

NORWEGIAN MEDIEVAL ALTAR FRONTALS

AND RELATED MATERIAL

Papers from the Conference in Oslo
16th to 19th December 1989

GIORGIO BRETSCHNEIDER - ROMA

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FOREWORD

The conference on Norwegian altar frontals was held at the University of Oslo from the 16th to 19th December 1989. It was attended by approximately 40 Norwegian and 25 foreign scholars; 23 papers were read, ranging from technical to liturgical to stylistic questions. The conference was generously funded by the Faculty of Arts at the University of Oslo and by the Research Council of Norway: We are happy to convey the gratitude of the conference delegates to both of these institutions.

The Norwegian altar frontals constitute an unusual, indeed an unique, group of medieval panel painting. 31 panels survive, most of them in a fairly good state of preservation. The datings cover the period roughly *c.* 1250-1350. This contrasts with the only comparable group of medieval church paintings, the painted altar frontals in Spain which are mainly attributable to the 12th century. The written sources suggest that painted frontals were once fairly common in medieval Europe. Their role as altar decoration – with the appropriate theological and liturgical overtones in iconography – appears to have been taken over by the retables. This change took place largely during the 13th-14th centuries, and the frontals consequently became redundant in many areas. In most countries they have been lost: victims not only of the change in altar fashions, but also of iconoclasm, decay and general indifference. The Romanesque group of frontals in Spain, the Gothic group in Norway, and a late and little-known group of Renaissance frontals in Denmark are the remains of what was once an important field of medieval panel painting.

The main corpus publication of the Norwegian altar frontals is finally nearing completion. The conference was intended to sum up the international context in which they are placed. In the course of the last few decades much new knowledge has been acquired on medieval painting, on altar furnishings, and on the function of pictures; the time seemed propitious for an exchange of information.

A conference of this kind is to some degree a matter of chance. We had hoped that the participants would concentrate on those aspects of their own research which fitted the purpose of the conference, and this hope was amply fulfilled. The papers contained a wealth of new information and theories, reflecting the lively and innovative state of research in medieval painting. It is especially rewarding to see the way in which the studies of technique, function, iconography and aesthetics supplement each other in the common goal of more precise as well as more subtle interpretations. To all the conference delegates, and especially to those whose papers are published in the following pages, we wish to convey our gratitude for their participation. We also wish to express our apologetic thanks to the contributors for the patience with which they have submitted to the unfortunate delay in publication.

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SIGNE HORN FUGLESANG - ERLA BERGENDAHL HOHLER
NIGEL MORGAN - UNN PLAHTER