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Sassetta's Madonna della neve: An Image of Patronage by Machtelt Israëls

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Book reviews

Machtelt Israëls, Sassetta's Madonna della neve: an image of patronage (Istituto Universitario Olandese di Storia dell'Arte, vol. 15), Leiden (Primavera Pers) 2003

One of the most important works by the fifteenth-century Siennese painter, Stefano di Giovanni, better known as Sassetta (1394–1450), is the *Ecstasy of St Francis*, now in Villa I Tatti in Settignano near Florence. It was bought by Bernard Berenson around 1900, and legend has it that his brother-in-law, Logan Pearsall Smith, discovered the panel “on a cart, being taken to be made into a tabletop.”¹ This in a way charming yet rather horrifying story reflects the neglect into which many works by early Renaissance Italian artists outside that triumphant fifteenth-century canon of, say, Donatello, Fra Angelico and Botticelli, had fallen by the beginning of the twentieth century.² Sassetta's reputation had been suffering for a long time. Berenson himself devoted no more than a few lines to him in his *Central Italian painters of the Renaissance* (1897) but six years later, as if to make up for this, the American connoisseur was to play an important part in the beginning of a reappraisal by publishing a pair of essays on Sassetta in *The Burlington Magazine*.³

However, after publications on Sassetta and his oeuvre by such illustrious scholars as Pope-Hennessy (1939), and Carli (1957),⁴ there was no modern, comprehensive monograph on the artist. As she herself acknowledges in the foreword to her book, Machtelt Israëls has taken up the challenge. It is telling of both the wealth of material relating to the Siennese master waiting to be studied, and Israëls's meticulous scholarly approach that, after having published three important articles on individual paintings by Sassetta,⁵ she chose to devote her entire doctoral dissertation to just one: the so-called *Madonna della neve* altarpiece. The panel was commissioned by one Ludovica Bertini of Siena in 1430, and was placed over the altar of a chapel in Siena Cathedral three years later. The work made its appearance in art-historical literature in 1862, when it was rediscovered in the church of San Martino in Tuscan Chiusdino—almost typically it was in a deplorable state of repair because of exposure to humidity and rain coming in through leaking roofs. In the mid-1930s the painting was ac-

quired by the Florentine Count Contini Bonacossi, who had it restored.

The main panel of the altarpiece is in a gilt wooden frame with a tripartite, somewhat protruding baldachin of two pointed arches flanking a round one in the center below an uncharacteristic horizontal top, which gives the work as a whole the form of an almost perfect square. This panel depicts a *sacra conversazione* with the Madonna and Child enthroned, surrounded by angels and Sts Peter, Paul, John the Baptist and Francis. The coats of arms of the patrons' families are displayed unusually prominently on the front of Mary's throne. To do justice to the intriguing name, *Madonna of the Snow*, by which the altarpiece is known, the angel to the left of Mary carries a platter filled with snow, while his companion on the right is kneading a ball from the snow in a second dish that rests on the throne beside the Virgin.

The depiction of snow in this altarpiece not only serves as a reference to the Virgin's purity, but also to the popular legend of the foundation of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. The events of this legend are depicted in seven narrative scenes that make up the predella, some of which are so badly damaged as to be barely legible. Thirteenth-century papal bulls recount that, one hot summer's day in August of the year 352, snow fell on the Esquiline hill in the shape of the ground plan of a church. The previous night, the Virgin Mary had revealed this event in visions experienced by both Pope Liberius and a Roman patrician by the name of John. The outlines of the miraculous snowfall were to become the ground plan of a church dedicated to the Virgin herself: Santa Maria Maggiore. By financing the building of the church, the childless patrician and his wife found a pious way of disposing of their fortune.

The enchanting, poetic legend of the Madonna of the Snow, its appearance in the visual arts, and especially its relation to the city of Siena, have been studied thoroughly by van Os, who published his findings in 1968.⁶ Depictions of the legend of the Madonna of the Snow have been known in Italy from about 1300 onwards, reaching a peak in the Quattrocento, in works by, among others, the Florentine painters Masolino and Masaccio, and the Venetian Jacopo Bellini. In Siena, the iconography became particularly popular during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, in manuscript illuminations in liturgical books, as well as in narrative sequences on

1 See K. Clark, “The work of Bernard Berenson,” in idem, *Moments of vision & other essays*, New York 1981, pp. 110–11.

2 A second, perhaps even more astonishing example is the rediscovery in 1909 of a polychromed wooden statue of a man on horseback attributed to another Siennese artist, Jacopo della Quercia. The group had been tucked away behind a pile of firewood in the cellar of an oratory in San Cassiano di Controne in the province of Lucca. See G. Rosario (ed.), *Il cavaliere di San Cassiano*, Florence 1995.

3 B. Berenson, “A Siennese painter of the Franciscan legend,” *The Burlington Magazine* 3 (1903), pp. 2–35, 171–84. This text has been republished and translated several times.

4 J. Pope-Hennessy, *Sassetta*, London 1939; E. Carli, *Sassetta e il Maestro dell'Osservanza*, Milan 1957.

5 M. Israëls, “New documents for Sassetta and Sano di Pietro at the Porta Romana, Siena,” *The Burlington Magazine* 140 (1998), pp. 436–44; idem, “Sassetta's Arte della lana altar-piece and the cult of Corpus Domini in Siena,” *The Burlington Magazine* 143 (2001), pp. 532–43; idem, “Sassetta, Fra Angelico and their patrons at S. Domenico, Cortona,” *The Burlington Magazine* 145 (2003), pp. 760–76.

6 H.W. van Os, “Schnee in Siena,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 19 (1968), pp. 1–50.

the predellas of altarpieces by Matteo di Giovanni (1477), Gerolamo di Benvenuto (1508), and, the earliest and most elaborate of all, Sassetta. Van Os stressed the fact that it would seem appropriate to find so many depictions of the Madonna della neve in the city which had considered itself to be no less than *civitas Virginis* ever since it had been dedicated to Mary to implore victory over a Florentine army in 1260. Whereas van Os did not seem to bother much about the precise identity of the patrons of Sassetta's altarpiece, merely referring to them as "*cives Virginis*,"⁷ this is a crucial issue in Israël's study.

In nine nicely rounded short chapters, each of which is conveniently headed by a summarizing introduction, the author investigates virtually every aspect of the altarpiece's physical appearance, style, iconography, commission, and original setting in order to present an account of the way in which the work's "genesis and patronage" have together determined its appearance. This question is typical of many studies of the relationship between form, patronage and function of Renaissance altarpieces that have been undertaken in the past few decades. Only too often this kind of research is hampered by a lack of documentary evidence, and it is precisely in this respect that Israël's book is a fortunate exception. Like her earlier publications on Sassetta, this study is based largely on important new archival findings, which she combines with facts that were already known.

For example, Ludovica Bertini, a Siennese widow of noble birth, has always been regarded as Sassetta's patron, because it was she who commissioned the work in a contract of 1430. However, it appears from documents newly discovered and presented here for the first time that in the period before the death of Ludovica's husband, Turino di Matteo, in 1423, the couple had been thinking about endowing a chapel in Siena Cathedral. This emerges most clearly in two official documents, dating from one week and three months after Turino's death respectively, in which several witnesses recount their recollections of Turino's words on his deathbed about the founding of a chapel. Turino thus gains prominence in the altarpiece's prehistory, giving Israël the opportunity to expand on this interesting figure. It appears that he held the important office of head of the works of Siena Cathedral (the *Opera del Duomo*). He was a wealthy, self-made man who was knighted only two years before his death, and was honored with the exceptional privilege of burial in front of his chapel in the cathedral. Seemingly trivial details, such as Turino's refusal to wear the ceremonial hat lined with squirrel fur that was part of an *operaio del Duomo*'s official dress, really bring the protagonists of this study to life. But more important is the conclusion that

the iconography of the altarpiece, more than being just a demonstration of Ludovica Bertini's efforts to honor her husband's memory, should be interpreted in the light of Turino's own involvement with the painting. The extent to which it is legitimate to consider the highly personal involvement of private individuals in a decoration in Siena Cathedral is convincingly illustrated by a lengthy discussion of other private commissions in that church.

In the case of Sassetta's altarpiece, St Francis, who figures prominently in both the panel and the contract of commission (being the only saint to be given a laudatory qualification: "seraphic"), should be seen in relation not only to Ludovica, who became a secular member of the Order of Franciscan Tertiaries after her husband's death, but also to Turino, who himself had belonged to the confraternity of San Francesco. And the choice of the Madonna of the Snow as the subject, which was particularly dear to Franciscan spirituality, proves to be more appropriate to both husband and wife than to the widow alone. Had not the Virgin Mary appeared to a childless Roman patrician to suggest that he use his wealth to finance a church? Just like the legendary fourth-century Roman couple, Turino and Ludovica had no offspring. Moreover, as the endower of a chapel, Turino would have been more than happy to identify with the church-founding patrician of olden times.

The fact that we now know that Turino di Matteo and his wife were already considering the foundation of a chapel and its decoration at least early in the 1420s, makes Kempers's suggestion that they must have had an adviser in the person of Cardinal Antonio Casini all the more plausible.⁸ Indeed, Casini must have served as an important *trait d'union* between Siena and the place where the snow legend originated—Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. The Siennese-born Casini served as archpriest of that Roman church, and although frequently residing in Rome, he occupied the Siennese episcopal see from 1408 to 1427—that is to say until three years before Ludovica's final commission to Sassetta, and until four years after the death of the important *operaio del Duomo*, Turino di Matteo, whom he undoubtedly knew personally. Israël's discussion of the figure of Casini, his interest in the snow legend, and his importance for the introduction of it in Sassetta's altarpiece in Siena, is lucid and convincing. Her extensive discussion of Casini's role in the commission of Masolino and Masaccio's so-called *Santa Maria Maggiore altarpiece*, with on the reverse of the main panel a depiction of the miraculous snowfall (c. 1428-30; now in Naples, Museo di Capodimonte), again making use of newly discovered archival material, can almost be regarded as a monograph within the monograph.

7 Ibid., p. 37: "Mit der Beauftragung Sassetta's eine 'Madonna della Neve' zu malen, waren die 'cives Virginis' die ersten, die einer noch ziemlich jungen Devotion für ihre Schutzherrin mit einem eigenen Altarbild neuen Glanz verliehen." It was only in his later book, *Siennese altarpieces, 1215-1460: form, content, function*, 2 vols., Groningen 1984-90, vol. 2, pp. 173-74, that van Os turned

his attention to the role played by Ludovica Bertini as the patron of the altarpiece.

8 B. Kempers, *Kunst, macht en mecenaat: het beroep van schilder in sociale verhoudingen 1250-1600*, Amsterdam 1987, p. 181.

New documentary evidence is also used to establish the precise original setting of Sassetta's altarpiece in Siena Cathedral. It appears that it was placed over an altar which until then had had a once-famous painting, the so-called *Opera Madonna*. This panel, probably part of an antependium painted around 1230, had been highly venerated ever since the troublesome days in 1260 when the besieged city was dedicated to the Virgin. Thus, Israëls concludes, by taking the place of a worshipped image loaded with important civic associations, Sassetta's altarpiece would have assumed those connections as well. From this point of view it cannot have been a coincidence that the exemplary Siennese citizen, Turino di Matteo, chose this particular chapel as his own. Interesting as this hypothesis may be, it is not entirely convincing. As the author herself tells us, by Turino's time the *Opera Madonna* (and, we may add, probably its original impact) had become somewhat forgotten. An inventory of Siena Cathedral made in 1423 explicitly states that the image was provided with a curtain rail, but that it lacked the curtain. Moreover it is hard to believe that an image that was still so treasured would have been removed as easily as the *Opera Madonna* seems to have been.

More convincing is the discussion of the form of the altarpiece in the almost square shape of a *tavola quadrata*. Traditionally, art historians have associated this form with the typology of Renaissance altarpieces in Florence, more or less tacitly assuming the primacy of Florence over Siena in the development of early Renaissance painting. However, Sassetta's *Madonna della neve* slightly predates the earliest known examples of the *tavola quadrata* as painted in Florence by artists like Filippo Lippi and Fra Angelico. One of the central issues addressed by Israëls is to demonstrate that Renaissance painting in Siena developed far more independently of Florentine examples and influences than has often been assumed. Interestingly, in Sassetta's altarpiece the "invention" of depicting a *sacra conversazione* in a unifying space, and the strikingly early use of the *tavola quadrata* in an altarpiece, appear to have had little to do with a conscious quest for stylistic innovation, but all the more with the original setting in a rather small chapel where there was not much space for the panel. This must have been the reason why the top remained horizontal, and why no painted gables or pinnacles should be imagined above it.

The slightly protruding framework probably also has something to do with the place the altarpiece occupied in this shallow chapel. One can imagine that the subtle molding of the carpentry was designed to enhance the spatial effect of the image, with the aim of involving the spectator in the painted

realm. However, one cannot help but wonder what the implications of this hypothesis are for other altarpieces with a more or less comparable projecting frame. An example is Orcagna's *Strozzi altarpiece* in Santa Maria Maggiore, Florence, painted some three-quarters of a century before Sassetta's. Here, no small chapel had to be taken into account. Moreover, the scene depicted, or at least the image of the vision of Christ in the central panel, notoriously lacks depth, so here there was no three-dimensionality to be heightened.⁹

The threads formed by descriptions, interpretations old and new, and newly discovered archival information come together in a concluding chapter, that is followed only by an epilogue consisting of a discussion of a commission Sassetta was to receive later from Antonio Casini (Ludovica and Turino's probable adviser). In that penultimate chapter, entitled "Iconography," Israëls presents the perfectly justifiable, albeit purely hypothetical conclusion (given the damaged state of the altarpiece) that the individuals depicted in some of the scenes on the predella should be identified as the patron, her husband, and their adviser. That conclusion is not especially startling, and in a way it is even a little anticlimactic as well. It had previously been suggested by van Os, who, in a concise seven-page discussion of Sassetta's *Madonna della neve* in the second volume of his *Siennese altarpieces*, had already raised the issue of iconographic references to Turino, and had stressed Sassetta's importance as an innovative Siennese, Renaissance painter who worked largely independently of Florentine models.¹⁰ It might almost seem as if Israëls has undertaken her study mainly to confirm these hypotheses. But to put it that way would certainly do injustice to her efforts, that first and foremost provide a thoroughly documented framework for new ideas and hypotheses about Sassetta's *Madonna della neve*. With this book, Machtelt Israëls has produced an elegant, well-written study that fully meets her objective as stated in the introduction, to "provide an art-historical model for similar case studies of altarpieces whose memories have been more scarred by history."

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9 G. Kreytenberg, "Image and frame; remarks on Orcagna's *Pala Strozzi*," *The Burlington Magazine* 134 (1992), pp. 634-38, analyzed this remarkable aspect of the frame of Orcagna's altarpiece, which he considered an exact, modern copy after the original one. He stressed that the frame, protruding some 4 cm, would strengthen the effect of three-dimensionality in the pictorial decoration created by "bulky figures," some of which—in the side compartments of the

polyptych—are placed at an oblique angle to the picture plane. Kreytenberg agrees with earlier authors in his conception of the central panel as essentially spaceless: "It is precisely the denial of spatial structure that transforms Christ's appearance into a divine vision." However, the author fails to explain why, then, the supposedly space-creating frame is identical in all parts of the polyptych.

10 Van Os, op. cit. (note 7), vol. 2, pp. 167-74.