

A Visit to Ravenna

(A review of the exhibition "Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200-1400" at the Royal Academy.)

...What do I remember of Ravenna?
A bad smell mixed with glory, and
the cold
Eyes that belie the tessellated
gold.

Louis MacNeice

Facing you as you enter this exhibition are three magnificently gilded and bejewelled symbols of power: a crown, sword and sceptre. They are placed to dominate, to provide a wordless theme for this exhibition, in which six years of painstaking effort has brought together most of the masterpieces of Gothic art in England. The visitor is immediately dominated, and perhaps a little appalled, by the ostentation, the unabashed splendour of these three symbols of the feudal social order, of the age of chivalry. We, standing before these artefacts, are invited to reenact in our own mind the thoughts of subjects of a medieval king, their reaction to power and glory on the one hand and the implicit threat of cold steel on the other.

No accompanying text beyond the title of the exhibition provides any exposition of the theme of the exhibition, and indeed my chief impression when leaving this collection was that it is a little formless. Formless in three ways: in plan, in content, and in theme.

The plan is fascinating. A suite of rooms circle round a central, final chamber. The chamber should provide the climax: it is octagonal, higher than the rest, and accessible only from one side. Its position and shape evokes the hidden room in the monastery library in The Name of the Rose, with all its overt and hidden commentary

on the nature of knowledge in the Middle Ages. But there is no visual centre in terms of the arrangement of the artefacts: the room itself has some small exhibits of stained glass, plus a rather battered effigy of a Norfolk knight that pales in comparison to similar effigies elsewhere in the exhibition. So the sequence of the visit dictated by the plan ends with a whimper that should be a bang: so unlike the end of Plantagenet England itself.

Second, I am still puzzled by the content of the rooms. We are told that some rooms are chronological, some thematic: the difference was not obvious. Each room has a variety of artefacts, all breathtaking but often, it appeared, unrelated to the title of the room. What have the exhibited manuscripts, for example, to do with the respective subjects of the rooms entitled "Pilgrimage" and "The Orders of Society"? And why do we go from rooms on themes, to chronology, then back to themes, and finally back to chronology again?

This problem with the titles of the rooms is related to a more general problem with the exhibition theme. Despite its title, there is no explicit mention of chivalry in the exhibition booklet, and I recall no mention of it in the texts accompanying the exhibits: certainly the "spirit of the age" envelops us from the start in the artefacts, but this is not dwelt upon in the accompanying captions.

Indeed, captions to the exhibits are uninformative in the extreme. My favourite accompanied a small green-glazed jug in the form of a man pulling his beard: "This jug is in the form of a man pulling his beard", it said. Really? I also enjoyed the deliciously coy reference to Edward II's "relationship" with Piers Gavaston antagonising the magnates. Another caption,

next to a carving of a joust on a misericord, claimed that the "horror of the falling knight is clearly shown", when the knight's face is in very dark shadow.

Clearly the theme is in no way about medieval society. The room entitled "The Orders of Society" had an impressive array of weapons designed to cut, slice, crush, bludgeon and otherwise harm, but little reference to the owners or victims. A corner of this room actually told us a little about social groups, namely, the Church, the Nobility, the Merchants and the Peasants (in that order). But the last group, though the largest numerically, was represented solely by a single photograph of a tithe barn, in other words a building put up by the monastic elite to house the surplus extorted with ideological and physical sanctions from that group. Again I don't recall this aspect of peasant life -- its misery and exploitation -- being mentioned.

Nor is it about the way art is used to express social concerns. The exhibition does not relate the Perpendicular style of architecture to aspects of Late Medieval society and ideology, though some have cogently argued that it should be (Pevsner 1964, 90-127): it is portrayed solely as "a reaction to the excesses of the Decorated style". Again, 18th and 19th century views of the Gothic past, it is implied, have nothing to do with Georgian or Victorian society: "Views of Ely [Cathedral] at different dates indicate the variety of responses by different artists to a particular building" (my emphasis).

My own view is that this exhibition does have a theme, albeit implicit, and that this is provided by the artefacts themselves. Their qualities of beauty, of splendour, of ostentation rise majestically above the rather dull way in which they are presented.

These artefacts can and must speak to us: they are not mute, and can never be made silent however hard we gag them with our epistemologies. Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy and son of William the Bastard, Conqueror of England, half rises in effigy on his tomb as if in the grip of some death throes: he grasps his sword, ready to draw the blade on the Infidel. His expressionless eyes look out to a feudal world divided into three: those who work, those who fight and those who pray. Richard II, the subject of one of the first naturalistic portraits revealing the first signs of the Renaissance, casts his young, sad, confused face on an altogether more complex world, a world entering a period of profound conflict and change and one which shall take from him his crown and his life.

Only the peasants remain faceless: their one major revolt, we are told, was easily crushed (though its immediate cause, an attempt to raise a poll tax, was abandoned, and never again successfully carried out...). But perhaps their monument lies in our memory, and our recognition that all these great works of art were only made possible by their toil in the open fields: a recognition not given in this exhibition. Their crushed dreams and broken hopes reveal themselves, though, by their very absence: they are the bad smell mixed in with the glory, the fear in the cold eyes of their masters belying the swagger and confidence of all that gold.

I enjoyed this exhibition: though I did have a free ticket -- the normal admission price is £3.00 for students, £4.00 for the rest. I also visited in the relative peace and serenity of a private viewing. I cannot tell you about the guidebook because at £16.50 it is well beyond my purse, and also ARC's. There is an "official children's souvenir" at £5.95, an

account of "one of the most thrilling, colourful and romantic periods of English history" (publicity flier for Wright 1987). I am not clear what was so romantic about the Middle Ages, though perhaps it is felt that we should not tell the children about the oppression and exploitation of the feudal system at such a tender age. Doubtless it will be underneath the Christmas trees of quite a number of middle-class households this December.

One final point: as one steps out from the dimly lit halls into the bright foyer, one is thrown immediately into the thick of the exhibition shop, replete with Age

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The Museum of An Iron Age

(A review of the Museum of The Iron Age, Andover, Hampshire).

The 'Museum of The Iron Age' in Andover represents a welcome departure in the presentation of prehistory to the public. For the first time a specific period is being fully treated in one building. This innovation is to be encouraged. The museum presents the results of Professor Barry Cunliffe's excavations on the Iron Age hillfort of Danebury, about 5 miles from Andover. It aims to "tell the story of the Iron Age" and so "to bring the story of prehistoric life in this part of Wessex to as wide an audience as possible".

This is definitely a post-Jorvik museum. Spread over two floors of a converted grammar school, the exhibition consists of displays covering topics such as "Warfare and Defence", "Housing", "Storage", "Farming" etc. Displays combine full scale models and impressionistic reconstructions of ramparts and a round house, pictures, artefacts in a wide variety of cases and wall mounted text.

of Chivalry T-shirts, posters, guidebooks, related adventure games, and other such contemporary material culture. As we emerge from feudalism, so a new social and economic order takes its place, that of capitalism. Where can the Royal Academy go from here?

Matthew Johnson

References

- Pevsner, N. 1964. The Englishness of English Art. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
Wright, S. 1987. The Age of Chivalry: English Society 1200-1400. London, Kingfisher.

There is perhaps too much text, and some could be replaced by audio-visual displays, especially as the museum seems largely used by school parties. Compared to most traditional displays this museum is an advance. Those casual visitors observed seem less museum shocked than normal, and reactions from teachers and children using the museum with one of the reviewers has been favourable (see Hill, this volume).

Despite obvious effort, the museum is still very much a traditional 'see and don't touch' experience. Artefacts remain behind glass, although the range of actual case shapes is quite varied. The physical experience is restricted to walking through a section cut through a complete timber fronted rampart (in a way the Iron Age builders could never have done), and a reconstruction of the inside of a round house.

The exhibition presents a single possible Iron Age, as a series of disconnected fragments -- warfare, houses, crafts etc., yet nowhere are visitors actually given an image of what an Iron Age hillfort