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The Knightly Art of Battle. Ken Mondschein. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011. 128 pp. \$14.95. ISBN 978-1-60606-076-6.

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The Hollywood image of the Middle Ages swerves between one of a benighted time of misery and ignorance to a shining era of chivalry and romance. Neither of these visions, dystopian nor utopian, is true; nonetheless, this is how most people view the Middle Ages. The actual Middle Ages were, like many things, a mixed bag. The elements of the romance are there (the grand tournaments, the courts of love, the heroic and romantic poetry) as are the elements of darkness (violent warfare, superstition, inquisitions, and mass illiteracy). But there is more as well. They produced philosophy, science, and an amazing trove of practical approaches to real problems.

An example of this medieval pragmatism is a book called *Fior di Battaglia* (*The Flower of Battle*) written in 1410 by Fiore di Liberi. One of the first *Fechtbücher* or “fight books,” it is an illustration of how a knight or man-at-arms should be trained for combat. It includes things one might expect, such as how to fight in armor, but also things one might not, such as how to face multiple attackers or ward off an assassination attempt. It is not an instruction manual; this idea, a product of the Renaissance, was just developing. Liberi’s book is a “memory aid,” designed to help people who have received instruction from a master to remember the many techniques he has taught. It is a strange book with an unusual pedagogy on an arcane topic.

Ken Mondschein’s *The Knightly Art of Battle* is an examination of the manuscript version owned by the Getty Museum in Los Angeles (one of four still known to exist). It is not a translation of the manuscript, nor is it a practical interpretation of the techniques in the book. Rather, Mondschein has written an introduction and explanation of one of the more fascinating artifacts of the later Middle Ages. Mondschein is uniquely qualified to write this book. He is one of the few men alive who makes his way by his wits and his sword (which in this day and age is quite an accomplishment). A medievalist by trade, with a PhD in history from Fordham, he is also a Prévôt d’Escrime, making him a registered fencing instructor. His specialty in both areas is historical European martial arts. He is a research fellow and fencing instructor at the Higgins Armory Museum in Worcester, Massachusetts, and also a visiting fellow at the Center for Interdisciplinary Renaissance Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He teaches historical fencing, he jousts, he translates *Fechtbücher*, and he publishes scholarly research on the subject. Castiglione would probably either love him or have him assassinated (which is really its own form of love when one thinks about it).

Mondschein examines Fiore’s book from a number of perspectives: as paleography, as a work of art, and as an artifact of both military and cultural history. In his introduction, he establishes a number of different contexts into which to place the book. Art history is one. Because it was necessary for the drawings to be sculptural in order to display the proper position of the combatants, the rough drawings are early examples of naturalism in figure drawing, with hatched shading to provide perspective. Studying the circumstances in which the book was created, Mondschein demonstrates aspects of court diplomacy in northern Italy at the beginning of the Quattrocento, as well as how culturally intertwined the Italian states were with the German ones, since Fiore got his training in arms from a Schwabian master. This also places Fiore astride the competing combat traditions of Italy

and Germany. Created for the d'Estes, probably as a diplomatic gift, the book is a practical expression of the theory expressed in both Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* and, to a lesser extent, Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *The Art of War*. By discussing the manuscript's relation to the three other existing copies, to the *Fechtbuch* tradition, and to the history of fencing, Mondschein demonstrates why this book has been so highly prized by students of the sword since its rediscovery in the nineteenth century.

The bulk of the book is made up of a selection of color plates from the Getty manuscript with brief explanations of the drawings and the techniques shown. As Mondschein shows, the book is neither romantic nor primitive. It is a well-thought-out, pragmatic system of self-defense, an important adjunct to the life of a medieval courtier. This book has a few drawbacks. Someone seeking to learn actually how to perform Fiore's techniques will have to look elsewhere. A trade book more than an academic book, targeted to a general audience, the book is not footnoted. But neither of those things is what this book is trying to be. This is an excellent introduction to the material, a well-edited look into an arcane but interesting topic. The book is also, frankly, quite beautiful, printed on glossy paper throughout with stunning high-resolution images of the manuscript. People who would want this book are art historians, martial artists, reenactors, and cultural historians.

