Stephen Perkinson, *The Likeness of the King. A Prehistory of Portraiture in Late Medieval France*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009. xiv + 338 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. $ 55.00 (cl). £ 38.00. ISBN 978-0-226-65879-7.

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Anyone who has strolled through a museum or gallery of pre-modern Western painting will have noticed that in progressing from the medieval halls to the early modern ones, there is a growing focus on faces and an increasing number of portraits. There is also a noticeably increasing attempt to capture likeness and resemblance. These two trends are not new discoveries and in his rich study, *The Likeness of the King,* Stephen Perkinson does not challenge the predominant narrative of this "apparent burst of artistic naturalism" in the later Middle Ages (p. 34). But he does try to go beyond a purely descriptive narrative in order to identify the "prehistory" of (or rather the reasons for) the emergence of physiognomic portraits. In other words Perkinson's book is a piece of cultural visual history that focuses mainly on the actors surrounding the image (artists, patrons, audience) and not necessarily on the image itself, or its aesthetic aspects. Perkinson's argument is that portraiture arises from a crisis (labeled by Michel Pastoureau as "l'effervescence emblématique") related to a shift in the understanding of likeness and representation. His hypothesis is that "physiognomic likeness was not a precondition to representation" and yet it came to play a fundamental role in images (p. 23). The book is organized around this observation.

Perkinson's methodology is based on a combination of various approaches, adopted by new cultural historians working on the body, the history of gesture, cultural anthropology, up to more traditional studies of texts, whether literary, scientific or theological. As a consequence, Perkinson ends up relying on almost every possible source: texts, images, cultural practices or social facts. Such an inclusive approach allows him to include an extensive range of transformations, including for instance a short study of the word *portrait* and the verb *portraire* from the thirteenth-century (pp. 51-4), as well as to trace the revival of the ancient science of physiognomy (pp. 67-75), and the transformation of theological approaches to the body.

The book is a generously illustrated volume (94 b/w plates) with a colour reproduction of the Louvre's wood panel *Jehan roy de France* as its jacket. This is not an arbitrary illustration of course, as Perkinson's introduction reiterates the thought-provoking assertion that the portrait of King John the Good (1319-1364) is the first French portrait (p. 2). This claim was indeed repeated throughout the twentieth century by various scholars as different as Louis Gillet, Charles Sterling or Grete Ring, and is confirmed in a way by its new display in the Nouveau Louvre which opens its French Painting collection with a dramatic new hall entirely devoted to John the Good's painting.

But why should we consider this fourteenth-century wood panel as the dawn of French painting, or even, more pretentiously, as the "first modern portrait"? The declared objective of Perkinson's book is to answer this question and shed "light on the reasons for which notions of naturalism came to be focused so heavily on the facial features of particular humans" (p. 38). Following on from Michel Pastoureau and Hans Belting, Perkinson sets out to "understand the development of portraiture within the context of

late medieval representational systems (particularly heraldic codes) and social practices" (p. 18). While previous scholars have offered answers related to a shift in taste and frame of mind that could be acknowledged in new genres and trends in literary and theological texts, others have looked for an answer in the transformation of the audience and the new identity of patrons for such images. Yet others have turned to the history of science and found that the history of sight and vision is instructive in explaining the new gaze on the body. Perkinson wisely builds his argument around this important scholarship and his book is a wealth of reference and discussion of previous studies. The author does not systematically claim to challenge or to contradict earlier historians, but rather to go beyond and deeper into the roots of the cultural and visual contexts that supported and led to what could be designated as corporeal or gothic naturalism. Perkinson's book advances chronologically and ends with the early fifteenth century in order to confirm and trace the phenomenon that would elucidate what allowed such a shift.

The first chapter ("The Discourse of Likeness in the Late Middle Ages") is principally devoted to the thirteenth century and the new meanings it gave to the body and appearances. The main thesis is that Christian culture is opposed in principle to images and should not accord such effort and attention to portraits or to likeness. A shift nevertheless took place some time between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, leading to a systematic analysis of the period's cultural and visual production. Perkinson notes the growing acceptance by theologians around the thirteenth century that "individuals consisted of a 'psychosomatic whole'–body and soul, mind and matter" intertwined (opposing the more established view that the body was abject and despicable in Christian eyes, pp. 46-7) and that the moral qualities of a man could be perceived by his bodily motions (pp. 48-9). All these changes are directly related to new rituals and practices well symbolized for instance by the cult of the Veronica, or by the portfolio of drawings composed in northern France between 1220 and 1240 by Villard de Honnecourt.

In a way the two fundamental questions that this book raises are: "why focus on the face?" and "why make such a fastidious attempt to resemblance?" Perkinson refuses to limit himself to the assertion that at some point, "by the later thirteenth century, artists, audiences, and patrons had come to accept the notion that corporeal likeness could provide a means of representing the essential identity of a particular individual" (p. 85). He wishes to understand the actual impact of this "mental shift" in art and uses of art. So the second chapter ("Representing the Royal Body in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries") is devoted to the proliferation of images depicting secular individuals, which became a pervasive practice in France at least, on which Perkinson comes to focus. The case of Philip IV is studied in detail at the end of the chapter (pp. 119-34) as an illustration and proof of the impact on cultural and political practices.

The third chapter ("The Vocabulary of Likeness at the Late Fourteenth-Century French Court") examines three main arguments. Firstly, the fact that what was considered by some art historians a cultural turning point was in fact the continuation of patterns initiated a century earlier, especially in fields such as heraldry or magic practices involving images (p. 138). Secondly, that Valois late fourteenth-century court culture accepted an image "that combines a particular form of verism with traditional representational methods" (p. 148); and thirdly, that a new artistic economy was shaped rewarding artists with the necessary skills to produce such elaborated images. The chapter–in contrast with the rest of the book–is mainly devoted to textual evidence related to physiognomy and portraitures, and less so to the actual production of images. Semantics show important features in "the discourse of likeness" over the course of the fourteenth century. While the idea that an individual's external appearances can express the person's essential identity is not totally new, it became gradually accepted that an image can almost make a person present and is certainly enough to make his mental picture present. Guillaume de Machaut's *Voir dit* (1360s) concerning a romance between a lady and the narrator who fall in love without actually having ever met is analyzed at length from this point of view. The role of the image *au vif* that the lady finally accepts to send the narrator is central to the argument

that the portrait serves "as a means of enabling a vision of her without having her present" (p. 171). To be precise it is not a complete substitute or a surrogate to the lady but "a memory aid" (p. 171).

The terms *portraiture, contrefaire, artifice, engin* or *ymage* are studied in Deschamps, Froissart, in the French anonymous translation of Boccacio's *De claris mulieribus* and finally in Christine de Pizan's works. Images themselves are finally considered in the two French illuminated manuscripts of *Des cleres et nobles femmes* produced in 1402 and 1403 for Jean Duke of Berry. They contain a series of miniatures depicting classical female figures, such as Thamyris painting a panel with the Virgin and Child, or Irene painting a polychrome statue of the Virgin and Child. While both Thamyris and Irene are working without models, Marcia on the other hand is painting a self-portrait paradoxically holding a mirror and considering her own reflection, as if she could not remember what she looks like. Perkinson, however, does not only wish to link images with memory, he also wishes to prove that mimetic naturalism was primarily concerned with a skillful replication of nature (plants, animals, fantastic beasts) and not necessarily of the human face or the body alone. Perkinson concludes that images are therefore not the expression of a newfound admiration of the Burckhardtian individual but the signs of a new culture "in which loyalty and devotion were understood in terms of memory, and in which images of all sorts played a crucial role in manifesting and reinforcing interpersonal allegiances" (p. 190).

This political twist brings us from terminology and discourse back to actual artists or image-makers in the fourth and last lengthy chapter of the book ("Likeness, Loyalty, and the Court Artist"). The detailed study of the careers of seven artists underlines various strategies adopted to prove and display particular skills and talent. The chapter goes from the early 1360s to the early fifteenth century, from Jean d'Orléans, Jean Bondol, André Beauneveu, the master of the Bible of Jean de Sy (Sy Master) to the Limbourg Brothers. The artist's ability to remember his patron's appearance was perceived as a sign of loyalty. Just as Thamyris or Irene's ability to represent the features of Christ from memory was seen as a sign of piety (in the manuscript of *Des cleres et nobles femmes* from the early 1400s). Thus, by the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries images came to play a central role in diplomatic and noble circles in a complex "system centering on the role of memory" (p. 257) and Perkinson reviews a number of effigies, portraits and images sent as gifts that were often admired in cycles of images on display in galleries and collections.

The book concludes with an epilogue reconsidering the Louvre panel of *Jehan roy de France*. It appears that the origins and locations of the painting are mysterious and puzzling since the first definitive reference to the portrait of the king only appears in 1634! However, Perkinson proposes the hypothesis that a 1380 inventory describing a "folding set of wood panels, in four pieces [with paintings of]... the present king, the emperor his uncle, the king John his father and Edward king of English" (p. 279) is a quadriptych from which the Louvre panel is taken. Perkinson maintains that the reasons why present day scholars reject the possible connection between the Louvre panel and the quadriptych, are not "terribly strong" (p. 279). The fact that John was for many years *in absentia* was relatively overlooked, and Perkinson suggests that this portrait could have been commissioned by his inner circle wishing to "reinforce the loyalty of his subjects in France' and act as a 'kind of surrogate for the absent king" (p. 295). At the same time Perkinson considers many other different possibilities coming back to the assumption that the panel is the only surviving part of the quadriptych. According to Perkinson, it was originally kept at the Hôtel de St.-Pol where Charles V resided throughout his reign. Perkinson thus suggests that the quadriptych functioned in a performative way (p. 300) during Charles V's lifetime. In other words the portrait of John was posthumous, and cannot be seen as "the first modern painting" but on the contrary as "a late medieval image" (p. 303). This conclusion seems to me to be based on assumptions that are far too hypothetical but it makes for an appealing final argument proving the thesis that "artists and patrons produced physiognomic likeness of their rulers as part of an attempt to demonstrate their ingenuity and loyalty" (p. 26).

The strengths of this study are numerous. It contains a wealth of information and the variety of source material is both remarkable and extremely valuable. Perkinson masters publications in French, English and German in a very large field including literary, artistic and historical studies, archival, published sources and secondary literature. His continuous dialogue with scholarship is noteworthy, whether with canonical or with more recent researchers, and in many cases Perkinson clearly explains why and how his narrative challenges the dominant theses and when he is adopting someone else's thesis. The abundant illustrations and numerous sub-titles facilitate the reading. The book is also clearly constructed, symbolically opening and closing with the *Jehan roy de France* wood panel, while the chronological choice contributes to the clarity of the argument. However, one could regret that the notion of prehistory mentioned in the title is not questioned or justified, that the resistance and opposition to physiognomic and verism could have been given a fuller account and are to my mind partially overlooked, and that considerations given to theological issues, to the history of science and more specifically to vision are not sustained throughout the book.

The claim for originality is sometimes overstated but the book does remain an engaging and fascinating study. These minor reservations in no way affect the high quality of Perkinson's convincing argument that "masterful instances of verism that arose in the fifteenth century must be seen as the logical outgrowths of earlier artistic strategies rather than as the hallmarks of a radically new and disjunctive age" (p. 277). As such, Perkinson's book is highly recommended for a wide readership as a valuable and sometimes brilliant piece of cultural, visual and intellectual history. It is not surprising therefore that this study was recently awarded the Morris D. Forkosch Prize for the best book by a first-time author in the field of intellectual history.[1] While the prize is clearly merited, I would suggest Perkinson's study finds an excellent complement in another recent volume, Dominic Olariu's edited book, *Le portrait individuel. Réflexions autour d'une forme de représentation XIIIᵉ-XVᵉ siècles*,[2] with contributions by Jean-Claude Schmitt, Hans Belting and Norbert Schneider (all quoted by Perkinson) but also by eleven other scholars absent from Perkinson's book but who offer different perspectives and case-studies. Fortunately, Perkinson's book does not overlap with Olariu's volume, but read together, their theses essentially reinforce one another, and indicate that a consensus has been reached in terms of a new narrative regarding medieval portraits and their uses and significations.

NOTES

[1] http://jhi.pennpress.org/PennPress/journals/jhi/Forkosch_wins.pdf

[2] Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Oxford and Wien: Peter Lang, 2009

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