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H-France Review Vol. 19 (November 2019), No. 246

Anna Russakoff, *Imagining the Miraculous: Miraculous Images of the Virgin Mary in French Illuminated Manuscripts, ca. 1250-1450*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2019. xvii + 194 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S (cl). ISBN 978-0-88844-215-4.

Review by Elizabeth Woodward, Bates College.

The Virgin Mary held a special position of prominence in the lives of medieval Christians. Biblical references to Mary are scant, limited primarily to naming her as the mother of Jesus and noting her presence at key events. Early Christians' desire to know more about Mary led to the development of biographies and legends of Mary's life in the centuries following Christ's death. Details of Mary's early life—her lineage, parentage, conception, birth, childhood, marriage to Joseph, and perpetual virginity—were of particular interest to emergent Christian communities, concerned as they were with defining the nature and divinity of Christ. It was among these early Jewish-Christian communities in the Mediterranean that apocryphal legends of Mary's life, such as the second-century *Protogospel of James*, first arose. In order to establish Jesus as the Messiah foretold by Jewish prophets, Jesus's miraculous conception and royal lineage took on polemical importance.[1] Early theologians continued to expound on Mary's role within the Christian faith and by the eighth century, her worship had officially been accepted and promoted by several major church councils (p. 6). Devotion to Mary gradually grew in the following centuries. Her cult increased in importance throughout Europe as Marian feast days were added to the liturgical calendar, prominent theologians like Bernard of Clairvaux actively promoted her worship, and legends about Mary's life and miracles proliferated (pp. 6-8). Mary appears in a broad range of media in the Middle Ages, including cult statues and devotional images. These two- or three-dimensional depictions were placed on altars in churches and were venerated in private homes. Certain pictorial representations became famous for performing miracles; several of these images, like the statue of Mary at Rocamadour (renowned for healing devotees' physical and mental illnesses) survive to this day.

Anna Russakoff's *Imagining the Miraculous: Miraculous Images of the Virgin Mary in French Illuminated Manuscripts, ca. 1250-1450* is an important art historical contribution to the ever-growing corpus of scholarly studies of medieval Marian worship and its associated imagery. Russakoff's volume is lavishly illustrated and, to the reader's delight, all ninety-four figures are printed in full color. The book's topic is miraculous images of Mary, though Russakoff does not examine historical cult statues, reliquaries, or panel paintings produced during the medieval era. Rather, the book surveys visual and textual representations of generic Marian cult objects featured in medieval stories of the life and miracles of the Virgin. Limiting her study to

manuscript illuminations accompanying Old French literary texts produced in France between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, Russakoff attends above all to the distinction--and, crucially, the frequent lack of distinction--between painted portrayals of inanimate objects crafted by humans and the wondrous visions of Mary experienced by characters in these miracle stories.

The book's introduction and first chapter outline the conceptual framework that undergirds the five chapters that follow. Beginning with a succinct summary of the development of Marian worship, from its elucidation by early Christian authorities to the promulgation of her cult in western Europe in the twelfth century and the parallel explosion in Marian imagery, the author presents a brief overview of medieval image theory and a short discussion of surviving cult images. Most notable is the distinction between an "image" and an "idol" and the medieval understanding of the relationship between an image and its prototype. Such distinctions were of critical importance during the medieval period, when concerns about improper image use could (and did) lead to debate and conflict, as well as the destruction of images. After the eighth century, the official position of both the Orthodox and Catholic church resolved that religious images were acceptable because, as physical objects, they were categorically separate from the things they represented, their prototypes. That images served to educate viewers, acted as memory aids, and inspired profound devotion were further arguments justifying Christians' use of religious images. For Russakoff's discussion of Marian images, the concept of "likeness," or the close relationship between an image and its prototype, proves to be of particular importance.[2]

Proceeding in chronological order, chapters two through six present a series of vernacular texts narrating various miracles associated with the Virgin Mary. Each chapter is dedicated to a literary work and the surviving illuminated manuscripts that preserve that text. Chapter two considers *Les Miracles de Notre Dame*, a lyric narrative begun ca. 1218 by the Benedictine monk Gautier de Coinci (p. 21). Gautier de Coinci's collection of fifty-eight miracles is a remarkable blend of literary genres, including lyric poetry and musical composition. Seventeen complete illuminated manuscripts of the *Miracles de Notre Dame (MND)* survive today, most from the late thirteenth century. Miraculous images of Mary feature prominently in Gautier's text, and Russakoff demonstrates that, with a few notable exceptions, illuminators were careful to distinguish between inanimate representations of the Virgin Mary and instances in which Mary herself appears "in person" to interact with a character. The specific moments in which inanimate representations of Mary momentarily show signs of life (such as moving, speaking, or exuding a liquid substance), however, proved to be a challenge for illuminators of *MND* manuscripts. Many artists opted not to depict the precise moment in which a Marian image miraculously comes to life, showing instead the "before" and "after" scenes or key events preceding the miracle (p. 49). Russakoff argues that this visual "blank," a term adopted from literary theorist Wolfgang Iser, requires the manuscript's reader-viewers to be active participants in the story, mentally filling in the narrative gaps created by artists' omissions. Miracle-working Marian images in the *MND* are also shown to reflect contemporary concerns about appropriate and inappropriate use of images. Several episodes tell of Saracens and Jews, considered idolaters by medieval Christians, abusing Marian images.

Building on her observations of Gautier de Coinci's *MND*, the remainder of the volume surveys an array of painted depictions of miraculous Marian images found in other French miracle stories from the late thirteenth century through the mid-fifteenth century. *La Vie des Pères*, the

focus of chapter three, is an anonymous thirteenth-century text that includes Marian miracles and appears to engage a lay, urban audience. Gautier's audience, by comparison, was likely the aristocratic elite (pp. 51-52). Russakoff examines four northern French manuscripts of *La Vie des Pères* and concludes that the Marian images, through the artist's careful depiction of their spectacularly animated qualities, visibly demonstrate a direct link with their holy prototype. Jean de Vignay's *Miroir historial*, a fourteenth-century translation of Vincent of Beauvais's Latin *Speculum historiale*, is the topic of chapter four. Similar to the miniatures found in manuscripts of Gautier de Coinci's *MND*, the illuminations of Mary's miracles in *Miroir historial* manuscripts tend to omit the most dramatic moments, instead leaving "blanks" where the reader-viewer must imagine the climactic scene of a Marian image coming to life. Chapter five examines miracles in the *Ci nous dit* and the *Miracles de Notre Dame par personnages*, noting the "striking ambiguity between material images and visions" in their illuminations (p. 83). Chapter six treats the three manuscripts of Jean Miélot's fifteenth-century prose version of the *Miracles de Notre Dame*. Comparing the fifteenth-century artists' treatment of scenes discussed in earlier chapters, the author suggests that the technique of grisaille, or monochromatic painting in shades of gray, combined with the artists' use of illusionism results in lifelike images of the Virgin that nonetheless affirm their status as objects. These pictorial devices, however, also result in ambiguity between two-dimensional and three-dimensional representations of Mary. The three illuminated manuscripts of the prose *Miracles de Notre Dame*, all produced in the mid-fifteenth century and copied by the same scribe, present "a heightened set of intersections and interactions between artistic representations, appearances, and human beings, and between image and text" (p. 113). Russakoff's analysis of illuminated French Marian miracles clearly demonstrates that later medieval vernacular compilations engage much more explicitly with the question of images and their uses than did their Latin predecessors. Similarly, late medieval illuminators were attentive to nuanced distinctions between images and prototypes, appearances and reality.

The author's primary goal is to "carefully examine a series of representations to try to determine the cases in which Marian images are depicted as handcrafted, material objects" (p. 20). Her secondary goal is to "unpack the miraculous and often animated qualities of the images" (p. 20). Russakoff succeeds admirably in achieving her first goal. Her attempts to "unpack" the images, however, are not as in-depth as readers might wish. By focusing almost exclusively on the relationship between text and image in each of the manuscripts, potentially fruitful connections between these narrative images and their broader cultural and religious contexts are left unexplored. The book's overwhelming emphasis is on describing different iterations of the same miraculous episodes in different texts, and potential variations in audience response are only briefly considered. Russakoff notes that some texts, like Gautier de Coinci's *Miracles de Notre Dame*, were written for the aristocratic elite, some were aimed at middle-class lay audiences, and others were commissioned for royal readers. Does socioeconomic status have any bearing on how these different manuscripts were used and interpreted? Furthermore, what is the relationship between the different artistic approaches to illustrating miraculous Marian images, late medieval devotional literature, and contemporary religious practices? This book tantalizingly hints at, but does not take up, broader cultural concerns.

Russakoff's volume is a careful study of significant illuminated manuscripts, some of which have not received adequate scholarly attention. Her work will be relevant for art historians, manuscript scholars, and anyone interested in acquiring a deeper understanding of medieval

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French art and literature.

## NOTES

[1] See Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

[2] For medieval (and modern) image theory and the concept of “likeness,” see Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

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ISSN 1553-9172