



Picturing the Celestial City: The Medieval Stained Glass of Beauvais Cathedral

Michael W. Cothren

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The cathedral of Saint-Pierre in Beauvais, France, is most famous as a failure--its choir vaults came crashing down in 1284--and only secondarily for its soaring beauty. This lavishly illustrated and elegantly written book represents the first serious look at the stunning collection of Gothic stained glass windows that has always dominated the experience of those who enter Beauvais Cathedral.

Chapter by chapter, Michael Cothren traces the glazing through four successive campaigns that bridged the century between the 1240s and the 1340s. The reader is transported back in history, gaining fascinating insight into what the glazing of Beauvais actually would have looked like as well as what it would have communicated to those who frequented the cathedral. Contrary to the widespread assumption that these windows are heavily restored, Cothren shows that they are in fact surprisingly well preserved, especially in light of the cathedral's infamous history of architectural disaster.

More importantly, Cothren goes far to dismantle a long-held misconception about medieval painted windows, and indeed monumental medieval pictorial art in general: the notion that it was conceived and produced as a substitute text for ignorant, illiterate folks, providing for them a "Bible of the Poor." Indeed, Cothren shows us that stained glass windows, rich with shaded meanings, functioned more like sermon than scripture. As an ensemble, they created a radiant interpretive backdrop that explicated and situated the performance of the Mass in this giant liturgical theater.

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