

THE OLD EMPERORS: NEW IMPULSES IN LATE MEDIEVAL RESEARCH

Ferdinand Seibt

This study is concerned with new approaches to the interpretation of history. If one considers the possibilities and limits of electronic media, then exhibitions offer a way of linking the demonstration of sources in written as well as in material form with their interpretation and with more exact verbal explanation. Historical exhibitions have been attracting a large public interest in Germany since the Charlemagne anniversary of 1965. At that time the Aachen art historian Wolfgang Braunfels and his collaborators set new standards in the scope of the themes and the form and extent of the catalogue, standards which are still valid today. Striking also is the close connection between history and art history, which, through the choice of exhibits, has led to an interdisciplinary collaboration necessary for progress in modern research to be made, but which – apart from in team work – is still deficient in most exhibitions.

Anton Legner's 1972 Cologne exhibition "Between the Rhine and the Maas" had a great deal to offer us about western Europe. "The Parlers and the Beautiful Style" by the same author took – with what became a five-volume catalogue – the connection between the representation of art and the analysis of history to its highest point to date. This exhibition corresponded to the contemporaneous biographical show about the Emperor Charles IV at the imperial castle of Nuremberg. "The Middle Ages in the Ruhr Region" sought to present the medieval past of a region known today only for its celebrated industrial landscape. Even the special phenomenon of the Hanse Towns had their own highly instructive show. More commonly, however, biographical or dynastic themes are sought in connection with historical anniversaries. And so after the Charlemagne exhibition, there followed ones on the Staufer, and the Wittelsbachs, and the Charles IV exhibition was followed by one about the Emperor Sigismund (Budapest, 1987). Through such exhibitions, biographical perspectives have found their circuitous way back into historiographical enquiry despite being superseded by sociological issues in the postwar period. From this premise, the author turns to the biographies of four medieval rulers which have recently been published, seeking by their example to elucidate the desire and possibility of biographical insights while – in his opinion – exhibitions and interdisciplinary issues are especially useful to the modern biographer.