BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX AND CHRISTIAN ART

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I will overlook the immense heights of the places of prayer, their immoderate lengths, their superfluous widths, the costly refinements, and painstaking representations which deflect the attention while they are in them of whose who pray and thus hinder their devotions…

…but apart from this, in the cloisters, before the eyes of the brothers while they read—what is that ridiculous monstrosity doing, an amazing kind of deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity? What are the filthy apes doing there? The fierce lions? The monstrous centaurs? The creatures, part man and part beast? The striped tigers? The fighting soldiers? The hunters blowing horns? You may see many bodies under one head, and conversely many heads on one body. On one side the tail of a serpent is seen on a quadruped, on the other side the head of a quadruped is on the body of a fish. Over there an animal has a horse for the front half and a goat for the back; here a creature which is horned in front is equine behind. In short, everywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms is seen that one would rather read in the marble than in books, and spend the whole day wondering at every single one of them than in meditating on the law of God. Good God! If one is not ashamed of the absurdity, why is one not at least troubled at the expense?

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1 “Omitto oratoriorum immensas altitudines, immoderatas longitudines, supervacuas latitudines, sumptuosas depolitiones, curiosas depictiones, quae dum in se orantium retorquent aspectum, impediunt et affectum…

With these words, among others, Bernard seems to both describe and condemn the lively and colourful artworks and the soaring stone churches that had become common in France and beyond in the century before he wrote this text, the *Apologia ad Guillelum abbatem*, between 1124 and 1125. Approximately 7300 words long, the *Apologia* opens with a lengthy defence of Bernard’s decision to address the failings of the Cluniacs at all. It continues with a criticism of the Cluniacs’ intemperance in matters of “food, drink, clothing, bedding, retinue, and the construction of buildings,” divided into chapters on meals, drinking, abuse of the infirmary, excessive clothing, negligence in priestly duties, pomp in riding, and art patronage. It ends with a discussion of the claim that Cistercians accept monks from who have fled from other orders against Benedictine strictures.

Bernard’s *Apologia* has long been interpreted as a bellwether of monastic and episcopal norms of art patronage contemporary with the Cistercian reform. It has also been believed to contain an implicit policy statement on art within the Cistercian movement, thought to proceed from Bernard’s personal and profound distrust of the visual arts. In fact, while Bernard’s apparent rejection of what he termed


2 The *Apologia* is almost universally agreed to have been written in the wake of William of Saint Thierry’s request around 1125 for a treatise on the excesses of the Cluniacs (and possibly referenced in Bernard’s letter to William of that date) and described as finished in a letter to a canon named Oger, again around 1125. See *The Letters of St Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Bruno Scott James, 2nd ed. (Glouchestershire, 1998), letters 87 (SBO 7, pp. 220–223, Epistola [Ep.] 85) and 91 (SBO 7, pp. 232–234, Ep. 88). On these letters, see Rudolph, *Things of Greater Importance*, pp. 211–114. The dating has most recently been studied by Kathleen Doyle, “Rereading Saint Bernard: Text, Context and the Art Historical Interpretation of the *Apologia*” (diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, 2004), pp. 17–39, who prefers a broader date range of 1121–26.