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Johan Huizinga. *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*. Translated by Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

## Book Review

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Johan Huizinga's cultural history classic *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen: Studie over levens- en gedachtenvormen der veertiende en vijftiende eeuw in Frankrijk en de Nederlanden* can be puzzling for English-speaking readers. Originally written in Dutch, the book itself has had a long history, having been continuously published since 1921, written in sixteen languages, and available in over 300 editions. Initially, *Herfsttij* received a mixed reception, but has since been regarded as a masterpiece of literature as well as a significant historical work.

Huizinga, seen by many as the greatest Dutch historian of the twentieth century, wrote during the period considered to be the age of classic cultural history. In many ways similar to his predecessor, Jacob Burckhardt, Huizinga sought to recover the soul of the time period he studied; in Huizinga's case, the late Middle Ages. Huizinga argued that the culture of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in France and the Netherlands was not the beginning of the Renaissance, but rather, that it represented the overly ripened fruits of the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> He defines much that has been attributed to the Renaissance to in fact be characteristic of the medieval period. Huizinga's examples include an analysis of the work of Jan van Eyck, concluding that van Eyck's art, while often regarded as "announcing the arrival of the Renaissance, should rather be regarded as the complete unfolding of the medieval spirit."<sup>2</sup>

Huizinga's prose immerses the reader in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries of northern Europe. He draws upon the works of the chroniclers of the age, most frequently Jean Froissart, Olivier de la Marche, Georges Chastellain, and Enguerrand de Monstrelet, as well as the theologians, Denis the Carthusian and Jean De Gerson, the poet, Eustache Deschamps, and artists, primarily van Eyck. He paints a world vastly different than that of the early twentieth century with his opening "When the world was half a thousand years younger all events had much sharper outlines . . . all things in life had about them something glitteringly and cruelly public."<sup>3</sup> Huizinga is at his strongest as he builds sights, sounds, smells, color, and emotion into the portrait he paints of the age. The reader is swept away.

While the Payton and Mammitzsch translation seeks to bring *Herfsttij* closer to English readers, it misses an opportunity to provide modern readers with a

better appreciation of the period through the use of color plates to portray the art works described in the text. The choice to rely on black and white plates is especially disappointing when one compares color to black and white representations of Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation*. The colors glow and shimmer in a color rendition of the painting; small details abound that are not apparent in black and white. Given Huizinga's desire that his readers experience as much as possible the life of the period, it is unfortunate that the new edition did not offer at least a few color plates of the many art works described in the text.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of its faults, *Autumn* has aged extremely well; unlike many other ninety year old books, much of it remains fresh and powerful. *Autumn* is a true classic and its author, Johan Huizinga, continues long after his death to wield a strong influence, particularly for cultural historians.

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## Notes

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1. Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 7-10; Huizinga, *Autumn*,
  2. Huizinga, *Autumn*, 319.
  3. Huizinga, *Autumn*, 1.
  4. Huizinga, *Autumn*, plate 29; Jan van Eyck, *The Annunciation*, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, <http://www.artbible.info/art/large/505.html> (accessed May 31, 2011).