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Review of Beth Williamson, Reliquary Tabernacles in Fourteenth-Century Italy: Image, Relic and Material Culture

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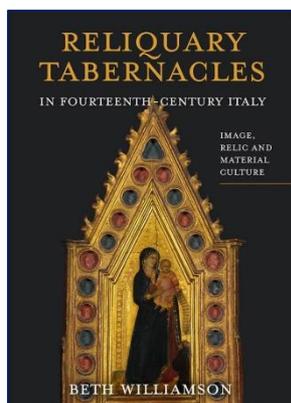
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Review: Beth Williamson, *Reliquary Tabernacles in Fourteenth-Century Italy: Image, Relic and Material Culture* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020)

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Only fairly recently has the discipline of art history formally established ‘materiality’ as a useful methodological framework, guided to some degree by the return to technical art history and the emergence of an anthropology of art. In *Reliquary Tabernacles in fourteenth-century Italy: Image, Relic and Material Culture*, Beth Williamson offers a lucidly written, “materially inflected” (p. 8), monographic study of a small group of surviving Trecento reliquary tabernacles, all originating from Siena, one of the leading artistic centers of the Italian peninsula during the medieval period.

These Siennese reliquary tabernacles, twelve of which survive, are here introduced as both single-paneled reliquaries, or in a triptych format, depicting varying iconographies – from the Madonna Enthroned, to the standing Virgin and the Madonna of Humility. Designed to hold relics inset upon their surface, these



Lippo Vanni, Triptych with enthroned Virgin and Child, Standing Saints and Annunciation, Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, Inv. no. 37.750, c. 1350-9, 49.4 x 45.4 x 6.2 cm. Photo: Walters Art Museum

reliquaries present themselves as unique, hybrid objects – simultaneously paintings and reliquaries – in marked contrast to older reliquaries whose purpose was to enshrine and conceal relics, rather than displaying them visibly around a central image.

Expanding upon initial research published in 2018, these tabernacles act as case-studies for Williamson to further advance her crucial and persuasive argument

that an awareness of the material characteristic of objects, and their connotations, is important to consider if one is to access the full range of interpretative possibilities – aesthetic, theological and devotional – that medieval objects offered their contemporary observers and users. More broadly, these objects serve to demonstrate that ‘materiality’ is a useful theoretical tool to examine visual culture at large.¹

To guide the reader from a formal and stylistic analysis of these tabernacles, considered within the artistic landscape of Trecento Siena, towards a broader consideration of the “ways on which different matter and materials create meaning, both individually and in concert” (p. 10), the book is usefully divided into two parts: Making and Meaning. Part I, chapters 1-3, provides ample discussion of the formal development of these reliquary tabernacles within the context of the Christian practices of the veneration of the bodily remains of saints and the Sieneese artistic sphere, centred around the close examination of early surviving examples. Part II, chapters 4-6, instead focuses on the meanings produced by the images and iconographies employed, as well as considering the effect of combining different materials, and the inter-medial conversations generated.

The first chapter offers a helpful overview of the development of reliquaries within the Christian tradition, tracing the evolution of reliquaries from containers that enclosed relics, to those that began to make their sacred contents visible. Setting the scene “to consider the connotations that are being evoked when a reliquary takes

¹ B. Williamson, “Matter and materiality in an Italian reliquary triptych,” *Gesta* Vol. 57, no. 1, (2018), 23-42.

the form of a painting” (p. 13), the author significantly suggests the possible “twin trajectories” that led to the evolution of this new type of object (reliquaries and small-scale panel paintings); these two types form the linchpin of her analysis of the Sieneese reliquary tabernacles for the remainder of the book (p. 22). At the close of the chapter, however, Williamson usefully problematizes this duality, arguing that considering the ‘reliquary-tabernacle’ lineage assumes “the material relic is the central, driving conceptual element” (p. 26) in the object’s function and development, and, equally, considering the genealogy ‘painting-reliquary’ is to perceive these reliquary tabernacles as first and foremost paintings, embellished with relics. The author clearly points out from the start that the category of object that forms the focus of this study was new and hybrid; Sieneese reliquary tabernacles crossed the media boundaries established by art-historical studies and are thus “very hard to pin down in terms of their ontological status” (p. 25). This is re-emphasised throughout the book.

The bulk of the second chapter is devoted to in-depth analysis of three of the earliest surviving examples of these reliquary tabernacles – the Cleveland tabernacle, Pietro Lorenzetti’s Berenson/Milan tabernacle, and Naddo Ceccarelli’s Baltimore tabernacle – “as a means to further interrogate the development and reception of this form” (p. 27). Williamson’s close and careful visual analysis, fuelled by comparisons between these earliest surviving examples, emphasizes the singularity of these



Naddo Ceccarelli, *Tabernacle with Standing Virgin*, Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, Inv. No. 37.1159, c. 1350, 62 x 43 x 9.4 cm. Photo: Walters Art Museum

objects whilst addressing issues of function, viewing conditions, the circumstances of their evolution, and the networks by which these objects assumed their particular visual and material form. The author further proposes compelling and plausible connections between the examples discussed and the patronage of the Augustinian friars. The significance of the devotional and artistic context offered by the Augustinians as a framework for the development of these reliquary tabernacles emerges as a common thread picked up throughout the book, specifically in relation

to specific artists working in Siena during the 14th century. Within this discussion, the Augustinians are significantly granted an increasingly active role within the artistic innovation of the Trecento; a role that art-historical scholarship, until fairly recently reserved for their mendicant counterparts, the Dominicans and Franciscans.

The third chapter sets the development of these new devotional objects within the broader Sieneese artistic and cultural climate of the mid-14th century. Williamson explicitly argues that “Siena was an engine for the development of new instances of visual culture in several media and in several forms” (p. 78), setting the climate of innovation pioneered by Sieneese artists as the context for the genesis of this new type of reliquary. Within the circle of innovative Sieneese artists engaging with this cross-fertilisation between media, Williamson specifically sets apart Simone Martini, arguing that “he seems to have honed, and provided a particular direction to the more general culture of innovation” that had become characteristic of Duecento and Trecento Sieneese art (p. 79).

Following a brief excursus into Martini’s artistic activity and legacy in Siena, chapter four, and part II of the book, opens with a consideration of Sieneese artists as “generators of new compositions and iconographical forms” (p. 83), and the iconographical meanings attached to these reliquary tabernacles. Here, the discussion centres around the emergence of two new iconographies, those of the standing Virgin and the Madonna of Humility, carried over to the reliquary tabernacles from medieval sculpture and panel paintings respectively, thus

extending the inter-medial conversations already prevalent in the Sieneese artistic sphere.

Treating each of these new iconographies separately, Williamson argues that the translation of forms from one medium to another, or instances of material objects alluding explicitly to others, was deliberate and “designed to facilitate long and complex chains of associations that could aid prayerful thought and behaviour” (p. 87). Specifically, she argues that this practice – defined more precisely in subsequent chapters – endowed these reliquary tabernacles with different levels of visual rhetoric, encouraging the observer to meditate upon different notions of “visibility, materiality, appearance and reality,” as well as interrogating the different viewing conditions of “close looking and distant gazing” (p. 89).

Williamson discusses *The Madonna of Humility* as a completely new iconographical type and attributes its adoption to the second generation of Sieneese artists producing these reliquary tabernacles, mediated through artists in contact with Simone Martini during his time in Avignon. With regard to the standing Virgin, the author makes a strong case for Simone Martini’s panel for the tomb-altar of Beato Agostino Novello as a model for the reliquary tabernacles’ adoption of this iconography. The tomb-altar type was itself, much like the reliquary tabernacles, a new type of object whilst simultaneously harking back to the earlier ‘vita-retable’ type. Williamson convincingly suggests that the example offered by the Novello panel, which emerged from the same Sieneese artistic circles, may have “stimulated an interest in producing, on a smaller scale, tabernacles that could reproduce this

clear and visible link between images and relics” (p. 95), whereby the central image is surrounded by relics. The author astutely re-emphasizes again, however, that the development of these reliquary tabernacles went beyond the small-scale mimicking of altarpieces; their novelty lies in their physical incorporation of relics into the fabric and design of the object, generating distinct dynamics between image and relics, as is explored in the final two chapters of the book.

The crux of chapter 5 is to assess the effect of the addition of relics, examining the “aesthetic, theological and devotional possibilities that this multiplication of media offered,” as well as the specific connotations of different materials (p. 120). The author’s discussion of the intentional combination of different artistic media significantly brings her to explore issues of viewing distance more thoroughly, as well as the specific image-relic relationship embodied by these reliquary tabernacles. A fundamental characteristic of the single-paneled reliquary tabernacles is that they were designed “to operate at two different levels of proximity” (p. 141). When carried in procession, at a distance, the immediate focus was their central image, with the relics assuming a secondary role; in contrast, when placed statically on an altar, the relics gained greater visual prominence and could be individually identified. In contrast, the triptych reliquary tabernacles discussed in the study rather offer a more dynamic mode of viewing, defined not by a dualism between proximity and distance, but by their capacity to be opened and closed, and thus to reveal and conceal the relics at the viewer’s discretion. As such, Williamson concludes that these triptych tabernacles do “not partake in the visual rhetoric of the

‘reliquary turned inside out’” (p. 143) in the same manner as single-paneled reliquaries, but instead defines them as “a compromise between the traditional form of enshrining reliquary, with the relics fully enclosed, and the new form of reliquary tabernacles, with the relics always on display” (p. 143). In such discussion, Williamson sets herself apart from previous scholars working on these reliquary tabernacles; she considers these objects both as a group and individually, offering valuable comparative observations, as well as more specific and singular judgements.

Despite differences in viewing conditions, Williamson draws attention to a common characteristic of both the single paneled and triptych reliquary tabernacles: their incorporation of relics that frame their central image. She successfully brings the notion of the “marginal” into this discussion, arguing that rather than the framing relics supporting the central, painted image, they adopted a much more active role in the devotional opportunities offered to the viewer. Following on from Jacqueline Jung’s consideration of church screens as “points of contact” rather than barriers, Williamson offers the interesting interpretation that the incorporation of relics around the central image offered “a transition from the human world outside the tabernacles towards the heavenly world depicted in the central image,” acting as intermediaries and a “way in” to the tabernacles (p. 147).²

² J. E. Jung, “Beyond the Barrier: The Unifying Role of the Choir Screen in Gothic Churches,” *Art Bulletin* 82 (2000): 622-657.

The liminal position of these relics – aesthetically, materially, and theologically – is explored further in the final chapter, which seeks to address the motives behind the incorporation of relics into this new type of object. The opening of the chapter sets this practice within a broader “impulse towards collecting” (p. 153) relics prevalent in Europe during the medieval period, offering the examples of Louis IX’s Sainte Chapelle and Charles IV’s Holy Cross Chapel, both erected to enshrine and display their collections of relics. To this, Williamson introduces three key concepts and lenses through which she re-focuses attention towards the incentive behind the reliquary tabernacles’ multiplication of relics, materials, and media: *spolia*, *bricolage*, and *varietas*.

Williamson argues that the practices identified in these reliquary tabernacles – of assembling different media, referencing other forms of material culture, and the physical inclusion of relics – was conceptually analogous to the activity of spoliation prevalent in Byzantine and medieval material culture, defined as the “reuse of an older precious object or material within a new object” (p. 159). The author suggests that not only the re-use of older materials, such as gems, but also the relics themselves lent “age-value” (p. 163) to the reliquaries. Like ‘*spolia*,’ the relics’ physical manifestation of the holy person they personify occludes a temporal gap; they simultaneously recall the past time when the saint was present and bring that time into the present, thus reaffirming that the value of these reliquaries ultimately transcended their materiality.

This activity of incorporating relics and materials, or *spolia*, into these Sieneese reliquary tabernacles is subsequently proposed by Williamson as a form of bricolage, defined formally as the “construction or creation from a diverse range of available things” (p. 168). In her use of the term, Williamson does not refer to an arbitrary practice of accumulation of materials, but to an enterprise that held “a certain degree of deliberate and conscious selection” (p. 168) in the moment of production. Through such an enterprise, the visible inclusion of relics, defined as a kind of *spolia* presented novelty whilst also temporally relating back “to the material reality of the Christian past in a way that the image can only refer to” (p. 170), thus encouraging more immediate meditation upon the sacred mysteries.

To conclude the chapter, Williamson adds discussion of the medieval concept of *varietas* – variety – as another factor that influenced the assemblage of different materials within these reliquary tabernacles, including the relics themselves. Of particular note, and linking to her discussion of the liminal nature of the relics, is Williamson’s application of Mary Carruthers’ concept of the *ductus* – the manner in which an object leads an observer around it – to these multi-matter objects.³ Each different material used, the author argues, “presented itself to visual scrutiny” (p. 173), anchoring the viewer’s attention on and around the object; the multi-matter nature of these reliquaries thus encouraged the viewer to explore the devotional

³ M. Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013), chapter 5.

possibilities offered by this new type and the “different ways they could attempt to approach the divine” (p. 173).

Of interest to both art-historical scholars and non-art-historians alike, Williamson is especially successful in integrating a close visual and iconographical analysis with broader considerations of production, artistic/cultural context, and reception. Whilst the crux of her study revolves around a select group of Sienese reliquary tabernacles, the author persuasively touches upon larger concepts pertinent to medieval objects and culture at large and, in the absence of substantial documentary evidence to support conclusions on provenance and patronage, is persuasive in sustaining that “the material evidence provided by the objects themselves can be eloquent in itself” (p. 5) As such, this study reveals to be a real asset and model for the broader field of material culture. 🐼