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Carl F. Barnes, Jr., *The Portfolio of Villard de Honnecourt, A New Critical Edition and Color Facsimile*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009. xxvi + 266 pp. 49 in-text figures, 48 black and white plates, 71 color plates, quire diagrams, glossary prepared by Stacey L. Hahn, bibliography, iconographic index of drawings, index. £75.00 U.K. \$145.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7546-5102-4.

Review by Melanie Holcomb, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

At some point in the first half of the thirteenth century, a prolific draftsman from Picardy—Villard de Honnecourt he called himself—gathered together a set of his own drawings into a book. Villard de Honnecourt, as we moderns know him, annotated (or had annotated) some of them in his native dialect and offered a preface to the whole in which he expressed hope that his readers would find therein advice on the art of masonry, on the methods and machinery of carpentry, and on techniques of representation according to the principles of geometry. The drawings, executed over a period of time in graphite and ink on loose and irregularly shaped pieces of parchment, often stray from those stated aims. They reveal an artist of admirable curiosity and skill who turned a keen eye toward subjects as diverse as animals and mechanical devices, the human figure and works of art and architecture. Even within the loosely defined genre of medieval “sketchbooks,” there is nothing quite like Villard’s portfolio. While most such works reveal artists, usually anonymous, intent upon recording scenes and motifs from other works of art, Villard’s drawings seem to have served as a mode of inquiry, a method of exploring and explaining aspects of the world that he found fascinating. Now bound in a humble leather case, this fascinating set of assembled sheets resides among the most reclusive volumes at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

For centuries the assemblage of drawings by Villard has aroused speculation about their purpose, served as fodder for expansive biographies of the artist, and stimulated provocative scholarship about a range of topics concerning the Middle Ages from technological know-how to building methods, from the status of artists and architects to conventions of representation. Carl Barnes has made his life’s work that set of drawings as well as the voluminous secondary literature that they have inspired. He has prepared a new facsimile, a culminating endeavor representing some forty years of single-minded devotion to the topic. It is a tremendously useful book, particularly for readers of English, a worthy successor to the last printed facsimile, laudably produced (in German) by Hans Hahnloser in 1935 and reprinted in 1972.^[1] The new work is similarly thorough, but speaks to our time. Its conclusions are laced with caution, and it steadfastly refuses a grand narrative about either the drawings or their maker.

Barnes is obviously a thoughtful teacher and takes pains to present the manuscript in a clear and logical fashion, in no way assuming knowledge of paleography, codicology, or library culture on the part of his readers. After an introduction explaining and justifying his methods, the text proper begins with a discussion of the manuscript as a whole: its history; its physical construction; the delineation of various hands; Villard’s vocabulary and drawing technique. The meticulous description of the often-ignored cover and the unusual way in which it houses the folios is most welcome. Charts and diagrams give clarity to Barnes’s discussion of the physical changes the manuscript has undergone. His remarks on the various hands make clear the sequence of additions from the mid-thirteenth century through the

seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, while the series of photographs that illustrates the script of each contributor offers a mini-course in paleographical method.

The color photos of each page (as well as the cover) and the painstakingly prepared descriptions and remarks that accompany each image are perhaps the volume's greatest contribution. The matter of color is not a minor one. Of the twelve printed facsimiles of this work, this newest is the only to reproduce the entire manuscript in color.[2] Even in art books abounding with color reproductions, drawings generally get short shrift. The palette of a medieval draftsman is often subtle to be sure, but it is rarely, if ever, black and white. Until now, those of us interested in Villard's techniques as a draftsman have had to rely on the passing remarks in Hahnloser's volume or on an article by Barnes from 1981.[3] Barnes includes many of those earlier observations in this new work, but now we can see with our own eyes the warm tones of the iron gall ink, the variation in line, the evidence of erasures, the layering of forms, the effects of bleed-through, and the condition and quality of the parchment that high quality color reproductions can reveal. Though Barnes laments that the BnF would not allow him to have the entire book re-photographed at his own expense, I hope he is pleased with the results. The color plates are a revelation.

Like Hahnloser, Barnes offers a folio-by-folio commentary, which examines each one of the often multiple drawings that appear on a single sheet. Barnes has taken it upon himself to methodically provide remarks on the condition, inscriptions, technique, attribution, and subject matter of every page. When browsing through Villard's work, it is often the odd page or the unusual sketch in the corner unrelated to anything else that catches the eye. The tidy arrangement of Barnes' commentary makes it easy to find the particulars of a given page or drawing, and the systematic inclusion of technique clarifies what we can and cannot see in the photographic reproductions. Borrowing a device now popular in various books of non-fiction, Barnes inserts within the page-by-page commentary mini-essays set apart by a simple frame. These brief excursions cover recurring themes in the scholarly literature about Villard: among them, geometry in the drawings; Villard's so-called mason marks; or the idiosyncrasies of his depictions of Reims Cathedral. Far from a distraction, the inset remarks allow Barnes to pull away from the details of a single folio, yet place the scholarly controversies where they belong. Where better to find a round-up of the scholarly debates on Villard's intriguing use of the word "*portraiture*" than amidst the discussion for folio 24v, where the famous image of the lion "*contrefais al vif*" appears? These short essays represent some of the liveliest writing in the book, strong opinion inflected with humor.

While much of the commentary brings together ideas Barnes has published over the years, his extensive engagement with the inscriptions is largely new, perhaps a reflection of intensive interest over the last two decades in the seldom straightforward relationship between text and image in medieval art. Barnes demonstrates in a section on the use of language and vocabulary in the manuscript that while much of the prose in the inscriptions exhibits the fluidity of meaning and orthography that we expect from Old French, Villard is nonetheless consistent and quite precise in his use of architectural technical vocabulary. Three different words--*fenestre*, *form*, and *verier*--that we might translate today as "window" in fact emphasized different aspects: the opening itself, the architectural framework, and the glazing, respectively (p.18-19). Barnes goes on to supply an elaborate apparatus for the interpretation of each inscription. The entry for every folio where we find written annotations includes a transcription, a "literal" translation and a "free" translation. In addition, a specially created glossary at the end of the book provides an English equivalent for every word in the manuscript. All of this attention to the inscriptions is laudable, but ultimately one laments a lost opportunity. The free translations depart in only minor ways from the literal, if at all, and are neither more elegant nor more informative. How much more helpful it would have been to use at least one of these venues to explore the suppleness of Villard's mother tongue. While the clunky "devices of carpentry" suffices as a word-for-word translation of "*engiens de carpenterie*" included in Villard's preamble (fol. 1v), it does not help us understand how the phrase in Old French could stretch to accommodate the methods, the tools, and the

results of carpentry. Yet “devices of carpentry” persistently appears in the literal translation, the free translation and in the glossary, with no other alternatives or explanations.

This somewhat static approach to language surfaces elsewhere in the book. The first chapter curiously opens with a statement on the correct way to refer to Villard’s collected drawings. We are told, at length, that anything other than “portfolio” is “not acceptable” (pp. 1-2). English-speaking scholars in recent years more typically refer to the work as a “modelbook” or “sketchbook,” while acknowledging either explicitly or implicitly the inadequacy of these terms. Barnes’s preferred term is as useful as any (Villard himself does not help us since he calls his work simply this “livre”), but to chastise those who choose other, generally accepted terms seems unnecessarily pedantic. Barnes introduces himself in these early pages as a stern schoolmaster wielding an *American Heritage Dictionary* rather than the careful instructor we discover as the book goes on.

Barnes lapses briefly into the same finger-wagging tone in the concluding chapter of the books, where he attempts a biography of the mysterious Picard: “Much that has been written about him or ascribed to him . . . lies somewhere between wrong and absurd”(p. 215), he declares. Curiously though, the authors he rails against most for their outlandish claims are long dead, their publications dating from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Is Barnes too immersed in the literature of Villard to recognize that those early works resonate little with contemporary scholars? Barnes is particularly keen to quell any notion that Villard might have been an architect or a master mason, ideas that did indeed have a long life. The fact that even in Barnes own accounting almost no scholarly work from the last twenty years claims either occupation for Villard is a tribute to the work that Barnes himself has done.[4] Barnes should rest easy in his own success and dispense with his admonishments.

The biography he does present is admirable in its restraint and in this sense the new facsimile offers a twenty-first century corrective to Hahnloser’s volume. Where Hahnloser sought to create a tight account of Villard’s life that supported his sense that the assembled drawings were a manual created for a building lodge, Barnes leaves many open questions and underscores how much we do not know. He is far more comfortable telling us what others have assumed than what he himself would wager. He seems not to object to suggestions that Villard was born in Honnecourt-sur-Escaut, south of Cambrai (a village with a population of 715 in 2001 he tells us in footnote!). He makes no guesses as to Villard’s education and is quick to point out Villard’s shortcoming in matters architectural, geometric, scholarly, and technical. Barnes seems even to step back from an intriguing suggestion he published earlier that Villard might have trained as a metalworker.[5] The biography concentrates on the visits to places near and far, to which the folios attest and offers possible explanations of why Villard may have traveled there. It suggests ever so tentatively that Villard might have been a lay representative from the chapter at Cambrai.

Barnes is so determined in this last chapter to “deconstruct the Villard myth . . . to get away from the temptation to create a personality for Villard and to make him a superstar” (pp. 215-16), that he seems reluctant to push himself to situate Villard in a larger world. With his deep understanding of the manuscript, Barnes seems the ideal scholar to help us understand how Villard’s technique compares to that found in other medieval sketches. Who better to show the links between Villard’s drawn responses to contemporary architecture and other reactions, written and visual, to the marvelous new structures underway in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries? How does Villard the traveler, whose voyages are so scrupulously delineated by Barnes, stand up against other travelers we know from this period? Villard is often compared to his English contemporary, the chronicler and illustrator Matthew Paris. The self-consciousness we find in both of their graphic explorations suggests they share an interest in the nature and limits of representation. Barnes, sadly, does not weigh in on even this classic comparison.

The Villard that Barnes is comfortable presenting to us is an accomplished, somewhat idiosyncratic draftsman. He makes use of the standard tools of the medieval draftsman: graphite, stylus, compass and straight edge. He experiments with graphic techniques, finding some more effective for his uses than others. He finds the art of the line equally suitable for probing the underlying structure of a thing and for recording surface texture. His choice of subject matter is guided by his particular interests and tastes. It may be too late to retrieve Villard from the relative realm of “superstardom” but through his cumulative commentary, Barnes in fact proves—perhaps in spite of himself—that he is a nuanced explicator of artistic personality. Even cut down to size, Villard’s artistry continues to capture the imagination.

NOTES

[1] Hans R. Hahnloser, *Villard de Honnecourt: Kritische Gesamtausgabe des Hauhüttenbuches ms. fr. 19093 der Pariser Nationalbibliothek* (Vienna: Anton Schroll & Co., 1935); 2nd rev. and enlarged edition (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1972).

[2] The BnF website includes an electronic facsimile in color (<http://classes.bnf.fr/villard/feuille>). Its limited capacity to zoom in on the pages and its relatively cursory commentary make it a less useful resource than Barnes’ book, even as it is more accessible.

[3] Carl Barnes, “The Drapery-Rendering Technique of Villard de Honnecourt,” *Gesta* vol. 20/1 (1981), pp. 199-206.

[4] Barnes maintains a website (<http://villardman.net/>) devoted to Villard, which includes an annotated bibliography of Villard scholarship.

[5] Barnes, “Drapery-Rendering Technique,” pp. 202-204.

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