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## Jacqueline Jung, Eloquent Bodies: Movement, Expression, and the Human Figure in Gothic Sculpture

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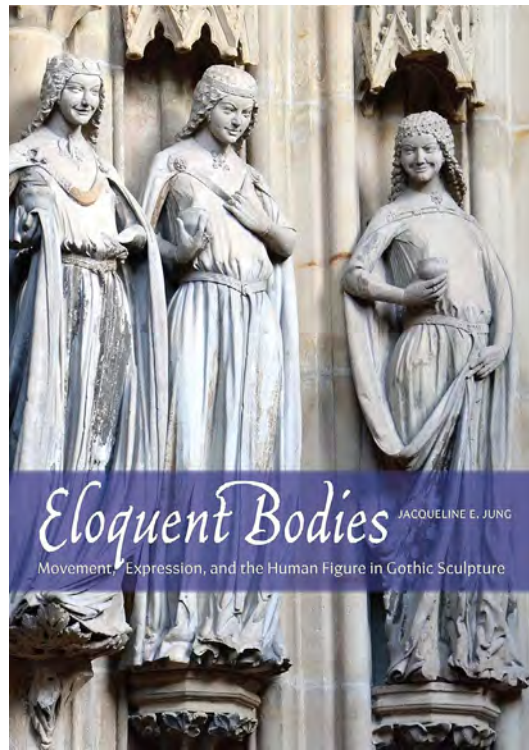
***Eloquent Bodies: Movement, Expression, and the Human Figure in Gothic Sculpture***

Jacqueline Jung

*Yale University Press, 2020. 340 pp., 211 color, 322 b/w. \$75.00 (cloth). ISBN 9780300214017*

In a band of writings published over the past twenty years, Jacqueline Jung has established herself as an exceptionally perceptive, ambitious, and creative medieval art historian. *Eloquent Bodies* is an impressive synthesis and extension of much of that work, as it offers a richly provocative series of interpretations of the celebrated Gothic sculptural programs at Strasbourg, Magdeburg, and Naumburg. Rooted in a rigorous attention to embodiment—both to the gestures as well as poses of the depicted figures and the reactions of active, mobile, physical viewers—Jung’s book posits compellingly fresh ways of thinking about works whose meanings *had seemed* largely settled. At a few points, admittedly, her argument feels limited by the regional and discursive boundaries that were once typical of medieval art history as a discipline. For the most part, though, this is a thoughtfully written, meticulously executed, and emphatically interdisciplinary work whose impact will surely be extensive.

To a certain extent, many of Jung’s central claims will be familiar to readers aware of her earlier scholarship, for the book’s core is based upon articles



and book chapters published between 2006 and 2018. But this is no mere reprise or compilation; rather, it is a consciously designed work of its own. Jung begins by emphasizing the importance of sensitive, active *beholding* in the presence of Gothic statuary. Where Romanesque carvings may have valued frontal axiality and a formal, aloof quality, Gothic works often anticipate and reward oblique views and nuanced, empathetic responses. That is a general claim, of course—but Jung then devotes the rest of this book to a vibrant exploration of its local repercussions.

Specifically, Jung leads us toward and through transept portals at Strasbourg, Magdeburg, and Erfurt Cathedrals, then around the west choir at Naumburg Cathedral, linking her sensory reactions to the historical contexts in which the sculptural programs took shape. These readings are exemplary in their patient attentiveness, and

they repeatedly yield intriguing, if speculative, results. For instance, she points out that the Strasbourg *Dormition* offers a series of progressive effects, as one approaches the south portal: a dynamic effect entirely appropriate to its dynamic subject matter. But Jung also notes that many visitors approached the portal from the west, meaning that the nearby figures of *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* came into view only gradually, and in distinct ways. Where *Ecclesia* reads as resolutely columnar—and thus as part of the church which she figuratively represents—*Synagoga* strikes Jung as more autonomous and embodied: precarious, in a word. And if such a claim reads as subjective, her subsequent contention that the reliefs and statues combine to present a sequence of shifting of images “that beholders must piece together as they move toward the threshold” is at once valid and valuable (90).

Her discussion of the Pillar of Judgment, just inside the south portal at Strasbourg, is also compelling. The larger figures in the upper registers of the massive pier project outwards more emphatically, in a clear concession to the awkwardly acute angle and considerable distance from which we view them. But Jung also notes that we are fixed by the intense gaze of John the Evangelist and addressed by the angels' trumpets, which implicitly summon the elect to a final judgment. As we make our way around the pillar, we then see three figures looking to our right, and towards a climatic image of Christ. Usually shrouded in shadow, the sculpture of Christ strikes Jung as both theologically apt (only partially perceptible in its articulation of divine mystery) and as art historically clever (in its subtle reference to earlier images of Jupiter in comparable Roman pillars found in the region).

In turning to Magdeburg, Jung focuses on ten large sculptures in the north transept portal, which depict the wise and foolish virgins. Their story, detailed in the Gospel of Matthew, centers on motion and relative access—only the wise are allowed into the bridal chamber—but was also seen by medieval theologians as a parable that taught good comportment and moral behavior. Noting that the transept may have been the site, in the early 1300s, of a public ritual involving the temporary expulsion of sinners, Jung proposes a reflective reading, in which the sculptures meaningfully relate to the situation of worshippers who are admitted, or denied, entry into the church. Moreover, she urges a close

attention to the nuanced renderings of the virgins, whose physiognomies and apparent emotions suggest a varied spectrum of grief and joy, soliciting both compassion and emulation. Such emotions, then, are appropriate in a diegetic and an extra-diegetic sense, and the virgins are at once models *of* Biblical actors and models *for* a medieval audience standing on the church's threshold.

Having thus established the potential value of close, embodied readings, Jung embarks on a sustained analysis of the Naumburg donor figures: a section that she terms openly experimental. In some ways, these two chapters are quite conventional, as they offer a detailed characterization of the political and ecclesiastical contexts in which the sculptures appeared. But Jung goes on to contend that the figures are unified by a series of mirrored poses and a dialectical logic. Extending that idea, she compares it to the *sic et non* structure employed by scholastic rhetoricians. Astute readers may be reminded of Erwin Panofsky's famous essay on Gothic architecture—but Jung's gambit is a clever one, as it offers a means of articulating the central ambiguity of the sculptures. Are they allusions to specific historical figures? Renderings of elevated, embodied virtues? Signs of a desired allegiance between court culture and bishop? Ultimately, Jung feels, we cannot know, for “these bodies speak eloquently, but it is not clear about what” (209). There is, here, no clear totalizing meaning. Rather, the program is effectively polyfocal and unresolved, with any reading of it bound to be necessarily provisional.

Throughout, Jung's prose is girded by a remarkable corpus of images.

This volume features more than 500 photographs, many of which Jung took herself in a deliberate attempt to supplement the elevated and artificially lit images typically produced by professional photographers. Working from the ground and from incrementally altered angles, Jung developed a visual demonstration of her claims: a compelling record of a roving, inquisitive eye. However, in a very candid section of the introduction, Jung ruminates on the ways in which photographs can misleadingly frame subjects and flatten space, well aware that photos can distort as much as they reveal. Moreover, our reliance on contemporary technologies has contributed to the development of viewing habits utterly distinct from “the fluidity of sensory perception, the sharpness and depth of memory, the layered and complex interpretive range that people in the age before print seem to have had” (6). Photographs are thus a potent but partial aid, illustrating important qualities but entirely foreign to any medieval period eye.

That abiding tension—between a respect for historical context and an embrace of modern tools—characterizes Jung's analysis in a second sense, as well. Certainly, she is attentive to relevant period evidence, drawing fluently on archival sources, ecclesiastical documents, and a large body of secondary historical scholarship. But Jung is also always aware that textual sources can only carry us so far (and can be used in very selective ways)—and so she enthusiastically draws, too, on a range of more recent theoretical models. This is doubtless the first analysis of Gothic sculpture to allude to cinematic

montage, astronauts' sense of proprioception, and Mitchell Schwarzer's notion of a *zoomscape*. Still, while such references are obviously anachronistic, they serve to underscore Jung's central conviction that only a combination of extended onsite looking, dutiful research, and flexible analysis can yield a satisfyingly nuanced account of embodied looking.

Approached from this angle, the potential objection that late medieval visitors to Strasbourg would not have thought in these exact terms (*proprioception?* *zoomscape?*) loses much of its force. Jung knows that the surviving primary sources simply do not permit confident generalizations regarding local viewing habits. Compared to, say, Byzantine examples, Gothic records of response are "less invested in evoking the buildings' perceptual effects beyond their awesome size and magnificence" (32). Nevertheless, the sculptures themselves seem to urge, or at least support, a haptic visuality and an eye to embodiedness. We are missing something important, in short, if we fail to attend to oblique views of the Strasbourg *Dormition*, to our merely partial view of Christ on the Pillar of Judgment, or to our precise position in relation to the wise virgins of Magdeburg. To Jung, at least, the rich polysemy of the works ultimately depends upon such self-awareness.

That is a fair assertion—but is it really a new one? Not entirely, as Jung fully realizes. "This aspect of sculpture," as we read on the opening page, "is so familiar in the literature on Baroque and modern art that it hardly would bear repeating, but

scholarship on Gothic sculpture since the 1920s rarely acknowledges this vital element of design and repetition." Hmm . . . since the 1920s? Well, in 1927 a provincial priest named Franz Stoehr criticized the use of scaffolds in a photographic campaign at Strasbourg, objecting to the creation of inappropriately elevated viewpoints. In a 1928 article, moreover, he emphasized the value of a *di sotto in sù* reading of the *Dormition*, stressing the physical position of an embodied viewer. But if Stoehr's work offers a precedent, it is merely partial and limited in scope. Jung builds on his implications but has crafted an undeniably richer and more far-reaching account . . . if not always far-reaching enough.

While Jung is certainly correct that historians of Baroque and modern art have long advanced kinetic and haptic readings of specific sculptural works, she seems uninterested in several significant related analyses of medieval and Renaissance works that could enrich her study. Consider, for example, O.K. Werckmeister's remarkable 1972 study of the lintel of Eve, at Autun, in which he contended that the figure's form was echoed by penitents directly beneath the portal; their prone position meaningfully echoed Eve's. Or take John Shearman's 1992 book *Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, which made a convincing case for what Shearman called an increasingly transitive relationship between spectator and artistic subject matters. At two points in her study (186-7), Jung also deploys the term *transitive*—but, disappointingly, Shearman's work is never mentioned, and finds no place in her ample bibliography.

In the end, these omissions don't indicate that Jung's thinking is narrow. To the contrary, in a brief but energetic conclusion, she gestures towards a variety of possible paths future scholarship might take. Among other things, she suggests a need for further work on the ensembles at Münster Cathedral and Paderborn Cathedral—each of which evince an interest in physical presence—and on the animated imagery found in Central Europe and Spain. In three dense paragraphs, moreover, she does acknowledge some of the ways in which art historians have begun to reconsider Romanesque and Gothic Italian sculptures from an embodied perspective. Unfortunately, as she notes, medievalists have tended to view Italy as a land apart. While flirting briefly with the possibility of transalpine cultural exchange, Jung ultimately declares that the work of the Pisani occupy a path "that leads us away from this book's focus" (279).

By focus, Jung means her primary subject matter—which, she gamely acknowledges, "hews to the traditional shape of the German Gothic canon" (276). Focus is also an optical term, reminding us of her methodological contribution, which is anything but conventional or myopic. At the end of her book, Jung writes, by "always taking into account where we stand as beholders and thinkers, we can let the works speak forth in various cadences" (283). The point resounds, and this book is ultimately an inviting testimony to a leading scholar's commitment to standing, beholding, and thinking in novel and rewarding ways.

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