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Christina Normore. A Feast for the Eyes: Art, Performance and the Late Medieval Banquet

Ken Albala

University of the Pacific, kalbala@pacific.edu

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A Feast for the Eyes: Art, Performance, and the Late Medieval Banquet.

Christina Normore.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. viii + 262 pp. \$55.

From the title and introduction one might think that this book focuses on the multimedia event of the late medieval banquet, in the planning of which artists were directly involved. The music, allegorical performances, costumes, and stage sets, as well as tableware, props, and of course the food itself and the magnificent sugar sculptures were all carefully scripted to project an image of power, wonderment, and sometimes explicit calls to action. However, food is absent from this study and the author does not even make passing reference to the rich literature on banquets, a good proportion of which is written by art historians. Some of these works examine table accoutrements (Carolin Young's *Settings of Gold in Apples of Silver* [2002]), depictions of food in paintings (Gillian Riley's many books), or even the broader treatments of feasts, such as Roy Strong's book of this name or Phyllis Pray-Bober's *Art, Culture and Cuisine* (1999).

Nor is there any reference to culinary history, the many cookbooks of the era, or ancillary food texts dealing with agriculture, medicine, fasting, carving, and sumptuary laws.

That food is absent is largely because medieval paintings and commentators on feasts were silent on the subject. Authors like Olivier de la Marche, whose *Memoires* about the Burgundian court are the focus here, barely ever mention what was eaten. Paintings depict a few rolls, a cup of wine, and on rare occasions a cooked dish. The question that lingers is why. Was the food itself considered inappropriate in a religious painting? Did people think they simply couldn't accurately describe or paint food because it is so ephemeral? Or did the fashion for small appetites make such topics seem lowly?

In any case, this book is actually about the performances, or *entremets*, that took place between the courses. There is detailed discussion of the meaning of these vignettes in the context of Burgundian history and taste and, where possible, explication with images. The illustrations are impossible to see in detail, but actually the Marriage at Cana (figure 1) by the Master of the Legend of Saint Catherine (National Gallery of Victoria) is quite rich. Three platters of meat are laid out with fowl and roast joints, manchet rolls, cups and knives, and every diner has his or her own rectangular pewter trencher. It is not at all arranged "without regard for the actual placement of supposed diners" (15). Among the few colored plates is the great Limbourg brothers' *Feast of the Duke of Berry*, but with little discussion of it.

If not in food, the strength of this work is in the discussion of performance. The author describes an array of themes, including the fascinating way live subjects and inanimate objects took the stage and how the lines between actor and spectator were blurred, as well as topics of particular interest to art historians, such as the collaborative nature of production. The illustrations that accompany the descriptions seem randomly chosen and flit from topic to topic, but they do highlight some important ideas, such as how emotions, spontaneous or calculated, were used in the *entremets*; how mimicry, especially with depictions of monkeys, was used to influence behavior; how pages learned to play the part of the noble through service in great households; and, most interestingly, how dining well was defined. For rulers magnificence was seen as a necessary part of virtue, but it could easily slip into excess and waste. That there were moral lessons and political propaganda written into these performances is no surprise, but how different they were from modern sensibilities is revealing. Medieval people clearly had a taste for the weird and fantastic, and that comes through in this book well. A final chapter on wedding feasts seems disjointed from the rest of the book, which ends abruptly without conclusion.

In the end, we do not get a full picture of what went on in banquets, or even the smaller subunit of *entremets*. There is not a full discussion of the overall aesthetic sensibilities that informed various media involved in these events, especially from a multi- or interdisciplinary perspective.