

THE PAINTED PAGE: BOOKS AS SYMBOLS IN RENAISSANCE ART

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Abstract

Within every collection of Renaissance art, any viewer will find books, despite the fact they were rare commodities, but what does their widespread artistic representation signify? The history of the book has attracted increasing academic attention, and recently popular histories of the book have been published, perhaps inspired by uncertainties about the future of the printed medium. However, sustained studies of the visual appearance of books within Renaissance works of art are either missing or elusive, so the 'Books as Symbols in Renaissance Art' (BASIRA) project, operating in the border zone between art history and the history of the book, offers perspectives to both.

This paper discusses the construction of the BASIRA digital database and its supporting taxonomy, for which our initial focus is on works created between 1400 and 1601 in northern Italian states and the Holy Roman Empire. In this paper we present our methods and describe preliminary patterns observed. We anticipate that the BASIRA Project will be of interest to art historians, European cultural historians, to scholars in media studies, religious history, and the history of reading, and we hope that our work will enable adding visual substance to studies of changing cultural expectations of power, literacy, class, and even knowledge during the European Renaissance.

Keywords: *Renaissance art; books; iconography; BASIRA project*

INTRODUCTION

Odds are excellent that, if you look at any collection of Renaissance art—be it from areas now known as Italy, Spain, Belgium, France, or Germany—you will see books. Saints hold books, sometimes displayed face out, sometimes closed and folded under an arm. Women carry books, fingers turning pages. Princes and priests and teachers sit among books, which at times are held on handsome lecterns, at other times piled on shelves. Angels sing from books and children play with books. And when God has a book, it is characteristically facing out—so viewers can see the text that God is “speaking.” (Figure 1). A survey of this widespread portrayal of books in late medieval and early modern art poses a range of questions. What do all of these books convey? Might there be patterns, as yet undiscerned, in ways that artists depict books being held or presented? Would a systematic study of portrayals of books enhance our understanding of European culture in a time of rapid change? To address these questions, two colleagues—a book designer/historian and an art historian—began a collaboration that has come to be known as the BASIRA Project (Books as Symbols in Renaissance Art).

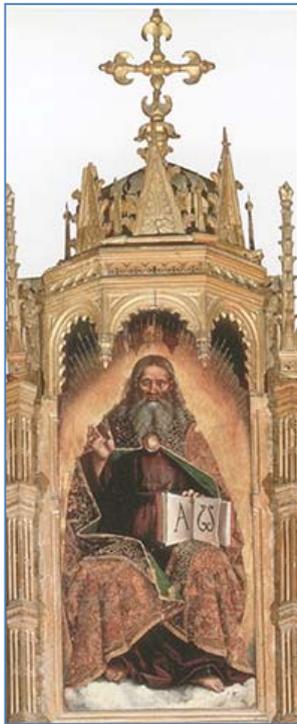


Figure 1. (left) Detail from St. Medard Altarpiece, Luca Signorelli, c. 1490 [Collegial Church of San Medardo, Ancona, Italy. Artstor and Scala Archives].



Figure 2. (right) St. Benedict detail from Frari Triptych, Giovanni Bellini, 1488 [Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice. Creative Commons, Wikimedia].

After taking the preliminary step of surveying existing literature in both art history and book history on the symbolism of books during the fifteenth century, the need for developing a database to hold and sort research images became essential. Subsequently, that effort in turn required devising a taxonomy for both the books and for the figures portrayed holding them. This paper outlines the parameters of the research project, and describes the methodology adopted to collect and order information. Although the BASIRA research endeavor is still under development, some preliminary findings will be shared in this paper's conclusion.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is known that small early Christian communities began to adopt the codex in the second or third centuries, and by 400CE the codex had become the dominant book form used in Christian communities. Reading was an important part of the new faith, as

witnessed by St. Augustine (343–330CE). A critique of Augustine tells us:

“In Augustine’s thinking, the act of reading was ‘a critical step in a mental ascent: it is both an awakening from sensory illusion and a rite of initiation, in which the reader crosses the threshold from the outside to the inside world. This upward and inward movement takes place when the appropriate text is transformed into an object of contemplation. *Lectio* becomes *meditatio*.”¹

St. Benedict of Nursia (depicted in Figure 2) further embedded reading with the religious life when he included prescriptions for widespread reading in his rules penned to govern the monastic order that bears his name. Writing recently to emphasize Benedict’s focus, Alberto Manguel suggests that:

¹ Sabrina Corbellini, *Introduction to Cultures of Religious Reading in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2013) 3.

"For Saint Benedict, the text—the Word of God—was [...] immutable and the author (or Author) the definitive authority."²

By the late Middle Ages, books stood as symbols for inherited knowledge and tradition, for culture and wealth, for access to the power of the Divine Word. Indeed, in some Christian communities, The Book (Holy Scripture) was a symbol for Logos, for the Almighty Divine. It appears, that, by association, individuals with access to books were then held up as figures of authority, worthy of respect. As Sarah Wall-Randell summarizes in *The Immaterial Book*:

"Before the wider distribution of print, the book was as much an idea, an emblem, as an object; books provided an imaginative framework for the abstract or transcendent, as when medieval writers speak of the Book of Life, the Book of Nature, or the encyclopedic *liber universalis*. As actual books move into the metaphorical spaces of these figures . . . they become potent intersections of the physical object and the metaphysical imaginary. Literary and dramatic representations of books are attended by an aura of mystery and wonder finally irreducible to the material circumstances of production and consumption."³

Recent academic attention to the history of reading has brought scholarly attention to visual examples of reading practice. Alberto Manguel, in his *A History of Reading*, discusses so-called *Biblia Pauperum*, or Bibles of the Poor. These large picture books carried two images per page for each liturgical date of the Church calendar: the top half of the page an illustration of an Old Testament text; the lower half a corresponding image from the New Testament. Often chained to lecterns in a church, these books made texts accessible as visual narratives to illiterate congregants. (Figure 3)

"For the illiterate, excluded from the realm of the written word, seeing the sacred texts in a book—in that almost magical object that belonged almost exclusively to the learned critics and scholars of the day—was very

different from seeing them in the popular decorations of the church, as they always had in the past. It was as if suddenly the holy words which had until then appeared to be the property of a few, to share or not share with the flock at will, had been translated into a language that anyone ... could understand."⁴



Figure 3. Anonymous Austria, *Biblia Pauperum*, 1331 [Kunsthistorisches Institut, Vienna. Wikimedia Commons].

Following the twelfth- and thirteenth-century rise of universities, with increasing literacy and the subsequent growth in vernacular language texts, an increasingly urban population began to evolve into secular communities of literate intellectuals. Renaissance scholars began to recover and study classical Greek texts; books, therefore, became less automatically associated with teachings of the Church. Then, in the middle of the fifteenth century, Gutenberg and associates brought mechanical printing to the knowledge economy of Europe. Suddenly, books—which had been rare objects available only to wealthy or highly educated individuals—became much more common and much

² Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Penguin Group, 1997) 115.

³ Sarah Wall-Randell, *The Immaterial Book: Reading and Romance in Early Modern England* (University of Michigan Press, 2013) 6.

⁴ Manguel, *A History of Reading*, 107.

more widely accessible.

This dramatic cultural shift has been the focus of increasing academic attention since the 1970s, when Lucien Febvre and Elizabeth Eisenstein published studies of cultural changes brought by printing technology to early modern Europe. Some scholars have explored the material culture of books (example: Jeffrey Hamburger, in "Openings").⁵ Others, such as Andrew Pettegree,⁶ encourage a view of Renaissance cultural upheavals as a lens through which to view the technical/media upheavals of our present time. Recent years have brought us popular histories of the book, perhaps inspired by uncertainties about the future of the printed medium. When represented in works of art, however, books are material objects, and they are objects that beg to be interpreted symbolically.

STUDIES OF VISUAL TRADITIONS

Throughout most of the history of Christianity, visual symbols (attributes) were used to identify specific saints or historical figures, such as St. Peter's key, St. Barbara's tower, St. Lucy's eyes and St. George's dragon. For a populace with limited literacy, these symbols provided clarity about specific figures and the stories being depicted. However, unlike the specificity of each saint's attribute, books were portrayed in the hands of a wide variety of figures, from children, to creatures such as lions, and even God.

From the early artistic biography penned by Giorgio Vasari in the sixteenth century,⁷ through Erwin Panofsky's magisterial studies of iconography in the twentieth century,⁸ up to the present, metaphors posed by saints' attributes remain matters of study and interpretation. However, even reference works on symbols in Christian art scarcely mention the book as an object or attend to books' presence and meanings. We propose to add books to that line of study and interpretation.

This is not to say that books have been entirely ignored in the history of art. From the later Middle Ages onward, a not-to-be missed element in images of the Annunciation is Mary's open book or the many tomes associated with the Evangelists. (Figs. 4 and 5)

Yet with so many books in so many Medieval and Renaissance paintings, books themselves—in spite of, and perhaps because of their ubiquity—are rarely commented upon in scholarly analyses of the paintings in which they are shown. The specific particularity of the book—why it is rendered and held in the manner that is present in the painting, what is meant by the placement of a book on a table or on the floor—has been relatively unremarked. Because it appears that the books themselves in a work of art are not perceived, the specific depiction of a book and what that might reveal, seems to have eluded scholarly discussions. For example, in the catalog entry for the National Gallery's Kress Collection images, great attention is paid to the background and to depicted saints and their accompanying attributes in Campin's *Enclosed Garden*:

St. Catherine of Alexandria, in a pink robe, is seated at the lower left, on the step of a Gothic portal opening upon a tiled interior. Her attributes are a broken wheel and a sword (the crescent of Islam is on the heart-shaped pommel; figures of Adam and Eve, on either side of the Tree of Knowledge, are incised on the blade). St. John Baptist stands at the upper left in a voluminous green robe, holding a small lamb in his left hand, blessing it with his right. A camel-skin (?) is seen under his robe, above his left knee. St. Barbara, in an orange, fur-trimmed dress, is to the right of Christ in a half-kneeling posture, extending an apple which he is about to grasp. Her attribute, a masonry tower, is in the upper right corner of the enclosed garden. St. Anthony Abbot stands in the lower right foreground, in monastic garb. His hands (one holding a scroll) are placed upon the Tau-shaped stick. A rosary hangs from his belt and the head of a pig, his emblem, is to the left.⁹

⁵ Jeffrey Hamburger, "Openings," *Imagination, Books, and Community in Medieval Europe* (Melbourne: Macmillan Art Publishing, 2009).

⁶ Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance* (London: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁷ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists; A Selection* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965).

⁸ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

⁹ Colin Eisler, *Complete Catalogue of the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Paintings Excluding Italian*. (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1977) 6.



Figure 4. Gerard David, *Annunciation*, 1490
[Detroit Institute of Art. Artstor].



Figure 5. Albrecht Durer, *Four Apostles*, 1526
[Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Artstor].



Figure 6. Robert Campin (Follower), *Madonna and Child with Saints in the Enclosed Garden*, c. 1400
[National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. National Gallery of Art, Open Access].

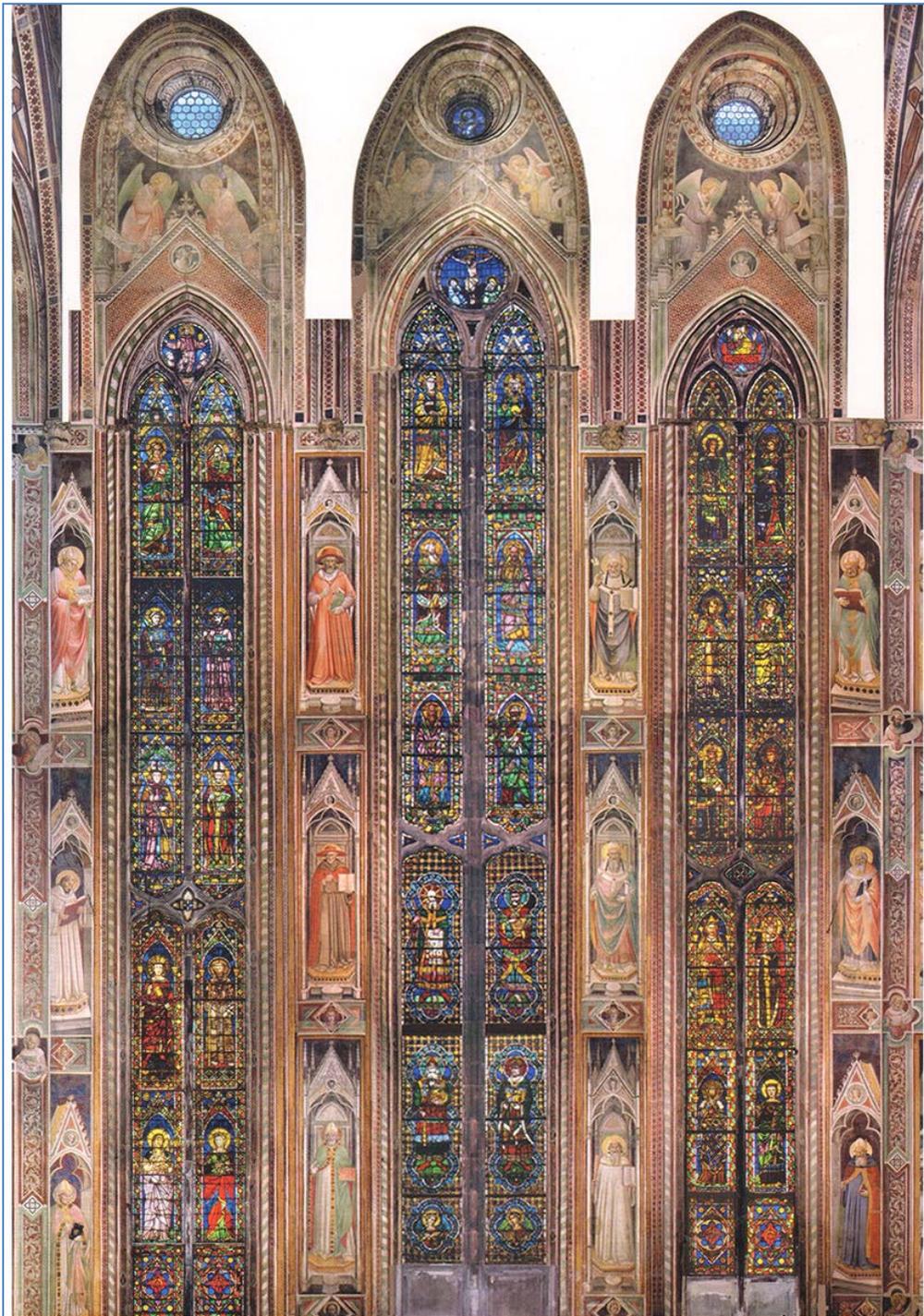


Figure 7. *Cappella Maggiore, Santa Croce, Firenze.* Image copyright © Opera di Santa Croce.

The description continues in great detail, delineating the background and the garments worn by other figures, and detailing the directions in which figures gaze. The book prominently open on St. Catherine's lap is only mentioned later in the Kress Catalog entry, where the author gives no details but makes a sweeping symbolic interpretation: "Catherine's book and Anthony's scroll both point to the prophecy of redemption."¹⁹ (Figure 6) For perspective on the ubiquity of books in Medieval European visual culture, consider the Cappella Maggiore of Santa Croce in Florence. In 1380, Agnolo Gaddi frescoed these walls with The Legend of the True Cross. Surrounding the narrative panels, he painted eighteen figures of Church fathers and leaders: sixteen of them carry and display books. (Figure 7)

THE BASIRA PROJECT

For a systematic study of images of books in European Renaissance art, one naturally turns to the time-honored tools of iconographic study: collection, classification, and analysis. Given the sheer quantity of images that fall within the BASIRA study's parameters (1400 to 1600), constructing an electronic database was the most practical strategy. As described below, the artwork and book detail records for each image include as many details of each book's appearance as is feasible. As with many scholarly projects born from perceived lacunae, the BASIRA Project, operating in the border zone between art history and the history of the book, hopes to detect patterns not yet identified or explored by examining and analyzing artists' portrayals of books across time. For example, as printing technology spread books became more widely available, with subsequent increases in literacy: were changes in power, literacy, and class then revealed in the ways that books were portrayed in the art of the time?

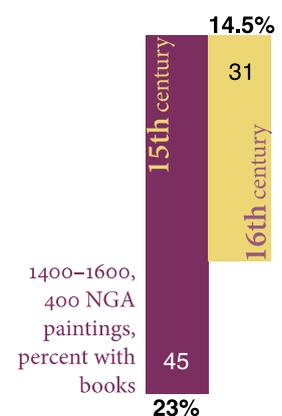
IMAGE COLLECTION

Collecting images which show a book or books being held, displayed or read in a work of art is by its very nature a random process. Individual museum

collections sometimes feature only selected works for online viewing, while others have sophisticated keyword searchable databases of their entire collections available online. Large image archives such as the Bridgeman Library, which gather works from a variety of collections, are helpful resources, On-line databases in museum websites and the ever-increasing files available via Artstor allow perusal, study, and collection of publicly accessible images. Image database initiatives in such museums such as the Walters Art Gallery, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam are invaluable.

For ease of study, it was decided to include as much of the entire images as possible, and also to retain the artistic integrity and context of each portrayed book. Details of prominent books within an artwork are recorded in linked "sub-records." So far, the BASIRA database uses only images that the researchers have themselves photographed, or ones that are publicly available, e.g. through Open Access, Creative Commons and Artstor.

Given that the sheer survival of images from the European Renaissance is somewhat random, one can still analyze data from those that survive. While the BASIRA database in its current form may still be too limited for reliable statistical inferences, we found a census of the National Gallery of Art's permanent collection to be informative. The NGA's viewable permanent collection contains 400 European paintings that were created between 1400 and 1600; of these, an analysis reveals that, from one century to the next, the percentage of works that depicted "sacred" topics (such as saints or scenes from the Bible) decreased from 75% to 42%. The number of images (of all types) that contain books decreased from 23% to 14.5%.



¹⁹ Eisler, *Complete Catalogue* 47.

DATABASE TAXONOMY

Devising the taxonomy used as the framework in the BASIRA database was a challenge which often seemed like an exercise in scholarly divination: the categories were defined in anticipation of questions future scholars might wish to ask. Several iconographic formats and databases provided answers to framework questions. For systematic iconography, the classification schemes that support the Dutch Iconographic system Iconclass20 were helpful.

The BASIRA taxonomy counts all books in an image and records detailed information for those that are “prominent.” After primary divisions of “open” versus “closed,” details of the physical book are recorded (binding style, size, color, etc.) Another main section sorts the book holder into such categories as “animate” “inanimate” and then within those to “mortal,” “immortal” etc. The posture of the holder and the presentation of the book are all noted and categorized. Suggestions and input on data fields and structure are sought and actively welcomed. (Figures 8, 9, 10)

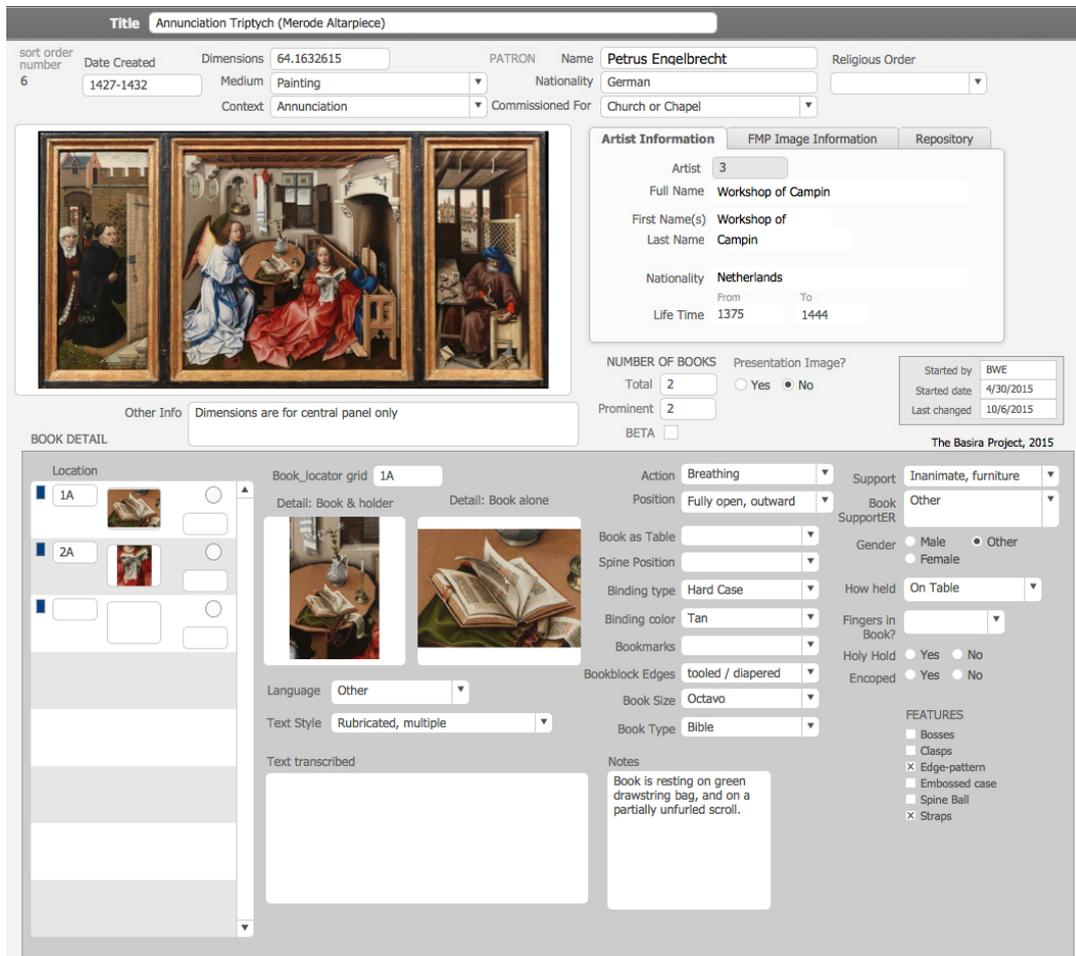


Figure 8. Basira database image. Artwork record for Merode Altarpiece, showing one of two linked Book Detail records.

²⁰ Iconclass is a specialized library classification system designed for art and iconography. Originally conceived in the early 1950s as the Decimal Index of the Art of the Low Countries (DIAL) by Henri van de Waal, it was further developed by a group of scholars after his death in 1972. The Netherlands Institute for Art History (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie) currently maintains the Iconclass system.

Title Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece)

sort order number 6 Date Created 1427-1432 Dimensions 64.1632615 Medium Painting PATRON Name Petrus Engelbrecht Religious Order German Nationality German Context Annunciation Commissioned For Church or Chapel



Artist Information **FMP Image Information** **Repository**

FMP Image Source Metropolitan Museum of Art. #470304
Photographer Name
Image permissions OASC. Open Access for scholarly use. #470304
Image Dimensions 13.06 x 6.64 inches Resolution 100
Hi res URL <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the->

NUMBER OF BOOKS Total 2 Presentation Image? Yes No
Prominent 2
BETA

Started by BWE
Started date 4/30/2015
Last changed 10/6/2015

Other Info Dimensions are for central panel only

BOOK DETAIL

Location 1A 2A

Book_locator grid 2A

Detail: Book & holder Detail: Book alone



Language Other
Text Style
Text transcribed

Action Reading
Position Fully open, inward
Book as Table
Spine Position medial (body)
Binding type Chemise
Binding color white
Bookmarks
Bookblock Edges painted / gilded
Book Size Octavo
Book Type Bible

Support Animate, human form
Book SupportER Mary, Mother of Jesus
Gender Male Female
How held Hands, both
Fingers in Book?
Holy Hold Yes No
Encoped Yes No

FEATURES

- Bosses
- Clasps
- Edge-pattern
- Embossed case
- Spine Ball
- Straps

Notes Case fully covered with white chemise.

The Basira Project, 2015

Figure 9. Basira database image. Artwork record for Merode Altarpiece, showing the second linked Book Detail record and an open tab for Image Information.

Layout: Artworks View As: [Icons] Preview A^a

Title: The School of Athens

sort order number: 102 Date Created: 1509-1511 Dimensions: 762 x 580 cm Medium: Painting PATRON Name: Pope Julius II della Rovere Religious Order: [Dropdown]

Context: Teacher / student Commissioned For: Public Space



Other Info: BWE has images of some individual figures.

BOOK DETAIL

Location: [List of thumbnails 1A-3C]

Book_locator grid: 1C

Detail: Book & holder [Image] Detail: Book alone [Image]

Language: Latin

Text Style: [Dropdown]

Text transcribed: "Ethics"

Notes: Book title written on bookblock top edge. Figure commonly thought to portray Aristotle

Artist Information: Artist: 67 Full Name: Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio) da Urbino First Name(s): Raphael (Raffaello) Last Name: Urbino Nationality: Italy Life Time: 1483-1520

NUMBER OF BOOKS: Total: 8 Presentation Image? [Yes/No] Prominent: 6 BETA: []

Support: Animate, human form Book SupportER: Human (not saint) Gender: Male/Other/Female How held: Hand, left Fingers in Book?: [Dropdown] Holy Hold: Yes/No Encoded: Yes/No

FEATURES: [List of checkboxes: Bosses, Clasps, Edge-pattern, Embossed case, Spine Ball, Straps]

The Basira Project, 2015

Figure 10. Basira database image. Artwork record for the School of Athens, by Raphael. A portion of the pull-down list of artist names is shown at right.

Artist Information FMP Image Information

Artist: 3

Full Name: Piero di Francesco degli Orioli

First Name(s): Pietro Cavallini

Last Name: Pietro Perugino

Nationality: Polidoro di Lanciano

Life Time: Quinten Metsys

Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio) da Urb...

Robert Campin

Rossello di Jacopo Franchi

Sandro Botticelli

Sansepolcro Master

Santo di Tito

Simon Vouet

Stefano di Antonio di Vanni

Taddeo Crivelli

Tilman Riemenschneider

Ugolino di Nerio

Unknown Unattributed /

Vincenzo di Biagio Catena

Vincenzo Foppa

Vittore Carpaccio

Vittore Crivelli

Workshop of Campin

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, two highly generalized observations stand out at this point in our study.

I. Changes in the manner of human book-holding

Earlier images more commonly portray an open book, face-out, mediating the space between the book holder and the viewer, and focusing the viewer's attention on the object. As the fifteenth century progresses, we begin to see more books held closed, under arms, or held face in (with the text facing the

figure in the image, rather than the viewer of the image). The text is now concealed, but access to it renders the holder of the book worthy of our attention. Bellini, for example, portrays books in the hands of Saints Peter and Jerome in his beautiful *Sacra Conversazione* paintings. But, by the 1560s, when Tintoretto and Veronese created images of Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers in the *Sala Monumentali* (part of the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice), some books have migrated to the floor. (Figures 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15)



Figure 11. Luca di Tommè, *Christ Blessing*, 1355 [North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh].



Figure 12. Giovanni Bellini, *St. Jerome*, detail of *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*, 1505, Venice.



Figure 13. Giovanni Bellini, *St. Peter*, detail of *San Zaccaria Altarpiece*, 1505, Venice.



Figure 14. Jacopo Tintoretto, *Philosopher*, ca. 1570 [Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice. WikiArt Public domain].



Figure 15. Paolo Veronese, *Aristotle*, ca. 1560 [Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice. WikiArt Public domain].

The book as object no longer mediates between figure and viewer; it retains its role as the foundation of authority, but the person—the individual—has emerged from behind the “shield” of the book. Would it be fair to conclude that, by the middle of the sixteenth century, artists began to represent individuality in its emergence from medieval prescriptions of community as the dominant social modality?

As the sixteenth century progresses, and secular portraits become more common, so do images which portray books near the main figure, often on a table or ledge. (Figure 16)

II. Observations on the Book Itself: “Breathing”

When images are examined for inclusion in the database, their unique qualities are classified and recorded. While entering the image of the Merode altarpiece, it was noticed that the central book in the image was representative of a particular movement

related to the pages of a book—a movement noticeable in some Annunciation scenes and also in various images of Saints. In the Merode altarpiece, the book on the central table appears as if touched by a holy wind in the pictorial space. (Figure 17)

In the BASIRA taxonomy, representations of a book with pages flipping by themselves are tagged with an action denoted as “breathing.” Of the over 300 images presently in the BASIRA database, twenty show books with this trait. Almost a century after the Merode Altarpiece, an Annunciation painted the Northern Renaissance painter, Gerard David, also shows the Virgin’s book with pages flipping—as does a work by Carlo Crivelli depicting a Saint’s visionary moment. (Figures 18 and 19)

Issues that would call a painter to depict a book in this manner are not definite, save for the obvious desire to manifest the presence of a spiritual act in the painting—one that might signal agency or posit temporality.



Figure 16. Andrea Mantegna, *St. Mark*, 1447 [Stadelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt. Artstor].



Figure 17. Detail, *Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece)*, 1427–32 [Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, New York, Open Access].



Figure 18. Gerard David, *Annunciation*. 1506 [Metropolitan Museum of Art. Artstor.]



Figure 19. Carlo Crivelli, *The Blessed Gabriele Kneels and Sees a Vision of the Christ Child*, 1486 [National Gallery, London. Artstor.]

CONCLUSIONS

While this research is still in its early stages, some observations thus far suggest insights to some questions about book iconography during the Renaissance. Firstly, earlier images tend to focus central attention on the book, which we surmise is a visual “citation” of religious tradition and authority. If our observations about the changing location of books within images are borne out by further study, then the pattern of books moving to less central locations may indeed point to the increasing prominence of individual thought over collective tradition. Secondly, the visual trope of moving pages deserves deeper exploration; this preliminary view suggests that, indeed, Renaissance artists may have used representational conventions not yet studied in contemporary scholarship.

In both these and other, as yet undiscerned patterns, the ability to search a database of Renaissance images across time, location, and subject matter offers sufficient promise to encourage continued development of the project. Perhaps historians of

reading, religious history, and European visual culture could benefit from searching the BASIRA database. It might not be too far-fetched to imagine that the BASIRA Project could inform media scholars seeking to understand such twenty-first century transformations as electronic books and some of the associated changes in ways that knowledge and information are compiled, transmitted, and preserved.

Future initiatives involving crowd-sourced data entry are underway, as are connections to other digital humanities endeavors. Interested colleagues and friends are invited to stay current with BASIRA Project developments through the web site: <https://BASIRaproject.wordpress.com>

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