

History of the Church through 100 Masterpieces

Jacques Duquesne and François Lebrette
M. Cristina Borges, Translator
Duquesne University Press, 2011
\$29.95, 225 pages

Lives of the Saints through 100 Masterpieces

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Reviewed by Ian Werrett, Saint Martin's University

All religions, be they big or small, provide their communities of faith with a common language—an institutionalized collection of symbols and metaphors. Not only do these complex systems of meaning afford adherents with the necessary tools to orient themselves to the Divine Presence, but they also enable believers from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and countries to share in the mysterious experience of God. In *The History of the Church through 100 Masterpieces* and the similarly titled *The Lives of the Saints through 100 Masterpieces*, Jacques Duquesne and François Lebrette focus on but a single dialect of the *langue religieuse*: Christian paintings and illuminations from Europe dating from the 14th to the 20th centuries.

Originally published in French and written for a Francophone audience, Duquesne and Lebrette have succeeded in bringing together a compelling array of images that discuss some of the major milestones of the Christian church and illuminate the lives of the saints. Although intentionally circumscribed, the goal of these two volumes is to deepen the reader's appreciation for both the artwork and the historical events contained therein. With text and image on facing pages, the authors move breathlessly from one moment to the next, focusing on a wide assortment of historical, biographical, and theological issues. In each instance the information presented is succinct and well written, but the accompanying images are rarely, if ever, discussed. Beyond the artist's

name, the title of the painting and the museum where the artwork currently resides, Duquesne and Lebrette are content to allow the images to speak for themselves.

Of the two books, *The Lives of the Saints through 100 Masterpieces* is the more focused and cohesive. Organized alphabetically from Agatha to Zechariah, Duquesne and Lebrette use a variety of named and unnamed sources to craft short biographies for each of the 100 saints that are highlighted in the book. The biographies are complemented by visual images of the canonized individuals who are, more often than not, on the verge of death or performing one of the miracles attributed to them by the Church. Given the strong connection between martyrdom and sanctification in the early years of the Christian movement, it should come as no surprise that many of the paintings in *The Lives of the Saints* are filled with violent and often grotesque imagery. Whether it be the death of St. Erasmus through evisceration or the torture of St. Quentin, which included flogging, racking, and the insertion of metal spikes beneath his fingernails, sacrificing oneself for the sake of the faith was understood by many believers to be the ultimate expression of piety—a selfless act that was only surpassed by Christ’s death upon the cross—thereby making the martyrdom of the saints an overwhelmingly popular theme in Christian art.

In contrast to *The Lives of the Saints*, Duquesne and Lebrette’s companion volume, *The History of the Church through 100 Masterpieces*, has a far more daunting challenge to overcome: surveying 2,000 years of Christian history through 100 paintings. Beginning with the influential leaders of the nascent Christian community, such as Paul and Peter, the authors move on to discuss a series of loosely connected topics, including the sacraments, virtues, and sins. Eventually, Duquesne and Lebrette settle on a chronological approach for their book and make their way through some of the major peaks and valleys of Christian history. From the persecution of believers during the time of the Roman Empire to the successes and failures of the crusades, and from the excesses and dogmatism of the Spanish Inquisition to the challenges of the Protestant Reformation and beyond, *The History of the Church* is an enjoyable romp thorough two millennia of art, political intrigue, and Church history.

From a pedagogical perspective, the usefulness of Duquesne and Lebrette’s volumes in a classroom setting is debatable. With so many things vying for the attention of students in the modern world, traditional educational methods, such as lectures and seminars, are fast becoming relics of a bygone era. Even PowerPoint, with all of its bells and whistles, has become a ubiquitous and

overly abused tool that fails to excite even the most earnest of students. While the use of paintings and artwork in the classroom as a way to teach history can be a compelling and powerful tool, this too has its limitations. In particular, it is not enough to simply present a series of images to students without occasionally discussing the images themselves, as Duquesne and Lebrette have done. Intentional or not, this approach has the effect of distancing students from the subject matter, the artwork, and the artists who created them. Moreover, no matter how beautiful or evocative a collection of images may be, a seemingly endless presentation of artwork without a variation in the tempo, method of delivery, or focus can be just as off-putting to students as the most monotone of classroom speakers.

In truth, there is much to commend about *The Lives of the Saints* and *The History of the Church*. Not only do they contain a total of 200 beautifully rendered images that are presented on glossy, high-quality paper, but the prose is well written, expertly translated, and, for the most part, historically reliable. Although these texts do not provide the reader with a comprehensive overview of the history of the Church, a fact that the authors freely admit to in the introductions to both volumes, these publications are an excellent starting place for further exploration. On the down side, there are no indices or bibliographies in either book, which make it difficult to use them as research tools. Moreover, there is no consistency in terms of their organization from book to book. For example, in *The Lives of the Saints* the contents are listed alphabetically, whereas in *The History of the Church* the material is organized thematically and chronologically. Finally, given that the texts were originally written for a French audience, there is a tendency to focus on those saints and historical events that resonate more deeply with a Francophone reader.

Taking into consideration the intentionally limited focus of the authors and the aforementioned shortcomings, it is eminently clear to this reviewer that *The Lives of the Saints* and *The History of the Church* were never intended to function as the primary textbooks for any course, let alone one on the subject Church history. If used in this way, these volumes will surely crumble beneath the weight that they are being asked to carry. However, if they are used sparingly, and in conjunction with other resources, such as an academically rigorous textbook on the philosophy or art or the history of the Church, these volumes will shine. Visually stimulating and eminently readable, these compact and enjoyable publications are a welcome addition to the field and they will no doubt appeal to students of European history and Church history alike.

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