

Art and Crusade in the Age of Saint Louis

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Nobody doubts the exceptional importance of the long reign of Louis IX (1226-70) as perceived either from modern historical perspectives, or presented in thirteenth-century (or later) views. Yet for those who wish to integrate into the historical nexus information and ideas deriving from all manner of specifically visual sources there has been in recent years a lack of fresh studies on which to draw. Whether researching or teaching, the drawbacks of such a situation are obvious: Louis IX deserves better.

Before turning to a consideration of Weiss's useful and important book, it is worth taking some time to try to understand why Louis IX has been relatively poorly served by art historians in the last quarter of a century. It is, I think, largely the result of a series of historiographical accidents, most obvious in the study of the vast body of evidence from illuminated manuscripts of the period (and less notable in the treatment of architecture and sculpture). The flurry of investigation and publication that marked the septicentenary of Louis' death in 1970 was followed by the untimely death of Robert Branner in 1974 (he was only 46). The posthumous publication of his last great monograph made available an ambitious work of fundamental research that sketched out a vast panorama, but which remains difficult to use.⁽¹⁾ Meanwhile in 1973 Reiner Hauss herr published an indispensable commentary volume to accompany the facsimile publication of one of the Bibles moralisés in Vienna, a key work of the 1220s,⁽²⁾ but he has been unable to follow it up with the multi-volume study of the Bibles moralisées which he has frequently cited as in preparation. Harvey Stahl's doctoral thesis of 1973 on the volume of Old Testament Miniatures in the Morgan Library remains unpublished,⁽³⁾ and his major work on the exquisite St Louis Psalter (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 10525), yet one more crux in our understanding of the period, is still awaited.

This conspicuous hiatus has, however, begun to be corrected within the last few years, and Daniel Weiss's book can be seen as a significant and very welcome stage in the process. Based on his 1992 dissertation,⁽⁴⁾ it will soon be joined by a book by Sara Lipton based on her 1991 dissertation;⁽⁵⁾ Hans-Walther Stork has

published two volumes based on his dissertation, as well as a commentary on the facsimile of the Morgan fragment of the Toledo Bible moralisée (which he calls the 'Bible of Saint Louis');⁽⁶⁾ Philippe Büttner is preparing his 1996 dissertation for publication;⁽⁷⁾ Gerald Guest, it is to be hoped, will publish his 1998 thesis;⁽⁸⁾ my own long-prepared two-volume study of the Bibles moralisées, due for publication in April 2000, will, I hope, also play a part in this invigorating process.⁽⁹⁾ Close to other themes of Weiss's book, the stained glass of the Sainte-Chapelle, presented in a pioneering volume of the *Corpus Vitrearum* some forty years ago,⁽¹⁰⁾ has recently been reconsidered in the thesis of A.A. Jordan, as yet unpublished.⁽¹¹⁾

And Stephen Murray's recent study of Amiens Cathedral reflects on the architecture of the Sainte-Chapelle.⁽¹²⁾ Meantime a flurry of articles as distinct from books by these and other scholars have continued to map out new territory in and around the topic of art in the Age of Saint Louis, or (to continue the metaphor) have proposed modifications to the maps we already possess.

It is time, then, to consider what Weiss does in his book, and this I propose to do in three sections. I shall summarise the main arguments of the book, fairly briefly. I shall draw attention to a few minor flaws. And finally I shall open up for discussion some more basic questions about how the arguments work. This will be in a constructive spirit, based on my judgement that this is a valuable book, and that it deserves to be debated. Most of what he has to say is soundly based on the accepted wisdom of the secondary sources, to which he has already himself contributed in articles. But of course there is always the urge to go further.

Weiss's book is quite short, and divided into two major parts, plus a conclusion. Part I is focused on the Sainte-Chapelle, and Part II on the illuminated manuscript known after its current location as the (Bibliothèque de l') Arsenal Old Testament. A brief introduction ('The Formation of a Crusader King') sets the scene and adumbrates some of the discussion to follow. Weiss then retells the story of Louis' acquisition of the Crown of Thorns and other Passion relics that had been amassed in the Byzantine imperial palace in Constantinople, and the construction of the Sainte-Chapelle to house and display them in his palace on the Ile de la cité in Paris. Ideological parallels are drawn with the palatine chapels at Aachen and at Palermo, and Weiss follows Slobodan Curcic in seeing the Norman Cappella Palatina as strongly reminiscent of imperial halls in the Great Palace at Constantinople (e.g., p. 22, although quite how Louis would have known this, *pace* p. 224 n. 69, is unclear to me). Architecturally, however, the contemporary and local design of Episcopal and royal chapels is emphasized as crucial for the plan and elevation of the Sainte-Chapelle. The glazed, painted, and sculpted decoration of the chapel is then considered, with emphasis given to the broad links between the Old Testament, Passion, and Relic cycles, and the particular visual links between Old Testament kings and their Capetian successors. The setting and display of the relics is discussed under the title *Solomonic Kingship and the New Temple*. After considering the tribune that flanked and supported the elevated dais on which the relics were housed in a magnificent shrine, and the baldachino that covered the shrine, Weiss suggests a number of Solomonic parallels: with biblical descriptions of the throne of Solomon, with a tradition of its representation in art, and with the facade of the Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, known to the Crusaders as the *Templum Salomonis*. Thus the passion reliquary was to the Sainte-Chapelle what the ark was to the temple of Solomon, Paris was a new Jerusalem, Louis was a new Solomon.

Part II begins with Louis' crusade, and moves rapidly to Acre, where, by general consent, the Arsenal Old Testament was made during the king's lengthy sojourn, 1250-54. Weiss first presents an extensive overview of this unusual manuscript with its vernacular and at times highly selective biblical text, and most importantly its twenty pages of images, acting as frontispieces before the various Old Testament books (all are reproduced, three in colour). In working through the cycle of images (which comprises 115 individual scenes, for most of the frontispieces are subdivided) he identifies sources or analogues primarily Gothic (i.e. Western) or Byzantine. Notably close parallels are found, for example, in the Oxford Bible moralisée (MS Bodley 270b), which Weiss argues accompanied the king to Acre, and may even have been made specifically to be taken on crusade. Amongst the Byzantine sources are found a number of individual manuscripts of varied types (an Octateuch, a Psalter, a Book of Kings, and so forth), and in this case Weiss suggests that the artist may have seen these manuscripts in Constantinople, and be basing himself on versions of the original images copied into a sketchbook. Weiss then works through the images to see how and why the iconographic and stylistic elements were combined as they were. His deduction is that they

reflect the complex contemporary circumstances of the crusaders in Outremer at one level, and the specific crusading ideology of Louis IX, as Capetian king but also as a new Solomon, at another. The local element is especially conspicuous in, for example, the turbans and levantine costume worn by some of the protagonists, or Job's naturalistic-looking camels. In particular the three slightly varied full-page representations of Solomon before three excerpts from the Wisdom books (mainly Proverbs) are found to exemplify Weiss's argument.

After a chapter of conclusion to the section on the Arsenal Old Testament, there are two further conclusions entitled *Crusader Politics and the Patronage of Louis IX*, and *Art and the Crusade*. These do more than merely restate the author's position, and enable him to situate the objects of his study within a broader context. The text is followed by notes, a selected bibliography, and an index.

The book is very clearly written, and the arguments easy to follow. The author is generally well-informed, and the notes effectively indicate his sources. Most of the crucial visual material is illustrated in the book, and the integration of image with text generally makes this readily accessible. This is a book solidly based on a large body of secondary work. It can be safely recommended to historians who require a clear and attractive presentation of its topic. Any student reading it will be reliably informed, and, it is to be hoped, inspired to want to know more. I have some minor quibbles. Some editorial correction is required. In the Latin, for example, the reading is certainly *significat ... in cuius utero* not *signat ... cuis uteros* on p. 235 n. 56 (cf. fig. 30); read *sacerdotium* not *sacerdotum* on p. 54. The reference on p. 112 to fig. 41 should be to fig. 35. Some of the monochrome illustrations are inadequate in a book of this expense (e.g. figs. 2, 5, 6, 22). The colour and monochrome images of the Sainte-Chapelle and Arsenal Old Testament are, however, good. It would have been helpful to include a scale in figs. 2, 8 and 10, and/or to record a few dimensions on pp. 25-29. The significance attached to God's representation as Christ in the Job miniature is puzzling (p. 170 and pl. VII), given his similar appearance elsewhere in the book (e.g., pls. VI, VIII, figs. 34-40). I think it doubtful that the Arsenal Bible 'functioned primarily as a picture-book with accompanying text' (p. 114) given that it has only some 20 pages of pictures as against more than 700 with text alone, and the images were placed in spaces left by the scribe (this aspect of the codicology could have been explored further). The Morgan Old Testament and the various Bibles moralisées are, I suggest, true picture books in that every page (or folio) has a picture on it, to which text was only added as a subsequent activity. The brief remarks on p. 86 concerning thirteenth-century vernacular Bibles and the 'popular canonical version' are potentially misleading. It is not clear what biblical version Weiss uses for his translations: the text on p. 168, for example, is certainly not from the Vulgate, nor is it based on the version of the manuscript (f. 368v). This is not an issue to overlook in a text/image enquiry.

It is time now to move away from such matters and consider broader issues. In keeping with the discussion format of this electronic journal I shall fire off a series of questions, much as one might in the discussion after a lecture. Many of these questions, I realise, cannot easily be answered. But that does not mean that they need not be asked. My motive is to suggest not so much how this book should be read (that is up to the individual) but how, starting out from the position Weiss has argued, we might now wish to proceed. I will focus mainly on the Arsenal Bible (but resist the temptation to use information from my forthcoming study which was not available to Weiss at the time he was writing).

Why, we may ask, would Louis IX be thought to want a vernacular abbreviated Old Testament with frontispieces? Why does the book have to have been made for him (or even by him as donor)? (The Templars are considered briefly on pp. 203-4 as possible sponsors, and sidelined.) Nothing in the book's later history implies a connection with Saint Louis, or the 'royal library' in the *trésor des chartes* of the palace (as on pp. 208-9). What is to say the book was not made, say, for Queen Marguerite, who was with him in Acre? Or was it perhaps ordered by one or other of them for a third party, a relative, one of their children possibly? The vernacular text could support that view, as well as aspects of the David/Solomon theme. That it has some sort of royal link seems to me quite probable (and I am not questioning its manufacture in Acre), but a much greater range of possibilities could be explored, and the underlying notion of 'Louis IX as patron or recipient' needs to be carefully examined.

When we look at a large and complex artefact like the Arsenal Old Testament we have to ask who made the crucial decisions that transformed it stage by stage from an idea into an object. To term it a royal book does not take us very far. (By extension, similar questions are raised by the Sainte-Chapelle, where the decision-making process undoubtedly extended over years, and must have involved many individuals in often highly complex debate. Certainly it is a royal chapel, but what might have been the role of, for example, Blanche of Castille, Louis IX's mother never a person to be underestimated especially in the realms of art and architecture?) Did Louis himself choose the (odd) textual model for the Arsenal Old Testament, and supervise its abbreviation? This is hardly likely. The text was not merely abbreviated, moreover: only certain books were included. Who chose them? If this was the work of a religious (rather than a royal) in Acre, as seems likely, under what kind of supervision did he work? Who devised the often subtle and complex images? Were they planned by the king? Hardly. By the religious, then, in the guise of 'iconographer'? Or were they devised primarily by the artist, alone or in consultation with one or more people? Who was it who decided, detail by detail, what balance of Gothic, Byzantine, and 'Crusader' content to include? If the artist was the best available in Acre, as seems likely, how closely was he directed? When he depicted Joshua and his army setting off to conquer the promised land as westerners with heraldic shields (fig. 38) the implied meaning seems to be obvious (the Israelites are proto-crusaders), but when in another frontispiece he depicts the army of the Maccabees fighting that of Bacchides (fig. 49), why is it the opposition who have the crusading shields? Is this a subtle point, or an oversight, or merely some aspect of visual entertainment? The same issue is raised by the different ways in which the Israelites/Jews are represented, most notable when they are given turbans and levantine ('moslem') dress. How much of this variation is meaningful, how much variety for art's sake? More specifically in terms of what we read out of images, if the coronations of David and Solomon (figs. 41, 42) are closely based on the Capetian royal *ordo* of 1250, why is the king in both instances shown holding an orb and being given a labarum, when according to the *ordo* he should be given a sceptre (not a labarum), and no orb is mentioned (see pp. 173-4 and accompanying notes)? Similarly, when it is argued, for example, that the trefoil-headed arch above Solomon in two of the full-page images is a reference to the baldachino above the relics in the Sainte-Chapelle (p. 184), we need to ask not merely whether the reference is plausible, but if it is how it was brought about, and who would have understood it. Throughout, issues of production and consumption, of input and out-take, ought not to be elided into a whole, however seamless and attractive the result might appear.

This is a book which has taken the material seriously, and deserves to be taken seriously in its turn. It is traditional, even old-fashioned in some aspects of its approach, the search for iconographic sources and the reconstruction of lost models, for example. Nonetheless it should be very useful to teachers and scholars. It deserves to find a place in bibliographies and on reading lists. It also deserves to be widely discussed.

Due to outstanding work commitments the author has not yet been able to respond to this review.

Notes

1. Robert Branner, *Manuscript Painting in Paris During the Reign of Saint Louis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1977).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Reiner Haussherr, *Bible Moralisée. Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat des Codex Vindobonensis 2554 der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Codices Selecti, XL-XL* (Graz, 1973).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Harvey Stahl, *The Iconographic Sources of the Old Testament Miniatures, Pierpont Morgan Library, M. 638*, Ph.D. thesis (New York University, 1974).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Daniel Weiss, *The Pictorial Language of the Arsenal Old Testament: Gothic and Byzantine Contributions and the Meaning of Crusader Art*, Ph.D. thesis (Johns Hopkins University, 1992).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Sara Lipton, *Jews in the Commentary Text and Illustrations of the Early Thirteenth-Century Bibles moralisées*, Ph.D. thesis (Yale University, 1991).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Hans-Walter Stork, *Bible moralisée Codex Vindobonensis 2554 der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek. Transkription und Übersetzung, Saarbrncker Hochschulschriften, 9* (St. Ingbert,

1988); *Die Wiener französische Bible moralisée Codex 2554 der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Saarbrücker Hochschulschriften, 18* (St. Ingbert, 1992); *Die Bibel Ludwigs des Heiligen. Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat von MS M. 240 der Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Codices Selecti, 102, 102* (Graz, 1995).[Back to \(6\)](#)

7. Philippe Büttner, *Bilder zum Betreten der Zeit: Bible Moralisée und kapetingisches Königtum*, Ph.D. thesis (Basel University, 1996).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Gerald B. Guest, *Queens, Kings, and Clergy: Figures of Authority in the 13th-Century Moralized Bibles*, Ph.D. thesis (New York University, 1998).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. John Lowden, *The Making of the Bibles Moralisées, 1. The Manuscripts, 2. The Book of Ruth*, University Park, forthcoming 2000.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. M. Aubert, L. Grodecki, J. Lafond, J. Verrier: *Les vitraux de Notre-Dame et de la Sainte-Chapelle de Paris, Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi, France 1.1* (Paris, 1959).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. A.A. Jordan, *Narrative Design in the Stained Glass Windows of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris*, Ph.D. thesis (Bryn Mawr College, 1994).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Stephen Murray, *Notre-Dame, Cathedral of Amiens: the Power of Change in Gothic*, Cambridge, 1996.[Back to \(12\)](#)

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