Chapter Four

Manuscript Illustrations: The Cantigas in Contemporary Art Context

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[46] The Cantigas de Santa Maria, produced for Alfonso X el Sabio around 1280, is one of the most spectacularly illustrated manuscripts of the period. Its 212 full-page illuminations, each divided into six compartments, are amply impressive; but its greatest significance resides in the fact that most of these miniatures, though illustrating hymns of praise to the Virgin, present a compendium of scenes from daily life. Wars are waged, merchants trade, seafarers cross perilous oceans, craftsmen practice their mysteries, games are played, births and deaths occur both peacefully and violently, and over this panoply of medieval life the Virgin presides, now watching, now interceding in the lives entrusted to her maternal care. In the number of illustrations of genre scenes and in the carefully detailed observations of life recorded in them, the Cantigas manuscript is unique among late thirteenth-century illustrated books. This manuscript also offers an unparalleled opportunity to study pictorial narrative techniques and relationships among text and image, particularly revealing in that the newly created text required an original visualization that could rarely rely on an earlier, established pictorial tradition.

Despite its significance, this manuscript has received relatively little attention from the point of view of its art-historical importance and its stylistic relationships with other late thirteenth-century manuscripts. John Keller's commentaries on the Cantigas focus on the literary more than the art-historical point of view. The miniatures of the Cantigas need to be seen in their art-historical context, so that the place of this manuscript not only in the court of Alfonso el Sabio but in the cultural milieu of late thirteenth-century Europe may be better understood.

[47] This period witnessed a dramatic rise in the growth of European towns. As urban economies prospered, so too did craftsmen, whose numbers increased dramatically in the late thirteenth century. The book trade, which by around 1250 had largely become a lay rather than monastic enterprise, mirrored the changing society of the late Middle Ages. The growing use of the vernacular in written texts, and the rise of literacy among the laity, stimulated manuscript production all over Europe. Royal courts gave the major impetus to the production of luxury manuscripts; kings and nobles became major patrons of the visual and literary arts.

Thus, Alfonso's commission of this literary work written in a vernacular, the Galician dialect, with its lavish illustrations, puts him in the company of other great thirteenth-century royal patrons--Louis IX of France and his sons Philippe III and Philippe IV, the southern Italian court of the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II and his son Manfred, and in England Henry III and Edward I. The Cantigas is distinguished from the works commissioned by these other royal patrons by the length of its text and the extensiveness of its pictorial program. The abundance of literary and visual material in the Cantigas prevents, in this relatively brief discussion, any consideration of more than a few examples.
The focus will be on a small selection of illustrations, some of which are characteristic of the manuscript as a whole (for example, cantigas 9, 28, 34, 185) (see Figs. 4-1 and 4-2), and on a few exceptions against which to measure them (for example, cantigas 29 and 80).

Only exceptional miniatures here rely on traditional illustrative formulae, such as the Tree of Jesse in number 80, and on the use of traditional formats, as in number 29 in the last two compartments on the page, which show highly formalized compositions: on the left Mary between two angels, and on the right a typical annunciation scene. The standard illuminations in this manuscript are remarkably liberated from conventional pictorializations. Examples are the unusual composition with seated figures amidst an architectural frame in number 185, illustrating the story of Mary's protecting the castle of Chincolla from the Muslims (and see numbers 46, 65, 126, and 185), as well as the numerous examples of extensive landscape representations of a highly realistic nature. Lively representations of commerce, detailing carefully observed scenes of buying and selling, occur in numbers 108 and 172. Perhaps the most unusual glimpse of medieval life occurs in a miniature that recounts the story of a Jew who disposed of the Virgin's image in a latrine; believers rescued the statue which then performed many miracles (number 34).

(LIBRO NOTE: THERE ARE TWO MISSING ILLUSTRATIONS)

[50] Since the Gothic style began in a clearly defined geographical area, northern France, and then spread from there, the French style in European manuscript illumination was the universal Gothic norm, which by mid-thirteenth century was dominated by Paris. By the time the Cantigas appeared, Parisian manuscript illumination had attained heights of technical excellence and pictorial elegance which resulted in widespread admiration and imitation. The manuscripts produced for the Capetians' sainted king, Louis IX, are among the most brilliantly executed of the period. The style resulting from Louis's patronage came to be known as the Court Style, and Parisian manuscripts became the standard of excellence by which other books were judged.

It is not surprising therefore to find a significant amount of French influence in the Cantigas miniatures. The French manuscript that comes immediately to mind for its stylistic affinities with the Cantigas is the so-called Shah Abbas Picture Bible, the greater part of which is in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York (MS 638). This Bible is a fine example of a wandering manuscript; although its miniatures are definitely of Parisian origin, around 1250--1260, its script and decorated initials are Italian, around 1300. Pope Clement VIII presented it to the Persian Shah Abbas the Great in 1608, at which time Arabic inscriptions were added to explain the biblical subjects.

Its full-page miniatures are divided into three or four compartments; the organization of the page into many compartments was a long-standing tradition of northern European manuscript illumination, especially in the large Romanesque Bibles produced in the twelfth century, as for example, the Morgan, Erlangen, and Lambeth Bibles. Although the subject matter in the Shah Abbas Bible is ostensibly that of the Old Testament, the visualizations, as was typical of all historical representation in the Middle Ages, present the scenes as if they were contemporary events.

Thus, when the city of Hai is captured (fol. 10v) the figure of Joshua is represented as a splendid knight in a golden helmet. Indeed, in its battle scenes, we receive a picture of medieval warfare as vivid as that found in the Cantigas. Battle scenes and soldiers on the way to combat are far more frequently encountered in the Shah Abbas Bible, where one observes some thirty-six of these combats in the ninety-two full-page illustrations, as compared to approximately twelve battle scenes contained in the 212 full-page illustrations in the Cantigas. One must allow for the frequency of opportunities for military illustration in the Shah Abbas Bible, especially in the Book of Kings, as compared to a book on the miracles of the Virgin. A strong tendency existed on the part of the illustrators of the Shah Abbas Bible to select military subjects from the many other themes available, nonetheless, considering
that over a third of this material is not in reality devoted to warfare as the ration of illustrations might suggest. A number of other illustrations, not considered in this count, depict military garb and weapons in both manuscripts, but again, the tendency to picture such figures is far stronger in the Shah Abbas Bible than in the Cantigas. As with so many other aspects of the comparison, one forms the impression that the Cantigas manuscript offers a closer representation of everyday life with regard to the military presence in its society--interesting in the light of the intensive militarization of society which historians tend to presume regarding Reconquest Iberia.

The presentation of military accoutrements and equipment offers a basis for both comparison and contrast. A wider variety of helmets appear in the Shah Abbas Bible, for example, as compared to the Cantigas. Round-topped helmets atop mail coifs dominate the Cantigas depictions, with head-enclosing casks rather less frequently pictured. The Shah Abbas Bible offers round-tops, casks, helmets with wide base-rims that move out from the side of the head, and even some older-style conical helmets with nose pieces, the origins of which predate the Shah Abbas Bible by two centuries. While swords, spears, and chopping weapons are similarly depicted in the two manuscripts, the Shah Abbas Bible presents a predominance of conventional bows in the hands of its warriors, in contrast to the Cantigas numerous well-drawn crossbows. If the evidence offered by these illustrations fairly represents the actual situation, both Spanish Christian and Muslim armies presented more advanced firepower than did the French of the period. Interesting also is the depiction of shields. In the Cantigas, the Christian armies carry only the kite-shaped shields, while the Muslim forces bear kites and also the heart-shaped shield (adarga) which had appeared in the thirteenth century. The Shah Abbas Bible invariably shows the Israelites bearing kite-shaped shields, while their opponents usually carry circular shields with an occasional kite. This may refer back to an earlier twelfth-century tradition, where kite shields identify the morally good or Christian forces versus the circular shield indicating the morally evil or Muslim side. An earlier preference of the Muslims for the circular shield in actual battlefield use did in fact exist in Spain.

The pictorial narrative reaches beyond men and their personal equipment in its display of military endeavors. Field tents appear in both the Cantigas and the Shah Abbas Bible. Especially interesting is the appearance of the trebuchet, the great stone-throwing machine which employed a heavy counterweight to obtain its hurling power. The Cantigas displays only one (where it appears in two frames of number 28) (see Fig. 4-2); but in this set the trebuchet plays a central part in the narrative, in that the Virgin will use her cloak to repel its stones in frustrating a Muslim siege of Constantinople. The Shah Abbas Bible displays two dramatically drawn examples in sieges of towns (fols. 23 v, 46v). This would have been a comparatively new weapon in midthirteenth century Western Europe, and it caught the attention of both manuscript workshops.

Horses play a large role in both manuscripts and provide a fine indication of the use of naturalism by the artists. The knights seem smaller in proportion to their horses in the Shah Abbas Bible compared with those of the Cantigas. This conforms to our evidence that the Spanish barb horse was smaller than its contemporary French competitor. The Cantigas artists also depict another known reality of the epoch, namely that the Christian Spanish tended to ride with a long-stirrup style called a la brida, while the Muslims rode with a short-stirrup strap which required bending the knee, a style called a la ginete.

In the Shah Abbas Bible, there is not only an abundance of graphically portrayed battle scenes but also human interest stories, such as David's adultery with Bathsheba (fol. 41 v) presented in a mode comparable to the lively scenes in the Cantigas. The narrative techniques are similar in both, with the visual narration following the text closely, even when minor episodes are represented. This expansive treatment makes it impossible for either the Bible or the Cantigas to represent every textual episode; in both manuscripts, the solution is to omit some stories altogether rather than compromise the close
Both manuscripts make use of Gothic architectural framing, but there is a major difference in the way each uses the outer border. The *Cantigas* borders are visually busier and more obtrusive than those in the *Shah Abbas Bible*. In both, the entire miniature is circumscribed with a flat, ornamented bar border, which in the *Shah Abbas Bible* is confined to the rectangular outline of the page. In the *Cantigas*, the border also bisects the page vertically, however, and is highly decorated with quadrilobed and other geometric patterns resembling the colorful cloisonne metalwork of the Mosan region. Ramon Menendez Pidal has suggested ivories as a source of inspiration for the six-part division of the page and for the borders, but in fact, carved ivory borders are not commonly found with the kind of geometric patterns used in the *Cantigas*. The more usual type of carved ivory border is a three-dimensional stylized acanthus leaf of Gothic architectural framing. The very flat geometric quality and clear-cut compartmentalization of the colors in the borders of the *Cantigas* strongly suggest an enamelwork source in which the metal strips mark out color boundaries.  

Another difference between these manuscripts concerns the relationship between the border and the space around it on the page. An unusual feature of the *Cantigas* miniatures is the inviolability of the borders. Nothing is allowed to intrude in their space. In the *Shah Abbas Bible*, on the other hand, the illustration of David and Bathsheba breaks the frame in the upper border, where a roof line extends into the margin of the page, and again in the lower-right corner where Joab's feet protrude into the border. Another well-known example of this kind of interaction between the border and the surrounding page occurs on folio 23V, depicting Saul's battle against the Ammonites, where a man on the left, completely outside the border on the miniature, clings valiantly to a rope on a catapult while an archer shoots from the top margin. Examples like these abound in the *Shah Abbas Bible*, where the border often seems too small to contain the force and vitality of its figures or the magnificence of their architectural setting.

In the *Cantigas*, the integrity of the border is never breached, on the other hand, and all its elements are tightly confined. In the scenes of the Moors besieging Constantinople in number 28, nothing breaks the integrity of the outer border, and only unobtrusively does a piece of siege machinery extend across the central border strip (see Fig. 4-2). Yet within individual scenes in the Spanish work, there is a great deal of spatial experimentation. Thus, in number nine, the placement of objects and figures in the vaulted room in the upper-right compartment indicates a large degree of spatial sophistication and awareness (see Fig. 4-1), as does the scene in the central compartment on the right, the selling of the Virgin's image. In both scenes, the figures interact spatially with the architecture: they move both in front of and behind columns and pillars. This type of spatial experimentation is extensive in the *Cantigas* and allies it with the *Shah Abbas Bible* where similar innovation abounds.

A significant difference between the *Cantigas* and the *Shah Abbas Bible* is the marked quality of elegance and refinement in the French work and its conspicuous absence from the Spanish manuscript. In the *Cantigas*, the figures are short and blocky; they move with a studied deliberation rather than with mannered grace. The gestures of the *Cantigas* figures are clearly delineated and convincingly represented, but they do not convey the balletic charm of the French work. The Spanish figures instead have a down-to-earth solidity and earnestness which lends them an appealing quality of slight awkwardness and the immediacy of reality. Proportions are heavier in the *Cantigas*, whereas the French figures are more attenuated. The drapery in both is well-shaded, giving a sense of three-dimensional solidity to the forms. In the *Shah Abbas Bible*, cloth characteristically falls in casually elegant folds, as for example in Saul's surcoat and his horse's trappings (fol. 27v). Throughout the French work, the drapery flows around the figures in a manner suggesting that the artist took great delight in enriching his miniatures with linear playfulness and charm. In the *Cantigas*, the drapery is volumetric and convincingly reveals the body within, but its flow and pattern are commonplace.
Many of these specific non-French qualities are found in late thirteenth-century Italian manuscripts, especially those produced in southern Italy for Frederick II's son Manfred. Another connection with southern Italian manuscript tradition is exemplified by the careful observations and delineations of birds in the *Cantigas*, as for example in numbers 124 and 142, which bear very close resemblance to the illustrations in Frederick II's hunting manuscript, *De arte venandi cum ambus*. A particularly telling stylistic relationship exists between the *Cantigas* and a manuscript in Rome's Biblioteca Angelica, Peter of Eboli's poem on the baths of Pozzuoli. The illuminators of both manuscripts faced the same challenge to create illustrations for a newly written text without an existing pictorial tradition.

Unlike the *Cantigas*, the Angelica illustrations are single full-page miniatures which are not subdivided into a series of compartmentalized narrative episodes. The Angelica artist does not use architectural framing, but he does employ architecture within each miniature to provide a sense of setting and space. He also makes serious attempts to integrate figures and architecture in a way very similar to that used in the *Cantigas*. The architecture in the Pozzuoli pictures, however, makes no pretensions to the Gothic; rather, it is resolutely Romanesque, solid, earthbound, and secure.

An important point of similarity between the *Cantigas* and the *Pozzuoli Baths* is the concern both share for representing, or attempting to grapple with, depictions of landscape space. In this area, both are far more sophisticated than the French work, which simply continues to use the old convention of a slightly wavy ground line to indicate outdoor scenes. Both the Italian and the Spanish illustrations show complex landscape settings with figures and architecture integrated into them, thereby achieving a kind of spatial actuality even though the pictures are not realistic in the sense of three-dimensional illusionism. Of these two, the *Cantigas* is by far the more developed in landscape representation. The Italian manuscript makes extensive use of conventionalized formulae, such as regularly rippling lines for water, repetitious broccoli-like trees perched on conical mountains, and shading that is more linear than tonal. The *Cantigas* presents landscapes that, though stylized, achieve a sense of reality not matched elsewhere until the fourteenth century. Cantiga 9 shows a delightful landscape in which a monk is confronted by a lion, while in cantiga 96 the Virgin miraculously restores a severed head in a landscape that is equally miraculous in its representation of hills, flowers, and trees (see Figs. 4-1, 4-3, 4-4, and 4-5).
It is in the treatment of figures, however, that the relationships between the Italian and the Spanish work are the most marked. In the illustration on folio 12 of the *Pozzuoli Baths*, for example, the figures walking through the landscape at the top of the miniature share many characteristics with the robbers in the first panel of cantiga 96 (see Figs. 4-3, 4-5). Heads are slightly too large in proportion to their bodies, movements are stiff and angular, facial features are bold and simplified, and the drapery is
shaded in a linear fashion. Similarly, the nude representations, of which by the nature of its subject matter the Pozzuoli Baths manuscript has a great many, are done in both books in a direct, forthright, and well-observed manner (as in cantigas 60 and 96) (see Fig. 4-3).

This discussion is not meant to suggest that there was direct influence from the Shah Abbas Bible or the Pozzuoli Baths manuscripts upon the Cantigas. The intention rather is to compare a major Spanish work with two other major works of a slightly earlier date, and to suggest the strong possibility of influence from similar French and Italian work upon the Cantigas pictures. One might be tempted to explore the possibility of German influence, considering that Alfonso el Sabio had a Hohenstaufen mother, and considering the existence of strong Hohenstaufen connections to the king of Aragon contemporary with the completion of the Cantigas manuscript. The likelihood of influence from German work ought nonetheless to be discounted because the German manuscript tradition of the second half of the thirteenth century was retardataire and heavily dependent upon French models. It seems therefore unlikely that it would have provided any major stylistic stimulus to the Cantigas, which is itself very advanced for the period. 13

Notes for Chapter Four

1. There are four extant manuscripts of the Cantigas. Two are in the Biblioteca de San Lorenzo el Real at the El Escorial palace near Madrid: MS T.I.1, called the Códice Rico, the most lavishly illustrated version and the subject of this article, and MS B.1.2 (formerly j.b.2), which has 40 miniatures illustrating musicians playing a wide variety of instruments. The third is in Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional MS 10.069, often referred to as To(1) or Toledo since it was originally in the cathedral there. The fourth is in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS Banco Rari 20 (formerly MS II.1.213). The definitive editions of the Cantigas discuss these manuscripts and their textual relationships: Cantigas de Santa Maria, ed. Walter Mettmann, 4 vols. (Coimbra, Portugal: University of Coimbra, 1959-1972). The manuscript in Florence is illustrated; in both format and style, its miniatures are closely related to the Escorial MS T.I.1, and both manuscripts appear to have been produced in the same workshop. See Antonio García Solalinde, "El códice florentino de las 'Cantigas' y su relación con los demás manuscritos," RFE 5 (1918): 143-79. See also Ramón Menéndez Pidal, "Los manuscritos de las 'Cantigas': cómo se elaboró la miniatura alfonsí," Boletín de la Real academia española 150 (1962): 23-51; he also discusses the Florentine codex. See also below, ch. 11, n. 1.

2. Keller has written most extensively on the Cantigas, although his focus is literary. He has provided some discussion of the miniatures; see, for example, his Alfonso X, and also Keller and Richard P. Kinkade, Iconography in Medieval Spanish Literature (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 6-40, with further bibliographic references. See too his "The Art of Illumination in the Books of Alfonso X (Primarily in the Canticles of Holy Mary)." Alfonso, Emperor, 388-406. Menéndez Pidal, in his 1962 article cited above in note 1, does discuss the question of foreign influences, citing a number of possibilities including German and Islamic art. Reproductions of the miniatures of Escorial MS T.I.i are easily available. An early edition of the miniatures in black and white is that of José Guerrero Lovillo, Las cantigas, estudio arqueológico de sus miniaturas (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1949). See also Matilde López Serrano, Cantigas de Santa María de Alfonso X el Sabio, rey de Castilla (Madrid: Editorial Patrimonio 222 Nacional, 1974), and Cantigas de Santa María: edición facsímil del códice T.I.1 de Biblioteca de San Lorenzo el Real de El Escorial, siglo XIII, 2 vols. (Madrid: Editorial Nacional de Libros Antiguos, 1979).

3. For a good general discussion of literary patronage, see Erich Auerbach, Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, trans. R. Manheim, Bollingen Series, vol. 74


5. Two leaves are in Paris (BNM, MS/n.a. lat. 2294) and one leaf is privately owned. See S. C. Cockerell and M. R. James, A Book of Old Testament Illustrations ... in the Pierpont Morgan Library, Cambridge, Roxburghe 1927, and reprinted with facsimile illustrations in color (New York: Braziller, 1970).


7. See especially fols. 10 and 22 of the Bible, and Cantigas, nos. 46,51, 63, and 129.


10. Cantigas, nos. 63,165,181. For a discussion of the evolution of riding style see Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Cantar del mio Cid , 4th edn., 2 vols. (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1969), 2:582-84; Jaime Oliver Asín, "Origen árabe de 'rebato,' 'arrobda,' y sus homónimos," Boletín de la Real academia española 15 (1928): 372-89. The Spanish barb horse is also discussed in James F. Powers, A Society Organized for War: The Iberian Municipal Militias in the Central Middle Ages, 1000-1284 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 160-61. It has been suggested that the artists of the Cantigas also exploit the color of the horses in an interesting manner — employing dapple gray, light brown, and darker chestnut brown, always in that order — to indicate the nearest horse of a group, the next distant, and the most distant, starting the series over again if there are more than three in a group. This was first indicated in an unpublished paper by Theresa Vann of Fordham University (1984). One can surmise that color used in this way is a device to clarify the crowded scenes created by the tight frames of the Cantigas. Although the Shah Abbas Bible in at least one place (fol. 44v) does display horses in this color arrangement, a particular color order seems nowhere established in the equestrian scenes. The more open space and less constricting borders of the Shah Abbas Bible would probably have obviated the need to attempt such techniques.


13. The authors would like to acknowledge the use of English translations of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, provided in typescript form by Kathleen Kulp-Hill of the University of Northern Iowa. See ch. 6, n. 24 below.