

**DOMINICAN PAINTING IN EAST ANGLIA: The Thornham Parva Retable and the Musée de Cluny Frontal by Christopher Norton, David Park & Paul Binski. *The Boydell Press*. 1987, xii + 113 pp. 129 plates, 10 figures. £39.50.**

This medieval retable—a panel painting somewhat autumnal in tone, calm and brooding in atmosphere—was included in the recent ‘Age of Chivalry’ exhibition in London, where quite likely it was seen by more people in a few months than in the previous six centuries. Yet many visitors to that exhibition probably *saw* less than their medieval ancestors. Distance lends oblivion, and we have to reconstruct another age’s sensibility.

The reconstruction is most ably done by these three young scholars, who combine an art-historian’s eye for style and technique with the detective’s nose for clues. And certainly they were faced with a great puzzle. Lord Henniker found the retable in the loft of a stable in 1927, and soon its resemblance to another panel in Paris was noticed. The authors now unravel many knots to suggest that the retable in a remote Suffolk village and the frontal in a French museum are in fact the two halves of the same altar, produced for Dominicans somewhere in East Anglia in about 1330–1340. Christopher Norton painstakingly assembles many details—from carpentry to family histories—to suggest plausibly how a once unified piece, probably from Thetford priory, came to be separated. There is even the tantalising possibility that Cardinal Howard, OP may have been involved in sending the frontal out of England.

In the judgment of David Park the entire programme of the panels is a skilful adaptation of typically Northern Gothic features to Dominican ends, a matter of doctrine and taste. The retable has a crucifixion scene at the centre, with Christ flanked by Mary and John, and then four upstanding saints on each side of the crucifixion. The figure of St. Dominic holding a staff and a book is of particular interest. According to early sources, St. Peter bestowed upon Dominic the staff and St Paul the book, like twin keys, as it were, emblematic of knowledge and power. Both apostles are represented. The other Dominican figure is St Peter Martyr. He was killed in 1252, yet as early as 1254 a General Chapter required that every Dominican church should contain images of him and St Dominic.

The wooden frontal, a unique survival from the English medieval period, displays scenes from the life and death of the Virgin Mary. The frontal and retable combine in sometimes wonderfully intricate ways, as in the Nativity scene where a bird pecks at the hand of Jesus prefiguring the passion that was to culminate in the crucifixion shown on the retable. Both panels render characteristically Dominican concerns, such as the stress on the word and on teaching. On the retable four of the saints hold books, whilst on the frontal St Anne teaches Mary from a book. More often in religious art, the book from which Mary is taught was shown blank or just ruled or covered with meaningless strokes. Here, however, there is an exceptionally long Latin text, just as the Latin inscription over the cross is in full.

The remaining essay, by Paul Binski, is on style and dating and it adds to the cumulative strength of their joint hypothesis. He is good at showing how the panels are intimately linked in decorative method, technique and colouration, and how they share a repertoire of expressions. Thus Mary’s gesture of grief at the crucifixion is shared by St Peter at her death, relating the two central scenes on the panels. Clearly this kind of art did more than decorate or teach—but what kind of imaginative response was it likely to elicit, especially in a liturgical context? One recalls how for David Jones, more often than not ‘in the time of the Mass’, there could arise mental associations, liaisons, meanderings to and fro, ‘ambivalences’, asides, sprawl of the pattern, if pattern there is...

Although it would only take a scrap of information to overturn (or confirm) whole sections of this carefully constructed case, the authors have gathered a lasting body of knowledge and explanation, equipping us to see and understand more of these dignified yet not static panels, with all their wealth of decoration and incident. The panels are now separated and both are severed from Dominican theology and liturgy that once gave them their full meaning; through this accomplished book they regain much of that lost eloquence.

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