

Books Reviews

Judging a book by its cover

Magnificent medieval book bindings of gospels and lectionaries reveal much of the period. By C.M. Kauffmann

Buch-Gewänder. Prachteinbände im Mittelalter
David Ganz
Reimer Verlag, 400pp, €79 (hb);
in German only

Luxuriously bound gospel books—such as *Codex Aureus of St Emmeram: Gospels of Charles the Bald (around 870)*—were sacramental, combining form and content

RELIGION

Buch-Gewänder. Prachteinbände im Mittelalter, which may be translated as Garments for Books: Luxury Bindings in the Middle Ages, expresses the metaphor of binding as clothing which is here discussed at length. However, it forms only part of the theme of books as central to church services and of the splendidly decorated binding making holiness visible. These luxury bindings were seen as demonstrating God's presence in such books, which was the overriding reason for donors and patrons to support their manufacture.

The first of the three main sections deals with book covers as ornament, with the role of books—in particular gospels and gospel lectionaries (a selection of passages for liturgical readings)—as liturgical objects, taking their place at the altar along with chalice, paten and relics. The ivory carvings on the covers sometimes contain gospel narratives while, from about 800, more frequently depict the Crucifixion.

"Books on Books: Self-Reference in Book Covers", the next section, discusses the belief, shared by all book religions, in the power of holy books. Books of the gospels sustain the teaching of Christ after his death and he is frequently depicted on the cover holding an open book. In the *Codex Aureus of St Emmeram*, commissioned by Charles the Bald in around 870, Christ is shown with a Bible open at John 14.6 clearly visible to viewers: "I am the way and the truth and the life". To spread the message, he is surrounded by images of the four evangelists writing the gospels.

The last section enlarges upon the role of the luxury book cover as an object in the church or monastic treasure. Books were in libraries and in sacristies, but luxury bindings were kept in church treasuries along with cult items, clearly entering a higher domain.

In his last chapter, "Montage and Media Archaeology", the author amusingly quotes Sergei Eisenstein, the Soviet film director, in analysing the gospel lectionary of the Emperor Henry II, made at his command for the Cathedral of Bamberg's consecration in 1012. The binding consists of an



ivory panel of about 870, its jewelled and enamelled surround, probably 10th century Byzantine, described as a "tour de force of montage". Only the narrow frame containing the inscription dedicated to Henry II is of the date of the manuscript. The need to create holy treasures for a newly founded cathedral frequently entailed such mingling of precious older materials for luxury bindings.

In covering these different aspects, David Ganz focuses on a dozen bindings of the period 600-1100. The majority are German of the Carolingian and Ottonian periods, and the donors discussed are mainly royalty or bishops, abbesses and abbots. His thoughtful and extensive text concentrates on the interpretation of iconographical meaning while also taking in the historical and ecclesiastical context of these artefacts. Only occasionally do these iconographical interpretations appear far-fetched. The study comes to end, we are told, because of the privatisation of book religion from the 12th century when more books were produced for private prayer. Undeniably true, but this generalisation ignores the splendidly illustrated giant Bibles made as status symbols for the richer monasteries in the period from 1100.

For a reader struggling with the densely argued German, it should be emphasised that there are 221 splendid illustrations which provide a welcome amplification of the text. Numerous pictures show these bindings from the side as well as the front and back, some even providing details of the embedded precious stones. Certainly, the volume draws attention to a major type of religious artefact largely neglected in the more general books on medieval art.

• C.M. Kauffmann was the Keeper of prints, drawings and paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum and then the director of the Courtauld Institute of Art (1985-95)

Olympians of letters

Bernard Berenson and Kenneth Clark corresponded for 34 years, creating a catalogue of friendship and mutual passions. By Eliot Rowlands

My Dear BB: the Letters of Bernard Berenson and Kenneth Clark, 1925-1959
Robert Cumming, ed
Yale University Press, 583pp, £25 (hb)

LETTERS

The subject of Bernard Berenson and of Kenneth Clark—among the most learned, influential, indeed Olympian, art historians and art critics of the last century—has gathered increased attention in recent years. In 2009, for example, a conference on Berenson was held at his former home of Villa I Tatti in Tuscany, the proceedings of which were published five years later. Specialists in Italian Renaissance painting, forever in his debt, continue to assess his contributions, and his vast world of contacts and correspondents invites further study.

The almost-40-years-younger Clark first met Berenson in 1925 and later gained worldwide fame thanks to his BBC television series, "Civilisation", with its fascinating generalisations and powers of synthesis. An exhibition highlighting Clark's multiple roles—including that of art patron, collector, communicator and historian of ideas—took place last year at Tate Britain, which is the repository of his papers. Now accessible, these

will surely be mined to maximum effect in a forthcoming biography by James Stourton. To this gathering mass of studies and material there now appears *My Dear BB*, Yale University Press's publication of the complete correspondence between Berenson and Clark. Extending from 1925 to 1959 (the year of Berenson's death), the letters have been edited and annotated to superlative effect by Robert Cumming, an adjunct professor at the Boston University Centre in London.

How do I love this book? Let me count the ways. First there are the letters themselves, richissime in information and observations on art, people and the world at large. As with any attempted complete correspondence, a certain repetition is present but, thanks to Cumming's notes, there is barely a dry page in the lot. The letters are divided into ten chapters, each of which is introduced by a cogent, well-informed double biography for the time span covered, as well as a brief chronology. In this manner, a steady stream of historical context engages the reader and leads him on. Among the book's worthiest components is a 48-page "dramatis personae". This is a real contribution to the study of art history, as the inclusion of notices on such diverse figures as Alessandro Contini Bonacossi, K.T. Parker and the collector Henry J. Oppenheimer attest. In his excellent "Afterword," Cumming also provides an eminently fair and



Although friends for many years, this is the only known photograph of Bernard Berenson and Kenneth Clark together, walking in the hills above Villa I Tatti in March 1950

nuanced assessment of Clark's and Berenson's individual achievements, as well as of their characters. To my mind, for example, what he says of the more controversial aspects of Berenson's career rings true. What Clark himself penned about "BB"—namely an obituary in the *Sunday Times* and the amplified text of his *Palazzo Vecchio* address of 7 May 1960—also appear here as appendices. This is followed by an excellent index, essential in any such publication.

In the early Berenson/Clark correspondence, Cumming notes that a certain "mutual opportunism" is evident. Clark proffers gratitude to the much older Berenson for guiding his career and continues to solicit his advice. In return, Berenson regularly implores Clark for art-world news and photographs of works of art. Yet by the eve of the Second World War, a palpable, genuine affection had clearly developed. Thanking BB in February

1939 for his recent hospitality in Florence, Clark wrote of "a flow of reason and learning [there] combined with a genial warmth which made me feel I was living in a golden age of culture, a sunset of culture no doubt, but none the less beautiful for that". The legacy of I Tatti, what the same figure dubbed "that hortus conclusus of civilisation", clearly lived on in Clark, who dedicated the rest of his remarkable and worthy life to disseminating the message of art to ever-widening audiences.

• Eliot W. Rowlands was the senior researcher at Wildenstein & Co, New York for more than 25 years. He is now an independent art historian and a specialist in early Italian Renaissance painting