

2007

The Church of Santa Maria Donna Regina, Art, Iconography, and Patronage in Fourteenth-Century Naples. Janis Elliott and Cordelia Warr, eds. London: Ashgate, 2004. £57.50. Pp. xxi + 234.

Elizabeth Molina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia>

### Recommended Citation

Molina, Elizabeth (2007) "The Church of Santa Maria Donna Regina, Art, Iconography, and Patronage in Fourteenth-Century Naples. Janis Elliott and Cordelia Warr, eds. London: Ashgate, 2004. £57.50. Pp. xxi + 234.," *Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/heliotropia/vol4/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Heliotropia - An online journal of research to Boccaccio scholars by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

*The Church of Santa Maria Donna Regina, Art, Iconography, and Patronage in Fourteenth-Century Naples.* Janis Elliott and Cordelia Warr, eds. London: Ashgate, 2004. £57.50. Pp. xxi + 234.

This volume, a comprehensive collection of essays by ten scholars, profiles the patronage, audience, architecture and decoration of Santa Maria Donna Regina, a church constructed in the early fourteenth century under the patronage of Queen Maria of Hungary for strictly cloistered nuns known as the Clarisses, or Poor Clares, who belonged to the second order of St. Francis. The church was part of a larger building program undertaken by the Angevin rulers of Naples (reign, 1266 to 1435). Although there are few extant documents pertaining to the church, it is certain that it suffered from fire damage in 1390 and earthquakes during the fifteenth century. During the seventeenth century, a new Baroque church was constructed adjacent to the original structure and the original fourteenth century church was neglected. After the suppression of the convent in 1861, the frescos of the choir, which had been covered by a layer of lime, were “rediscovered” in 1864, and the church was restored between 1981 and 1986.

The first four chapters of the book discuss the influence that the restrictions of the religious order and the royal patrons had on the construction of the original church. Particular attention is paid to the unusual gallery choir space built for the nuns, whereas the remainder of the church is deemed to be merely functional. The second half of the book concerns the painted decoration in Santa Maria Donna Regina. A close iconographic study of the frescos on the lateral walls of the choir is carried out in relation to the contemplative practices of the nuns. Based on the powerful patrons and the sophisticated visual program of Santa Maria Donna Regina, the authors conclude that the church should not only be considered highly significant and unusual within the Angevin building scheme, but that the church should be recognized equally within the broader context of European art.

The book is generally well written and balanced. Each chapter is dedicated to a distinct aspect of the church, including the frescos, Queen Maria of Hungary’s tomb and the nuns’ choir. Although each chapter may be read as an informative independent entity, the chapters do progress logically and are enriched when read together. The success of this arrangement is perhaps best exemplified by the relationship between chapter two by Mathew Clear, “Maria of Hungary as Queen, Patron and Exemplar,” and chapter three by Tanja Michalsky, “Mater Serenissimi Principis: The Tomb of Maria of Hungary.” Clear provides copious, well-substantiated

information (e.g., concerning Queen Maria's reign, her close relationship with her fourteen children, her extended royal family and her affinity for the Clarissan order), which deepens the reader's understanding of the study that follows: Michalsky's articulate and in-depth iconographic study of the Queen's impressive tomb.

This understandable and progressive organization is bolstered by the scholars' consistent consideration of the royal family, fourteenth-century Naples and the religious tenants of the Clarissan nuns as central to understanding the architecture and decorative cycles of the church. This focused, yet multi-faceted methodological approach is easily traced throughout the book and further unites the chapters while at the same time effectively emphasizing the complexity of the individual parts of the church to the whole.

A second positive aspect of the book is the close scrutiny of such an unusual structure. During the fourteenth century, it was much more common for churches and convents merely to have been adapted for female use from structures previously constructed for their male counterparts. In other words, Santa Maria Donna Regina, a convent built *ex novo* for mostly literate nuns and funded largely by a powerful and well-educated woman, was highly unusual. Thus, the unique circumstances and resulting study of the church led to a novel study that emphasizes the necessity of considering Neapolitan art and architecture within the larger European context.

However, this is not to say the book is without error. Despite the success of the focused methodological approach, the almost singular scrutiny of the church is not entirely successful. This flaw is especially evident in Caroline Bruzelius' otherwise well written chapter, "The Architectural Context of Santa Maria Donna Regina" in which she denies a French stylistic influence on the church and instead suggests that it is distinctly Neapolitan. Bruzelius notes that Naples had highly skilled native masons and sculptors and, consequently, its own style. Although Bruzelius may in fact be correct, her highly concentrated analysis of the single structure, leads her to neglect comparisons of Santa Maria Donna Regina to similar French fourteenth-century structures to corroborate her claim. Furthermore, based on the unique situation of the church's patronage and construction, one wonders if such a comparison is possible at all, and thus her claim is fundamentally flawed and impossible to prove within the confines of the study.

A second problem with the book's singular focus on the church is the ignorance of the side chapels that are evident in the ground plan. This is particularly disturbing because the book clearly seeks to be a post-restora-

tion monograph on the church. Thus, it would have been prudent either to address how the chapels are incorporated into the church's overall program, clearly and convincingly presented elsewhere by the authors, or simply to address why they were not included.

Overall, the book is well researched within the methodological confines established and is the most substantial post-restoration study of the church to date. However, the author's attempt to emphasize the significance of Santa Maria Donna Regina in the broader European context would have been more successful through comparative studies with other European aristocratic convents. However, this is not to suggest that the book does not firmly establish the importance of the church. Indeed, the thorough iconographic study of a church constructed under and for unusual circumstances makes it evident that the church should indeed be considered within the broader European context. The text, which contains plentiful helpful illustrations and diagrams, further suggests the sophistication and significance of Neapolitan art and architecture during the fourteenth century and aptly demonstrates the need for further comparative study.

ELIZABETH MOLINA

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST