

Optics and Visio Dei: interpretations of female mystic Art

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Religious visions are personal experiences in which individuals have a sensory experience that is in some way supernatural or divine. In the context of medieval Christianity, true visionaries were understood to have received revelations directly from God, without mediation from priests. In the tradition of the medieval Church and society, women were relegated to a subordinate role; thus, when the mystic who experienced a vision from God was a woman, the situation required careful interpretation, for in bypassing the intermediary authority of the priest, the woman was potentially subverting a hierarchy which itself was considered to have been established by God. This paper will analyze one of the most important medieval mystics, Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), and examine her writings and her images produced in *Scivias*. It is hypothesized that the medieval ideas of optics and biblical exegesis worked in harmony to structure Hildegard's experiences and to legitimize those experiences to others at the time. In this paper, key images created by Hildegard were analyzed to interpret the descriptions of her experiences and their rendering in visual form in relation to the medieval theories of vision and theology itself. The study was sponsored by Undergraduate Research Opportunities Grant

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