OBSERVATION AND IMAGE-MAKING IN GOTHIC ART

JEAN A. GIVENS
University of Connecticut

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INTRODUCTION

This project was launched by three deceptively simple questions. Did medieval artists work from the firsthand observation of nature? How would we know? And why does this question continue to attract the attention of scholars? Surprisingly perhaps, the last of these questions is the easiest to answer, for the proper relationship between artistic practice and the observation of nature has been debated for centuries. In his first-century *Natural History*, the elder Pliny observed that it is "Nature herself, not an artist, whom one ought to imitate." Moreover, since at least the sixteenth century, the observation of nature has been described as one of the defining characteristics that separate "Renaissance" from "medieval" artistic practice. As important, scholars in other fields frequently have internalized these art historical tropes and with them, some very durable assumptions about the use of images as tools of visualization and agents for the transmission of visual knowledge.

This project begins and ends with the lively and varied carvings of plants that art historian Nikolaus Pevsner memorably called *The Leaves of Southwell*. Their unexpected verve notwithstanding, the Southwell sculptures are not unique. Vividly observed leaves, fruits, and flowers are the ornamental focus at other mid- and late-thirteenth-century sites such as York Minster, Exeter Cathedral, the Sainte-Chapelle of Paris, Reims Cathedral, and Naumburg Cathedral, to name just a few of the more notable locations in England and on the Continent. As at Southwell, the sculptures at these sites frequently picture individual species with remarkable precision. Moreover, as demonstrated here, other painted and carved images of much the same date similarly highlight the distinct and particularized physical details of curiosities, birds, beasts, and seemingly individualized human subjects.

As virtually every scholar interested in this topic has noted, a few often-cited thirteenth-century sketches also are inscribed with the artists' claims to have worked "from life" or from "the actual model." These comments have been thoroughly debated, but they rarely have been taken at face value (nor should they be). Even so, they confirm the existence of a medieval dialogue concerning the artist's working methods and the authority of visual imagery.

Any discussion of medieval observation and image-making exists within the context of long-running debates concerning descriptive art. The first of these brackets mimesis and the visual arts, specifically the relationship between descriptive facility and artistic achievement, whereas the second opposes "medieval" schematism and "Renaissance" naturalism. In an effort to move beyond these still powerful, if increasingly tired formulations, my strategy here is to expand the frame of reference by offering a wide range of images and image types as evidence of observational practice and by differentiating a series of representational modes. Examination of medieval visual and verbal testimony regarding first-hand knowledge as a basis for image-making leads naturally to discussion of the functions served by medieval descriptive images. At the same time, the fundamental issues discussed here – the ways images reveal their facture and the analysis of the relationships between visual knowledge and the transmission of that knowledge – extend this project's scope well beyond the medieval period.

As a study of craft practice, this essay does not pretend to exhaust the topic. Rather, it is a work of synthesis that builds upon a number of suggestive examples to develop an argument concerning images and their relationship to the world as seen. It focuses on thirteenth-century and early-fourteenth-century England, France, and, occasionally, Italy, precisely because the art of those periods produced more testimony concerning images and observation than the preceding medieval centuries. Some might protest that thirteenth-century imagery is not entirely typical of medieval artistic production or that image-makers in that period were beginning to register the sorts of historical and cultural changes that produced what traditionally has been referred to as the "Renaissance." In response, this essay probes, and ultimately discards this central, enabling distinction between medieval and Renaissance art, and it similarly rejects the assumed primacy of high art on which this familiar duality is built. Demonstrating the interpretive value of a more inclusive range of visual productions, this study presents

diagrams used by scholars, maps that served land managers, and pictures of creatures both seen and imagined by healers as evidence of the medieval artist's working methods.

This project is founded on a very full awareness of just how difficult it is to override a lifetime of experience to see what sits before one's eyes. In a study of Leonardo's drawings, James Ackerman framed this opposition in terms of "*optical*" and "*conceptual*" rendering: the contrast between an image as it is known to be rather than as it appears at a specific time and place. Ackerman's terminology might easily be taken to imply a competition between the brain and the eye, but this would be a gross simplification of his nuanced readings. As argued here, however, specificity of visual reference – Ackerman's "optical" imagery – implicates a directed kind of looking, one that supplants normal, adaptive behavior. What art schools generally refer to as *life-drawing* requires the artist to overcome a lifetime of experience in which generalizing, scanning, and selection is normal, indeed, essential adaptive behavior in a world that requires the quick absorption of visual information. In contrast, picturing a specific object or person requires a pace and a kind of inquisitive looking that is unique to the enterprise of making an image from the observation of life.

This study owes a special debt to William Ivins's analysis of the effects of copying on the transmission of visual information and the implications of viewing images as "containers for information." Ernst Gombrich's investigations of visual process and Otto Pächt's study of descriptive observation similarly formed this project from the start. When it comes to the complex and contingent relationships between function and representational codes, the commentaries by William Clark, Madeline Caviness, Michael Camille, Nicola Coldstream, Veronica Sekules, James Ackerman, Claudia Swan, and Paul Binski have proved invaluable. As important, historians of science such as Peter Murray Jones, Linda Voigts, and Karen Reeds have clarified the historical understanding of images as tools of scientific inquiry in ways that are essential to the conclusions and to the methodology sketched here.

This essay addresses the process of looking as well as the semiotics of descriptive rendering by asking how and in what ways medieval viewers may have exploited the potential of visual imagery. To the extent that visual representation provides access to modes of organizing and displaying knowledge, medieval descriptive observation offers a remarkable case study of both artistic practice and the traditional interpretive means of art history.

As argued here, the decision to make a descriptive image registers an image's function and its intended audience. The insights offered by medieval image-making apply to the art of other times and places by refining our sense of the syntax of visual communication and, by extension, the functions of descriptive art in both sacred and secular contexts. If this inquiry permits us to see the medieval images surveyed here afresh by clarifying and refining the vocabulary we apply to such works, then it will have achieved its goal of characterizing the still broader relationship between observation, naturalism, and the capacity of images to inform.