Showing Abstractions

Late Medieval Images of States and Status

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As we are today living in a world full of visual images, photos and videos, it is obvious that the historians' attention is also drawn to the role of the image in the past. In the following paper, I shall first deal with research techniques by which visual sources can be retrieved. In a second section, I shall discuss the much broader question of the types of information historians can get from these sources. The traditional division of labour between historians and art historians needs to be overcome if we want to integrate the visual dimension of medieval societies in our knowledge.

Research Techniques

Publishers and television producers are now offering opportunities to reproduce and publicise visual material from previous ages that our colleagues of one or two generations previously could not have dreamt. We thus see more of the preserved visual source material and in a better quality of reproduction. Moreover, visual sources have become much more accessible to us over the internet and in CD-Rom publications. Technology nowadays facilitates not merely reproduction but also manipulation, which allows reconstructions of lost items. In the field of architecture, virtual imaging allows the recreation of lost monuments,[1] as it facilitates computer assemblies of fragments and analyses of paintings.[2] Further, search-machines have revolutionised methods of data collection since all kinds of associations, of which nobody may have thought before, can now be made in a few seconds. This enables researchers to collect and compare far more visual sources than ever before, and

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1. See for example *Hochrenaissance im Vatikan*. Vol. 1: 1503-1534. 1999, pp. 582-85 and the video demonstration.
2. Ainsworth and Martens 1994, pp. 40-52; Koreny, ed. 2002, p. 16.

to analyse it systematically from more complex questionnaires. Indeed, generally available information technology offers keys to scrutinize the sources in a more penetrating way than could ever be done before on a large scale. Nevertheless, one has to keep in mind that any data available on the internet has been collected on some existing basis, such as museum collections, and has been described on the basis of some frame of reference.

In the light of these revolutionary developments, heroic efforts made by our predecessors to develop new tools to unlock the wealth of visual sources have rapidly become technically outdated. However, digitalisation projects are normally based on existing collections, which unavoidably continue to play their role, even if the premises of their composition have become scholarly irrelevant. To make the difference more concrete, I may refer to three avant-garde projects dating from the fifties and sixties. In the *Centre de Culture et de Civilisation Médiévale de Poitiers*, an important *photothèque* was the object of pride of the dynamic organizers such as Michel Crouzet. Tens of thousands of black-and-white photographs of Romanesque buildings, paintings and sculptures have been collected and identified on cards. The objects having a function in the cult, most of the representations had a religious theme. As the main field of interest of the initiators was the history of art, the whole collection was focused on the problems considered to be relevant for that discipline. Although the *Centre* was based on a collaboration of several disciplines, its issues and the methods remained fairly monodisciplinary. It is hard to use this *photothèque* to collect data on problems interesting to historians such as the symbols of power or the representation of social classes.

Léopold Génicot launched a similar initiative with the aim to use the visual art material for the purposes of the history of agriculture. His project aimed at collecting iconographic material containing representations of people living in the countryside, their working methods, tools and techniques, and lifestyle. Being a progressive man, he chose for the application of the newest computerized techniques of his day, the early sixties. The collection can still be seen in the medieval history department at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve. Nobody has used it for years, and no great effects of it can be traced in research. Its main value may perhaps be for the history of scientific development, as it really deserves a place in a museum for the history of science because

of its progressive endeavour. The collection consists of two files: 1. some two-thousand black-and-white photos of panel paintings; the observations esteemed to be relevant for agrarian history (and only for that, leaving out other topics on the same panel) have been typed on cards; 2. a collection of punched cards by which it is possible to sort out the indexed references, if one manages to apply with the required manual skill the appropriate equipment, which resembles a knitting-machine.

Obviously, Génicot was a blasphemer – or iconoclast – in the eyes of the art historians. Methodological doubts seem justified indeed, as the project split up works of art into details judged to be relevant or not for that particular type of research. As a consequence, the meaning of the work as a whole composition got lost, and thus also a meaning which might have had implications for the detailed representation under consideration. More practical objections concern the limitation to panel painting and the loss of an opportunity to create an instrument which might at once have unlocked the material for other research purposes. The project nevertheless was a stepping-stone from which historians could reach further.

The third project started in the fifties that I would like to mention is known by some as *Iconclass*. It was conceived by the Leiden art historian Henri Van de Waal as a universal classification of key-words to describe representations on paintings. The system as such is simply a thematic and numeral nomenclatura, its value depends on its application on particular collections.[3] Only a limited number of collections have been effectively unlocked by this system, which obviously seriously limits its use. For art historians, it seems to work well in those collections which have been described along this classification: all references to, say The Adoration of the Magi, or to dogs or Jews can be traced. The iconographical coherence of the work has been respected and divergent questionnaires may be served by its use, on the condition of knowing the right names or terminology in advance. However, the keywords have been selected from the art-historians' background, and they thus have only a limited applicability for a historian who might be interested in blue velvet hats or in female moneychangers.

In our day, we see the publication of CD-Roms with thousands of full-colour reproductions of whole museums and libraries, such as

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3. Van de Waal, Fuchs and Couprie 1985.

the Vatican Manuscripts or those of the Dukes of Burgundy in the Brussels Royal Library. This massive but delicate material has been studied far less intensively than panel painting, partly because it is more fragile, maybe less spectacular for the public and preserved in far larger quantities. So, masses of visual materials are now becoming available to us in an unprecedented way, and the software allows us to analyse it on a much greater scale and with a broader scope than before. Which use are we as historians going to make of these sources? Ideally, we should try to combine all the previous approaches, adding to them the refined interpretative models developed by Jacques Le Goff, Michel Pastoureau and others.[4] However, the bottleneck obviously remains: the transposition of visual observations to concepts and keywords that make sense for all kinds of research questionnaires. This requires a huge amount of highly qualified work whereby the great challenge remains to transcend the limits of one's own discipline and of the existing research paths. Techniques for electronic pattern-recognition are seemingly not yet adequate for the refined questionnaires we are dealing with, and even then the patterns will always have to be defined by scholars trained in some way or other.

The Image as Testimony

A first dimension of the analysis of visual sources is their informative value for the historian who wants to study material culture and social practices. The analysis of visual sources can be intended to be purely informative: we can use them to get more and other information than we have from other sources. The issue is an old one: we refer for example to the so-called realism of the early Netherlandish painters. It inspired some nice confrontations of preserved artefacts such as copper kettles, chandeliers, furniture and tapestries with their painted representation such as that in the Cloisters Museum in New York.[5] It even provoked discussions about the authenticity of the landscape in Van Eyck's Mystic Lamb triptych; while more than three hundred botanic varieties have been identified on this single painting, and the tower of the Utrecht cathedral

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4. Le Goff 1977; Pastoureau 1986 and 1989.
5. Prevenier and Blockmans 1985, p. 89.

is easy to recognize, the composition of the landscape as that of the whole work was obviously fictional.[6]

A type of visual source which has been underrated in this respect is that of the miniature painting. Much less worth in sales value per item than panels, they have only recently received due scholarly attention. I see three major advantages in their use for historical fact-finding, in comparison to panel paintings: 1. they are preserved in a far greater quantity; 2. they have in many cases been designed more loosely, in a serial production which became, in the early sixteenth century, even standardised and reproduced in workshops; 3. they mostly accompany a written text which offers a context of interpretation. Looking for historical realism, one can find a huge amount of it in a large number of miniatures, if one leaves aside the purely devotional figures representing saints in their most simple appearance and without any background. A revealing example of these possibilities has been offered in a magnificent book published under the direction of Walter Prevenier.[7] It shows more than 400, mostly unpublished, miniatures as factual information about all kinds of current instances in daily life, dealt with in the scholarly text. Given the large quantity of the preserved material, which is still quite difficult to get a grasp of, one can expect that they offer the possibility to define certain frequently appearing situations as normal and of contrasting them with deviant behaviour, attitudes and situations. The preserved material is huge: we may certainly count some four thousand richly illuminated manuscripts produced in the Burgundian Netherlands between, say, 1430 and 1530.[8] As a measure to delineate the database, a minimum of five miniature paintings per manuscript has been adopted. On such a large number, one might try a sampling of fifteenth-century 'Flemish' miniatures looking for 'realistic' social interaction, and all forms of status affirmation by the length, the materials, the colours and the fashion of clothing, the jewellery, hair dress, and other symbols. The illustrations of particular types of texts are particularly informative: works of history normally con-

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6. Harbison 1991.

7. Prevenier, ed. 1998.

8. H. Wijsman presented in 2003 a PhD thesis at Leiden University identifying and analysing these illuminated manuscripts. An edition in English translation is in preparation.

tain lots of ceremonial and military representations, while moralistic works show different types of situations with desirable or indecent behaviour. Since most of such scenes are represented by dozens of paintings, they can be grouped by workshop tradition and by literary context before leading to an interpretation. Anyhow, the manuscripts were intended as 'mirrors' for correct behaviour, so they must have reflected recognisable experiences, either ideal or abhorred ones. They were more than just illustrations in the text: the visualisation must have had a reinforcing effect intended to impregnate the reader and onlooker with the norm.

A great number of miniature paintings reflect scenes of daily life without having an outspoken moralizing function. I refer here to marginal illustrations in general and those in books of hours in particular. This type of book was been produced in the Low Countries for export all over Europe from the late fourteenth century, and many of them were lavishly illuminated, containing hundreds of representations. They had only a loose connection with the text, often just a reference to activities currently practiced during the month of the calendar shown on the particular page. A nice example of this use of miniature paintings is offered by a recent book which identified no less than 155 children's games in the borders of Netherlandish books of hours, dating mainly from around 1400 to the early sixteenth century. The author could confront the paintings systematically with archaeological material, which demonstrated the high level of precision of these marginal illustrations, however standardised they may have been in a serial production. Some of her identifications even led to the discovery of games which were not described in texts.[9] Thus, there can be no doubt about the utility of miniature painting as an invaluable source of information about realistic aspects of daily life, not only with regard to objects but also to practices.

The Medieval Communication System

I think that we can go farther than the simple identification of authentic objects. In the line of François Garnier's, Jean-Claude Schmitt's and Gerd Althoff's inspiring books on the meaning of

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9. Willemsen 1998.

gestures,[10] I think that works of visual art contain massive amounts of information about attitudes, gestures and modes of behaviour. One might object that panel paintings are by definition exceptional representations with a high symbolic value. This might imply that people were not represented in their normal way, but rather, in a particularly tense situation. While this objection certainly applies to a great number of panel paintings, especially those representing exclusively holy figures, the argument doesn't apply in all cases. Lots of early Netherlandish 'realistic' paintings produce highly realistic elements besides the central theme, such as townscapes or circumstantial evidence. This is especially the case for miniature paintings which have been produced in series and often represent scenes in daily life, either as illustrations of a narrative or as embellishment of books of hours.

The new techniques now offer the opportunity to take into consideration much larger quantities of data than a man's mind could oversee before. If association by memory, based on formal or intrinsic analogies was the prevailing basis of the study of art, huge data bases compiled systematically can now be screened in a very short time and with less risk of fortuitous findings. Moreover, as a consequence of being split up into different disciplines, text and images are currently being studied in isolation; and the idea of intertextuality, the transfer between texts of a different nature, is scarcely studied, e.g. between theological texts, normative documents, historiography and propagandistic inscriptions. For contemporaries, however, the meaningful context of their life was to be found in the various types of documents circulating between them, as each medium had its own reach and public. If we become more aware of the communicative functions of the documents we are studying and the acts or representations they describe, we might be able to reconstruct the communication system as it functioned in late medieval societies.

In societies where reading remained limited by the difficulty and price of text reproduction, the reach of this medium was still restricted to particular uses – such as liturgical, devotional, administrative and legal – and to learned elites. However, even the elites needed the support of the population at delicate moments such as the transmission of power. For political messages to reach

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10. Garnier 1982-89; Schmitt 1990; Althoff 1996; Baschet and Schmitt, eds. 1996.

the masses, monumentalisation and ritualisation were the obvious means, and both were visual. A monument had its effects mainly through its permanence and its functions, location and sheer volume in the public space. Rituals included buildings and the space around them as the evident scene of action; they added gesture, sound and especially interaction. The public was not supposed to remain purely passive, it had to play its own role, showing off its identity and adherence. The full meaning of the performance could be explained orally and by writing on *banderolles*, and it was further to be found in the books in the hands of the reading elite. For the masses, however, emotional participation could be stirred up by the colourful appearance of authorities, the display of heraldic emblems, and above all by the demonstration of cult objects such as relics and images of the holy. A ritual was an event of a certain duration during which a strong feeling of sympathy could be expressed in some kind of mutual self-confirmation by authorities and subjects alike. Its effects could be perpetuated by collective memory; early printing was soon used to attain a much larger and lasting dissemination of the images and descriptions of glorious events such as King Louis XII's entries in Italian cities, Prince Charles' inauguration in Bruges 1515 and his imperial coronation in Bologna 1530.[11]

Some marvellous case studies have shown that contemporaries were constantly involved in such types of intertextuality. Think of the beautiful demonstration by Anna Galletti on the iconographic programme on the fountain in the central square of Perugia, between the Palazzo dei Priori and the San Lorenzo cathedral.[12] Nicola Pisano sculpted in 1278 a fountain, with three basins, each having twelve sides. The symbolism could hardly be more typically Christian. The bas relief sculptures show at eye-height and explain by inscriptions the city's double origin: on the one hand it was a member of the papal state, represented by John the Baptist, on the other we have the local hero *Heulixtes* (Euliste), the alleged founder and legislator of the city. Each of them is surrounded by more saints and heroes representing on the one hand the origins of the Catholic Church, and on the other those of the urban community. In 1293, a jurist of the city sponsored the writing of an epic

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11. Scheller 1985; Blockmans 1999; Burke 1999.
12. Galletti 1988.

in Latin on the origins of the urban community and its constitution. It stressed the harmonious organization of the city and its territory, through its confrontations with the emperors and the popes. A few years later, the local hero Euliste was presented as a chivalrous hero in a history of the city in the vernacular. The cult of local saints such as San Lorenzo has consciously been used by city authorities in conjunction with mythological local heroes such as Euliste in order to stress the city's political independence and its autonomous rule over its territory. This autonomy needed to be legitimised against rival political powers. The chain of meaning between various media – the cult in church, the images and texts on the fountain, the learned epic in Latin and the popular historiography – all served the purpose of making abstract structures understandable for the larger public. The constitutional arrangement and conflicts regarding the division of power between the city, the territory, the Pope and the Emperor were complicated matters which had to be explained to the citizens by the available symbolic means of mass communication. Precious materials, artistic and innovative design and a conspicuous location attracted the attention of as wide a public as possible. Rituals certainly enhanced the effect of monuments.

Quentin Skinner made a masterly demonstration of a chain of meaning in different media in a reverse order. He showed that Lorenzetti's famous frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, painted around 1340, had been constructed to illustrate precisely the constitutional structure as it was formulated in legal texts of the late thirteenth century.[13] The frescoes thus reflected a purely lay vision of the political order in the city based on abstract values represented by allegorical figures, whose names were added in inscriptions. It could be seen and understood immediately by all visitors to the Room of the nine justices.

In a similar way, during the second half of the fifteenth century many city halls in the Low Countries were decorated by panel paintings representing the righteous judges. The lost work by Rogier van der Weyden for the Brussels city hall has been followed by dozens of similar works such as the famous ones by Gerard David for Bruges. Panel painting, which has received most of the attention of art historians, is only one medium. Especially targeted at

13. Skinner 1989.

mass audiences were the sculpted decorations on the hall's façade and the stained glass windows. Works of art obviously symbolised the norms and values to be respected and imposed by urban authorities. Their message could be understood by all entering these public rooms or looking at the buildings. By taking all these sources and their written descriptions systematically into account in combination with the written sources with which historians are better acquainted, we simply restore the communicative processes as they functioned in late medieval society itself, i.e. by multimedia. As historians, we should be fully aware of the fact that visual means of communication played a considerable role in a society where literacy certainly was spreading, but where its use as a means of mass communication was still not attained.

Bernard Guenée has drawn our attention to the transfer of the ritual scenario of the Corpus Christi processions into the secular sphere of royal entries.[14] This view can be generalized: most of the artistic production of the early and high Middle Ages functioned in a liturgical context. Utilitarian architecture in the cities first developed into more artistic styles in symbolic buildings, such as bell towers. As we have seen in the examples of Perugia and Siena, secular authorities increasingly applied techniques for mass communication for their own propagandistic purposes. Since communities and mass movements played a growing role in political life, it mattered for the authorities to secure their adherence by the most effective means. The spoken word had only a limited reach; the visualisation of public acts was therefore of utmost importance: gestures could be perceived and understood in a mass audience, especially since the tradition of symbolic interaction had certainly not been lost after the introduction of the written record. More or less ephemeral products carried in processions such as escutcheons, costumes and pageantry are mostly not preserved as objects, and art historians have become interested in them only recently, as their value was considered to be inferior. However, some descriptions and even series of illustrations came to us of French royal coronation ceremonies.[15]

Processions, purely religious ones just as their mainly lay counterparts, were all carefully constructed with well-defined groups,

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14. Guenée and Lehoux 1968, pp. 13-20; Rubin 1991, pp. 258-60; Guéry 1996.
15. Le Goff 1990; Bonne 1990; Blockmans 1997, pp. 271-73.

ordered hierarchically. Each section was easily recognisable by its heraldic symbols and/or by its garb. They constituted a reflection of the society as it was divided by class and rank. In daily life, external symbols such as the shape, material and colour of garb signalled each individual's social position.[16] The Church had made illiterate people acquainted with complex abstract notions by reference to visual, audible or even odoriferous analogies. Just as kings revived for themselves the concept of the *corpus mysticum,* they gradually extended this identification to encompass the abstract notion of the state. In the mystification of Emperor Charles V after his death in 1558, the Ship of State, named Victoria, was the highlight of his funeral procession in Brussels. The float, representing a huge galleon steered by the three theological virtues: Hope, Faith and Charity, carried all his flags and emblems and was decorated by depictions of the emperor's twelve triumphs. The printed report of this *Magnifique et sumptueuse pompe funèbre* was published in five languages and it contained 33 coloured copper plates designed by Hiëronymus Cock. It showed the abstract and invisible empire as an endless succession of flags and coats of arms carried by noblemen representing all the territories which had been ruled by the defunct emperor.[17]

The scene of this extraordinary demonstration of power was the city of Brussels; it held a particular lustre by the presence of Philip II who had already succeeded his father. Mourning ceremonies and processions were equally held in other cities of the empire, in Valladolid, Rome, Mexico and Augsburg. Cities were thus the visible scene for ceremonies of the abstract state: tangible were city palaces, the persons of the monarchs and members of their dynasty. They could be represented permanently through visual symbols, which originally were merely heraldic. In the sixteenth century they became increasingly emblematic through a mixture of Christian and antique themes.[18] Visualisation helped people in the late Middle Ages to grasp abstract concepts such as constitutional structures, power relations, invisible states. It equally helped people to internalise patterns of behaviour: the current, desirable, as well as the undesired are shown. It is up to us to grasp these

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16. Blockmans and Janse, eds. 1999.
17. Blockmans 2002, pp. 5-6.
18. Muir 1981; Kipling 1998; Arnade 1996.

refined bits of information about the more subtle side of human relations, communication and interaction, which we hardly find described on such a scale in written documents.

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