

# The Burlington Magazine Index Blog

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## ‘The Labours of the Months’ (1923): Herbert Read’s first article for The Burlington Magazine

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Surrealist poet, war hero, militant anarchist, art critic and Editor of *The Burlington Magazine* from 1933 to 1938. Herbert Read, the son of a Yorkshire farmer who became one of the country’s most influential writers, is an intellectual figure who looms large in British history and about whom much has been written.

Recently, art historian Kate Aspinall has examined a fascinating aspect of Read’s criticism, his connection of medieval art with early twentieth century British modernity through the use of ‘line’.

Starting from a 1933 article in *The Burlington Magazine* Aspinall showed how Read’s theory stemmed from ‘a wider community of thinkers who linked the British avant-garde with medieval illumination via the watercolours of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.’ Theorists and scholars such as Kenneth Clark, William George Constable, and Nikolaus Pevsner were part of this group. With Read, they identified drawing as an essential aspect of medieval illumination that later re-emerged in the work of modern British artists such as John Piper and Paul Nash.



*Herbert Read by Edgar Holloway, etching, 1934, London, National Portrait Gallery*

Aspinall's convincingly argues that the enthusiasm for the stylistic traits of the Middle Ages arose not only from aesthetic affinities but also from these intellectuals political views: 'Amid concerns over mounting political extremism, notions of medieval art were useful as emblems of British precedent for sustainable and proud work'.



This blog aims to provide a comment to Aspinall's essay by discussing an earlier article in *The Burlington Magazine*, 'The Labours of the Months: a series of stained glass roundels', that Read published in the *Burlington* in October 1923, shortly after having been appointed Curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Here I argue that the connoisseurial work of establishing a corpus of Medieval British art was the foundation from which Read's later theorisation originated.

The 1920s were a very interesting (and much overlooked) decade for *The*

*Burlington Magazine*. Under the editorship of Robert Rattray Tatlock and the vigilant eye of Roger Fry on its consultative committee, the Magazine published some of its most philosophical and theoretical writings such as Hubert Waley's 'Psychology of Aesthetic Pleasure' (February 1924), Arthur Waley's 'Chinese Philosophy of Art' (August, November and December 1921), Gerald Baldwin Brown's 'The Origin and Early History of Art in Relation to Aesthetic Theory in General' (August and September 1922) and Charles Mauron's 'Unity and Diversity in Art' (September 1925).

Read's short article, however, is not philosophical or an exercise of aesthetic critique but an example of the connoisseurial, evidence-based art history that is more often associated with the *Burlington*.



Read described in a few paragraphs a series of six roundels which had just been acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum (Museum

nos.C.123-128-1923). The series was originally part of a set of twelve roundels depicting the 'Labours of the Months' purchased with the assistance of the National Art Collections Fund from the sale of the contents of Cassiobury House, a country mansion in Cassiobury Park in Watford (Hertfordshire, illustrated above), which originated in Tudor times and was demolished in 1927.

The 'Labours of the Months', illustrations of the months and occupations associated with them, appear early in the Medieval period on church facades and interiors. Subsequently they appeared in other forms such as illuminated manuscripts and stained glass in the course of the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. The occupations depicted in these 'Labours of the Months' are mostly agricultural and are thus closely associated with farm labourers.

Illustrations of 'Labours of the Months' were found all throughout Europe and Read's principal contribution in this article is attributing this series to an English workshop rather than Netherlandish masters.

Read expresses his opinion in mild tones:

*The roundels are certainly either Netherlandish or English; between these attributions there may be room for an opinion, though not for a very strong one.*

The mildness, however, is merely a rhetorical device.



Read proceeds to connect with great assurance these works with British precedents such as St. Mary's Hall at Coventry, Colville Hall in Essex, and Lincoln Cathedral.

Read also identifies the illustration of the month of June 'Man weeding with a weed-hook' in which a farmer is depicted battling with an infestation of dandelions, as a unique English representation of this month.

As Aspinal illustrates, in the course of the 1930s, early medieval British society was described as 'a de-centralized network of villages peopled by craftsmen who were untroubled by the superstructure of the Church

and who channelled their personal mysticism into ritualized creativity, which was embalmed in their intricate scrollwork and bold stylization'.

Undoubtedly, the labourers represented in the Victoria and Albert Museum's 'Months' with their untroubled relationship with nature can be interpreted as representative of this idealistic vision of history.

To state the political, emotive and theoretical significance of medieval British art, however, one must first obtain a firm notion of what British medieval art actually was. In other words it was necessary to ascertain which of the many medieval works of art dispersed in churches, houses and museums belonged to the British tradition and which were the product of other nations.

Read's 1920s articles in *The Burlington Magazine* did this: at a time when medieval British art was still a fluid notion they determined with assurance a corpus of works that could be with certainty attributed to native workshops.

BP, October 2016

Herbert Read, 'The Labours of the Months: A Series of Stained Glass Roundels', *The Burlington Magazine* 43 (October 1923), pp.167-8.