

H-France Review Vol. 16 (October 2016), No. 237

Janet Marquardt, *Zodiaque: Making Medieval Modern, 1951-2001*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015. xv + 202 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$74.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-2710-6506-9.

Review by William J. Diebold, Reed College.

The Middle Ages in general, and medieval art in particular, had a good run in the nineteenth century; examples include such disparate phenomena as Hugo's *Notre Dame of Paris*, the Gothic and Romanesque Revivals, or the reassertions of Catholicism and nationalism, which claimed the Middle Ages as a precedent. The twentieth century continued this streak, at least as far as medieval art is concerned. This is largely because twentieth-century art was consistently able to find virtues in medieval art. In the first half of the last century, the era of modernism, art's penchant for abstract or non-naturalistic forms found historical validation in the presence of those same forms in medieval art. Then, in the later part of the twentieth century, the era of postmodernism, medieval art continued to fare well. It was no longer its forms that mattered so much, but its function. Postmodern artists wanted to make art that mattered, art that spoke to viewers in visceral ways, art that was efficacious. For them, medieval images and objects, which were believed by their original viewers to have extraordinary power, provided a validating model.

If the status of medieval art was good throughout the twentieth century, the status of medievalism was less consistently high. Modernism, with its search for the new and the authentic, had problems with medievalism. At the artistic level, this meant the explicit rejection of nineteenth-century historicist styles, and, at the scholarly level, it meant the marginalization of medievalism. In modernity, scholars wanted to know about the Middle Ages themselves, not its more recent avatars, which were seen to be of antiquarian interest at best. Postmodernism, by contrast, has been a tremendous boon to medievalism, which is currently enjoying an intellectual revival. If people believe, as many now do, that what matters is not the thing itself (if that can ever be known), but rather its appearance and representation, then medievalism turns out to be not peripheral, but central. As Leslie Workman, the founder of the modern discipline of medievalism put it, "the Middle Ages quite simply has no objective correlative," it exists only in its representations.<sup>[1]</sup> In this sense, medievalism, which studies post-medieval representations of the Middle Ages, is now where the action is.

I provide this sketch history because Janet Marquardt's *Zodiaque: Making Medieval Modern, 1951-2001* stands at the intersection of the medieval and medievalism and, as its subtitle makes clear, engages with modernity and with modern periodization. While Marquardt's subtitle is clear and precise, her main title may be more mystifying. Marquardt and her press seem to think that "Zodiaque" is a well-known term. I'm skeptical. For those not in the know, Zodiaque was the name of the publishing wing of the Benedictine abbey of Sainte-Marie de la Pierre-qui-Vire in Burgundy. Zodiaque produced a journal with that name, but is most famous for the large series of books (265 in all) that they began to publish in 1954. Most familiar to art historians, and the primary subject of Marquardt's book, is the Zodiaque series *La nuit des temps*, which comprises 88 volumes. The first, *Bourgogne romane*, the line's bestseller with total sales of 140,000, established what became a quite firmly fixed format. The volumes of *La nuit*

*des temps* were devoted to regions of France (and later Europe) and to Romanesque art. The latter was defined loosely and chronologically, rather than through any kind of precise stylistic analysis. For *Zodiaque*, Romanesque generally meant “before Gothic.” The regional organization of the *Zodiaque* volumes allowed them to be used as guidebooks but, because they treated a number of lesser-known monuments, they also had important scholarly functions. They thus stand at the intersection of the popular and the scholarly and are an important example of how the medieval is transmitted to the modern world. This is one of the reasons why Marquardt’s story is important. The format of the *Zodiaque* books was consistent. Their texts were relatively short and basic, containing a lot of factual information and an introductory overview. Their outstanding feature for both their makers and their users was their illustrations. These were primarily or exclusively black-and white and were produced not by offset printing, but by photogravure (also known as heliogravure), a photographic-based printmaking process in which the quality and character of the ink is especially prominent (Marquardt gives a fine discussion of both the process and its visual effects).

The photographs in *Zodiaque* books were distinctive not only in the manner in which they were printed, but in other ways as well. They tended towards extremely high contrasts and were formally and compositionally distinctive, with an emphasis on details and on the abstract or quasi-abstract formal values of Romanesque sculpture and architecture. It was not just the nature of the photographs that separated *Zodiaque* books from others of the era. Virtually everything about the series was distinctive (we would nowadays call this branding). *Zodiaque* volumes were almost square, with the photographs grouped together in several large unbroken chunks of images, so that they were separate from the text and could be consulted independent of it. The photographs tended to be printed so that they bled to the very edge of the pages. They were thus not surrounded by a white margin and this was crucial to their effect, for it meant that the contrasts were within individual images, not between the images and their frames. Another *Zodiaque* peculiarity likewise concentrated attention on the photographs and not on their surroundings: the images were identified only by tiny, almost invisible numbers printed at the corners (sometimes, there were no numbers at all). Marquardt compares this to the tendency of modernist works of art to have no title or to be called “untitled.” While this comparison may be forced, *Zodiaque*’s makers were distinctively modern in their belief that word and image are separate realms that should not be brought together. This was the position laid out at the beginning of the modern era in Lessing’s *Laocoön* (1766) and subsequently canonized as the quintessential feature of the modern in Clement Greenberg’s 1940 essay, “Towards a Newer Laocoön.”[2]

Special mention must be made here of the decision by Marquardt and Penn State Press to produce *Zodiaque* in a format that closely imitates *Zodiaque* publications. Virtually no design detail of the *Zodiaque* series was deemed too idiosyncratic to be reproduced in Marquardt’s book. *Zodiaque* has the cloth-bound covers with the bold, characteristic *Zodiaque* font on the spine and the blind-stamped title and *Zodiaque* symbol on the front; the distinctive cloth book ribbon to serve as a page marker; the small, square format; and, most importantly, photographs bled to the margins, barely identified with captions, and printed in separate sections throughout the text (photogravure was, apparently beyond the limits of what could be done, so Marquardt’s book features the normal glossy black and whites of most art history books). In an age in which university presses are regularly decried for succumbing to commercial interests, the care with which this volume was produced is worth signaling, especially since the design is consequential. It is an art history truism (but no less true for that) that form and content are inseparable. Marquardt’s book shows this to be the case. *Zodiaque* is a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* that will either remind readers familiar with the *Zodiaque* format of what made the books special or will introduce a new generation of readers to them.

Marquardt’s study of *Zodiaque* is straightforward in method and format. Introductory chapters sketch *Zodiaque*’s importance and outline twentieth-century medievalism, especially of the Catholic variety pursued by the monks of La Pierre-qui-Vire. These opening pages provide a context for her more narrowly focused study, which consists of four chapters. One is devoted to the history of the *Zodiaque*

project, while the other three consider the volumes' texts, photographs, and reception. For the first three of these, Marquardt draws on extensive work in *Zodiaque's* archives and interviews with key participants; for the last she uses scholarly reviews and an informal survey of present-day art historians. The chapter on the photographs, the signature element of *Zodiaque* publications, is fittingly the longest. The format and method of *Zodiaque* may be very much art-historical business as usual, but that is entirely appropriate to Marquardt's subject. *Zodiaque* has never been subject to scholarly study and, for Marquardt, history and details matter. Here, a useful contrast can be drawn between Marquardt's book and another recent study of related material, Alexander Nagel's *Medieval Modern*. Nagel's speculative book frankly embraces anachronism in trying to account for what he and Marquardt both agree was a special relationship between the medieval and the modern. Marquardt, by contrast, uses very traditional historical and art-historical tools to explain how it was that a group of mid-twentieth-century French Benedictine monks came to represent the Romanesque with an "edgy modernist aesthetic" (p. 112).

It would have been easy for Marquardt simply to have attributed *Zodiaque's* pictorial modernity to the *Zeitgeist*, but she is too good and careful a historian to do that. Instead, she makes two moves that greatly increase the interest of her story. First, she establishes clearly that the modernism of the *Zodiaque* photographs is both characteristic of their age and unusual. Thus, their modernism cannot simply be attributed to generic aesthetic currents at work in post-war Europe (they are not, in other words, simply the look of Scandinavian Modern furniture translated to images of Romanesque churches). Among the most effective sections of Marquardt's book are those in which she shows that the lighting, the angles, the emphasis on black-and-white, and the use of photogravure all gave *Zodiaque* images an appearance that separated them from most other photographs, including of Romanesque sculpture, made in the second half of the twentieth century. Marquardt, for example, contrasts *Zodiaque* images with those used by André Malraux or in the *L'Univers des formes* series, both of which also gave a lot of attention to medieval art. She is completely convincing that *Zodiaque* is a distinctive historical phenomenon that must be understood on its own terms. Her other great contribution is to historicize *Zodiaque*. She is able to show that *Zodiaque's* embrace of modernism is due in large measure to its guiding force, Dom Angelico Surchamp, who joined the project at its inception. (Surchamp, born in 1924, is still alive; Marquardt's book is dedicated to him.) Surchamp, it turns out, was a pupil of Albert Gleizes, the Cubist painter and theorist. Gleizes was the self-proclaimed founder of Cubism and, while that claim is often disputed by art historians, his co-authorship with Jean Metzinger of the 1912 treatise *Du cubisme* gives him major modernist bona fides. Many who have looked at *Zodiaque* photographs have recognized that they express a quite clear and distinctive modernism. But, until Marquardt's research, few had known that this was because these books, produced in an obscure Burgundian monastery and shot through with religious sentiment, had a modernist pedigree of the purest sort, one that could be traced back to the glory days of the so-called Classical Modern.

Marquardt's method is traditional, but well applied; she characterizes her objects of study, traces their origins, and describes their reception. Traditionally trained art historians, including many medievalists, will recognize that approach from any number of monographic articles and books. What is unusual is that she is studying not medieval works of art themselves, but their modern renderings. The story she is able to construct around this modern medievalism is fascinating and convincing. I did sometimes worry that Marquardt is too much of a fan of *Zodiaque*. Not only is *Zodiaque* dedicated to Surchamp, but Marquardt tells us that "most of the material in the book derives" from interviews and correspondence with him (p. xv). Here she understates her own research achievement, but there is certainly the danger that Marquardt gives Surchamp, who clearly has a vested interest in his legacy (and retrospective authority) and that of his series, too much authority as an interpreter of *Zodiaque*. I also worry that Marquardt, in her desire to make *Zodiaque* modern, has not paid sufficient attention to the religiosity of Surchamp and his books. One familiar narrative has modernity going hand-in-hand with secularism. This line of thought seems to have guided Marquardt's study, as she time and again deemphasizes the religious content of the *Zodiaque* books. She claims that in the *Zodiaque* photographs "tired associations with representational Christian scenes were rejected in favor of their exciting reanimation as powerful

shapes made up of line and light” (p. 89) and writes that, in Surchamp’s images, “his artistic sensibility ultimately overrode his spiritual goals” (p. 99). How does she know? An image of a Christian subject that emphasizes its line and light does not mean that its subject is unreadable or even weakened. And, for much of art’s history, spiritual goals and artistic sensibility have gone hand in hand. Why should they be opposites for Surchamp? As Marquardt shows in her opening chapters, Surchamp’s project arose directly out of certain Catholic reforms that could easily be classified as modern, suggesting that the modern and the Christian need not be seen as antithetical.[3] Furthermore, Surchamp’s secularism and modernity were certainly not un-tempered. Marquardt cites Xavier Barral i Altet’s observation that, even within the rigid confines of the surviving corpus of Romanesque art and architecture, the canon of monuments treated by *Zodiaque* was almost exclusively religious, but she claims that “Surchamp was attracted to Romanesque art largely because it aligned with modernist experimental alternatives to Renaissance space” (p. 51). This may be right, but it is hard to imagine a Benedictine monk who would not have been equally attracted to Romanesque art simply because it was Catholic. And, as two of the great monuments of modern French (and world) art, the chapels by Le Corbusier at Ronchamp and Matisse in Vence, make clear, Catholic Christianity and the most advanced avant-garde modernism are anything but antithetical. Few, I think, would question the “spiritual” nature of these chapels, despite their immaculate avant-garde, modernist credentials. Finally, we know that at least some of the secular authors of *Zodiaque* books did not regard them as lacking in religion. Marquardt describes in some detail the ways in which Raymond Oursel’s Christianity, which she tellingly characterizes as a “personal religious bias” (p. 82), informed the many texts he wrote for *Zodiaque*. She also tells us that another *Zodiaque* author, the distinguished art historian Anne Prache, contributed her royalties from the series back to the abbey that published them to secure the monks’ prayers. This poignant, medievalizing gesture indicates to me that the relationship between modernist, secular art history, and the *Zodiaque* series is probably more complicated than the already complex story Marquardt tells in her book.

Christian Sapin writes in the foreword to *Zodiaque*: “the *Zodiaque* books evoke a vision...[that] changed our view of the thousands of monuments making up the architectural fabric of medieval Europe” (p. ix). This is a strong claim, although not an implausible one. It is the kind of claim that studies of medievalism should be striving to make, for it makes clear the field’s importance. Janet Marquardt, by choosing such a large, distinctive, and influential series as *Zodiaque*, has gone far in showing how such a claim could be justified and why it is important.

#### NOTES

[1] Leslie J. Workman, “The Future of Medievalism,” *The Year’s Work in Medievalism* 10(1999):7-18; cited in Kathleen Verduin, “The Founding and the Founder: Medievalism and the Legacy of Leslie J. Workman,” *Studies in Medievalism* 17(2009):20.

[2] John O’Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, volume 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 23-38.

[3] See, for example, the title and subtitle of Stephen Schloesser’s *Jazz Age Catholicism. Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919-1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

William J. Diebold  
Reed College  
[wdiebold@reed.edu](mailto:wdiebold@reed.edu)

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical

---

Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172