

Exhibitions

Spiritual solace

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Devotion by Design: Italian Altarpieces before 1500

National Gallery, until 2 October

The basement galleries of the Sainsbury Wing are darker than ever for this intriguing redisplay of some of the oldest paintings in the National Gallery. The atmosphere attempts to recreate the penumbral gloom of church and chapel in which these paintings were originally to be seen, before impoverished religious foundations flogged them to dealers and collectors. Nearly all these pictures come from the NG's permanent collection, but it is always revealing to see things exhibited in new ways, and this exhibition is no exception.

For a change, it focuses our attention on the nuts and bolts of altarpieces — how they were commissioned, constructed, framed, positioned — and in so doing sheds much light on them as devotional objects. This approach, however, has little to add to the aesthetic appreciation or understanding of the works on display. Happily, there are some beautiful paintings among the demonstration pieces.

The real eye-catcher in Room 1 is Sassetta's 'Funeral of St Francis' (1437–44), painted in egg tempera on poplar panel. The pink and blue architecture, trimmed with gold, is gently radiant, and provides an uplifting setting for the human drama. One friar hides his head in grief, another turns his gaze to heaven, a third looks out at the viewer while a fourth fixes his eyes upon the bishop. This panel is one of seven scenes from St Francis's life originally intended to surround a painting of the saint in glory. But does this information enhance our appreciation of the individual painting? It adds to our knowledge but not, I think, to our pleasure.

We are used to seeing great paintings (which could properly be called fragments of altarpieces) out of context, such as Piero della Francesca's 'Baptism of Christ'. Put it back in the setting for which it was intended, in a polyptych altarpiece with attendant saints and predella panels (horizontal images along the base) painted by another artist entirely, Matteo di Giovanni, all brought together in an elaborate frame of Gothic ornament, and it looks wildly incongruous. Yet this was the way altarpieces were often constructed and commissioned. Is it then so misleading to study Piero's painting in isolation, if we want to learn more about his work? No. It remains a masterly work, and while we should be aware of its original setting the rest of the altarpiece is now really only a distraction.



Eye-catching: 'The Funeral of St Francis', 1437–44, by Sassetta

To go back to Room 1, which contains paintings of altars, don't miss the splendid Rogier van der Weyden (and workshop) 'Exhumation of St Hubert'. You may notice that the heads are generally too large for the bodies, but somehow this does not detract too much from the glory of the cool and lucid architectural setting. Evidently, portraits were important: faces, not paltry bodies. In Room 2, the two main types of altarpiece are contrasted: the polyptych of many panels, and the pala of one principal one, and the viewer can walk round behind

both to view how they were constructed and battered.

Room 3 contains three great paintings: Carlo Crivelli's 'Madonna of the Swallow', Benozzo Gozzoli's 'Virgin and Child' and Andrea Mantegna's 'Virgin and Child with Magdalen and St John the Baptist'. While recognising the intricate power of the Crivelli, I don't particularly like it, preferring the sculptural forms of the Mantegna and the subtlety of its colours, while Gozzoli's array of figures is human and compelling in a way Crivelli's is not. The main gallery,

Room 4, is the most church-like, with the paintings raised above altars. Here is 'The Circumcision' by Signorelli above the high altar. A painter friend of mine admitted that never before had he fully appreciated the meaning and beauty of this painting, but in its new position, high on the wall, it made complete sense. This is how altarpieces were made to be seen, and the height at which they're hung may be the single most important feature of this exhibition. I preferred, in this room, Zenobi Strozzi's 'Annunciation', however trimmed and cut down it may be. Note the passage of abstract patterning at centre front, presumably intended to suggest marble flooring.

Room 5 presents a number of real fragments, dislodged from their settings, though it focuses on the lovely self-contained Piero of St Michael on the end wall. There's a Ghirlandaio predella and a couple of small things by Fra Angelico, but for me one of the finest exhibits is in the last room, 'The Birth of the Virgin' by the Master of the Osservanza. Room 6 is dedicated to defining what exactly an altarpiece is, and this hinged triptych was probably for private rather than public devotion. I'm sure I'd be a better person if I had this exquisite painting to say my prayers to...

In very different mode and mood is an exhibition of recent work by Daniela Gullotta (born 1974, Bologna) at Marlborough Fine Art, 6 Albemarle Street, W1 (until 31 July). Gullotta concentrates on the structure of buildings, usually in mixed media images on wooden panels. She employs photography and collage, oil and acrylic, pencil and charcoal. Her previous theme was the interiors of wrecked or abandoned buildings, forgotten places suggesting the relevance of the recent past to our lives today. In this new body of work she has shifted emphasis entirely to Rome, and takes her inspiration from Piranesi. In fact, this impressive show is a tribute to Piranesi's great etchings, and deals more with exteriors than interiors.

Gullotta has also broadened her technical approach by painting on different materials: principally a series on small squares of slate, and another on rectangles of stretched damask. These vary the pace and texture of her approach and offer a variety of beguiling grace notes on the larger wooden panels. For the first time, Gullotta has introduced small figures into her compositions and these give a clue as to her intentions.

In all her work she investigates the relationship of man to the built environment. In this new exhibition she significantly deepens her game and surpasses earlier achievements, with images of the Colosseum, the Pantheon, the Forum Romanum and, most particularly, Castel Sant'Angelo, my personal favourite. Gullotta offers another way of looking at the past, but one which is no less valid than *Devotion by Design*.