Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve. An Image of Patronage

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Citation for published version (APA):
Over the past years the research for this book has developed like the matur­ing of a fruit tree, with each period of growth followed by necessary pruning to yield first harvests. At the roots of my exploration was a historiographic paper on the reception of Sassetta, to which I was introduced by Ilja Veldman and Paul van den Akker. This paper inspired the outline for a monograph on the artist, presently a work in progress, and I am delighted that Henk van Os was willing to be what one might call the expert gardener on this project. The first fruits borne by my research concerned the genesis of Sassetta’s first and last works, the Arte della Lana altarpiece and the fresco on the Porta Romana in Siena. Since the documents I discovered appeared to have a broader significance, not only regarding our knowledge of the painter, but also regarding the function of altarpieces, the history of artistic tradition in Siena and the use of cartoons, the material was published in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1998 and 2001. This introduced me to its editor at that time, Caroline Elam, whose professionalism and critique have since been great stimuli.

Trimming scissors were needed to cut the project down to fit the require­ments of a doctoral dissertation for the University of Amsterdam and, in a search to establish the impact of patronage and function on Sassetta’s work and career, I therefore singled out the artist’s most central and innovative work. The fairly complete picture that emerged of the steering committee behind the commission then gave a twist to the argument. Through a study of Cardinal Antonio Casini, the mastermind behind the iconography of Sassetta’s altarpiece, it emerged that two other altarpieces had participated in the tale: the Santa Maria Maggiore altarpiece by Masaccio and Masolino, and Sassetta’s own Madonna delle Ciliegie in Grosseto. Moreover, the Madonna della Neve constituted a fortuitous case: the archives yielded surprising doc­uments, not only to me but also to Monika Butzek who is preparing a volume on the Siene Duomo for the *Kirchen von Siena* project of the Kunsthisto­risches Institut in Florence. I thank her for the characteristic generosity and friendship in which she shared with me her thoughts, her documents and her immense knowledge of Sienese artistic history. At the time, the altarpiece was being restored by Nicola McGregor and Roberto Buda, under the supervision of Alessandro Cecchi, all of whom allowed me to visit the restoration atelier and all of whom openhandedly showed me their findings. Andrea Lensini’s colour photographs accompany this volume and present the work for the first time after its restoration.

It was privilege to have Henk van Os’ seminal study on the topic of 1968 (‘Schnee in Siena’) at my disposition and to find his predilection for the artist scattered throughout his writings. I feel honoured to have been able to benefit from his insights, his thought-provoking discussions and his ability to look towards the broader framework. I am indebted to Ludwin Paardekooper who, with enthusiasm, pragmatism and erudition opened my eyes to the wondrous, labyrinthine world of Italian archives, while the support and scientific mind of Christa Gardner von Teuffel made her my guardian angel. Sible de
Blaauw, Monika Butzek, Bram Kempers and Ludwin Paardekooper gave valuable comments on earlier drafts of the present study. To Virginia Thomas I am deeply grateful for her dedication in scrutinising my English. I could not have been happier with the skill and good taste of Evelyn de Regt and her publishing house. The Istituto Universitario di Storia dell’Arte in Florence, incarnate in Bert Meijer and Gert Jan van der Sman, remained a sustaining base throughout my study. For their friendship, intellect and help, each individually shaping the present work, I express my warm gratitude to Alessandro Bagnoli, Rémy Baudet, Lilian Berger Blauwkuip, Simona Biagianti, Monsignor Bocci, Daniel Bornstein, Alessandra Carniani, Maria Grazia Celuzza, Keith Christiansen, Andrea Conti of Chiusdino, Donal Cooper, Peter van Dael, Clay Dean, Lorenzo Fabbri, Gabriele Fattorini, Giancarlo Gallino, Julian Gardner, Bruno Gialluca, Philippa Jackson, Werner Jacobsen, Isabelle Krijger, the Lensini family, Wolfgang Loseries, Nicola McGregor, Simonetta Mugnaiuoli of Chiusdino, Joachim Pisarro, Claudio Pistolozzi of the Opera del Duomo in Siena, Kees van der Ploeg, Menno Polak, the late Gerard Portielje, Victor Schmidt, the late Henk Schulte Nordholt, Dominique Thiébaut, padre Ubaldo of San Marcello in Rome and Anneke de Vries. I thank the staff of all those loci amoeni: the Archivio di Stato in Siena, especially Carla Zarilli, Graziella Ilari and Maria Assunta Ceppari; the Archivio dell’Opera del Duomo in Siena, especially Maria Merlini and Susan Scott; the Archivio Arcivescovile in Siena and its genius Franco Nardi; the Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati in Siena; the Archivio di Stato in Florence; the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies at Villa I Tatti in Florence; the Archivio Segreto Vaticano; the Archivio Vescovile of Grosseto, especially Don Vittorio Burattini; the Istituto Olandese in Rome, especially Sible de Blauw and the fantastic libraries of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana; the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence and the Hertziana in Rome. With special thanks to Giuseppe Verdi, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Johann Sebastian Bach and Claudio Monteverdi, at full blast.