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FRONT COVER

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Piazza del Duomo, Milan
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Comments are welcome.

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The main gate of the Centre d'études supérieures de la Renaissance, Tours
Photograph: CESR

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Pen and Parchment: Drawing in the Middle Ages

Curator: Melanie Holcomb

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

2 June – 23 August 2009

Although the Metropolitan Museum of Art's recent exhibition *Pen and Parchment: Drawing in the Middle Ages* made no claim to specialize in architectural material, the exhibition included a sample of early architectural drawings that was not merely representative, but provocative in its scope.

Spread across three rooms of the Met's galleries for drawings, prints, and photographs, *Pen and Parchment* brought together six centuries of material to present a synoptic view of drawing before the Renaissance. Most of the fifty-three objects on display were bound manuscripts, including the earliest work in the show, the ninth-century Corbie Psalter, whose pages feature elaborately ornamented outsize initials. In other instances the illustrations were the main event, as with the full-page figural line drawings of the tenth-century Sherborne Pontifical. If all of this sounds esoteric, it is to curator Melanie Holcomb's credit that *Pen and Parchment* did not seem so: on the contrary, the show made a vivid case for the vitality of drawing across a wide chronological and geographic range.

That vitality apparently knew no size limits, as *Pen and Parchment* demonstrated with the inclusion of both a thirteenth-century scroll illustrating *The Compendium of the History through the Genealogy of Christ* by Peter of Poitiers, unfurled to more than three meters, and the miniatures in the Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux (1324-28), measuring less than nine centimeters high. In her exhibition catalogue essay, "Strokes of Genius: The Draftsman's Art in the Middle Ages," Holcomb found unity among this disparate material by returning to several themes, among them the symbiotic relationship between text and image and the variations of technique among draftsmen. But neither of these themes applied to the architectural material, by and large confined to the exhibition's third and final room.



Architectural Drawing, France, 1450 – 1500.
Pen and brown ink over black chalk on vellum
Photograph: Courtesy of the Metropolitan
Museum of Art, the Cloisters Collection, 1968, 68.49

The representation of a building was the artist's main objective for only a few drawings in *Pen and Parchment*. Add to that number a couple of diagrams that are architectural in nature, and this is still a small subset of drawings—small, but not meager. Probably the best known of the drawings is the elevation of the Strasbourg Cathedral façade known as Plan A1, owned by the Musée de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame, Strasbourg. Part of a group of drawings documenting various schemes for the west front of the Strasbourg Cathedral before construction began in 1277, Plan A1 shows a design for the façade's southern half that was never executed. As such, the sheet is one of the oldest extant examples of what might be called a process drawing, that is, a building design that originated with a draftsman working on parchment. This point was established in the lively debate over the Strasbourg drawings carried out by Roland Recht, Reinhard Wortmann, and, most recently, Robert Bork, whose 2005 *JSAH* article delved into how geometric manipulations were used to generate the Strasbourg façade design.* At the Metropolitan exhibition one could see first-hand how the accumulation of detail added up to much more than a complex—albeit chronologically early—exercise in compassmanship.

*Robert Bork, "Plan B and the Geometry of Façade Design at Strasbourg Cathedral, 1250-1350," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 64, no. 4 (December 2005): 442-473.

Strasbourg Plan A1 was exhibited alongside another cathedral elevation, a late fifteenth-century drawing of a church that bears some similarity to the west façade of Saint-Maclou in Rouen. Not included in the exhibition catalogue, the drawing belongs to the Met's own Cloisters Collection and is a beautiful example of how orthographic projection was employed by a northern draftsman at a time when architects south of the Alps were experimenting with linear perspective. More pictorial representational techniques were also on display at *Pen and Parchment*, particularly in a view of the Cathedral of Pavia by Opicinus de Canistris (1296–ca. 1354), part of a larger portfolio of his works now in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Pal. Lat. 1993), which faced the northern drawings from the opposite wall.** Although the view of Pavia Cathedral is not truly representative of any distinct southern architectural tradition—for one thing, Opicinus was not an architect, and this view is the only one of his works to show a building in this way—the arrangement was apt. Opicinus's rendering of the cathedral, a structure demolished in the fifteenth century, shows the exterior as a visitor might approach it. The building appears as a series of plastic volumes tilting into the foreground, with an equestrian statue

**For an illustration of this drawing of the double cathedral of Pavia, see the exhibition blog: http://blog.metmuseum.org/penandparchment/exhibition-images/cat44or4_49f/



Strasbourg Cathedral façade elevation (Plan A1)
Photograph: By permission of the Musée de l'œuvre
Notre-Dame, Strasbourg

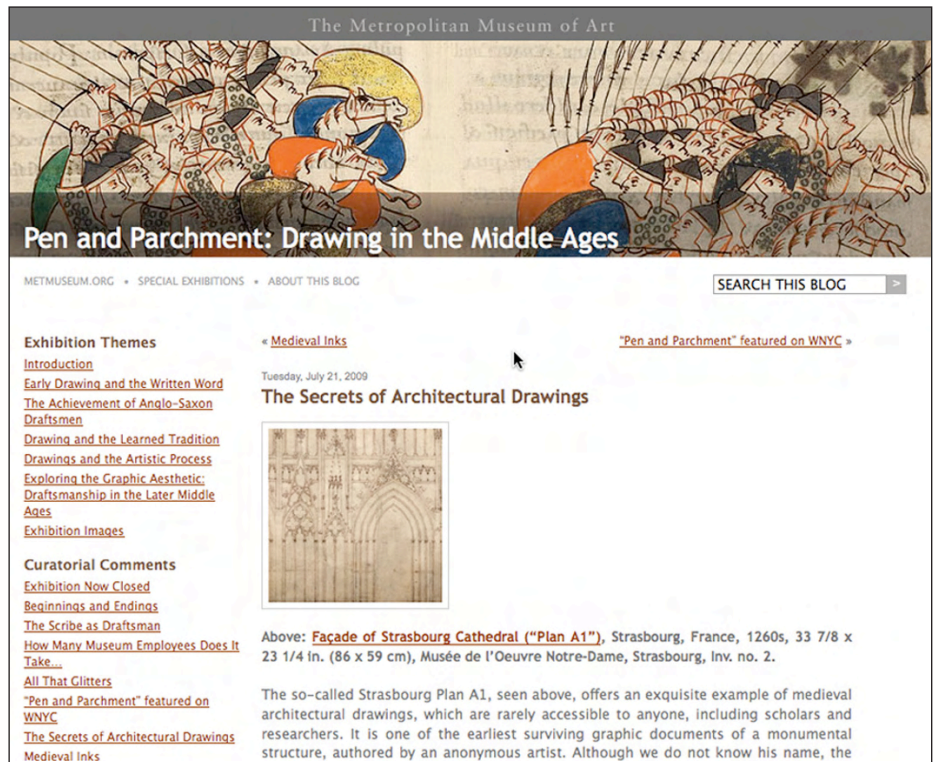
in the center giving scale to the ensemble. As a highly individualistic record, the view could not be more different from the smooth and intricate lattices of the Gothic façades across the room.

† For an illustration of this crucifixion diagram, see the exhibition blog: http://blog.metmuseum.org/penandparchment/exhibition-images/cat45or6_49f/

The exhibition included another drawing by Opicinus, an extraordinary diagram of the earthly and spiritual church with a crucifixion of Christ at its center.† This diagram formed part of the same Palatinus portfolio that contains the Pavia Cathedral view, a portfolio produced in Avignon between 1335 and 1350. Like many of the sheets exhibited in the show, this one would be difficult to understand without its accompanying catalogue entry, a lucid and informative piece by Karl Whittington. Whittington explains how Opicinus laid out the church hierarchy within this diagrammatic frame, a complicated piece of geometry that comes complete with embedded iconographic representations and even a map, if one knows where to look. It is a mind-bending number, and one that resembles a floor plan.

In the same category of architecturally based diagrams, one could also include the Consanguinity Chart, an illustration of family relationships from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (ca. 1160–65). This drawing, part of a long work produced in a scriptorium in Prüfening, Germany, and now housed in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, establishes degrees of kinship using a series of linked arches. Family members appear as carefully labeled heads, sorted into different archways according to their relationship to each other, and the stacked arches in turn form the body of a man inscribed within a square frame. In this last respect it is difficult to resist comparing the Consanguinity Chart to Vitruvian man. Exhibited among such a fine selection of early architectural drawings, limited in number but rich in scope, one cannot help but make such broad historical comparisons.

Carolyn Yerkes
[Columbia University]



The *Pen and Parchment* exhibition blog
Screenshot: Courtesy of the Metropolitan
Museum of Art

Publications related to the exhibition:

Melanie Holcomb, *Pen and Parchment: Drawing in the Middle Ages*. With contributions by Lisa Bessette, Barbara Drake Boehm, Evelyn M. Cohen, Kathryn Gerry, Ludovico V. Geymonat, Aden Kumler, Lawrence Nees, William Noel, Wendy A. Stein, Faith Wallis, Karl Whittington, Elizabeth Williams, and Nancy Wu. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009, 200 pp., 157 illus. (138 color), \$ 50, ISBN 978-1-58839-318-0 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), 978-0-300-14894-7 (Yale University Press).

Exhibition blog:

<http://blog.metmuseum.org/penandparchment/>

The *Pen and Parchment* blog contains digital images of the objects included in the show, narrative entries on “exhibition themes,” and “curatorial comments” about specific objects.