

## *Plus ça change . . . ?*

### The Lives and Afterlives of Medieval Iconography

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As the scholarly conference from which this collection developed was in plan, at least one colleague cautioned us not to use “iconography” in its title. If we did, she worried, it might deter attendance. So far as we could tell it did not, but her concern was noteworthy in reflecting a widespread perception of the term as a relic of the past, a yellowing label for a methodology still mired in the dictionary-like taxonomies of Émile Mâle, the preternaturally orderly stemmata of Kurt Weitzmann, and the “fishing expeditions” for textual sources that aped, often ineffectively, the learned excursions of Erwin Panofsky. There is some reality behind those stereotypes, as those of us can attest who remember spending hours as graduate students plumbing the depths of the *Patrologia Latina* or *Patrologia Graeca* for just the right text. Yet it is clear that those who today practice what we at the Index prefer to call “iconographic studies” draw upon a far wider range of methods. They also ask a far more diverse array of questions.

Whether semioticians, cultural theorists, materialists, or iconographic traditionalists, students of the medieval image want to know both what those images meant and what they mean. They ask what an image signified to its first makers and viewers as well as whether it said the same thing to them all. They ask how such meanings transformed over time and in different functional, geographical, cultural, and social contexts. Above all, they ask what all this may reveal about the values and practices of the past, and what our modern reading of them might reveal about the values of our own day. Although such scholars may choose quite different routes toward answering

these questions, this hardly negates the congruency of their goals with those of more traditional iconographic research, nor should these efforts be seen as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the existence of such shared questions suggests that iconographic work still holds a critical place within the rapidly evolving discipline of art history, as well as within the many other disciplines, such as history and comparative literature, that increasingly prioritize the study of images. What remains to be examined is just what that work can now do. What does the study of iconography entail for scholars active today? How does it intersect with the broad array of interpretive tools now at their disposal? What is its potential, and what are its limitations?

Such questions have been asked before, notably by Brendan Cassidy, director of what was then the Index of Christian Art, in his introduction to the edited volume *Iconography at the Crossroads*, published in 1993 on the basis of a conference of the same name held at the Index in 1990.<sup>1</sup> The event's premise was that iconography then stood at two important crossroads. First, it had become the meeting point of multiple non-art-historical disciplines, including literature and musicology, to which the study of the visual was becoming increasingly central. Second and still more consequentially, it had reached a crossroads in its own history as scholars struggled to adapt traditional iconographic methods, which had become sharply focused on descriptive identification and text-based interpretation, to an art-historical discipline both challenged and energized by the emergence of the New Art History of the preceding two decades. This movement's strong emphasis on critical theory and rejection of structuralist approaches—the latter label was not entirely inaccurate with respect to much iconographic work in those years—highlighted the subjectivity and indeterminacy of scholarly interpretation to a degree that precipitated, as Cassidy saw it, a “loss of innocence” for the field.<sup>2</sup>

The essays in that volume offered a telling snapshot of iconographic studies at that date, presenting theoretical essays and traditional case studies that cohabited rather uneasily across what was still quite a marked methodological divide. The gap was perhaps best bridged by Michael Camille's now widely read contribution “Mouths and Meanings: Towards an Anti-Iconography of Medieval Art,” which set out to overturn traditional iconographic interpretation by privileging oral and performative traditions over written sources and arguing for the possibility of multiple interpretations for an image, based on the varying social position and relationships of the beholder.<sup>3</sup> The essay's assertion of the artist's frequent independence from official, scholarly texts, and its refusal to accept the image as resulting from a one-way transaction between artist and viewer, at the time must have seemed a radical break from older methods. However, in hindsight it can also be seen as a constructive rehabilitation of the “critical iconology” initiated by Aby Warburg and his most famous student, Erwin Panofsky, who in their own day pushed past the identification, mapping, and textual foundations of specific motifs to ask what the iconography of a given work could reveal about the society within which it was produced.

For these scholars and their followers, understanding images was already a route to understanding human culture and ideas. However, it was Camille's ebullient, omnivorous openness to the wider sociocultural stockpile of images and ideas on which such understanding rested, and the immeasurably widened methodological toolkit these engaged, that brought new life to the endeavor and telegraphed the new directions that such work would take in subsequent decades. In its way, his approach embodied the very crossroads that the 1990 conference set out to explore.

Assessing the directions that crossroads afforded was the chief goal of the conference from which the essays in this volume have been drawn. "*Plus ça change . . . ? The Lives and Afterlives of Medieval Iconography*" was organized in 2016 by the Index of Christian Art as the first of several conferences intended to stimulate the reassessment of iconographic work as a component of current art-historical practice. The speakers invited to the conference were asked to test the fluidity of iconographic studies in modern scholarship by exploring the fluidity of iconography itself. In tracking the transformation of medieval images and their meanings across multiple times, spaces, media, cultures, or social strata, they aimed to discover which medieval iconographies remained stable and which changed; how meanings were reconceived in response to new contexts, new ideas, or new viewerships; how alterations to the material image affected its reception and perceived meaning; and how the modern conceptualization and presentation of medieval images and objects—including the application or rejection of traditional methodologies—has shaped our own understanding of what they signify.

The speakers' answers ranged from micro- to metahistorical, some dissecting the meaning of a single image closely against a specific historical moment; others addressing broad trends in, or even the historiography of, entire fields. Their geographical and chronological zones of inquiry also varied notably, ranging from al-Andalus to Gothic Germany and from Romanesque France and Italy to fourteenth-century Byzantium. Despite their variety, the essays also displayed powerful congruencies. Several offered a spirited challenge to traditional iconographic methods and the scholars who developed them, among them Erwin Panofsky and his imitators. Most proposed innovative approaches that engage with and revise, rather than simply reject, the methods of an earlier scholarly generation. And all strongly asserted the continued value of studying image and meaning as a path toward understanding medieval art and the cultures that produced it.

The arguments of those conference papers are developed more fully in this volume, presenting diverse approaches to seven visual case studies that offer new insights into how images convey meaning. Many complement each other in either focus or method. The collection opens with two essays, by Dale Kinney and Catherine Fernandez, that explore the importance of memory, experience, and imagination in the medieval construction of meaning in cases where established forms or whole objects were imported into new visual contexts. Kinney considers the challenges posed to the

study of iconography when spoliated images are reused in a radically new setting. Her examination of the spoliated colonnades of Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome ponders the “renaming and denaming” practices often harnessed by medieval viewers confronted by ancient, pagan imagery, in this case several third-century capitals with imagery of Isis, Serapis, and Harpocrates that had been relocated to the twelfth-century church from the Baths of Caracalla. She finds evidence that here, as elsewhere, the capitals’ three main viewing communities might have recognized multiple meanings for reused images, imaginatively reconciling these with their own particular experiences. In Kinney’s description of how original meanings may be acknowledged by some viewers but displaced for others, anthropologists may recognize something akin to iconatropy, when stories are invented to account for an object unmoored from its original meanings.<sup>4</sup> Arguably more self-conscious than the oral traditions behind iconatropy, the recontextualizations described by Kinney nonetheless remind art historians that meaning is extrinsic to the object itself, and that an object’s meaning always depends on who is looking at it. Drawing upon a range of medieval texts that serve to recontextualize spoliated images, Kinney cautions medievalists, who necessarily rely on primary texts to elucidate iconography, that medieval reliance upon texts was more flexible than the founders of iconographic methodologies claimed. Sometimes humans have other grounds for introducing changes into their own cultures.

Catherine Fernandez posits a more politicized reconception of Roman spolia at Saint-Sernin in Toulouse, where the rediscovery of ancient sarcophagi in a thirteenth-century renovation triggered an expansion in the church’s claims to apostolic and saintly relics. The discovery appears to have catalyzed an association of the sarcophagi with a legendary donation of apostolic relics by the emperor Charlemagne, a figure already venerated in the city and linked to the church by several other classical and Carolingian treasury objects. Fernandez notes, however, that Charlemagne’s legendary role became complicated in the thirteenth century, when his status as a Capetian forerunner led to the emergence in a disempowered Toulouse of a new legend accusing the emperor of attempting to transfer the relics of Saint Saturninus to Saint-Denis in Paris. Highlighting the variability with which the Frankish king and the spolia linked with him were understood by constituencies of differing times and places, this essay serves as a reminder that even the reuse of iconography may vary in meaning over time.

The essay by D. Fairchild Ruggles directly challenges the applicability of traditional iconographic study for whole genres of medieval art that transcend the boundaries of conventional iconographic methods—in this case, the study of representational images in Islamic art before the thirteenth century. Recognizing that the mimetic appearance of such works might tempt Western-trained art historians into iconographic analyses similar to those applied to medieval art for Christian use, Ruggles argues that images made and viewed in an Islamic context produced meaning in ways too different from those in a Christian one for this Western-based method to work. Islamic images, she

points out, were rarely narrative and even less often didactic; they stood independent from theological doctrine; and their symbolism tended to eschew the elaboration characteristic of much Christian religious art. Rather than insisting on understanding these images in terms of what they represent, then, she suggests asking instead what Islamic images *present*: the authority inherent in a ruler portrait; the values announced by a floriated Quranic inscription; the cosmopolitanism behind the gold tesserae in a dome; the artistic pride behind the given name scratched into the surface of a column. In doing so, she sounds a clear call for methods of iconographic study that are adapted to representational and symbolic paradigms beyond Western, Christian conventions, or at least for methods flexible enough to accommodate them.

The essays by Charles Barber and Kirk Ambrose both shift our attention from the maker to the viewer, asking how iconography intersects with ideas about the nature and power of vision. Barber evaluates a Byzantine illumination of the metamorphosis in a late fourteenth-century manuscript of theological writings of the emperor John IV Kantakouzenos as a potential manifestation of hesychastic iconography—that is, a symbolic visual expression of Byzantine principles of mystical retreat from the sensory world in an effort to apprehend the divine. Reading the image, with its complex, light-filled mandorla and uninhabited gold panels, against a series of texts about art by hesychastic theologians, including the movement’s founder Gregory Palamas and his fourteenth-century follower Theophanes of Nicaea, he argues that its focus is not on representing the divine, but on creating the conditions of perception that enabled the apprehension of the divine by the properly prepared viewer. In other words, rather than being guided by a discretely hesychastic iconography, it manifests hesychastic aesthetics.

Ambrose addresses the iconography of aging vision, specifically age-related presbyopia, a near-universal condition reflected in the emergence of late medieval depictions of older figures wearing spectacles. He finds such images rich with meaning related to the ways in which vision was understood and represented in the later medieval West: in some images, the addition of eyeglasses could evoke negative properties, such as the “shortsighted” literality of Pharisees in the Temple or the declining faculties of age; in others, he argues, they could connote the benefits of higher, spiritual vision or evoke the high personal status and wealth that gave access to the books and other precious objects that would have required such precise vision. Both Barber’s and Ambrose’s contributions call our attention to the importance of vision in the presentation and apprehension of iconographic meaning, Barber’s essay highlighting the spiritual readiness required for an image to function properly and Ambrose’s calling our attention to the physiological demands that make such spiritual work possible.

The essays by Elina Gertsman and Jacqueline Jung each pursue iconography over time, examining how postcreative transformations can also change the ways in which an image may be understood by later generations of viewers. Gertsman considers the primarily accidental erasure resulting from the pious touching, rubbing, and

even kissing of images in manuscripts as traces of an engagement with the visual image that altered iconography even as it recorded a response to original meaning. More specifically, she considers the absence of imagery once integral to the page as it might have related to late medieval ideas about the invisibility of the divine. In a late fifteenth-century Netherlandish book of hours in which several representations of Christ have been abraded to near-invisibility by the kisses of the devout, presence is signaled merely by traditional iconographic attributes surrounding the lacuna at the site of the lost image. The latter can be read, Gertsman argues, as a reminder of Christ's absence from the world, his literal inaccessibility through vision affording an apophatic and therefore more perfect apprehension of his divine presence.

Jung addresses the thoroughly modern iconographic transformations effected through World War II-era photography in Germany on twentieth-century readings of Gothic sculpture. Contrasting Richard Hamann's methodical campaign to document French Gothic architectural sculpture in occupied France between 1940 and 1942 and Walter Hege's contemporaneous set of atmospheric, romanticized photographs of canonical German sculptures, Jung explores the intersection between photography's ability to mediate modern reception of the sculptures and its potential for use in the promotion of a German nationalist agenda. As objects of study, she demonstrates, these photographs are not just records of visual evidence, nor are they only interpretations of the meaning of the objects they record. They are new images conveying their own meanings to be apprehended anew by successive generations of viewers. As Jung presents it, Hamann's carefully orchestrated campaign, which systematically isolated and lit each sculptural element with "scientific" precision, constituted a visual conquest analogous to the political annexation of the monuments, while Hege's affective, near-cinematic photos of sculptures at Naumburg and Bamberg helped to position the monuments as nationalist icons.

As described by Jung, Hamann's scientific methods may remind us of the positivism that drove Émile Mâle, Aby Warburg, and other early scholars in the study of iconography. The impulse to document and interpret iconographic images as "scientifically" as possible is understandable when we consider the potential hazards of subjective reasoning, a charge that those who work in the humanities sometimes overzealously strive to avoid. In developing their methods, twentieth-century scholars were aware of the danger of allowing arguments to feed back into each other like a question-begging Ouroboros of methodology. As Jung shows, however, even the most careful documentarian could not evade his own subjectivity, whether or not he recognized it. Perhaps it is an awareness of this that enables the essays in this volume to move so flexibly among and between their preferred approaches to iconography and to demonstrate that it is not only possible but necessary to study the meaning of images from multiple points of view.

It may seem strange that, nearly two decades beyond the turn of the twenty-first century, art historians could still be debating the use of twentieth-century

methodologies, and stranger still that some could reject even the useful aspects of imperfect methods. While the authors in the present volume are certainly willing to set old text-based methodologies aside when they do not apply, they are to be credited for also giving a thought to the baby in the bathwater. Perhaps this was already clear to some twentieth-century students of the image. Perhaps the controversies about their legacies would have puzzled Warburg and Panofsky far more than modern scholars might imagine. Perhaps now, as long as the limits of a method and its applicability to the objects under consideration are made clear, any idea can be tested fairly in the study of what we may, without embarrassment, once again call “iconography.” Perhaps the problem is not really with the methods, but with the practitioners—or, as Walt Kelly put it: “We have met the enemy and he is us!” As Ruggles’s essay shows with particular clarity in its call for a new “disciplinary apparatus” to pursue traces of ordinary lives, current scholars are in an excellent position to recognize which tool best fits a given question and which new tools remain to be developed.

The diversity and criticality of the essays in this volume offer a heartening vision of the work to be done, a vision in which scholarship on medieval iconography has been far from a case of “plus ça change, plus c’est le même chose.” In the quarter-century since iconography came to the crossroads at the Index of Christian Art, something has changed—something already germinating a generation ago. Even what the word “iconography” can mean has altered, its ambit having widened. However, one thing certainly has not changed: in 2017, at the Index of Medieval Art, we learned that iconography still inspires intense passion among those who would study it. Unlike the methodologically divided scholarship of the Crossroads conference, the academic community that gathered more recently in Princeton came prepared for open collaboration, eager to share and explore a range of ideas and approaches in a spirit of unity, but also in support of diversity. Their drive to expand the boundaries of a once-traditional academic method offers a decisive response to the increasingly expansive questions that art historians now ponder. In setting aside semantic arguments about what “iconography” has meant over the last century—leaving that to historiographers to sort out—and directing their efforts instead to articulating exactly what they intend to accomplish and how they wish to do so, the scholars contributing to this volume demonstrate the importance of keeping matters of image and meaning—whether or not we use the word “iconography”—at the center of modern inquiry into medieval visual culture.

## Notes

1. Brendan Cassidy, ed., *Iconography at the Crossroads: Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 23–24 March 1990*,

Index of Christian Art Occasional Papers 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

2. Cassidy, introduction to *Iconography at the Crossroads*, 11.

3. Michael Camille, "Mouths and Meanings: Towards an Anti-Iconography of Medieval Art," in Cassidy, *Iconography at the Crossroads*, 43–57.

4. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago: Aldine, 1965), 10–11.

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