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## BOOKS

# Life and Art in the Middle Ages

ART IN MEDIAEVAL FRANCE, by Joan Evans; Oxford University Press, English price, £3.3/6.

(Reviewed by J. C. Beaglehole)

HOW fortunate a person is Dr. Joan Evans, one cannot help thinking, to study the things and write the books she does, to have a life so much devoted to art and to the French Middle Ages; to be able to write so well; and to have her books produced so nobly by the Oxford University Press. This book, indeed, might make any author jealous, with its fine quarto page and its three hundred magnificent plates. It can hardly help being an expensive book, and three guineas in England means about four guineas in New Zealand, so that one can hardly expect a large circulation for it; and yet one hopes that it will go into at least some self-respecting libraries. For it is a good book; it would make one of the best of all introductions to the Middle Ages for ordinary non-technical people with an interest in art as well as in life; one can see it standing together with Henry Adams's *Mont St. Michel and Chartres*, equally civilised; and the lovely Virgin that forms Dr. Evans's frontispiece might equally well do for that other classic work.

Dr. Evans uses a sub-title, "A Study in Patronage"; and though no art can be studied only from this simple point of view, the point of view does give a good starting-point, it does give a frame of reference; it does give some primary illumination. There is importance in the fact that in a book of just under three hundred pages, 145 are devoted to the arts of the church, 62 to those of the king and the court, 37 to those of the citizen class, and 8 to those (if they can be called "art" at all) of the villagers of France. Nothing could more overwhelmingly show the importance of religion in the Middle Ages, and nothing show more overwhelmingly its mastery of building, of sculpture, of colour, of design, of material—not merely as aids to a particular sort of life, but as symbols of that life's importance. Not that the medieval church is to be taken as weltering in luxury; for Cistercian austerity and its great man Bernard of Clairvaux indicate one side of mediaeval life as clearly as do the great cathedrals or the magnificent basilica of 12th Century Abbot Suger of St. Denis. But how much interest is there also in the proud secular art of those five hundred years, the castles and tapestries and plate, the rich miniatures, the portraits,

sculptured or painted on panels, tombs and furniture; interesting too in that we are always coming back to religion, however far we wander, to the parish church or the castle chapel, to the tombstone or to that most typical of all period manifestations of art, the "dance of death." The "dance of death" was typical of the 15th Century, when France was sunk almost beyond recovery beneath the twin disasters of plague and English armies; and of those two the English were by far the most dreadfully effective in wrecking the basis of civilisation. Medieval France, really, perished in the Hundred Years' War. France rose again—"Creation might begin again, but the rhythm of life had

been broken and could not be repaired." The French went marauding themselves into Italy; and the conquerors were conquered by Italian art.

Some specimen of Dr. Evans's writing ought to be given—not a particularly purple patch, but as an example of felicitous generalisation arising from the facts of, in this case, manuscript illumination; as well as to

show that an art that seems at first sight so remote from our way of life can still touch deeply the awakened spirit.

In the early Middle Ages, in a literature and an art that was religious and symbolical, men had sought eternal and unchanging verities. In the 14th Century men were conscious, instead, of the beauty of change. They were peculiarly sensitive to things that were lovely because they were not lasting; to flowers that fade, and to moments that cannot endure. They responded to the charm of spring mornings and summer evenings and autumn sunsets, to moments of heightened physical sensibility, when the hound leaps on the quarry and the falcon is loosed from the wrist, when lovers ride together through the woods or read poetry to one another in the orchard. At times they even attempted, in art as in literature, to perpetuate the moments when the exquisite ordinariness of things—the passers-by in the street and the women selling fruit in the market—seem to have a transcendental significance that makes them subjects for eternal art. It is this poetic naturalism expressed first in poetry, then in the manuscript illuminations to poems, and then in the manifold decorations of castles, that sets the note for the imagery of ornament in the later Middle Ages.

It is interesting that of all contemporary medieval historians, the most delightful and sensitive writers of English prose have been women—the late Eileen Power, Joan Evans and Helen Waddell; the first on economic history, the second on art, the third on literature.

**TWELVE WORTHIES**  
SOME VICTORIAN PORTRAITS AND OTHERS, by Hilda Martindale; Allen and Unwin, 10/6.

IN these brief sketches of her friends Miss Hilda Martindale celebrates what the 17th Century would have

