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'A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe', Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 16 October 2016 – 8 January 2017. Catalogue: Ed. Martina Bagnoli, Yale University Press, London, 2016, 280 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780300222951, \$65.00.

In his *De Anima*, Book III, Part I, Aristotle described a taxonomy of five senses.¹ These have since become so embedded in our collective consciousness that it is easy to forget that they were by no means self-evident to all pre-modern cultures. In his fourteenth-century poem *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, for example, William Langland (d. 1386) listed the five personified wits of the wise knight 'Good Sense'.² The first two, Sirs 'See-well and Hear-well', echoed the Classical hierarchy of human faculties which – not unlike Foucault's surveillance, for example, or McLuhan's 'Great Divide' theory – emphasised vision as the dominant modality of contemporary being. The third son, however, Sir 'Say-well', was a raconteur and the fourth and fifth, 'Work-well-with-thine-hand' and 'Godfrey Go-well' (i.e., moving and walking), both spoke to a sense of tactile-intuition (or kinaesthesia). That neither of our modern predilections for smell and taste were invoked – the Old English word *sme*c was often used, somewhat apathetically, to mean both – further attests to the point, in brief, that our 'senses' have long been socio-cultural constructs.

'A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe' hints at the extent to which curators are now willing to take the many recent gains of the material, affective and sensory 'turns' beyond academia, to the more public arena of the museum (see also

this year's 'Love, Art of Emotion 1400–1800' at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne). This moment owes a long debt to the early work of, amongst others, Steven Feld, Lucien Febvre and to Johan Huizinga's *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, first published in 1919.³ In order, however, to take account of the sensory-somatic vanguard and of medievalists such as David Howes, Richard Newhauser and Eric Palazzo, this exhibition must also speak to the fact that most schemata of human perception have varied (and interesting) histories.⁴ Put another way: with whom, and why, will this feast be shared? Can the special sensoria of medieval Europe be effectively represented within a modern, bureaucratic and Brutalist museum space, or even, that is, beyond the page at all?

In short: not this time, though not for want of trying. Many of the more than one hundred ivories, manuscripts, tapestries, metals, stained glass and paintings, gathered in Baltimore (and later on at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota) are intriguingly selected and often brilliantly evocative. A small gilt-copper ball from the mid-thirteenth century, on loan from the Musée de Cluny in Paris, for example, is one of the least conspicuous on display, yet amongst the most effective. It almost screams out to be touched, turned and cradled in the palm. It was in fact designed as a hand-warmer, in which gently smouldering ashes would be placed to revive the winter-weary appendages of medieval clerics. Another object, a particularly arresting *desco da parto* (birth tray) from the early-fifteenth century, shows a nude Venus with a gawking assembly of young men, and sight-lines connecting their eyes to her pudenda. Its exhibition label, however, offers an over-generous synopsis of the near sixty-year old research of Eugene B. Cantelupe,

which results in a somewhat demure analysis of chaste and idealised love. Given that Galen's theory of extramission was still popular in the Middle Ages – whereby the active rays of the eye functioned as a kind of *pneuma* that both *lit* and *felt* the world – an opportunity was perhaps lost here to draw out a loaded conflation of sight and touch.

These exceptions notwithstanding, most of the objects on display here are unlikely to be the first thing you notice upon entering each room. Bold golden quotations emblazon cobalt blue walls; incense, myrrh and other assorted fragrances permeate throughout; the quixotic sounds of birdsong and bells resonate on a loop, and visitors are encouraged to ‘touch’ (medieval-style) rosary beads and chess sets. Even without the curator’s lament to a local newspaper that visitors could not also ‘lick the works of art’, these systematic overtures to the audible, the olfactory, and the tactile feel a little bit too on the (Aristotelian) nose.⁵ In a similar vein, one wall text on medieval gardens reads: ‘Secluded from the chaos and filth of cities [...] perfumed with the aromas of flowers [...] resonating with gurgling fountains and singing birds [...] [they] evoked the beauty and harmony of God’s primeval orchard.’ Access to such havens though, like most of the objects found here, would have been severely restricted to all but the narrowest elites. Thus, another regrettable but unavoidable implication of this exhibition is that pleasurable sensations were somehow absent from the lives of ordinary people, who, at one and the same time, were also living dirty and anarchic existences (as per the all too common stereotype).

That there is next to nothing, moreover, to represent the early Middle Ages, the Emirate of Córdoba, the Balkans, Scandinavia, the

Orthodox Church and especially Islam, makes for further questions regarding which ‘Medieval Europe’ we are supposed to be (re-)experiencing here. If many of these spaces cater for very pleasant encounters today – and they do – then a selectively wistful picture of the past (something that the exhibition purposefully aimed to complicate) that is altogether too simple, too Latinate, and ultimately too modern in respect to thinking and framing the ‘medieval’ senses, still seems to have been advanced.

- 1 Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. R. D. Hicks, New York, 2008, pp. 73–112.
- 2 William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, trans. George Economou, London, 1996, p. 94.
- 3 See Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, Chicago, 1996; Lucien Febvre, ‘Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past’, in Peter Burke (ed.), *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, trans. K. Folca, New York, 1973, pp. 12–26; Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (eds.), *Senses of Place*, Woodbridge, 1999.
- 4 See, especially, Richard G. Newhauser (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*, London, 2016.
- 5 Mary Carole McCauley, ‘Walters Art Museum Exhibit “Feast for the Senses” Immerses Visitors in Medieval Europe’, *The Baltimore Sun*, October 15, 2016.

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Christian Mieves and Irene Brown (eds), *Wonder in Contemporary Artistic Practice*, Routledge, New York and London, 2017, 308 pages, hardback, ISBN 9781138855816, £95.00.

Wonder thrives as a theme in contemporary art today. Since 2000, exhibitions on the topic have proliferated and the *Wunderkammer*, or