
Over a hundred years ago Mary and Bernhard Berenson purchased a set of panel paintings they encountered while visiting an antique shop in Florence. This discovery began a journey which culminated into a sumptuous two-volume set about an altarpiece painted by Sassetta, a fifteenth-century Italian artist. Originally commissioned for the Franciscan church in Borgo San Sepolcro, it had been broken up and dispersed long ago. Existing panels have been identified in twelve museums and collections. Splendidly illustrated, these tomes describe the reconstruction of the altarpiece so as to illuminate its initial conception and assembly. This in-depth case study consists of scholarly essays by art historians, historians, curators, conservators, woodworkers, and others that have shared a passion for this altarpiece and are fascinated by its mysteries. Originally situated behind the altar which held the remains of the Blessed Ranieri, the front, depicting the Virgin Mary with Child flanked by saints, faced the nave of the church. The back of the altarpiece portrays Saint Francis surrounded by scenes from his life.

Both editor and author, Machtelt Israëls, has organized the collaborative work in two volumes. Volume I consists of five parts and begins with essays on Sassetta and Berenson. This is followed by a discussion of the church where the altarpiece stood and the confraternal order which commissioned the polyptych. “Reconstruction and Type,” the third section, provides background on Sienese altarpieces in the context of its era. The subsequent essay delineates the participation of the individual scholars who teamed together to reconstruct the original masterpiece. Here the reader finds an in-depth discussion of the placement of the panels and illustrated models of the virtual reconstruction. The program of the altarpiece is also thoroughly investigated, interpreted, and placed in its relationship to the Franciscan order for which it was intended. The volume concludes with the discussion of painting techniques and the physical construction of the altarpiece.

Volume II contains the sixth part, the technical catalog, and is followed by appendices which are comprised of primary documents relating to the altarpiece and its commission, a chart of the use of punch marks, a glossary, bibliography, and index. The catalog, consistently and clearly designed, provides an entry for each known panel, includes its placement in the altarpiece, its iconography, technical analyses, and provenance. Each section is richly illustrated with details of x-rays and infrared, as well as close-ups of both sides of the panels.

This exquisitely published work is highly recommended for academic libraries that support graduate art history, history, and conservation programs, and museum libraries.

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