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The Case of Rouen Cathedral: An Art Historical Detective Story

Michael Watt Cothren

Swarthmore College, mcothre1@swarthmore.edu

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The Case of Rouen Cathedral

An Art Historical Detective Story

by MICHAEL W. COTHREN

"Praetorium enim recordatio futurorum est exhibitio."

The recollection of the past is the promise of the future.

Sugerius Abbas

When we think of French Gothic stained glass, radiant and well-preserved ensembles like the Parisian Sainte-Chapelle or the Cathedral of Chartres are most likely to come to mind. There are good reasons for this. Works such as these, because they have been well cared for, maintain their aesthetic impact to this day and allow us to experience them in a way similar to that intended by their creators for the original viewers over seven hundred years ago. These glittering, colorful compositions were meant to take our breath away, to dominate our experience within a soaring, unified architectural space, to imbue us with a sense of wonder and excitement. The idea that sparkling and multicolored light can replace walls to enclose lofty architectural spaces is still overwhelming, even to jaded twentieth-century viewers to whom space shuttles and skyscrapers are an everyday experience.

Yet even if our visual responses ally us with our thirteenth-century precursors when standing before the windows of



Figure 1: Malchus led before the Bishop and Prefect of Ephesus. Detail from a panel of stained glass from the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus window of Rouen Cathedral, now in the Glencairn Museum, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, dating from 1200-1202.

Chartres or the Sainte-Chapelle, many aspects of them—such as their symbolic meaning or the circumstances that called for their creation—remain obscure to the modern viewer unfamiliar with medieval theological speculations or political power struggles. We need guidance to understand how the glazing of Chartres outlines and interprets cosmic history from the creation of the world, through the Incarnation, to the end of time. Even more obscure is the political justification proclaimed in the windows of the Sainte-Chapelle, which cite sacred precursors

for the reign of the patron, King Louis IX, and even imply the political sanction of Christ for Louis's earthly power. The windows of many medieval churches, however, present problems to the modern viewer which are even more basic. The ravages of time have often constructed barriers between us and the original glazings of many Gothic churches, reducing them to a mere fragment of their original appearance, and thus hindering our aesthetic, as well as our symbolic and historical understanding. The windows of Rouen Cathedral are a case in point.

The cathedral church of the Norman capital of Rouen (about eighty miles northwest of Paris) was one of the most impressive buildings of the Middle Ages. Constructed in the High Gothic style after a fire in 1200 seriously damaged the previous Romanesque church on the site, the new cathedral was filled with stained glass windows executed by some of the most important artists of the time. Glass painting was arguably the major medium of painting in this period largely because of the vogue of Gothic architectural complexes like the Cathedral of Rouen. The Gothic architect opened broad spaces between supports so that walls could be replaced with colored glass depicting ecclesiastical subjects of hagiographic, theological, occasionally moralizing, often political significance.

Some of the windows painted for the nave aisle of Rouen were entrusted to a painter who is generally considered one of the greatest artists of the early thirteenth century, a true old master. He was a virtuoso in the use of overlapping to suggest three dimensional space, and he enveloped his figures in lusciously painted drapery that falls in elegant, long curves over sophisticated and graceful poses (Fig. 1). He used glass of unusually

Michael Cothren, A'73, is associate professor of art history at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. On October 16, he was the guest lecturer for the Vanderbilt Art Association's Lecture Series; his topic was the Nave Aisle Windows of the Cathedral of Rouen.

rich texture and color. Only our ignorance about his name has prevented him from holding the revered place he deserves within the history of art. Medievalists refer to him as "the John the Baptist Master," naming him after his best known work, a window at Rouen which portrayed the life of Saint John the Baptist; it would be like calling Michelangelo "the Sistine Ceiling Master."

The work of the John the Baptist Master and his contemporaries in the nave of Rouen has not been preserved as whole windows like those of Chartres and the Sainte-Chapelle. Portions of them have actually been removed from Rouen. In fact the best examples of the work of the John the Baptist Master are not even in France, but in American collections. Two panels are in the Raymond Pitcairn Collection in the Glencairn Museum, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania. Others are in the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Thus, experiencing the windows of the nave aisle of Rouen requires some effort, since they are no longer there. It requires the assistance of a detective.

First, all the dispersed pieces in the United States and France must be tracked down. Then they must be examined closely to determine to what extent each has been distorted by modern alterations (stained glass in museums has often been "refreshed" by its trip through the art market). Only at this point can an attempt be made to piece together the meager fragments that have been gathered and to assemble from them a whole window. The detective work and reconstruction necessary to study the nave aisle windows of Rouen have occupied my research for the last few years. Here I would like to share the story of how it has been possible to reconstruct one of the John the Baptist Master's windows—a window that told the story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.¹

First some historical background. The primary obstacle to the study of the early thirteenth-century windows of Rouen was erected in the late thirteenth century. Originally there were no chapels along the aisles of this great cathedral as there are today. By the 1270s, however, the functional demands placed on this building had changed. There were not enough altars to fulfill contemporary liturgical imperatives, so the aisle walls were knocked down and a series of chapels were built along both sides of the building, each with an altar where services could take place. Architectural styles changed rapidly during the thirteenth century, and the design of the original aisle windows was hopelessly old-fashioned by the 1270s. The new architects who built the additional chapels replaced

the simple, singular, early thirteenth-century lancets with up-to-date, larger, and greatly subdivided windows. Instead of one broad opening, the new windows were composed of four narrow ones (Fig. 2). But the stained glass taken out of the old windows was too precious to discard, so the decision was made to adapt it to fit the new multiple, but narrow openings. The panels chosen for reuse were much transformed to fit their new home—butchered we might want to say. Some were cut down, most were reshaped, turned on the bias or patched up. Then they were plugged into the openings like a series of patches in a quilt. Little attempt, other than the addition of a new strip of decoration along the edge to form a border, seems to have been made to give any semblance of formal continuity, or to bind the battered relics into a coherent whole. There was even less concern for continuity in symbolic meaning. Episodes from the lives of the various saints from several windows were randomly arranged within a single lancet as if subject were a matter of little significance. It is impossible to follow a narrative or to discern a symbolic theme. Perhaps this was the first "museum installation" of medieval art.

Two such patchwork windows confront the visitor to the Cathedral of Rouen today in two chapels of the north aisle of the nave. Together they contain the remnants of a dozen or so windows. As late as 1830, however, there were two others on the south side of the church. Their disappearance represents the first step into a journey that would lead some of this glass into American collections. During the nineteenth century, it seems the disorder of those hodge-podge windows at Rouen was even more bothersome than it is today. By the middle of the century it was determined that, since these confused old windows detracted from the appearance of the venerable cathedral, they should be replaced with modern windows that would simulate the appearance of medieval windows. While new, tidier, neo-Gothic windows were made during the second half of the nineteenth century for this position on the south side of the nave, the displaced relics of medieval glass were moved for safe keeping to a first floor room in the northwest tower of the cathedral.²

It seems that most people forgot that the medieval panels had been placed in storage—most but not all. From this not-so-safe dépôt panels began to leave for the art market. Four entered the New York collection of Henry C. Lawrence in 1918, from which they were sold in 1921 to the Worcester Art Museum and to Raymond Pitcairn. They had already left Rouen by 1911 when an inventory of the storeroom made by Jean Lafond, a renowned French specialist in medieval

stained glass, reported many losses. In 1934 when Lafond returned to the storeroom, other panels had been smuggled out and sold, including two panels purchased by Raymond Pitcairn, one of which has recently entered The Cloisters Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1934 it was further discovered that the panels that had remained in storage had not been cared for and were in deplorable condition. These battered fragments have now been moved to the French national storage facility at the Chateau of Champs-sur-Marne. A program is currently underway to return them to Rouen. The first product of this effort is a splendid modern window, which has recently been installed in a chapel of the choir of the cathedral. Contemporary French glass painter Sylvie Gaudin has surrounded eight fragmentary early-thirteenth-century panels with skillful and judicious modern variations of their medieval themes—a mixture of the medieval and the modern created in such a way that justice has been done to both.

My study of the Rouen nave aisle windows began with an examination of this group of panels—those in American collections and those that have been returned to Rouen in this modern window. In 1982, while I was on sabbatical in Paris working on this and other projects, however, more fragments were discovered, fragments that had apparently been left in a storage crate and forgotten. There were partially preserved panels, small ensembles, and even individual pieces of glass, morsels which presumably fell from

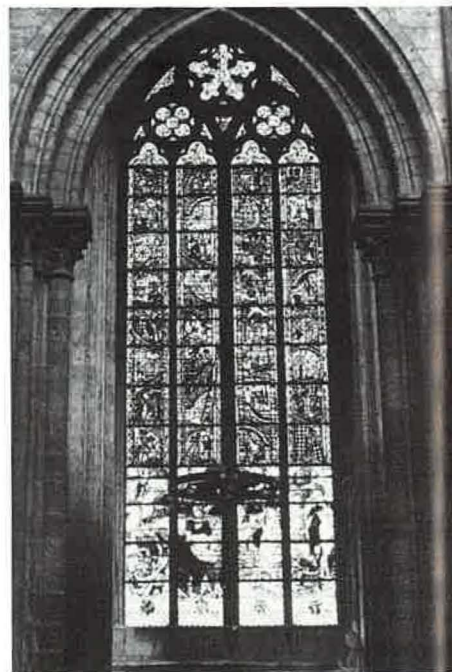


Figure 2: The "Belle Verrière" of the chapel of Saint-Jean-de-lanef, Rouen Cathedral.

various larger fragments while the panels were in storage cases, and which must now be returned to them like pieces of a huge, still fragmentary jigsaw puzzle. I discovered the existence of this glass by chance, noticing a photograph of several pieces while I was in a French Ministry of Culture Office involved with other research.

A nervous few months of delicate diplomatic encounters followed before I had gained permission to examine these pieces and ascertain (by studying their physical character and determining their actual size) if they fit where they ought to fit in the reconstruction I had developed based on the known panels. Because many important panels of French medieval stained glass made their way to the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, American scholars often encounter suspicious government authorities when they seek special permission to study precious national treasures. In this case, however, I was supported by Catherine Brisac, a French art historian who specializes in the study of stained glass and who works in that capacity for the Ministry of Culture. With her aid I was able to convince the Ministry officials that I could help determine what to do with these fragments. In return for my promise to file an inventory of them with the Ministry, I was given formal permission to study them.

Like any good detective, with all this evidence gathered, I now had to interpret it. The first step in such an interpretation is a determination of what the whole Seven Sleepers window originally looked like. There are eleven fragmentary panels and numerous single pieces of glass to work with, but the evidence they present is often confusing. Many panels have been marred by later restorations. These later additions must be eliminated and occasionally the authentic cores must be rearranged in order to unravel the tangled knots of the later transformations which now hold these panels together.

An examination of the panel now in the Worcester Art Museum will demonstrate how this step can be accomplished and what it will reveal. In the diagram reproduced here as figure 3, all the hatched areas are modern. A modern lattice mosaic ground was added to the top and white strips of beaded decoration to the sides of the panel by an early-twentieth-century dealer, who sought to transform an irregular panel defined by curving fillets and ragged edges into a regular, and more marketable, rectangle. His theory was that an art-buying public accustomed to thinking about paintings as framed rectangles, would be more likely to buy stained glass if it were also a rectangle. Once all this modern glass is removed, an early-thirteenth-century core is exposed. A close look at this core re-

veals that for some reason the lower part of the Worcester scene has been shifted to the left. Once this strip is moved slightly to the right, the composition, though still incomplete, becomes more coherent. More clues to its original design and format are exposed, clues that were disguised as long as it was trapped in its modern presentation.

Following a similar study of all surviving panels and a collection of such clues, a regular pattern emerges revealing the original design of the panels which originally comprised the Seven Sleepers window. By arranging these panels in groups, the original design of the entire window can be reconstructed (Fig. 4). It seems to have been composed of a series of undulating medallion shapes formed by the clustered combination of four panels. Those portions of the quadrants that held the figural compositions were defined by three straight sides and a fourth deline-

ated by an asymmetrically disposed curve. Foliate ornament filled the interstices cut by the curving fillets to complete the rectangle, and a triangle of ornament was reserved from the corner of each panel. When the panels were combined in groups of four, these triangles formed a canted square boss that served as an ornamental clasp at the center, binding the clustered design of each medallion. No complete panel exists from the Seven Sleepers window, but each surviving fragment is compatible with this general design, which has been derived from the best preserved example of each motif.

The true test of this reconstruction of the design of the Seven Sleepers window, however, resides in the compatibility of the arrangement of the extant panels with the temporal sequence of the legend of the Seven Sleepers, an episode of which is portrayed in each panel. In other words, if when placed in chronological narrative

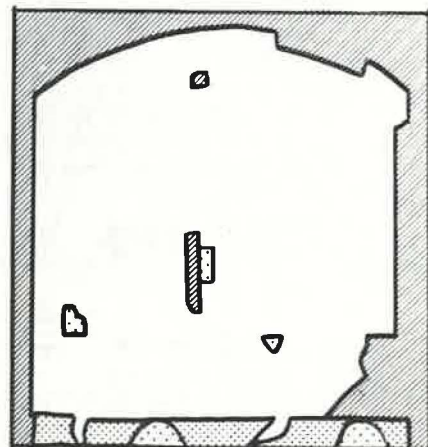


Figure 3: Restoration chart and reconstruction of the medieval core of a panel depicting Messengers before the Emperor Theodosius from the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus window of Rouen Cathedral, now in the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.

order, the extant episodes will not fit into this window design, the window design has to be thrown out. Before testing, however, I should briefly review the legend. It is not, alas, as well known in the twentieth century as it was in the thirteenth.

The story opens during the turbulent persecution of Christians under the Roman emperor Decius (249-51 A.D.). While his court was in Ephesus, seven of the emperor's noble retainers converted to Christianity and soon refused to perform the requisite pagan sacrifices. The angered emperor chastised the seven when they were brought before him accused of their Christianity, but he released them, admonishing them to practice penance in Ephesus until the court returned. Instead, the seven men sold their possessions, gave the proceeds to the poor, and retired into a cave where they could practice their religion without fear of persecution. One of them, named Malchus, was chosen to sneak regularly into Ephesus to buy food and listen for news of Decius's persecutions.

Eventually Decius and his court returned to Ephesus and learned of the continued Christian piety of the seven. Aware of the emperor's anger over the steadfast faith, the seven courtiers knelt in their cave and prayed to be delivered from his wrath. God answered their prayer by putting them into a deep sleep just as Decius's men closed the opening to their retreat with huge stones, sealing their fate as martyrs.

Many years passed, and the existence of the cave behind the boulders was forgotten. The seven, however, continued to sleep uninterrupted. One day during the reign of the Christian emperor Theodosius II, a wealthy shepherd, seeking stones to build an enclosure for his sheep, unknowingly uncovered the mouth of the cave in which the seven Christian nobles had been sleeping peacefully for almost two centuries. Awaking as if from a single night's sleep, Malchus left for Ephesus on his daily visit to buy food and seek news. Immediately upon his arrival he was struck by changes in his customary environment. A cross was set up at the gate of the city. Inside he saw churches. Christian clergy walked freely on the streets. When he attempted to buy food with what was now an ancient silver coin, Malchus was led before the bishop and prefect because the Ephesian merchants were suspicious about how he might have obtained such an antique treasure. Although at first skeptical, upon hearing this story, both sacred and secular authorities followed Malchus to the cave to witness the survival of his six companions and glorify God for this wondrous

miracle. The bishop and prefect sent messengers to inform the emperor Theodosius of what had transpired. Overjoyed by what he had heard, the curious emperor came in haste on horseback to Ephesus to venerate the seven, who, after talking with him, fell again into sleep.

Fortunately for me, most of the surviving panels from the Seven Sleepers window can be arranged in narrative order within the design format which I had established for the window based on their formal analysis alone. Three registers containing the "American panels" can be

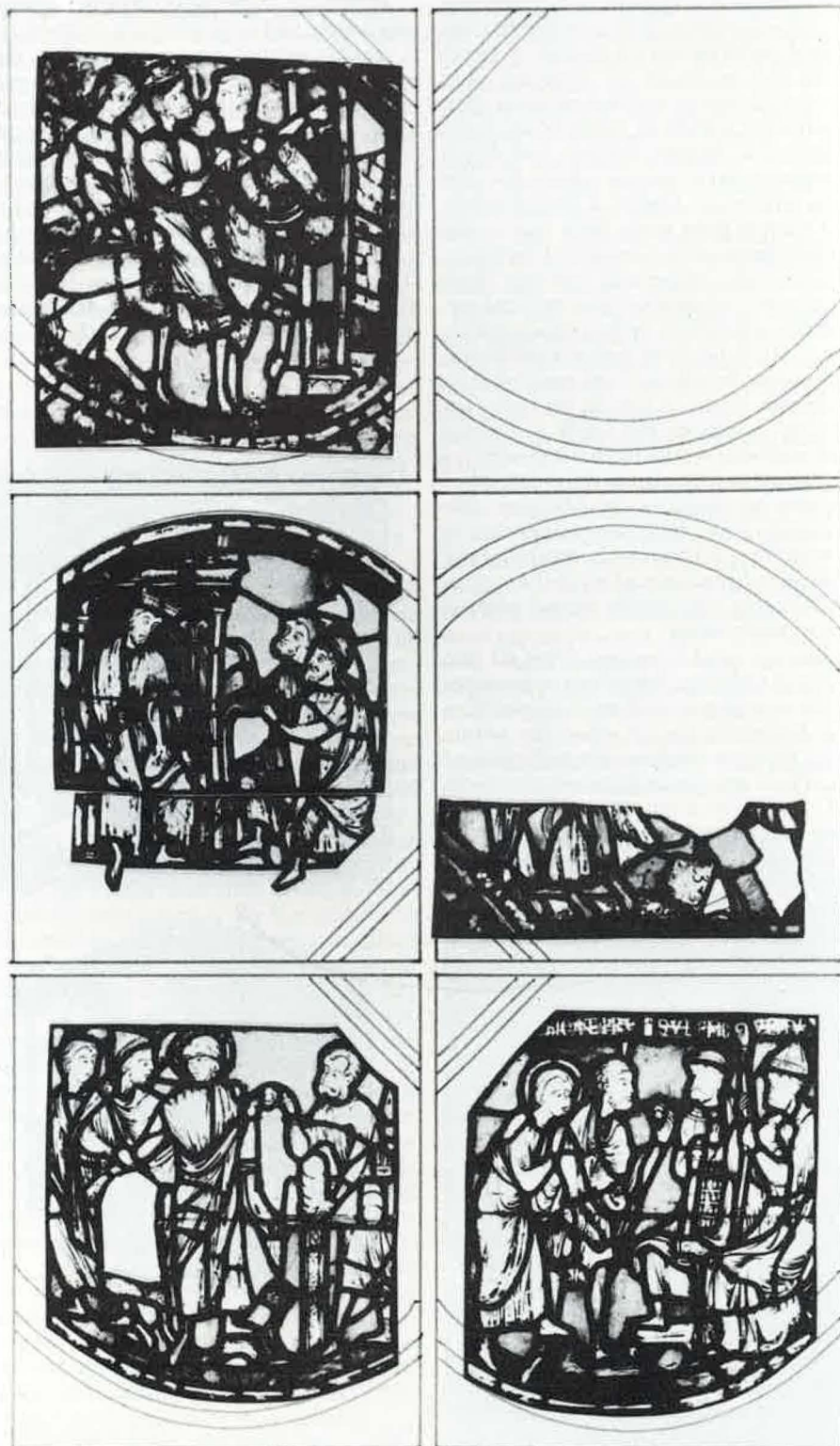


Figure 4: Author's reconstruction of the Seven Sleepers window (registers 7-10) of Rouen Cathedral.

cited here as examples (Fig. 4).

Both scenes survive from what was probably the seventh register from the base of the window (the lowest register in Fig. 4). The panels are both in the Pitcairn Collection. Malchus attempts to buy food with his old money to the left and is brought before the bishop and prefect in a panel that is only one of two to have retained the Latin inscription that once identified most scenes of the window, in this case "Hic ante presulem ducitur." Above this, at the left on the subsequent register, messengers are sent to the emperor Theodosius advising him of the miracle, the Worcester panel just analyzed. I have placed another panel at the right on this register to help round out the medallion cluster, but its subject—the lower portion of a group of figures—is too generic to determine where it actually belonged in the window. From the next register of the window, however, the scene of Theodosius on horseback traveling to Ephesus (now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art) can be placed with certainty.

I have accomplished what I was asked to do: I have recounted the sort of detective work that is often necessary when attempting to reclaim a masterpiece of medieval art, in this case the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus window that once decorated the nave aisle of the Cathedral of Rouen. Without painstaking, tedious, persistent, occasionally controversial research on the part of the art historian, many works of art like this window would remain lost. I have only had the space here to present one window as a case

study, but it is my hope that, as my study continues, the application of the same method will allow me to recover other seemingly lost windows that once illuminated the aisle of Rouen cathedral, windows whose panels, like those of the Seven Sleepers window, have been distributed in American collections and French storerooms.

But I am not finished. Some important questions beg to be addressed. What is, after all, the purpose of this detective work and the reconstructing it allows? Why do art historians involve themselves in such work? For this art historian the answers lie in the public and private meanings of works of art, how those meanings drawn from the past can affect the present and perhaps even be projected into the future. In the more eloquent words of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, whose enlightened patronage of the 1140s practically invented the use of the stained glass window as we now know it, "Praeteritorum enim recordatio futurorum est exhibitio."¹³

Ultimately what art historians want to do is not simply reconstruct the lost design, but explore the lost meaning of the privileged artifacts we call works of art within the full richness of their economic, social, political, and cultural contexts. Many civilizations attempted to express their most important ideas through visual language. So effective were they that we often identify pictorial imagery or constructed environments with the essential character of a particular culture. For instance, pyramids and paintings are likely to come to mind when thinking of pharaonic Egypt or Renais-

sance Italy. An understanding of the role played by works of art within these cultures should inspire questions concerning the reduced role of aesthetic values, or even the attempt to deny the value of the visual, within our own culture.

Stained glass windows were perhaps the most ostentatious and sincere evocations of an age of faith and absolute power. The Seven Sleepers window was created for the cathedral of Rouen around 1200-1202, just before the culmination of a political crisis in Normandy which would see the allegiances of the province turn rather tumultuously from England to France. The subject of this window, in fact, seems to be directly involved with an expression of English royal and dynastic pretension and may be directly associated with John, King of England, and Walter of Coutances, Archbishop of Rouen. This historical moment, which allied two of the shrewdest politicians of the day, was full of promise but short-lived. In 1204 Rouen fell to King Philip Augustus of France, and Archbishop Walter and his canons switched their allegiance from the King of England to the King of France. The subject of the Seven Sleepers, tied to the English royal cult of Edward the Confessor, lost its political appropriateness. Since it was not discarded, however, it remains not only a document of political and social transition at the beginning of the thirteenth century, but also a testament to the significance of the visual arts within Gothic society when kings and archbishops turned to artists to embody the structures of meaning that supported their power. But even if the subject matter of the Seven Sleepers window is rooted in a particular moment, the eloquence of the figures which embody it is not. They speak directly to us across time with enduring freshness. At the turn of the thirteenth century, art expressed more than the aspirations of the powerful; it served artists as a potent means of eternalizing interpersonal dialogue. It always has. It always will.

Thus if the detective has been successful, his reconstructed window will not seem a simple exercise in cleverness, an attempt, that is, to put together a jigsaw puzzle without all the pieces for idle amusement. The reconstruction of the windows of Rouen is but the vehicle through which to establish contact with the past both on a societal and personal level, to grasp its fragile primary artifacts before they crumble away, and bring them and the artists who made them back to life by snatching both into the present in a form in which they can be transmitted to the future and never be lost.

Erwin Panofsky, a German refugee scholar who came to the United States in the 1930s, and to a large extent founded

continued on page 34



Figure 5: Malchus led before the Bishop and Prefect of Ephesus. Detail from a panel of stained glass from the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus window of Rouen Cathedral.

the American discipline of art history as we know it, defined the role of art historian as a humanist by contrasting it with that of the natural scientist. "Natural science," he pointed out, "observes the time-bound process of nature and tries to apprehend the timeless laws according to which they unfold. . . . The humanities, on the other hand, are not faced by the task of arresting what otherwise would slip away, but of enlivening what otherwise would remain dead. Instead of dealing with temporal phenomena, and causing time to stop, they penetrate into a region where time has stopped of its own accord, and try to reactivate it."⁴

In my study of the nave aisle windows of the Cathedral of Rouen, I hope to meet Panofsky's challenge in two ways: first by exploring their meaning within the social history of the art of the Middle Ages, a time when pictures really mattered to many people; and by exploring the relationship of the art to the artists, the people for whom it probably mattered the most. In this way it will be possible to bring back to life and to restore to his rightful place in the history of art the John the Baptist Master of the Cathedral of Rouen (*Fig. 5*). If you read this and as a result encounter for a brief moment his most exquisite art, or better yet, if I have coaxed you into a direct confrontation with the John the Baptist Master by means of a visual dialogue across time and space, this detective will have accomplished his purpose. I hope he tells you something about the importance of the visual in this and every culture.

NOTES

1. The extensive visual and scholarly documentation of my study of this and another window from the Rouen nave aisle is forthcoming as "The Seven Sleepers and the Seven Kneelers: Prolegomena to a Study of the 'Belles Verrières' of the Cathedral of Rouen." Here I will only present general arguments and conclusions.

2. The nineteenth-century windows were destroyed with much of the cathedral in a devastating bombing in April of 1944. Today visitors to the cathedral see twentieth-century windows in their place.

3. "The recollection of the past is the promise of the future." *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis and its Art Treasures*, ed. and trans. Erwin Panofsky, Second Edition by Gerda Panofsky-Soergel (Princeton, 1979) pp. 52-3.

4. "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," in *The Meaning of the Humanities*, ed. T. M. Green (Princeton, 1940), p. 117.