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### Review: Of Earth and Heaven. Art from the Middle Ages (London, Sam Fogg, 2018)

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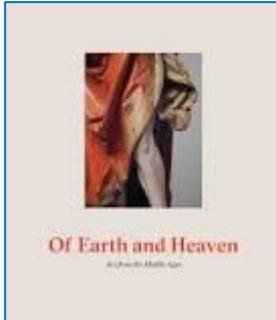
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# PEREGRINATIONS

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Book Review: *Of Earth and Heaven. Art from the Middle Ages* (London, Sam Fogg, 2018), to accompany an exhibition by Sam Fogg Ltd, held at Luhring Augustine, New York, 30 January-10 March 2018, 128 pages, 73 color, 1 black & white photographs.

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This visually stunning catalog published by commercial art dealer Sam Fogg accompanied an exhibition of the same name held at Luhring Augustine gallery in New York, from January to March 2018. The catalog features twenty-seven objects in a variety of media, all made in continental Europe. The exhibits are arranged more-or-less chronologically in the volume, spanning the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries.

Unfortunately, the format of plates at the front and list of works at the back restricts the depth of scholarly information on each object. The curator of the exhibition/compiler (who remains anonymous, much like many of the makers of the objects described within) is confined by the format to providing information on two objects per page, regardless of their perceived historical value. The list of works offers a description of the object and a stylistic analysis. It then places the object within its geographical and historical context and provides its provenance. The front section reproduces close-ups of the medieval objects, often a whole page per color plate, sometimes spanning a double-page spread. The production values are high, with quality paper and a heavy-weight matte cover, as you would expect from a sales catalog that aims to spotlight each object for potential buyers.

Yet, what it lacks in analysis, it makes up for with the exceptional quality of the photography, which allows the reader to examine the objects very closely, enhancing the intimacy of the reader's experience. For example, the beautifully shot close-ups of a life-sized polychromed corpus of Christ from Aragon in Spain reveal the individual blobs of paint



depicting drops of blood around Christ's head from the removed crown of thorns and the oozing from the wound in his side.

Unlike other exhibition catalogs by Sam Fogg, this publication lacks thematic focus, reflecting its remit to present objects of different medium, function, and original location. The assembled objects include pedestal sculptures from Apulia, a cloisonné enamel medallion depicting St Pantaleon from Constantinople, a huge architectural drawing from Rouen, a Netherlandish triptych of the Virgin and Child with its original frame and wings, and an Austrian Schöne Madonna. With the exception of the precious Montefiore Mainz Mahzor, an illustrated manuscript written in Ashkenazi script and produced by Jewish communities in the Rhineland during the fourteenth century, the exhibits were made by and for Christians in Europe.

Among the major exhibits are three monumental sections of stone tracery originally from the south-transept window of Canterbury Cathedral. Their description recounts how the limestone used for the windows was quarried at Caen, Normandy, making the construction of the original windows vastly ambitious in terms of logistics. The design, by master mason Thomas Mapilton (d. 1438), matched this ambition, as the window almost entirely filled the height and width of the cathedral's south transept.



The two arch intersections and the springer mullion featured in the catalog came into the gallery's hands following the restoration of the window between 2009 and 2013. The entry reports they can now be appreciated as statuesque forms of immense beauty, and that their "energetic mouldings [create] a dynamic interplay between light and shadow." These sections of an important architectural feature in one of Europe's most significant medieval pilgrimage sites (following the murder in the cathedral of Thomas Becket in 1170), seem particularly emblematic of art works divorced from their original context and function. While the volume presents, describes, and illustrates these fascinating objects with care and attention, the reader cannot ignore this dislocation. At the time of their construction in the fifteenth century, these pieces were parts of a whole window. That was their function. Now, removed from their original position, undoubtedly through necessity to preserve the window in perpetuity, these sections of stone are available for private collectors or public institutions to purchase. One could argue, however, that publications like this facilitate the wider appreciation of skillfully made objects from the medieval period in a

way that's simply unachievable in situ. Which devout fifteenth- or twenty-first century viewer could appreciate the beauty of individual stones placed seventy feet above the ground, as were these specimens from Canterbury?

Another stand-out object is a monumental drawing for the crossing tower of Rouen Cathedral, presented to the Cathedral Chapter on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1516. The drawing, in near-perfect condition, was executed in pen and ink on parchment, and measures almost three and a half meters long. The drawing pictures a three-storied Gothic tower topped by a polygonal spire, set at forty-five degrees to the picture plane. Tracery, sculpture, pinnacles, and spires are rendered in exquisite detail. So important is this object, (both to scholarship and to this Sam Fogg exhibition catalog), that the reader is treated to a double-gatefold rendering of the drawing, which opens out to reveal its intricacies over four pages. Only when one studies closely the unfolded reproduction can one truly appreciate the patience, methodical approach and skilled draftsmanship required by the original maker of such an object.

This drawing is exceptional not only in its quality, but in the disruptive position it holds within the art-historical canon. Costanza Beltrami (in *Building a Crossing Tower: A Design for Rouen Cathedral of 1516*, Sam Fogg with Paul Holberton Publishing: London 2016) confronts the accepted scholarship on architectural drawings made in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Typically, large architectural drawings of the late Middle Ages were created as working models for masons. Beltrami argues that the Rouen drawing's unusual features (its size, minute architectural details, and perspectival rendering) challenges what we know about how architectural drawings were used. On the status of the drawing itself, the author proposes that it was not simply a blueprint, but a presentation piece intended to wow prospective patrons. And what a dazzling feat of drawing it is! Of Heaven and Earth's catalog-entry format necessarily reduces this fascinating object to the bare essentials of its provenance (given to the '*président à mortier*' of the parliament of Rouen c. 1726 and thereafter in a private collection until 2014) and context. The entry emphasizes the collaboration between local Rouen architect Roulland le Roux and sculptor Pierre des Aubeaux (the latter responsible for the exquisitely drawn statuary) and covers briefly its unique qualities. As with many of the entries, the description merely titillates the reader, but fails to fulfil intellectual desire.

The final exhibit of the book, a polychromed wooden sculpture of the Risen Christ by sixteenth-century Bavarian sculptor Andreas Frosch, is of particular interest. The author offers a tantalizingly succinct description of how this sculpture played a principal role in liturgical dramas enacted inside the church. The clergy attached ropes or chains to the figure and winched it through the nave and up into the vault to signify Christ's ascension into heaven. Christ would literally have



<sup>1</sup> See reviews of this book elsewhere in this issue.

flown through the air above the heads of the congregation! The role images played in medieval liturgical dramas continues to excite scholars and this brief entry for one of the exhibition's twenty-seven objects makes a fittingly dramatic conclusion.

*Of Earth and Heaven* succeeds in whetting the reader's appetite. It serves as a visually enticing stepping stone towards further study of this fascinating, if diverse, collection of precious objects from the late Middle Ages. Its intimate photography will inspire and delight any person with an interest in beautiful sculptures, paintings, precious goldsmith's work and stained glass. 🐣