THE MYSTIC ARK: HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, ART, AND THOUGHT IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY

In this book, Conrad Rudolph studies and reconstructs Hugh of Saint Victor's *Mystic Ark* (c. 1125–1130), one of the most unusual sources we have for an understanding of medieval artistic culture. In medieval written sources, works of art are not often referred to, let alone described in any detail. When they are mentioned, it is seldom with more than a word or phrase, at the most a sentence. Almost completely ignored by art historians, *The Mystic Ark* is a forty-two page description of the most complex individual work of figural art of the Middle Ages, a painting that was meant to be copied by others. Depicting all time, all space, all matter, all human history, and all spiritual striving, this highly polemical image had an impact on medieval culture far beyond its original role in the education of society's elite, during one of the great periods of intellectual change in Western history.

Conrad Rudolph is Professor of Medieval Art History at the University of California, Riverside. He has received fellowships and grants from the Guggenheim, J. Paul Getty, Mellon, and Kress Foundations, as well as from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the College Art Association. At UC Riverside he has received both the University Distinguished Teaching award and the University Honors Faculty Mentor of the Year award. He is a member of the board of editors of *Speculum* and of *caa.reviews*, the online journal of reviews of the College Art Association. He is author of *The "Things of Greater Importance": Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia and the Medieval Attitude Toward Art* (1990); *Artistic Change at St-Denis: Abbot Suger's Program and the Early Twelfth-Century Controversy over Art* (1990); *Violence and Daily Life: Reading, Art, and Polemics in the Cîteaux Moralia in Job* (1997); *Pilgrimage to the End of the World: The Road to Santiago de Compostela* (2004); and *"First, I Find the Center Point": Reading the Text of Hugh of Saint Victor's "The Mystic Ark"* (2005).

THE MYSTIC ARK

HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR, ART, AND THOUGHT IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY

CONRAD RUDOLPH
University of California, Riverside

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107037052

First published 2014

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Rudolph, Conrad, 1951–
The Mystic Ark: Hugh of Saint Victor, art, and thought in the twelfth century / Conrad Rudolph.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-03705-2 (hardback)
1. Hugh, of Saint-Victor, 1096? – 1141 – Criticism and interpretation. 2. Hugh, of Saint-Victor, 1096? – 1141. De arca Noe mystica. 3. Hugh, of Saint-Victor, 1096? – 1141. Mystic ark (Painting)
4. Art and society – Europe – History – To 1500. I. Title.
ND553.H82R83 2013
759.02′1–dc23 2013003486

ISBN 978-1-107-03705-2 Hardback

Additional resources for this publication at http://mysticark.ucr.edu

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

To my son,
John

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Color plates follow page 340.

PREFACE

In the written sources of the Middle Ages, works of art are not often referred to, let alone described in any detail. When they are mentioned, it is seldom with more than a word or a phrase, at the most a sentence. Almost completely ignored by art historians because of the immense difficulty of its text, Hugh of Saint Victor's *Mystic Ark* is a forty-two-page description of the most complex individual work of figural art of the entire Middle Ages, a painting also known as *The Mystic Ark*, making both the text and the painting among the most unusual sources we have for an understanding of medieval artistic culture and, as we will see, its polemical context.

The purpose of the painting was to serve as the basis of a series of brilliant lectures undertaken by Hugh – considered to be the leading theologian of Europe during his life[1] – from around 1125 to early 1130 at Saint Victor, a Parisian abbey of Augustinian canons, whose school, along with those of Notre-Dame and Sainte-Geneviève, acted as the predecessor of the University of Paris. The purpose of the text was to enable others outside of Saint Victor – scholars, teachers, advanced students, canons, monks – to undertake similar discussions themselves by providing the information necessary to produce the image. And, given the unusually large number of surviving manuscript copies of *The Mystic Ark* – enough to make it the medieval equivalent of a best-seller – it seems that *The Mystic Ark* was very successful at addressing a widely and urgently felt need among a great part of the educated elite of Western Europe during a period of significant intellectual change.

To begin to give a sense of the uniqueness of *The Mystic Ark*, let me be just a bit more precise regarding the length of the text and say that it is not actually forty-two full pages in the modern critical edition but forty-one and a quarter. This makes it something more than forty-one pages longer than any other medieval description of a single, actual work of figural art before its time, a length that comes with a correspondingly greater degree of description, detail, and commentary. And in the astonishing image that is the subject of this unusual attention, perhaps nowhere do art, science (in its earlier form as natural philosophy), and theology more strikingly converge in medieval culture – and this at a time of previously unrivaled controversy over art and over the perceived threat by science to theology.[2] It is not often that an art historian has

the opportunity to study such an image. It is virtually unique that this should happen in association with a large body of applicable written material that, in one way or another, originates with the author of that image, an image that is already loaded with some rather heavy baggage. All this makes the text and image of *The Mystic Ark* of importance to a very broad spectrum of scholars, including those interested in the history of art, intellectual history, the history of science, theology, spirituality, exegetical theory and practice, literature, the Schools, and, to a lesser extent, cartography and, perhaps, even codicological practice. Even Hugh himself seems to have been amazed at the breadth of his own creation, writing of the *Ark*,

> In it, you will look for nothing that you will not find, and, when you find one thing, you will see many more revealed to you.[3]

To the art historian, a very wide range of material indeed emerges from *The Mystic Ark*, whose study here is not directly concerned with intellectual history, the history of science, theology, and so on but only indirectly, in regard to the image in its historical context, broadly understood.

For example, *The Mystic Ark* is of great importance in showing to what degree an original work of visual art could participate in the current controversies of its time. In this regard, it is quite interesting in demonstrating how both major and minor themes in such a work might be chosen. It indicates what the roles of previous thought as well as contemporary ideas might be in this selection. Going a step further, it gives a detailed example of the extent to which traditional authority might compete with current thought, challenge it, or accept it – or how current thought might do the same with traditional authority – and how this might be manifested in an image. And it lets us see how an image like this could actually be used – not just in one of the prestigious new schools of Paris like Saint Victor, but anywhere appropriate to a discussion of the content put forth in the image.

The Mystic Ark reveals – at that moment when scholarship began its long campaign to break free from the domination of the Church and from the demand that all learning pertain to spiritual advancement – how science and theology could interact in a medieval work of art. It shows how the use of scientific images in a religious work of art could be much more than just simple insertions of such imagery, but rather can give rise to a complex interaction that affects the relationship of form and content in a profound way. It suggests how the theological content of an image might demand that the artistic image take its apparent form from the "formal knowledge" or schematic imagery of scientific learning but, at the same time, also how this scientific form might come to be read in an entirely different way because of that theological content. And it demonstrates how systematic theology could provide the scholarly impetus and conceptual basis to a new multiplication and systematization of imagery.

The Mystic Ark offers valuable evidence of a twelfth-century awareness of artistic culture and its terminology. It indicates how the iconographic components (as opposed to the conceptual themes) of such a complex image might be chosen. It sheds light not just on the relation of image to text in the sense of the ostensible subject (the biblical text of the Ark of the Flood), but also on the relation of image to text in the sense of significant incorporated inscriptions, as well as on the relation of image to schematic structure, nonfigural symbols, number symbolism, and color symbolism.[4] It speaks eloquently of the deep presence of exegesis in art, of the essential fusion of sacred and secular history in the visual image, and of the complex interplay between the macrocosmic and microcosmic in a religious, not scientific, depiction. It shows how a medieval artist might play off different artistic modes, namely, the iconic and the narrative, in the same work. And, in it, one can see how a visually dominant form might actually function in a conceptually subordinate way.

The Mystic Ark also provides an understanding of how knowledge could be transmitted at this exciting transitional period of Western culture, how that knowledge might then be used in relatively independent ways, how visual art might play a significant role in such a transmission, and how the desire to use visual art to convey the same sort of complex message as that expressed through writing could affect monumental art and ultimately bring about significant artistic change, most notably in the form of the Gothic portal and the exegetical stained-glass window at Saint-Denis.

These and other factors place *The Mystic Ark* alongside Bernard of Clairvaux's *Apologia* and the writings of Suger of Saint-Denis as one of the most extraordinary sources we have for the study of the role of the image in medieval artistic culture. Extraordinary in themselves, these sources are all the more extraordinary in that they all emerge out of the same political world of the Ile-de-France and its immediately related regions, they were all formed by the same intellectual environment of monastic and canonial culture, they were all written around the same time, and they were all produced by men who knew one another. And if, in this period of significant artistic change, Bernard's tract informs us about the role of art from the basic standpoint of the criticism of art (though it says much more), and Suger's from that of the justification of art (though it says much more as well), *The Mystic Ark* enlightens us regarding how a complex work of art might be conceived of intellectually and visually, and function artistically and polemically, although it, also, says considerably more.

QUALIFICATIONS

Even to the modern reader, a striking creativity and palpable sense of excitement and enthusiasm permeate the vestiges of the *Ark* lectures. Yet, as with the theatrical performance of a story from Greek mythology in Classical Athens,

the audience of Hugh's lectures most certainly knew much of the "story" of *The Mystic Ark* before its presentation. It was, to a certain extent, the "acting out" of this narrative that was the point – the assemblage, the coherency, the order, the method, the emphases and nuances, the similarities and (perhaps even more) the dissimilarities to previous and contemporary thinkers, and the accompanying discussion that all contribute to the affirmation of the particular intellectual/spiritual position that is *The Mystic Ark*. While such a dynamic might increase interest in the *Ark* for many modern scholars, it has not made the writing of this book any easier. Not only does a knowledge of the narrative need to be provided to many contemporary readers in order to simply begin to take it up, but it has also seemed necessary in this long recounting of the story of *The Mystic Ark* to occasionally reiterate certain themes that arise intermittently throughout its course. This repetition would have been much more natural and unobtrusive in the oral *Ark* lectures than in a written study of them. Still, I have tried to be judicious about this, but felt it best to take into consideration the full spectrum of those who might read this book.

The reader is forewarned that the word "ark" is unavoidably used in a number of different ways. *The Mystic Ark* refers to either the image or the text, depending on the context. *Ark* is a shorter version of *The Mystic Ark*, again, relating to either the image or the text. The term "ark" is occasionally used to refer to an ark in the generic sense, while the capitalized term without italics typically is made in reference to a particular ark: the Ark of the Flood (the biblical ark) or one of Hugh's four Arks (the Ark of Noah, the Ark of the Church, the Ark of Wisdom, and the Ark of Mother Grace). "The *Ark* lectures" is used in regard to "the *Mystic Ark* lectures," while "the Ark lectures" might pertain to one of the four different lectures on these four different Arks that make up the *Mystic Ark* (for example, the Ark of the Church lecture as distinct from the lectures on the other three Arks). If this seems overly particular or even a little confusing, it almost certainly will not appear that way in the actual discussion of *The Mystic Ark*, where I believe it will come across quite clearly and naturally.

Readers should be aware from the outset of the body of four *Ark*-related texts. *The Mystic Ark* is the main text, a *reportatio* (something like class notes written by someone other than Hugh, explained more fully later) that identifies the various components of the image and gives very short, typically unrelated interpretations of some of them. *The Moral Ark* is a proper treatise, written by Hugh himself, on the Ark of Wisdom component of the *Ark* lectures. It gives a very brief overview of the entire *Mystic Ark* but primarily in regard to the place of the Ark of Wisdom in the larger context of *The Mystic Ark*, not as an actual comprehensive view of the *Ark* for its own sake. *De vanitate mundi*, by Hugh, makes significant reference to the *Ark*, taking up and developing various of its themes. And Hugh's short piece or *sententia* called

Quid vere diligendum sit (*Quod amor Dei sit vita cordis*) distinctly refers to the *Ark*, although its main value lies only in confirming certain aspects of the *Ark* figure more prominently in the other *Ark*-related texts.

References to the text of *The Mystic Ark* are made in the usual way, by giving the traditional chapter citation as well as the pagination of the modern critical edition. These page references to the (Corpus Christianorum) critical edition appear in the margins of the English translation in the Appendix to this book (for example, *CC ed., p. 123*).

All of my own constructed images of the *Ark* may be found in color and in greater visual detail than is available here at http://mysticark.ucr.edu.

I have followed standard art historical practice in using lowercase when writing about something in its direct form (e.g., the zodiac, patience) and uppercase when referring to it in its iconographic form (the Signs of the Zodiac, the personification of Patience). In my translation of *The Mystic Ark*, I use italics to indicate inscriptions. For certain components (such as the personifications), a particular term might be conveyed in italics the first time to denote the intention of an inscription (*Patience*) but, when referred to later by the reporter as a component and not as an inscription, the term is not given in italics (Patience).

I sometimes speak of monastic and collegial cultures as if they were identical. They were not. What I refer to when I do this is their many shared traditions – the many copies of *The Mystic Ark* found in monastic libraries is indicative of the close association between these two subcultures. And I sometimes use the terms "platonism" and "neoplatonism" (and their variants) interchangeably even though I am well aware of the differences. I do this because neoplatonism was thought of as platonism in the twelfth century, and I simply use whichever term seems best according to the context.

Finally, *The Mystic Ark* makes only too plain just how complex an image could be in the Middle Ages. With quite conscious methodological intent, this study addresses this aspect not simply according to any convenient primary sources that might come to hand, but strictly as articulated through the vast body of writings left by the original scholar-artist, both writings that relate directly to the image and others that, while not concerned with the *Ark* itself, do directly address the same issues raised in that image. When I cite other primary literature, my purpose is, generally speaking, not to claim direct sources for Hugh but rather to indicate the established tradition he participates in or to show his involvement in contemporary subjects of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study has been a long journey, intense, all-consuming, and personal, and I was strangely sorry to see it end. During this time, many debts of gratitude

were incurred. Most of the holders of these debts have already been thanked in my earlier, short book on the text of *The Mystic Ark*, *Center Point*, but let me at least briefly thank them again here and mention some others who have helped me in one way or another in the meantime.

Robert Benson, Kurt Forster, Herb Kessler, and John Williams were strong supporters from the beginning, though, sadly, all were not here to see its completion. Dan Sheerin was unusually generous in the unenviable task of checking my Latin translation of the often unclear text of *The Mystic Ark*. I am deeply grateful to all of these fine scholars for their generosity and support.

The image of *The Mystic Ark* and the related diagrams were planned and/or designed by myself but executed by a series of digital artists to whom I am very much obliged. Claire Clement made the initial image (as provisionally employed in *Center Point*) in all its vast and complex array, from the challenges of the creation of the world down to the very last color segment. She was also responsible for the main body of diagrams and the palette, no simple matter. Mieke Bahmer adjusted the main image from its provisional version to the current image, made the acrylic sketch of Hugh teaching before the *Ark*, and revised many diagrams. Carlos Rivas made numberless, sometimes very significant, revisions to the image and the diagrams, also making a number of important new diagrams, something continued by Kliment Bozhilov, although they both had other demands on their time. Theodora Bozhilova brought all of this to conclusion with an unflagging professionalism and personal commitment, to which I owe very much. Andrew Tallon generously made his photographs of Saint-Denis available. Wayne Haniuk cleaned up the image and prepared it for full-scale printing and exhibition at the National Gallery during the winter of 2008–2009. This modest exhibition was at the invitation of Faya Causey, Head of Academic Programs, a person of unlimited dedication, to whom I am eternally grateful for this otherwise unthinkable opportunity to test my thesis that the *Ark* was meant to be made, could be made, was usable in a teaching arrangement, and had readable inscriptions in a full-scale construction. The construction of the image of *The Mystic Ark* and the testing of its functionality – both a crucial part of this project – would simply not have been possible without all of these generous and variously talented people, to whom I am truly indebted.

Thanks must go to my friends and colleagues Françoise Forster-Hahn and Steven Ostrow, who regularly gave me advice and support. Stephen Gersh, Mark Jordan, Cornelius O'Boyle, and Maria Smyth helped on matters of medieval philosophy, intellectual history, and cosmography at the earliest stage of this study, with Stephen continuing to advise from time to time as the study progressed. Teddie Bozhilova, Charles Buchanan, Sara Chan, Adam Cohen, Judson Emerick, Shirin Fozi, Karen Genet, Rudolf Goy, Avital Heyman, Bianca Kühnel, John McNeill, Madelyn Millen, Glenn Olsen, Francesca Rochberg,

Warwick Rodwell, Martina Schilling, and Kelle Truby helped or supported, whether directly or indirectly, whether they know it or not. And I very much appreciate the long support of Julia Bloomfield for this undertaking and the helpful comments of the Press readers, one of whom was Peter Low.

Hugh once wrote,

> A humble attitude, an eagerness to inquire, a quiet life, silent scrutiny, poverty, a foreign soil – these, for many, are wont to lay open the hidden places of learning.[5]

Of all these fine scholarly virtues, I have really mastered only poverty, and, for help with this aspect of higher learning, I would like to express my gratitude above all to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for their fellowship support for this study. And, for support for the construction of the image of the *Ark*, let me thank the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and various funding sources of my own school, the University of California, Riverside, including the personal efforts of Max Neiman, the late Emory Elliot, and, when it counted most, Michael Pazzani.

Lastly, it would be wrong of me if I did not recognize my wife and children, Roberta, Anna, and John, for accepting as a matter of course what might have seemed like an obsession bordering on mania to anyone else, but which, in our family, simply passed for normal.

Finally, if this book is long, it is because the *Ark* lectures were long; if it is complex, it is because those lectures were complex – lectures that certainly went on for weeks and probably months, lectures whose visual subject comprised the most complex individual work of art of the entire Middle Ages, an image depicting all time, all space, all matter, all history, and all spiritual striving. But to anyone interested in the urgent issues of this great transitional period of Western history as they were worked out through an astonishing work of art before an elite audience in one of the leading Schools of Paris, I believe that what Hugh said about entering into the *Ark* applies here as well:

> This will certainly be a long walk, but not a boring one.[6]