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The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography. Routledge Art History and Visual Studies Companions

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Studies in Iconography

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THE INDEX
OF MEDIEVAL ART

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Composed by Kathy Bond Borie

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society of a village is seen as an arena where an archive of a family is kept both physically, with the burial of younger relatives alongside the remains of older generations, and as an extension of a customary, unchanging way of life through long-lived traditions and beliefs in the power of therapeutic methods that may involve the cult of a saint like Anastasia Pharmakolytria (poison curer) or a herbal medicine read in a *iatrosophia* manuscript. Gerstel concludes that although life in the Greek village has changed, many aspects of village life hail back to Byzantium, and she has tried to bring to life the men, women, and children who populated this village.

How to think about sacred topography, including stone, soil, and water, links these two books together. In *Natural Materials of the Holy Land*, materiality consists of the intrinsic quality of an object that is present even in an infinitely small particle of the holy material because of the power of faith. The materiality of the Byzantine village, on the other hand, consists of a web of social and historical associations that give life to a place. These materials constitute the landscape that defines the medieval world of Byzantine Greece and the Holy Land, a world made up of anonymous actors acting at the instigation of (sometimes) named agents. From a methodological point of view, I believe it is no coincidence that both books favor an archaeological-anthropological approach, which stresses the importance of material culture over art history. For instance, stone plays a fetishistic role in the case of relics, including parts of the grave of Jesus or the Column of Flagellation (as in the case of Ragusa and the Gareja desert in Georgia), or in the eyes of the archaeologist who attempts to interpret the archaeological remains of homes, threshing floors, or millstones. This turn towards material culture and anthropology is a welcome addition to the investigation of the medieval world as it offers new perspectives for research.

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Colum Hourihane, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography*. Routledge Art History and Visual Studies Companions. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. 580; 8 color illus., 148 black-and-white illus.

Few would deny that the study of iconography occupies a central place in the scholarship on medieval art. It might even be said to serve as the master narrative that grounds the field. Without doubt, scholars have examined other aspects of the art: issues of style, patronage, and reception continue to inform research in the field. Newer approaches, such as those emphasizing the body and the performative, have deepened our knowledge of the period as well. Yet even the most theoretical and cross-disciplinary of approaches cannot afford to neglect the iconographic components of the medieval work of art. If the field today is marked by a plurality of approaches, one needs to ask: How do we do iconography in the twenty-first century? *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Iconography* attempts to summarize past achievements in the field, to offer overviews of key areas of thematic concern, and occasionally, to suggest avenues for future research. Some of its authors also offer a critique of the practice of iconographic inquiry. This review will consider how the book might be read as an assessment of past achievements and a guide to future work in the field.

The volume's editor, Colum Hourihane, contributes both a preface and an introduction. He notes that in contrast to the use by previous generations of art historians, "iconography" now refers broadly and somewhat vaguely to any aspect of the study of the content of works of art. He even goes so far as to assert that "this is now the age of the iconologist" (2). In gauging this present moment, the book is divided into three large sections with a total of 38 articles.[1] Part I is entitled "The Great Iconographers." Each of its twelve articles is a profile of a key scholar in the history of iconographic studies, from Andrea Alciato (1492–1550) to Michael Camille (1958–2002). Part II is devoted to "Systems and Cataloguing Tools" and contains only four articles. Part III is the book's widest-ranging section. Entitled "Themes in Medieval Art," it contains twenty-two essays. Throughout, the book's focus is squarely on the medieval West. Some individual authors do bring in influences from the Byzantine and Islamic worlds, but this is far from widespread in the collection. Rather refreshingly, one article was co-written by a Byzantinist and a Western medievalist (Sharon E. J. Gerstel and Michael W. Cothren's "The Iconography of Light"); the book and the discipline would benefit from more collaborative work such as this, but readers looking for a more expansive approach to the medieval world will not find it here; this feels like a missed opportunity given current interest in the global, both in art history and in the humanities more broadly.

In what follows I will touch upon only some of the issues raised by the book's articles. It is my intent to draw out some ideas that provoke theoretical reflection. I am especially interested in those contributions that look forward as much as they look back and that assess both the achievements and the shortcomings of the field as it stands today. I will also be interested in gauging the limitations of iconographic methodologies. Recognizing that very few people will read this collection from cover to cover, it is my aim to consider what it says about the study of medieval art as a discipline.

One way to begin this assessment would be to consider iconography as an aspect of the agency of a work of art. This is a notion that has been implicitly written into the history of art but which has perhaps not been given explicit consideration. It should be stated up front that in attempting to flesh out this notion of iconography as agency, I begin with the discipline's primary focus on religious art and the common assumption that it existed fundamentally as a system of content delivery. Iconography as agency might then be defined as the image's successful functioning as an intermediary between a viewer and the work's presentation of a preexisting textuality and/or ideology. Here, we should note that "iconography" has been used over time to refer both to the visual re-imagining of written texts as well as the visual encoding of naturalized societal beliefs or ideologies. The recognition of this dualism dates back at least to Panofsky, who allowed for the work of art to have both intended and unintended meaning effects.[2]

The artwork's iconographic agency therefore functions differently from viewer to viewer and over time. Much of the scholarly work on medieval iconography assumes that an artwork operated efficiently, smoothly delivering its content. We often imagine that art encodes belief systems that were transparent to artist, advisor, and patron at the time of the work's making. Less often do we stop to consider the ways in which a work's iconographic agency might have malfunctioned or failed. More work also needs to be done to theorize how a work's agency is shaped by the relationship between the iconographic and the non-iconographic.[3]

The best articles in this collection begin to do some of this work. They point to the ways that iconographic study might make room for compatible but competing ways of understanding visual

culture. Other authors in the collection problematize their very topics showing us the inconsistencies at the heart of some of the key areas of study in the field. All of this creates space for future work.

The book's first section on the "Great Iconographers" contains useful sketches of some of the giants of the field—Mâle, Warburg, Panofsky (to name the most obvious). All of the articles in this section are insightful, but two of the contributions strike me as essential reading for anyone interested in the history of medieval art. These are Patricia Stirnemann's chapter on Meyer Schapiro (142–53) and Matthew Reeve's on Michael Camille (154–71).

Stirnemann immediately problematizes her project by asserting that "It is unlikely that anyone would describe Meyer Schapiro as an iconographer" (142). Yet she makes a convincing case that he was, demonstrating that some of his essential writings are iconographic at heart; witness his papers on the Ruthwell Cross, the Mérode altarpiece, and the ivory throne of Maximianus. Stirnemann argues that Schapiro approached iconography as one interrelated problem among many, an aspect of his work as what she calls a philosopher of visual language. In Schapiro's hands iconographic study was embedded in a wide-ranging project to consider the play of meaning within the visual field. Above all, Stirnemann vividly reminds us of the astonishing intellectual breadth that Schapiro brought to the history of medieval art and the continuing example that it provides for scholars in the field.

Like Schapiro, Michael Camille was not quite an iconographer, but no one working on medieval iconography today can help but be influenced by him. The fact that so many of the articles in this collection refer to his work is striking proof of that. That many other pieces in the book turn to the margins of medieval art as a way to consider the power of the medieval image to critique image-making itself could hardly have been possible without Camille's influential writings.

Matthew Reeve's article on Camille stands as the most informed and insightful assessment of the late scholar and his work that I have yet read.[4] He zeroes in on Camille's early work (roughly from 1985 to 1993) and its consideration of the problematics of iconographic interpretation as an art historical method. The well-known 1993 article, "Mouths and Meanings: Towards an Anti-Iconography of Medieval Art," is perhaps Camille's most celebrated statement in this vein. Here, he suggests that there are medieval images that resist their presumed iconographic agency; these works of art do not want to be decoded as bearers of textualized meaning.[5] For Reeve, Camille's scholarship needs to be seen as part of a longer English tradition that queers the historical past, investing it as a site of "erotic and libidinal possibility" (158) and consequently undermining notions of fixed iconographic meaning. Camille himself described his own method as "monstrous" in its joining together of different approaches and in its reading against the grain of medieval hegemonic discourse.

One has to ask: How close are Stirnemann's Schapiro and Reeve's Camille on the family tree of medieval art historians? Both, in fact, might be called methodologically monstrous with neither being tethered to any one overriding theoretical commitment. At the same time, however, their work most certainly did have theoretical commitments (plural). Furthermore, both produced highly personal and, at times, even idiosyncratic scholarship. Without doubt, the field is the better for it; they remain touchstones for future work.

The most probing articles in Part III ("Themes in Medieval Art") open up other avenues for research. The range of topics treated in this section is vast. Some of the authors were charged with almost impossible tasks. How does one write the entry on "Religious Iconography" or "Secular Iconography"? One has to rely on either broad structuralist generalizations or selective case studies (or a savvy combination of both). Most of the chapters are concerned with broad categories of imagery (for

example, animals or plants). Some topics are inspired by other disciplines (music, liturgy). Still others deal with more modern scholarly approaches (feminism, gender studies), and a few are conceived around topics that are not inherently iconographic (patronage). In what follows, I consider some of the articles that I found the most provocative.

Let me begin with Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim's article on "Monstrous Iconography," which sits provocatively at the book's end (518–33). In gauging medieval culture's intertwined conceptualizations of the "monstrous" and the "normal," the authors demonstrate that this preoccupation has much to teach us about both hermeneutics and epistemology. Central to their understanding of this binary (monstrous/normal) is the notion that the monstrous is regularly used by medieval authors and artists to point to other concerns; the figuration of the monstrous is thus able to gesture semiotically to the realm of the human—or elsewhere. As a result, the monstrous as a category is able to encompass both meaning and meaninglessness. It also blurs the boundary between center and periphery. As Mittman and Kim argue, the semiotics of the monstrous is built on multiplicity, excess, and opacity. The hermeneutic issues eloquently opened up by them might be applied to medieval iconography more broadly. How might an approach that seeks out this multiplicity, excess, and opacity enliven the study of medieval iconography?

There is some overlap here with Debra Higgs Strickland's article on "Animal Iconography" (504–17), which follows a more traditionally structuralist approach. In considering the meanings of animal imagery in medieval art, Strickland argues that animals are regularly used to comment on humanity. Thus, to take a well-known example, the images of apes and monkeys found in the margins of illustrated manuscripts are not really concerned with the nature of the animals in question but rather are regularly used to comment on human nature. Strickland also brings up interesting points concerning how animal imagery was used to comment on gender roles or how the world-upside-down mode of marginal imagery was used to satirize human folly. The author is indeed correct here to focus on this structuration, but it also begs a methodological question: How might we as scholars read against the grain as a way to decenter the human and the ideologies of anthropomorphism that animated medieval culture? Strickland points out that the emergent fields of animal studies and eco-criticism have shifted the ways in which we think about humanity's coopting of the natural world and that medievalists have made important contributions to these new scholarly fields. This opens the door for a more rigorously theorized critique of our ways of understanding medieval art's figuration of humanity's place in the world, something that might prove invigorating to the field.

The ways in which we might formulate such a critique can be teased out of some of the articles that deal explicitly with human bodies and the various frames of reference through which they were given meaning in medieval culture. Although the term is not used in the collection, these pieces point the way toward a *post-humanist* iconography of the body in the Middle Ages, for in the end, we cannot draw strong lines of conceptual segregation between the human and the monstrous, the animal, the botanical, and the world of inanimate things. The medieval understanding of each of these categories informs the others.

Jack Hartnell gestures toward such an understanding when he speaks of the "infinitely extend-able subject of The Body" (322) in his article "Medicine's Image" (322–39). Here again, one of the keys to the article's usefulness is its recognition that an examination of medical iconography has the potential to inform the study of non-medical images. The primary optic that is scrutinized here is the anatomical gaze—the ability of medicine and those trained in medicine to see inside the body,

to turn it inside out. The resultant imagery constructs a layered, mechanistic body, one assembled from a multitude of highly conceptualized biological systems. Hartnell is especially good at evoking the idea of a field of knowledge emerging, sometimes messily, into the visual field. He understands medieval medical images as reflective of the back-and-forth tension that existed between word and image; his analysis of this dynamic could easily serve as a model for other types of iconographic work. Medieval iconography emerges here as a kind of technology that connects the human to the broader natural world, positioning it either in the center in some discourses or on the periphery in others. As microcosms and macrocosms mutually influenced one another in medieval thought, the autonomy of each is called into question; this instability might serve as a tool for conceptualizing a post-human understanding of medieval imagery and its meanings.

Issues that relate to the body and to sexuality are addressed in three separate articles, making for an especially wide-ranging treatment of the subject. These three articles are Sherry Lindquist's "The Iconography of Gender" (412–24), Madeline H. Caviness's "Erotic Iconography" (267–81), and Martha Easton's "Feminist Art History and Medieval Iconography" (425–36). All three are carefully attuned to issues of method, and all three recognize the problematics of fit when superimposing these different themes onto medieval visual culture.

Lindquist, for example, begins with the notion that gender as a category of analysis is itself inherently contingent and unstable—even with the essentializing and normalizing claims made for gender throughout the Middle Ages by authors whose fields included theology and medicine. As has long been recognized by medievalists, Christ himself undermines the male-female binary, as do a multitude of examples from medieval devotional art; this destabilizing of gender is accomplished in ways that are not necessarily easily articulated in words, an aspect of medieval iconography that feels especially true of gender presentations. Like medieval gender identity, the play of the visual in this period is layered and at times contradictory; one's gender could be remade, played with, and occluded through the wide-ranging metaphorics of medieval visual culture. Building on previous scholarship, Lindquist demonstrates the potential for this kind of queered approach to medieval iconography through a close reading of Jean de Berry's *Belles Heures* (ca. 1405–1409). Gender here emerges as an unstable construction that is triangulated in the minds of both the artists and the patron as mediated by the painted page which is activated through desire, devotion, and projective identification. The art object, in this case a vehicle for prayer, becomes a prosthetic in a complex play of identity bringing together class, gender, sexuality, and piety.

Caviness's article on erotic art offers a model for how we might begin to intertwine iconographic studies with other aspects of the medieval artwork's agency—its potential to evoke sexual arousal, passion, and pleasure in the viewer. This is an arena of visual play in which cultural metaphorics and the gaze are essential variables in any iconographic reading; in this economy, the image itself emerges as overdetermined and contingent. Here and in previous work, Caviness demonstrates that the erotics of medieval art might be understood as a kind of training for the gaze; this points to a special aspect of the agency of medieval iconography, one whose operations are delicate and which might easily fail or be subverted by viewers. This opens a space for non-traditional readings of medieval art, ones that might allow for a more embodied sense of viewing and a fluid sense of subjectivity with an emphasis on non-traditional constructions of gender and sexuality.

Easton's piece on feminist methodologies offers a more traditional example of ideology critique. Here, the feminist optic can be seen as constructing an intervention that offers scholars an

expanded historical outlook, bringing to the fore medieval women whose stories have been previously hidden, especially those of artists and patrons. Easton also notes that feminist scholars of the Middle Ages have worked to uncover and spotlight voices of resistance to medieval patriarchy, like Christine de Pizan's. In bringing these ideas into the visual field, Easton takes as a case study ivory objects that feature images of "courtly love" (a term that likely needs more scrutiny when being applied to medieval visual culture). Like Caviness, Easton also considers the metaphorics of medieval culture and how it impacts our understanding of iconograpy. Here, however, one feels acutely the contemporary politics of doing historical scholarship. As Easton notes, when viewing these so-called images of courtly love, one is confronted with very real issues of sexual consent. So, for example, to what extent is the Castle of Love an idealized image of sexual assault? The ways in which iconography naturalizes the wielding of power and violence through euphemism is something that we cannot lose sight of as scholars of visual culture. We might also think more deeply about the ways in which these ideologies were embedded in time and space. These secular ivories, for example, were designed for an intimate viewership, one informed by the domestic spaces in which they were likely used.

This brings me to a final point. When thinking about the complex iconographic agency of the medieval image, one must always look to the ways in which the work of art was mediated in its cultural settings. To my mind, this idea of mediation has been undertheorized—both in this collection and in the scholarship more generally. What is at stake is the possibility of positioning the study of iconography in an expanded field of critical visual inquiry. Some of the implications of this approach are addressed in this collection by Ralph Dekoninck in his piece on "The Anthropology of Images" (175–83), which considers important mediating factors such as materiality and performance.

In the end more attention needs to be paid to this rather obvious fact: the medieval work of art was mediated in its reception by a relatively large number of factors, such as spatial setting, medium, materials, performative use, and by the viewer's own situatedness in the world, as structured by class, gender, relative able-bodiedness, and other factors. What I am describing might sound like the work of historical contextualization—but I believe that in its theoretical implications this is something significantly different than traditional historicism. It is, in part, the variable process by which context adheres to the work of art. More careful attention to that process and to its embodied reception by historical viewers is what is needed.

Here I cannot help but think of Hans Belting's work in advocating for a more anthropological art history.[6] Belting has argued for a three-pronged approach for thinking about the social work of art objects. The *image* is only understood through a series of mediations that involve the work's *medium* and the viewer's *body*. This is an oversimplification of his model—but for those who are game for methodological recalibrations, his work offers a way of situating iconography in an expanded field. Some of this work is already being done—recent scholarship offers exciting new approaches to the materiality of medieval art as well as to embodied reception.[7] If iconography is to maintain its central place in the study of medieval art, it is most likely to thrive by incorporating scholarly work such as this.

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NOTES

[1] The full list of articles is available on the Routledge website: https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Companion-to-Medieval-Iconography/Hourihane/p/book/9781472459473.

[2] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 8.

[3] One thinks here of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's distinction between meaning effects and presence effects. This distinction might help us to problematize the iconographic as the primary mode for understanding medieval art as a bearer of meaning. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[4] See also W. J. T. Mitchell, "Art History on the Edge: Iconology, Media and Visual Culture," in *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2–11.

[5] The article appears on pages 43–57 in *Iconography at the Crossroads: Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 23–24 March 1990*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton: Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 1993).

[6] See Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). The original German publication is Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich: Fink, 2001). A summary of Belting's approach can be found in his "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005): 302–19.

[7] See, for example, the special issue entitled "*Res et significatio*: The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages," ed. Aden Kumler and Christopher R. Lakey, *Gesta* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2012). For a more embodied approach to medieval art and culture, see *The Saturated Sensorium: Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages*, ed. Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, Henning Laugerud, and Laura Katrine Skinnebach (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2015).