

Study Day: Saturday 24 March 2012

The Westminster Retable in Context

Lecturer: Prof M.A. Michael

The Westminster Retable is the most important panel painting to have survived from Northern Europe from the period 1200-1400, and it is arguably the most important panel painting to have survived from anywhere in Europe in the thirteenth century. Despite most scholars agreeing with these statements it is also perhaps one of the least well known treasures of English medieval art. This Study Day will examine the Westminster Retable and place it in the context of thirteenth-century English and French art by examining it in comparison with other works of art including illuminated manuscripts, wall paintings, enamels, glass and micro architecture. The purpose of the day is also to place the Retable in the wider context of European culture as part of a movement that will eventually lead to innovations that are associated with the so-called 'Renaissance' of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Prof. M.A. Michael is Academic Director of Christie's Education, London. His Ph.D. (Westfield College) was a study of the artists of the Walter of Milemete *Treatise* and its sister Manuscript the *Secretum Secretorum*, two illuminated books on good government which were presented to Edward III in 1327. He has written a short book on the *Arezzo Frescoes of Piero della Francesca* (Thames and Hudson 1996), an introduction to the iconography of the *Stained Glass of Canterbury Cathedral* (Scala, 2004) and is joint editor with Julian Luxford of *Contexts of Medieval Art, Images, Objects and Ideas: Tributes to Nigel Morgan* (Harvey Miller 2010). He is an Honorary Professor of the School of Culture and Creative Arts at the University of Glasgow, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and sits on the Fabric Committee of St Albans Cathedral.

Programme for the Day

10.00-11.00 **Rediscovery of the Westminster Retable.** The re-emergence of the Retable as a work of art after its 'dark ages' in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can be traced to the account of the Retable made by George Vertue in his notebooks of 1721-25 and the subsequent paper he read to the nascent Society of Antiquaries in 1736.

11.00-11.30 Coffee

11.30-12.30 **Making of the Westminster Retable.** The recent conservation of the Retable at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Whittlesford, Cambridge has enabled us to understand better its date, form and function and the decision making that went in to its creation.

12.30-14.15 **Lunch** (not included).

14.14-15.15 **Style and Iconography.** In the first 200 years after its discovery it was the style of the Westminster Retable that caused the most debate amongst art historians – was it French or was it English – or could it be Spanish? And what was its purpose – why does it display miracles of Christ in its narrative scenes?

15.15-15.30 Tea

15.30-16.30 **Re-orienting the Westminster Retable.** As a Christian work of art the use of decorative motives that have sources in Islamic art seems surprising, but has our view of Gothic art been conditioned so that we edit-out the non-western European elements from our vision, effectively re-appropriating these decorative motives and Christianising them?