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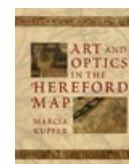
February 5, 2020

Marcia Kupfer

Art and Optics in the Hereford Map: An English Mappa Mundi, c. 1300

London: Yale University Press in association with Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2016. 240 pp.; 50 color ill.; 50 b/w ill. Cloth \$75.00 (9780300220339)

Sven Dupré

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This book offers readers an in-depth study of one single object: the world map (*mappa mundi*) produced for Hereford Cathedral in England around 1300 CE. Rather than situating this work within the history of cartography, Marcia Kupfer treats it as an object of art. She convincingly argues that by exclusively considering the map as a repository of geographical knowledge, scholars have fundamentally misunderstood the *mappa mundi* and some of its puzzling visual characteristics. Tellingly, the interchange of the legends of Africa and Europe on the map has traditionally been interpreted as a failure on the part of a maker lacking adequate geographical knowledge. With a concision characteristic of the book as a whole, Kupfer convincingly argues the contrary: this is an intentional and knowledgeable optical conceit—the interchange of legends indicates the reversal of a mirror image, not a mistake. She shows that the Hereford Map “deploys the *mappa mundi* iconographically in a sustained meditation on the reciprocity of human and divine speculation” (123).

The present autonomous survival state of the Hereford Map is misleading in its soliciting of consideration within the history of cartography. The parchment and vellum *mappa mundi* was originally in a case with folded, painted doors, and as such it was part of a larger ensemble—a somewhat unusual triptych in its combination of material supports. While the focus of Kupfer’s attention is the map as image, she never loses sight of its materiality. For example, its dating between 1289 and 1311 is based partly on the dendrochronological analysis of the map’s housing. Kupfer in the first part of her book carefully reconstructs this original context of the map as an artwork within the architectural setting of Hereford Cathedral. A “compelling visual expression of the Incarnation as a great wonder” (46), the map was a central component of the cathedral’s Marian program. Interestingly, it is also in this part of the book that the map is most situated in a multisensory environment, which specifically also included the sense of hearing, while elsewhere Kupfer’s emphasis is on the map as “artful staging of visionary experience” (146). “Still,” she maintains, stressing the full sensorial experience of the map, “the liturgy—not to mention sermons preached from the pulpit, the principal means whereby the laity became acquainted with scripture—created a rich aural environment for the Map’s reception” (45).

Nevertheless, the book is at its strongest and most original in reconstructing the visual experience of the Hereford Map. Kupfer shows how the *mappa mundi* is a play on multiple viewpoints; it meaningfully coordinates God’s external and human earthly viewpoints on the world, as well as corporeal vision with that of the inward eye. Kupfer brings to bear associations of *speculum*, as a mirror image, and *specula*, a high vantage point, as from a watchtower or the top of a mountain (Mount Zion in Jerusalem), on the intricate optical games of the Hereford Map. Her rich analysis, which considers the map as embodying contemporary optical knowledge and theories of vision, is made possible by recent work in the history of optics and vision, such as A. Mark Smith’s *From Sight to Light: The Passage from Ancient to Modern Optics* (University of Chicago Press, 2014). Kupfer puts this scholarship in the cultural history of science to excellent use and masterfully borrows from the vocabulary of medieval optics—with terms such as “visual pyramids” and “species”—to reveal the visual conceits hidden in the Hereford Map. This aspect of the discussion is perhaps not always easily intelligible for the modern reader less familiar with medieval optics, and, by the same token, one might begin to wonder how conceivable it is that medieval makers and viewers of the Hereford Map possessed and applied such seemingly advanced, specialized optical knowledge.

Here it is important to note that recent scholarship has convincingly shown how high the “optical literacy” rate in this period must have been. In *Seeing through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval*

Allegory (University of Toronto Press, 2004), Suzanne Conklin Akbari has discussed Dante Alighieri's use of optical language and its implications in the description of the ascent from the blindness of hell to the direct vision of God in paradise in the *Divine Comedy*; and closer to home, so to speak, it seems to be the same sort of optically literate readers that Geoffrey Chaucer assumes when referring to the writings of Alhacen (Ḥasan Ibn al-Haytham) and Witelo in his *Canterbury Tales* (as argued by A. Mark Smith in his contribution to Sven Dupré, ed., *Perspective as Practice: Renaissance Cultures of Optics*, Brepols, 2019). Even more to the point, and also discussed by Kupfer at length, optical language and analogy permeated theology and medieval religious discourse. The widely circulated *Moral Treatise on the Eye* of the Franciscan Peter of Limoges (d. 1306) underscored the pastoral value of optics and served as resource for clergy and preachers. In sum, it is conceivable that at the time of the production of the map the optical language that Kupfer uses to analyze its meaning could have been heard in sermons at Hereford Cathedral.

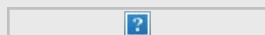
The final part of the book places the Hereford Map within the pictorial tradition in which the world under Christ's dominion is represented by a reversed T-O figure. This reversal, alluding to the world as seen from Christ's point of view, Kupfer argues, was a norm of cartographical representation that had developed into an iconographic motif. Connecting the opticality of medieval religious discourse to iconographic tradition, this book shows how impoverished is a reading of the Hereford Map as merely a repository of geographical knowledge. By scrutinizing this one map, Kupfer's book offers us a view onto a world in which a map was also an image in an iconographical tradition and in which its production and reception were mediated by contemporary theology and theories of vision. For emphasizing the importance of shifts of scale and points of view, it is appropriate, even necessary, that the book is lavishly illustrated with one hundred illustrations, half of them in full color. It will be of interest to all scholars of medieval visual culture.

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