

4-23-2017

BOOK REVIEW: Douglas Brine, *Pious Memories. The Wall-Mounted Memorial in the Burgundian Netherlands*

Sophie Oosterwijk

School of Art History, University of St Andrews (UK)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal>



Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons

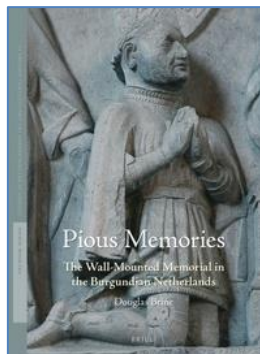
Recommended Citation

Oosterwijk, Sophie. "BOOK REVIEW: Douglas Brine, *Pious Memories. The Wall-Mounted Memorial in the Burgundian Netherlands*." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 6, 1 (2017): 176-182. <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol6/iss1/28>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Art History at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art & Architecture

Vol. VI, No. 1 (Spring 2017)



BOOK REVIEW: Douglas Brine, *Pious Memories. The Wall-Mounted Memorial in the Burgundian Netherlands*, Studies in Netherlandish Art and Cultural History, vol. 13 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), XX + 322 pages, 118 b/w and color illustrations, €102.00 (hb.), ISBN 978-90-04-28832-4,

By Sophie Oosterwijk, School of Art History, University of St. Andrews (U.K.)

This important study addresses a medieval art form that was wide-spread in the Burgundian Netherlands before the Reformation, *viz.* the wall-mounted memorial. This could be a panel painting, stone sculpture or an engraved brass, and would comprise a commemorative text usually – but not always – combined with religious imagery. *Pious Memories* is based on Douglas Brine's PhD thesis that he defended at the Courtauld Institute in London in 2006, and parts of this research have since been published elsewhere.¹ In the present volume Brine has produced a meticulously researched and lucidly argued account of the many different types of wall-mounted memorial, their models, material, iconography, and inscriptions, and how they were intended to benefit the dead by attracting prayers for their souls. Key to understanding these memorials are the theological concepts of purgatory, intercession and salvation.

In the past, researchers have concentrated almost exclusively on tomb monuments as the main form of commemoration. Thus in his seminal but flawed study *Centuries of Childhood* (English translation published 1962) the French historian Philippe Ariès – himself no medievalist – even supported his claims that medieval society did not have a real concept of childhood and that the dead child was considered “not worthy of remembrance” with the evidence of a supposed absence of children on medieval monuments.² Thereby he overlooked the many extant and documented examples, such as the spectacular Limoges enamel tomb plaques to Louis IX's infant children Blanche (d. 1243) and Jean (d. 1248) now in the abbey of Saint-Denis, Paris.³ Furthermore, tomb monuments do not necessarily prove affection towards the deceased: they can also convey status and dynasty, for example. Yet what Ariès also failed to recognize was that medieval people used many other forms of commemoration: less-tangible ones such as masses, chantries, and other pious bequests of which evidence may

now be found mainly in written records, but also memorials in stained glass, wall painting, or indeed, the different types of wall-mounted memorial such as the *Anna Selbdritt* memorial panel with saints and donors (including many children) of c. 1490-1500 by the anonymous Master of the St. John Panels. (**fig. 1**) *Pious Memories* thus fits in well with medieval *memoria* research conducted in Germany and the Netherlands, notably the Medieval Memoria Online (MeMO) project still continuing at Utrecht University that inventories Dutch *memoria*.⁴ Brine's geographical research area covers all of the Low Countries, including the modern-day Netherlands, Belgium and parts of northern France.



Figure 1
Master of the St. John Panels (North Netherlandish), *Memorial Panel with the Virgin and Child with St. Anne, Sts. Francis and Lidwina, and Donors* (c. 1490-1500), oil on panel, 55.5 x 53.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Netherlands).

Pious Memories is divided into six chapters and based very much on case studies, albeit with many comparisons to provide a wider context. In his lengthy Introduction Brine first discusses the different categories of memorial and their original locations, often near the tombstone of the deceased. In some cases, both survive, as in the case of the memorial painting and the incised limestone tomb slab of dean Pieter van der Meulen (d. 1459), both still housed in the cathedral of Saint-Paul in Liège, Belgium (pp. 2-4 and figs. 3-4). However, much has been lost over the centuries: for example, the city of Liège was virtually destroyed on the orders of Charles the Bold in 1468, which makes the survival of these two joint

memorials even more fortuitous. Far more widespread was the damage caused by the iconoclasm of 1566 and subsequent outbreaks of Calvinist vandalism that caused the defacing or total destruction of the majority of Dutch examples, so that Brine focuses instead on extant wall memorials in Belgium and northern France. This may explain his claim that floor slabs did not offer the same possibility of intercessory emphasis because “it would have been wholly unacceptable for images of these holy figures to appear on floor slabs” (p. 25). In fact, several Dutch extant floor slabs in the MeMO database feature saints, such as the large incised figure of St. Anthony Abbot on the slab of Adriaen Jan Anthonisz. (d. 1486) in Oudelande (Zeeland),⁵ (**fig. 2**) although most examples date from the sixteenth century. Brine also discusses the problems of terminology: there was so single standard term used consistently in documents of the period (pp. 7, 114), while nowadays the term “epitaph” can be used variously for a memorial tablet or for just the commemorative inscription.



Figure 2

Slab of Adriaen Jan Anthonisz. (d. 1486) in Oudelande (Zeeland, Netherlands). Photo: Chris Booms, RCE.

In his second chapter Brine juxtaposes two near-contemporary sculpted memorials to noblemen from the same extended family in the province of Hainaut (Belgium). That of Baudouin de Hénin-Liétard (d. 1421) at Tournai commemorates him along with his second wife, Catherine de Melun. The stone tablet shows the pair kneeling on either side of the Virgin and Child, with their chosen patron saints behind them: almost inevitably the wife has her name saint (St. Catherine of Alexandria), but for Baudouin it is St. Anthony. This choice

of saint is in accordance with explicit instructions in Baudouin's will and Brine cleverly explains this choice by demonstrating a resemblance with the extant, slightly earlier statue of St. Anthony at the chapel of Saint-Antoine-en-Barbefosse at Havré (Hainaut) and pointing out the political importance of this Wittelsbach foundation as well as the personal relevance of the saint to a crusader like Baudouin. His younger relative Thierry de Hénin-Liétard died in Venice in 1430 on his return from the Holy Land. His memorial in Boussu is thus commemorative without actually marking his grave because Thierry was buried in Venice, as the rhyming inscription on the limestone tablet explains. Although he had married in 1429, not long before embarking on his pilgrimage, the relief shows just Thierry kneeling before the Virgin and Child, and the inscription makes no mention of his wife. The inclusion of Sts. Barbara and Christopher – both protectors against sudden death – suggests that Thierry may have commissioned the memorial himself before his departure: the inscription was obviously added after he had failed to return home.



Figure 3 Memorial to canon Jean de Libourc (c.1470), church of Notre-Dame in Saint-Omer (Pas-de-Calais, France).
Photo: Douglas Brine.

Chapter three examines the eighteen sculpted memorials to canons at the collegiate church of Notre-Dame in Saint-Omer (Pas-de-Calais, France). Although this is a surprisingly large number to survive in just one church, there must have been many more originally and they are but one of the many forms of memorial on which the canons are known to have once lavished their prebends: these included stainedglass windows, tapestries, a rood screen, brass doors leading to the choir, and a retable with alabaster apostle figures for the high altar (pp. 101-102). Furthermore, many of these stone memorial tablets originally featured painted wing panels, as indicated by the hinges still visible on some, although none survive with wings intact. Brine discusses the iconography of the extant stone panels and draws an interesting comparison between the elaborate memorial of c.1470 to canon Jean de Libourc and its likely model, a South Netherlandish *Mass of St. Gregory* woodcut of c.1460.

(fig. 3) This was actually an indulgenced image and the inscription beneath the printed image offers its readers 10,000 years off purgatory, whereas the Libourc epitaph promises an even-more impressive 20,600 years off.

In chapter four Brine discusses an often-overlooked category of female religious, *viz.* canonesses, focusing on three memorials to abbesses at the once important abbey of SainteGertrude in Nivelles (south of Brussels). Unfortunately, the interior of the church underwent drastic refurbishment in 1753 and it also suffered extensive damage from aerial bombardments in 1940: only one brass and four sculpted memorials to its canonesses survive from the fifteenth century, but all are damaged and two in a ruinous state. The brass of Marguerite d'Escornaix fared badly in the 1940 fire and now survives in three separate pieces, *viz.* the devotional image of the kneeling abbess with the Virgin and St. Margaret, and the two mangled fragments of the 28-line inscription with its detailed description of her pious foundation (transcription provided in the Appendix, pp. 232-235). The extent of destruction at Nivelles and elsewhere – including the frequent loss of polychromy, inscriptions and heraldry that would allow us to identify memorials as such, and their patrons – has inevitably distorted our understanding of how important the *memoria* cult once was, how widespread this type of memoria, and whether the surviving examples really were as exceptional as they may strike us today – a caveat that Brine sensibly reiterates throughout (*e.g.* pp. 134-135).

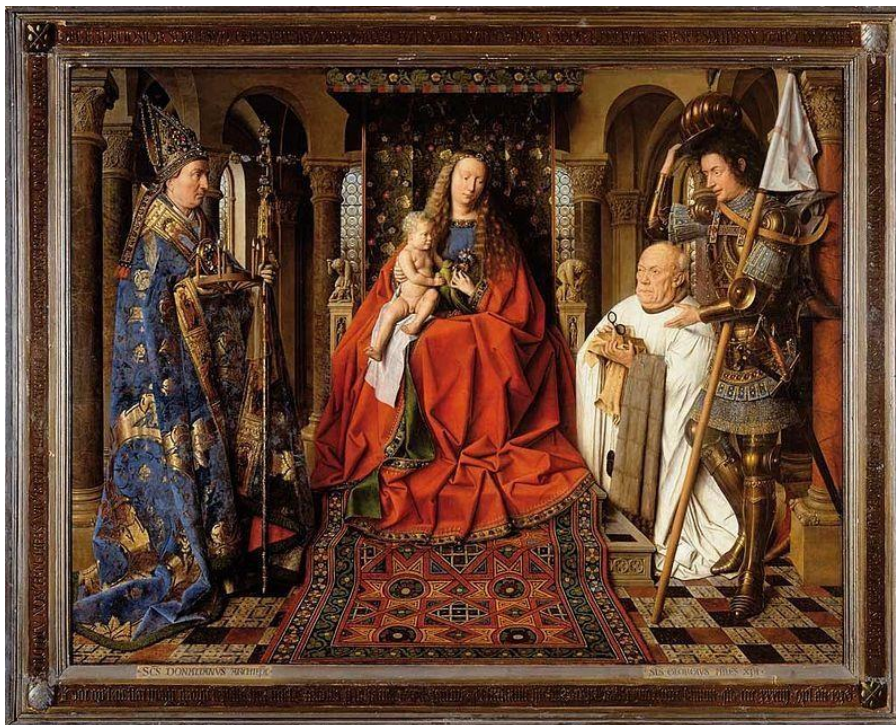


Figure 4
Jan van Eyck, *Virgin and Child with Canon Joris van der Paele* (c. 1434-36), oil on panel, 141 x 176.5 cm (including frame), Groeningemuseum, Bruges (Belgium). Photo: Wikipedia

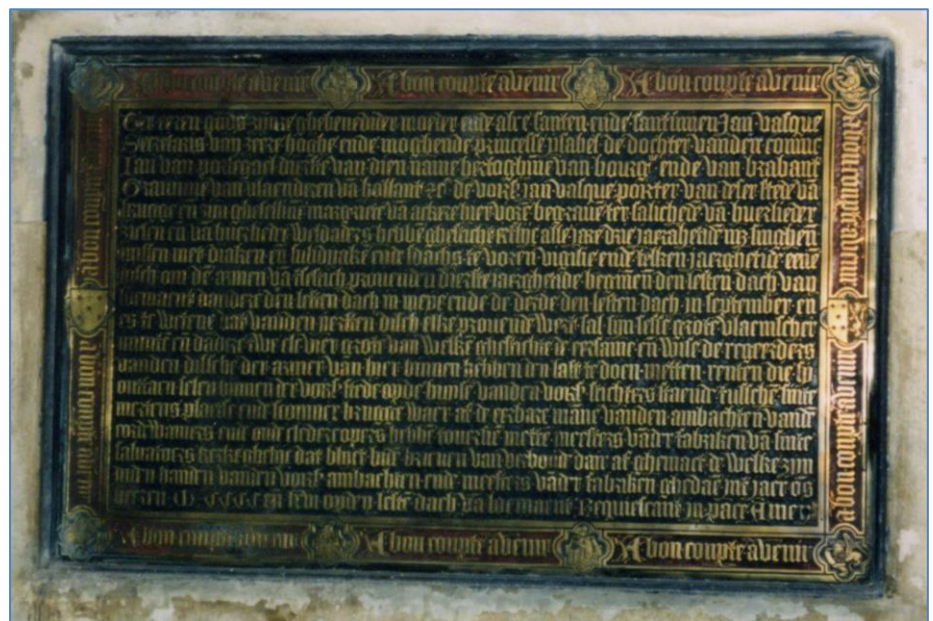
These first four chapters build up towards what is undoubtedly the most famous memorial discussed in this book: Jan van Eyck's *Virgin of Canon Joris van der Paele* (c.1434-36), which has been variously interpreted as an altarpiece, a focus for devotional meditation, or indeed as an epitaph above the patron's grave. (**fig. 4**) Yet Brine argues in his fifth chapter that these three different functions are not mutually exclusive (p. 181) and by then he has already made a convincing case for regarding this large panel with its illusionistically painted epitaph on the frame as yet another wall-mounted memorial. Its exceptional quality probably ensured its survival and thus it has proved more enduring than stone or brass.

The Epilogue shows that as a type of funerary monument the wall-mounted memorial had a long afterlife well beyond the Reformation and the 1566 *Beeldenstorm* (iconoclasm). Yet in Protestant areas its purpose was commemoration and status whereas the medieval *memoria* culture concerned the hereafter, viz. the salvation of the soul. Even in the Catholic Southern Netherlands the biographical element was emphasized more than ever before while the image of the crucified Christ without any accompanying saints became more prevalent.

Figure 5

Memorial brass of Jan Vasquez and Margriete van Ackere (c.1467), 47.5 x 75.5 cm, Cathedral of St Saviour, Bruges.

Pious Memories is well written and carefully proofread overall, even though the name "Van Zwieten" is



misspelled as "Van Zweiten" (p. 12). A number of key documents are included in an appendix and there is an extensive bibliography and an index. The photographs – many by the author himself – are of excellent quality, as is the quality of the paper and the clear layout of the text itself. Nonetheless, the layout also carries a problem: many illustrations have been reproduced in just postage-stamp size in the wide blank margins, such as the engraved brass epitaph of Jan Vasquez and Margriete van Ackere (fig. 90). (**fig. 5**) This makes them almost

or even wholly illegible. I actually had to resort to a magnifying glass (in addition to my usual reading specs) in an attempt to judge the “illogical” gesture of the Christ child in fig. 50, and there is really not much to be learnt from Jan Baptiste van Meunincxhove’s *Interior of the Sint-Donaaskerk* of c.1696, 90.4 x 100.2 cm, in a 31 x 34 mm reproduction. While I welcome the number of illustrations in this study, the diminutive size of so many seems counter-productive in an art-historical study that relies so much on iconographical interpretation and comparison.

However, this last quibble is with the publisher and not with the author. *Pious Memories* is an important work for any medievalist as it shows how the *memoria* cult pertains to so many forms of medieval art and how there may be an unsuspected memorial purpose underlying works that now lack an epitaph or other identifying marks – and this is true not just of art in the Low Countries.⁶ Brine’s work thus raises our awareness of this often overlooked character and purpose of many medieval works of art, including portraits such as Van Eyck’s *Léal Souvenir* that has sadly lost its original frame and inscription that could have proved this point – and the identity of the sitter – once and for all. 🐼

¹ Winner of the 2008 Church Monuments Society Essay Prize, Brine’s essay “Image, Text and Prayer. The Indulged Memorial Tablet of Jean de Libourc (d. 1470), Canon of Saint-Omer” was published in *Church Monuments*, 23 (2008), 45-61, 163-165; see also Brine’s article “Jan van Eyck, Canon Joris van der Paele, and the Art of Commemoration,” *The Art Bulletin*, 96 (2014), 265-287.

² Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (1960, trans. 1962, Harmondsworth: Penguin, repr. 1986), p. 36 and 125.

³ For example, see Sophie Oosterwijk, “Miniature Adults? Representations of Children and Childhood in Medieval Art” in Sally Crawford, Dawn M. Hadley and Gillian Shepherd (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of childhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2017).

⁴ One can search for extant Dutch examples at Utrecht, for example, in the MeMO online database at <http://memo.hum.uu.nl/>. Brine previously made part of his preliminary inventory of wall-mounted memorials from the Southern Netherlands dating from c. 1380 to c. 1520 available on the MeMO website, although to date it is still incomplete. See <http://memo.hum.uu.nl/memorials/index.html>.

⁵ See MeMO ID 1507.

⁶ For example, see the recent study by Sally Badham, *Seeking Salvation: Commemorating the Dead in the LateMedieval English Parish* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2015).