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### Review of Anita Fiderer Moskowitz, Nicola & Giovanni Pisano: The Pulpits: Pious Devotion/Pious Diversion

Peter Dent  
*Courtauld Institute*

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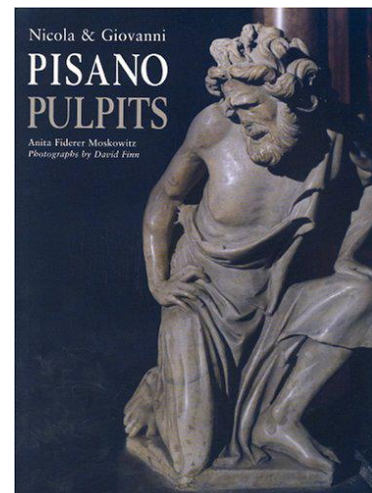


## BOOK REVIEWS

**Review of Anita Fiderer Moskowitz, with photographs by David Finn, *Nicola & Giovanni Pisano: The Pulpits: Pious Devotion – Pious Diversion*, (London, Harvey Miller, 2005), 362pp., ill. 329 b/w, 8 colour, €125 (\$156), ISBN 1-872501-49**

By Peter Dent (Courtauld Institute, London)

*Nicola & Giovanni Pisano: The Pulpits: Pious Devotion – Pious Diversion* by Anita Fiderer Moskowitz is the first monograph devoted entirely to these fundamental works of late medieval Italian sculpture. It is an attractive volume, largely down to the extensive set of new photographs commissioned from David Finn, an initiative that should be applauded. Although the decision (defended and discussed in the Preface) to present a “sculptor’s” rather than a beholder’s eye view raises methodological issues, there are some magnificent images here. The accompanying text appears to be aimed at students studying the art of the period, and engaged general readers who may have seen these monuments and would like to know more. Such an audience will also benefit from the useful bibliography of works cited, an iconographical index, and a brief appendix containing biographical sketches of both artists.



Of the six chapters, the central four survey the Pisano pulpits in chronological order, beginning with the Baptistery at Pisa and concluding in the neighbouring cathedral, after a detour through Siena and Pistoia. Each of these sections presents a clear and engaging summary of the state of scholarship, combining sensitive visual analysis and useful contextual detail. For those without the skills required to tackle an extensive critical literature in several languages, this section of the book will be an accessible introduction and invaluable guide. There is less here to excite readers already familiar with this material, although it is worth spending time with the footnotes, which tease out some of the complications glossed over in the main text and conceal the occasional provocative idea. But the real contribution of the book lies in the frame around this core. In the first chapter, the author deftly sets out the tradition of stone pulpits, helpfully analysing the formal and functional continuities that bind the Pisani to their forerunners, without diminishing their striking originality. She also presents the underlying thesis of the book, arguing for the most part that the changing nature of public preaching, driven by the need to meet the burgeoning appetite of the laity for religious engagement, lies behind this rapid evolution in pulpit design. In pursuit of this idea, a considerable amount of fascinating material on medieval preaching is condensed into a vivid snapshot of late medieval religiosity. The concluding chapter takes the story in a different but no less absorbing direction, unravelling the rich afterlife of these pulpits in the work of later artists, not least Michelangelo.

Inevitably, in a work of synthesis of this type, there will be certain aspects that might have been handled differently, and there were two that struck this reviewer in particular. The first is a general point about the historical context outlined in the introduction. The author places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of preaching and, correspondingly, the liturgical, paraliturgical and ceremonial uses of these extraordinary objects receive rather limited attention. Imagery derived from religious theatre, for example, makes an appearance in pulpit decoration at an early date, and pulpits themselves were used as stages during the dramatic re-enactment of biblical events like the Annunciation. Equally, the ceremonial use of pulpits stretches back towards Byzantium where, from the early ninth-century, part of the imperial coronation took place on an ambo in Hagia Sophia. The Byzantine legacy probably inspired the Venetians to build polygonal pulpits in San Marco sometime in the mid-thirteenth century. Pisa, another maritime republic, may also have had an eye on the example set by Constantinople.

This is not to deny that preaching had an impact on the pulpits commissioned from Nicola and Giovanni. There are numerous parallels between the beliefs and ideas communicated in such sermons and the iconography of these sculptural ensembles, above all, in the imagery of the narrative panels. But direct evidence that these pulpits were built with the purpose of preaching uppermost in the patrons' minds is lacking, and some of the contradictory testimony perhaps receives less attention than it deserves. However hard it is to believe, there is no secure indication, for example, that the charismatic bishop of Pisa, Federigo Visconti, preached any of his numerous surviving sermons from the pulpit commissioned from Nicola Pisano during his episcopate. In commenting on this, Nicole Bériou, the modern editor of Visconti's sermons, has made the intriguing suggestion, mentioned here in a footnote, that the pulpit may have functioned as *un lieu de mémoire*. It is a shame that this idea was not given more consideration in the main text.

While the decision to focus on preaching was clearly a deliberate choice on behalf of the author, problems of a more specific nature arise in the chapter on the pulpit at Pistoia. To begin with, Moskowitz does little to dispel the puzzlement that often besets the modern visitor to Sant'Andrea, who may legitimately wonder why such a large sculptural pulpit was commissioned for a relatively cramped Romanesque parish church. But the impression given by the building is misleading. During the late medieval period, it was the *plebs magna*, the second most important church in the city after the cathedral. It stood by the northern processional and pilgrimage route into Pistoia, and the canon Arnoldus mentioned in the inscription on the pulpit held the key post of vicar general to the bishop. Above all, it was the only church apart from the duomo that enjoyed baptismal rights, albeit confined to the week following Pentecost. This is a significant fact, given that the first pulpit of the series was built in a baptistery. During the twelfth and early thirteenth century, throughout central and northern Italy, the administration of baptism was increasingly centralised at cathedral churches under the control of the local bishop. At some level, it may well be that the Pisano pulpits are among the final fruits borne by that long process.

The concluding section of the chapter, which repeats in some detail an idea first published in the journal *Source* in an article written by Piero Morselli with contributions from Moskowitz herself, is also problematic. It argues that the pulpit originally stood on a trefoil shaped platform, the perfect complement to the underlying Trinitarian numerology of its geometry. This is such an attractive suggestion that it was a shame to see it refuted almost immediately and very persuasively by Peter Kováč (*Uměni*, 51, 2003, pp. 459-73), who presented an alternative reconstruction of his own. Unfortunately, this study must have been published just too late for the author to respond to it in the text or to include in the bibliography.

But these issues aside, Moskowitz has succeeded remarkably well in meeting the competing objectives required of a book of this type and, like the author's previous survey text, *Italian Gothic Sculpture*, it will make an excellent teaching resource. Writing in 1969 of the pulpit at Pistoia, Michael Ayrton described it as 'one of the greatest complexes of relief sculpture in Christian art'. He also noted that he had 'never seen more than five people in its presence'. Little has changed. Hopefully, *Pious Devotions, Pious Diversions* will serve to introduce a new generation of students to these rich and fascinating works. If even a handful of these are inspired to conduct research into the many open questions that hover around this group of pulpits, the book will have more than succeeded.

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## **Review of Lisa Verner, *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2005), ISBN: 0415972434**

By Asa Mittman

Lisa Verner's *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2005), based on her Tulane dissertation of the same title (2001) provides detailed and careful analysis, with clear attention to literary detail and to the influence of sources upon later works. Indeed, her very clear and helpful accounts of the origin and distribution of each of the major texts described should serve to make this book a convenient point of reference for researchers orienting themselves in the study of medieval monstrosity. There is a slight disingenuity in the work's title and opening discussion, in that her subject is really *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in Medieval England*; three of her four chapters explicitly focus on English texts. Even her discussion of *Mandeville's Travels*, French texts written around 1356, focuses not on the original text but rather, on the Middle English translation, despite "its mistranslations and slavish and unidiomatic translations of the French." (125) Verner does mention Old and Middle English in her introduction, but never openly takes on this more specific focus, which would have not diminished her study. Rather, as England seems to have been a major locus for the interest in monstrosity, it would have been a fitting choice.

In her introduction, Verner harshly challenges the "freak show" analogy often found in discussions of medieval monsters, as well as concepts of the grotesque, Kristeva's theory of abjection and, by implication, all modern theoretical approaches, as "clearly temporally biased." (1) Consequently, her bibliography contains numerous dusty works (even discounting editions of primary texts, a full half of her sources are more than two decades old, and much useful recent scholarship is omitted) and very few theorists or historians who make extensive use thereof appear (the sole exception being Michel Foucault, who is invoked briefly in the conclusion, though passages in which he explicitly discusses the Middle Ages). Instead, she argues, we need to examine what medievals said about monsters to see what they thought about them. She rightly questions "the insistence on seeing [monsters] as 'real,' and therefore scientific mistakes, or as purely literary metaphors, and therefore narrative blunders." (8) The pre-Enlightenment context was radically different from our own, and so

