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The Apostolic Commissioning of the Monks of Saint John  
in Münstair, Switzerland:  
Painting and Preaching in a Churraetian Monastery

Abstract

“The Apostolic Commissioning of the Monks of St. John in Münstair, Switzerland” embeds a program of wall painting created around the year 800 in its local, historical context. The frescoes emerge as the primary historical evidence for a convergence of monastic vocation and pastoral obligation in the early medieval entity labeled by scholars as Churraetia. They also provide primary evidence for the didactic potential of images in the Carolingian period.

The introduction recounts the modern history of the frescoes and the interest in them on the part of art historians before it turns to an assessment of the state of research on early medieval wall painting. It then establishes the background for discerning the apostolic program of the frescoes through a survey of other early medieval apostolic programs. Chapter one then identifies the audience. It first locates the viewers according to historical context. Beginning with dendrochronological dating of the church and frescoes and the analysis of contemporary local documents, the chapter establishes discrete historical contexts for the founding of the monastery and the decoration of its church. The chapter then addresses the issue of whether the people from the surrounding countryside would have received any of the monks’ care on-site and whether they were

an intended audience of the frescoes. The second chapter demonstrates the prominence of the Apostles and their preaching in the program and explains its relevance in a monastic setting. The third chapter plots the extension of an apostolic tradition in the program from the Apostles to the monks at Müstair through Paul, the first successor to the Apostles, Vigilus the local apostle, and John the Baptist, the proto-apostle, by virtue of his preaching and baptizing. Chapter four turns to the experience of the lay worshipper and posits the frescoes at Müstair as the primary exemplar of visual preaching in the early Middle Ages. It analyzes the frescoes to discern a pedagogical intent behind the heightened visibility and clarity of the panels. The dissertation also includes a catalogue of the frescoes.