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THE MEDIEVAL FRANCISCANS

GENERAL EDITOR

STEVEN J. McMICHAEL
University of St. Thomas

VOLUME 1



THE ART OF THE FRANCISCAN ORDER IN ITALY

EDITED BY

WILLIAM R. COOK



BRILL
LEIDEN · BOSTON
2005

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The art of the Franciscan Order in Italy / edited by William R. Cook.

p. cm. — (The medieval Franciscans, ISSN 1572-6991 ; v. 1)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 90-04-13167-1 (alk. paper)

I. Franciscan art—Italy. 2. Christian art and symbolism—Italy—Medieval, 500-1500.

I. Cook, William R. (William Robert), 1943- II. Series.

N7952.A1A84 2005

704.9'4863—dc22

2004062919

ISSN 1572-6991

ISBN 90 04 13167 1

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 Koninklijke Brill NV incorporates the imprints Brill Academic Publishers,
 Martinus Nijhoff Publishers and VSP.

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PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

T001446866

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INTRODUCTION

William R. Cook

The greatest joy of editing this volume is to have assembled the work of several important senior scholars and essays of young people beginning their careers. I sought out scholars from both sides of the Atlantic; hence there is work here that represents somewhat different scholarly traditions. The essays presented here are the work of historians, art historians, a historian of theology, and a literary scholar. As a result, the art of the Franciscan order is examined from a number of perspectives. Essays focus on panel paintings, frescoes, stained glass, sculpture, and architecture. The result is, I believe, the most significant volume on Franciscan art in decades and perhaps the most important ever in the English language.

According to Thomas of Celano, “in beautiful things, [Francis] saw beauty itself.” This is a good way to think about the art discussed in this volume’s essays. The works of art that are studied here are far more than “pretty pictures,” the way they are often thought of today by students and travelers alike. We need always to keep in mind that they were created to elevate the viewer to an understanding and experience of a reality beyond the material world.

Francis himself experienced such an epiphany while gazing at a painted crucifix in the crumbling church of San Damiano, just outside the walls of Assisi. As he prayed before this painting, by tradition the one now preserved at Santa Chiara in Assisi, Francis experienced God’s call to “rebuild his church,” a call Francis understood literally long before he perceived a larger meaning to that message.

Despite Francis’ own experience at San Damiano, there have been many followers of Francis, from the thirteenth century until the present, who have argued that the art created for the Franciscan Order beginning shortly after Francis’ death is a scandal to the poverty and simplicity of the Order’s founder. After all, the argument goes, would Francis have approved of the sorts of buildings for which the panels and frescoes were created, let alone those decorations that were so expensive and “gaudy”? Many have answered ‘no’ to this question. They cite Francis’ attempted demolition of buildings in Assisi