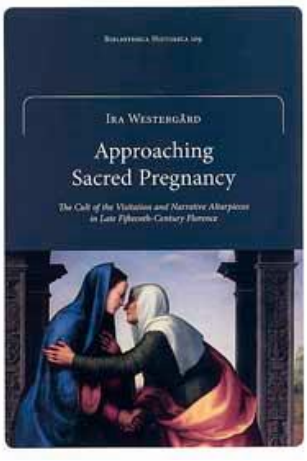

Ira Westergård, *Approaching Sacred Pregnancy: the Cult of the Visitation and Narrative Altarpieces in Late Fifteenth-Century Florence*, (Bibliotheca Historica 109), Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura: Helsinki 2007. 248 pp.

Ira Westergård's *Approaching Sacred Pregnancy* seeks to fill a gap in art historical exploration of fifteenth-century devotional imagery, focusing on Florentine narrative altarpieces that figure the Visitation. The book, prefaced by introductory matter, is divided into three parts: the first offers an overview of the cult of the Visitation, its developments and visualizations; the second strives to provide a methodological framework for studying narrative altarpieces; and the third consists of three case studies that explore Visitation altarpieces by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494), Piero di Cosimo (1462–1521), and Mariotto Albertinelli (1474–1515). There is much to commend in this book: compelling visual analyses, sensitivity to studying a work of art in its particular visual and socio-historic contexts, and the general breadth of interdisciplinary research that underlies the study of the altarpieces. Yet, in the end, the book leaves one unsatisfied, largely because the author spends a lot of time on introductory material, and not enough on weaving together a cohesive narrative for specific pieces. The first two parts of the study—although very clearly, intelligently written—do not really inform the last section where case studies are considered, nor is it really clear why the three altarpieces under consideration were chosen.

Following the brief introduction that summarizes the basic elements of her study, Westergård lays out the book's methodology: essentially, a

contextual approach, which, despite its acknowledged pitfalls, will allow the author to pay close attention to the beholder's possible response to the altarpieces under consideration. Westergård's caution in approaching even the most basic of terms and concepts betrays the origins of the book as a dissertation, albeit clearly a worthy one. An almost apologetic case, for example, is made for using the word 'Renaissance' at all.[1] Conversely, the question of reception is treated lightly: perhaps a welcome sign that viewer response studies have become implicitly valid for the new generation of scholars. The following historiographic section traces general scholarship on altarpieces but provides only one paragraph that surveys the study of Visitation imagery in Italian art; this may have been a good place to address publications that explored medieval manifestations of this visual theme elsewhere.

The first part of the book proper outlines the development of the cult of the Visitation, paying particular attention to its theological, liturgical, and visual history, contextualizing it especially clearly within the rise of late medieval Marian devotion. This is a succinctly and effectively written introduction to the narrative developments of the theme, although its brief iconographic survey would have benefited both from additional figures, and from clear details of images that were reproduced: one of just four figures included in Part I, for example, features a nearly indecipherable Visitation panel placed in the *predella* of Neri di Bicci's (1419–1491) Crowning of the Virgin with Saints, and equally illegible *predella* images are reproduced as Figures 10-13. Especially frustrating for a book that focuses on pregnancy tropes is the lack of images that figure the uterine types of Visitation, in which Mary's and Elisabeth's bellies become transparent to manifest small children interacting with each other from within. Westergård does cite and reproduce the famous example of the Visitation sculpture from the St. Katharinental convent (now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art), but it is not actually certain whether or not the sculpture originally contained images of small children. Westergård's most effective argument is her refutation of the generally held belief that the rise of the cult of the Visitation was associated with the

[1] The reader interested in a succinct argument for and against using this term as well as its rival, 'early modern,' would do well to turn to Margaret L. King's introduction to her basic text *The Renaissance in Europe*, McGraw-Hill Humanities: New York 2003, esp. xi–xiii.

Franciscan order; she convincingly posits a connection between the cult and the Immaculate Conception controversy that pitted Franciscans against Dominicans, and highlights the role of the feast in the lives of Dominicans.

One might expect the next section of the book to zero in on the Tuscan Visitation altarpieces *per se*, but instead the reader is given another introductory section. Part II of the book is dedicated to several mini-histories: a mini-history of the development of narrative images and their introduction in churches (the specter of Jacob Burckhardt haunts the book here and elsewhere); a mini-history on the development of the altarpiece; [2] a mini-historiography of narrative theory, which really should have been integrated into the "Terms and Methodology" section. Westergård, in general, offers a lot of exposition in the first hundred pages of the book. We are given a series of historical, theological, methodological frameworks, but it is not clear why these are useful, especially if the extended engagement with scholarship on narratology yields the rather self-evident conclusion that a Visitation altarpiece functioned as an interpretation and evocation rather than a straightforward illustration of Luke 1:39–45. It may have been more useful to combine the prefatory matter and material in Part II, pare it down considerably (narrative theory hardly needs to be expounded on at length; it is old hat for art historians, after all), and instead offer more extended remarks on visual transmutations of Visitation imagery, which in the present study occupy about seven full (and heavily footnoted) pages, split between brief "Iconography of the Visitation" and "The Visitation as a Devotional Image" sections. As far as I know, there exists no sustained art historical study of this theme in medieval art, and the author clearly possesses the knowledge of the subject and interpretative tools that would have made such a consideration a felicitous addition to the book.

We return to the Visitation theme on page 109, and what follows is a series of tightly focused case studies. Westergård begins with Visitation altarpieces created by Domenico Ghirlandaio for Santa Maria Novella and Santa Maria Maddalena di Cestello. Patronage looms large in this section as the author explores Tornabuoni's family connections with the Medicis, and the potential interest that they had in the Visitation scene. The first altarpiece merits a more sustained analysis from the author, who discusses the image

[2] Here I refer the reader to the recently published *The Altar and its Environment, 1150–1400*, J. E. A. Kroesen and V. M. Schmidt (eds), Brepols: Turnhout 2009.

contextually connected with others in the chapel, and points out the presence of contemporary Florentine figures in the frescoes. Similarly, the author argues, the Cestello altarpiece stresses the relevance of a particular detail of the image as relevant for the members of the Tornabuoni family. Here, finally, the holy pregnancy theme comes to the fore as Westergård contends that the painting stresses the fertility of the depicted figures. Patronage history takes center stage in the author's discussion of Piero di Cosimo's altarpiece as well, although Westergård admits that there is (172) "no evidence indicating that the Visitation would have assumed particular relevance for the Capponi family" that commissioned it. Instead, she links the painting to the influence of the Augustinian friars in whose church it stood, offering a sensitive analysis of the image that seems to foreground themes of charity. The final case study, Mariotto Albertinelli's altarpiece made for a clerical confraternity of the Visitation, is considered in light of the brotherhood's connections with the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) and his extolling of the virtue of simplicity. Iconographic analyses and careful socio-historic contextualization are a driving force behind all the case studies, and even though the final sections of each chapter and the Conclusion briefly evoke both the potential richness of narrative readings and the place of the viewer before these images, these evocations remain curiously divorced from the complex methodological considerations promised in the earlier chapters.

Also in the conclusion the author begins engaging more closely with the theme of pregnancy promised in the title of the book, but one would have liked to see this theme actually explored in the body of the book proper. The theme of the Visitation, after all, is about pregnancy; unlike other Infancy episodes, including the Annunciation, it foregrounds fertility; as part of the Incarnation narrative, it stresses the materiality of sacred flesh. Contextualizing Visitation images within late fifteenth-century discourses (visual, textual, devotional) on pregnancy and motherhood would have yielded rich results. Birth trays, or *dischi da parto*, come to mind; for example, Lucrezia Tornabuoni and her husband Piero de' Medici, who loom large in the author's analysis of the Ghirlandaio altarpiece, commissioned such a tray to commemorate the birth of their son Lorenzo.[3]

[3] Here I refer the reader to Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, Yale University Press: New Haven, CT 1999, and Patricia Fortini Brown, *Private Lives in Renaissance*

Other quibbles are mainly of an editorial nature. One notes, from time to time, an odd split between hypotheses posited by the author in the main text and their elaboration in the footnotes. It seems that one or the other would have been preferable: if the assertions are tentative, they can be discussed in a footnote, but if the author feels that they merit sustained discussion, why not bring them up in the text and substantiate them? A case in point is the sentence on page 148, which begins with "For example, the green trees of the background could be an allusion to the two unborn children…" and is footnoted with what appears to be a continuation of this hypothesis: "The wooden bridge could refer to the Virgin, or the Church…" (note 472). Some notes appear unnecessary, such as note 493, which states that "there is a great deal of information on the rosary available on the Internet" and provides the url to a decidedly non-academic resource on rosaries; and yet, the following note refers a reader precisely to the proper kind of study of medieval rosary imagery, in this case Anne Winston-Allen's work. But this was up to a copy editor to notice, along with quite a few misspellings and grammar gaffes: among them "fiercly" (59), "consacrated" (154), "wether" (176), and a bewildering first sentence of the last paragraph on p. 95.

If I seem frustrated with this book, it is, paradoxically, because it holds out so much promise. It is written by someone with a sharp mind, excellent research ability, interest in theory, and desire for an interdisciplinary reach. It is an ambitious book, but it does not deliver on its ambition; it pulls together interesting material, but it seems raw, undigested. What the book does brilliantly, however, is to open a new line of inquiry within the field of fifteenth-century art, and to provide future researchers with excellent information and useful tools to engage with such inquiry in depth. Scholars of Renaissance culture will find much of interest on the pages of this book, and this alone makes it a valuable addition to an academic library.

Venice: Art, Architecture, and the Family, Yale University Press: New Haven, CT 2004, both absent from the bibliography, and to Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL 1985, which does appear on the sources list.

Elina Gertsman, PhD
Department of Art History and Art
Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH
exg152[at]case.edu.