

Rudolf von Ems: World Chronicle

Der Stricker: Charlemagne



The Favourite Book of the Middle Ages

A Best-Seller of the Middle Ages

For many centuries, the City of Saint-Gall has preserved a most chivalrous magnificent manuscript of the Late Middle Ages. This codex exemplifies, in both script and language, in miniature painting and narrative verse, a highlight of Southern German Gothic. Its poetic literature and pictorial decoration records the world history for the ages, as it presented itself to the eyes and ears of a knightly round enjoying a glass of good wine.

It was around 1300 that the court commissioned two Middle High German poems to be written on vellum and embellished with vivid scenes on a gilded ground. The first written version of these works dated back to half a century earlier. It is the World Chronicle by Rudolf von Ems and the Life of Charlemagne, recorded by an anonymous author, called "Der Stricker".

The Old Testament as the Main Source for the World Chronicle

During his last years, Rudolf von Ems wrote a World Chronicle of over 33,000 verses in consecutive rhyme, commissioned by Conrad IV, one of the Staufer Kings. This chronicle deals with the world's history, from the Creation to the death of King Solomon, in the Middle High German language.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, the World Chronicle obviously became one of the most popular poems, as it recounted biblical history in the contemporary language of the time. It recites biblical history of salvation, as seen from the times past, but rearranged before the background of contemporary life. In the same way, the precious miniatures aim to guide the reader to this very point, in the company of extremely lean women in flowing gowns or by brave knights in shining armour. The overall goal was to transpose the history of long past centuries into the experiences of the world of the High Gothic period.

The Saint-Gall manuscript thus became, even outside the area of Lake Constance, the reference for later illustrated chronicles and a precious testimony to German book illumination of the Middle Ages.

Charlemagne, the Perfection of a Christian Ruler

The epic of the "Stricker" was extremely well known in the Middle Ages and goes back to the Chanson de Roland, a piece of Old French poetry, which the cleric Conrad of Regensburg first translated into German

in 1170. The "Stricker" enlarged the old heroic epic set in the environment of Charlemagne to a didactic anthology of the chivalrous lifestyle.

The plot is based on the legend of Charlemagne and his faithful battle companion Roland who, with the support of his sword Durandal and his horn Olifant, fights on his side against the Saracens but is finally killed after having achieved real wonders of braveness. In the end, the emperor, alerted by Roland's horn, arrives too late to save his companion's life but wins the battle against the Saracens. It later went down in history as the decisive battle between Christians and Heathens in Europe.

Chivalrous, Courtly Lifestyle Depicted in Precious Miniatures

The Saint-Gall manuscript is the most important work of the transitory period in Southern German book illumination. In a fresh, corporal language and alemannic delight in narration, the 58 miniatures on a gilded ground provide a perfect image of the lifestyle which prevailed at the noble courts of the late 13th century. There is a new life-like and vivid expressiveness which for the first time breaks with the angular and twisted Northern German Zackenstil, a sure sign of a new current introduced by French artists of the time. Heroes from the Old Testament in tournament gear, court ladies in flowing dresses recount fascinating biblical events and heroic legends from Antiquity as well as from the environment of Charlemagne.

Rudolf von Ems and "Der Stricker"

Rudolf von Ems is thought to have originated from the village of Hohenems in the Austrian province of Vorarlberg, a village closely connected to Saint-Gall abbey throughout the centuries. Born around 1200 into the knightly society, he later was promoted to court poet of the Staufer dynasty because of his good education.

Although tradition knows very little about Rudolf von Ems, even less information exists about his contemporary, the "Stricker." However, from his works we gather that he was neither a member of the clergy nor a knight but originally rather came from the bourgeoisie. In one of his writings he refers to himself as a "homeless" person. Obviously based in Southwest Germany, he wrote a number of verse epics, rhymed farces and didactic poems.

The Fine Art Facsimile Edition

The 588 pages (294 leaves) have been reproduced in the original format of 29.5 x 20 cm in full accordance with the original, down to the most minute details.

While the World Chronicle extends over 436 pages, the "Stricker's" epic on Charlemagne takes up 152 pages. Even the 58 miniatures, of which a great number are in the format of 14 x 10 cm, have been reproduced with their golden reflections to enhance the impression of three-dimensionality. The individual leaves have been trimmed according to the original and the headband is stitched by hand. The cover also corresponds to the original binding and it is made from nappa cowhide ornate with 16 brass fittings. The fine art facsimile edition is limited to 980 numbered copies world-wide.

The Commentary Volume

On nearly 400 pages, the scientific commentary sheds a new and most comprehensive light on the manuscript.

Documentation Kit

A documentation folder containing three full-sized leaves from the facsimile edition and an illustrated 16-page information brochure is available for information upon request.