

Introduction

Art, Power, and Resistance in the Middle Ages

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Popular stereotypes tend to cast medievalist art historians as ivory-tower sorts who sit sequestered in book-lined sanctuaries as they churn out papers on arcana—say, the origins of the codex form, the production and exchange of tiraz textiles, or the mechanics of stained-glass production. Yet in the present era, where sociopolitical turmoil coincides with relentless online connectivity, neither the tranquility of the bookshelf nor the remoteness of the archive insulates medievalists from present-day conflicts and concerns. Nor indeed do they seem to desire such insulation: on the contrary, as any review of recent conferences or working-group publications demonstrates, most medievalists actively desire a fuller understanding of how the historical problems that they study intersect with and shed light on modern ones.¹ Among the most consequential of these questions is that of how works of art relate to power.

Nearly all art produced in the Middle Ages engaged with power in some way. To return to the examples noted above, European Christendom's adoption of the codex, that innovative book format that made it possible to compress the contents of dozens of unwieldy scrolls into a compact, portable textual repository, not only supported the efforts of early Christians to resist the religious restrictions imposed by the ancient Roman Empire but ultimately became indispensable to the workings of the Church as a new global power.² Costly silk textiles produced by Muslim weavers in centers such as Baghdad and Fustat and then gifted or marketed throughout the medieval world routinely served to express authority, forge alliances, build capital, and assert political

and cultural authority; yet when looted and/or repurposed, they also could strike a symbolic blow against a dominant community.³ And the production of Gothic stained glass for northern European cathedrals, as is now widely understood, was at least as often motivated by episcopal competition and the desire for local economic control as it was by pious impulse.⁴ Common to all these examples is not just the potential of the works of art in question to influence power relationships but their makers' recognition of how they could be manipulated to do so.

Nor have medieval patterns of expressing power disappeared in modernity. Exemplary is the tradition of equestrian portraiture, a form that endured from antiquity through and beyond the medieval world. The ninth-century equestrian bronze statuette now in the Louvre and thought to represent either Charlemagne or Charles the Bald is widely recognized, despite its diminutive scale, as echoing imperial Roman equestrian statuary long used to project imperial political authority;⁵ in the twentieth century, the same tradition found modern expression in American equestrian monuments, such as the 1924 sculpture commemorating Confederate general Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. One of many such monuments produced in the first decades of the twentieth century—not, as is popularly believed, after the United States Civil War—this work was deployed to reinforce white dominance at a time of sharpened racist and anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. The tenacity of its ties to an older language of power can be seen in the fact that when the decision was made to remove the statue in 2017, it sparked a protest by white supremacists that led to deadly violence.⁶ The genre was powerfully upended by Kehinde Wiley in his 2019 bronze *Rumors of War*, which depicts a young Black man in contemporary streetwear astride a horse in a composition echoing another Confederate monument dedicated to J. E. B. Stuart. Wiley's work stood temporarily in Times Square before its permanent installation at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, near the end of Monument Avenue in Richmond, as an enduring reply to the tradition.⁷

The ways in which images relate to power are complicated for modern viewers by the pervasiveness of digital media in which images can be created, manipulated, and disseminated with ease. This can challenge public confidence in both the images' own veracity and that of the narratives behind them. Over the past two decades, public access to and awareness of many forms of digital fakery—from the simple but formerly viral photo of "Snowball the giant cat" at the dawn of the internet age to the far more convincing deepfakes now used to spread political disinformation—enable modern viewers to cast doubt on almost any image.⁸ Was the 1969 moonwalk by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, then seen as a moment of American triumph in the space race, the "fake news" that some now claim it to be? Even when faced with photographic evidence and the continuing testimony of Aldrin himself, some viewers now imagine the image to be part of a government conspiracy.⁹ Such examples underscore the need to increase critical understanding of how images contribute to discourses of power, both historically and in the present.

This premise inspired the conference on which the present volume is based. The conference date, 16 November 2019, predated the global pandemic that just a few months later would reshape the landscape of research and teaching—and the role of images in public discourse—just as thoroughly as it did nearly every other aspect of modern life. This pre-COVID period found medievalists preoccupied with a different but no less far-reaching series of public questions, from how long-standing patterns of racism and sexual violence have shaped modern society to the impact of nationalism and capitalism on political movements and the changing human relationship to the environment. None of these issues were new—all had parallels or even obvious foundations in the problems of the medieval world, but all shared a common element in having been impacted by discourses of power in which the production and consumption of visual images played a central part.

At the Index of Medieval Art, we believed there was no better time for comparative exploration of the place of medieval images within a wider economy of power and resistance. Our hope was to refine modern understanding of how images worked in medieval culture while also fostering critical attention to how they have continued to operate within the power structures and resistance movements of the modern world. The eight speakers, whose papers became the foundation for the essays collected here, examined these questions across a field that stretched from the Byzantine, Ottonian, and Valois courts to the successive mythoi of Umayyad and Castilian authority in Iberia and from the military and commercial confrontations of the eastern Mediterranean to the metaphorical and personal ones of courtly love culture. Each contribution offers a chance to reflect upon how enduringly visual culture has served to assert or to resist power in various medieval settings, as well as on how the same strategies can persist, sometimes obviously but often barely perceptibly, within a modern ambit.

The volume opens with two chapters that examine the complex claims made by visual expressions of imperial power. Elena N. Boeck finds in a now-lost equestrian statue of the Byzantine emperor Justin II a dramatic opposition between Justin's efforts to emblemize his power through the construction of the monument and the "spectacularly didactic" act of resistance in its dismantlement by his successor, Tiberios II. Resistant herself to accepting at face value John of Ephesos's account of the monument's history, Boeck dissects John's text in light of numismatic, architectural, and textual evidence to find in Tiberios's coins and commissions a preference for overtly Christian iconography to project imperial authority, rejecting the ill and unpopular Justin's preference for using Roman imperial signs of power.

Eliza Garrison's contribution characterizes the tension between "absorption" and "avoidance" of imperial visual rhetoric in the often-politicized historiography of Ottonian portraiture, the understanding of which, she argues, is too often oversimplified by the projection of modern political ideals. Focusing on the portraiture of Emperor Henry II, the last and most tenuous ruler in the Ottonian line, she shows how the tendency to interpret such images as flat statements of political authority can obscure

the ambiguity that often lay behind them. The complex iconography, verbose inscriptions, and lavish covers of the Regensburg Sacramentary, as she shows, both speak to Henry's desire to cement his authority and silence the resistance that he had encountered to his own accession in 1002. In doing so, they invite a broader reevaluation of the interplay of power and resistance in Ottonian imperial imagery.

The often-tacit connections between power and religious or cultural identity form the theme of the next several essays. Heather Badamo demonstrates how the hagiography and image of Saint George were mobilized to consolidate identity and assert religious and political authority by widely diverse communities in the eastern Mediterranean. Comparing Coptic and Georgian representations of the saint, she shows how George's portrayals in text and image were transformed as they traveled the networks of the Mediterranean world, responding to the predominant pressures and agenda of the saint's diverse communities. At the same time, her essay critiques lopsided approaches to the "global Middle Ages" that sometimes obscure rather than reveal the contributions and interconnections of communities beyond widely studied medieval centers.

Thomas E. A. Dale explores the interplay of power and identity in Venice, focusing his contribution upon the distinctively varied representations of Muslims produced in and around the cathedral of San Marco. Drawing attentively on recent scholarship on race and identity in the Middle Ages, he scrutinizes the variable discourses of race, religion, and conversion that are suggested by the carefully calibrated combinations of physiognomy, skin color, and dress used to depict Muslims of diverse status and semiotic role. The frequent racialization and exoticization of such figures, he argues, served as proxies for the actual Muslims with whom the Venetians regularly interacted economically, politically, and socially, strengthening the latter's self-perception as categorically white and Christian while arguing for the city's dominance as a commercial and pilgrimage center in the eastern Mediterranean.

The quintessentially multicultural mosque-cathedral of Córdoba provides the locus for two essays, one related to the structure's original life as Iberia's preeminent Umayyad mosque, the other following upon its conversion into a Castilian cathedral. Avinoam Shalem contends that a minbar added to the mosque in its late tenth-century renovation under al-Hakam II represented not just a religious but a political symbol that its viewers perceived to track directly back to the minbar in the House of the Prophet in Mecca. The commission of the structure for the Córdoba mosque, he suggests, sought to validate the legitimacy of the caliph, while its conjunction there with the bloodstained Quran leaves of the assassinated third caliph 'Uthmān ibn Affān also constituted an expression of Sunni legitimacy and resistance to the Shiite movement then expanding elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

Tom Nickson's essay parses the "silent rhetoric" presented by the mosque-turned-cathedral's *Puerta del Perdón*, which was rebuilt in the late fourteenth century with an array of decoration that intermingles vernacular, Latin, and Arabic inscriptions with

allusive geometric and foliate forms. He proposes that as an ensemble, these offered a multivalent message. For Christian viewers who could read some or all of the texts, the portal could evoke Castilian triumphs in the history of this contested site, staking claims that were central to both royal and ecclesiastical authority. To the illiterate, the presence of even unreadable Arabic on the portal of a converted site still could suggest dominance over an acquiescent Muslim populace. And the faith of all viewers, literate or not, could be swayed by the paradisiacal and even magical associations of the portal's abstract ornament. Nickson's observations present the visual articulation of power as intersecting with other factors characteristic of multicultural medieval societies, such as the motivations behind cultural exchange, the relationship of performance to architecture, and the semiotic value of ornament and material.

The volume's final chapters trace the distinctive discourses of power and resistance found in luxury objects from late medieval France. Anne D. Hedeman harnesses the concept of the paratext to analyze how images and rubrics created for King Charles V's manuscript of the *Grandes chroniques de France* reshaped an established text by adding paratextual material that affirmed Valois authority for the manuscript's royal reader. Through analysis of surviving instructions to the *écrivains du roy* charged with producing the new manuscript, as well as through a close reading of several newly added illuminations and their rubrics, she reveals how such additions "sculpted" and sometimes controverted the text to craft a discourse of authority that aligned with the king's own claims to power.

Martha Easton's contribution draws an explicit line from the Middle Ages to the modern day as it challenges prevailing interpretations of so-called courtly love scenes in fourteenth-century Gothic ivories. Easton engages the framework of the #MeToo movement and current discourse about rape culture to disrupt romanticized modern readings of such imagery. Instead, she proposes to apply a "period eye" to female figures whose facial expressions and gestures often seem far from neutral, sometimes strongly resembling those of victims in contemporaneous images. Highlighting the violence and power inequities embedded in both these images and the literary texts to which they closely relate, the chapter exhorts modern viewers to resist entrenched tendencies to silence the victim, urging readers to recognize the ivory maidens' own resistance to pictorial sexual aggression.

The contributions here, then, ask readers not merely to contemplate the degree to which discourses of power and resistance threaded through the visual culture of the Middle Ages but to reflect on how modern perception of those discourses might have been either emphasized or muted by contemporary sensitivities. They also demonstrate that while the resources to make and preserve lasting works of art have tended to lie in the hands of the powerful, committed modern study of their gaps, erasures, and successive rereadings can also find within them meaningful expressions of resistance. Above all, they remind us that power expressed in any form is most clearly understood when it is placed in dynamic relationship to the resistance it has inspired.

Notes

1. As this volume reached final form, such initiatives included numerous scholarly sessions and thematic strands on race, gender, immigration, colonialism, and the environment at the annual medieval conferences at Kalamazoo and Leeds; the influential “Race B4 Race” conference series founded by Ayanna Thompson (<https://www.ayannathompson.com/raceb4race>); interventions initiated by Medievalists of Color and The Material Collective; and numerous other freestanding conferences and lecture series, as well as such recent publications, such as Heng, *Invention of Race*; Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*; Albin et al., *Whose Middle Ages?*; Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*; and Hsy, *Antiracist Medievalisms*.
2. Roberts and Skeat, *Birth of the Codex*, 38–74.
3. See examples in Mackie, *Symbols of Power*.
4. As memorably formulated by Williams, *Bread, Wine, and Money*.
5. Heuschkel, “Metzer Reiterstatuette,” 32–33.
6. Stolberg and Rosenthal, “Man Charged After White Nationalist Rally.”
7. “Sculpture Created by Kehinde Wiley for VMFA,” *Virginia Museum of Fine Arts*, accessed 15 September 2023, <https://www.vmfamuseum/about/rumors-of-war/>.
8. Campbell, “‘Monster’ Cat a Photo Experiment,” and Satariano and Mozur, “People Onscreen Are Fake.”
9. See “Buzz Aldrin on the Moon,” NASA, 11 July 2013, https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/apollo/40th/images/apollo_image_12.html.

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