

**Mondini, Daniela: *Mittelalter im Bild. Séroux d'Agincourt und die Kunsthistoriographie um 1800*, Zürich: Zurich InterPublishers GmbH 2005**  
ISBN-10: 3-909252-13-3, 408 S.

Reviewed by: Ingrid R Vermeulen

The „Histoire de l'art par les monumens“ (1810-23) is one of those monumental works in the historiography of art whose reputation never fully flowered. Its author Jean Baptist Séroux d'Agincourt (1730-1814) remained in the shadow of many of his colleagues at least until 1997, when Édouard Pommier suggested that he was after Vasari and Winckelmann maybe the third inventor of the history of art. Such a remark is linked up to a steady increase of interest for the French scholar in the last decennia. In the 1960s d'Agincourt's collection of reproductive drawings was rediscovered in the Vatican library and 10 years ago the manu-scripts and letters relating to the book were recovered in the Getty Research Institute. These finds generated several articles by Angela Cipriani, Henri Loyrette, and Pascal Griener and now finally the first monograph on d'Agincourt, written by Daniela Mondini. [\[1\]](#)

„Mittelalter im Bild“ gives the fullest account to date of the long and troubled history of the Histoire. In 1779 the former tax farmer at the French court, d'Agincourt, settled in Rome to write a book on the vast world of medieval art. He initiated a series of reproduction campaigns, assembling large amounts of drawings and engravings, and he became a well-known figure in circles of art scholars. The speed with which d'Agincourt dealt with his project in the 1780s came to an abrupt halt in 1789 when the illustrations which had been sent to Paris for publication were sent back due to the outbreak of the French Revolution. As the tide turned he was deprived of financial resources and distrusted because of anti-French sentiments. When the text for his book was ready in 1796, he could not find a publisher. Only in 1810 the publication of his magnum opus was finally started in Paris. But even then problems occurred. The editor Dufourny decided to update the by now old-fashioned writing and made changes to the organization of the book, which had a negative effect on its reception. When d'Agincourt died in 1814, it would take another nine years before the „Histoire de l'art par les monumens“ was complete.

The core of „Mittelalter im Bild“ is made up of a discussion of the realization, content and reception of the Histoire, which comprises an overview of medieval architecture, sculpture and painting respectively in the extended period from the fourth to the sixteenth century in six large folio volumes. More than on the often repeated topoi from the prefaces, Mondini bases the discussion on a detailed knowledge of the main body of d'Agincourt's Histoire in conjunction with that of the drawing collection, manuscripts, contemporary art literature and medieval art. Especially in a series of stimulating case studies, such as that devoted to Santo Stefano in Bologna or S. Paolo Fuori le Mura in Rome, d'Agincourt's work comes to life. Added to historiographical observations are those concerning the documentary value of the reproductive drawings to medievalists today. On Santo Stefano for example we not only learn how d'Agincourt documented the different aspects of the building in drawings - from ground plan, elevations, architectural details and relief

sculpture to frescoes -, how he developed his views on the basis of secondary literature by Malvasia, Bianconi and Lanzi for example, but also how the reproductive drawings of frescoes now lost extend the present knowledge of the entire ensemble.

One of the new insights put forward is that an understanding of the basic premises of the *Histoire* cannot be gained from the movement of artists and art-historians who promoted the admiration of medieval art since the 1790s. The belated publication between 1810 and 1823 seems to suggest that the *Histoire* was a result of this reappraisal. Yet, the initial ideas for the book were already formulated in the late 1770s. Moreover, d'Agincourt had been fervently against the appreciation of an art which was deemed barbaric in comparison with classical examples. His work is a product of an antiquarian and cultural-historical tradition in which the importance of objects, monuments and works of art as historical sources was already acknowledged. Within this tradition, to which belong scholars such as Bosio, Mabillon, Montesquieu, Montfaucon, Gibbon, Caylus, Winckelmann, Muratori and Tiraboschi, the vision on the Middle Ages as a period in decay - vital to d'Agincourt - was already thematized. These authors showed the French scholar that a historical interest for (medieval) art went together perfectly with the taste for classical art. In fact, it was the continuation of the use of classical motives in medieval art which concerned him most.

Fundamental to d'Agincourt's interpretation of the history of medieval art was further the widespread fascination for artistic developments of growth and decline. It originated in the sixteenth century with Vasari's discussion of Renaissance art in the *Vite* and was given new form in the middle of the eighteenth century by Caylus and Winckelmann in respect to classical art. By applying it to the Middle Ages d'Agincourt aimed to bridge the gap between classical and modern art. In the period from the fourth to the sixteenth century he recognized several phases of decay, renaissance and renewal. These phases, which were in a variation likened by d'Agincourt to Buffon's „*Les époques de la nature*“, seem easily comparable to the system of (stylistic) periods which characterize overviews on art history in the nineteenth century. [2] Mondini however convincingly argues that d'Agincourt's empirical method, in which a detailed connoisseurship of art works reigned supreme, stood as yet in the way of a coherent periodization.

The emphasis on connoisseurship accounts for the unusually large amount of illustrations in the *Histoire*, which receive ample attention in Mondini's study. D'Agincourt's book was a history of art ‚by its monuments‘, meaning that art works instead of artists had now become the main actors in the story of art. The plates, on which often whole groups of art works appeared, are typified by a specific image didactics, resulting for example in chronological-systematic plates devoted to church façades or columns and in those devoted to painting schools such as the Tuscan or the Venetian. Mondini justly appreciates the careful organization of the illustrations, but dismisses their proclaimed fidelity. She is generally right, stating that many inaccuracies occur in the images and that they are of varying quality, especially if they are judged against today's standards of reproduction. However, measured by eighteenth-century standards d'Agincourt did occasionally produce faithful images, in particular when he used the technique of tracing for the reproduction of miniatures.

„*Mittelalter im Bild*“ proves to be a valuable contribution to the knowledge on d'Agincourt and his work. A remark should however be made on its one-sided focus on the architecture section. Mondini points out that only the section on architecture in d'Agincourt's manuscripts has been

studied, and that those on sculpture and painting await further study. Indeed, in the paragraphs entitled „Erzählung durch die Monumente“, for example, sculptures and paintings do occur, but most works discussed are buildings. They illustrate the artistic events in the Middle Ages, such as the S. Paolo Fuori le Mura exemplifying the phase of decay, the S. Vitale that of a temporary revival, and the Notre Dame Gothic architecture. Yet, the architecture section is not representative for the whole book. As Mondini states, not the architecture section but the painting section was probably the most important to d'Agincourt since 204 of the total of 325 plates were devoted to painting, whereas 73 plates were devoted to architecture and only 48 to sculpture.

A theme which is mentioned, but deserves more full attention is that of the methodological roots of the *Histoire* in the art literature from Vasari to Winckelmann, not least because it substantiates Mondini's analysis of d'Agincourt's particular connoisseurship. It is the art literature which gave art scholars in the eighteenth century the tools to develop connoisseurship and analyze works of art empirically. The tools came for example in the form of artistic criteria such as design and expression which helped Winckelmann and later on d'Agincourt - especially as it seems in the sculpture and painting sections - to focus on stylistic characteristics and pinpoint artistic change. The French scholar improved the basically descriptive approach of his predecessors by the systematic supply of visual proof in the form of illustrations. The reoccurring details of the heads of figures for example served to show the changes in the mastery of expression in art. It is obvious that such and other illustrated details in the *Histoire* cannot but disappoint art-historians aiming to retrieve or reconstruct lost ensembles of works of art today - a sentiment which is expressed several times by Mondini.

Another tool which was handed down in conjunction with the art literature was the collection of prints and drawings. In the eighteenth century paper collections did not simply form the visual reference material on which many art scholars such as Baldinucci, d'Argenville, Winckelmann and Lanzi drew, when they conceived and wrote their as a rule unillustrated books. Carefully selected and arranged collections also, and more importantly, obtained a unique reputation for revealing artistic developments from the past. D'Agincourt explored such mechanisms fully and decided on a scale up till then unimaginable in the art literature to publish his own collection of reproductions, as we have seen. <sup>[3]</sup> A discussion of this tradition of paper collecting would complete that of Mondini on the forerunners of illustrated literature in the fields of for example architecture, natural history and antiquarianism.

Unlike Pommier, Mondini does not strive to rehabilitate d'Agincourt's *Histoire*. After all, the book's half-hearted reception was not entirely unjustified, given its many flaws resulting from the ill-fated history of its publication mentioned above. Yet, the rich picture sketched in „Mittelalter im Bild“ provides enough clues as to why d'Agincourt nonetheless deserves a firm place in the historiography of art. First of all he managed to see the Middle Ages as a period valuable to the study of the history of art, despite the fact that the aesthetic appreciation of medieval art was low. For its assessment he incorporated antiquarian and historical approaches into an art-historical one, to which connoisseurship was central. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Middle Ages in the field of art history opened up the new possibility to treat art in a historical continuum from antiquity to the present. He replaced the in the eighteenth century usual art-historical arrangement according to schools for a succession of periods. The as yet inconsistent application of phases of artistic decay and subsequent growth seems to prefigure the consecutive stylistic periods which charac-

terize art-historical overviews since the nineteenth century. Moreover, d'Agincourt made an important contribution to the illustrated history of art. The ways in which his illustrations revealed artistic changes in the past were so convincing that they were imitated repeatedly in the already mentioned overviews from the nineteenth-century. It is probably thanks to image fanatics such as d'Agincourt that up till today a history of art without reproductions seems unimaginable.

#### Notes:

[1] Angela Cipriani, 'Una proposta per Seroux d'Agincourt. La Storia dell'Architettura', *Storia dell'arte* 11 (1971), pp. 211-261; Henri Loyrette, 'Séroux d'Agincourt et les origines de l'histoire de l'art médiéval', *Revue de l'Art* 48 (1980), pp. 40-56; Pascal Griener, 'La fa-tale attraction du Moyen-Age. Jean-Baptiste Séroux d'Agincourt et l'Histoire de l'Art par les monumens' (1810-23), *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte* 54 (1997), pp. 225-234.

[2] Franz Kugler, *Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte*, Stuttgart 1842.

[3] Ingrid Vermeulen, *Picturing Art History. The Rise of the Illustrated History of Art in the Eighteenth Century* (diss.), Amsterdam 2006.

#### Recommended Citation:

Ingrid R Vermeulen: [Review of:] Mondini, Daniela: *Mittelalter im Bild. Séroux d'Agincourt und die Kunsthistoriographie um 1800*, Zürich 2005. In: ArtHist.net, Jul 19, 2007 (accessed Apr 19, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/reviews/16>>.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License. For the conditions under which you may distribute, copy and transmit the work, please go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>