

British Art Talks podcast

Season 1, Episode 3:

Julian Luxford, *The English Carthusians and the Art of Abstinence*

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Anna Reid: *British Art Talks* from the Paul Mellon Centre. Championing new ways of understanding British art, history, and culture.

I'm Anna Reid, Head of Research at the Paul Mellon Centre. Welcome to Episode 3 of *British Art Talks*. Our speaker today, Julian Luxford, is a Professor of art history at the University of St. Andrews. From the 14th century in England, the Carthusians were remarkably popular and powerful medieval monastic order owing to the impressiveness of their severe adherence to solitary observance.

As an order that largely and strictly divested itself of art forms and ritual objects, it poses an interesting challenge to the art historian. This episode invites contemplation of the experience and aesthetics of isolation via an initial exploration of the Carthusians, their English monasteries of which little remains and some of the very few existing artworks that signify Carthusian' spiritual belief.

Let's begin with an introduction to the Carthusian monks and the form of their life that they pursued.

Julian Luxford: Yes, by all means. In addition to the mental restraint normal in people who are religious by profession, Carthusian monks placed special emphasis on physical abstinence, as well as regarding food, and other creature comforts as necessary evils to be used as meagerly as possible. They were more or less defined by what we might call 'abstinence from association'.

In current jargon, Carthusians were-- and they still are--committed to self-isolation. It's not stretching analogy with current circumstances too far to say that they considered self-isolation a matter of hygiene and virtue signaling provided we understand that their primary concern was with spiritual rather than physical health.

As we will see, the Carthusian type of isolation was a matter of prestige for both the monks and those who sought association with them. The desire to isolate helped to shape Carthusian monasteries, which we call charterhouses, and also the oldest collective reputation. It's such a sensible thing for a historian of material culture to ponder over and above whatever current residence it may have for people living in lockdown.

Anna Reid: Can you remark on the development and character of the Carthusian Order in the Middle Ages? It's divestment from the world.

Julian Luxford: Well, I'll make a quick preliminary point, if I may, about art and architecture specifically. That is that, as with the art of any religious order, it's wise not to expect too much of the subject we're discussing here except in the representation of its marks and a few sorts of image relating to the oldest history. The art found in charterhouses wasn't visibly distinctive. It might have been used in monasteries of any denomination or in a secular church for that matter.

What was distinctive was largely invisible. All I mean by this is that, as Carthusian regulation prohibited-- or at least inhibited-- practices like light burial and elaborate liturgy that encouraged the accumulation of art, Charterhouses contained less sculpture, less painting and metalwork, less stained glass and elaborate textiles, these sorts of things. The monasteries of comparable wealth belonging to other orders.

The Carthusians first appeared in France in the late 11th century. Thus, they belong to the wider current of religious revival from which the Cistercians, Premonstratensians, the Trinitarians, Gilbertines and other orders also flowed this period of the monastic revival. In 1084, a cleric named Bruno scared and disgusted by city life left Paris with six companions to found a hermitage. They were granted a site in the Alps outside Grenoble beneath the daunting *massif* which is called in Latin *Cartusia* and in French *Chartreuse*. The hermitage became the mother house of the order of the 'Grande Chartreuse'.

Anna Reid: The journey of Bruno and his companions is illustrated in a devotional miscellany now held at the British Library. The men are seen venturing into the wild rocky Chartreuse. Then, as vested monks within the confines of Grande Chartreuse, a verdant scene, with men in colours of red, blue and gold, pairs to white wool, stone and rope.

Julian Luxford: The Grande Chartreuse subsequently played a very important part in the order's self-definition. For a start, its remote locations symbolised the order's separation from society. Moreover, it was the site of annual general chapter meetings at which all charterhouses were supposed to be represented. From these

meetings came all the order's legislation, all the rules about liturgy, property management, diet, clothing and, just occasionally, art.

It'd be hard to overemphasise the importance of this centrally devised and disseminated legislation to the order's development. Historically, the Carthusians owed their reputation for exceptional spiritual quality, and thus their popularity with laity and clerics alike, to hidebound observation of their austere religious principles set out in their legislation. Their boast was, and still is, that their order has never been reformed because it never departed from its foundational principles "*Nunquam reformata quia nunquam deformata.*"

Guigo, the 5th prior of Grande Chartreuse, he was a man who wrote rules for Carthusian living. He wrote these down in 1127. He had nothing directly to say about that. The orders subsequent statutes contain very little about it. This moral and visceral identification with the spirit as well as a letter of an austere legislation provides the most useful context we have for thinking about a characteristically Carthusian art and architecture.

Anna Reid: Let's turn to the architecture of the charterhouses, its detail designed to ensure the aesthetic existence of its inhabitants.

Julian Luxford: By 1200, there were 37 charterhouses, mostly in France. However, by the time of the reformation, there were about 225 of them, spread throughout Europe. The order is thus largely a late medieval phenomenon. This is illustrated by the English province, 8 of whose 10 houses were founded between 1343 and 1429, which otherwise is the least fertile period of all monastic foundation in England.

The development of the 13th century with major implications for Carthusian art and architecture was that of urban charterhouses. The instigator here was the French King Louis IX who founded a charterhouse at Paris in 1257-'58. There were three of these urban charterhouses in England at London, Coventry, and Hull. Proximity to many admiring and spiritually desperate people put pressure on Carthusian poverty as well as solitude.

For one thing, it resulted in gifts: offers of patronage, requests for burial, commemorative services, and other things like that. The order's main reason for agreeing to the office of patrons to found charterhouses near cities and large towns seems to have been a recognition that the austere life of the monks set a spiritually profitable example for those who encountered it. According to this thinking, a monastery buried in the countryside would benefit few people apart from its inmates whereas one that could be seen and occasionally visited by many people, one that was ostentatiously austere would better serve the medieval church's core mission, that is the salvation of as many souls as possible. When we turn to the architecture of charterhouses, we find a plan and elevation recognisably monastic

but quite unlike that of, say, a Benedictine, Augustinian or Cistercian house. To make a basic division of the normal charterhouse plan, there was an inner and outer precinct or as at the Grande Chartreuse, an upper and a lower one.

The inner or upper precinct was the domain of the choir monks, while the outer or lower one was for the lay brethren or converts who did much of the manual and outlets facing work on which the solitude of the choir monks depended. The outer precinct, bounded by a wall, contained a secondary cloister, a kitchen, infirmary and other utilitarian buildings. Here was a lay brothers' dormitory and, sometimes, where the lay brothers didn't use the main chapel, their place of worship.

In the inner precinct, the dominant element in terms of area and symbolism was not the church, but the cloister. That's quite different from a normal monastery which has a vast church dominating it. The cloister wall opposite the gaff was punctuated by the doorways of self-contained cells. These cells, each for a single monk, resembled little houses. They were set regularly around the cloister, and normally had a bit of garden attached to them. Each cell, along with its garden, was walled off laterally from its neighbor.

Often, the cells appeared to have had two stories, the low one built of stone, the upper of either stone as, for example, at London charterhouse, or Mount Grace charterhouse in Yorkshire. Brick, as was apparently at Hull charterhouse or half-timbered, as apparently at Coventry charterhouse. In a charterhouse of standard size, there were 13 cells for a prior and 12 monks likened to the number of Christ and His apostles, plus a spare one for a monastic guest or monk under correction. Not uncommonly, however, a medieval charterhouse exceeded the standard size. For example, the Paris and London charterhouses were both double monasteries, while Sheen, founded by King Henry V some 10 miles southwest of London, was for 30 monks. The Carthusian monk spent most of his day locked up in his cell. He sang only two of the canonical hours in the conventional chapel, matins and vespers.

In addition to which he attended a conventional mass, but there was only one common meal per week and one chapter meeting, both on Sunday. Perhaps you can see the implications of this lifestyle for charterhouse design. For start, the soul had to accommodate most of our monk's activity. It had a sleeping bag with a cot, a writing desk, an oratory, a store for lumber and tools, and a room for manual labor, perhaps with a small piece of machinery like a spinning wheel in it.

Food, what little there was of it, came from a kitchen in the outer precinct and was pushed through a hatch in the cloister wall, often L-shaped to ensure the monk did not catch so much as a glimpse of the hand of the lay brother who delivered it. You can still see the L-shaped hatches in the ruins of Mount Grace charterhouse in Yorkshire. The cells and their inmates were incidentally identified, not by names, but by alphabetic letters. A, B, C, et cetera.

The medieval concept of the monk as an anonymous prisoner was nowhere more clearly represented. Conversely, the church or chapel, as it's better called, church is really too grand a name, was relatively small consisting of an aisleless rectangle whose choir extended right up to the steps of the high altar. In some cases, there was a screened off western bay or bays to accommodate lay brethren and non-Carthusian, privileged for one reason or another, to observe the monastic liturgy.

Another development, particularly characteristic of late medieval urban houses, was the foundation and multiplication of little chapels around the main conventional one dedicated to popular saints and housing the tombs and commemorative apparatus of special benefactors. If the chapel had a tower, then it was small. At Mount Grace in Coventry, the tower was centrally positioned following the model of Franciscan and Dominican churches. The charterhouse and refectory were usually bald rectangular buildings. As in those of other orders, a Carthusian refectory was equipped with a pulpit for pious reading during the meals, and its walls might be painted with imagery.

For example, there's a giant crucifixion surviving in the, what was left of the refectory at Coventry charterhouse. There was, of course, no dormitory for the choir monks and usually no library proper, although a 13th century structure called a library survives at Hinton in Somerset. Probably, books not on loan to monks and kept in cells was stored with other precious things in a sacristy adjoining the chapel or else perhaps, with the document bureaucratic documentation that existed in all monasteries and monuments. Books, it should be said, were extremely important to the Carthusians. Any institution so committed to written codes will probably regard its books with what now seems a fanatical reverence.

In Guigo's Customary, the copying of books by monks is not only authorised but prescribed. In this way, says Guigo, the monks preach with their hands. Carthusians were not allowed to preach orally, they were routinely silent and invisible. Copying thus had an important role in their mission. We may wish that illumination have been important too, but predictably perhaps and with a few honorable exceptions, their books are pretty plain.

Anna Reid: What of the art of the Carthusians, what was forbidden and restricted?

Julian Luxford: Well, by talking about books, I'm beginning to stray into the territory of Carthusian art, away from the architecture. As noted earlier on, there's little that's visibly Carthusian about this art. Of course, the art historians might naturally jump towards those exceptional things that stood in charterhouses and have got into the literature on late medieval art. For example, the breathtaking tomb sculpture and painting from Champmol in Dijon. The charterhouse founded in 1383 as a dynastic mausoleum for the Dukes of Burgundy. The Certosa di Pavia founded around the same time by Gian Galeazzo Visconti, the Duke of Milan.

Miraflores in Burgos, with the fabulous star-shaped marble tomb of John II, King of Castile. The panel paintings made by Enguerrand Quarton and Rogier van der Weyden for charterhouses at Villeneuve-les-Avignon in Brussels. A few English charterhouses may have had this sort of thing in them. At London, for example, the founder had a very smart tomb in the middle of the chapel, while a benefactor of 1382 left 20 pounds to quote his will to buy a tabular, work of the best painter in London to be installed in front of the high altar. We know from other documents that all the altars at London were decked with imagery.

These objects and such records have helped to shape modern ideas about late 14th and 15th century European art, but they weren't typical of Carthusian aesthetics, which as far as anyone can tell, were always rigidly stripped back and utilitarian. It would naturally be ridiculous to think that the monks who saw and used these things were indifferent to their appearance, but it's secretly reasonable to think that their reactions were coloured-- and perhaps even determined-- by doubts about the legitimacy of artistic magnificence in a Carthusian setting.

This seems most likely in the case of things which directly contravened legislation. Guigo's customary states that monks have given up gold and silver for the purposes of adornment.

As his customer remained literally valid for monks throughout the Middle Ages, gilding in artistic context presumably caused qualms. The customary also forbids non-Carthusian burial in charterhouses. To quote it on this point, "It is absolutely forbidden to bury any dead person in our cemeteries, whether she or he dies within or outside the charterhouse with the exception of those of our profession, so only monks."

Thus, any tomb, and particularly one that formed the centerpiece of a Carthusian Chapel as at Champmol and Miraflores, represented an obvious breach of the rules and its effect a likely cause of anxiety for the monks. Objects like these came with the territory of elite patronage.

One can easily see how monks might have justified accepting grand tombs and other works of art into their midst if these works were a precondition of foundation or even a benefaction that helped to maintain the quality of Carthusian observance. With time, such works, particularly tombs and other objects to do with personal commemoration, just seeped in, particularly in urban contexts where a balance had to be struck between observing rules about isolation and austerity, on the one hand, and maintaining the public goodwill that brought charterhouses the property and protection they needed to survive on the other.

I'd suggested, this realism was never simply taken for granted by the order. The general chapter continued to censor the burial of non-Carthusians and admission of

laypeople to charterhouses right throughout the Middle Ages. It was particularly worried about women. Thus, we find a statute of 1423 which forbids, "Panels on altars with curious imagery and various other images containing representations of women and the shields and heraldry of secular people."

As usual, copies of this statute went out all over Europe. It goes without saying that such strictures were provoked by the very things they were designed to eliminate. There were presumably lots of images of lay women and heraldry in charterhouses by this date, as well as curious images calculated by artists to make viewers stop and stare.

The point to stress is that these things didn't become some sort of 'new normal' for the Carthusians as they did for other originally very austere orders like the Cistercians and Carmelites. They were, rather, a constant source of tension for monks whose self-regard and wider reputation were built on strict adherence to the rules. Two points deserve emphasis here. The first is simply the Carthusian monks never appeared to put their own resources into grand works of art. In that, they're quite unlike the monks and canons of other orders, but they're rather like the friars who also didn't tend to pay for their own art and architecture. The second is that high quality stone architecture was perfectly compatible with Carthusian ideals.

Thus, for instance, Henry Yevele who designed among other things, Westminster Hall and the nave of Canterbury Cathedral was responsible for the early planning of the London charterhouse in the later 14th century. This is for the obvious reason that the honor of religion was at stake in the outward and for that matter internal, appearance of any monastery, it would have struck contemporaries as eccentric and indecent if monks of any sort, including Carthusians, had chosen to express their worldly poverty by living in primitive or gimcrack buildings. What the Carthusians felt they had to avoid was visual excess, the sort of things signified by the use of the word "curious," in the statute of 1423 that I quoted from a minute ago.

Two types of image invented for and probably by Carthusians may be singled out for what they tell us about the order's approach to self-representation. Both have to do with the Carthusian Order's foundation. They nicely express the identification of later medieval monks with their order's origins.

As such, they can be regarded as visual affirmations, as the value of authentic and indigenous principles. Both also amount to a sort of builder politic bordering on propaganda. These ideas are supported by the fact that both of the images appear in printed form in the so-called third compilation, a *tertio compilatio* of the Carthusian statutes that were published in Basel in 1510 and sent out to charterhouses throughout Europe.

Indeed, one of these images only survives in the statutes where it appears in two places, it can be called the 'Tree of Bruno'. Bruno, you remember was the founder of the Grande Chartreuse. In it, Bruno lies on his side in a wilderness setting, habited in the distinctive white Carthusian garment known as the scapula, and flanked by standing figures of the Virgin and Child and John the Baptist. From his heart grows a tree. His flourishing branches are adorned with busts of 10 Carthusian saints and quasi-saints, the lowest of these closest to Bruno, is Guigo, the author of the customary.

All the Carthusians are labeled for easy identification. Bruno's label is '*Bruno primus cartusienis*', Bruno first of the Carthusians. Near him, there lies a miter and a crosier symbolising the fact that he turned up the chance to become a Bishop. By extension, the miter and crosier also stand for a broader Carthusian rejection of ambition and reputation.

Anna Reid: The graphic is printed without color. The branches of the tree structure its form so that the 10 saints are set up together, but separated by line and blank. Hands are joined in prayer. Others are in open gesture to the main figure of the scene, the spectacle of the tree itself rooted in the heart of the protagonist. The figure of Bruno looks to the viewer whose eye is drawn by his pointed finger to an upward gaze.

Julian Luxford: The basic model here is the Tree of Jesse, which expressed Christ genealogy as given in Matthew's gospel. This was probably not all that influenced the Tree of Bruno. Indeed, the direct adoption of such a sacred form by Carthusians seems rather unlikely. Other religious orders, including the Benedictines, Dominicans and Franciscans, had previously adopted the Jesse tree motif to epitomise their own origins and growth. The Carthusian version was probably inspired by knowledge of these.

The other intrinsically Carthusian image may be called the 'Bruno cycle.' As this suggests, it is actually a series of images depicting stages in the foundation of the Grande Chartreuse. Accordingly, it begins at Paris with the event supposed to have terrified Bruno and his companions into seeking an austere life in the wilderness. That had been the revelation that the dead cleric who had apparently led a blameless life was damned.

It then moves to Grenoble, where the local bishop here of Châteauneuf dreams of seven stars in the wilderness symbolising Bruno's piety. Lo, it comes to pass that these men arrive at his door begging a place to build their monastery. He leads them into the mountains guided by seven stars in the firmament. The final scenes show the monks building their monastery and going to and fro within it.

This cycle seems to have been devised around 1350 for the secondary cloister, the Paris charterhouse, where it had a special local relevance. You remember that Bruno and his companions originally took flight from Paris to found the Grande Chartreuse. The first version was painted on the walls. This was followed about 1510 by a second version on canvases. Then, came a third iteration painted by Eustache Le Sueur in 1648. Le Sueur's canvases are still kept in the Louvre and you can see them there displayed in a special room.

The Bruno cycle seems to have spread pretty widely and was represented in stained glass and painted textiles, as well as in panel, wall and manuscript painting. The only known English example is in the well-known Carthusian devotional miscellany now [British Library Additional Manuscript 37049](#). This has only four scenes. The printed version in the 1510 statutes has nine scenes arranged in threes like a little cartoon strip.

Anna Reid: A late medieval manuscript. A book that opens with three pages, each painted black, on which large drops of painted blood trickle down. The third page is rubbed, smudged and worn through touch and kissing. Five pages are colored red covered with streaming blood. Large prints, also with red, recall the passion of Christ with English inscription. A Carthusian kneels before bloody Christ who stands beside his cross. He petitions Christ, "Oh, Lord, I beseech send me salvation."

This is an intense image of Christ where art and anything excess were otherwise denied. How does it speak of Carthusian devotion?

Julian Luxford: Well, before ending, let's turn briefly to the image found in [British Library Egerton Manuscript 1821](#), a devotional book written out and presumably made in its entirety at the London charterhouse. It's a striking image because of the simulated blood. It captures, as well as any Carthusian image I know, the spiritual relationship, which is a solitary cell-bound monk, spent most of his adult life trying to cultivate.

Egerton Manuscript 1821 was made around 1500. It's unique, as far as I know, for having whole pages painted black and spotted with drips of red and other pages painted red with slightly darker red drops on them. The idea was to evoke the sufferings of Christ. The red pages in particular suggest Christ's raw skin oozing blood from the many wounds inflicted by flagellation and other tortures.

On one such page, the one we're concerned with here, a woodcut representing a Carthusian monk kneeling at the feet of the resurrected Christ is set in the middle of the gory field. This image itself is liberally sprinkled with red drops. There are speech scrolls in Latin by which the Carthusian beseeches Christ to direct him towards salvation. He's told to flee the world, conquer his urges, remain silent, and be at peace. Underneath, there is a consolatory verse in English stating that the

greatest comfort in all temptation is the remembrance of Christ's passion. Now, this expression of what's sometimes called blood piety is largely out of step with modern tastes. If we ignore it, then we miss an opportunity to appreciate the most urgent concerns of practically any Carthusian monk.

The whole point of the monk's solitude and abstinence was to help him develop the personal relationship with God, which he considered necessary for the salvation of his soul. This relationship involves suppression of the ego and utter subjection to the divine will.

An effective way of doing so was to dwell on the human aspects of divinity, because these touched on the essential condition of the monk himself. In particular, Christ's suffering offered a focus for meditation because, of course, the monk was implicated in it. Like all Christians, he believed Christ's death the necessary condition of his own salvation. The implication involved feelings of guilt as well as expectation and joy, not least because sins were thought to hurt Christ as long as they were committed.

As this image suggests, pious reflection on the messy, painful nature of Christ's bodily death functions to intensify the monk's experience, partially by heightening his emotional vulnerability, and partially by manifesting the idea that the holy blood cleanses the soul. To sprinkle the monk in the woodcut with blood was to express a hope that his soul would be made spotless through absolute devotion.

This brings us to the end of the talk. I hope you take something of value away with you even if you leave with more questions than answers. I have a lot of questions of my own about the subject. The fact is that a joined up history of Carthusian material culture is yet to be written. Who knows? Perhaps someone listening to this will write one.

Anna Reid: Thank you to Professor Julian Luxford, who is currently editing a volume of essays on the London charterhouse, *The Carthusians and the City* to be published by the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies. Images of the devotional books described in this episode of *British Art Talks* can be viewed online at the British Library website and via the [Paul Mellon Centre website](#), where you can also find the PMC summer program of virtual events.

Join us for our next podcast episode "Hard Times and Late Victorian Art" with Alex Potts. Thank you for listening.

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