

4-2018

### Stephen N. Fliegel and Elina Gertsman, *Myth and Mystique: Cleveland's Gothic Table Fountain, Cleveland Masterwork Series 3* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art in association with D Giles Limited, 2016)

Sophie Ong

*Rutgers University, Samuel H. Kress Institutional Fellow, Institut national d'histoire de l'art*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal>



Part of the [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#)

---

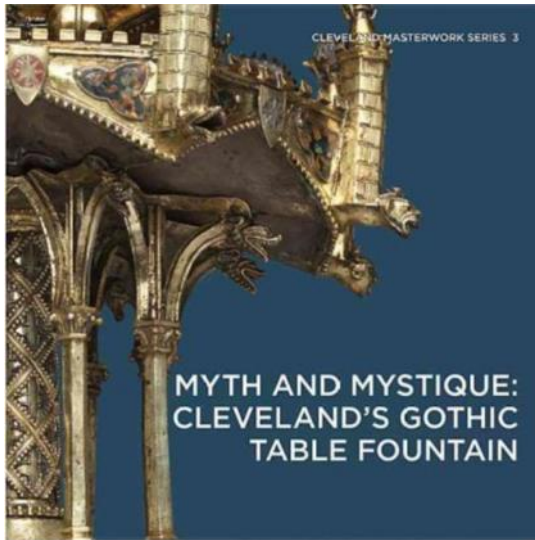
#### Recommended Citation

Ong, Sophie. "Stephen N. Fliegel and Elina Gertsman, *Myth and Mystique: Cleveland's Gothic Table Fountain, Cleveland Masterwork Series 3* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art in association with D Giles Limited, 2016)." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 6, 3 (2018): 149-158. <http://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol6/iss3/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [noltj@kenyon.edu](mailto:noltj@kenyon.edu).

# PEREGRINATIONS

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE  
VOLUME VI, NUMBER 3 (SPRING 2018)



Book Review: Stephen N. Fliegel and Elina Gertsman, *Myth and Mystique: Cleveland's Gothic Table Fountain*, Cleveland Masterwork Series 3 (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art in association with D Giles Limited, 2016), XIV + 162 pages, 135 color photographs and two illustrations, \$29.95 (softcover), ISBN: 978-1-907804-94-6.

SOPHIE ONG

*Rutgers University*

*Samuel H. Kress Institutional Fellow, Institut national d'histoire de l'art*

In 2016, the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) celebrated its centennial, commemorating this achievement with a year-long program of events, including the exhibition *Myth and Mystique: Cleveland's Gothic Table Fountain* on view from October 9, 2016 to February 26, 2017. The exhibition was developed in conjunction with an object-based, graduate seminar in spring 2015 on late medieval European leisure and piety at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU), co-taught by Elina Gertsman, Professor of Art History and Art, and Stephen N. Fliegel, Curator of Medieval Art at the CMA. It is the third in the museum's *Masterwork* series, a succession of small, focused shows and publications organized around a single object from the museum's collection, in this case one of the CMA's most treasured objects: the fourteenth-century masterpiece of medieval goldsmiths' work known as the Cleveland Table Fountain (**Fig. 1**). The exhibition's



**Figure 1** *Table Fountain*, c. 1320-1340. France, Paris, 14th century. Gilt-silver and translucent enamels; overall: 31.1 x 24.1 x 26 cm (12 1/4 x 9 1/2 x 10 3/16 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of J. H. Wade 1924.859.

accompanying catalog, reviewed here, features essays by Fliegel and Gertsman, respectively, followed by fifteen catalog entries written by students in the graduate seminar. The book is sumptuously illustrated with 135 color photographs, many of which are full-page details of the fountain, and two mock-up illustrations of automata.

In the first essay, “The Cleveland Table Fountain,” Fliegel carefully examines this rare, late-medieval fountain acquired by the CMA in 1924, elucidating its historical context, function, and technical and stylistic features. The so-called “table” fountain is a small, octagonal, three-tiered, crenelated fountain resembling a castle, fashioned out of gilt-silver with *basse-taille* enamel decoration. It is the most complete medieval automaton, a self-moving machine, to survive; pieces of two other Gothic table fountains survive, albeit in fragmentary states. Water would have originally issued from the upper-most turret and the animal- and gargoyle-shaped nozzles on the tiers below, and streamed down the fountain, turning the water wheels and ringing the bells on its cascading descent, pooling eventually in a now-lost catch basin.<sup>1</sup> Fliegel’s analysis of the fountain’s stylistic features and decorative program, including a series of eight *basse-taille* enamel plaques depicting musicians, grotesques, and drolleries, suggests that it is of Parisian manufacture, dating sometime around 1320-40. The circumstances of its commission are unknown, but Fliegel follows George Szabo in connecting the fountain to the Order of the Star, a chivalric order founded in 1351 by John the Good, king of France. Although the fountain predates the Order’s founding, it displays the Order’s eight-pointed star motif on eight applied gilt-silver shields, prompting Fliegel to propose that the shield-shaped escutcheons may have been added to the fountain sometime after its original fabrication, perhaps to accompany its presentation to the Order by one of its members.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Cleveland Museum of Art produced a wonderful animation showing how the Cleveland Table Fountain works when water runs through it. “How Does a Table Fountain Work?,” Cleveland Museum of Art, January 14, 2016, <https://www.clevelandart.org/media-video-or-audio/animated-representation-a-table-fountain> (accessed April 6, 2018).



**Figure 2** Peacock-shaped Hand Washing Device: Illustration from *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices (Automata)* of Ibn al-Razzāz al-Jazarī, 1315. Syria, Damascus, Mamluk Period, 14th Century. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper; overall: 31.3 x 21.5 cm (12 5/16 x 8 7/16 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 1945.383.a.

Fliegel traces the history of automata back to antiquity, citing technical treatises and literary descriptions, and discusses the later enthusiasm for automata in the Byzantine and Artuqid courts.<sup>2</sup> He examines *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*, a remarkable treatise on the construction of automata, written and illustrated by the Artuqid craftsman Ibn al-Razzāz al-Jazarī in 1206; its detailed technical descriptions and splendid illustrations provide scholars with an unparalleled glimpse into the creation and use of automata in the Islamic world, an apposite counterpoint featured in both his essay and Cleveland’s exhibition (**Fig. 2**). In the western medieval context, Fliegel mentions a drawing of a bird drinking

wine from a basin in Villard de Honnecourt’s sketchbook as an early example of the depiction of an automaton. Given the dearth of extant comparative examples of medieval automata, Fliegel devotes substantial attention to documentary evidence, especially to the numerous descriptions of fountains and mechanical devices in late medieval French and Burgundian inventories. One of the central premises for the essay — as well as for

---

<sup>2</sup> Fliegel refers to the “Urutuqid” court, but I am choosing here to refer to the dynasty by its more common name, the Artuqids.



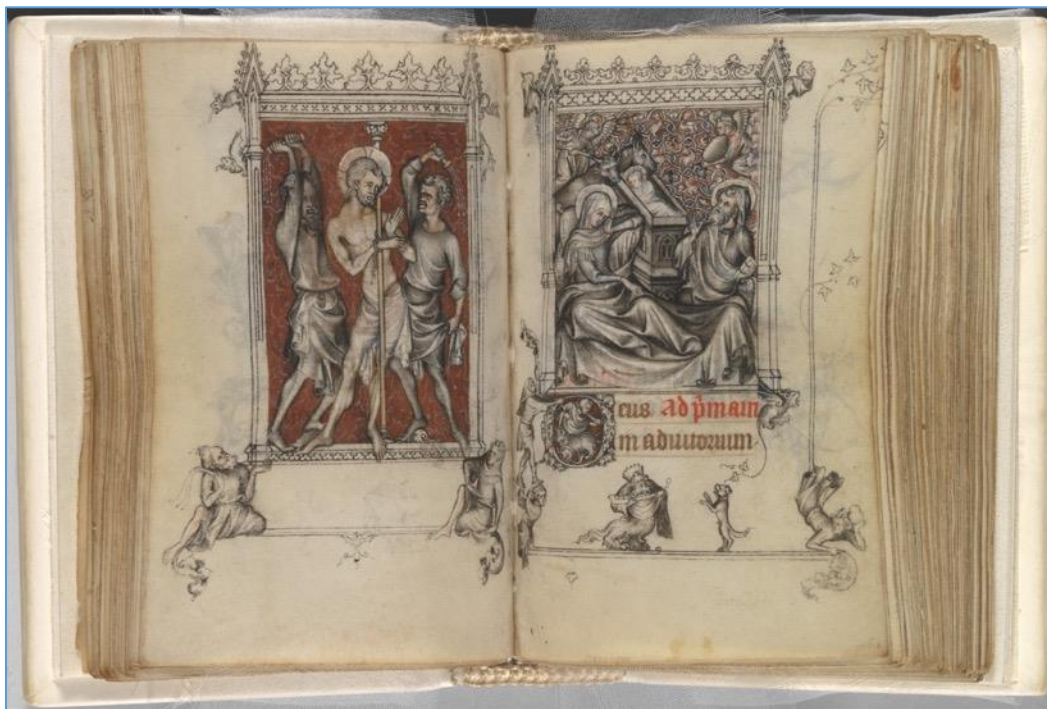
the exhibition and catalog as a whole — is that there are several long-standing assumptions surrounding this fountain, especially with regard to its function, that need to be rectified. The object's name, the Cleveland Table Fountain, refers to the long-held belief that such an object was placed on the banqueting tables of the nobility, like centerpieces, possibly to aid in the washing of one's hands. However, Fliegel notes that fourteenth-century texts make no mention of "table" fountains, and persuasively argues that the fountain would have required a semi-permanent installation to a plumbing system and, therefore, was likely installed on a metal stand or small side table along the edges of a room, perhaps in a niche. He concludes that, because of its delicate construction, it could not have been used for hand-washing or pumping wine, but probably circulated rose water through its system, scenting a room. Thus, he contends that so-called table fountains like Cleveland's, served to issue fragrance and, above all, to entertain; the Gothic table fountain is an object of multi-sensory spectacle meant to enthrall and amuse aristocratic beholders. Given the problematic assumptions associated with the term "table fountain," to which Fliegel rightly points us, I wonder if it might not be worthwhile for the CMA to reconsider the use of the term and perhaps adopt a new, more appropriate title.

Fliegel's essay expands on his earlier work on this fountain, revising his article "The Cleveland Table Fountain and Gothic Automata" published in *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art*.<sup>3</sup> Most of the revisions are syntactic, but he has made some significant and useful changes to the content. In his consideration of its production, for example, he now argues for a separate goldsmith and enameller, and he has added additional documentary evidence concerning the ceremonial aspects of the Order of the Star. Much of the new content relates to other objects in the exhibition, thus better incorporating them into his essay and strengthening their relationship to the Gothic Table Fountain. For

---

<sup>3</sup> Stephen N. Fliegel, "The Cleveland Table Fountain and Gothic Automata," *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art* 7 (2002): 6–49.

example, discussing the documentary evidence for the popularity of small-scale, metalwork fountains within the fourteenth-century French court, Fliegel elaborates on his treatment of the will and testament of Jeanne d'Évreux, which includes an important reference to a small-scale, rock crystal and silver fountain featuring a viol player and decorated with enamels and precious stones. The *Hours of Jeanne d'Évreux*, an early fourteenth-century Book of Hours generously illustrated by Jean Pucelle for Jeanne d'Évreux, was one of the major loans to the exhibition; the manuscript and Cleveland fountain share a decorative vocabulary, including animal-human hybrid creatures and pierced, quatrefoil, open-work architectural decoration (**Fig. 3**). Thus, many of the objects to which Fliegel turns as evidence in his essay constitute the exhibition's object checklist. The revision and re-publication of Fliegel's essay will hopefully call further attention to this wonderful article and encourage future studies on late medieval automata and luxury metalwork.



**Figure 3** Jean Pucelle (French, active Paris, c. 1319-28), *The Hours of Jeanne d'Évreux*, folios 53v & 54r, The Flagellation and The Nativity, ca. 1324-28. Grisaille, tempera, and ink on vellum; overall (with binding): 3 7/8 x 2 13/16 x 1 1/2 in. (9.9 x 7.2 x 3.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, 1954, 54.1.2.

The Cleveland Table Fountain's engagement of one's visual, olfactory, auditory, and even haptic sensorial faculties, prompts Gertsman to understand fountains as necessarily sensual objects. In her essay, "Sensual Delights: Fountains, Fiction, and Feeling," she leaves behind the physical fountains of the Valois courts, taking a more conceptual approach and turning her attention to fountains of the medieval imagination. Surveying a considerable selection of medieval visual representations



**Figure 4** French, Royal MS. 19 B XIII, *Roman de la Rose*, folio 14 v, detail of Narcissus at the Fountain, c. 1320-40. The British Library, London.

and textual descriptions of fountains, her examples range in date from the early thirteenth century to the turn of the sixteenth century, and span western Europe from Alhambra, Spain to Piedmont, Italy, and further north to France and the Netherlands. She explores the dominant narratives featuring fountains and water in late medieval art and literature and reflects on the scope of their symbolic meanings in both religious and secular contexts. In Guillaume de Lorris' *Romance of the Rose*, c. 1230, she reveals how Narcissus' fountain (*fontaine narcissus*) is unstable, contradictory even, like the rippling and shifting water Narcissus stares into; it embodies the Spring of Love, the fountain of longing and of ardor, but also the fountain of peril (**Fig. 4**). She examines the Fountain of Youth made popular by texts such as the *Roman d'Alexandre* and Gervais du Bus' *Roman de Fauvel*, as well as the *fons vitae*, the fountain of life, depicted in *The Ghent Altarpiece* and evoked by



the *Well of Moses* in the cloister of the Carthusian monastery, the Chartreuse de Champmol. Gertsman argues for an understanding of fountains as paradoxical and shows how their semiotics are inconsistent, like water, which reflects and deceives, purifies and infects. Fountains, both of this world and of the medieval imagination, possess and manifest a sensual nature and power. Consequently, paradisiacal fountains in the Garden of Eden, exemplified by the Limbourg Brothers' fountain on folio 25 verso in the *Très Riches Heures du Jean Duc de Berry*, were transformed and eroticized into fountains of love and desire, such as the fountain of love mused on by Guillaume de Machaut in *La Fonteinne Amoureuse*. Thus, in this beautifully crafted and well-illustrated essay, Gertsman concludes that all fountains are fictions; they call on one's senses and imagination, conjuring the panoply of meanings associated with fountains and water. Moving from this stimulating, conceptual proposition back to the main object at hand, Cleveland's Gothic Table Fountain is, therefore, an earthly evocation "of both unearthly delights and poisonous pleasures," its shimmering surface, tinkling bells, and sweet smell simultaneously signaling the Garden of Paradise and the Garden of Love (p. 84).

Occupying a single room on the museum's ground floor, the Cleveland exhibition was small and focused, containing only fifteen objects. Despite its size, the exhibition boasted several impressive loans, including Jan van Eyck's diminutive panel painting *Madonna at the Fountain* (cat. 15; Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp), as well as two extraordinary manuscripts: Jean Pucelle's *Hours of Jeanne d'Évreux* (cat. 9; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and the *Grandes Chroniques de France* (cat. 14; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris). Also of note, are the two other extant fragments of Gothic table fountains: the gilt-silver, late 1300s *Table Fountain Fragment* now in Antwerp (cat. 2; Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp) and the table fountain fragment which has been reworked into a monstrance (cat. 3; Monasterio de San Paio de Antealtares, Santiago de Compostela). Students in Fliegel and Gertsman's graduate seminar wrote the individual catalog entries for the objects in the exhibition, with the

exception of the entry for the Cleveland Table Fountain, which Fliegel penned. The entries provide detailed visual descriptions, iconographic analysis, rich explanations of function, style, and context, thorough discussions of fabrication and technical information, as well as pertinent comparative examples and bibliography. Some, although not all, of the entries consider the relationship between the chosen object and Cleveland's fountain, thereby clarifying its role within the larger exhibition. These connections, however, were made more explicit in the exhibition's wall text and are less clear in the catalog. The entries are followed by a useful glossary of terminology and a substantial bibliography. One noteworthy publication which should be added to the bibliography is Elly Truitt's excellent book on medieval automata, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art*, published in 2015 by University of Pennsylvania Press.<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, this handsome catalog provides a comprehensive account of a single, late medieval object, but studied within a much larger context of medieval artistic practice including illuminated manuscripts, enamels, hand-washing vessels, a painting, and other examples of luxury gold and silver metalwork. *Myth and Mystique: Cleveland's Gothic Table Fountain* engages with the recent art historical interest in the five senses and offers both a contextual and conceptual account of this magnificent object. It is an exemplary model for the kind of scholarly publication and exhibition that can be achieved in a collaboration between a museum and graduate institution when there are sufficient resources available.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, one of the greatest features of this catalog is the collection of photographs adorning its pages. Of particular importance are the numerous details of the Cleveland Table Fountain, some of which are full-page or span two pages, allowing

---

<sup>4</sup> Elly Rachel Truitt, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> The graduate course was supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, as part of the CMA-CWRU collaborative doctoral program in art history, and additional financial support came from the Womens Council of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

one to study and see clearly its construction, tooling marks, intricate decoration, and the complex mechanism of bells and wheels from all sides. The eye-catching images delight the reader's senses; one can imagine the trickling of cool, cascading water, the light jingle of ringing bells, and the sweet smell of perfumed rose water. The photographs make visible the exhibition's central tenet: that the Cleveland Table Fountain is a remarkable example of late medieval secular goldsmiths' work of exceptional importance, rarity, and beauty. 🐼