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Donna L. Sadler, *Stone, Flesh, Spirit: The Entombment of Christ in Late Medieval Burgundy and Champagne. Art and Material Culture in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, volume 2. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2015. xv + 235 pp. Figures (104), notes, bibliography, and index. \$142.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-90-04-26411-3.

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The large-scale enactments of Christ's Entombment that are the primary concern of Donna Sadler's study are among the most evocative sculptures of the late Middle Ages. Produced over the course of nearly a century and a half, from the first quarter of the fifteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth, these ensembles of nearly life-size, fashionably dressed, and often vividly poly-chromed free-standing figures enact the moment at which Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus either place the body of the dead Christ on a burial slab or lower it into a coffin. The Marys and the young John Evangelist are usually shown looking on, despairing of the event that unfolds before their eyes or responding to their own inner grief. The groups readily bring to mind fifteenth-century descriptions of *tableaux vivants*, in which real people, situated on tiny stages and accompanied by various objects, assumed the postures of characters in Gospel scenes. Posed like the paintings they sometimes imitated, these living pictures were pulled on carts through towns in festive processions and provided entertainment at courtly feasts. The Entombments Sadler discusses, and which she often refers to as *tableaux vivants*, push the conceit in a different direction, fixing in stone utterly flesh-like figures which attract as well as project spiritual energy. The author explains that she was curious to understand how these works "performed."

A brief introduction presents the major observations of successive chapters, as though the book were a collection of papers with the editor summarizing and connecting discrete contributions at the outset. In chapter one, Sadler reviews long-standing ideas regarding the development of the iconographic theme of Christ's burial, following the trajectory set out forty-five years ago in a monograph on French Entombment groups and updating it with references to more recent studies.[1] The three substantive chapters that follow discuss specific sculptural ensembles in relation to theories or issues they appear to be well positioned to illustrate. The final chapter looks at a number of other late medieval carvings that take the place of the Entombments as devotional objects in the course of the sixteenth century.

The first of the chapters to present the book's arguments examines the late medieval shift towards "a more embodied mode of identification with religious monuments" that enabled the worshiper to enter "the realm of the holy and bec[o]me a participant in the biblical event" (pp. 2-3). Sadler identifies the "sympathetic response" that an Entombment in Tonnerre (1453-54) elicits in the viewer as "...reminiscent of the art of Claus Sluter" (p. 30), an observation that serves as the segue to a discussion of his sculpture for the Carthusian monastery at Champmol outside of Dijon, done in the years around 1400 under the patronage of Philip the Bold (pp. 32-52). Sadler draws on several recent publications in support of her "conviction" that Sluter's figures "hold the key to the pathos-provoking capacity of the Entombments found in Burgundy" (p.3).[2] The sculptures at the heart of her study, she contends, were

“... influenced by the visual art that emanated from [Chammol] not only in terms of style but, perhaps more importantly, in terms of ‘spirit’” (p. 32).

In this way, the reader discovers what the author does not directly acknowledge, namely the reason for the selection of these particular Entombments as the subject of study in place of other, better-known or more accessible examples, such as the Entombment, now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, from Biron in the Dordogne, or the particularly exuberant, elaborately framed one at St. Peter’s Abbey in Solesmes, southwest of Paris mid-way to Brittany. The absence of a direct explanation for the geographical choice of material is unsettling, since, in the first note to her study, she cites Karsallah’s count of 460 Entombments dating after 1420 in France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Germany. But Sluter’s work would not afford as ready or reasonable an entry to a discussion of those in other geographical areas. Thus, the old art historical issue of a grand master’s style, with its conventional assumptions and conceptual limitations, serves as the determining factor in Sadler’s selection of works to study. Realization of this shifts our understanding of what to expect from her book from an examination of art’s relationship to material culture, as the series in which it is published suggests, toward that of regional survey.

The third chapter begins by examining the significance for worshipers of the presence in Entombments of the three Marys, since their arrival at the sepulcher, a central element in liturgical drama, is understood to signify Christ’s absence. Sadler draws attention to what she regards as this paradoxical aspect of the Entombments, arguing that the sight of Jesus’ wounded body provided worshipers with something tangible through which they could “grasp the meaning of...something as abstract as the Resurrection” (p. 72). Without controverting this observation, there is another way in which to reckon with their appearance that aligns the visual ingredients of the Entombment ensembles with Sadler’s stated interest in understanding the “performative” way in which they work. The presence of the Marys at the Entombment is not paradoxical; rather it announces the multiplicity of moments inherent in the Easter story. The women alert the audience to temporal duration, key to an appreciation of the sacred events and critical in experiencing performance. Sadler then pivots from this, transferring her attention to the aedicule of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the architectural structure that stood inside the church that the Crusaders had rebuilt, within which the tomb of Christ was located. She notes that European copies of this little building, some of which claimed to replicate its measurements, invoked the spiritual presence of the one in Jerusalem, conferring blessings similar to those obtained during pilgrimage on those who visited it or were buried near it. She believes that the spiritual beneficence that accrued to copies of the aedicule extended to the monumental carvings, particularly in instances in which an Entombment was commissioned immediately after a donor’s return from the Holy Land. Her assertion that the “visual reenactment of the burial of Christ was a souvenir of what transpired at the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem” would have been a productive place to begin her inquiry (p. 90) since, as she points out later in the book, citing Karsallah, entombments were foils for the mass of the dead, with every ritual of a funeral recapitulating Christ’s own entombment (p. 189). The worldly if not exactly secular, which comes up primarily in the pages of the book as a matter of patronage, would have found its proper place here intertwined with the spiritual.

Sadler’s third take on the Entombments in chapter four relates them to contemporary drama, since “the body is the organ of knowing in both late medieval religious piety and theatrical performances” (p. 111). Towards this end, she applies various tenets of performance theory to a few of the more exuberantly enacted, theatrically posed and costumed Entombments that date from the sixteenth century, some of which include statues of the donors as witnesses to the event. Her claim that the sculptural ensembles “engendered a tactile experience akin to the affective piety summoned by actors in medieval plays” (p. 111) is too simple a statement, given how much richer the concept of performativity is understood to be,^[3] and at odds with the enticement of the opening words of the title to the chapter. The tomfoolery and trickery of vulgar magicians to which “Hocus Pocus” refers is off-putting and unrelated to her argument.

The final chapter, which serves as the conclusion to the book, looks at a potpourri of “some of the sculpture that was produced in the regions of Burgundy and Champagne during and after the period in which the Entombments flourished” (p. 149). These include retables in wood and limestone, as well as Pietàs—freestanding representations of the Virgin holding the dead Christ on her lap, and a few statues of saints. Sadler uses the decline in Entombment production to terminate her study, wondering whether “the absence of a cult dedicated to the Entombment [could] have been a factor in its lower art historical profile,” (p. 168) but attributing their ultimate disappearance to the more powerful lure of diminutive depictions of the event: “The retables, it would seem, were, in the final analysis eminently more accessible than the monumental memorials to Christ’s Passion” (pp. 160-2). The Entombment’s “presence,” the element that “captivated” her and inspired her to study them, is superannuated, without sufficient or satisfying explanation as to why that occurred.

Sadler’s report on the demise of the sculptures at the end of a long run replaces any reflection on the implications of the Entombments’ unique power. Quoting Forsyth’s characterization of a resituated ensemble in Epinal as an “impoverished monument...a classic example of a local style gone to seed,” she uses the sculpture to sum up what she has said before because it “captures so many of the characteristics proposed in this study...” (p. 194). Her comment that these characteristics include “the often sub-standard quality of the workmanship” catches the reader by surprise since details of craftsmanship were not significant issues in previous chapters, although Sadler attributed the “unsophisticated style” of the Entombment in the cemetery chapel at Baume-les-Dames to the local origins of the work. In that instance, she went on to note that, “[t]hough rustic in execution,” it creates an effect that is “akin to a ritual” (pp. 144, 147). This work, and others that fall below an arbitrary qualitative benchmark, could have been productively examined in the way that Sadler treated the sculptures made by Claus Sluter, in regard to their visual rhetoric, those aspects of what we call style that affect the way in which works address and engage audiences rather than assist connoisseurs in differentiating artistic hands.

Sadler has read widely in secondary material related to the subjects of medieval drama and spirituality, and many of her comments, even as restatement rather than original argument, stimulate the reader’s thinking about a number of remarkable and underappreciated sculptures. But problems with her study compromise its utility. Too often, questions stand in for the answers the reader is hoping for. Discussion moves from large freestanding ensembles (*Entombments*) to smaller relief depictions on altarpieces (*entombments*), confusing the reader and obscuring the important issue of the worshiper’s ability to commingle with the monumental mourners and imagine him or herself present at Christ’s burial. Size matters, yet the physical dimensions of the works discussed are seldom provided; perhaps that information was thought to be too archeological for a study of this sort. Nevertheless, diminutive relief entombments, however stunning many of them are and however similar they may be in composition to the larger works, did not function like the large scale Entombments in whatever region or country they were found and could not have “performed” in the remarkable ways that the others, whether rustic or courtly, certainly did. For a more probing inquiry into the dimensions of French art’s theatricality during the period in question, and for a recalibration of the relation between the secular and spiritual in medieval performance, Laura Weigert’s book, published the same year as Sadler’s, should be consulted.[4]

NOTES

[1] William H. Forsyth, *The Entombment of Christ: French Sculptures of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); Elsa Karsallah, “Mises au Tombeau du Christ réalisées pour les dignitaires religieux: particularités et fonctions,” in Fabienne Joubert ed., *L’artiste et le clerc. La commande artistique des grands ecclésiastiques à la fin du moyen âge (XIVe-XVIe siècles)* (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2006), pp. 283-302 and “Les Mises au tombeau monumentales

du Christ en France (XVe-XVIe siècles): enjeux iconographique, funéraire et dévotionnel,” doctoral thesis, Fabienne Joubert (dir), Paris, 2009.

[2] Sherry C.M. Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society at the Chartreuse de Champmol* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008); *Art from the Court of Burgundy: The Patronage of Philip the Bold and John the Fearless 1364-1419* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2004); Donna Sadler, “The Well of Moses: Roland Barthes’ Punctum of Piety,” in Laura Gelfand and Sara Blick eds., *Push me Pull You: Imaginative and Emotional Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 383-414.

[3] Laura Weigert, “Performance,” *Studies in Iconography* 33. Special Issue: Medieval Art History Today – Critical Terms (2012), pp. 61-73.

[4] Laura Weigert. *French Visual Culture and the Making of Medieval Theater* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), especially the introduction and chapter one.

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