

Margaret Koster. *Hugo van der Goes and the Procedures of Art and Salvation*. Harvey Miller Studies in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art History 49. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2008. 178 pp. index. append. illus. bibl. €125. ISBN: 978-1-905375-15-8.

The organization of Margaret Koster's book seems promising: chapters explore Hugo's connection to the *Devotio moderna*, his historiography, the iconography of the Portinari altarpiece, its technique, patron, Italian setting, and connections to Florentine devotion. But its promise is not delivered. Some sections seem extraneous, such as those that seek to establish which Italian artist first used oil paint or the extent of Castagno's work at Sant'Egidio. Others only skim the surface. The only information that may seem new to some readers — Portinari's will and his triptych's underdrawings — were previously published by Koster. Her final summation, "What this study shows is that the Portinari Altarpiece would have been experienced as a powerful instrument of salvation" (147) is nothing new. Even the awkward title fails to signal the main subject of the book, the Portinari Altarpiece.

Koster's volume is filled with oversimplifications. She asserts, "The Portinari Altarpiece is the only semi-documented work by Hugo van der Goes" (5), but several works are documented; the triptych is the only surviving one. Koster declares that Geertgen tot sint Jans "entered a cloistered community" (9), but as a lay brother he was not required to live at the monastery. Koster maintains that the reliefs on the Bladelin hotel depict a marriage (109); actually they show portrait busts.

Koster leaps to conclusions without supporting evidence. She asserts that "the habits of members" of the *Devotio moderna* are "well documented" (22). In fact, much prescriptive literature survives, but little documentation of actual practice. Koster maintains that Hugo relied on Aquinas for the motif of the angel announcing the birth of Christ to the shepherds, but this idea was widespread, and she offers no evidence of the painter's direct knowledge of the philosopher (48). Koster declares, "It is safe to suggest that Hugo followed the practices of the *Devotio moderna* even before he made his momentous decision to move to the Red Cloister" (22). But we know very little about his reasons for joining the cloister. Isn't it possible that Hugo underwent a sudden conversion? Furthermore, she earlier contradicts this statement by terming Hugo's life before entering the Red Cloister "secular" (9). This statement, in turn, fails to consider the possibility that a lay life can be filled with religious devotion.

Koster repeatedly distorts or ignores earlier literature, while rarely citing the sources on which she relies. She seems unaware that I have linked Hugo's canvases to the ideals of the *Devotio moderna* (*The Beginnings of Netherlandish Canvas Painting*, 1989), and unfairly criticizes the superb research of M. B. McNamee (40) and Lynn Jacobs (70n7, 105n20). She often relies on a series of undigested quotations from other authors, and tends to favor only one explanation rather than seeing issues as multivalent. For example, she insists that Hugo's inclusion of the devil in the Portinari Altarpiece — a rare motif at this time — has nothing to do with the painter's psychological state, but is portrayed solely for devotional reasons (60).

Koster repeatedly fails to contextualize ideas. She never places the interpretations of Alphonse and Émile Wauter within the wider movements of nationalism and Romanticism. She fails to situate the *Devotio moderna* within the context of other observant movements, to mention Portinari's major donation in Bruges, or to compare Hugo's Portinari underdrawings with those of his other works or those of his contemporaries. Koster concludes that as a lay brother, Hugo's "work must be evaluated as a product of the monastic community" (9). Yet this fails to take into account the wishes of his patrons, who were not necessarily members of that community. She describes the Windesheim monasteries as "centers for literature and art," but notes that their primary task was the correction of the Vulgate" (21) and that their "daily fare" was reading the Gospels and their commentaries, hardly what we would call today the activities of a literary center. She cites the words of Geert Grote to draw conclusions about Hugo's life in the cloister, but she is silent about the relationship between the ideals of the fourteenth-century founder and the reality of the fifteenth-century monastery. For those interested in a better understanding of Hugo van der Goes, Koster's book will not be useful.

DIANE WOLFTHAL
Rice University