

# H-Net Reviews

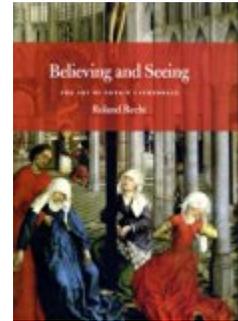
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Roland Recht.** *Believing and Seeing: The Art of Gothic Cathedrals.* Translated by Mary Whittall. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 376 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-70606-1.

Reviewed by Christopher LeCluyse (Westminster College [Salt Lake City])

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## A Surfeit of Surfaces

The Gothic cathedral was and is a space of visual abundance. The architectural form itself is one of immense space delineated and indeed constituted by ranks of columns and arches arranged in multiple levels and topped by a series of ribbed vaults. That infrastructure, combined with buttresses and other external load-bearing elements, made possible the inclusion of often immense stained glass windows, adding to the visual complexity. Add sculpture to the matrix and (in its original appearance) polychromy and stock it with hangings, altar decorations, votive images, and reliquaries, and the space overflows with the visual. The experience of the individual subsumed by this ubiquitously signifying space is one of selective focus, drawing the attention to each element in turn because the eye cannot meaningfully digest the whole. Roland Recht's *Believing and Seeing*—originally published as *Le Croire et le voir: L'art des cathédrales (XIIe–XVe siècle)* (1999)—mimics the visual barrage of the art form it describes with an analytical style that results in a fascinating *bricolage* rather than a fully synthetic interpretation.

Recht's book attempts to analyze the overwhelming visual space of the Gothic cathedral in its entirety while situating it both within the historiography of art and architecture and within a theory of seeing derived from medieval texts. Part 1 of his book, "From Romanticized Mechanics to the Cathedral of Light," first considers how nineteenth- and twentieth-century architects and architectural historians read the Gothic and applied it to mod-

ern architecture. In contrast to the Italian humanists, who coined the term "Gothic" to disparage what they saw as a barbaric and irrational style, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architectural historians rehabilitated Gothic architecture as a supremely refined, rational system. Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (a figure with whom Recht assumes his readers are already familiar) went so far as to promote a return to the Gothic, stripped of its religious associations, as a modern architectural movement that would be "lay, bourgeois, secular, almost Protestant" (p. 15). Twentieth-century architects, too, rather than defining themselves against the Gothic, learned from it to build open, airy structures supported by steel rather than stone.

Chapter 2, "Ornament, Style, and Space," begins with the question of whether Gothic architecture is best defined formalistically or ideologically—as the result of technical innovation or the outgrowth of intellectual concepts (his treatment of the topic elsewhere suggests that Recht sides with the latter). Most of the chapter, however, is dedicated to considering various explanations of artistic style, from those rooted in psychology to structuralist treatments of the representation of space in Western art. The latter subject returns focus to the medieval, though the full import of the discussion does not become apparent until Recht's final chapter, in which he argues that the Gothic cathedral cultivated a way of seeing that led to the development of three-dimensional perspective in Renaissance painting.

In part 2, “An Introduction to the Art of Cathedrals,” Recht considers the various kinds of art objects that furnished these Gothic spaces, beginning with reliquaries and monstrances. Here he makes the intriguing argument that the size and openness of Gothic churches was motivated by “the increasingly overt demand by the congregation to see the Host at the moment of consecration” (p. 70). This demand resulted from the increased emphasis placed on the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, specifically the notion of transubstantiation, and the accompanying liturgical action of the elevation of the host. The dates of these doctrinal developments coincide nicely with the rise of Gothic architecture, from the first indications of veneration of the sacrament in the mid-eleventh century through the adoption of the term “transubstantiation” at the Lateran Council of 1215. Architects and artisans responded to the need to look upon Christ’s true body by building open spaces unhindered by internal columns and, eventually, crafting monstrances to display the sacrament for public adoration. In creating these vessels, artisans followed the older model of reliquaries. Recht associates this desire for the visual particularly with the theology and preaching of the Franciscans, inspired by their founder Francis of Assisi’s emphasis on visual testimony—particularly on seeing Christ in the Eucharist—and on making the central message of Christianity visible through one’s actions. Throughout the rest of his discussion, Recht returns to the work and ideas of the Franciscans as a prime mover in later medieval religious art.

The saintly relics preserved in ornate art objects provide an analogy to the self-conscious preservation and display of earlier architecture by Gothic renovators. In chapter 4, “Architecture and the Connoisseurs,” Recht relates cases of Gothic building and restoration projects designed to showcase preexisting structures, such as Abbot Suger’s renovation of Saint-Denis, which provided a Gothic enclosure for the Carolingian crypt. Juxtaposing the old and the new, Recht argues, “gave the new architect a place in a tradition and also allowed the true age of the church to be seen” (p. 115). As this quotation suggests, Gothic architecture gave the architect an increasingly important role in guiding the construction of complex buildings designed to create spectacular visual effects.

In chapter 5, “The Carved Image and Its Functions,” the pendulum of Recht’s discussion swings back to sculpture and the decorative arts. Having set the stage for the space inhabited by medieval votive images, reliefs, and other sculptures, the author can now examine how they

functioned in that environment. Of particular interest is the relation of these images to the liturgy—whether they took a part in ritual action or simply provided a backdrop. From there, Recht considers the notion that the images that decorated cathedrals served as a “book” for the laity (an idea put forward by medieval writers like Sicard of Cremona and Albertus Magnus). The complex iconographic programs of many of these images, he concludes, put them largely beyond the reach of the illiterate, clerics as well as lay people. Rather, the sculptures served as mnemonic aids for literate clergy already versed in the arts of memory and the subtle doctrinal concepts indexed by the images.

Having introduced the concept of realism in both sculpture and painting in chapter 5, Recht further traces the development of naturalistic style in chapter 6, “Models, Transmissions of Forms and Types, and Working Methods,” focusing on funerary sculpture. In contrast to the idealized, geometric forms of earlier medieval art, sculptors around 1300 began to model their works on live subjects. In time, the “reality principle” took hold, and effigies became realistic portraits of the deceased rather than abstract representations distinguishable only by features of dress or ornament. Contrary to this naturalistic movement were the conditions under which much medieval art was produced: a collaboration among many artists working on parts of a larger project, intended to represent “types” rather than individuals.

In his final chapter, Recht tries to draw the various threads of his discussion together into a unified concept of medieval seeing. “The medieval conception of space,” he posits, “remained reliant on two-dimensional vision because it was determined by the vertical axis”—a hierarchy that applied to people and ideas as well as visual forms (p. 312). The Gothic, in his analysis, began to change that situation by shifting emphasis from the eternal cycle of ritual to the realistic claims of narrative: this really happened. Belief in transubstantiation and realism in sculpture reinforced that narrative quality by making claims to real presence, whether that of Christ or of the person depicted in the art object. Nevertheless, medieval vision dissected the world as a series of flat surfaces, with the result that “every part of the church is treated as a plane” (p. 314). As perspective came to be employed by Florentine painters, the plane was transformed from “a plane of projection” to “a plane of section,” a two-dimensional slice of a three-dimensional space (p. 315). This perceptual and stylistic leap would not have occurred, Recht suggests, without the ground laid by the Gothic: in architecture, by an “emphatic axiality” (p. 316)

of deep rectangular space; in art, by an increasing mimesis that pushed artists to represent the visual as naturally as possible.

Synthesizing topics of this scope and variety proves a significant challenge to Recht's work. Trying to find a unifying element, one feels as if the author's exposition has come to resemble his subject: a vast, extraordinarily complex, and ultimately overwhelming space. Clear argumentative claims frequently come in the middle or at the ends of chapters, as at the end of the book itself, leaving the reader to wonder at times why the subject matter at hand needs to be considered. While Recht's style may simply reflect a continental preference for inductive rather than deductive organization, works of this scope benefit from more front-loading. Otherwise, the book becomes a *bricolage* of topics and concepts that, although interesting, fail to form a coherent whole.

To explore as many subjects as he does, Recht draws on an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, which he relates with a confident familiarity. Scholars wishing to see these sources for themselves, however, may have difficulty locating them because of inconsistent citation. While direct quotes are generally cited in endnotes, secondary sources are indicated only

in a bibliography compiled by the translator along with a list of "suggested reading" for each chapter. Recht's discussion of the mnemonic utility of carved images, for example, is heavily indebted to Mary Carruthers's *The Book of Memory* (1990), yet the author makes no explicit mention of her work; a reader unfamiliar with Carruthers beforehand would not know to look for her in the suggested reading list for the chapter.

Despite these shortcomings, *Believing and Seeing* will productively inform the work of scholars interested in testing and applying Recht's provocative ideas. To gain the most from the book, readers may best approach it piecemeal, investigating one section or chapter at a time and using the indices of persons and places to locate particular artists, authorities, subjects, or buildings (a subject index is lacking). In his summative chapter, Recht argues that because of the two-dimensional nature of medieval seeing, "[t]he gaze is able ... to move about the church, or rather over its surfaces of stone and glass, and consciously take in everything; there is nothing 'behind' the visible forms" (p. 315). The modern reader navigating this flawed monument, however, is unlikely to gain such a comprehensive view at first glance. Only careful and patient reading will bring the complete visage of *Believing and Seeing* into focus.

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