

Framing the Middle Ages: concepts of the frame in medieval art and architecture



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14.00 - 18.00, Research Forum South Room

ABSTRACTS

Stuart Whatling (Courtauld Institute)

Some prefatory remarks on the ontology of frames

[Image of a blank sheet of paper]

In 1970, Meyer Schapiro wrote;

“We take for granted today as indispensable the rectangular form of the sheet of paper and its clearly defined smooth surface on which one draws and writes. But such a field corresponds to nothing in nature or mental imagery where the phantoms of visual memory come up in a vague unbounded void.”¹

[Lascaux painting – see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lascaux> for images]

Like Plato’s shadows, the first paintings on the wall of the cave occupied just such a vague unbounded void. The artists of Lascaux who made these images some 15,000 years before Christ felt no need to delineate the boundaries of their image field. Indeed, much prehistoric art shows a deliberate antipathy towards image boundaries, with later interventions overlapping and partially effacing earlier ones, partly in an act of spatial appropriation but also emphasising that there is no privileging of particular areas of the rock surface. Children, in their acts of visual self-expression, seem to have no need for frames. Furthermore, if the person seated next to you is doodling absent mindedly in their notebook, I’ll wager that they haven’t yet drawn neat frames around their squiggles. Framing nowadays is seen as a

¹ Meyer Schapiro, “On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image Signs”, in Greimas, Jakobson et al (eds) 1970 p. 487

conscious act which marks the completion of the artwork, an assertion of its status as artwork. It is an act of closure, both physical and psychological.

[Canosa Vase]

Classical Greek art in various media embraced frames, though often the frame served only to delineate the image field as a whole, which could contain multiple different narrative and non-narrative elements, jumbled up in what was characterised by Franz Wickhoff as the *Complimentary* method or by Kurt Weitzmann as the *Simultaneous*.

[Boscotreale murals see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boscotreale>]

Roman art, narrative and otherwise, revelled in the illusory power of the frame, as in these examples from one of the bedrooms in the villa at Boscotreale. Here the viewer is challenged to disentangle the myriad layers of fictive architecture and re-assemble them into a plausible three dimensional world - a task which is only possible because of the layers of architectural framing devices, through which one sees deeper into the imaginary landscape. I run the risk here of straying onto the topic of mimesis, which is of course the theme of our next session - so I will flee the architectural frames of Boscotreale and shelter instead in what may once have been the bedroom of Augustus in the imperial villa at Boscotrecase.

[Boscotrecase murals]

Here we find fictive frames being used in a far more subtle way. As well as illusionistic elements like birds and miniature landscapes, which float ambiguously on the mural surface, we also find here some of the earliest traces of self awareness in Western art, such as this portrait medallion on the left and the painted papyrus on the right. The frames around these picture elements invite us to interpret them as artworks which are in some way separate from the wall itself.

[Boscotrecase murals - detail of papyrus plus Petrus Christus (portrait of a young man, London National Gallery)]

The presence of the frame implies a separate substrate. The separate substrate implies a distinct and independent image within the main image. Thus the fictive frame marks out what it purports to contain as belonging to a different reality from the rest of the image.

Even if we temporarily imagine that the room occupied by this young nobleman is the real world and not a painting, we would still regard Christ's face, pinned to the wall, as being a painting and not part of that real world. All the more so since iconographically, every Veronica demands a separate hankie. Thus, the frame marks the enframed as being *ontologically* distinct from the frame itself and from the world that contains it.

As Victor Stoichita observed; "The frame separates the image from anything that is nonimage. It defines what is framed as a meaningful world as opposed to the outside-the-frame which is simply the world experienced."

[Augustine Gospels - narrative page; f.129v see

http://images.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2b/AugustineGospelsFolio125rPassionScenes.jpg&imgrefurl=http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AugustineGospelsFolio125rPassionScenes.jpg&usq=_Gt6xxayJJXD5HRX23uDC

[34d_u4=&h=1794&w=1443&sz=450&hl=en&start=1&um=1&tbnid=LbCzdWrn9ZqrHM:&tbnh=150&tbnw=121&prev=/images%3Fq%3Daugustine%2Bgospels%26hl%3Den%26rlz%3D1T4HPEB_en-GBGB279GB280%26um%3D1\]](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1093/ajph/100.11.1987)

It is this function of the frame as an ontological marker - as a delineator of 'meaningful worlds' - that most interests me since it is key to the role of frames in the reception of narrative images. Frames help to construct a diegetic world that is spatially and/or temporally distinct, not just from the 'outside-the-frame' but also from adjacent frames.

This becomes particularly important in the reading of images such as this one, in which an outer frame, here painted to suggest honorific marble, contains multiple sub-images, each with its own frame. We are so familiar with such cyclic images that we tend not to think about their inherent complexity. Yet it is nothing more than artistic convention that leads us to assume that these particular frames proceed from left to right and from top to bottom, and that each sub-frame in this page represents a chronologically distinct phase from a single narrative - unlike, say, an iconostasis which shares the same basic format but which constructs an entirely different relationship between the individual images.

[Augustine Gospels - Luke page; f.125r see

[http://images.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/82/AugsutineGospelsFolio129vStLuke.jpg&imgrefurl=http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AugsutineGospelsFolio129vStLuke.jpg&usq=__BKI45YkNM8LAEFaHV8GskeRhuRs=&h=1878&w=1449&sz=358&hl=en&start=3&um=1&tbnid=HHmi4k402T4okM:&tbnh=150&tbnw=116&prev=/images%3Fq%3Daugustine%2Bgospels%26hl%3Den%26rlz%3D1T4HPEB_en-GBGB279GB280%26um%3D1\]](http://images.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/82/AugsutineGospelsFolio129vStLuke.jpg&imgrefurl=http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AugsutineGospelsFolio129vStLuke.jpg&usq=__BKI45YkNM8LAEFaHV8GskeRhuRs=&h=1878&w=1449&sz=358&hl=en&start=3&um=1&tbnid=HHmi4k402T4okM:&tbnh=150&tbnw=116&prev=/images%3Fq%3Daugustine%2Bgospels%26hl%3Den%26rlz%3D1T4HPEB_en-GBGB279GB280%26um%3D1])

In the one other full-page illumination that survives in the Augustine Gospels we face an even greater challenge in disentangling the various narrative and non-narrative worlds constructed upon this architectonic frame.

[Augustine Gospels - Luke page with map of parts]



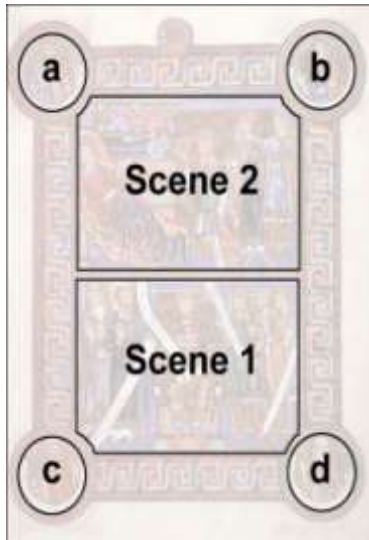
It is a measure of the effectiveness of frames and of the extent to which they are ingrained in our perception of art, that most viewers simply accept the various different modes of semiosis that are built into the different parts of St Luke's honorific archway. For example, despite our experience of historiated triumphal arches, few people would interpret the narrative scenes flanking this aedicule as being polychromed relief carvings occupying the same physical reality as the evangelist seated within it. That we are able to decode such images correctly is an indication of how habitually we use these frames as ontological guidelines.

Indeed, the illuminators of manuscripts came to use frames as templates - ontological maps if you will - by means of which the viewer could short-circuit the task of identifying what realities the various parts of the page belonged to and how they interrelate.

[Gospels of Henry the Lion see

http://images.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=http://www.wga.hu/art/zgothic/miniatur/1151-200/3german/04g_1150.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.wga.hu/html/zgothic/miniatur/1151-200/3german/index.html&usq=_dGxKsF11B3QK-dPQdDQU2CR-5mc=&h=1106&w=800&sz=181&hl=en&start=24&um=1&tbnid=xmAT33ycvGAUQM:&tbnh=150&tbnw=108&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dgospels%2Bhenry%2Blion%26ndsp%3D18%26hl%3Den%26rlz%3D1T4HPEB_en-GBGB279GB280%26sa%3DN%26start%3D18%26um%3D1]

If we turn to one of the last great manuscripts in the Ottonian style, the famously expensive Gospels of Henry the Lion, we find this page which is typical of the formal arrangement of frames used in many of the book's pages. Here, the main part of the page is divided into two sequential narrative scenes - the magi before Herod in the lower frame and the adoration of the magi in the upper one.



[Gospels of Henry the Lion - Map]

In addition to the two narrative frames, we also have four non-narrative medallions in the corners of the frame. These sub-frames contain what Wolfgang Kemp has referred to as 'hypotactic clauses' subsidiary frame elements which observe or comment on the main action.

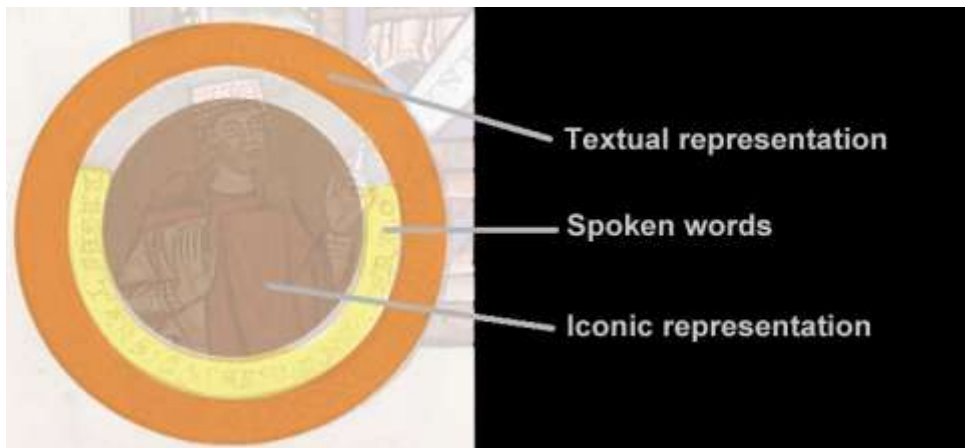
[Gospels of Henry the Lion - Medallions]

In frame c (lower left) we have an iconic depiction of King David who, in Psalm 72 prophesied the coming of the Magi, and in frame d, lower right, the prophet Balaam, whose prophecy of the Messiah gave Herod good reason to be nervous. Thus these two lower medallions provide straightforward Old Testament prolepses of the main narrative episodes above.

By contrast the upper two medallions work very differently. Upper left shows a crowned male figure, labelled in gold as *sponsus*, holding a scroll based on Hosea {2:19-20} "I will espouse thee to me forever in faith and justice", while upper right is a crowned female figure labelled *sponsa* whose scroll carries the words of the Canticle "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth".

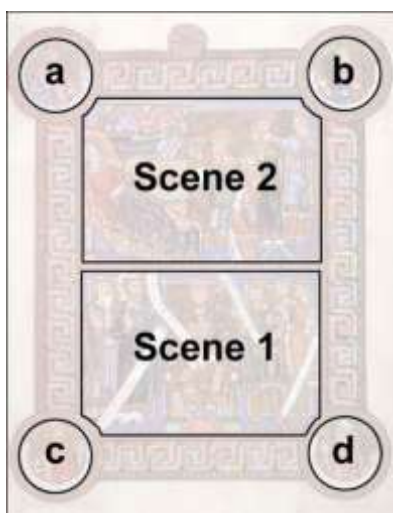
Thus unlike the straightforward prophecies of the lower medallions, these figures represent a higher level exegesis of the incarnation scene below them as the marriage of Christ and His Church.

[Gospels of Henry the Lion - Medallions]



Even within these small medallions, subsidiary frames maintain a strict semiotic relation to their subject. Always we have three concentric frames, the outer one giving the name of its occupant in gold letters, then an inner ring for the scroll that bears their speech and in the central frame the speaker themselves, their gestures indexing the act of prophecy.

[Gospels of Henry the Lion - map 2]



(a + b - Typological commentary, c + d - Old Testament prophecies)

In effect, the arrangement of distinct frame elements on the page, the *mise-en-page*, becomes an intricate ontological map, preconditioning the viewer's reception of each distinct part of the image.

[Gospels of Henry the Lion - two pages]

In this later page of the same manuscript we have three episodes - the Magdalen at the tomb and the Noli me Tangere - in the lower half and the annunciation to the Apostles in the upper narrative frame. On this page the typological and prophetic medallion pairs are reversed - Ecclesia and Synagoga are on the bottom while David and another prophetic King are on the top (one can make out the words of Psalm 45 "My heart hath uttered a good word" in David's scroll, which clearly relates to the *Apostola Apostolorum* - can't quite read the other one in this photo but I'd wager it's something to do with the Resurrection!

The beauty of such framing systems is that once the relationships between the various parts has been recognised, the viewer can apply this knowledge in the deciphering of subsequent pages, even if the specifics vary slightly from page to page. In effect the decorative frame has become a cognitive frame that simplifies recognition of the subject matter and encourages the recipient into a higher, more exegetical mode of viewing.

[Oscott Psalter see www.imagesonline.bl.uk]

Such systems became particularly popular in the 13th century, arguably the high-point of artistic invention in the visualisation of narratives. Here for example is a page from the Oscott Psalter - one of a number of English and French 13th century Psalters whose prefatory cycles employ a similar mise-en page. In this manuscript, there are about a dozen pages with this same design - two large circular medallions containing sequential episodes from the incarnation and Passion of Christ (A & B). Two medial semicircles containing sequential episodes from Genesis (c1&c2) plus four little quadrants in the corners (d). These quadrants mostly contain busts of figures who are not part of the narrative but who seem to be witnessing, or commenting on it, as if providing us with models of active viewing. In between all these elements (marked in grey on the schema) is a purely decorative, non-diegetic limbo which separates the other elements.

Once again, the ontological map provided by this consistent mise-en-page serves as a cognitive short-cut - a contract if you like between artist and viewer which allows both to navigate their way safely through a complex visual structure with minimal risk of confusion.

Sadly I don't have images of the rest of the Oscott Psalter so I will turn instead to another member of this group of related prefatory cycles, one with a slightly simplified version of this schema, known as the Křivoklát Psalter.



[#Křivoklát mise en page #]. Gone are the heads we found in the corners of the Oscott Psalter - and instead of the Old Testament scenes, the medial semicircles now contain

prophets, present as witnesses to the events they foretold but not active participants in the narrative.

To understand the effect of the consistent mise-en-page, and more importantly, what happens when it is violated, one must consider not one page in isolation but the effect of paging through multiple openings. We start on folio 7 recto, which faces a blank page {n.b. John Baptist}.

[# f7v/f8r] Folios 7 verso and 8 recto are similarly regular and well-behaved...



[# f8v / f.9r] ... as is the next opening. In terms of the all important relationship between narrative scenes and their frames, it is worth noting that quite often elements of the story overspill - such as the back leg of the third magus in the adoration - and the feet of some of the participants in the presentation scene. Nevertheless, these frame transgressions are inconspicuous and the intrusion of narrative elements into the non-narrative border is well within the spatial flexibility characteristic of this period. All this changes however on the next opening;



[#10v / f.11r #] Now we find our ontological schema ruptured. What has disturbed it is not just the full page crucifixion scene on folio 11 recto - but also the figure of the executioner stretching Christ's legs along the Cross in the lower right margin of f 10 verso.



Křivoklát Psalter – lower half of f.10v (Nailing to Cross)

[#f10 v detail#] This figure has completely transgressed the boundary of the narrative image field. Stepping out of the frame and across the decorative border, he leans back into the blank right margin, his foot seemingly braced against part of the image frame, the better to strain on the rope stretching Christ's legs along the cross. Whereas the various other figures in the manuscript who leak into the borders remain firmly anchored within their medallions, this figure has been painted almost entirely outside it.



Křivoklát Psalter – lower half of f.10v (Nailing to Cross)

[#f10 v detail with schema #] Even in isolation the detail is unsettling but when viewed as part of a sequence of pages, whose uniform layout establishes the viewer's expectations as

to what should appear where, the deliberate violation of the schema acts like a magnet, demanding the viewer's attention and drawing the gaze to the savage violence of which this is a part.

[#Křivoklát Metalepsis #] The frame-violation here represents a meta-narrative phenomenon that has been recognised for some time in the field of literary studies, where it goes by the name of Metalepsis.

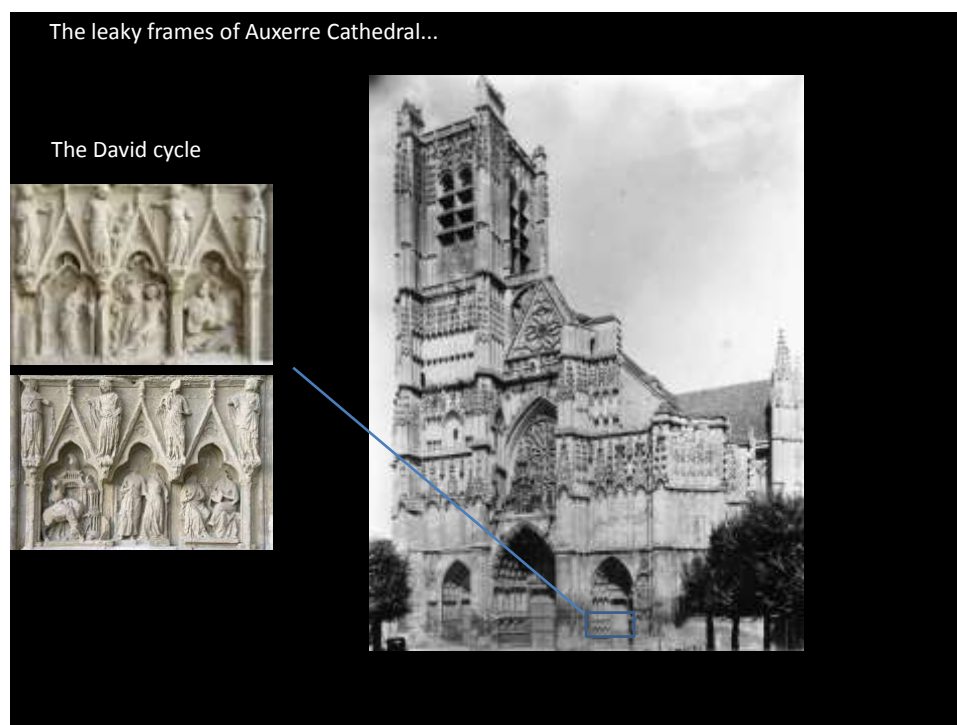
As you can see by this handy definition provided by the Austrian narratologist Werner Wolf, metalepsis has four key characteristics; its occurrence within art-forms that represent 'possible worlds', the existence of recognizable, ontologically distinct levels or sub-worlds, a transgression between, or a confusion of these sub-worlds. and, crucially the paradoxical nature of this transgression.

The canonical literary example is Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, where the ontologically distinct worlds of the reader, the author and his characters periodically collide, with results which are perplexing and often amusing, but which also draw the reader's attention to the artificiality of the medium. Within the visual arts, the example of Metalepsis that invariably gets dragged out is Escher's "drawing hands" lithograph. However, I would maintain that deliberate violations of an otherwise consistent ontological schema such as we find in the *Křivoklát Psalter* also fully meet these criteria.

[Morgan Picture Bible see

<http://www.themorgan.org/collections/swf/exhibOnline.asp?id=200>] It is important to stress that the phenomenon I am describing does not apply to just any violation of an image border since it is dependent on how consistently the mise-en-page behaves prior to the violation. For example, in the midst of the magnificent chaos that is the Morgan Picture Bible, there is nothing paradoxical or unexpected about these extravagant breaches of the image borders simply because they occur so frequently. It is only when a consistent framing pattern has been established that the violation of that pattern becomes noteworthy.

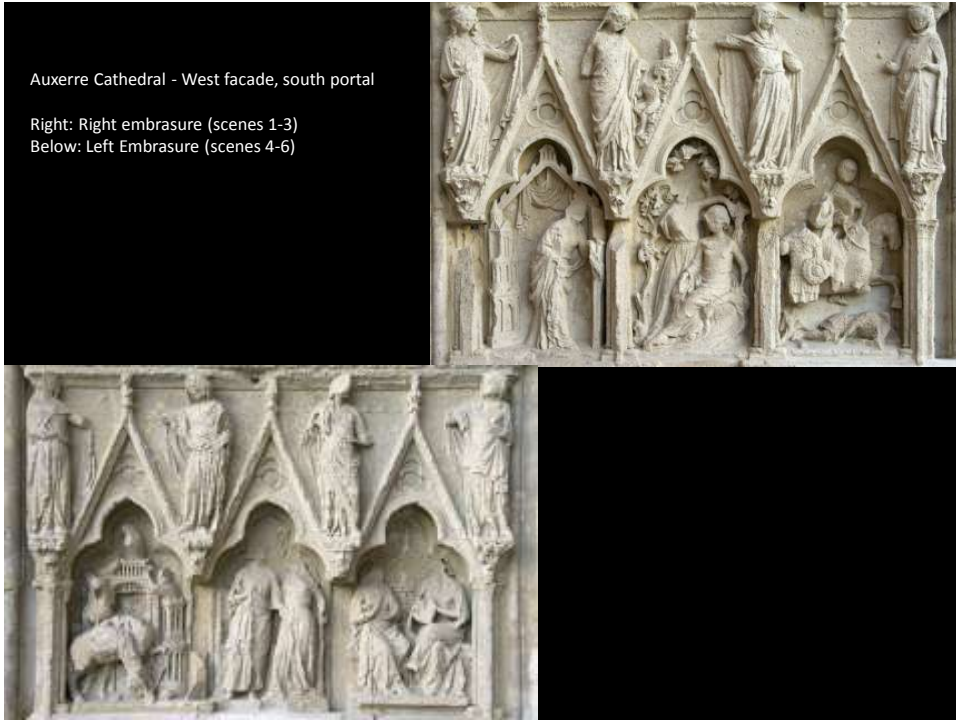
It isn't only in manuscript illuminations that frames are ruptured in this way - indeed one finds similar examples in almost every medium of medieval art (except possible embroidery where for some reason image borders seem curiously impermeable). I shall end however with a couple of examples in that most solid of framing materials, stone.



[# Auxerre overview of David frieze] In the North of Burgundy, an area with a strong and imaginative tradition of narrative art, is the town of Auxerre . The rebuilding of its cathedral began around 1215 with the sculptural decoration of its western facade beginning in the 1250's.

Auxerre Cathedral - West facade, south portal

Right: Right embrasure (scenes 1-3)
Below: Left Embrasure (scenes 4-6)



[Right Embrasure overall] The south portal is flanked by five episodes from the story of King David; David spying on Bathsheba, Uriah riding off to war, his subsequent death in the front line, the marriage of David and Bathsheba and the royal couple seating in state. All of these scenes are contained within elaborate Rayonnant microarchitectural niches separated by pilasters, some of which have broken or eroded away in places but which once formed a solid barrier between each niche. The convention that such elaborate sculptural niches house either iconic figures or else self-contained narrative episodes is broken just once.



[David spying] - David, within an additional microarchitectural frame denoting his Palace gazes out of a window, through the once solid pilaster, and into the adjoining niche, where Bathsheba is bathing with the aid of her maid. Not only is this unusual in splitting a single scene across two niches but it also plays some interesting games with our normal notions of solidity and visibility.



[David window detail] The artist has given us a cut-away window frame, on which the overexcited king steadies himself and through which he directs his scopophilic gaze.



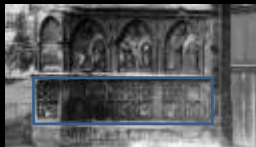
[Bathsheba] The King's voyeuristic act perhaps excuses the real viewer's interest in what's happening in the adjoining frame - unquestionably one of the most sensual examples of gothic portal sculpture.



[whole group] But the final play on the porosity of these frames comes in the spaces between the gables where two of the group of female personifications stretch out their cloaks, as if to shield our own gazes from the scenes below.

The leaky frames of Auxerre Cathedral...

The Joseph cycle



[# Auxerre overview Joseph] This is not however the only paradoxical frame at Auxerre. Across the other side of the facade, in the northernmost embrasure, the lower dado contains a low-relief frieze depicting the early stages of the life of the patriarch, Joseph.



[# Auxerre full story #] This Joseph story is told in some 24 frames split over two rows, reading from right to left along the top, then right to left again along the bottom. The individual scenes are bounded within frames made up of alternating cusped quatrefoils and trefoil lancets. These frames are all neatly closed and self-contained. Each frame contains one or two scenes squashed in side by side, but these scenes never spill over into the adjoining frame and the solidity and impermeability of these elegant cusped frames is never questioned. Until that is one gets to the far left hand panels of the top row



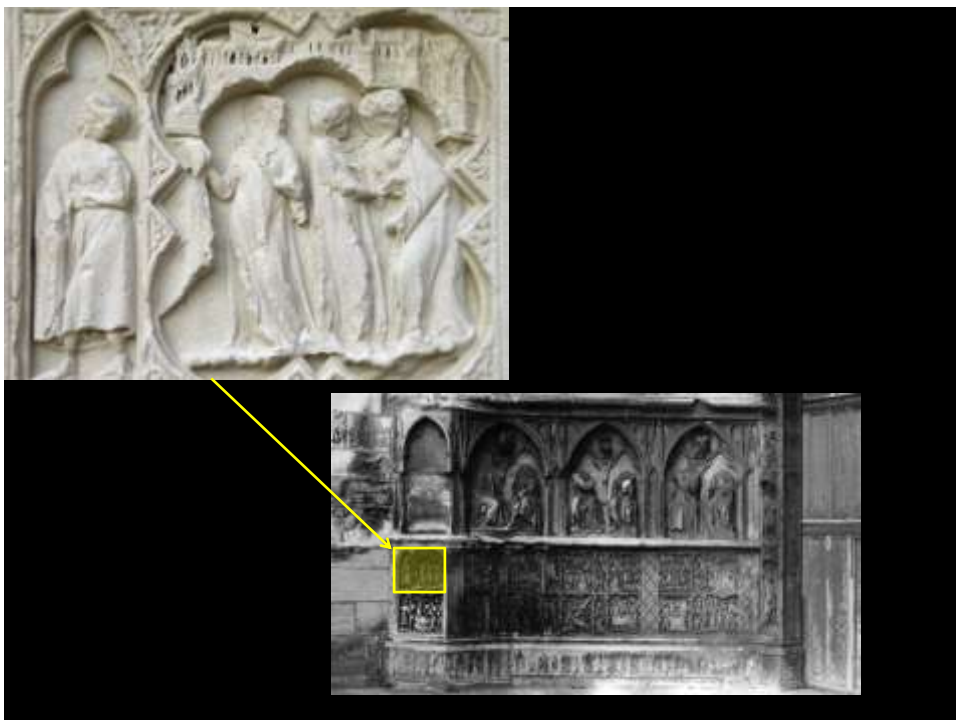
[#Auxerre top left detail] Here we find a cusped quatrefoil and a trefoil lancet between which two episodes are split. On the right, beneath an elaborate architectural canopy denoting an interior scene, Potiphar's wife tries unsuccessfully to seduce Joseph. Immediately to the left, she is repeated within the same frame, now facing left towards the adjoining lancet, into which Joseph has already made his escape, virtue intact. Connecting these two adjoining frames is Joseph's cloak - one end is grasped by Potiphar's wife, the other end slips from Joseph's shoulders as he escapes - but the cloak itself continues behind the intervening cusping of the frame. The continuity, less visible now, would have been very obvious indeed when the frieze still had its original polychromy.



[Detail top of cloak] Fortunately, the Auxerre portal sculptures have been cleaned recently and in my latest photographs, the continuity of the cloak is clearly visible - here you see a detail of the top of the cloak...



[Detail bottom of cloak] ...and here the bottom, with the hem curving elegantly behind the frame. For some reason the sculptors at Auxerre have deliberately chosen to play fast and loose with our expectations of how frames behave.



So what was the purpose of these paradoxical frames? At the risk of severe anachronism, I would answer that by quoting an essay written in 1917 by the Russian Formalist Victor

Shklovskij. He argued that the artist's responsibility is to 'defamiliarise' the world; to de-rail the automatic processes of perception and force the reader/viewer into a more active mode of reception. As Robert Holub put it,

"The 'algebrization' or 'making automatic' of perception leads inevitably to a failure to 'see' the object; instead one merely recognizes it, i.e. perceives it in a habitual fashion. The function of art, on the other hand, is to dehabitualize our perception, to make the object come alive again".

[#Auxerre detail plus overview#] Metalepsis and other frame paradoxes are widely used by the modern advertising industry to 'defamiliarise' the world - to attract the attention of audiences whose gaze is too easily saturated by the profusion of images with which they are daily bombarded. Whilst it is true that medieval audiences were exposed to fewer images than we are, in certain contexts - such as within illuminated manuscripts or around the great cathedrals - they too ran the risk of a highly localised visual overload. In such contexts, the playful quality of these metaleptic images would have served as a cognitive hook to re-engage the viewer and drag their attention back to the story.

In the Joseph cycle at Auxerre, it is no coincidence that the one and only frame paradox occurs at precisely the point where the viewer has to break off their reading of the story and walk back to the other end of the frieze to continue on the second row. Rather than simply a container of narrative images, the frame here has become a meta-narrative tool that plays an active role in shaping the experience of reading the story.

Stuart.whatling@courtauld.ac.uk