# ILKA MESTEMACHER, *MARMOR, GOLD UND EDELSTEINE. MATERIALIMITATION IN DER KAROLINGISCHEN BUCHMALEREI*

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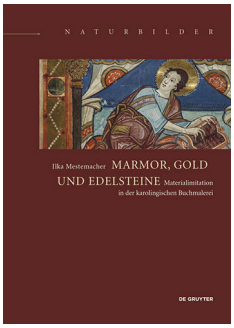


Reviewed by
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## *Realia* and representation. More questions for the "court school"

The decades just around 800 were a good time for book-making in the Frankish kingdoms. At this time painters, draftspeople, and patrons invested prodigious experimental energy and, often, hefty material resources in re-imagining visual aspects of the codex form. Some 1200 years down the line, the decade since the anniversary of Charlemagne's death in 814 has proven a good time for the study of these consummately rich books – whether "rich" is construed primarily in a visual, intellectual sense, or includes a manuscript's material to boot. While Lawrence Nees's nimble new catalogue of Frankish manuscripts spotlights the diversity of genres and production levels that flourished in the eighth and ninth centuries,[1] a number of notable studies have looked afresh at the cluster of stunning gospel books traditionally known as the "Court School"

[1] Lawrence Nees, *Frankish Manuscripts. Seventh to Tenth Centuries*, London/New York 2022.

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manuscripts, following Wilhelm Koehler.[2] Befitting a family of book paintings that includes several innovative renditions of a composition often dubbed the "Fountain of Life", a constellation of colleagues working in multiple languages and with varied methodological commitments has gone to the well and drawn deep.[3]

The impetus for this brief contribution to *21* was a review request for one of the new additions to the constellation: Ilka Mestemacher's *Marmor, Gold und Edelsteine. Materialimitation in der karolingischen Buchmalerei*. In view of the journal's broad art historical remit I have taken the occasion not to weigh merits and desiderata in this particular study, but rather to present Mestemacher's book as an invitation to think with early medieval art when approaching core questions of representational culture. For one thing *Marmor, Gold und Edelsteine* does very well is to bring out the kaleidoscopic ways the Court manuscripts pose a set of questions about the nature of representation in pictorial media.

The prompt for Mestemacher's study is the fact that early medieval book painters – spectacularly, but not solely, in the Court group – consistently used their own medium and materials to harness others. Mestemacher's title enumerates three of the most prevalent natural materials rendered in manuscript painting of the time: marble, gold, and gemstones. These rendered materials generally appear in, or as, settings for textual, numeric, or figural contents. Marble, gold, and gems most commonly adorn and help to structure the indexing apparatus for the four gospels known as the canon tables, which usually begin a gospel book. The canon tables comprise lists of textual sections that facilitate cross-reference among the evangelists' distinct texts. In elaborate renditions, the tables are often presented in colonnades. This form has practical value in ordering the lists of numbers and supporting comparison across them, but the colonnade also articulates an architectural metaphor key to contemporary thinking about the harmonious relationship among the four discrete gospels. Later in the manuscripts, painters regularly reprised the arch forms of the canon tables to house

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The term is increasingly contentious. The studies mentioned here consistently engage it (with more or less discussion of its difficulties) for lack of another efficient moniker to encompass both the conceptual unities of the corpus and the persistent uncertainty about the production history of its members. In the primary study discussed, Mestemacher keeps the term in play with qualifications, sometimes opting for "Hof-Handschriften", which foregrounds the court's social and intellectual context above the production-implications of "school". The book includes a catalogue of key manuscripts that lays out their known connections to royal circles. My review title tips a hat to the late Theo Jülich, who weighed the "Court School" category primarily on the ivory side: Jülich, Fragen an die Hofschule, in: Peter van den Brink and Sarvenaz Ayooghi (eds.), *Karls Kunst*, Dresden 2018, 57–73.

3
Not a comprehensive list, but one that gives a flavor of this variety, should include Cécile Voyer, *Orner la parole de Dieu, le livre d'Évangiles et son décor (800–1030). Paris, Arsenal, ms. 592*, Paris 2018; Elizabeth Lane Fischer, *The Depiction of Spatial Experience in Early Medieval Gospel Books, 787–814 CE*, PhD Dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2018; and the substantial contributions to Michael Embach, Claudine Moulin, and Harald Wolter-von dem Knesebeck (eds.), *Die Handschriften der Hofschule Kaiser Karls des Grossen. Individuelle Gestalt und europäisches Kulturerbe*, Trier 2019. Forthcoming work by Lawrence Nees, Anne-Orange Poilpré, and the "Textures of Sacred Scripture" project at the University of Zurich, *inter alia*, testify to continuing investment in the corpus.

images of the gospel writers; pictured marble and gemstones, along with gold, define these settings too. Moreover, in several Court-sphere books, patterned settings featuring related motifs encase the gospel texts on every page.

Significantly, the potent natural materials of marble and jewels are almost always depicted here in highly worked forms, whereby stone is polished and cut to pillars; gemstones carved and intricately set. The need to observe this distinction between the natural and the worked already indicates several of the most pressing and interesting questions arising from the painters' practice – questions that turn on the ability of one medium and/or material to represent another, and the consequences of its relative success. What factors assure us of the imitation of one material by another in the first place? When should we look for meaning in the pictorial invocation of a specific material? When does the pictorial invocation of another medium (like architecture, or jewelry) or craft (like carving) matter more than the citation of a specific material (like marble)? How does picturing affect the (idea of an) imaged material, and how does it affect the character of the imaging medium, in turn?

When the mimesis of particular pictured materials and their worked forms is historically situated, probing the practice yields a wide range of cultural connotations. These oscillate among the properties or origin stories ascribed to materials themselves, and the range of association that can accrue to particular pairs of material and form (that is, when iconography gets involved). The topic of cross-media mimesis can also be framed more generally. Then, the representation of natural materials, especially in worked forms, can become part of a larger conversation about painters' rendition of crafted things *qua* crafted things. The depiction of books-within-books is a classic for the early medieval corpus, for instance; pictured textiles offer other rich ground.[4] In this light, pictorial cross-reference among recognizable materials and forms can prompt exploration of varied possible intellectual ramifications that follow when painters incorporate the world "outside" into the purview of their images. The practice of such cross-reference, though, also circles back on itself to urge other lines of inquiry based in questions of convention, innovation, and participation in established pictorial traditions. In turn, questions about pictorial tradition call for attention to themes of process as well as themes of image. What does it mean to participate in a particular pictorial tradition in a particular time and place? How do pictorial choices ask us to think in balance between artistic transmission (in the sense of emulation or reproduction of other works) and painters' direct observation of the world around them?

A study like Mestemacher's is generative in the way it at once seeks responses to all these (and other) questions in the historical sphere of the primary sources, and also fosters at least this reader's

[4] Explored, *inter alia*, by Anna Bücheler, *Ornament as Argument. Textile Pages and Textile Metaphors in Early Medieval Manuscripts*, Berlin/Boston 2019.

desire to convene a book club around the core phenomena that would bring diverse studies into conversation. The work is already necessarily in dialogue with recent discussions of the particular focal materials, with their many uses and connotations.[5] It would be productive to read together with studies of material rhetoric keyed to other matters;[6] and likewise all those concerned with the practices and terminology of evocation and allusion.[7]

In the tighter context of renewed work on the "Court School", highly productive dialogue grows between analysis focused on pictorial rhetoric, and the strides in physical material analysis this corpus has increasingly enjoyed.[8] The more we know about the literal materials and processes that produced such sophisticated books, the more complex our understanding of their verbal and visual rhetoric becomes. Gold, for instance, seems to function rather differently to pictured marble. It can work representationally, but straightforwardly embodies itself at the same time – together with the other values attached to such precious matter (aesthetic, economic, theological, or natural-philosophical values, for example).[9] However, especially in a literary culture that frequently uses gold as a metaphor, and prizes the bright qualities associated with the metal as much as the metal *per se*, it makes a real difference to know the fact and the types of admixtures that could stand in for gold, even in the highest-end book production. It makes a difference to know, in one case, that the purest gold available was used for the halo of a Christ figure. This matters not primarily because such a match of weighty iconography and material grade confirms ready expectations about the way the quality of materials can effect the expression of theological priorities. Instead, the example points up the way the *distribution* of matter becomes part of a book's material rhetoric. This case concurrently emphasizes the way the ability to *make* different kinds of paint in the first place becomes part of

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E.g., Fabio Barry, *Painting in Stone. Architecture and the Poetics of Marble from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, New Haven, CT/London 2020.

6
E.g., Ittai Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2016.

7
E.g., Margaret S. Graves, *Arts of Allusion. Object, Ornament, and Architecture in Medieval Islam*, New York 2018. I have kept these suggestions for triangulation essentially in the medievalist sphere; Mestemacher's bibliography contains more such, and the book engages with many works I also highlight here. Other titles treating more varied artistic traditions, however, could readily be swapped in.

8
A touchstone in the important ongoing work with the books' material composition is Charlotte Denoël, Patricia Roger Puyo, Anne-Marie Brunet, and Nathalie Poulain Siloe, Illuminating the Carolingian Era. New Discoveries as a Result of Scientific Analysis, in: *Heritage Science* 6, 2018, 1–28.

9
On the status of metal in manuscripts, see now: Joseph S. Ackley and Shannon R. Wearing (eds.), *Illuminating Metalwork. Metal, Object, and Image in Medieval Manuscripts*, Berlin/Boston 2022. Robert Fuchs and Doris Oltrogge discuss the terminology of illusion relative to gold in their contributions to Patricia Carmassi and Gia Toussaint (eds.), *Codex und Material. Jenseits von Text und Bild?*, Wiesbaden 2018.

material rhetoric, no less. In other words, in full knowledge of the materials and techniques used in book production, the question of "material imitation" or "material illusion" becomes not one of picture alone – and not one of matter alone – but also one of craft and process.[10]

One especially intriguing aspect of the medial alchemy Carolingian book painters performed concerns scale. Marble pillars of grand dimensions in the real-world referents at Aachen or Rome dwindle next to the outsize figures of the gospel writers. Carved gemstones bespeaking those designed to be brooch-sized or ring-sized – or palm-sized at best – appear (relatively) as large as a keystone when they are set at the top of a drafted arch. These distortions are dizzying when contemplated as part of the relationship constructed by painters among images, natural materials, and their crafted forms. But further, much like asking how the actual material qualities of paint meet pictured material qualities, the plays of scale end up drawing attention to the painter's own work in setting the visual terms of the book.

One of the best moments in *Marmor, Gold, und Edelsteine* appears when Mestemacher explicitly turns to the question of value. The point is key, to my mind, because characterizing value in the products goes hand-in-hand with understanding the painters' work of imagination and production. There is a historically specific context to the issue of value: the focal manuscripts were made at a time of debate and dissent about the role of art within the Church, and the capacities of art to represent things of real worth (in contrast to scriptural texts or the proper performance of liturgy, whose spiritual and social value was not in doubt). It has long been recognized that the Court-sphere evangelists are a particularly self-reflexive bunch: the gospel writers are represented throughout the group as active scribes, making precious books. Several of the manuscripts go on to make treasure a prominent theme in the gospel quotations written out in the evangelists' pictured codices. At stake in this move is the differentiation between treasure on earth and treasure in heaven, and a location of the manuscripts themselves relative to the idea of true value. Material things and images might be theologically suspect, but Mestemacher draws attention to the painters' investment in crafted objects' metamorphic power. In the form of a materially precious book donated to a church treasury – and especially an image-rich book that comments on its own form – earth-derived matter, even lucre itself, may transmute to spiritual worth.

This is a valuable reading not least because it creates space to see art's work in harnessing one material to image another as a bait-and-switch. On one level, the pictorial evocation of precious things helps to communicate the worth of the gospel book as religious text. More trenchantly, though, such mimesis renders painting itself

[10] On this theme see now Henrike Haug, *Imitatio – Artificium. Goldschmiedekunst und Naturbetrachtung im 16. Jahrhundert*, Vienna 2021.

legible as a model of transmutation. The importance of treating manuscripts' likely functions (here, as donation) as inseparable from their visual rhetoric also cannot be overstated. This point brings us back to the place we began. The turn of the ninth century in Frankish lands is an important time to think about books and what their medium can encompass, because its bookmakers were doing the very same thing. The visual experiments and painterly fireworks of the time exist in relation to artistic tradition, *realia*, natural philosophy, theology, and more. But they occurred first and foremost in the context of a manuscript culture that saw people interrogating form time and time again, asking over and over what a painted book can do.