

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Melion, Walter S. The Meditative Art: Studies in the Northern Devotional Print 1550–1625

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Volume 35, numéro 2, printemps 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105845ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i2.19383>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

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#### Citer ce compte rendu

Stowell, S. (2012). Compte rendu de [Melion, Walter S. The Meditative Art: Studies in the Northern Devotional Print 1550–1625]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 35(2), 166–168.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i2.19383>

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**Melion, Walter S.**

***The Meditative Art: Studies in the Northern Devotional Print 1550–1625.***

Early Modern Catholicism and the Visual Arts Series, 1. Philadelphia, PA: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2009. Pp. 431. ISBN 978-0916101602 (hardcover) \$90.

The rise of affective meditation and other devotional practices that demanded votaries to picture moments of sacred history has long been posited as one of the cultural factors that supported the revival of naturalistic image-making techniques toward the end of the Middle Ages. Such devotional and meditative practices have been used by scholars to illuminate art-historical contexts ranging from works of art commissioned to decorate mendicant churches in Northern Italy in the early Renaissance, to private devotional panels painted in Northern Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Though such descriptions of Renaissance naturalism have been in circulation for several generations, questions regarding the symbiotic relationship between visual art and meditation have been revisited in recent years by scholars of devotional literature and art historians of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Despite recent contributions, many questions still remain unexplored, particularly as concerns later early modern devotional art and literature. As such, *The Meditative Art: Studies in the Northern Devotional Print 1550–1625* by Walter Melion is a particularly valuable contribution to the growing literature on the use of images in internal devotional practices. The book provides sensitive readings of printed devotional images (for example, images that appear in devotional texts) through a series of case studies that demonstrate how printed images supported and cultivated image-based meditative practices. Melion's particular emphasis is to argue that the prints "call attention to their status as images, using the theme of pictorial artifice to heighten the soul's awareness of its own image-making powers" (p. 3).

The introductory chapter describes cultural factors that made the historical milieu under study a particularly fertile context for the development of such devotional practices, specifically by outlining how images were important to contemporary theologians. Melion proposes two general species of devotional images: speculative and spectacular images, which encourage the soul, respectively, to mirror the virtuous actions of holy people, or to contemplate vivid representation of the lives and actions of holy people. Following the

introduction, each chapter of Melion's study focuses on the printed images within a single devotional text or a small group of related printed images. His analysis combines a range of art-historical methods, but most notably comprises close visual analysis of the images together with close readings of the literary apparatus accompanying the print, or the book in which the print is featured. The strength of this approach is evident, for example, in chapter 3 on Antonius Sucquet's *Via vitae aeternae*, printed in 1620. One image in this book engraved by Boëtius à Bolswert represents a painter observing a scene of the nativity and then painting the features of this scene on a panel in the shape of a heart that has been divided into various sections, each of which has been labelled according to one of the "circumstances" (a series of questions — who? where? when? — that were used by ancient orators to amplify a given material, and later used in hermeneutics and sacred oratory). By slowly parsing how the image represents the process of picturing a scene from sacred history to oneself, Melion reconstructs how images were implicated in the process of meditation, and why it was important for the artist to call attention to the differences between the historical scene itself, and the scene as painted on the panel of one's interior heart. Discussions on the relationship between art and meditation have sometimes suffered from generalization, leaving many questions about the actual process of meditation unanswered, and Melion's study does much to amplify our understanding of the inner lives of Christian votaries at this time.

Because he emphasizes individual case studies and close readings, Melion's text does not focus on the place these texts occupy in the broad history of affective, image-based meditation. For this reason, chapters in which Melion shows how early modern spiritual writers and artists refashioned earlier devotional traditions in order to fabricate a new technique of affective meditation are particularly compelling for giving a clearer sense of what was novel in these devotional prints and practices. In chapter 6, for example, on Hieronymus Wierix's *Septem Psalmi Davidici*, printed in 1608, Melion shows how the program of meditation combining the passion and the penitential psalms is indebted to Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, among other texts. In this analysis, Melion also describes how the printed images and texts in Wierix's series of prints, which lay out the penitential psalms in words that spiral decoratively around images of the passion, prompt readers/viewers to circle around the images in the act of reading, thus enacting a process that bears upon a series of related metaphors concerning chains, hearts, binding, and turning, which have traditionally been

used to engage in meditative readings of the psalms. This reading imaginatively explores how the prints combine and re-work traditional spiritual processes; Melion's interpretation shows how the monastic contemplative tradition, as has been described recently by Mary Carruthers among many others, is revitalized in the age of print.

Melion's book will be of great interest to those who work on the art of the period under study, but also to those who, like this reviewer, work on art and devotional practices in other parts of Europe. The strength of the book is Melion's highly sensitive and well-informed readings of these images. The book is generously illustrated with high-quality reproductions of each image discussed.

STEVEN STOWELL, *Concordia University*

**Montaigne, Michel de.**

***Selected Essays, and La Boétie's Discourse on Voluntary Servitude.* Trans. James B. Atkinson & David Sices. Introduction and notes by James B. Atkinson.**

Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011. Pp. 410. ISBN 978-1-60384-595-3 (paperback) \$12.95.

Four hundred and twenty years after his death, Montaigne continues to inspire four or five books and countless scholarly articles every year. During the twentieth century alone there were six new English translations of the complete *Essais*, plus re-issues of older versions (Florio, Cotton). The more recent translations (Cohen, 1958; Frame, 1965; Screech, 2003) either appeared or were republished in low-cost paperback editions, and both Frame and Screech have been excerpted to provide students with a manageable volume containing what the editors believed to be the more important of the essays.

Why, then, this new, partial translation? Atkinson might have claimed that previous compilations were an inadequate reflection of the totality of the *Essais* or that translation errors deformed Montaigne's thought. Instead — and his point is well taken — he argues for the need to provide American students with a version of Montaigne that is couched in a language closer to their