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Danielle B. Joyner

*Painting the Hortus Deliciarum: Medieval Women, Wisdom, and Time*

University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016. 256 pp.;  
36 color ill.; 60 b/w ill. Hardcover \$89.95  
(9780271070889)



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In *Painting the Hortus Deliciarum: Medieval Women, Wisdom, and Time*, Danielle B. Joyner has tackled one of the most challenging topics in Romanesque studies, the illuminated manuscript compilation known as the "Garden of Delights." Created ca. 1175–85 by Abbess Herrad for the Augustinian convent of Saint Odile at Hohenberg in Alsace, and destroyed in the bombardment of Strasbourg in 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War, this highly important Romanesque work survives only in copies and descriptions. Students of Romanesque art and culture will welcome this volume not only for its thoughtful insights but also for its beautifully reproduced illustrations and extensive documentation.

Joyner's interpretations are based on the 1979 edition/reconstruction (not a true facsimile) edited by Rosalie Green et al. and published by the Warburg Institute, which in turn was based on an exhaustive study of descriptions, transcriptions, and copies made in the nineteenth century. While not definitive (new material occasionally comes to light, and additional copies, which once existed but were lost in World War II, may yet reappear), Green and her coeditors' exemplary work of scholarship is currently the best point of departure for any study of the lost manuscript.

The textual content of the original manuscript was assembled from a heterogeneous range of sources, selected, edited, and organized for the use of the Hohenberg community. Scripture, poetry, exegesis, scientific texts, and astronomical/temporal calculations are just some of the genres represented in the volume. Numerous illustrations and diagrams, many of them highly original, expand on the textual material.

Joyner begins her study with the reasonable hypothesis that the compilation, though assembled from disparate sources, was a purposeful exegetical construct, rather than an uncurated encyclopedic accumulation, which is what the term *miscellany*, often used to describe this type of work, might imply. As such, the manuscript had a rationale to its content and structure, which Joyner attempts to

elucidate through detailed analysis. In her view, the materials assembled by Herrad are all related to the tasks of understanding salvation history and of locating Hohenberg and its community within that cosmic process.

One of the great strengths of Joyner's approach is that she tries to interpret both texts and images as part of a unified whole, rather than separately. Instead of offering a global interpretation of all the manuscript's known content, though, she has focused on just a few sections and major themes. From these she develops a working hypothesis explaining the overall purpose of Herrad's compilation.

Chapter 1 situates the *Hortus Deliciarum* historically through comparisons with (1) Romanesque manuscripts made for female audiences (the *Saint Albans Psalter*, the *Guta-Sintram Codex*, the *Liber Scivias* of Hildegard of Bingen) and (2) other twelfth-century monastic miscellanies (such as the *Speculum Virginum* and *Liber Floridus*). In chapter 2 the author begins her examination of the manuscript with its first section, describing how its compiler created a broader framework for the Genesis account of the creation of the world by juxtaposing it with medieval scientific and cosmologic knowledge. The next two chapters are perhaps the most original and compelling part of the book: Chapter 3 provides a detailed explanation of the manuscript's body of *computus* material. These tables and texts, found in many manuscripts, were used in the Middle Ages primarily to calculate the days on which Easter (and the dependent feasts of the *temporale*) should fall in any given year. Chapter 4 argues that, for the medieval readers of these texts, understanding the temporal patterns revealed by the *computus* was a logical extension of exegetical practice, another way for educated contemplatives to "read" the nature of God and the meaning of salvation history in the complicated interactions between historical time, seasons, and the liturgical year. In chapter 5 the author extends this argument by suggesting that the figure of Ecclesia, the personified Church—who reappears sporadically across the course of the book as an abstract concept, as a concrete personification, and in her local or contemporary manifestation in the community portrait of Hohenberg that appears at the end of the manuscript—is a key figure for understanding the overarching structure and meaning of the collected texts and images of the miscellany.

The value of Joyner's method is that it seeks to present the manuscript as a coherent intellectual enterprise. By focusing on selected themes and elements, she is able to pursue complex topics in more depth than scholars can usually aspire to when dealing with such an extensive, and ramified, work. Some of these topics have not hitherto received much study, at least not in art-historical literature. In particular, the author's lucid explanation of the *computus* section in the *Hortus Deliciarum* will be welcomed by many historians of medieval art history, who have often seen, and been puzzled by, this densely technical material in manuscripts. A selective methodology also allows for a close reading and interpretation of a number of the miniatures. Joyner's overall conclusions about Herrad's intentions, considered in relation to the material she chooses to discuss, seem sound. Her intuition that Herrad is using the compilation to give the nuns in her care an enhanced understanding of the place and purpose of their community within the "economy" of salvation history is certainly very probable and fits well with what we know about the construction of other large-scale synthetic programs—for example, in monumental arts—made for reform-minded religious institutions in this period. Such broad-brush conclusions, though, are subject to caution, given the fragmentary state of the evidence and the selectivity of Joyner's approach.

The state of the evidence—its reliability and relative degree of certainty—is critical to building any argument about the manuscript's content. Joyner states that the 1979 edition was able to recreate "nearly half" of the imagery and about two-thirds of the text. The commentary volume of the 1979 edition gives more detail: it indicates that at least eighteen and possibly more leaves had already been lost prior to the manuscript's destruction, while thirty-one full or partial leaves were identified in the nineteenth century as "interpolations." With regard to the images, of 346 separate scenes that are documented to have once existed, only 187 (54 percent) were copied in full, 68 (20 percent) were partially copied, though sometimes what was copied was just one detail or a single figure, and 91 (28 percent) were not copied at all, though their subjects were recorded (Herrad of Hohenbourg, *Hortus Deliciarum*, edited by Rosalie Green et al., commentary volume. London: Warburg Institute, 1979, 3–4). The quality of the extant copies also varies: Some are highly accurate tracings, while others are rather rough freehand drawings. Some of the copied images included all associated inscriptions, but others leave them out. The textual content is similarly difficult to pin down exactly. Some of the text excerpts were copied in full, but in other cases only the rubric identifying the text was copied.

Because of the many uncertainties about the content of the original manuscript, readers who do not have the 1979 edition to hand may find that the present volume does not always transmit all the codicological and content detail needed to answer the many questions that arise in the course of following these complex arguments. Is an "unusual" juxtaposition or choice of subject really significant, or could it be an artifact of the state of the evidence? A description of the codicological organization of the manuscript, as far as it is known, and a complete list of the contents (textual and visual) would have allowed the reader a greater basis for judging.

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The lack of corroborating detail can sometimes lead to unnecessary confusion. To take one example, on pages 123–25, Joyner interprets folios 251v and 253r of the manuscript as two halves of a unified composition depicting the Last Judgment, even though the foliation indicates that another folio (252) intervenes between the two miniatures. It would have been helpful in this instance (and a few similar ones) to explain that, in the codicological analysis provided in the 1979 edition, folio 252 is described as one of the “interpolated” leaves. Joyner’s tacit rejection of folio 252 from consideration is probably justified, but it would have been clearer if the anomaly had been explained. The insertion of an extra leaf in that place is, if nothing else, evidence for how the manuscript was received in the time following its creation—obviously, the person responsible for inserting folio 252 must have had little regard for the iconographic coherence of the two-page composition.

Such minor points aside, Joyner has made a solid contribution to the study of twelfth-century monastic literature and to the study of the *Hortus Deliciarum* in particular. Her volume, beautifully illustrated and extensively documented, should find a place in academic libraries and, it is hoped, will provide a useful springboard for future study of this rich and enigmatic masterpiece.

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