

Jane L. Carroll and Alison G. Stewart, eds.
*Saints, Sinners, and Sisters: Gender and Northern Art in
Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Ashgate, 2003.
pp. xxlv + 274.

Each of the eleven articles in this volume stands as a focused case study of issues involving women and art in northern Europe from the 9th through 17th centuries. The collection originated in discussions among feminist scholars at the 1993 meeting of the Historians of Netherlandish Art. Although ten years might seem an unusually long gestation period for a volume in a field which has seen rapid growth and evolution in the past decade, the resulting product has been worth the wait. As the editors point out, their primary motivation in producing the collection was to give university-level teachers a useful resource to supplement traditional art history textbooks when teaching the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Baroque periods. On these terms, the book handily succeeds. It is also this reviewer's hope that the book will be read and taught by

scholars in disciplines outside of art history.

Chronologically and geographically speaking, this is (for the most part) a tightly focused book. Only one article deals with the early Middle Ages (Genevra Kornbluth's "Richildis and her Seal: Carolingian Self-Reference and the Imagery of Power"). The next article, chronologically speaking, is Susan Smith's "The Gothic Mirror and the Female Gaze." This is the only article to treat the central Middle Ages. The remaining pieces focus on later centuries. Five of the articles deal with art in Germany at either the very end of the 15th century and/or in the 16th century. Three further articles deal with the Netherlands in the 17th century.

The articles are arranged topically under three rubrics—"Saints," "Sinners," and "Sisters, Wives, Poets." Nearly all of

them deal with the challenges of interpreting specific images of women and with ways of gauging those images against contemporary constructions of gender. The one exception to this rule is Corine Schleif's very interesting article on the wives of artists in Renaissance Germany ("The Many Wives of Adam Kraft: Early Modern Workshop Wives in Legal Documents, Art-historical Scholarship, and Historical Fiction"). Here the focus is principally sociological with interesting forays into reception history. In keeping with the book's overall focus on hermeneutics, there is little on specific women as patrons but a good deal on women as the audience for art in a more general sense. Along the same lines, the actual artworks discussed rarely depict specific, contemporary women. There is, for example, no discussion of portraiture—with the exception of Kornbluth's analysis of a very unusual seal and Jane Carroll's discussion of some wonderfully original self-portraits (or something akin to self-portraits) in "Woven Devotions: Reform and Piety in Tapestries by

Dominican Nuns." Beyond this last article, the art discussed is overwhelmingly secular and focuses on either artistic envisionings of specific women from the European past or more generalized representations of contemporary women (for lack of better terms).

Thus, more than with many anthologies, the case studies collected here tend to cluster together in felicitous ways. One finds that certain articles can be read productively with and against each another (another reason to recommend the book for classroom use). To take one example, several authors deal with the discursive complexity of the female nude in northern Renaissance art. Both Carol M. Schuler (in "Virtuous Model/Voluptuous Martyr: The Suicide of Lucretia in Northern Renaissance Art and Its Relationship to Late Medieval Devotional Imagery") and Pia F. Cuneo (in "Jörg Breu the Elder's *Death of Lucretia*: History, Sexuality, and the State") discuss images of the Roman heroine Lucretia. Their separate analyses demonstrate how representations of a specific

woman from history can, in a variety of contexts, interweave discourses of politics, virtue, and desire. In simple terms Lucretia meant different things to different people at different times. Such a conclusion is not at all surprising. As medievalists know, artists and writers almost constantly reworked stories and figures from the past as lessons for their premodern audiences. The virtue of the articles lies elsewhere—in the richness of the art studied and the care with which its meanings are mapped out by the authors.

Two further articles dealing with German Renaissance art demonstrate the ways in which male artists drew on and transformed deep-seated fears about women. In “Dürer’s *Four Witches* Reconsidered,” Linda C. Hults offers one of the book’s strongest studies. Her investigation centers on a strangely compelling engraving of 1497 in which Albrecht Dürer depicted a quartet of classically-inspired female nudes standing in a tight circle, while a demon watches from the shadows. The analysis here is complex—Hults argues that the

primary audience for such an image was elite males and that they would have recognized the multivalence of the image and read it on multiple levels. Hults makes a convincing case that no matter how rich this image is, it turns on a fear of the power of female sexuality. In “Distaffs and Spindles: Sexual Misbehavior in Sebald Beham’s *Spinning Bee*,” Alison G. Stewart discusses an example of what she calls “female popular culture,”—the spinning bee, in which women came together in the evening to spin and socialize. The 1524 woodcut at the center of Stewart’s analysis shows a spinning bee where the women’s attentions have (for the most part) shifted to a group of men, with whom they are carousing. Stewart makes a convincing case that the print draws on Reformation ideology, which sought to curtail and even eliminate activities that were thought to foment the sexual desires of women.

It might be argued that these discourses of the desiring and desirable woman have their seeds in earlier Gothic art. Here Susan Smith’s article

on 14th-century ivory mirror backs is instructive. These objects, which were designed to hold a mirror of metal or glass, regularly show scenes of courtship and romance; they seem to have been owned primarily by women. Smith argues that such images work to discipline the female gaze, granting their owners a desiring gaze but asserting that it can exist only when subordinate to the desiring eyes of men. One of the great strengths of this argument is Smith's acknowledgment that some of the objects in question offer alternative models of male-female relations; artists might occasionally re-imagine the dominant discourse.

In the end, one of the true strengths of this collection is the art that the authors have chosen to study. Some of it is familiar, some not. Virtually all of it, however, is sophisticated and offers wonderful challenges for scholars and students attempting to consider the ways in which gender is constructed at the level of the visual. These are images that generate their meanings through productive

tensions between narration and description, the learned and the popular, the admonitory and the celebratory. As such, their meanings cannot be wholly circumscribed by words. The readings offered in this collection, however, offer a first-rate foundation for further discussion.

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