

MONUMENTS OF ROMANESQUE ART. *The Art of Church Treasures in North-Western Europe.* By Hans Swarzenski. With 240 illustrations. (Faber and Faber; 8 gns.)

The publication of this volume has long been expected as a major event in the history of the study of early medieval art. It was foreshadowed in two courses of lectures given by Dr Swarzenski at Princeton in 1940 and in 1942, and represents a generation of patient study. The photography is of a very high order, most notably so in the reproductions from metal work. Many of the objects have never been reproduced before and have lain half forgotten in cathedral treasuries. Each is described in detail in the notes upon the plates.

Yet when all this has been emphasized the volume as a whole is oddly disappointing. Even in the notes on the plates there are phrases that should be queried. Thus on page 78 the two lovers embracing on the handle of a mirror are described as being Tristan and Iseult, or David and Abisaig; the first is unprovable, the second most unlikely. The man tearing open the lion's jaws in Plate 180 is described as Samson; remembering the Winchester Bible it would seem more likely to be David. There is an odd phrase on page 79: 'St Sigismund, one of a series of Anglo-Saxon Kings'. 'Agrippa, Ruler of Belgium' on page 33 seems a rather strange description of the greatest statesman of the Augustan age. These are only trivialities, but there is a very disquieting sentence at the end of the preface on page 36: 'The works selected on these plates will disclose their beauty and eloquence only as long as the spectator will see them in relation to the artistic aims of his own time.' Surely this is to lead art history up a cul-de-sac, for art objects can only be intelligible in terms of the aesthetic preconceptions of their own period.

Perhaps this emphasis on the aesthetic values of our own time may partly explain the apparently arbitrary selection of the plates. Dr Swarzenski writes, 'All selections of works of art of the past are bound to reflect the tastes of the period in which they are chosen'. But another factor may have been the author's intense and expert interest in the schools of Rheims-Aachen, from which the great majority of the objects chosen derive. This gives a unity which is not suggested in the title. It is a unity bought at a heavy price; there are none of the Romanesque masterpieces of Spain and Burgundy, the school of Adda is by-passed, the school of Reichenau almost ignored. Yet as a result there is a real homogeneity, plate leads naturally to plate, and Faber and Faber have achieved the most beautiful of all recent books of reproductions.

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