
This book is the result of a conference which sought to honour Walter Cahn as one of the greats of Romanesque art history, to take stock of the state of Romanesque scholarship, and to question its slipping attraction among younger scholars. It has at times the quality of a long-drawn out lament for a former golden age of scholarship or, rather, two different visions of such a golden age. One vision is the personal: scholars used to have more time to develop a wide range of expertise, as Cahn himself did, in a period where tenured posts were often achieved prior to completion of a doctoral dissertation, when movement between universities and museums was normal rather than extraordinary, and ‘outputs’ were still confined to the industrial or agricultural sectors. Thus Elizabeth Sears’s tribute to Walter Cahn is a window onto a more leisured, more kindly, and fundamentally more scholarly age. Reading it now, its tone strikes as quaintly on the ear as might passages from Walter Scott’s *The Antiquary*, and although closer to us chronologically, the scene it presents is pretty much equidistant conceptually. Its relevance to the book as a whole should not be forgotten, however, as many of the contributors are retired or nearing retirement, and their perceptions of the state of the field may sometimes verge not on accuracy but on anachronism.

The second version of that golden age is one when the Romanesque had cultural capital, and is epitomized by Madeline Caviness in her essay on the historiography of Romanesque art in the twentieth century. For this reviewer, hers was the most thought-provoking essay in the collection, not as much for the tale it told of modernism and Romanesque (although this was fascinating) as for the distance we have so lamentably
travelled in terms of what is now perceived as relevant to contemporary society, or even contemporary art. Picasso’s debt to Romanesque art was new to me, but more remarkable, once Caviness’s essay has been read, is how there could ever have been any doubt about it. The occlusion of the medieval and its increasing isolation nowadays both in academia and more widely could not be better illustrated than by contrast with even so relatively recent a period as the 1930s.

That is not to say that this tone of lament is found throughout the book. Some essays do not attempt to address the issues highlighted above and in Colum Hourihane’s introduction, but concentrate instead on bravura analyses of specific pieces, monuments or themes. And this volume, like many conference transactions, presents something of a mixed bag in terms of the coherence of the pieces, with contributors displaying widely disparate interpretations of the confluence of art and thought. In those that focus most closely to stocktaking, however, the air of melancholy pervades, and there is little doubt that many who are involved in the field will find the book vaguely depressing. The range covered is relatively wide in terms of monuments, but feels a bit narrower when the institutional affiliations of the contributors are factored in: predominantly from the US, there are two from France and Germany, and one each from Canada and England. Spain and Italy do feature, but not institutionally; this is problematic if we are to achieve a global view of scholarly continuity. For instance, while there can be no doubt that John Williams was the preeminent authority on Spanish Romanesque in the late twentieth century, it feels strange to read his work in a book that claims to question continuities in Romanesque scholarship, and not to see mention of his former student, Therese Martin, who is one of the leading scholars on Spanish Romanesque today, and who now (although not at the time of publication) works for a Spanish research institution. Somewhat unfortunate, if not perhaps quite so problematic overall, is the
lack of an Irish voice, particularly as between 1990 and this book’s publication in 2008 at least four doctoral dissertations were written on Irish Romanesque architecture or metalwork. Nonetheless these shortcomings reflect the inevitable constraints in a volume which is primarily a *Festschrift*.

Henri Focillon’s role as a key scholar in the development of Romanesque scholarship is honoured: what a shame then that the successes of his student, Françoise Henry, in starting a vibrant interest in the Romanesque in Ireland, should not be acknowledged. It is a pity to have to remind oneself that being based on a conference, lacunae like this are as likely to spring from conflicting schedules of potential speakers and funding constraints, as they are from intellectual criteria. Overall, to attempt three things in a collection of essays is perhaps undoable, certainly unwise. Most essays either honour Walter Cahn with a scintillating piece, sometimes with a nod towards the ‘art and thought’ of the title, or present a dreary picture of the current scholarly climate. Taking on board the warning that the book does not quite do what it claims to do, however, there are still some gems to be found.

Bruno Reudenbach’s article on body-part reliquaries is just such a gem. These reliquaries, which represent always only one part of the body, such as a head, an arm or a foot, are striking in their naturalism of detail but, being made of precious metals, are also remarkably unnaturally looking. Reudenbach sets out in detail their very specific characteristics before going on to argue that this duality has at its essence ideas on the transformed saintly body, both contained within the reliquaries, and already heavenly. They are made of precious metals because they are glorious and celestial, hence what might be read as non-naturalistic is in fact simply a reflection of a reality which cannot yet be seen or, as he puts it (103), ‘we therefore should *not* see the simple emulation of anatomy, but the aesthetic representation of the holy corpus spirituale.’
His article draws together research on the cult of relics, and on reception, as well as offering a striking insight into these remarkable objects.

Equally stimulating is Sandy Heslop’s article on the Utrecht Psalter and English Romanesque art. This looks both at the impact of the Psalter on the imagination of later artists, and at how the differences between what they produced, and the illustrations in the Psalter, may clarify for us what Romanesque might mean in terms of English art between 1050 and 1170. Heslop places the artists at the centre of his argument, and avoids that tired and overused idea of influence, instead showing how individuals chose and transformed compositions and motifs to produce something new that was both very different and, at the same time, tantalizingly close to the earlier work. The definition of Romanesque that he draws from his analysis can only be described as liberating, cutting through and disregarding the tangles of historiography that have accumulated around the term, to conclude (288) that Romanesque ‘is thus not akin to Rococo, but rather more like the Enlightenment, which conveys sensibilities or ideologies and implicitly also the strategies to convey them’.

While these two stood out particularly for this reviewer, as genuinely tackling the connection between art and thought in an exciting way, many other contributions are in their own way remarkable. Dorothy Glass examines the sculpture of northern Italy in the light of the Gregorian Reform, critiquing the loose use of the term Gregorian to refer to art, but showing how the sculpture at Modena cathedral comments directly on specific Gregorian issues: the sacramental duties of the priesthood and the primacy of the church of Rome. Neil Stratford’s article on verse tituli tackles the neglected interconnections between art and epigraphy, an area worthy of more study.

The topic is indeed taken up again in Ilene Forsyth’s fascinating contribution on the inscriptions of the cloister at Moissac (of which more
below). Other contributions are more conservative. While Willibald Sauerländers overview on the problems of the term ‘Romanesque’ is a fine illustration of the mockery of stylistic labels, it does not open up the debate in the way that Heslop’s article does. John Williams’s reexamination of the façade sculpture at Santiago places it in a historiographic frame and situates it culturally, but perhaps exemplifies the problems of Romanesque scholarship raised in the introduction: solid work as this is, it is unlikely to interest anyone but a Romanesque sculptural historian.

The editorial hand is light, sometimes a little too much so. Éliane Vergnole has been badly let down by either her translators or the editor, as on her first page (179) she defines the *Maiestas Domini*, the subject of her essay, as specifically confined to God the Father enthroned, while a few pages later it slips to Christ, with no explanation, and remains thus to her conclusion. Although her essay is more of a general survey of the subject as found on Romanesque tympana than a discussion of its meaning and significance, given the importance of the distinction in such a context this is either a worrying slip or indicative of a formalist stumbling a little outside her familiar terrain: either way it undermines her essay. This is a shame, as the gathering together of examples of the subject is useful in itself, and shades of difference in iconography and inscription do actually suggest that some images may be of God the Father and not of Christ. The fact that prior to and indeed during the Romanesque period the *Maiestas Domini* is more usually found painted within the apse raises interesting issues regarding liturgy and audience, and here again a little editorial nudging might have brought this paper closer in focus to one, at least, of the strands of the overall theme.

Elsewhere that lighter editorial touch works well, and allows a diversity of voices to be heard. Walter Cahn in his contribution is critical of the current trend towards over-interpretation of artworks, noting, and
with some justification, that pieces now seem to need to reveal much about doctrine, politics and gender if they are to warrant scrutiny: form and style are insufficient to interest us. Romanesque art is largely ornamental, he notes, and this has both damaged its impact and resulted in much speculative and imaginative interpretative work on ‘wholly aniconic’ (38) sculpture and manuscripts. Yet, later in the volume Herbert Kessler takes exactly this approach, each citing, amusingly, the same essay with respective derision and approbation. It is refreshing to see such a level of methodological approaches in the one volume, but I could have wished for some editorial contemplation upon this in the introduction, or failing that, in an afterword.

Cahn is not alone in emphasizing the ornamental tendencies of the Romanesque, or pointing to current boredom with ornament and its analysis. Patricia Stirnemann notes that ornament is fundamental to Romanesque manuscript art, but that it is of very little interest to most historians of medieval art; indeed I think she could go further and say to most medievalists, and to most art historians. This is perhaps another reflex of modern aesthetic tastes, but it has particular significance for the Romanesque, due, in my opinion, to the wealth of surviving material. If we contrast Romanesque art with Insular art (see for instance what might almost be termed a companion volume, Insular & Anglo-Saxon: Art and Thought in the Early Medieval Period), reviewed by Juliet Mullins in the summer 2013 edition of Óenach, I do not believe that there is a greater emphasis on ornament in the Romanesque than the earlier period. Amongst those who study Insular art, however, iconography is held in high esteem. More importantly, however, interpretative readings are not there undermined by a plethora of further surviving objects, similar but different, whose very plenitude might contradict the specific meaning attributed in any particular instance. An example should clarify.
Ilene Forsyth’s analysis of what she terms ‘word-play’ in the cloister at Moissac shows very convincingly that the supposedly illiterate inscriptions are here in fact playful inversions and puzzles, designed to enliven the viewer and to sharpen his apprehension of the images’ meaning. Yet there is no doubt that this cannot be the explanation behind the many irregular inscriptions found on countless carvings (and metalwork) elsewhere, as Stratford’s article reminds us. We should of course expect Moissac to be an exception, given its place in the Cluniac order, but should we expect that those about to undertake a dissertation concentrate only on such masterpieces? The sheer volume of examples where precise meaning cannot be attributed makes the Romanesque an unpromising period to study, given contemporary tendencies across the humanities to privilege meaning over form. As Willibald Sauerländer notes (51–2), the number of studies of the Romanesque may not have diminished, but their impact on other fields has dropped dramatically, as the questions asked no longer interest others. This surely must partly explain also Patricia Stirnemann’s observation (83), that few and all as are those who complete dissertations, fewer still continue in the field. It would have been an interesting and worthwhile exercise had the editor drawn together the variety of threads spun out by the contributors to provide tentative answers to the questions posed in the introduction, and it could have added considerably to the volume’s impact.

Despite such minor reservations, the book itself is well worth its price. The hardback edition is particularly handsome, and indeed has the same feeling of yesteryear about it as some of the contributions — but in terms of production values this is altogether a good thing. Experts should find much here to set them thinking, while several of the essays provide excellent paths into the medieval mindset, and would work well as case studies for MA or undergraduate seminar groups. To an extent, the book reflects the strong grasp that formalism has exerted over
Romanesque art history — whether that is a strength or a weakness is up to the reader to decide.

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