadow the likes of Holbein the Elder, and to a lesser extent, Burgkmair. Furthermore, the paintings themselves are full of details that are, for a modern viewer, not immediately decipherable, and some would probably argue (as has been done, for example, with Lutheran imagery) that the functional aspects overwhelm the aesthetic. And yet, persistent scholarly interest in different forms and manifestations of female spirituality as well as the ongoing debate about the nature and definition of late medieval piety call urgently for a renewed and critical examination of the basilica cycle.

Görtner responds to this call and in so doing, makes several important contributions to our understanding of the paintings. For example, in addition to her careful description and exacting formal analysis of each painting, she identifies the rare iconographic precedents for the basilica cycle found in two South German convents (in Villing and in Kaufbeuern), thus bringing to light

images rarely discussed in art historical literature. She also draws a suggestive connection between scenes from Christ's Passion included in the basilica cycle, and devotional practices featuring the use of the rosary. The CD-ROM included with the book provides superb, high quality images of the individual paintings, including details. This feature is very useful, since it is extremely difficult to find even adequate reproductions of these richly detailed images.

Perhaps Gärtner's most important contribution is her articulate analysis of technical examinations (primarily dendochronology and infrared reflectography) newly carried out on each of the six paintings. The results of these examinations provide important information about how the paintings were produced, about workshop practices, and even about the possible identity of Monogrammist L.F. For example, the first painting in the cycle to have been completed is the panel representing S. Maria Maggiore, dated 1499 and signed by Hans Holbein. The artist was responsible for another panel, completed in 1504, representing S. Paolo fuori le mura. The underdrawings from these two paintings, revealed through infrared reflectography, indicate, however, that the 1499 painting was probably carried out largely by a workshop assistant, while the 1504 panel was mostly the work of Holbein himself. In addition, part of the underdrawings in the panel by Monogrammist L.F. are similar in style to the underdrawings in the panels by Hans Burgkmair, indicating that the unknown artist was most likely an assistant in Burgkmair's workshop.

Gärtner's work is also typical of German art history (again, generally speaking) in that it avoids speculation. While this reluctance can be positively understood as both the basis for and the byproduct of a strictly objective and rigorously historical method, it can also lead to a rather impoverished and unnecessarily limited understanding of the dynamic and complex roles played by visual imagery.

The consequences of this issue in Gärtner's book are fundamental. The goal of her work, as she explains in the introduction, is two-fold; first, to establish the cycle's iconographic program considering the cycle's patronage and contemporaneous "Zeitgeist" (her word) and religious practices; and second, to analyze the results of the technical examination in terms of new insights these afford us (p. 11). Related to the first part of her goal is the issue of the paintings' function, which, Gärtner maintains, is unusually complex. However, the subsequent section specifically designated for the discussion of that

function occupies only two pages of her entire text (pp. 35-36). Essentially, and to my mind correctly, Gärtner articulates three functions of the work: to provide representations of the seven basilicas in relation to specific indulgences which the nuns could obtain thanks to a papal privilege granted them in 1487; to provide a focus for devotion in the additional scenes illustrating Christ's passion; and to commemorate the donors through their included portraits, patron saints and/or family coats of arms.

But Gärtner never asks how this cycle of paintings functioned in terms of an almost exclusively female audience. She very carefully elucidates the numerous activities carried out in the convent's chapter hall (for which the paintings were made), but never makes any connection between those rituals/deliberations and the paintings, other than to say that the chapter hall was sometimes open to visitors and that this space would thus provide an appropriate place for the memorialization of the donor nuns (pp. 32-35). The chapter hall was in some ways the nerve center of the convent; here is where the most important decisions were made regarding all facets of the community's life, from the economic to the spiritual. Here the rules of the order were regularly read; prayers were said for the convent's benefactors; the prioress was elected; individual nuns confessed their sins in front of their sisters (and were punished and reinstated); and deliberations were conducted by the prioress and her council of twelve advisors regarding acceptance of novices and physical and economic maintenance of the convent. In short, the chapter hall, newly constructed and completed in 1499, provided the space for some of the most fundamental and defining rituals of communal identity for this group of approximately fifty women. It would seem a fruitful line of inquiry to ask how these paintings, situated in that space, and viewed under these particular circumstances, would have communicated with their female audience.

This question becomes all the more inviting when one considers, as Gärtner does not, that the images are full of female figures, not only the patron saints of some of the donors. These women include the Virgin, anonymous female pilgrims, female saints and early female followers of St. Paul (Thecla and Plantilla). Taken together, these women could be seen, for example, as powerful role models for the nuns. This possibility is particularly interesting in light of St. Katherine's reputation as a fairly lax convent and its position as a target of various attempts at (vigorously resisted) reform in the course of the fifteenth century. Gärtner does not consider this fact either, nor

does she even mention convent reform. This decision is especially surprising since the very title of Görtner's book indicates that she will be considering very specifically *Nonnenfrömmigkeit*. By not considering the cycle's audience other than in a perfunctory manner, Görtner misses an important opportunity to understand further functions of the cycle, and this despite some vital literature, uncited in her bibliography, that addresses just these issues, such as Jeffrey Hamburger's work on female spirituality and visual culture, or my own article on the

basilica cycle.

Görtner's promise in her introduction to provide a contextualization of the cycle's iconographic program thus remains largely unfulfilled. Her real strength, as is revealed in her book's structure, is in her ekphrastic description and formal analysis. The bulk of her book is taken up with these methods that in fact do have an important role to play within the full panoply of art historical scholarship.

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