

Making medieval art modern

Review of:

Janet T. Marquardt, *Zodiaque. Making Medieval Art Modern 1951-2001*, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press 2015, 202 pp. and 86 illustrations (70 b&w and 16 colour), ISBN 978-0-271-06506-9 Hardcover edition \$74.95.

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Janet T. Marquardt's *Zodiaque. Making Medieval Art Modern* is best regarded as the belated closing volume of the *La Nuit des Temps* series, the best-known of the *Zodiaque* publications issued by the monks from the abbey of Ste-Marie de la Pierre-qui-Vire in Burgundy between 1951 and 2001. The series' subject was Romanesque sculpture in the different regions of Europe, with each book trying to captivate 'the artistic spirit of a given locale'. The *Zodiaque La Nuit des Temps* books were not intended as scholarly books, nor were they coffee table books, but they were to be used as travel guides, for 'en route' and, above all, in the home, where the pictures would serve as aids for contemplation and an uplifting of the spirit. This is why the photographs in the books differed from those in ordinary travel guides and art books; they were more intense, evocative and mysterious, and above all, they had an abstract quality to them. Preference was given to art over iconography, close-ups brought out tool marks and isolated details. Quite often, unusual viewpoints were selected. Sometimes, in order to achieve the desired simplicity, churches were emptied of everything that was removable, prior to taking the photograph. In the books themselves, no distracting white borders or on-page captions would distract from the purity of the image. As the project advanced, the accompanying texts became more informed and accurate. As volume after volume appeared, the series of publications gradually turned into a sort of pan-European survey of pre-Gothic medieval art. Although the initial prejudice was for France, gradually other countries entered the ranks: Spain, Switzerland, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, England and the Holy Land. Not until 1993 was a first volume devoted to the Romanesque in Germany; in 1994 the Netherlands were dealt with. No volume was ever dedicated to the Romanesque in the countries of eastern Europe.

Marquardt's extensively illustrated volume takes its format, typography and layout from the *La Nuit du Temps* volumes, from which most of the plates were also taken. There is but one difference: the images are ordinary photographs and no longer the photogravures on copper plates printed in contrasting white and saturated grey and black tones on heavy matte paper that made the series famous. These original photogravures are no less than avant-garde works of art in their own right, as Marquardt convincingly argues. She even draws a comparison between the sequence of photographs in the books and André Malraux's 'Museum without walls'. Leafing through the pages of a *Zodiaque* book was and is an aesthetic experience. In the early years of the enterprise, the photographs were made by professional photographers, but having learnt from them, the monks took over in the 1960s. Unlike the *Zodiaque* photogravures, some of the images in Marquardt's book show people. The pictures featuring monks in the process of photographing images for the *Zodiaque* books are among the real treats of the book.

Marquardt's extensively-researched work is divided in five chapters. In order to explain why Romanesque became the chosen style for the twentieth-century renewal of religious art in the works and publications of the monks of La-Pierre-qui-Vire and how *Zodiaque's* very unique and particular aesthetic evolved, in chapter 1, 'The Setting', she introduces the reader to the religious and artistic milieus in pre- and post-war France. In the early twentieth century, contemporary religious art was considered by many artists and churchmen to be unsatisfactory: it was too academic, too realistic and sometimes too chocolate-box-like. As a reaction, artists resorted to the pure forms and abstraction of primitive art, both from the colonies and from times long gone, in order to render essential truths. This led the way for a greater appreciation of the so-called Romanesque. Chapter 2, 'The Project', zooms in on *Zodiaque's* founding monk, Angelico Surchamp, who had trained with the cubist theorist Albert Gleizes (1881-1953), by whom he was much influenced. Dom Surchamp was a champion of abstract art and considered the Romanesque phase of Christian art attractive, as its primitive freshness and spirituality aligned it with abstract tendencies in modern art. It was, as Marquardt has it: 'an ideal predecessor for modernist abstraction'. Surchamp thus set himself to exploit its spiritual potential in his fresco paintings for the abbey of La-Pierre-qui-Vire and in his publishing work. The chapter also discusses the various series of books launched by the abbey of Ste-Marie de la Pierre-qui-Vire, where, she suggests, the idea of the medieval monastic scriptorium was recreated. Chapter 3, 'The Texts', is devoted to the authors of the books. Initially these were well-informed, albeit untrained clerics, but gradually more and more scholars came to write for the series. Marquardt zooms in on two of them, Françoise Henry, who wrote the three volumes on Irish Art and lifted the academic standard of the series, and Raymond Oursel (1921-2008), who from 1966 onwards wrote several of the volumes and whose Catholic bias obviously appealed to the monks. Surchamp even considered him the *Zodiaque* author 'par excellence'. Marquardt characterizes him as 'an archivist who wove primary source material into a vibrant humanistic yet traditional Catholic narrative full of elevated vocabulary and complex syntax that bespoke 'Old France'.' Significantly, 'he never held a formal academic position and remained outside the inner circle of medieval historians'. In Chapter 4, 'The Photographs', the highly evocative *Zodiaque* images are given their due, as well as the technical aspects of the so-called photogravures, and their artistic possibilities. In the last chapter, 'The Impact', the success of the series is discussed as well as the initial lack of art-historical enthusiasm for the abbey's endeavours.

All this makes fascinating reading. There is only one aspect of the book that I found unconvincing and that is where Marquardt deals with the historiography of Romanesque studies before the publications of the *Zodiaque* books. Unlike Marquardt seems to suggest, Romanesque was not discovered by *Zodiaque*. It may be true that the books served to make the public aware of the wealth of Romanesque churches all over France and beyond, but by the time the *Zodiaque* presses had started printing, scholars had long been giving attention to the art of the eleventh and twelfth century: Romanesque was not the 'art-historical grey area' that Marquardt makes it out to be. In France, for instance, there was more than just Émile Mâle, whose writings were concerned with iconography rather than style, and Henri Focillon, Mâle's successor at the Sorbonne. R. de Lasteyrie's 749-page volume *L'architecture religieuse en France à l'époque romane, ses origines, ses développement* of 1912 and Marcel Aubert's four-volumed work *L'art français à l'époque romane. Architecture et sculpture*, published between 1929 and 1948, are but a few of the titles that spring to mind. Neither do I agree with Marquardt's view that the *Zodiaque* series 'made a significant contribution to the

construction of knowledge in the field of medieval art history'. Zodiaque books were not annotated and had, at best, brief bibliographies. No need was felt to explain what 'Romanesque' was and how it should be defined, nor were the obvious art-historical issues dealt with. A few volumes excepted, such as Françoise Henry's three books on Ireland and the Scandinavian volumes, scholars use and used Zodiaque books primarily for their pictures and for working out itineraries for visits to France and the other countries covered by the books.

Even if the impact of the Zodiaque series on the study of Romanesque art seems to be somewhat overrated by Marquardt, there is no denying the impact of its photography. Moreover, Marquardt has, in showing us that the aesthetic appeal of these images owes much to their modern abstract idiom, given us Surchamp and the other monk photographers as avant-garde artists in their own right.

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