

Marcia Kupfer, *Romanesque Wall Painting in Central France: The Politics of Narrative*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, 262 pp., 16 colour plates, 230 black-and-white illus.

Thomas E.A. Dale

Volume 19, Number 1-2, 1992

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072860ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072860ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dale, T. E. (1992). Review of [Marcia Kupfer, *Romanesque Wall Painting in Central France: The Politics of Narrative*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, 262 pp., 16 colour plates, 230 black-and-white illus.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 19(1-2), 143–145.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1072860ar>

Blackfoot painting towards a more detailed pictorial style by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Brownstone includes an intriguing point that Blackfoot artists may have adopted a visual system similar to the European in response to the changing needs of the viewing audience or patron. Painting created for use by the Blackfoot was intended to be accompanied through mime and oral tradition at specific ceremonial and social occasions. A European viewer, however, would have required more detailed imagery and narrative. The Morris robes incorporate both approaches to representation. Brownstone suggests that perhaps a more conservative Blackfoot visual system was used to please Morris and his interest in traditional Plains Indian cultures. On the other hand, the pictographic style applying a European approach to representation may have been an attempt to appease the government, who rewarded Blackfoot individuals conforming to European values. Brownstone concludes, "The combination of the two incongruous visual systems in Blackfoot pictorial art of the early 1900s may thus serve as a metaphor for the profound and unsettling changes to which the culture was forced to adjust" (p. 35).

Arni Brownstone's *War Paint* includes the first published photographs and translations of the five Morris robes, as well as copious tracings made of the detailed pictographs. Brownstone's methodical research covers important areas of exploration, such as individual artist biographies, that hopefully will inspire future studies. In addition to thoroughly describing the historical context, collection history and painted imagery of the Blackfoot and Sarcee buffalo robes in the Morris collection, Brownstone offers thoughtful suggestions regarding the possible intentions of the artists and their adoption of transitional styles of pictography. It is an important contribution to Plains Indian art history.

CATIE ANNE CADGE
University of Victoria

- 1 Evan M. Maurer, ed., *Visions of a People: A Pictorial History of Plains Indian Life*, exhibition catalogue, Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Minneapolis, 1992).
- 2 Gloria A. Young, "Aesthetic Archives: The Visual Language of Plains Ledger Art," in *The Art of the North American Indians: Native Traditions in Evolution*, ed. E.L. Wade (Tulsa, 1986).

MARCIA KUPFER, *Romanesque Wall Painting in Central France: The Politics of Narrative*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, 262 pp., 16 colour plates, 230 black-and-white illus.

Although it was one of the most public fields for pictorial narrative between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, Romanesque wall painting has rarely been explored as a medium for contemporary theological and political thought. A firm foundation was laid by Otto Demus in his *Romanesque Mural Painting* (London, 1970; German edn, Munich, 1968). Superseding conventional stylistic surveys, Demus provided the first overview of the structure and meaning of Romanesque church decoration, together with a catalogue detailing iconographic programmes. However, even in the French heartland of Romanesque studies, where monographs on sculptural programmes are legion, few writers have devoted attention to the meaning of individual ensembles of monumental painting. This relative neglect is partly due to the ephemeral nature of the medium: Demus estimates that 98 to 99 percent of the original production has perished, and most remaining ensembles are extremely fragmentary. Furthermore, what survives is concentrated in provincial parish churches, far from the major abbeys and city churches believed to be the centres of artistic production. Marcia Kupfer's penetrating study of rural churches in the diocese of Bourges is therefore a welcome addition

to the literature on Romanesque painting, both because it expands the canon and because it poses new questions about the meaning of monumental narrative programmes.

Dr. Kupfer's primary thesis is that wall painting helped define the place of the local parish community within the scheme of universal sacred history (1-2, 16). She moves away from conventional iconographical analysis with its emphasis on "sources" to consider overall patterns of narrative programme, underlying intentions of patrons and reception within the contemporary community. By analysing the internal structure and disposition of these pictorial narratives, she successfully reveals the theological and ideological designs of ecclesiastical patrons which constitute for her the "politics of narrative."

As the author herself admits, her methodology is a hybrid of traditional and progressive approaches (8). Like Demus, she establishes a concrete basis for her broader synthesis in a corpus of nineteen churches, including previously unpublished material (Appendix, 151-98). Here, data essential for establishing the dating and social context of each monument are provided, including patronage, historical sources, architectural history, iconography, style and painting techniques. The corpus is amply illustrated with site and building plans, schematic diagrams for more complete iconographic programmes, drawings of damaged scenes, clear general views, and details in black-and-white and colour.

In the interpretative chapters, an iconology anchored in particularised exegeses of theology, liturgy and history is cast in the universalizing language of narratology. Such a catholic marriage of ideas is at once a source of tension and strength. Thus, one senses a certain dissonance between historically delimited intentions of patrons uncovered by the author and her assertion that "sacred history makes church walls into an optic through which the lived present perpetually takes shape as story" (97). But this breadth of approach also allows her successfully to recognize what previous specialists have neglected: namely, that physical production and internal structure of the narrative can clarify a programme's meaning.

After setting her own work within a lucid overview of the historiography of French Romanesque wall painting since the nineteenth century, Kupfer moves logically from regional history and theoretical issues of pictorial narrative to three specific case studies. Chapter II considers the political geography of the diocese of Bourges in the twelfth century. Here, the author describes the decentralisation of ecclesiastical and secular authority, which led to the fragmentation of the diocese into competing spheres of influence, and the elevation of the rural parish as the focus of community life under the patronage of monasteries, regular clergy and regional seigneurs. In Chapter III, the author finds a reflection of the political fragmentation of the diocese in the diversity of individual artists and painting styles represented by the extant programmes of wall painting. While recognizing that "stylistic disparity is...not reducible to developmental change" (48), the author does not abandon the evolutionary model entirely, but tempers it with arguments based on historical and archaeological data.

In Chapter IV, style and technique are convincingly integrated into the interpretation of narrative programmes. Kupfer affirms that the formal decisions of the artist, far from being divorced from content and meaning, are "conventional narrative strategies implemented to recount events from scripture and the lives of saints" (60). The compositional process is described as an "internalized grammar" in which gesture, colour, framing and discrepancies in scale all contribute to a nuanced interpretation of the original sacred narrative. Considering the narrative disposition of the three case studies presented in subsequent chapters, she further contends that the architectural configuration and the very procedure of applying the plaster contribute to alternative "narrative strategies" that structure the intended readings of the programmes.

At Chailivoy-Milon (Chapter V), a hierarchy within the architectural framework governs narrative disposition. On the horizontal axis, the apse is the natural focus for the pas-

sion scenes, excerpted from the Christological narrative on the choir walls to provide a backdrop for the re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice in the Eucharist. On the vertical axis, the vision of the *Crux Gemmata* appears in the celestial zone of the barrel vault—a visual keystone for the soteriological message of the Passion depicted below. Kupfer reveals extra-biblical meaning in the juxtaposition of disparate episodes within a single register. Particularly significant is the association of Christ cleansing the Temple with the Payment of Judas in the upper register of the south walls. Not only did these episodes figure prominently in the contemporary polemics about simony; Kupfer demonstrates that the issue was topical for the priory in the early twelfth century during the abbacy of a Gregorian reformer named Elias.

In the choir of Brinay (Chapter VI), the application of plaster in continuous horizontal registers and the internal narrative structure foster a rigorous serial reading of Christ's Infancy. Kupfer explicates the selection of episodes through liturgical drama, lections and commentaries for the feast of Epiphany. She argues less convincingly that the Labours of the Months and the lay donor portrait constitute polemical statements inscribed within the ordered cycle of liturgical narrative. The author sees in the "liminal" positions of these secular figures at the entrance and window jambs a reflection of the Church's insistence on the subjection of temporal authority to spiritual authority in the aftermath of the Investiture Controversy. Within this interpretative frame, the Magi and King Herod are viewed respectively as the embodiment of wise rulers who subject themselves to divine authority and diabolical rulers who rebel against it.

Saint-Martin at Nohant-Vicq (Chapter VIII) displays the most complex of the three programmes. Here, in contrast to Brinay, eccentric plastering patterns isolate individual scenes to enhance what Kupfer terms a "disjunctive" narrative. Thus, the textual sequence of biblical history is eschewed in favour of the clustering of disparate hagiographic, Old and New Testament episodes to make theological arguments. Kupfer's pictorial exegesis is firmly rooted in the early twelfth-century commentaries of Herveus, a monk from the Vicq priory's mother house at Déols. The monk's exposition on "spiritual passage" provides a compelling thematic cohesion for such diverse images as the Deposition of Christ, the purification of the Virgin and the Presentation of Christ in the Temple at the physical threshold between nave and choir. Again, on the interior, Herveus's commentaries help explain the rare image of the Cleansing of Isaiah's Lips as a connecting link between the prophetic vision of the apse and the Passion sequence inaugurated next to Isaiah with the Entry into Jerusalem. Kupfer also discerns a polemical cast in the choir

programme's emphasis on the sacerdotal duties of preaching and the administration of sacraments, for these tasks, normally performed by regular clergy, were here appropriated by the proprietor monks and Déols at the parish church.

Certain elements of Kupfer's interpretations may be debated. One might question, for example, the extent to which pictorial narrative establishes boundaries between lay and clerical viewers. The author assumes but does not support her view that the painted sanctuaries were inaccessible to the laity, and the inclusion of the donor portrait in the choir of Brinay would seem to indicate that at least the lay aristocracy had access to the sanctuary. On a more general level, one would like to see the author distinguish the func-

tion and structure of these "Romanesque" narratives from earlier medieval programmes of church decoration. But these questions detract little from a book that is so carefully researched and forcefully argued. The author has certainly demonstrated her principal thesis that the universal, sacred narratives in Romanesque wall painting were shaped by the "politics" of the local parish. She is to be commended for opening meaningful avenues of interpretation in French Romanesque painting and for redeeming from obscurity the programmes of rural churches, previously condemned as "folk art" and therefore denied the careful analysis they deserve.

THOMAS E.A. DALE
Columbia University

LARRY J. SCHAAF, *Out of the Shadows. Herschel, Talbot & the Invention of Photography*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1992, 188 pp., \$50 US.

The history of the origins of photography has, until comparatively recently, been the almost exclusive domain of historians of photography or science. Given the consequences of the invention of this medium, it is surprising that the date 1839 and the names of Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot are not considered part of the fundamentals of general knowledge. The nebulous place photography holds within any level of formal education is in certain respects the result of the manner in which the medium supersaturated nineteenth-century culture and visual perception. Evaluation of the history and function of photography has undoubtedly suffered considerably from the extent of its nineteenth-century success. This is particularly true of the years of photography's invention and early progress.

Nevertheless, the early experiments of Daguerre, Talbot and Herschel and the first years of the progress of photography following the epoch-making announcements of 1839 are at once both complex and fascinating. This book by Dr. Larry Schaaf, based on his University of St. Andrews Ph.D. thesis, is an important contribution to the history of the invention of photography and chronicles both the facts of the crucial experiments and the human drama which unfolded from them. This drama involved central characters on both sides of the English Channel, the intermixing of real and imagined problems and a variety of very human reactions which were, in the short, medium and long term, to have significant implications for the progress of the medium.

The crucial question that Schaaf poses at the beginning of the book is "why, rather than how, photography was finally invented." This is a consideration which continues to vex historians of chemistry, science and photography. Various hypotheses have been propounded, and these fall under three primary headings:

- some of the chemical elements used in the photographic process (such as iodine and bromine) were not invented until the first quarter of the nineteenth century.
- those eighteenth-century chemical experimenters cited as precursors of Daguerre and Talbot did not have fundamental reasons to wish to "fix" an image created by the action of light on silver chloride.
- the inventions of both Talbot and Daguerre were the result of an element of good luck, very much in the same vein as the invention of penicillin.

Art historians have also built up a set of theories regarding the influence of the pictorial and literary arts upon the invention of photography. These include:

- the logical conclusion to the use of the camera lucida and camera obscura.
- the new forms of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century painting centred on a new standard of pictorial logic which was symptomatic of changing artistic values, of an embryonic realism.
- the work of Goethe and Schopenhauer, together with early nineteenth-century research in psychology and physiology, caused an uprooting of vision, resulting in sensation and perception taking on many of the features that would later characterize photography.

In answering the question he poses, Schaaf explores all these elements within an examination of the relationship between Herschel and Talbot up until 1844, in order to put for-