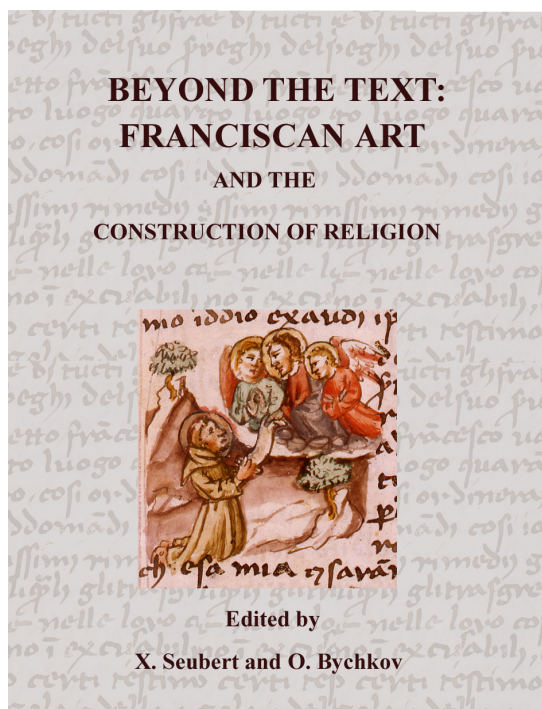


Beyond the Text: Franciscan Art and Construction of Religion

ed. by Xavier Seubert and Oleg Bychkov. Franciscan Institute Publications, June 2013. 240 p. ill. ISBN 9781576593400 (cl.), \$65.00.

Reviewed March 2014 Andrea Walton, MA, MLS, krw1@nyu.edu



The Franciscans' exemplar of humility and emphasis on simplicity coupled with observance of poverty and absence of property ownership is frequently seen to be incongruous with the production of art. It created a tension between its Rule and the need to promulgate the Christian story viewed through the lens of the life and spiritual journey of St. Francis of Assisi. We have only to recall a key moment in that journey when he prayed before the San Damiano crucifix to attempt to understand Francis's own ambiguous position towards art. The Franciscan movement did not always lend emphasis to art in the formulation and interpretation of its history.

With studies of its textual legacy advancing since the Second Vatican Council mandated exploration of foundational documents, the impetus to rediscover the Franciscan artistic legacy continues to move forward. Fourteen essays by noted

scholars gathered together in this volume published by Franciscan Institute Publications not only reflects this mandate but aims to go outside the scope of textual studies towards the written words and their relationship to the visual construction and reconstruction of Francis's legacy and subsequent history of the religious orders which continued beyond his death.

Edited by St. Bonaventure University professors Xavier Seubert (Thomas Plassmann Distinguished Professor of Art and Theology Emeritus) and Oleg Bychkov (Professor of Theology), it begins with a preface by the editors followed by an insightful introduction by William Cook (Distinguished Teaching Professor of History Emeritus, SUNY) regarding early Italian images of Francis. A list of contributors comprised of art and religious historians as well as theologians precedes fourteen interdisciplinary essays ranging in subjects: architecture,

painting, and manuscript illumination. Each essay is fully footnoted and interspersed with a considerable amount of illustrations, the majority of which are in color. An index concludes the book.

The Franciscan movement occurred during an era of revolutionary change, evolving from Byzantine and International Gothic to Renaissance styles. About four-hundred years separate the living Francis of Assisi from Giotto. The essayists in this highly informative work follow in the footsteps of Henri Thode who suggested that Francis and his followers were responsible for crucial developments in the visual arts because of their emphasis of Christ's humanity. Thus shifting Jacob Burkhardt's posited Renaissance timeline to the thirteenth century, a period which gave birth not only to a "renewed" art but to a religious renewal linked with the saint's own humanity and preaching. This highly recommended collection of essays stands in ironic testimony to Francis' verbal legacy translated to visual theology.