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Nethersole, Scott. Devotion by Design: Italian Altarpieces before 1500

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Nethersole, Scott.

Devotion by Design: Italian Altarpieces before 1500.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. Pp. 128 + 93 figs. ISBN 978-1-85709-525-8 (hardcover) \$40.

A permanent memory of a profound but transient exhibition held at The National Gallery in London in the summer of 2011 is provided by the book *Devotion by Design: Italian Altarpieces before 1500*. The text takes the form of an extended essay on the devotional purposes of early Italian altarpieces written by one of the curators, Scott Nethersole, in such a way as to encompass aspects of the more than forty paintings originally featured, and now lavishly reproduced on full-page spreads in this book. Not only does this publication bring to the forefront several less well-known panels in the gallery's collection from the years c. 1365–1495, and the interesting details of their initial patronage and later trajectory, but its author also emphasizes his indebtedness to the strong tradition of British scholarship on this material, both art-historical research on the original circumstances of commission and function, and scientific study at The National Gallery since the 1980s of the methods and materials of Italian painters, or what is now referred to as “technical art history.”

Written with the museum visitor in mind, Nethersole's vivid accounts of the religious environments in which devotional images were used, and his close readings of the painted imagery and structural composition of individual altar panels, would enlighten undergraduate students approaching the art of this period for the first time. Readers more familiar with altarpieces from the later Middle Ages and Renaissance will discover new and fascinating discussions in Nethersole's essay, especially when he enumerates the sequence of physical changes that several of the panel-paintings have undergone since being removed from their original altar tables. Whereas by the early nineteenth century the *Trinity Altarpiece* by Pesellino and Lippi had been sawn into five or six pieces and the predella divided into individual scenes, other examples at The National Gallery, including Crivelli's *Demidoff Altarpiece*, are the result of later reconstructions by dealers and collectors who recomposed fragments of disparate origins to create apparently coherent “authentic” works, either for their own aesthetic purposes or for sale on the art market.

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