



Introduction: Towards a Visual History of the Working Class

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The tale of Landolfo Ruffolo in Boccaccio's *Decameron* explores the vicissitudes of the mercantile life, but in doing so it also makes clear the generosity and heroism of a washerwoman. This story, known to northern Europeans through Laurent de Premierfait's French translation of around 1413, tells of the sea merchant Landolfo, who invests unwisely, becomes a pirate, is taken prisoner by the Genoese, and is shipwrecked in a storm, which he survives only by clinging to a coffer that had been thrown overboard.[1] A "poor woman" (*povre feme*) who is washing her "goods" (*utensilez*) in the sand and salt water sees him. Though terrified, she is moved by compassion. Seizing the merchant by his hair, she drags him to shore and nurses him back to health. Landolfo discovers that the coffer is filled with jewels, which he hides in a sack before boarding a ship home. The story ends with the wealthy Landolfo retiring from the tumultuous life of a sea merchant and rewarding those who helped him. He sends a "great quantity" (*grande quantite*) of money to the "good" (*bonne*) washerwoman to thank her for her "kindness and courtliness" (*bienfait et courtoisie*).



Fig 1. Master Mansel, “Tale of Landolfo Ruffolo” in Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. by Laurent de Premierfait, Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Ms. 5070, fol. 51v (Flemish, 1430s or 40s).

An illumination by the Flemish Master Mansel, dated from the 1430s or 1440s, depicts the end of the tale at the right, but spotlights at center stage the washerwoman bending low over a large wooden tub filled with laundry (Fig. 1). She is shown as an ordinary worker with her bent back, apron, and rolled-up sleeves – all common signs of labor.^[2] At the left, she stands in the rippling waves of the sea; she has wrapped her outer garment around her waist and removed her shoes to keep them dry. Unlike the elite women in this manuscript, who are shown either indoors or, if outdoors, in the company of others, here the washerwoman can go outdoors alone, which, on the one hand, leaves her unprotected, and, on the other, offers her greater freedom. It is striking that although she is depicted as an ordinary worker, she is also portrayed as heroic as she grasps Landolfo’s wrist and hair in order to pull him to safety. In short, in this episode, two normative power relations are overturned. It is not only a woman who saves a man, but also a low-status laborer who rescues a wealthy merchant.^[3] Although she plays a minor part in Boccaccio’s text, in the accompanying illumination she is cast in a starring role. She appears twice, and with

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considerable character development, depicted as industrious, compassionate, and daring.[4]

The Problem

Medieval images of workers like Boccaccio's laundress are often overlooked. Even in the last fifty years, when the field has turned to such categories of analysis as race, gender, sexuality, and materiality, workers have attracted little attention. Political movements have sparked most of the new ways of understanding art. Yet, although growing income inequality has become a pressing political issue, art historians have paid little attention to class as a category of analysis.[5] In 1988 Herbert Kessler's article on the state of medieval art history in *The Art Bulletin* ignored class altogether.[6] Similarly, the 2012 issue of *Studies in Iconography*, which was devoted to critical terms in medieval art history, contained essays on feminism, gender, postcolonial, "Other," and queer, but failed to include an article on class.[7]

Why has the working class failed to become a major focus for art historians? To some extent, workers have been ignored because most medieval sources, both texts and images, express the interests and viewpoints of the elite. Generally medieval workers appear in the margins or background as mere staffage or as foils for elite characters. In fact, sometimes their presence is simply implied, for example, through the tools of their trade, but the workers themselves are invisible.[8] Similarly, it was largely the wealthy and powerful who commissioned art, and who owned the sort of beautiful objects that fill museums and art history books.

The discipline of art history has also contributed to the lack of interest in representations of workers. "The urtext of classical Art History," Pliny's first-century *Natural History*, grouped together under the rubric "low subjects" such themes as "barbers' shops" and "cobblers' stalls." [9] Pliny noted that the painter Piraeicus, although quite skilled technically, did himself an injustice by choosing such humble themes. This and other similar comments contributed to the establishment of a hierarchy of subjects in which themes drawn from historical or religious texts were judged to occupy the highest level, but images of workers were ranked low.[10] Although today innumerable books are concerned with other themes that the discipline of art history has traditionally deemed low status, such as genre, still life, and animal studies, few publications are devoted to images of workers. Instead, art historians have tended to focus on what Patricia Skinner has termed "the great and the good": royalty and aristocrats, master artists and major monuments, and monks, nuns, and saints.[11]

In the United States, several factors exacerbated this tendency. Thomas Crow has demonstrated that early historians of medieval art were “avowedly conservative.”[12] For example, Charles Rufus Morey condemned modern art, with its focus on such “sinister” issues as “economic stress and social injustice.”[13] Then, during the Cold War, antagonism towards socialism and communism led to the McCarthyite witch hunts, which targeted higher education and had a chilling effect on academia.[14] Some professors were blacklisted or imprisoned. Those who remained, adapted to the suppression of dissent in part by avoiding any issues that might mark them – rightly or wrongly – as Communist sympathizers. Erwin Panofsky, writing in 1955, described the “terrifying rise” of intellectual intolerance: “Americans can now be legally punished ... for what they say or have said, think or have thought.” He cited as one example the scholar “who doubts the divine nature of the free enterprise system.”[15] Museums, originally founded and funded by the leaders of industry and finance, also served the anti-Communist agenda, as Eva Cockcroft has demonstrated. For example, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. the director of the Museum of Modern Art, wrote an article in 1952 condemning social realism – a movement that highlighted representations of workers – as a Fascist and Communist style.[16]

The lack of interest in representations of workers, labor, and the socio-economic structure of society continues today in part because our discipline is closely tied to the art market and to wealthy donors and collectors, and for this reason still identifies to a great extent with the privileged.[17] American museums are filled with middle-class and wealthy viewers and run by boards of trustees in which the wealthy play a prominent role.[18] As a result, they rarely display images that represent the working class or their concerns.[19] Similarly, the process of obtaining a college education generally strips students of their working-class identity as studies have shown.[20] This issue of *Different Visions*, by focusing on medieval workers, aims to redress past oversights by demonstrating the fruitfulness of embracing class as a category of analysis.

Historiography

An art history from below can be written, and some scholars have done so by exploring medieval images of workers, studying their material remains, analyzing their patronage of art, examining the contributions of a cross-section of members of art workshops, or interpreting medieval art and architecture in terms of class conflict or ideology. Two categories of workers have drawn particular attention: peasants and skilled craftsmen. Since most of the papers in this issue of *Different Visions* concern

western Europe and the long Gothic period, my discussion of historiography will focus on the same time and place.[21]

In the United States those art historians most interested in the working class were initially foreign born. Several declared themselves Marxist, including Meyer Schapiro and Otto Werckmeister, whose publications sometimes reflect their political outlook.[22] For example, articles by Schapiro focus on images of workers, from entertainers to Joseph the Carpenter, or analyze art in terms of ideology and class conflict.[23] Schapiro also recognized that the elite class was associated with leisure, even in many monasteries, where monks prayed while lay brothers, tenants, and slaves provided the agricultural labor.[24] Werckmeister, in turn, explored class ideology as a driving force in the creation of the Bayeux tapestry.[25] But the work of these European-born scholars was continued by their American students. For example, Jane Welch Williams, a student of Werckmeister, studied the thirteenth-century windows at Chartres showing bakers, tavern keepers, and money changers in light of their economic and political struggles with the clergy and aristocrats.[26] She read the windows as projecting the clergy's ideology. Barbara Abou el-Haj, who also studied with Werckmeister, rejected the idea of a broad social consensus in the building of Gothic churches, analyzed the economic entanglements and unequal social burdens involved in their construction, and explored how tensions between social classes illuminate our understanding of medieval art and architecture.[27]

Early on Aby Warburg of Germany, Julius Ritter von Schlosser of Vienna, and Johan Huizinga of the Netherlands studied peasants.[28] But an important thread for those interested in the entangled relationship between peasants and aristocrats begins with Erwin Panofsky who as early as 1953 noted the “antithetical characterization of divergent milieus” in the calendar illuminations of January and February in the Limbourg Brothers' *Très Riches Heures*. [29] Forty years later, building on Panofsky, Jonathan Alexander brilliantly analyzed the two scenes. His goal was to expose the ideology behind these seemingly naturalistic representations, noting, for instance, that the explicit nudity of the peasants was invoked as a way to represent them as “uncultured, boorish and vulgar.” [30] He further observed that in this manuscript the power of the gaze derived not only from gender, but also from class, and noted the common trope of associating aristocrats with culture, and peasants with nature. He compared the differences between peasant and lord, not simply in dress and setting, but also in posture, since the agricultural worker's back was so often bent. Alexander further noted the recurrent comparison of peasant to beast, and the theme of the

lazy peasant, which is depicted, however, in manuscripts other than the *Très Riches Heures*.

In the same decade, Michael Camille also explored agricultural workers in an article devoted to the ploughman, which was republished as a chapter in his book on the Luttrell Psalter.[31] Camille investigated how radical and rapid changes in the economy can affect art, how the materialism of the plough and the ploughman's symbolic meanings may have affected viewers' responses to imagery, and what the bas-de-page illuminations of workers may have meant to the lord who commissioned the manuscript. Camille's primary point, however, was that these images of workers were never mirrors of reality, even though earlier scholars had interpreted them that way.

In 2001 Jonathan Alexander summarized publications on images of medieval peasants, but he took a new turn by exploring representations of urban workers, and this is the direction adopted by most contributors to this issue of *Different Visions*. [32] A large body of research on urban workers analyzes the varied contributions of members of individual art workshops, from apprentice to master artist, as well as the collaborations between different trades, such as sculptors and art movers or painters and stained-glass makers. [33] A few scholars have examined artists' knowledge of other professions. For example, Nicole Reynaud demonstrated that Jean Fouquet was well aware of the clothing, skills, and gestures of executioners. [34] Similarly, Jean-Marie Guillouët, in his analysis of a fifteenth-century French illumination of the *Building of Solomon's Temple*, noted the accuracy of the portrayal of the construction site. Guillouët concluded that sculptors and masons must have shared intimate knowledge of their trades with painters. [35] But the objects we call art were also the product of more than one trade. The production of a panel painting, for example, involved painters and carpenters. [36] To be successful, many workers married strategically, formed alliances with other workers, insured access to credit and materials, and courted customers, patrons, or employers. [37] As Gervase Rosser concludes, "our understanding of work in medieval towns is likely to be furthered less by the classification of supposed 'structures' and 'hierarchies' of labour than by the sensitive reading of the *processes* whereby agreements were reached in particular periods and places." [38]

Artists depicted workers not simply to demonstrate their careful observation of the world around them, but also to make ideological arguments, as art historians continue to note. For example, Guillouët concluded that in the *Building of Solomon's Temple*, King Charles VII of France was "placed in a relationship of equivalence or

succession to Solomon.”[39] Similarly, Gerard Jaritz proposed that images of work were not simply descriptive, but rather were fused with positive or negative concepts. For example, mining communities produced and displayed images of mining that served to create identity – a positive concept for Jaritz. Alternatively, depictions of work could represent either a well-run society, or its reverse, a world upside down.[40]

Other scholars pushed back against those medieval and modern texts that reported tales of a popular and widespread movement, known as the Cult of the Carts, which purportedly involved ordinary citizens spontaneously and enthusiastically pulling heavy carts filled with stone to build Gothic churches.[41] Nicola Coldstream rejected the idea of such an unplanned, popular, and broad-based movement at Chartres in the 1140s. Instead, she concluded that the Cult of the Carts was “carefully organized by a group of churchmen acting in collusion” and that these clergy were “highly manipulative.”[42] Similarly, Caroline Bruzelius concluded, “many of the texts reflect a kind of polemic to assure the audience that indeed, though starving, the poor were happy to put their back to the cart and contribute toward the enterprise both physically and financially.”[43]

Recently other scholars also acknowledged that medieval art reflected and reinforced the ideology of the powerful and privileged. Lynn Jacobs demonstrated how illuminators ensured that peasants were shown not only industriously working the land, but also tied to it through boundary lines and other visual means in manuscripts made for the nobility.[44] My recent book analyzed the dominant way of depicting household servants and slaves, which not only denigrated them in numerous ways, but also generally gendered them male until the late fifteenth century. I also explored how artists portrayed the hierarchical differences among domestic workers in a large aristocratic household, and how images differentiated peasants from servants, who, unlike agricultural workers, often had an intimate relationship with their masters. I also examined the visual codes employed to suggest labor, the concept of sacred service (performed by Christ and the saints), and the intersection of gender, religion, and class in depictions of domestic workers.[45]

Mark Rosen examined the fifteen reliefs, dated 1235-50, that show artisans at work on the central doorway of San Marco in Venice.[46] The subject of skilled workers was chosen as the final part of a program that progresses from bestiality and chaos to order and harmony, ending in the fulfillment of God’s injunction to work (Genesis 3:17). But the subject of skilled workers was also selected because Venice was a

leading mercantile center. These reliefs represent the ideological viewpoint of the ruling class, who were the patrons of the series. Created at a time when the Venetian elite was ensuring that the *popolo* would never have any real political power and would, in fact, be controlled by the state through numerous guild regulations, these workers represented an ideal. Master and teenage apprentice work harmoniously together in a hierarchical manner, with the apprentice following the master's orders. As Rosen concludes, these images show Venetian workers "as well-governed subjects of good government."^[47]

A different approach was adopted by Deirdre Jackson (who is also a contributor to this issue). She recently published an overview of medieval images of work that explored such topics as the labors of the months, the monastic conceptions of work, the three orders of society, the virtue of labor, Adam and Eve as workers, artists as producers of manuscripts, and the gendered conception of medieval work.^[48]



Fig. 2. Bracteate from Holmetorp, Stockholm, Statens Historiska Museum. Photo: Nancy Wicker.



Fig. 3. Detail of fig. 2.

Archaeologists have also contributed greatly to our understanding of the history of the working class. This brief overview can only mention a few examples. Nancy Wicker has identified individual workshops of Scandinavian metalworkers of the fifth and sixth-century Migration Period by analyzing the punch tools that they used (Figs. 2-3).[49] The study of skeletal remains across Europe of ordinary workers and of workers who became saints has revealed evidence of their lived bodies: malnutrition, heavy labor, or lung damage caused by fumes from the hearth.[50] And Sharon Gerstel has demonstrated how archaeology can contribute to our knowledge of the working class in Byzantium by investigating skeletal remains that reveal evidence of a life of arduous work. Gerstel also employs a range of strategies to examine how workers and art intersected by exploring laborers' donations to churches, murals of workers in hell, and paintings of the patron saints of agricultural workers.[51] Selena Anders and Virginia Raguin adopt a similar approach in this volume by examining workers as users and patrons of art and architecture.

A few scholars have studied the clothing worn by the working class through surviving images, wills, inventories, and other documents.[52] Generally the garments of low-status workers are shorter, less colorful, and made of a rougher material. Some laborers lacked coats and worked barefoot; underwear was scarce. Inventories describe clothing as "old," "holey," and "patched," and artists sometimes

visualized this.[53] But some workers had garments particular to their trade. Waterproof outerwear was available. Livered servants wore *mi parti* clothing, whereas camouflage was necessary for ambushing prey, and beekeepers wore masks and gloves. Images even indicate how clothes were maneuvered during work: sleeves were rolled up, long garments were hitched up (Fig. 1) or removed. One clothing item specific to a wide swath of the working class was the apron, worn by men and women alike, depending on their profession. Gervase Rosser has observed that the “single most pressing earthly concern of every medieval artisan was the establishment of a good personal reputation.”[54] Clothing is one way in which a person’s honor or dishonor is visualized.

In this brief summary, I can only mention the highlights of publications on the working class. Yet despite the contribution of past scholars, art historians have barely scratched the surface of understanding both images of the working class and the materiality of their lives. Some issues have been largely ignored: the range of ways in which medieval society envisioned social class, the hierarchy and diversity within the working class, how physical labor was visualized, and, especially for the later Middle Ages, the role money plays in images of workers. The following sections will explore the first two issues.

Visualizing Medieval Class Structure

By the ninth century some Europeans envisioned society as divided into three occupational groups: those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor (*orantes, pugnantes, laborantes*).[55] This division, derived from ancient Roman texts, appears in writing by the late tenth century, and was illustrated in a variety of manuscripts, including in a copy of Gautier de Metz’s late thirteenth-century encyclopedic *L’Image du monde*, and in a fifteenth-century version of Honoré Bonnet’s fourteenth-century dialogue on war, *L’Arbre des batailles* (Figs. 4-5).[56] The third estate, that is, workers, was generally viewed as lower in status than the other two, as can be seen by its placement in *L’Arbre des batailles* in the lowest row, and in *L’Image du monde* on the heraldic left, the least privileged position. Furthermore, in the latter image the priest and knight gesture towards each other, suggesting that they are conversing. By contrast, the laborer, as Deirdre Jackson wryly observes, “is not included in the discussion, although he listens from the periphery, like a shy guest at an exclusive party.”[57]



Fig. 4. "The Three Estates," in Honoret Bonet, *L'arbre des batailles*. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Ms.2695, fol. 6v (French, 15th century).



Fig. 5. "The Three Estates," in Gautier of Metz, *Image du monde*, London, British Library, Ms. Sloane 2435, fol.85. (French, ca. 1285). © British Library Board.

That the privileged classes are today referred to as the "upper class," as opposed to workers, who are termed the "lower class," derives from images such as these and the attitudes that lie behind them. In this introduction I have chosen instead to avoid these terms because they reinforce the idea that workers are beneath others in some moral or intellectual sense and that their contribution is less valuable than higher-status workers.

But medieval society sometimes imagined class in ways other than the three estates. A profusely illustrated manual for princes, probably composed in Paris around 1347-50 for the sons of King Jean II of France, includes several different conceptualizations of class. One illumination shows the classes necessary for a successful society.[58] In Book 3, chapter 9, the anonymous author defines these classes by the type of work each performs: peasants are needed to till the earth, artisans to produce goods, magistrates and scholars to interpret law, and soldiers to defend the commonwealth. The accompanying image includes from left to right a laborer digging with a shovel (presumably the peasant), a worker repairing a roof (presumably the artisan), two men in longer robes conversing (presumably the magistrate and scholar), and a large knight in armor holding a heart-shaped shield (Fig. 6). Although no king, clergyman, or member of the new mercantile class is portrayed, two laborers are included among these essential workers.



Fig. 6. “Three classes: peasant and artisan, intellectuals, knights,” in *Avis au roys*, New York, Morgan Library and Museum, Ms. M. 456, fol. 86r (Probably Paris, ca. 1347-50). Credit line: The Morgan Library & Museum. MS M.456, fol. 86r. Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913) in 1911.

The next chapter defines class in a different way, by wealth: the very rich, the very poor, and those in between. In an Aristotelian mode, the treatise concludes that the middle class does the most for the common good. It argues that the powerful

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despise and oppress the poor, and the poor envy the rich and think of ways to improperly seize their wealth. Only the middle class maintains “peace, love, and justice.”[59] But who is this middle class? The accompanying illumination shows at the left a king pointing to a man seated at the center (Fig. 7). A third figure, standing at the right, also points to the seated man, who must represent the middle class. This ideal citizen is a shoemaker. His right hand holds the toe of the shoe, while the black object hanging above is probably material to make the matching shoe. The idealization of skilled artisans is similarly articulated in the anonymous ballads of the Four Estates and illuminations by Jean Bourdichon, dated around 1500, where the artisan is visualized as a carpenter.[60]The corresponding ballad echoes the *Avis aus roys* by asserting, “there is none better than the middle way” (*Il n'est cy bon que la moyenne voye*).[61]



Fig. 7. “King points to middling class (artisan),” in *Avis aus roys*, New York, Morgan Library and Museum, Ms. M. 456, ca. 1347-50, fol. 86v (Probably Paris, ca. 1347-50). Credit line: The Morgan Library & Museum. MS M.456. Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913) in 1911.

Yet another striking conceptualization of class from this manual of princes shows a nude king as the body politic with his body parts representing different classes of the realm, all working harmoniously together in a hierarchical ordering (Fig. 8). While the king is at the top as the head, merchants “who run all over the world,” and laborers are at the bottom, associated respectively with the legs and the feet, the parts of the body closest to the earth.[62]



Fig. 8. “The personification of the state,” in probably Parisian, *Avis au roys*, New York, Morgan Library and Museum, Ms. M. 456, ca. 1347-50, fol. 5r (Probably Paris, ca. 1347-50). Credit line: The Morgan Library & Museum. MS M.456, fol. 5r. Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913) in 1911.

How is the working class distinguished visually from other classes? Workers – both men and women – frequently wear an apron or plain or rough clothes. Their physical labor is often indicated through rolled-up sleeves, a bent back, or (especially for men) open, removed, or shorter clothing that enables them to more freely or avoid

Diane Wolftal, “Introduction: Towards a Visual History of the Working Class,” *Different Visions: New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 10 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.61302/IGGK5859>.

overheating (Figs. 1, 5, 6, 9, 10).[63] And, if workers were associated with labor, then the elite were often portrayed, by contrast, enjoying leisure activities. The occupations of the months, which often appear on the calendar pages of Books of Hours, frequently link the arduous work of agricultural laborers with the leisure pursuits of aristocrats. In addition, numerous medieval images show workers as small and active figures either pushed to the margins or into the background, whereas elite figures are often taller, stiller, and the focus of the composition. In short, images frequently conceptualize workers in opposition to the elite; one defines the other. But class is not a stable category. Status was often in flux; the social or economic advancement of some workers might produce resistance from another class or subgroup.[64] And this is one reason why the class of the viewer is critical in assessing the reception of a particular image of a worker. If at first workers seem to be represented as a homogeneous group – those who labor, the Third Estate – , then a deeper examination reveals the varied and shifting ways in which class was understood in the Middle Ages.

Differentiating among Workers

Although we easily recognize differences within the groups to which we belong, we are more apt to view members of another group as an undifferentiated mass.[65] Yet the medieval working class was far from a homogenous unit since it was composed of most members of society, and its boundaries were fluid. Did it include everyone who was not a king, an aristocrat, a knight, or a clergyman?[66] Did it comprise both skilled and unskilled labor, and include the apprentice who paid for training, the journeyman who was paid wages, and the head of the workshop who was an entrepreneur?[67] Most medieval workers were agricultural laborers, but even the peasantry constituted a broad category, including bondsmen, wage earners, and seasonal workers.[68] In the late Middle Ages a new category of monetary workers arose: bankers, notaries, and money changers. Should they, too, be considered part of the working class? And should beggars, child laborers, or women who labored in the home be considered workers?[69]

Medieval workers were visually differentiated in innumerable ways. The images of the three estates discussed above differ in their depiction of the working class (Figs. 4-5). The earlier manuscript shows a peasant with a shovel; the later one includes wealthier men with purses, swords, and long, expensive clothes. If these manuscripts omit female workers, others include them.[70] Women participated in the workforce in a wide range of roles – as cook, laundress, domestic servant, spinster, and midwife. Most of these jobs were deemed low-status even when they were highly skilled. It is

often the tool that figures carry or the act of labor that they perform that differentiates one worker from another: laundry identifies a laundress (Fig. 1) or a shoe a cobbler (Fig. 7). Just as medieval artists generally termed themselves carvers, illuminators, or panel painters, so other workers identified with their profession through the tools and materials that they used. Kathleen Kennedy raises another issue of difference in this volume, by focusing on a group of illuminators with tremors.

One widespread distinction that medieval Europeans made was ranking workers whom they deemed skillful higher than those they judged unskilled, even though both groups were members of the working class. As James Farr concludes about late medieval Europe, “society was increasingly organized across the intersecting axes of hierarchy and subordination, and so it was taken as natural that some people commanded more power, more resources, and more respect than others. Everywhere Europeans divided themselves more and more into a series of graduated ranks.”[71]

One image will have to suffice to demonstrate how art reflected and reinforced such hierarchies. In 1458 at Ferrara, Guglielmo Giraldi painted an image that highlights both the gradations among workers and the intersection of gender, class, and race. It accompanies the pseudo-Virgilian poem *Moretum*, whose title refers to an edible paste composed of cheese and garlic.[72] This text describes how Similus, a rural laborer, awakens and then prepares his lunch of bread and *moretum*, which he will take with him to the fields. As William Fitzgerald observes, the poem is remarkable in that it has no agenda other than to represent in great detail the grim reality of the ploughman’s life, especially his labor and poverty.[73] Another figure appears in this poem, the slave Scybale, who is his caretaker.[74] The description of her falls far short of the contemporary female ideal:

His solitary housekeeper was she,
Her nationality was African,
And all her figure proves her native land.
Her hair was curly, thick her lips, and dark
Her colour, wide was she across the chest
With hanging breasts, her belly more compressed,
With slender legs and large and spreading foot.
And chaps in lengthy fissures numbed her heels.[75]

The poem makes clear that although Similus is only a poor ploughman, he has a higher status than the slave Scybale. It should not be surprising that even within the working class a white male has power over a black female.[76]



Fig. 9. Guglielmo Giraldi, “Similus and Scybale,” in Pseudo-Virgil, *Moretum*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms. Latin 7939 A, fol. 48r (Ferrara, 1458).

The accompanying image shows the two figures within a simple structure (Fig. 9). At right, Similus sits astride a bench; his short garment and his manual labor (mashing his food with a pestle) make clear his working-class status. At left, seated on a chair, Scybale holds a ladle above a cauldron warmed by a vigorous fire. The simple cut of her dress and her act of cooking mark her as a worker. Her brown skin and full lips conform to the pseudo-Virgil’s description of her, but other aspects diverge from the poem. Some scholars have suggested that she is a portrait, which is possible since girls and women of African descent generally worked as domestic slaves or servants in fifteenth-century Italy. Isabella d’Este, who grew up in Ferrara, had a particular interest in the portrayal of black women, as Paul Kaplan has shown.[77] Gender and

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race, in short, further complicate the varied and shifting ways in which class was understood in the Middle Ages.

Attitudes towards Labor and Laborers in the Middle Ages

Labor, the defining feature of the working class, was viewed ambivalently in the Middle Ages. Augustine (d. 430) warned that wealth should not be the goal of work. He advised instead that anything earned beyond what was needed to survive should be given away. For Augustine, the value of work was its ability to combat the sin of sloth and to provide a pathway to the virtues of humility and charity.[78] Early Christian monks also valued work, and their example generated respect for manual labor.[79] The Rule of St. Benedict, dated 516, warned that “Idleness is an enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should be occupied according to schedule in either manual labor or holy reading.”[80] Labor became linked to prayer in the Benedictine motto “work is worship” (*laborare est orare*), and work was praised by reformers like Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), who advised, “Rise up, gird yourself, stop being lazy, show strength, do something with your hands, work in some way.”[81] Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240) similarly warned against the stultifying effects of leisure and sloth.[82] He praised labor as an antidote, as a way to distinguish humans from mice, who only live to consume.

Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) combined many of these arguments when he articulated his view of the purpose of labor: it provided sustenance, followed God’s commandment, curbed sloth and lust, and promoted charity:

First and principally to obtain food: wherefore it was said to the first man (Gen 3:19): “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,” and it is written (Ps. 27:2): “For thou shalt eat the labors of thy hands.” Secondly, it is directed to the removal of idleness whence arise many evils; hence it is written (Sirach 33:28-9): “Send” thy slave “to work, that he be not idle, for idleness hath taught much evil.” Thirdly, it is directed to the curbing of concupiscence, inasmuch as it is a means of afflicting the body, hence it is written (2 Cor. 6:5-6): “In labors, in watchings, in fastings, in chastity.” Fourthly, it is directed to almsgiving.[83]

As urban centers grew, work took on an additional positive association: the technological advances of artisans and the goods they produced could make a city prosperous, since these could then be sold beyond the town walls. Nuremberg, among other cities, owed its economic prosperity in the late Middle Ages in large

part to the rise of skilled artisans.[84] The Nuremberg Housebooks, which are filled with images of retired craftsmen performing their trade, visualize the respect such workers commanded.[85]

But labor also had negative connotations. The ancient philosophers Plato and especially Aristotle denigrated physical labor. Aristotle believed that unskilled workers lacked creativity and simply carried out the orders of skilled artisans. Not surprisingly, he judged both skilled and unskilled workers inferior to philosophers like himself. As a result, Aristotelians at medieval universities taught that the ideal society should be organized hierarchically, with liberal arts ranked higher than manual arts, since, according to their formulation, the former drew on the mind, the latter merely from the hands.[86]

In a fascinating study, Michael Uebel and Kellie Robertson showed that in every European language the medieval word for “labor” had an “unambivalent connotation of pain, suffering, and fatigue.”[87] Furthermore, Christians viewed labor, in part, as a punishment from God for the Fall. Due to his act of disobedience, Adam must “labour and toil ... all the days of thy life” (Genesis 3:17). For this reason, the Dominican friar Hubert of Romans (d. 1277) preached that peasants led a life that was consistent with God’s commandment, since it was filled with penance and punishment.[88] But the elite often belittled manual laborers. Robert Kilwardby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote in the mid-thirteenth century, “Physical activity is more suited to insignificant and common people, the peace of meditation and study to the noble elite; in this way, everyone has an occupation fitting his station in life.”[89]

Contributing to the disdain and animosity that the elite often felt towards peasants and urban laborers were their periodic revolts in the hope of attaining greater economic or political parity. Jean Froissart’s *Chroniques*, among others, expressed contempt for the Jacquerie, members of a popular uprising that took place in northern France in 1358. But during the Peasants’ Revolt in England in 1381, the priest John Ball preached a sermon at Blackheath that expressed great sympathy for workers. He purportedly said:

When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman? From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, he would have appointed who should be bond, and who free. And therefore I exhort you to consider that now the time

of sexual assault, one assailant aims his lance at a woman's breast. All the victims drip with blood, the only color in an otherwise monochromatic composition. Yet this image, which condemns the Jacquerie, also allows us to imagine the fury of these overworked, overtaxed peasants who were left unprotected as foreign marauders brutally raped and looted them.

Summary of Essays

Workers were not a monolithic group and the articles in the first part of this issue reflect this. In her essay, "Work is Hell: Demon Laborers in Late Medieval Art," Layla Seale examines demons who are depicted as workers in fifteenth-century French and Flemish illuminated manuscripts, analyzing their tools of torture and their actions, which resemble those of blacksmiths, construction workers, and cooks. She thoughtfully explores whether these figures work for God or the Devil, and considers how the elite readers of illuminated manuscripts would have interpreted images of such workers. Would their naturalistic tools and actions make the hellish scenes seem more real? Seale views these images against the backdrop of the changing political position of workers in French and Flemish cities.

Kathleen Kennedy analyzes illuminators who had hand tremors (as evidenced by the tremulous lines of their work) in her article, "Aging Artists and Impairment in Fifteenth-Century England." By exploring their border decorations through multiple lenses – including Disability Studies, labor history, the history of medicine, and medieval devotional and charitable practices – she suggests what might have caused the tremors, how the impaired illuminators mitigated the effects of their impairment, and why these artists continued to be employed. She concludes that it was the artists' "web of social relationships" that facilitated their continued employment.

Barbara Crostini investigates plasterers in her contribution, "Gypsum and Mortar: Constructing Byzantine Builders and Craftsmen between Late Antique Practice and Medieval Exegesis." She examines those who prepare the wall for frescoes, who mix mortar for building construction, and who create architectural elements from plaster, that is, her focus is skilled artisans who have been overlooked for too long. Crostini approaches her subject by exploring images of plasterers in illuminations and relief sculpture, plasterer's social networks including builders' associations, and documents that name individual plasterers. Crostini sheds further light on plasterers by examining the texts – both secular and religious – that accompany their images.

Anna Russakoff's "*Pain Quotidien: Images of Bakers in Medieval France*" explores representations of those who baked bread in the communal ovens of French cities. She examines store signs, corporate seals, church sculpture, and stained glass, before focusing on manuscript illuminations, which show the most images of bakers and the most complex ones. Russakoff analyzes bakers' peels and ovens, and the simple round loaf known as the *miche ronde* that bakers produced, the most important food in medieval France. She also investigates the roles of gender and sexuality in images of bakers. She concludes by placing her imagery against the historical background of periodic famines and food shortages.

Deirdre Jackson explores images of workers as well as the ideological reasons for their appearance in King Alfonso X's thirteenth-century manuscript of Marian miracles. Her article, "Work and Workers in Alfonso X's *Cantigas de Santa Maria*," examines images of humble male and female workers (vintners, teamsters, farmers, and owners of one sheep or a few silkworms). The *Cantigas* manuscripts not only show the tools, garments, and labor of these workers, they also demonstrate that the Virgin will answer their prayers. By including all ranks of his subjects, even poor workers, Alfonso hoped to build a unified society in Castile-León under his leadership. Nor were the *Cantigas*, which were monophonic songs, reserved only for the elite; ordinary workers may have heard them at Marian festivals.

A second group of essays explores workers as patrons or users of art. Selena Anders's contribution, "Housing the Butcher, the Baker, and the Candlestick Maker: The Cultural Significance of the Use of the Residential Façade Porticoes in Medieval Rome," repopulates the medieval city of Rome with workers by closely examining the porticoes on the buildings where they once lived and worked. By ingeniously examining a variety of sources—from records of medieval property sales and extant structures to nineteenth-century drawings of demolished buildings—Anders is able to reconstruct numerous porticoes dating from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. She explores the materials with which the porticoes were constructed (including spolia), their social uses (from marriage rituals to protection from intemperate weather), and their varied designs, and she traces the streets on which these commercial and residential structures once stood.

Virginia Raguin's contribution, "Windows on the Working Class," explores a group of Swiss and German stained-glass windows from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that represent a range of workers: a goldsmith, a farmer, militiamen, tailors, ropemakers, millers or brewers, and members of a law court. The actual labor that they exercise, however, is generally relegated to the margins and depicted in small

size, and sometimes even performed by monkeys. These works were commissioned not by elite patrons, but by working men who could now afford to buy stained glass windows.

The final section highlights two unusual approaches to studying medieval work and workers. In the penultimate article, Hallie G. Meredith's essay, "Shaping Viewer Experience through Images of Unfinished Work: A Visual History of Making in the 5th-8th Century CE Eastern Mediterranean," explores images of unfinished labor. Focusing on eastern Mediterranean images of incomplete work, dating from the fourth through eighth centuries, she argues that not only do these images show tools, work processes, and sequential stages of production that were common sights at the time but little known today, but also and more importantly she demonstrates how such images focus the viewer's attention on the secular or religious meaning of the artwork.

The final article, by Lindsay Cook, examines the cathedral chapter in Paris through a series of lenses that allow us to uncover traces of medieval peasants who labored on the chapter's land and those workers' relationship to the cathedral's art, architecture, and material culture. Titled "Reflections of the Working Class in the Land of the Paris Cathedral Chapter," it begins with an exploration of a wooden rod that serfs gave the chapter as a material form of apology when they improperly rented its land. Cook also discusses an incident in which Blanche of Castille challenged the chapter's authority by saving serfs whom the chapter had improperly treated. The fees that those serfs paid the chapter, perhaps for manumission, in turn contributed to the building campaign, which included images of agricultural workers that Cook deftly interrogates.

Conclusions

Although studying the working class is difficult because their lives are so often made invisible or are visible only through the lens of their oppressors, it is still possible, as this issue shows. The essays that follow teach us much about medieval art and workers. They challenge us to examine our assumptions about the working class and their entangled relationships with each other and with the rich and powerful. They introduce a broad range of workers and workers' experiences. These essays remind us that a consideration of class is critical to a full understanding of both medieval society and medieval art.

References

- 1** I would like to thank Sherry Lindquist and Alan Wallach for their astute comments on an earlier draft of this introduction and for their bibliographic suggestions. I am also very grateful to the journal editors, Jennifer Borland and Nancy Thompson, for their thoughtful and helpful editing and for expertly guiding me through the process of publishing this issue. For the *Decameron* under discussion, see <https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc87590n>. Accessed 8/22/21.
- 2** For these visual signs of labor, see Diane Wolfthal, *Household Servants and Slaves: A Visual History, 1300-1700* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022) pp. 47-49, 52.
- 3** Although some might dispute characterizing the laundress as a laborer, those who have washed laundry by hand can attest that it involves considerable exertion.
- 4** Illuminations in other manuscripts similarly show her as a major character. In fact, she is sometimes accompanied by a second working-class figure, her daughter, who, according to Boccaccio, helped her mother rescue Landolfo. See Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, It. 63, fol. 44r; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fr. 12421, fol. 58r; and Vatican City, Vatican Apostolic Library, Pal. lat. 1989, fol. 43v.
- 5** Economic class is generally defined by income and wealth. For example, in the Middle Ages kings were wealthier than peasants. The term “socio-economic class” also takes into account social status, that is, one’s relative rank within society. Thus medieval saints had high status even if they were poor. The term “social class,” which is sometimes used interchangeably with “socio-economic class,” also considers socio-cultural elements, such as behavior, knowledge, and culture. Then as now the social class into which one is born is quite difficult to change and generally determines one’s future income, employment possibilities, political power, marital prospects, health, nutrition, and life expectancy. In short, class (along with race, gender, and sexuality) is one of the ways in which societies deny individuals equal access to rights, resources, privilege, and power in society. See Andrew J. Grant, “Class, definition of,” in R. J. Barry (ed.). *Routledge Encyclopedia of International Political Economy* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2001), pp. 161-163.
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- 7** *Studies in Iconography*, edited by Nina Rowe, vol. 33 (2012).
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- 8** The French historian Georges Comet noted that many images of work foreground a tool or a finished product rather than the labor of the worker. See “Les gestes du travail, une approche iconographique,” in *Le geste et les gestes au Moyen Âge* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence 1998), pp.175-197. For alternative reasons for the invisibility of workers, see Diane Wolfthal, “The Unseen Servant,” in “*We are all servants*”: *The Diversity of Service in Premodern Europe 1000-1700*, ed. by Isabelle Cochelin and Diane Wolfthal (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2022), pp. 497-548.
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- 73** William Fitzgerald, "Labor and Laborer in Latin Poetry: The Case of the 'Moretum,'" *Arethusa* 29.3 (Fall 1996): 389-418.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/are.1996.0020>
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- 74** In order to humanize people who were forcibly deprived of their freedom, historians have increasingly discouraged the use of the word "slave," preferring the term "enslaved person" because it suggests that they were "humans first, commodities second." Eric Foner, however, has countered that "*Slave* is a familiar word and if it was good enough for Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists who fought to end the system, it is good enough for me." He added, "I do not think that *slave* suggests that is the essence of a person's being ... All people have multiple identities, including slaves." See Katy Waldman, "Slave or Enslaved Person?," *Slate*, May 19, 2015.
<https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/05/historians-debate-whether-to-use-the-term-slave-or-enslaved-person.html> (Accessed 4/15/2023). I would also argue that "slave" is a powerful word, whereas the term "enslaved person" blunts the brutality of slavery.
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- 75** Virgil, *Opera omnia, ex editione Heyniana, cum notis et interpretatione*, ed. by Abraham John Calpy (London: Valpy, 1819), vol. 3, pp. 1555-6, lines 31-36, for original language: "... erat unica custos,/Afra genus, tota patriam testante figura,/Torta comam, labroque tumens, et fusca colore;/ Pectore lata, jacens mammis, compressor alvo,/ Cruribus exilis, spatiosa prodiga planta; Continuis rimis calcanea scissa rigebant." For the translation, see Joseph J. Mooney (tr.), *The Minor Poems of Vergil: Comprising the Culex, Dirae, Lysdia, Moretum, Copa, Priapeia, and Catalepton* (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1916),
<http://virgil.org/appendix/moretum.htm> (Accessed 1/9/22).
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- 76** A rich body of research has explored gender and racial hierarchies in the Middle Ages. For race, see, among many others, Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018) and Cord J. Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).
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- 77** Paul H.D. Kaplan, "Isabella d'Este and Black African Women," in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 125-54.
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- 78** Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work* (Albany: SUNY, 1992), pp. 192-193, 200.
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- 79** Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), pp. 80-81. See also George Ovitt, "Manual Labor and Early Medieval Monasticism," *Viator* 17 (1986) p. 1-18.
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- 80** Translation from Garver, "Introduction," p. 2. For the original Latin of this section of Chapter 48, see Gregory M. Sadlek, *Idleness Working: The Discourse of Love's Labor from Ovid through Chaucer and Gower* (Washington, D.C.: University of America Press, 2004): "Otiositas inimica est animae: et ideo certis temporibus occupari debent fratres in labore manuum, certis iterum horis in lectione diuina."
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- 81** *The Great Beginning of Cîteaux: A Narrative of the Beginning of the Cistercian Order: The Exordium Magnum of Conrad of Eberbach*, trans. by Benedicta Ward and Paul Savage, ed. by E. Rozanne Elder (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 1961), pp. 248-249; Bernard of Clairvaux, Ep. 1, *Sancti Bernardi Opera*. vol. 7, pp. 9-10: "Surge, praecingere, tolle otium, exsere vires, move brachia, complosas explica manus, exercitare in aliquo, et statim senties sola te appetite quae famem tollant, non fauces demulceant."
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- 82** This appears in sermon 61. See Michael Uebel and Kellie Robertson, "Introduction," in *The Middle Ages at Work: Practicing Labor in Late Medieval England*, ed. by Kellie Robertson and Michael Uebel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 6.
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- 83** Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica secunda secundae partis*, q. 187, art. 3.
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- 84** Michael Diefenbacher, "Nürnberg, Reichsstadt: Handwerk," published on 15.03.2010; in: *Historisches Lexikon Bayerns*, URL: http://www.historisches-lexikon-bayerns.de/Lexikon/Nürnberg,_Reichsstadt:_Handwerk (accessed on 4.05.2021).
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- 85** For the Housebooks, see see Wilhelm Treue, *Das Hausbuch der Mendelschen Zwölfbrüderstiftung zu Nürnberg: Deutsch Handwerkerbilder des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols. (Munich: Bruckmann, 1965) and Gerhard Fouquet, "Zwölf-Brüder-Häuser und die Vorstellung vom verdienten Ruhestand in Spätmittelalter," in *Sozialgeschichte mittelalterlichen Hospitäler*, ed. by Neithard Bulst and Karl-Heinz Spieß (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2007), pp. 37-75.
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- 86** Farr, *Artisans in Europe*, pp. 10-11.
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- 87** Uebel and Robertson, "Introduction," p. 4.
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- 88** For Sermon 78, see Uebel and Robertson, "Introduction," pp. 6-7.
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- 89** Uebel and Robertson, "Introduction," p. 7; Robert Kilwarby, *De ortu scientiarum*, ed. by Albert G. Judy (London: British Academy, 1976), p. 129.
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- 90** "Readings from *The Peasants' Revolt*," from Melvyn Bragg's BBC show *Voices of the Powerless* https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/voices/voices_revolt.shtml (Accessed 5/15/21).