

government announced that it plans to ratify the convention as well – the first positive result of the conference (see also ‘Berlin Resolution 2003, Berlin, 25.05.03’, in *TEA* 19:11–12).

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

Quark, Strangeness and Charm: Reconstructing the Medieval in European Museums and Galleries

During 2001–2002, a number of exhibitions across Europe opened, all of them concerned with presenting aspects of the medieval world and its continuing influence. The exhibitions were: *Medieval Ireland 1150–1550* at the National Museum of Archaeology and History, Dublin, Ireland; *The Quest for Camelot – The Arthurian Legend in Art*, held at the City Art Centre, Edinburgh, Scotland; *Image and Idol: Medieval Sculpture*, at Tate Britain, London, England; *Hieronymous Bosch*, at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands; *A Noble Art – Burgundian Tapestries in a New Light*, at the Historisches Museum, Berne, Switzerland; *The Treasury of Basel Cathedral*, at the Historisches Museum, Basel, Switzerland and *Wonder, Painted Sculpture from Medieval England*, at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, England.

Dublin's *Medieval Ireland 1150–1550* is a stimulating new permanent gallery that on the one hand encourages its audience to think about identity (not least through a recurring theme of Anglo-Irish interaction) and on the other firmly grounds its approach in the evidence and its historical context. It skilfully asks us to think about whether we should think of medieval identity in terms of being English or Irish or rather as royal or aristocratic or ecclesiastical or entrepreneurial. These questions are reflected in the tripartite structure of the new displays, focusing on ‘Power’, ‘Work’ and ‘Prayer’. This deliberately echoes a medieval perception of social structure as expressed in the tenth century by Bishop Adalbero of Laon, France, who wrote: ‘The house of god, which people believe to be one, is divided into three: those who pray, those who go to war and those who work’.

This stimulating use of a medieval outlook allows objects to be displayed in a way that reflects the lived-in medieval world and more practically allows the use of the difficult, available space of the museum's historic interior. The structure is a useful one, offering insights into the material without being over rigidly applied. One is implicitly aware that Adalbero's comments were made by one who was involved in giving medieval society a particular form and hierarchy but that this would always have been open to redefinition at a local and at a personal level. Bishops could be warriors, commoners could rise through the accretion of wealth and make their contribution to prayer by being parishioners and born warriors could become monks and bishops. There was fluidity between these notional boundaries and the exhibition reflected this through the judicious use of the material chosen for display. Thus copper-alloy weights decorated with images of beasts of the chase are used in both the sections on ‘Power’ (to discuss the lordly pursuit of hunting) and ‘Work’ (to discuss the process of commerce).

The new gallery displays a real wealth of material, effectively interpreted and striking a balance between a concise, economic text and the need to explain and promote understanding to a wide audience. Space precludes the use of large-scale reconstructions but where original material is absent or highly fragmentary replicas are not eschewed and include examples of aristocratic dress and

touchable ceramics. These are supported by a programme of workshops and activities including medieval music and making pottery.

Edinburgh's *The Quest for Camelot – The Arthurian Legend in Art*, focused on the ever-popular subject matter of King Arthur and in a very accessible and interdisciplinary fashion. The emphasis is certainly on the painted depictions of Arthurian legends but it combines these with contemporary and Victorian Arthuriana, film art and medieval art and archaeology. The exhibition was laid out over three floors, beginning on the first with the more recent material, reviewing the depiction of Arthur in cinema, popular literature and toys and games. Moving up a floor, the second section tackles the Victorian revival in the matter of Arthur, which was led by Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*. It also considers some of the wider tales such as the quest for the Holy Grail and the romance of Tristram and Isolde. The final section deals with the medieval and renaissance depictions of Arthur focusing on Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes and the reworking of Sir Thomas Mallory. The exhibition concluded with an examination of the evidence for a historical Arthur and his associations with Scotland's early medieval power centres particularly Traprain Law, Dumbarton Rock and Edinburgh Castle. Key exhibits included fine silver metalwork from Traprain Law and the poem *Y Gododdin* (containing the earliest surviving reference to an Arthur) written by Aneirin, sixth-century bard of the kingdom of Gododdin. The manuscript on display was the earliest surviving version, dating to the thirteenth century and on loan from the City of Cardiff, for its first display in Scotland. On all three floors there was an activity area for the younger visitor, with lots of colourful period costumes to dress-up in. Again the question of identity came powerfully through, including Arthur's identity, national – particularly Welsh and Scottish – identity, regional identity and the identity of the individual.

The exhibition did two things very well. Firstly, it laid out the possibilities for the existence of a real Arthur and his possible 'Scottish' (more correctly North British) origin and let the visitor decide. Secondly, it showed how a rather opaque medieval warlord figure became the inspiration for an ever-flowing wellspring of cultural ideas about identity,

power, chivalry and faith. Constantly told and retold, these stories have given us the popular contemporary vision of Arthur as an armour-clad high medieval king, residing in many towered Camelot with his Round Table brotherhood of knights. The quest for Camelot goes on and shows no sign of abating. This exhibition proved an excellent guide, aided by a concise, well-illustrated guidebook and a host of supporting films, talks, a conference, and family workshop activities.

London's *Image and Idol: Medieval Sculpture*, explored the role of sculpture in religious life. Its main innovation was to interpret its objects through the collaboration of a medieval historian, Philip Lindley and an artist, Richard Deacon (but with no scope for visitors to add their own view). This collaboration manifests itself in some of the Deacon devised plinths on which the objects rest, but principally through the dual text of the labels, giving the views of the artist and the historian side by side. However the views expressed are generally in such broad agreement that this feels like a lost opportunity, a description appropriate to the exhibition as a whole. The objects are fabulous examples of medieval art and whilst I did not have a problem with their being de-contextualized from their ecclesiastical settings I was disappointed that they were hardly recontextualized in any really meaningful way. Tastefully spread through the Duveen Galleries of the Tate there were acres of space not only from object to object but from object to label. The opening exhibits were situated 15 ft away from their labels and there seemed to be an inviolate law that labels could only be sited on the side walls of the gallery and never in close association with the objects they interpreted. This presumably gave the objects the freedom to speak for themselves and obscurely reinforced some point about the separation of image and text, then and now.

The visitor certainly benefited from being able to get very close to the objects. This was notably so for the Tree of Jesse fragment where ironically one can feel the work that went into it not from the exquisite detailing of the figure but from the huge hollowed out back of Jesse, the part of the sculpture never meant to be seen. However this physical access was not consistently maintained throughout the exhibition, which eschewed the use of photographs and computer-based virtual tours

of the original locations of the sculptures on display. Photographs would also have worked well with the tomb of Sir Thomas Andrew and his two wives, the internal faces of the side panels of which bear evidence of their reuse from other monuments. Of the same sculpture we are told that its wooden guard-rail 'radiates around the tomb like a splash from a thrown stone' but we learn nothing of the two wives who represent two thirds of the dead the tomb was meant to commemorate.

Rotterdam was European City of Culture 2001 and as part of that celebration the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen staged a splendid international exhibition on the life, work and times of *Hieronymous Bosch*. On show were all the surviving drawings by Bosch and some of his well-known masterpieces of painting. To these are added a wide selection of works by contemporaries and followers. Bosch has generally been seen as, if not a surrealist way ahead of his time, then certainly a very enigmatic and singular artist. This exhibition takes nothing away from his individuality and unique talents but does demonstrate that Bosch was a man of his times. His talent was directed towards depicting his world and was part of a wider artistic phenomenon. He shared with many others a visual culture full of symbols and material richness. The richness of this culture is demonstrated further by the inclusion of a wide variety of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century objects, of the types often depicted in Bosch's work. These include various domestic utensils, pottery, gaming equipment, and, most importantly, lead-alloy badges. There were at least 200 of these on display. Both secular and religious, the badges are part of the huge corpus of similar badges from the Netherlands amassed partly through archaeological investigation but in large part through the assiduous work of private collectors (most notably H.J.E. van Beuningen). Bosch often depicted such badges in his paintings, recognition of which further reinforces our understanding of how Bosch was in touch with the widespread and popular material culture of his age.

The interdisciplinary nature of the exhibition, fusing as it did art historical, archaeological and documentary materials and approaches was complemented by the inclusion of contemporary/modern art. A large number of works by more recent artists were

displayed to demonstrate the lasting influence of Bosch and the preoccupation many artists have with the themes he tackled. The majority of these works were displayed in an introductory gallery, but several were integrated with the works by Bosch (most effectively Pipilotti Rist's tiny, round, video installation of a naked figure set within the gallery floor peering up at the passing visitor and pleading to be freed from the Hell flames that surround her). My one major quibble with the lay-out of the exhibition is that whilst room was found to integrate both medieval art and contemporary art in the same room, with the rare exceptions of one or two badges and a small wooden box, most of the other medieval material culture was displayed in offshoot spaces and not beside the paintings and drawings.

The collections of medieval material culture in Switzerland are superb in their richness and variety – both the museum collections and the fabric of its cathedrals for example indicate that it suffered far less than say Britain or the Low Countries from a violent Reformation. Two particular exhibitions are of note here.

Berne's *A Noble Art – Burgundian Tapestries in a New Light* was a fabulous exhibition small in scale and big in vision. It focused on the thirteen Burgundian tapestries in the museum's collection, dating from 1440–1515, one of the most significant collections of Franco-Flemish tapestry art. These are simply and imaginatively interpreted using textile banners printed with text, supported by smaller more conventional labels (but in three languages!). Additional objects, including suits of armour, further contextualize the tapestries and emphasize the reality of the medieval culture depicted in the tapestries. The exhibition succeeded in encouraging an understanding of the political and cultural context in which the tapestries were produced and then leads you to encounter the huge hangings, singly or in themed groups. The scale and needle-skill of the tapestries invite wonder, from which the exhibition never detracts but it also confronts you with the complexity of identity and belief. The Trajan Tapestry for example illustrates the robust complexity of medieval Christianity, Trajan being a pagan emperor but one whose moral behaviour and good conduct made him a Christian to later eyes and one important enough to take his place in the cult of relics.

Burgundian identity is distinct from present day Dutch and Swiss identity: Burgundy was one of the most powerful late medieval polities that crossed several ethnic and geographic boundaries and reminds us how identity is not always ethnically bound.

Basel's *The Treasury of Basel Cathedral* was a small exhibition of some 80 objects all formerly part of the Basel Cathedral Treasury, consisting mainly of relics and reliquaries. Many of these are now in the collections of the Historisches Museum and the rest are split between various other European collections and churches. The treasury was put together and used between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries, both in the Cathedral and without in church processions, to demonstrate the active power of the saints' relics so displayed. As a surviving coherent group of material it is unique but such treasuries were central to the functioning of medieval churches and the identity of urban centres. The Basel treasury amazingly did not go the way of other treasuries – because of their material value most were pillaged and their contents melted for bullion – but survived wars, an earthquake and iconoclasm only to be dispersed in the nineteenth century due to political divisions in Basel itself.

Leeds' *Wonder, Painted Sculpture from Medieval England* was a look at late medieval painted sculpture from England, exploring the way colour was used to enhance the viewer's devotion by bringing relief sculpture to life. The title derives from the medieval concept of *admiratio* or wonder: to experience wonder was to possess a desire that could not be resolved by understanding the object of wonder but by appreciating its mystery and remaining in awe of it. The exhibition seeks to induce awe and wonder in the visitor today, but in a decontextualized secular pace. Like *Image and Idol* it has the effect, perhaps unintentional, of drawing an elite distinction, between the audience and the material. Its minimalist approach invites the viewer to engage primarily with the sculpture, in the illusion that the gallery space is neutral. I did feel some genuine confusion as to whether it wanted to contextualize the material or not. Room 2 was titled, *Reredos*, a term which was explained but then we were told that the display was not meant to be read as a reredos, but as a range of architectural niche settings. The institute has itself demonstrated more successful ways of

elucidating medieval material culture with its 1999 exhibition, *A Sense of Heaven*, which examined the private devotional practice of the sixteenth century using boxwood carvings. Powerfully it recreated a sense of that devotional practice by displaying the material in such a way that kneeling before the object was required. I was certainly struck by the echoing pattern of the exhibition's symbolism. In a space symbolic of the significance of sculpture, an exhibition of medieval sculpture that symbolized the medieval world was set. Further, those damaged remnants symbolized a once extensive whole. Further still, Norwegian and other continental examples of painted wood symbolized lost English examples. Continental craftsmen were often commissioned by English patrons, which reminds us once more of the fluidity of identity and how precarious it can be sometimes to speak of medieval art and culture in national terms.

The exhibitions discussed here serve to remind us of the lasting influence of our medieval past, through fresh looks at the archaeological and material culture evidence for medieval cultural practice across Europe, including the continued reworking and adaptation of myths and legends. Taken as a group of exhibitions their forms and display language are often strikingly different, but some underlying commonalities come out of the different ways the material culture of the medieval period is addressed. Primarily they all underscore the importance of the question of identity. Edinburgh assesses the continuing appeal of King Arthur from the Dark Ages to today and a strong element of his appeal has always been bound up with identity, personal, social and national. Dublin unearthed some of the roots of the continuing political dilemma of Anglo-Irish interaction and showed that medieval identity in Ireland was also part of the hierarchical identity of the church-state nexus. London and Leeds took a traditional art-historical approach. They recontextualized their subjects away from their sacred spaces to differently powerful secular ones. Both take the line of minimal interpretation in the interest of a 'free' approach to their subjects and so are unable to avoid centring the identity of the individuals engaged in the act of looking at the objects above that of understanding the historical context from which the objects come. Basel's grammar of display is also rather

traditional but its very tight focus combined with the coherence and accessibility of its subject matter allows it to communicate and illuminate the identity of a medieval city. Rotterdam and Berne have an art-historical approach, but crucially one that is interdisciplinary and brings in other aspects of material culture and a full exploration of the context in which their subjects worked or were generated. Their medieval contexts of identity are amongst the most fluid in Europe given their geographical and political setting in the Low Countries and Burgundy. This allows us to question and ponder our own identity today when so much of it is channelled down the rather narrow path of national identity.

The exhibitions share a desire to aid our understanding of what it was to live in medieval times but no two are the same and some are more successful (for me) than others. Rotterdam, Basel, Berne and Leeds in

particular demonstrate that in both religious and secular contexts medieval culture was not sparse and dull but vibrantly coloured and shaped by glittering, precious richly textured objects that focused and channelled encounters with the supernatural and the real. The medieval world is a popular subject at academic and student level and more widely in society. Not least that popularity is reflected in the success and appeal of such films as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* (though we should not forget that their innate narrative appeal is equally important). For those who wish to seek beyond these powerfully imaginative fictions, it is pleasing to say that the current level of medieval themed exhibitions is providing richly rewarding stations on the journey to understanding.

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