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Review of B. Lane. Hans Memling, Master Painter in Fifteenth-Century Bruges

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Barbara Lane *Hans Memling, Master Painter in Fifteenth-Century Bruges*

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Barbara Lane's *Hans Memling: Master Painter in Fifteenth-Century Bruges* explores the life and oeuvre of Hans Memling, one of the most important Flemish artists of the fifteenth century. In it, Lane argues that despite various exhibitions of the artist's works, "many of the tantalizing problems surrounding Memling's life and work remain unresolved" (10). She offers her book as a remedy to the lingering gaps in Memling scholarship and provides a comprehensive treatment of the artist by dividing her study into four main sections. Section 1, "*Wanderjahre*," traces Memling's early career from his apprentice days through his journeyman years. The next section, "Master Painter in Bruges," considers his life as a working master. Section 3, "Major Commissions," explores a number of his most famous works. The final section, "Memling and Italy," delves into what Lane sees as the artist's lasting effects on Italian art. She ends her study with a brief epilogue followed by an extensive catalogue raisonné, broken down into accepted works (catalogue A), disputed works (catalogue B), and rejected works (catalogue C). As the majority of the volume is dedicated to the issues raised in the first two sections (chapters 1–6), I have focused my analysis primarily on them.

In her first chapter, "In Search of Memling in Rogier's Workshop," Lane challenges the common wisdom regarding Memling's connection to Rogier van der Weyden by stating, "no documents place him in Rogier's workshop" (17). She then dissects Vasari's account of the early Flemish artists and asserts that the putative accounts of Memling included in this and other Italian sources are "too ambiguous to be used as support for the theory that Memling trained in Rogier's workshop" (19). Having disposed of the sources that scholars use to link Memling and Rogier, Lane takes aim at the supposed stylistic similarities between the two. She asserts that one cannot assume a master/student relationship from the mere presence of any particular Rogierian motif. Lane uses the examples of the *Beaune Last Judgment* (1445–48) and the *Gdansk Last Judgment* (1467–71) to make her point. She notes that despite scholarly insistence that Memling copied Rogier's panel, it is highly unlikely that Memling ever saw the *Beaune* panels, let alone worked on them. She does not rule out, however, that Memling may have seen some of Rogier's workshop drawings at some point. Even if he spent time in Rogier's workshop, Lane argues, he need not have ever met the older artist but could have "learned Rogier's underdrawing technique and composition method from an assistant or assistants rather than from Rogier himself" (36).

In chapter 2, "Early Training in Cologne," Lane begins her search for non-Rogierian explanations for certain motifs in Memling's art. Her primary focus is the role that Stefan Lochner's works (e.g., *The Last Judgment* [1435–40] and the *Altarpiece of the Three Kings* [1440–45]) may have played in young Memling's artistic development. She is careful to disavow the possibility that Memling trained in Lochner's shop, preferring instead to note that, "Since Lochner's paintings were on view in Cologne in the second half of the century, Memling could have seen them there before traveling to Bruges" (49).

Rather than assuming direct contact between the artists, Lane asserts that any stylistic similarities between Memling and Lochner, or the pre-Lochner "Cologne School," are artifacts of the time the artist spent in Cologne during his journeyman years.

Chapter 3 continues tracing Memling's sojourn toward Flanders. In particular, Lane explores a possible stay in Louvain, during which Memling came into contact with the works of Dirk Bouts. For Lane, Boutsian motifs are as prevalent as Rogerian elements in Memling's oeuvre and equally inform the young artist's development.

Her next chapter, "The Impact of Van Eyck and Christus," explores the influence that the most famous artists of Bruges had on Memling. Lane argues that Jan Van Eyck's works and Petrus Christus's oeuvre had as much influence over Memling's artistic production as any painting by Rogier. She notes, for example, that Memling used inscriptions on his frames, as well as trompe l'oeil insects in his paintings, neither of which is particularly Rogerian. At the end of the chapter, Lane offers the conjecture that the artist may have spent time as a journeyman in Christus's shop to explain "Memling's extensive knowledge of the style and compositional types of both Christus and Van Eyck" (88). While this supposition is provocative, I am unconvinced by it. After taking such pains to show how Rogier could not be the sole source of Memling's style, and after debunking the notion that Memling must have been in Rogier's shop, it seems somewhat contradictory to create yet another mythology regarding a definitive source for Memling's art (especially without providing supporting documentary evidence). This conjecture is unnecessary, as Lane already provides a better model in her preceding analysis. She develops a picture of the artist as a well-traveled craftsman who synthesized multiple visual vocabularies rather than faithfully following one model.

In the second section of her book, Lane turns to Memling's career in Bruges. Chapter 5 focuses on his workshop practices, apprentices, and journeymen, and seeks to ferret out the identities of his assistants and their roles in his shop's production. Lane notes that Memling was a highly successful painter with a large number of commissions, and that he needed a great deal of help in his shop. She posits that Memling employed a fair number of journeymen to help him meet his obligations. Some of these assistants may have included Martin Schongauer, Michel Sittow, and Albrecht Dürer. Given the gaps in the record, Lane, like other specialists, connects these artists to Memling based solely on stylistic grounds. While tantalizing, the attempt to place these artists in Memling's shop is problematic. As Lane herself points out many times, any of these artists could have come across examples of Memling's works in any number of places and need not necessarily have been assistants in his shop. The assistants' identities, however, are not as important as Lane's underlying assertion—that Memling used journeyman rather than relying only on apprentices—which provides more insight into the artist's working methods.

Lane finishes her examination of Memling's training and workshop practice in chapter 6, "Patronage." In addition to local citizens, priests, and confraternity members, the artist also garnered commissions from the many foreigners who lived and worked in Bruges. Lane states that the reason Memling had such success was that he "gave his public what they wanted even if this meant repeating existing compositions," including his own works (116).

She continues her discussion of patronage in section 3 by focusing on the artist's major commissions. Having established Memling's working method and the fact that he was a successful artist in Bruges, she breaks the artist's most important works into three main categories: "Funerary Altarpieces" (chapter 7), "Paintings as Aids to Spiritual Pilgrimage" (chapter 8), and "Hospital Altarpieces" (chapter 9). Each of these varieties demonstrates that Memling was a successful artist, because, as Lane asserts, he gave his patrons objects that met their social, physical (e.g., recovery from the plague), and spiritual needs.

The fourth section of Lane's book explores the complex relationship between Flanders and Italy by investigating Memling's Italian patrons (chapter 10) and the Italian painters who emulated the artist (chapter 11). Lane sees Memling as a good entry point into the subject, because his works enjoyed something of a vogue in Italy in the 1470s and the 1480s. According to Lane, Italian artists imitated Memling because they wished to please patrons who wanted paintings in the Flemish style. Lane argues that Memling played a vital role in the transmission of "Flemish-style landscapes" into the visual arts in Italy, and states that his portraiture "appears to have had the greatest impact on Italian painters" (215). Like other scholars, Lane counts Ghirlandaio, Leonardo, Perugino, and Raphael among those most affected by Memling's works. The possibility that Memling's art may have influenced high-profile Italian artists is intriguing but, unfortunately, inconclusive. Like the discussion of his potential workshop assistants (chapter 5), these assertions stem solely from stylistic analysis; the documentary evidence remains frustratingly silent and prevents any solid connections between any given image by Memling and any possible quotation of it or its elements. Given the brisk trade in Netherlandish images in Italy, there are many possible sources from which these artists may have drawn their "Northern" elements. Such patterns need not derive solely from Memling. Despite gaps in the documents, Lane's analysis of the numerous instances of "Northern" motifs in Cinquecento painting challenges still-prevalent notions regarding the primacy of Italian painting and helps continue to move the art-historical narrative from its stubbornly Vasarian bias to a more balanced view.

Ultimately, Lane's investigation of Memling enriches the discourse on the artist by enhancing an understanding of artistic training, professional development, and workshop practices in the period. Although I have expressed minor reservations about certain arguments in the book, she successfully challenges the status quo in Memling scholarship by shifting the discussion of the artist away from a narrative of artistic dependence to one of intelligent synthesis.

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