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Vigintennial Views on Ottonian Art History

By Adam S. Cohen, *University of Toronto*

When I began my Ph.D. thesis on the Uta Codex in 1989, I was aware of only three dissertations written in the English language on the subject of Ottonian manuscript illumination and only one on Ottonian architecture, metalwork, sculpture, or wall painting.¹ In some ways this was surprising, for the study of Ottonian art was central to the study of medieval art from the beginning of the discipline (Ottonian art traditionally has been defined as the art and architecture produced between approximately 950 and 1050 in Central Europe under Emperors Otto I, II, III, Henry II, and their Salian followers Conrad II and Henry III.) The focus on book illumination emerged at the end of the nineteenth century with several books by Stephan Beissel (on the Aachen Gospels of Otto and the Gospels of Bernward of Hildesheim), Wilhelm Vöge's 1891 work on a school of illumination later localized to Reichenau, and the 1901 monograph by Heinrich Sauerland and Arthur Haseloff on the Psalter of Archbishop Egbert of Trier, all foundational scholarship that drove Ottonian art history for a century and continues to repay

¹ The earliest is Charles T. Little, "The Magdeburg Ivory Group: a Tenth-Century New Testament Narrative Cycle," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1977). The three on manuscripts are Satoko I. Parker, "Codex F.II.1. of the Biblioteca Queriniana of Brescia and its Place Within the Reichenau School," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1978); Jacqueline A. Frank, "Astor 1—An Early Saxon Manuscript in the New York Public Library," (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1986); Janet T. Marquardt, "Illustrations of Troper Texts: The Painted Miniatures in the Prüm Troper-Gradual, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Fonds Latin MS. 9448," (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1986). None of these manuscript dissertations resulted in a book or articles and so their impact on the field was limited. I realize, of course, that at the time there may well have been other works of which I was not aware (and may still not know).

study today.² It is clear that the attention paid to Ottonian art (and history in general) in the German academy was part of broader nationalistic concerns at the time, and so it is little wonder that in the English-speaking world interest in German history waned first after World War I, when North Americans stopped flocking to German universities, and even more after World War II, during which the study of the Ottonian period (considered the First Reich) was implicated in Nazi ideology, resulting in a tendency even among German scholars to shy away from the subject.³ Still, the centrality of Ottonian art and history to medieval studies never wholly dissipated. Ottonian art has always been admired for its sumptuousness and expressiveness, making it somewhat remarkable that so few young scholars in North America during the twentieth century devoted themselves to its study.⁴ When I embarked on my dissertation, then, I knew I was heading somewhat into *terra incognita*, but I was cheered by the sense that things were changing: Jeffrey Hamburger was making the study of German art exciting and respectable for everyone, and there was even someone else, Karen Loaliza (now Blough), who was writing a thesis on an Ottonian manuscript at the same time.⁵

Having said all that, I could not envision the tremendous eruption of scholarly work in English on Ottonian art witnessed especially in the past ten years (concurrent with intensified

² See the fine historiographic study by Kathryn Brush, *The Shaping of Art History: Wilhelm Vöge, Adolph Goldschmidt, and the Study of Medieval Art* (Cambridge 1996).

³ William Diebold is currently at work on a historiographic investigation of twentieth- and twenty-first century attitudes toward medieval art in Germany (tentatively titled *Exhibiting Medieval Art in Modern Germany*).

⁴ Some of the same historical circumstances I have outlined here also account for the general predilection toward French and, to a lesser degree, Italian art among medievalists, which resulted in the continued study of these subjects and their predominance in art history. For a theoretical analysis of some of these issues, see the fundamental study by Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁵ “Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana Codex Barberini latinus 711: a Late Tenth-Century Illustrated Gospel Lectionary from Reichenau,” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1995). This is an important study of a manuscript that deserves more attention than it has received.

research by German scholars). A watershed, of course, was Henry Mayr-Harting's two-volume work, *Ottonian Book Illumination* (London: Harvey Miller, 1991), and more and more scholars who have not have traditionally worked in this field, like Anthony Cutler, Herbert Kessler, and William Diebold, have turned their attention to the subject.⁶ What is most exciting, however, is the substantial number of young English-speaking scholars who have chosen to pursue dissertations in the area of Ottonian art and to stake their claims in the field. In addition to those written by the four authors whose essays appear in this journal, I know of four others, for a total of eight completed in the past nine years (and there are, no doubt, others currently under way of which I am unaware).⁷ In the last decade, then, twice as many dissertations on Ottonian art have been written in English than in the previous century.⁸ I am not enough of a statistician to be able to say whether these numbers indicate either a significant or long-term trend, but it is certainly encouraging that an area long-ignored by art historians is being rediscovered and addressed with vigor and sophistication by both established and emerging scholars. The essays in this volume of *Peregrinations* certainly indicate that the study of Ottonian art is becoming increasingly

⁶ I list here only representative essays: Anthony Cutler and William North, "Ivories, Inscriptions, and Episcopal Self-Consciousness in the Ottonian Empire: Berthold of Toul and the Berlin Hodegetria," *Gesta* 42 (2003): 1-17; William Diebold, "'Except I shall see . . . I will not believe' (John 20:25): Typology, Theology, and Historiography in an Ottonian Diptych," in *Objects, Images, and the Word: Art in the Service of the Liturgy*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton, 2003), 257-73; Herbert Kessler, "Corporeal Texts, Spiritual Paintings, and the Mind's Eye," in *Reading Images and Texts. Medieval Images and Texts as Forms of Communication*, ed. Mariëlle Hageman and Marco Mostert (Turnhout 2005), 9-61.

⁷ Annika Fisher, "Representations of Presence and Absence: The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ in the Ottonian Empire," (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2001); Irina Kolbutova, "Transformations of Philosophical Metaphors in Text and Image: from Plotinus to John Damascene and Christian Iconography," (Ph.D. diss., Central European University, 2004) -- substantially about the Uta Codex; Kristen M. Collins, "Visualizing Mary: Innovation and Exegesis in Ottonian Manuscript Illumination," (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2007). Mention should also be made of Erin Gabrielle Barrett, "Art and the Construction of Early Medieval Queenship: the Iconography of the Joint Royal/Imperial Portrait and the Visual Representation of the Ruler's Consort," (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1997), with several chapters treating Ottonian and Salian material.

⁸ While it is no doubt true that there may be more students overall in doctoral programs now than 30, 50, or 70 years ago, statistics indicate that more than half of all students currently pursue topics in modern and contemporary art, and Ottonian art is still only a small subsection of all of medieval art and architecture.

mainstream, and the results of these scholars' work will be of interest to anyone concerned with medieval art in general and with such specific issues as the intertwining of theological and political ideology (what I like to call "theopolitics"), status, spirituality, philosophy, and vision.

Evan Gatti, the editor of this volume, directly interrogates the meaning of the term "Ottonian" by looking at the *Warmund Sacramentary*, a manuscript made at Ivrea in northern Italy. She seeks to situate Ottonian art in the broader context of "medieval" and the "Middle Ages" by thinking about the ways the manuscript, its iconography, and its patron occupy an intermediate position in terms of geography, patronage and historiography. Gatti reviews the changing historiographic treatment of the manuscript—as a signifier of autonomous Italian artistic and political identity, as dependent on a central, Ottonian (i.e., German) imperial ideology, and as an expression of local episcopal patronage, power, and theology. She affirms the most recent view that the Sacramentary must be understood first and foremost as an expression of Warmund's episcopal status and function and concludes that the most satisfying explanation of the imperial iconography is as a demonstration of the bishop's role as the bridge "in between" the sacred and secular realms.

Status and the shared values of king, bishops, and abbots is a theme that emerges from Stephen Wagner's essay, which looks at a series of Ottonian and Salian manuscripts containing pages painted to simulate textiles and which examines the courtly and ecclesiastical context for understanding these works. A book like the *Codex Aureus of Echternach* was among the most sumptuous creations of the eleventh century; the inclusion of images that imitated textiles was a critical feature that made it so luxurious, for such painted pages evoked the splendor and majesty of real silk fabrics. Wagner reviews the use of actual textiles in the eleventh century, many imported from venerable Byzantium, and underscores how cloaking oneself in magnificent robes

was a fundamental aspect of establishing and broadcasting one's status, whether in life or in death. Indeed, textiles were most commonly used to wrap the sacred relics of saints, and the transfer of textile motifs to books was a way to correlate sanctity across different media. Wagner ends by looking specifically at the relationship between such luxurious Echternach manuscripts as the *Codex Aureus* and earlier eighth-century books made in the first flowering of Echternach manuscript production, arguing that, by modeling their textile pages after the earlier examples, the eleventh-century artists and patrons were consciously connecting themselves in an act of monastic reform to a purer past.

The use of objects to forge a "material dialogue" is the central idea in Eliza Garrison's investigation of a group of objects associated with Otto III in Aachen and the activities of that emperor in the Palace Chapel built by and containing the body of Charlemagne. By examining the form, function, and social life of two Gospel Books and a processional cross, she illuminates the web of associations created by the objects in this visual and ideological dialogue with the recent (Ottonian) and more distant (Carolingian and Roman) past. Garrison firmly establishes the historical context surrounding the creation and presentation of each object to chart a developing awareness of Otto III's own royal and sacerdotal status in relation to his Ottonian predecessors, to Charlemagne, and above all to Christ. Thus, she relates the image of Otto III in the Liuthar Gospels on the one hand to seals, to establish political continuity, and on the other to the standard image of Christ in Majesty, to demonstrate the Christomimetic elevation of the king. Based on her dating of the manuscripts, Garrison connects the Otto Gospels to the celebration of Pentecost in Aachen in 1000, when the emperor opened the tomb of Charlemagne. Once more we can see the foundation of Ottonian theopolitics: through this action Otto was imitating Augustus Caesar, promoting and connecting himself to the cult of Charlemagne, and insinuating

himself into the process of seeing and witnessing the divine that were intrinsic themes of the Pentecost holiday. These themes are also evident in the *Lothar Cross*; with the crucified Christ and the Romanized Otto on flip sides of the cross, the idea of twin political and spiritual victory were telescoped on a single object.

The imitation of Christ and the desire to unite with him are among the themes in Jennifer Kingsley's compelling essay, which demonstrates the remarkable complexity of Ottonian art. She focuses on one specific manuscript, the famous Gospel Book known especially for its image of Bishop Bernward of Hildesheim presenting the book on the altar of his newly dedicated monastery church of St. Michael. Kingsley looks carefully at specific iconographic details to elaborate a sophisticated understanding of the role of touch and tactility in the spiritual apprehension of Christ. She embeds the pictures in the Neoplatonic philosophy of Calcidius to argue for a kind of "non-touching touch" that allows the believer to discern Christ's dual corporeal and incorporeal nature. By demonstrating how figures from sacred history represented in the illuminations, like John the Baptist, served as exempla for Bernward himself, Kingsley reveals how the bishop, vividly depicted holding the Gospels, in turn becomes a model for how to grasp Christ and also how his gift makes the sacred realm tangible.

For those who already have considered such works as the Bernward and Otto Gospels, the *Codex Aureus of Echternach*, and the *Warmund Sacramentary*, the four essays presented in this volume will bring exciting new insights. For those unfamiliar with Ottonian art, this volume should provide an excellent entry into a body of material that comprises some of the Middle Ages' most beautiful and compelling objects. In either case, the essays should persuasively demonstrate that Ottonian artists, patrons, and thinkers were among the most sophisticated of the Middle Ages in using art to embody and communicate complex ideas about their relationship to

the past, present, and future. It is particularly encouraging to see that what had become a relative backwater in medieval art history now seems to be an area in which some of the most stimulating work is being done. Based on the articles here, and the intellectual riches promised by the authors in their footnotes as forthcoming, the future of Ottonian art history over the next twenty years should be exciting indeed. We can expect not only that more North American scholars will turn to this material as the subject of study in its own right, but also that the results of this work will become increasingly important to other medievalists. The appearance of a page from the Uta Codex on the cover of the revised edition of Snyder's *Medieval Art* by Henry Luttikhuis and Dorothy Verkerk is a great sign that Ottonian art is moving into the "mainstream," but there is still much to be done to make this material intellectually germane to a broader scholarly audience. I commend the authors in this volume for their current work and look forward very much to seeing the continued fruits of their labors.