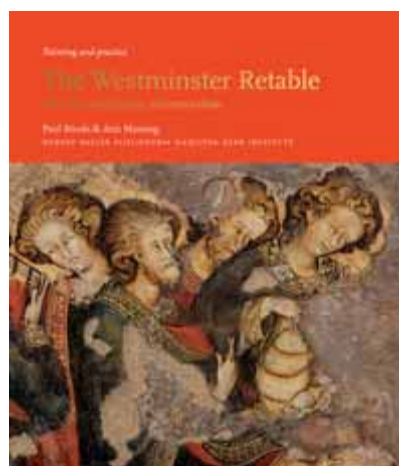


*Painting and Practice*

**The Westminster Retable:  
History, Technique, Conservation**  
Edited by Paul Binski and Ann Massing



**Editors' Introduction**

The thirteenth-century Westminster Retable is rightly celebrated as one of the most beautiful and enigmatic panel paintings to have survived from medieval Europe. Its history is not without tragedy. It was made for Westminster Abbey, one of the most prestigious Gothic churches of the thirteenth century, itself a treasure-house of medieval wall and panel painting; then, after the Dissolution of the Monasteries, it was demoted rapidly to use as part of a large cupboard; its ruination in the eighteenth century just pre-dated the Gothic Revival and its rediscovery and rescue. Since then, it has intrigued commentators because of its extraordinary technical mastery, its value as an ornamental resource for study and, more recently, as an important if fragmentary link in the history of painting in England and France in the thirteenth century. There is every reason to believe that its standing as an artwork was apparent even in the Middle Ages, and that, in short, it may be seen as one of the central monuments of Anglo-French Gothic painting.

This volume, which attempts to set out the interpretative issues raised by the Westminster Retable as fully as possible, could not have attained its present form without an agreement, arrived at in the 1980s and 1990s, that the Retable needed the most expert conservation to secure it for the future. In the course of the detailed technical examination far more was found out about its construction than had been known and this has contributed to the reassessment of its initial importance. The lengthy, cautious conservation treatment of the Westminster Retable at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, University of Cambridge, was completed in 2005, after which the Retable was exhibited at the National Gallery, London, before being returned to the Abbey.

This book, based in part on a conference on the panel held in 2005 in Cambridge, is greatly supplemented by other contributions, investigations of art history, science and technology, which come together to establish a far deeper understanding of the many truths about the panel's manufacture, date, origin and purpose. Our aim has been to place before the public the fullest account yet conceived of any medieval panel painting produced for use in England.

The volume has been the product of a long process of exchange between art historians, archaeologists, scientists and conservators. Our editorial policy has been, first, to provide a first-class art-historical monograph on a work of art which, to date, had not benefited from one. We have also tried to balance as reasonably as possible art-historical analysis with archaeological and technological insight.

The book opens with a general introductory account of the literature and principal art-historical questions, before proceeding to the European and wider art-historical context of the Retable as altarpiece and artwork; its extraordinary decorative repertory; its post-medieval history and early treatment, modern analysis, technological context and finally treatment. Much, inevitably, is said about other works of art at Westminster. But this ordering is especially intended to convey a sense of the European stature of the panel as a work which has much to tell us not only about medieval London and Paris, but other cultural spheres, especially Byzantium and Islam. The various sections of the book are accompanied by reference photography of the Retable. By its means, we enter an 'open laboratory' of investigation of all types. Its findings can only increase a sense of wonder at the sheer mastery and depth of expertise that went into this panel's manufacture.

In editing the findings, we have been aware that a general consensus has arisen on the part of all those involved about the panel's date (*c.* 1259–69, which is to say 'early' in the spectrum of art-historical possibility), origin (at Westminster, but with the direct involvement of French, probably Parisian, expertise) and function (as Westminster Abbey's high altar retable was in place by 1269). We are also aware that, as regards ancillary evidence, contributors have not always been in total agreement, and we have not considered it necessary or important artificially to iron out variations in interpretation of other works of art in order to produce an 'official' account of all aspects of painting at Westminster. Suffice it to say that many other painted objects at Westminster Abbey related to the Retable are explored more thoroughly here than in any previous work, but in such a way as to respect and preserve diversity and richness of opinion.