

Walter S. Melion. *The Meditative Art: Studies in the Northern Devotional Print, 1550–1625*.

Early Modern Catholicism and the Visual Arts 1. Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2009. ix + 431 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$90. ISBN: 978-0-916-10160-2.

The question driving the analyses in this book is how and why Northern European devotional prints were utilized as instruments of Christian meditation and contemplation. There is ample attention paid to the aesthetic qualities of the

prints, but the main focus is on their functionality and the distinctiveness of visual and textual information. Eight chapters, devoted to engravings made in the Low Countries by Philips Galle and Boetius à Bolswert, among others, clearly state that the prints were meant to heighten the soul's awareness of its own image-making power. As Melion convincingly argues, the images in these prints were reflective in character. They visualize what the accompanying meditative texts describe — in the case of Melion's selection, that is, episodes from the life of Christ (his infancy, ministry, Passion, death, and Resurrection) — and encourage the viewer to imitate Jesus by reflecting upon what is shown. Through this process, “visual experience mediates our relation to Christ” (6). Melion's analysis of the visual stimuli is interwoven with assessments of the textual pointers engraved in the prints: in response to the texts, the viewers were stimulated to identify the depicted figures and to make analogies with what was not depicted. The constant interaction between image and word in these prints guided the viewers' meditative exercises. Melion analyzes the interplay between word and image the prints were based on in such detail that the differences between the individual approaches within the group of engravers whose work he studied become apparent.

In analyzing bimedial source material such as these prints, art historians and literary scholars often unconsciously focus on either the visual or the textual, depending on the disciplinary area to which they belong. It is a great merit of Melion's book that it covers both the textual and visual components of the devotional prints. It demonstrates that valuable insights can be found in the interstices between disciplines by arguing that the word-image relation found in these prints have a specific devotional function, most obvious in Hieronymus Wierix's *Septem Psalmi Davidici* dating from 1608, in which small Passion scenes are framed by an enlaced, embroidered border composed of the text of the penitential psalms which spiral round the image, requiring the viewers to rotate the print as they follow the psalm text. As the print is rotated, the viewers' perspective on the depicted scenes constantly changes.

The chapters with analyses of the selected prints are preceded by an introduction on image theory and the theology it resides from. As Melion argues, the prints were framed in and responded to various meditative traditions, which largely explains the variety of techniques and compositions found in the prints analyzed in chapter 1 through 8. The relation to theories on visuality and the applicability of sight in religious matters is for instance explained in Otto van Veen's *Physicae et Theologicae Conclusiones* (1621), in which a series of geometrical diagrams is used to reveal how sacred images can bring us closer to God. Images could engage the cognitive and affective faculties of mind, will, and desire by which one could get to know his own soul, wherewith the soul could refashion itself in the image and likeness of Christ. By linking the *Conclusiones* to Van Veen's painting *The Carrying of the Cross*, Melion is able to argue that the representations of *realia* offered in Van Veen's painting facilitated this kind of meditative exercises.

The book is superbly illustrated with an engaging enlargement of a detail of an image at the opening of each chapter. Also enlarged, high-quality reproductions of

the full images follow at the end of the chapters. Melion discusses the readers' access to the prints and the visual memory being built by the consulting and memorizing of these prints (in chapters 2, 4, and 7), but that they are best studied when they are enlarged — in *The Meditative Art* the medallions of Wierix's *Septem Psalmi Davidici* are almost doubled in size for maximum effect — perhaps deserves a bit more attention. How did the prints' appearance inform the viewers?

Melion's in-depth studies into the specificity of the functionality of these prints fill a significant lacuna in the existing scholarship. They supplement studies such as Ralph Dekoninck's *Ad Imaginem: Statuts, fonctions et usages de l'image dans le littérature spirituelle jésuite du XVII^e siècle* (2005) in which a much wider perspective on the use of literature in meditative practices during the Counter-Reformation was taken by focusing on the strategies behind the print production. Melion's well-researched analyses show how individual prints were made efficacious. That *The Meditative Art* refrains from reflecting on the confessional origins of the prints all too intensely, paves the way for excellent explorations of intriguing bimedial puzzles.

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