

## ARLIS/NA Multimedia & Technology Reviews

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### BASIRA: Books as Symbols in Renaissance Art

Reviewed by:

Lisa N. Peters, PhD

Independent Scholar

[Lisa@lnpeters.com](mailto:Lisa@lnpeters.com)



*BASIRA (Books as Symbols in Renaissance Art) home page*

[BASIRA \(Books as Symbols in Renaissance Art\)](https://basira.library.upenn.edu) is a cross-disciplinary resource that identifies and describes thousands of images of books and other textual documents in the figurative arts between approximately 1300 and 1600 CE. The site unites the history of art and print media during the period when moveable type and the printing press facilitated the final important advance of books as knowledge containers, and is an outstanding model of digital humanities. The site bridges visual and

material culture. Analyzing the symbolic role of bound and unbound documents in paintings, it reveals how these forms amplify the act of looking by drawing the viewer's attention to the internal life of individuals observing, holding, or reading books. At the same time, intriguingly, the site flips the usual relationship between word and image. Whereas the verbal is typically a means of analyzing the visual, here a visual form provides information about a verbal one, drawing the user's attention to what can be learned about the materiality of the depicted books and other documents.



<b>ID</b>	825
<b>Name</b>	Book held by Saint Catherine
<b>Document Type</b>	Unknown Religious Book: sacred context
<b>Document Format</b>	Codex/Book
<b>Orientation</b>	Bottom
<b>Size</b>	Large
<b>Aperture</b>	Fluttering / Breathing, Partially open
<b>Notes</b>	Three-line inset initials.

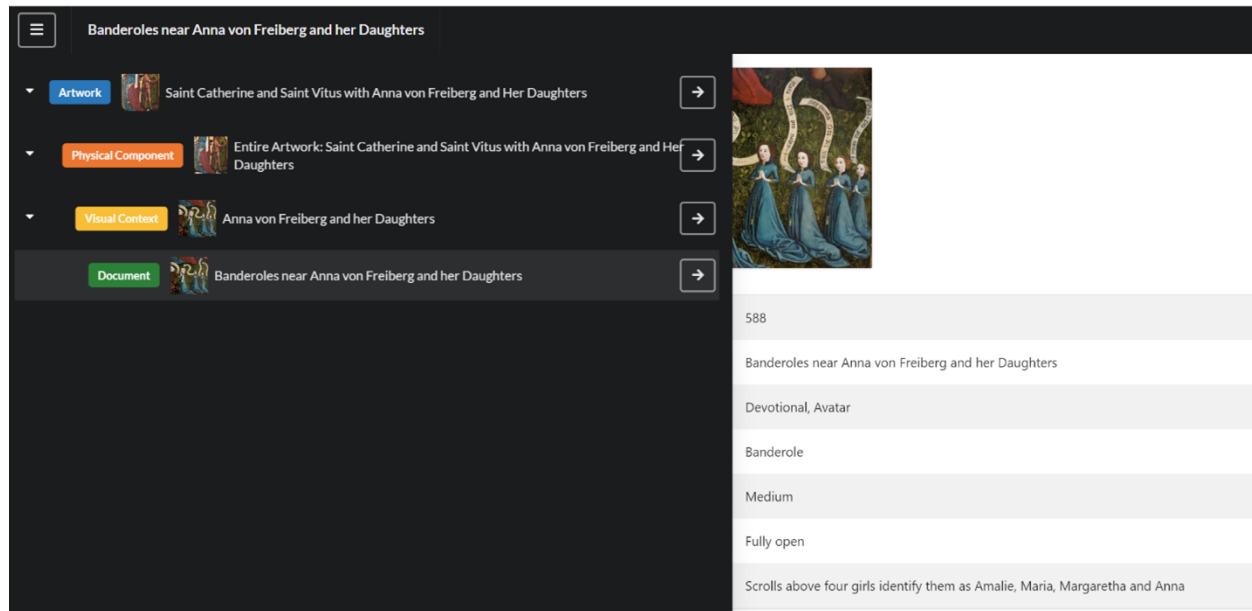
*A detail of the intellectual Saint Catherine of Alexandria with a fluttering book from a large panel in the Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art by a follower of the Flemish artist Robert Campin*

Available on an open-access platform at the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies, University of Pennsylvania Libraries (supported by the Kress Foundation and Price Lab for Digital Humanities), the project is headed by codirectors, Barbara Williams Ellertson, an independent researcher in the history of printing portrayed in Renaissance art, and art historian Nicholas Herman, the Lawrence J. Schoenberg curator at the Schoenberg Institute. The site's team includes content specialists, a few of whom photographed works onsite in museums and churches. BASIRA's continually growing image dataset thus goes far beyond what one might find through website searches.

BASIRA excels in its categories and navigation. On entering the database, thumbnails allow the user to browse through details and find a full document page, with a description of the visible features of the

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document and actions related to it. External features include bindings, endbands, and fore-edges/textblock edges. Internal features include layout, text, and image. A menu on the upper left provides tabs to the full artwork including its physical component, visual context, and document actions, explaining how a book is being presented and used. See the illustration below.



On the site, users can create searches by selecting any number of facets from the menu, such as subject, object type, date, range, and other details. The beauty of such a resource is its expandability, so that works (and texts) and information can be added and amended. The site also includes a blog (providing information on symposia and coming attractions), a way to contact the project, and a form to nominate artwork new to BASIRA.

A few helpful additions might include the following. When opening details, only a few images have captions, and they are often simply a title; providing the artist and collection would save the time of clicking back to find this information. For users who are not familiar with the terminology of books, a glossary would be welcome. Some transcriptions of book texts are available but providing more would be of value. Despite these very small matters, BASIRA is a tremendous enhancement to scholarship, research, and education as well as a delight to book lovers.