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How to Read Medieval Art. Wendy A. Stein

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How to Read Medieval Art
By Wendy A. Stein
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Book Review

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Medieval art often remains inaccessible to viewers because of the complexity of its subject matter. Given the importance of storytelling in medieval art and its biblical subjects, a great deal is missed when the viewer is not familiar with its imagery. Wendy A. Stein's book attempts to increase the viewer's understanding of medieval art through detailed descriptions of each scene and an explanation of their theological significance. This objective is achieved not only through the text but in the abundance of photographs of each object. These photographs are especially appreciated, since some of the objects are quite small and composed of multiple scenes. In almost all cases, individual photographs for each episode of an object accompany the description.

How to Read Medieval Art is in the format of an exhibition catalog, which requires reading each essay for a more comprehensive view of medieval art. Preceded by an Introduction, the objects in the catalog are arranged into sections by subject type ("Foundation Stories of Christian Art," "The Hebrew Bible and Jewish Art," "Saints and Their Attributes," "Changing Images of the Virgin and the Crucifixion," and "Secular Themes"). As explored in the introduction, medieval art reflects the cultural exchanges that took place among Jews, Christians, and Romans in the Early Christian period and, later, when the Crusades brought Byzantine art to the West. Although

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subjects and figures became recognizable through a standardized iconography, patrons are significant, since they could influence the details of the imagery. Medieval art was always created to serve a specific purpose, including teaching Biblical narrative, aiding in prayer and devotion, and exalting a holy person.

The first section, "Foundation Stories of Christian Art," features objects depicting multiple episodes from the life of Christ. Most of the artworks featured in this section are small devotional objects that would have encouraged their medieval owner to contemplate each scene up close. Christ's life is generally divided into three parts: Infancy (scenes from his birth and childhood), Passion (ministry and events leading to his death), and Post-Crucifixion (Resurrection and later miracles). Objects displaying each one of these cycles were carefully chosen to provide the reader with information on the essential stories of the Christian faith. In each entry, the author includes a description of the object, the placement of the imagery, and what is taking place in each episode. Frequently, the theological significance of a particular scene is also noted. For example, The Annunciation is one of the images on the *Reliquary Shrine* attributed to Jean de Touyl (Cat 1). The moment when Gabriel visits the Virgin Mary signifies the Incarnation or the moment when Christ became flesh. While medievalists will largely be familiar with much of the imagery, observations on subtle nuances and interpretation make this valuable to academics as well as a general audience. Regarding the *Situla* (Cat 4), the placement of the cycles, the infancy in the lower register and the passion above, intimates the spiritual progression from earthly to heavenly. The calculated juxtaposition of the individual scenes in the *Situla*'s registers creates additional meaning.

Images in the second section, "The Hebrew Bible and Jewish Art," mostly served in a Christian context or, less frequently, were intended for a Jewish patron or audience. Among the subjects created to serve Christian purposes were individual figures who confirmed Christ's Jewish genealogy and narrative scenes that prefigured events in the New Testament. Depicted on a stained glass window from an abbey church in France, *Abiud* (Cat 9), was one of Christ's ancestors named in Matthew's gospel. The essay on the *Miniature Shrine* (Cat 8) demonstrates how scenes from the Hebrew Bible were paired with scenes from Christ's life in Christian art. The *Miniature Shrine* features a central image of the Crucifixion flanked by the Sacrifice of Abraham and the Brazen Serpent. Christians viewed the Sacrifice of Abraham and the Brazen Serpent as prefigurations of the Crucifixion.

Some essays move beyond the general symbolism of episodes from the Hebrew Bible to an analysis of style and an exploration of historical context. Discussion of the *Plate with the Battle of David and Goliath* (Cat 8) outlines the stylistic conventions of medieval art. This essay also delves more deeply into interpretation, explaining how the scene of David and Goliath could be read as a reflection of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius's battle with the Persian general. While the use of scenes from the Hebrew Bible was generally positive, Jews were occasionally depicted in a negative light. In the rear medallion of the *Cloisters Cross* (Cat 12), the figure of Synagoga pierces the Lamb of God. The anti-Jewish nature of the imagery is reflected in some of the inscriptions on the cross: "The Jews laughed at the pain of God dying." The *Mishneh Torah* (Cat 13), which had a Jewish patron, is exceptional for the rare portrayal of figures.

Saints were standard features of medieval art. The third section, "Saints and their Attributes," explores the attributes and symbolism of the most post popular saints and modes of representing them. *Saint John the Baptist with Scenes from His Life*, from a manuscript, depicts the saint alone in the wilderness in the center of the page. This more formal presentation contrasts with the narrative scenes surrounding it. *The Golden Legend*, a collection of saints' lives, often informed the cyclical presentation of certain saints. The *Belles Heures of Jean de France, Duc de Berry*, included a cycle of the life of Saint Catherine. Because of their significant role as authors of the Gospels, the Evangelists, who also appeared as symbolic animals, abounded in medieval art. Essays on objects featuring the most popular saints—Peter, Paul, Anthony, and Thomas Beckett—recount their legends, popular appeal, and attributes.

The fourth section, "Changing Images of the Virgin and the Crucifixion," explores the numerous manifestations of these revered subjects and how their representation changed over time. Different modes of representing the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child carried standardized meanings. Seated on a throne with the Christ Child in her lap, the *Virgin and Child in Majesty* (Cat 22) is a type known as the *Sedes Sapientae* or Throne of Wisdom. In contrast to the formality of this image, later works such as the *Virgin from Strasbourg Cathedral* (Cat 23) present a more human image of Mary. Wearing a crown and luxurious fabrics, these images portray Mary as the Queen of Heaven and reflect the political system and liturgy. Reflecting changing devotional trends in the later medieval period, depictions of the Virgin and Child required the viewer to identify with the holy figures

portrayed. As a result, images elicited an extreme of emotions from great sorrow (*Pietà*, Cat 25) to joy and tenderness (*Virgin and Child*, Cat 26). Images of the Crucifixion experienced transformations similar to those of the Virgin and Child, as formality gave way to increased humanity. *The Monumental Crucifix* (Cat 31) exemplifies early representations of the subject. Christ, with open eyes and head erect, is shown as triumphant over death. In later images, Christ's humanity and suffering become more pronounced. In *The Crucifixion* (Cat 33) from ca. 1330–1335, not only is Christ represented dead, with his slumped body and blood pouring from his wombs, but numerous other figures are included to encourage an empathetic reaction from the viewer.

The last section of the book, "Secular Themes," presents a variety of subjects, the source of which was not derived from the New Testament or Hebrew Bible. Mythological subjects, such as those found on the *Casket with Warriors and Dancers* (Cat 34), reflected the integration of the Christian and Classical in the Byzantine world. In the West, themes of love in poetry and prose influenced the *Casket with Scenes from Romances* (Cat 35). Even if not religious, the subjects of medieval art were symbolic. The Wild Man, for example, represented everything beyond the civilized world. The representation of this character was not static, however, since on the *Ewer with Wild Man Finial* (Cat 36), this figure was depicted as a protector. The *Corbel with a Pair of Beard-Pulling Acrobats* (Cat 37) illustrates the range of bizarre subjects encountered in medieval monasteries. Finally, the essay on *The Unicorn Tapestries* (Cat 38) explores how the line between sacred and secular could be blurred in medieval art.

How to Read Medieval Art would be valuable in the classroom but not as a medieval art history text. Its focus on religious narrative is too narrow for this purpose. As a growing number of students are unfamiliar with the stories of religious art, medieval art history courses should assign an essay or entire section to help them feel more comfortable with identifying scenes and religious figures through conventions and attributes. Essays or sections of the book could be used in theology classes to understand how theological concepts were represented in art in the medieval period. The introduction of the text, which gives a brief overview of the development of medieval art and issues that shaped it, could be assigned as a reading in a medieval art history course. Overall, undergraduate students will find the writing of the book and explanations of the imagery to be very accessible.