

Andrea Pearson. *Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art, 1350-1530: Experience, Authority, Resistance*. (Women and Gender in the Early Modern World.) Ashgate, 2005. pp. xix + 236 + 64 illus.

Andrea Pearson's scholarly investigation into Burgundian devotional art establishes fundamental gender differences in the iconographical development of portraits in books of hours versus diptychs from 1350 to 1530. The book continues and expands on the author's previous investigations published in "Personal Worship, Gender, and the Devotional Portrait Diptych"<sup>1</sup> and "Margaret of Austria's Devotional Portrait Diptychs."<sup>2</sup> It is a key contribution to our understanding of gender studies in the patronage of devotional art, substantially altering accepted perspectives on the two genres and works by major artists such as Jeanne Pucelle, Jean Fouquet, Rogier van der Weyden, and Jan van Eyck, to name only a few. Pearson's text is a must for researchers and teachers of medieval, Renaissance, and devotional art. The author evaluates more than sixty works of art by major artists such as the Master

of Mary of Burgundy, Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling, and Bernard van Orley commissioned by prominent women in the Valois Burgundian-Hapsburgian family. One of the running threads in the text is the inherited, pictorial traditions between three women in the same family: Margaret of Burgundy, her step-mother Margaret of York, and her daughter Margaret of Austria. The author shows how devotional portraits were manipulated for the purposes of both the patron and viewers in different periods to advance hierarchies of gender, political authority, and social status. As Pearson states at the beginning of the book, her goal is to identify and examine pictorial conventions of masculinity and femininity in order to ascertain the "boundaries of hierarchy" (pp. 150-55).

Pearson demonstrates that books of hours for laywomen

were initially designed to assert the female patron's autonomy in secular and ecclesiastical realms. Her foray into women's devotional imagery is introduced by examining commissions by Margaret of Burgundy. Pearson rejects the premise that monastic books of hours served in these instances. Instead, she argues that books of hours were often conceived as primary tools of instruction for daughters, designed to affirm the female identity and assert women's role in society. In contrast, the author argues that diptychs in Burgundian art served to promote the male corporate identity, a perspective often fragmented and fraught with uncertainty in response to the growing authority of women in religion.

The book consists of six thematic divisions, an introduction followed by five chapters, a checklist of "all devotional portrait diptychs on panel that remain intact or can be reliably reconstructed" (195), an extensive bibliography, index, eight color plates, and sixty-four black and white illustrations. The text is densely written, and wisely the author includes

a conclusion at the end of each chapter, summarizing and contextualizing the analysis.

A survey of some 500 books of hours with over 150 portraits and forty-six diptychs in Burgundian art was undertaken for this investigation. As a result, Pearson affirms that books of hours were owned by women at a ratio of three-to-one compared to diptychs which show male sitters at a ratio of six-to-one. Establishing a gender division between these two types of art, the author lays a foundation for further discourse on the pictorial manipulation of gender for political and religious purposes.

Chapter 1 addresses the concept of authority and community in women's books of hours discussing their design in relation to female identity and usage. Women's portraits in the *Buves Hours*, *Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, *Hours of Jeanne of Navarre*, and the *Breviary of Catherine of Valois* are analyzed in relationship to Marian worship and women's direct relationship, spiritual communication with Christ. Two sections follow: one

on the education of girls at the Burgundian Court and another on women's reading communities. The latter section analyzes a portrait in the *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, which Pearson suggests was commissioned to celebrate the birth of Margaret of Austria. The author shows how the portrait of Mary of Burgundy and Margaret of York before the Virgin Mary created a family tradition of readers for the third generation. Margaret of Austria, as the intended reader, would have viewed a portrait of her mother and step-grandmother engaged in reading and prayer.

In Chapter 2, "Regendering the Faith: Books of Hours, Devotional Portraits, Diptychs, and the Affirmation of Men," the author shows that women's portraits dominate books of hours commissioned between ca. 1300 to ca. 1370. After this period, a genre previously claimed by women is appropriated in male patronage. Key works such as the *Savoy Hours*, *Petites Heures*, and the *Très Belles Heures* known as the *Brussels Hours* are examined in this remarkable transition. The author's examination of male

portraiture in books of hours and the use of incarnational imagery and *ostentatio genitalium* presents further evidence of this development.

Chapter 3, "The Problem of Male Embodiment in Two Diptychs from Bruges," focuses on two diptychs from Bruges and examines a range of issues pertaining to male embodiment in relation to masculinity, erotica, manhood, marriage, and the public eye. Hans Memling's diptychs of *Martin van Nieuwenhove* and *Jan du Cellier*, each painted at different stages of the men's lives are examined to investigate how depictions of the male body and masculinity were fraught with conflict and inconsistencies in Burgundian society. At the core of this conflict are the traditional views of the Church versus fifteenth-century attitudes among laymen.

Chapter 4, "Nuns and Clerics: Ambiguous Authority in a Devotional Portrait Diptych," explores how ideas of reform in the Cistercian order were given expression and visual support in the portrait of Jeanne de Boubais, abbess

of the Cistercian convent of Flines, on the exterior panel of a diptych painted by Jean Bellegambe of Douai (b. 1470-75, d. 1535). In contrast to the Jeanne de Boubais' support of the Cistercian reforms, Pearson demonstrates in chapter five that Margaret of Austria's devotional portraits were designed to assert her sovereignty and the Hapsburgian claim to the Netherlands. The author argues that Margaret of Austria draws on earlier Christocentric and incarnational imagery traditionally associated with women's religious art and modified them for political hegemony.

In terms of style and methodology, Pearson's text is a challenging read. The author's integration of traditional, historical investigations with gender perspectives pushes the art analysis in new directions. Unlike her earlier articles, the text is dense and, at times, awkward, requiring a careful read to ensure that significant ideas are not lost. To some extent, the author's efforts to explore new, analytic spaces by integrating traditional methodologies with gender

analysis accounts for the compressed awkwardness in certain sections. The author appears to have been aware of this for in the opening and closing comments of each chapter, key ideas are reiterated and highlighted to reinforce conclusions reached in the analysis. This aside, however, for those seeking pedagogical material, the book is an invaluable addition to gender studies for upper-level students. In the current field of art historical research, it breaks new ground and adds greatly to our understanding of patronage and gender issues in devotional art. Pedagogical discussions of works such as the Melun Diptych, the Wilton Diptych, and others in standard art historical texts now need to be rewritten after Pearson's insightful and revealing commentaries.

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#### END NOTES

1. *Sixteenth Century Journal* 31.1 (2000): 99-122.
2. *Woman's Art Journal* 22.2 (2001-02): 2, 19-25.