In the medieval sources, works of art are rarely referred to, let alone described in any detail. When they are mentioned, it is seldom with more than a word or phrase, at the most a sentence. Hugh of Saint Victor’s *Mystic Ark* is a forty-two page description of what seems to be the most complex single work of art of the entire Middle Ages, a fundamentally political painting also known as *The Mystic Ark*, making both the text and the painting among the most unusual sources we have for an understanding of medieval artistic culture and its polemical context.

*The Mystic Ark* is known to have arisen from a series of brilliant lectures given by Hugh—considered to be the leading theologian of Europe during his life—sometime from 1125 to early 1130 at Saint Victor, a house of Augustinian canons in Paris whose school was a predecessor of the University of Paris. Because of the immense difficulty of its text, *The Mystic Ark* has been almost completely ignored by art historians and often misunderstood by other scholars. Generally speaking, it has been seen as a "step-by-step" set of instructions that were rarely or even never used to create an actual painting, the text being meant to be read strictly as a work of *ekphrasis* (the verbal evocation of an imaginary work of art) or as a memory aid in order to conjure up a purely mental image.

conceptual development of the Gothic portal, perhaps the most significant fully indigenous expression of Northern European, public figural art of the Middle Ages.)

My approach to the problem in Center Point is three pronged. First, through close study of the text, I show that The Mystic Ark is not a work of literature properly speaking but a reportatio (something similar to class notes) by one of Hugh’s students, although Hugh himself very much remains its author. Recognition of this previously unrecognized aspect goes a long way in clarifying many difficulties of the text that previous authors were at pains to explain. Second, I refute a large and impossibly complex body of opinions that has arisen to explain the relation between the painting of The Mystic Ark, the different recensions of The Mystic Ark, and The Moral Ark (a related treatise by Hugh). In place of those tortuous arguments, I provide straightforward explanations for these relationships through analysis of the textual tradition and historical context of The Mystic Ark. And third, having established The Mystic Ark as a reportatio and explained the relation of the painting and the various texts, I address the nature and immediate function of the text of The Mystic Ark, clearly establishing that a painting of The Mystic Ark originally existed at Saint Victor, probably in the form of a wall painting, an image I believe was painted by Hugh himself. I show that, although the text of The Mystic Ark was not an actual "step-by-step" set of instructions, its purpose was to enable scholars outside of Saint Victor to undertake similar lectures and discussions based upon a reconstruction of the painting. Since the major themes of the painting were the subjects of contemporary controversies such as the history of salvation, creation, neoplatonism, and the place of science in the education of society’s intellectual elite, my conclusions demonstrate that The Mystic Ark--of which enough manuscript copies survive to indicate that it was the medieval equivalent of a best seller--served as a major and novel statement in the current intellectual controversies of the mid-twelfth century, a time of great intellectual and cultural change.

In the end, Center Point clarifies generations of confusion surrounding The Mystic Ark. It reveals the striking role that a complex image could play in the spiritual and intellectual controversies of the day. And it sets the stage for my future book on this amazingly popular image and text that, together, form one of the most important sources we have for medieval art in its social context.