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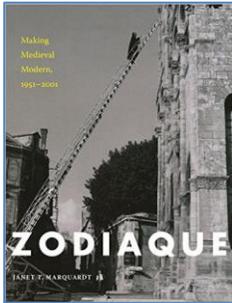


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Book Review: Janet T. Marquardt, *Zodiaque: Making Medieval Modern, 1951-2001* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2015), 224 pages, 16 color and 71 black-and-white illustrations (ISBN# 978-0-271-06506-9)

By Lindsay Cook, Columbia University

Presenting the books published by éditions Zodiaque as *lieux de mémoire* for a generation of art historians, Janet T. Marquardt explores the underpinnings and impact of the French imprint established in the middle of the twentieth century and known chiefly for its lavishly illustrated monographs of Romanesque churches. Created and operated out of the Benedictine abbey Sainte Marie de la Pierre-qui-Vire, Zodiaque was the brainchild of the monk Dom Angelico Surchamp, whose own artistic training had a profound impact in shaping the “Zodiaque aesthetic,” which, according to Marquardt, distinguishes the series from both scholarly and coffee-table books of the same era. The author relates the photographs, which often depict unusual views of medieval monuments, to abstract painting, and she situates Surchamp as the “curator” of the images, which were then offered up to and consumed by a large audience that eventually included medieval art historians. While scholars have tended to ascribe a documentary status to Zodiaque illustrations, Marquardt reveals the extent to which the images could also operate on artistic and affective levels, the high-quality photogravures of medieval Christian art and architecture serving a contemplative function.

The first chapter places the *Zodiaque* publications in the historical context of the debates surrounding Catholic art in the modern era. Marquardt presents the *Zodiaque* enterprise as part of a revival of interest in Romanesque art after a period of relative neglect, during which the Gothic predominated as a model for new religious art and architecture. Intended to appeal to a public increasingly enamored with modernist aesthetics and decreasingly invested in Catholicism, the Benedictine monks of La Pierre-qui-Vire presented the historical forms of Romanesque with a modernist overlay to stimulate a *Renouveau catholique*. Whereas the French Dominicans commissioned radically modern sacred works from the likes of Matisse and Le Corbusier, the French Benedictines attempted to modernize Catholic art by building upon history rather than rejecting it.

The second chapter, the most compelling of all, examines the creation of the *Zodiaque* project in light of the artistic and spiritual ambitions of its founder. Marquardt is especially attentive to the physical backdrop of the monastery of La Pierre-qui-Vire as a testing ground that encouraged Surchamp and his collaborators to exercise their passion and creativity in the production of books and journals as a form of *opus dei*. It considers the place of the monastery's journals *Témoignages* and *Zodiaque* and especially the *Zodiaque* book series within the intellectual landscape of postwar France. Marquardt surveys the range of subject matter covered by the *Zodiaque* publications, and she observes that the most lavishly produced volumes focused on Romanesque monuments and were marketed to a wider audience than the Christian journals, which contained articles on a broader range of subjects. Surchamp championed the Romanesque mode as a worthy alternative to the representational status quo for Catholic art at the time, which tended toward the saccharine and naturalistic.

The third chapter analyzes the texts that accompanied the *Zodiaque* publications, using Françoise Henry and Raymond Oursel, two key authors for the *Nuit des temps* series, as case studies to explore the role of the texts in relation to other aspects of the *Zodiaque* publishing venture. Marquardt notes a general improvement in the quality of the writing over time, due in large part to the contributions of reliable professional writers, a key factor in bringing the series to the attention of an academic audience. While integral to Marquardt's central argument, this chapter interrupts the flow of the book. The previous sections consistently emphasized the visual impact of the *Zodiaque* publications and signaled the importance of the photogravures in "making medieval modern," and by the third chapter the reader longs to understand the function



of the photographs in the *Zodiaque* publications. Instead, she must wait until the penultimate chapter, well into the second half of the book, for the visual analysis of the photographs to appear.

Figure 1 (fig. 37) Phéliphot studio, crossing pier at Paray-le-Monial from above, in *Bourgogne romane* (*La Nuit des temps* 1)

The fourth chapter considers, at long last, the role of photography in the *Zodiaque* series. Marquardt contends that the photographs

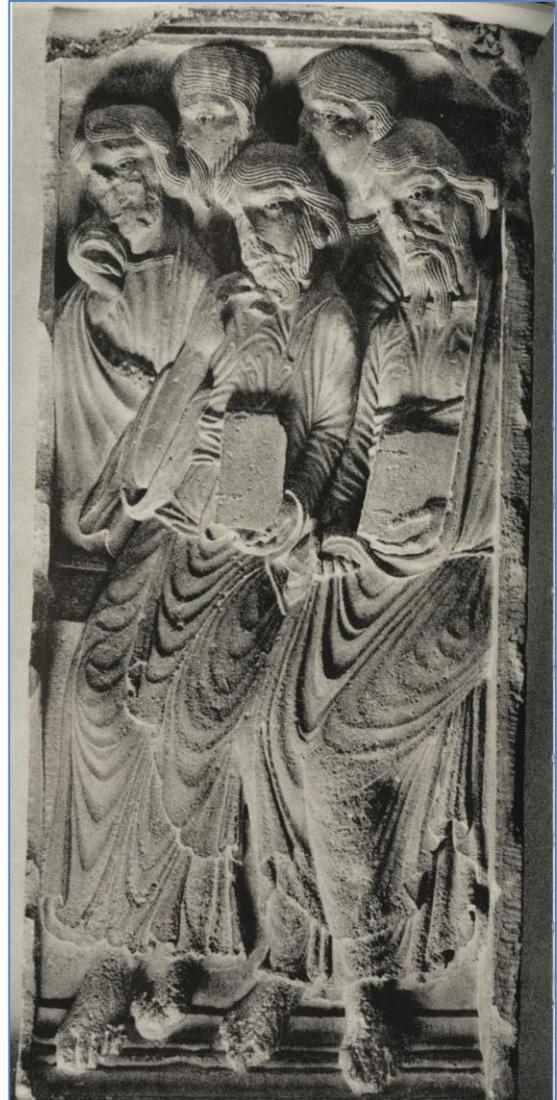
expressed Henri Focillon's concept of the "life of forms." Moreover, she reveals various

manipulations that took place when producing and editing the photographs and demonstrates that Surchamp and the professional photographers employed by *Zodiaque* favored abstraction over more traditional modes of architectural documentary photography. After diminishing or entirely eliminating signs of contemporary liturgical use, the photographers further abstracted the monuments by using unusual angles, close-ups, cropping, and airbrushing, thereby creating the aesthetic now synonymous with *Zodiaque* (**figure 1**). Marquardt claims that the photogravures shared many of the aesthetic ambitions of twentieth-century abstract paintings, particularly works by Gleizes, Picasso, and Braque. Since abstraction is a relative value, however, some of Marquardt's juxtapositions amplify the representational content of the *Zodiaque* photographs rather than revealing its absence. For instance, the apostles in the relief from the cloister of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert (**figure 2**) have never appeared more anatomically accurate than they do in relation to Picasso's *Le guitariste*, an analytic cubist work of 1910. That said, many of the specific formal parallels Marquardt establishes are striking enough to convince the reader that the modernist aesthetic of the *Zodiaque* publications resulted primarily from photographic manipulations related to painterly abstraction.

The final chapter draws upon the author's written correspondence with her colleagues, primarily American and French, to estimate *Zodiaque*'s impact on art historical pedagogy. Once the quality of the texts improved, scholars began to use the books for the purposes of research and teaching. Marquardt contends that the aesthetic qualities of the photogravures shaped a generation of art historians' understanding of the past. The idea that a fixed set of images could have such a profound and lasting impact on scholars may come as a surprise to later generations of researchers, who take for granted the vast quantities of digital images available from a variety

of sources, including the intramural image catalogues available at some universities, scholarly subscription-based or open-access digital databases, and commercial image search tools.

Figure 2 (fig. 53) Cloister relief of apostles from Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, now at Musée de la Société archéologique, Montpellier, in *Languedoc roman* (La Nuit des temps 43), plate 132.



Marquardt's study represents a significant contribution to medieval art historiography, but it comes with some minor flaws. The book turns on the erroneous premise that Romanesque monuments were lesser-known than Gothic ones. The churches that appeared in the *Nuit des temps* series were hardly obscure by the time the first book in the series appeared in 1954, and, in fact, the earliest *Zodiaque* monographs treated many of the same Romanesque monuments that Prosper Mérimée, in his capacity as Inspector General of Historic Monuments, had praised in his letter to the French Minister of the Interior, which appeared in 1840 as the introduction to the first inventory ever published by the Commission des Monuments historiques. While Gothic did become the dominant stylistic model for new church construction in the nineteenth century, many Romanesque churches—especially in Burgundy—were widely known in both popular and

academic circles long before *Zodiaque* was founded. *Zodiaque* may well have brought Romanesque monuments and the term “Romanesque” to the attention of a broader public, but the series neither coined the stylistic term nor invented the Romanesque canon of monuments.

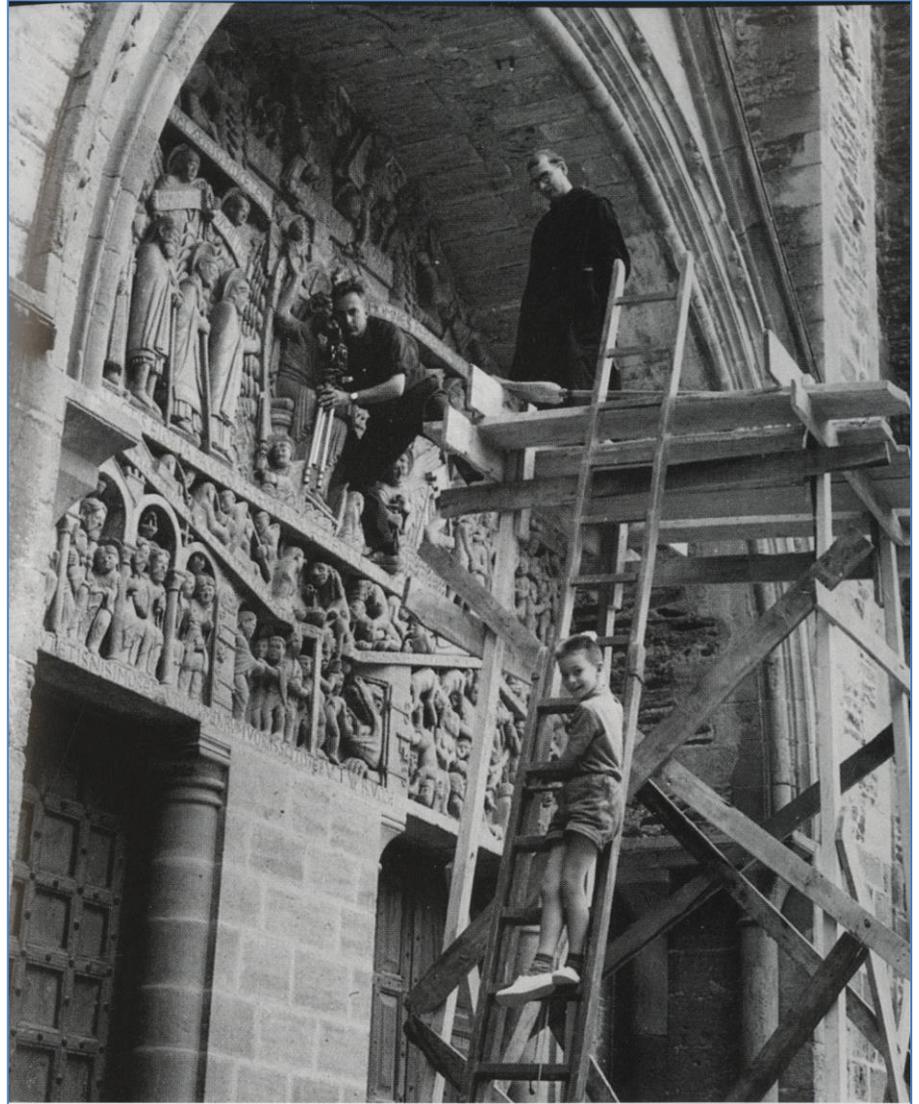
Furthermore, while Marquardt laments the limited scope of the *Zodiaque* publications, which likely resulted from prejudices linked to contemporary European geographic boundaries and political chasms, she is insufficiently critical of *Zodiaque*’s treatment of non-European subject matter. The author skirts the issue of the chronological intersection of the foundation of the *Zodiaque* enterprise and the missions established by La-Pierre-qui-Vire monks after World War II in French Indochina, Madagascar, and Congo. In a similar vein, Marquardt does not contextualize *Zodiaque*’s frequent, unqualified use of the term “primitive” to describe colonial subjects and their cultural production in *Zodiaque* books and journals. These issues are inextricably linked to the book’s central argument. In an early issue of the journal *Zodiaque*, following an article about Dogon sculpture by Sorbonne anthropology professor Marcel Griaule, Surchamp penned an essay that focused on the difficulty of reconciling “modern, primitive, and Christian values.”¹ Marquardt convinces the reader that *Zodiaque*’s *Nuit des temps* series used modernist photography of Romanesque churches to synthesize these three values, but the reader is left wondering whether Surchamp’s fascination with non-European art—a frequent topic of *Zodiaque* journal articles, but not the luxurious book series—resulted, at least in part, from the monastery’s colonial missionary activities, and may have contributed to the *Zodiaque* aesthetic.

Finally, while Marquardt establishes the connection between the aesthetic of the *Zodiaque* photogavures and modernist paintings, she explores only perfunctorily *Zodiaque*’s place in the history of photography, in general, and the history of architectural photography

¹ Surchamp, “Sens de *Zodiaque*,” *Zodiaque* 5 (October 1951): 34.

Figure 3 (fig. 30) Louis Balsan, view of Jean Dieuzaide and Dom Angelico Surchamp (with young Michel Dieuzaide) working on west tympanum of Sainte-Foi, Conques, in 1960.

in particular. Marquardt does consider some photographic precedents for *Zodiaque*, but she dismisses their impact, even though the *Voyages pittoresques*, the *Mission héliographique*, and the sumptuously illustrated nineteenth-century monographs of select Gothic cathedrals must have loomed large in the minds of the



Zodiaque producers. Although Marquardt downplays the similarities between *Zodiaque* and the *Mission héliographique*, the “*Zodiaque* aesthetic” appears to my eye at least as indebted to Gustave Le Gray’s photographs as to Gleizes’ or Picasso’s paintings. In the early years of *Zodiaque*, before Surchamp started taking most of the photographs himself, professional photographers produced the book illustrations, and their work receives the most attention in Marquardt’s study. Some of the professionals, including Pierre Belzeaux and Jean Dieuzaide (**figure 3**), were quite well known beyond the confines of *Zodiaque*, and a discussion of their work for *Zodiaque* in the context of their *oeuvres* would have enhanced the book. Contemporary

pictorialist photography is yet another aesthetic touchstone with which the professional photographers Zodiaque employed might have been in dialogue, especially after Paul Strand, known for his high-contrast abstractions of architectural forms, relocated to France after World War II and published *La France de profil* in 1952.

Overall, Marquardt's book succeeds in situating the Zodiaque enterprise in the context of postwar French Catholicism and demonstrates the series' impact on art-historical pedagogy. Scholars familiar with the Zodiaque books as well as art historians invested in critically evaluating their own visual pedagogical tools will find this study particularly enlightening. 🐦