

---

H-France Review Vol. 20 (June 2020), No. 89

Willibald Sauerländer, *Reims, la reine des cathédrales: Cité céleste et lieu de mémoire*, translated from German by Jean Torrent. Paris: Fondation Maison des sciences et de l'homme and Centre allemande d'histoire de l'art, 2018. 103 pp., 59 b/w and 2 color figures, notes, and photo credits. 12 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-7351-2418-3

Review by Jacqueline E. Jung, Yale University.

The year 2011 marked the 800-year anniversary of the beginning of construction on the cathedral of Notre Dame in Reims, a building long regarded as the crown jewel of French Gothic architecture. This church's real birthday--the point of its origin as a site of Christian worship--lay much farther in the past, in the fifth and early sixth centuries, when a martyred bishop bore his severed head to this place and, some years later, a dove carried sacred oil straight from heaven for the anointing of Clovis, the first Christian king. And it has come close to death several times--once, for instance, when Revolutionists looted, dispersed, and destroyed its most precious treasures (not just gold and jewels but also the venerated remains of its founding saints) and again, during World War I, when German artillery set the structure ablaze, melting the lead, decimating the roof, and reducing some of the abundant exterior statuary to rubble.[1] Happily, the combined efforts of European and American financiers and technicians enabled the *grande dame* to be resuscitated, and in 1938 she celebrated her return from near-death and began a new life as a symbol of beauty and reason, history and culture, triumphing over the brutal forces of violence and irrationality.

When, on October 20, 2011, the German art historian Willibald Sauerländer, who had come to love French art after having been a prisoner of war in Lorraine in 1945, stood up in Reims Cathedral to deliver to a large general audience a *Festvortrag* (ceremonial public lecture) celebrating the church's long life, it was also a deeply symbolic event, this time displaying the victory of collaboration and mutual respect over the antagonism of nationalist ideologies.[2] Symbolic, too, was the publication of that lecture by the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte (DFK)/Centre allemande d'histoire de l'art, a German-led cohort of international scholars based in Paris. At the invitation of the Forum's director Andreas Beyer, Sauerländer put together a slightly expanded and lightly, though very aptly, annotated version of his lecture in its original German form (he had presented it in French at Reims); he also composed a new postscript that brought together thematic clusters of images not treated in the lecture itself. The slim, pocket-sized, affordable volume, illustrated by small but crisp black-and-white images (and two color pictures) appeared in 2013. The volume under review is the French version of that book, likewise published by the DFK and fluidly translated by Jean Torrent; the only change, apart from some slight adjustments to the page layout, is that this version lacks the foreword by Beyer that

---

introduced the German one. (It would be lovely to see an English-language translation in English and North American bookstores, but in the meantime Anglophone readers can find the lecture in the New York Review of Books.)[3]

The lecture itself must have been thrilling to behold in person, delivered under the soaring vaults of this grandest of Gothic cathedrals and presumably making use of slides to show the many exterior sculptures discussed; despite Sauerländer's slight adjustments to the text, his voice comes through loud and clear. After a lifetime of speaking to audiences in lecture halls, seminars, and public forums, Sauerländer had perfected a manner of speech (and writing) that brought to view the excitement and beauty and urgency of what he was seeing. In this case, where the circumstances of the lecture demanded he appear less as a scholarly analyst than as an "art historical panegyrist" ("kunsthistorischer Panegyriker" in the original German, p. 41; translated here as "en faisant l'éloge . . . en ma qualité d'historien de l'art," p. 41, see also p. 15), Sauerländer was in especially sparkling form.

In keeping with Gothic design principles, he arranged his remarks in a clear tripartite structure, each addressing one of the church's key symbolic identities. First is its role as an evocation of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the celestial city in which the Elect will dwell with God at the end of time. Whereas this was a familiar trope in the medieval liturgy and could, in principle, be applied to any Christian church, Sauerländer cites very specific aspects of the Reims design to substantiate this view; the sculpted angels that stand guard around the radiating chapels, for example, declare the building's affiliation with a celestial company, while inside, the stained glass windows present saints, Christ, and the Virgin--Notre Dame herself--in alignment with other church buildings labeled as the suffragans (subsidiaries) of the Reims archbishopric. Institutionally and architecturally, the church thus stands as the earthly analogue of heaven.

While the spirits of the saints dwell already in heaven, their bodies still reside (or resided) on earth, encased in glittering reliquaries and venerated by the faithful; Reims Cathedral's role as the house of holy persons occupies the second section of Sauerländer's talk. Here our guide leads us deep into the history of the church, tracing the stories of the holy bishops and martyrs who established the site as sacred, whose stories were broadcast in the sculpture program of the north transept portal, and whose fragmented bodies were protected and displayed by shrines inside the building. Most of the latter fell prey to the Revolutionists in the late eighteenth century, so Sauerländer here uses both textual and graphic documents to reconstruct the vitality of this medieval church interior filled with the presence of the saints, still aware of and interested in the goings-on around their bodies.

The saints were always on hand to sanction liturgical rituals, but at Reims they also presided over a distinctive ceremony that gave this building added luster and prestige: the coronations of kings of France, a practice that extended, with few interruptions, from the reign of Louis VIII in 1223, when the Gothic building was still in progress, until that of Charles X in 1825. The key part of the rite at Reims was the *Sacre*, the ritual anointing with the miraculous, self-replenishing heavenly oil delivered to bishop Remigius when he baptized Clovis in 499, instituting the form of sacred kingship that would be a hallmark of the French political system for well over a millennium. While, again, the spectacular scenes of medieval and early modern coronation proceedings that transformed the cathedral's Gothic crossing into a highly embellished theatrical space can only be reconstructed through visual and textual documentations, no visitor to the building, then or now, can forget its royal connections. The episode of the anointing of Clovis,

along with the narrative of the early missionary bishop Nicasius's martyrdom, were both rendered in stone sculpture on the north transept portal and alluded to in other parts of the building, lending a narrative frame to the holy men's relics. The church's royal identity was reaffirmed in the engaging monumental figures of Old Testament kings who stood as idealized models for contemporary royals in the upper reaches of the buttresses—and, of course, in the gable crowning the center portal of the west façade, showing the enthroned Virgin Mary bending her head to receive a crown from her Son's hand. Even as Mary, *Notre Dame*, becomes Queen of Heaven, her church at Reims takes shape, in Sauerländer's story, as queen of cathedrals.

Sauerländer's afterword to the lecture, composed for the German edition, picks up both the thematic strands of the lecture and its methodological commitment to showing the building's integrated quality as it turns to the characters who hold pride of place in Christian iconography: Christ and the Virgin. This gives Sauerländer opportunity to touch on some of the building's most celebrated sculptures, including the *Beau Dieu* on the north transept portal and the Annunciation and Visitation groups on the west façade. These he treats less in terms of their much-vaunted Classicizing style than in terms of their invitational rhetoric, their appeal to beholders. He concludes with a consideration of the figure of Eve, who here appears uncharacteristically clad in thirteenth-century garments, and brings her into dialogue with sculptures of the Queen of Sheba and of the biblical villainess Herodias on the inner west wall, who both wear similarly up-to-date outfits; the publication ends on a strangely gloomy note, as it positions distinctly *modern* (women's) clothing as the emblem of condemnable luxury.

Returning to the lecture proper: it is moving to think of this text as a performance, one among a whole sequence of spectacles that animated this cathedral's interior throughout its long and glamorous life, of the kind Sauerländer evoked in his talk – high-profile yet ephemeral events that drew crowds and provoked a sense of wonder, from the regular displays of reliquaries and liturgical treasures that punctuated each liturgical year to kings' coronations that might be witnessed just once in a lifetime. It is clear that the singular, celebratory occasion for which it was penned shaped the text's content and format. Although Sauerländer, in concluding his talk (p. 65), made reference to the German damages inflicted on this building during World War I and, throughout the text, had acknowledged the destruction that the Revolution wrought on the church's sacred treasures, no other signs of stress mar his depiction of the building as a unified, harmonious, benevolent entity. He makes no mention, for example, of the social disturbances that undergirded the church's creation in the thirteenth century – the civic riots that halted construction in the 1230s, prompting many of the workers to move to other sites, or the tensions that brewed between the Christian majority and their Jewish neighbors, emblemized in the figures of *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* near the south transept's rose window.[4]

At several points, moreover, Sauerländer differentiates himself from the kind of positivistic art historians who would parse out nuances of style and technique to quibble about dating and chronology, a form of inquiry that, he says, invoking Marcel Proust, leads to “la mort des cathédrales” (p. 15). His speech, as promised to his general audience, was indeed less scientific than “poétique et évocateur” (p. 15). But specialist readers will recognize how firmly rooted the analyses put forth here are in Sauerländer's own very deep scholarship. The lecture as a whole encapsulates his turn, already in the 1980s, from a positivistic, style-based mode of investigation of sculpture (exemplified in his early book *Von Sens bis Strassburg*, 1966) to one that was more concerned with the dynamics of imagery within and across the spaces of Gothic buildings, and with the communal rituals that gave images meaning in their distinctive sacred environments.

His probing studies on the connection of portal iconography to the placement of relics and altars inside churches, on the interrelations of the sculptural and stained-glass imagery of kingship with the rites of *Sacre*, on the question of how Gothic buildings may be considered “integrated” despite their disparities of style, and many others all undergird his analysis—even though, with characteristic humility, his notes center other scholars’ contributions rather than his own.[5] Casual readers will find in these pages a learned and beautifully engaging presentation of a grand and glamorous building, evidence of the most glowing creativity medieval European culture had to offer. Readers familiar with Willibald Sauerländer’s life and work will also find a poignant self-portrait: a German scholar in love with French art, determined to make it accessible and enthralling to a vast international audience by focusing less on the stones and glass, beautiful as they are in themselves, than on their activation in the realm of communal viewership and use.

## NOTES

[1] That episode, and the political, ideological, and scholarly hostilities that followed, has been newly analyzed by Thomas Gaetgens, *Reims on Fire: War and Reconciliation between France and Germany*, trans. David Dollenmayer (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2018).

[2] As per Andreas Beyer in the foreword to the German edition of this book, *Reims, die Königen der Kathedralen: Himmelsstadt und Erinnerungsort* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2013), 8.

[3] Willibald Sauerländer, “The Queen of Cathedrals,” trans. David Dollenmayer, *New York Review of Books* (22 March, 2012).

[4] See, for example, Barbara Abou-el-Haj, “The Urban Setting for Late Medieval Church Building: Reims and its Cathedral between 1210 and 1240,” *Art History* 11 (1988): 17-41; Nina Rowe, *The Jew, the Cathedral, and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 86-139. Sauerländer does make passing mention to “les troubles et les conflits entre la religion et l’économie qui se font donc jour” in his postscript (p. 75, see also p. 73).

[5] Willibald Sauerländer, “Reliquien, Altäre und Portale,” in *Kunst und Liturgie im Mittelalter*, ed. Nicolas Bock et al. (Munich: Hirmer, 2000), 121-34; “Observations sur la topographie et l’iconologie de la cathédrale du sacre,” *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* (July-Oct. 1992): 463-79; “Integrated Fragments and the Unintegrated Whole: Scattered Examples from Reims, Strasbourg, Chartres, and Naumburg,” in *Artistic Integration in Gothic Buildings*, ed. Virginia Chieffo Raguin, Kathryn Brush, and Peter Draper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 153-66.

Jacqueline Jung  
Yale University  
[jacqueline.jung@yale.edu](mailto:jacqueline.jung@yale.edu)

Copyright © 2020 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

---

edistribution/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