

views

review
Reviews

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The Ritual of Observing

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Clemena Antonova, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2009), 206 pp., 19 b&w illns., ISBN 9780754667988, £50.

Elina Gertsman (ed.), *Visualizing Medieval Performance: Perspectives, Histories, Contexts* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2008), 366 pp., 41 b&w illns. and 1 music example, ISBN 9780754664369, £63.

Medieval art history has recently witnessed a theoretical intervention through studies on the senses, especially touch and sight, and their relation to representation and social practice.¹ In particular, theories of phenomenal relations between observers and objects have gained a foothold, small as it may be, in the ever-expanding branch of art history that deals with reception or response theory. By foregrounding ritualistic and performative values through the phenomenal relations engendered between beholders and objects, scholars are beginning to ask how objects were designed to communicate formally *in situ* to edify and engage their viewers. This new intellectual framework entices by refocusing attention away from purely iconographic or patronage-laden analyses to those that reconstruct the spatio-temporal experiences of beholders. This framework also opens onto a new understanding of the historicity of objects and performances impossible to locate in texts.

These issues dovetail nicely in two recent books published by Ashgate, Clemena Antonova's *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God* and an anthology of essays, *Visualizing Medieval Performance: Perspectives, Histories, Contexts*, edited by Elina Gertsman. The latter takes as its theme a broad definition of medieval performance by examining how its differing subsets – ritual and liturgical, somatic and devotional, visual and textual – interrelate and signify performance. What began as a conference in 2005 at the University of Chicago on 'Performance/Performativity in the Middle Ages', grew into a volume of sixteen interdisciplinary essays grouped around four broadly conceived sets of performance: visual, devotional, social, and lived. From seventh-century Armenian church decoration to sixteenth-century ceremonial ephemera, the essays address a wide range of subjects in impressive depth – both historical and theoretical – across media: manuscripts, devotional sculpture, ritual enactments of Christ's passion, and so on. Such a range of material might signal fissures between the essays. However, each essay is not only thematically coherent from one to the next, but theoretically articulate as well. Beyond an adherence to performance and phenomenological theory *per se*, particularly the works of Jacques Derrida, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Richard Schechner, and Victor Turner, each essay addresses how an observer would interact within, or experience, a given

performative space, whether that space is pictorial, monumental, or auditory.

Similarly, Antonova is interested in understanding the phenomenal relationship between beholders and objects as figured in the very objects themselves. To this end, Antonova focuses on the convergence of icon theology and art history in the writings of twentieth-century Russian theorists by offering a wide-ranging and ambitious account of the icon in the Byzantine and Eastern Orthodox traditions. By demonstrating how pictorial space and pictorial time were interrelated through ritual, Antonova forces the reader to understand anew a critical and familiar category of representation, pictorial perspective. Through a critique of 'reverse perspective', explicated most vigorously by Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), Antonova expounds how observer and icon shared an intimate relationship in real time and space through what should be considered embodied viewing: the notion that our senses are tethered to our bodies. Even when attempting to channel the divine, we begin the process with our feet planted firmly on the ground.

In Chapter 1, Antonova unpacks the thorny problem of time as an organising principle in the visual arts, marching through well-known theorists ranging from Alberti and Leonardo, to Kant and Lessing, and to Greenberg and Bahtkin. What emerges from this amalgam of theorists is Antonova's interest in the fluidity of time in the relationship between icon and observer – a counterforce to what she understands as the dominant spatio-temporal dimension of perspective paintings, which she argues 'excluded the moment of the [sic] time' (pp. 13–14). By juxtaposing Western painting and Eastern icons, she is able to contrast pictorial time in classically derived perspectival compositions as closed and interior, or fixed, and the time of the icon, which she understands through Florensky's concept of 'reverse time'. The important distinction between fixed time and 'reverse time' is not that time is literally in reverse, but that time is 'cyclical and non-directional (other than locally)' (p. 20). It is into this conception of time which Antonova deposits the icon.

If 'reverse time' is understood as performative or liturgical time, a concept she explicates in Chapter 3, then it is easier to understand the differences between icons and Renaissance paintings in terms of pictorial time. The performative aspect of an icon, specifically its relationship to an observer in liturgical ceremonies, can reconceptualise notions of fixed, linear time: liturgical time is cyclical and locally determined. However, this difference has more to do with the function and context of an icon, its extra-pictorial elements, than its style. But the problem of a particular pictorial style, in truth, lies at the heart of Antonova's careful explication of 'reverse perspective', a means of spatial organisation of the pictorial field around multiple points of view within a given image. The desire felt in the early twentieth century to conceptualise such a system to explain medieval images reifies the historical lacuna regarding medieval perspective in general. What emerged from these theories was a coherent conceptualisation of a moving beholder in which the shared space between

pictures and beholders was emphasised and the notion of a singular, fixed point of view was deemphasised.

Antonova's second and fourth chapter unpack the historiography and theories behind 'reverse perspective' beginning with the work of Oscar Wulff, who in 1907 developed a category of pictorial space known as 'inverted' or 'reverse' perspective. This system was constructed as the reversal of rationalised pictorial space made famous by Alberti *et al.*, despite the fact, as Antonova points out, that many of these pictures in question were produced long before the Renaissance. According to Wulff, in 'reverse perspective' constructions, the vanishing point of any object must exist outside of the pictorial field, the object *de facto* includes the beholder in the spatial construction. Wulff's theory was expanded upon most prominently by the scholar and priest Pavel Florensky who in 1919 developed his own theory of 'reverse perspective' in order to demonstrate that a perspectival depiction of the world – a depiction produced using the technology of linear perspective – was not necessarily the only correct or natural depiction of the world. In part, Florensky wanted to establish a legitimate theory concerning the relationship between pictorial space and observers for Eastern Orthodox art. He believed that because the dominant theoretical model for a 'correct' or 'realistic' visualisation of the world in pictures was developed using linear perspective, a different system was needed to show how non-perspectivally wrought pictures could be equally 'correct' and 'realistic'.

Florensky proffered two ideas important to the larger intellectual framework of the volumes under review in this essay: first, he argued against the notion that one, fixed point of view, which he called 'monarchial', was demonstratively correct.² Secondly, building from his belief that paintings produced using the technology of linear perspective assumed, or 'presupposed', one viewing position, Florensky argued that perception was active and that one fixed viewpoint ran counter to the reality of most viewing conditions, especially those associated with ritualistic spaces. Generally, an observer constantly moves their eyes, head, and mind when contemplating or viewing a picture. In other words, perception is a dynamic activity that makes use of the eyes, the body, and the mind.

The above notions bring up two critical points regarding medieval art: first, religious pictures (though, certainly other pictures as well) by nature generally command, if not demand, repeat observation – a ritual of observing – which practically speaking entails different temporal and spatial circumstances upon each observation. How an observer sees a picture can never be repeated, or replicated precisely (though this in no way is unique to medieval art). Secondly, how an observer experiences these pictures is clearly subjective and the spatial systems, however conceptualised, deployed in medieval depictions accommodated for this type of repeated observation: they obviously did not follow the laws of linear perspective, 'viewpoints' are non-existent, and, as Antonova demonstrates, mobility is implied in the form, location, and subject matter of the objects in question. One could even go so far as to say that immobility and optical fixity runs counter to the representational status of medieval

art. Medieval depictions were designed to be seen from different standpoints, at different times, and by different people. Repeated observation could only produce multifaceted visual and/or spiritual experiences.

Florensky's theory of 'reverse perspective' paved the way for a theorisation of the shared space between the beholder and the object. Though he did not extrapolate this concept very far, a follower, Boris Uspensky (b. 1937), did. Uspensky held the position that an observer projects himself or herself mentally into the pictorial field. One way to understand this concept is to look at an example of a spatial system involving medieval icons that he unpacked in a 1965 essay, which elaborated and synthesised the work of Florensky and his followers, such as Lev Zhegin (1892–1969). This system stems from the fact that in processional art the viewing position of the primary work necessarily moved because the work itself was not displayed in a fixed manner, but rather was processed. Uspensky claimed that the figures depicted in the icon need not move, which accounts for their rigid style, because the observer moves with the object: movement is built into the relationship between object and observer. He contrasted this type of observer–object relationship with one in which more naturalistic instances of foreshortening and *contrapposto* of later art were built into the picture to imply movement, which he claimed implies a fixed observer. While this is not necessarily true (why does implied movement in the figure imply fixity in the subject?), it was important to establish a contrast between fixed observers and mobile observers, which he argued was symptomatic of the general principles of medieval representation; not just with icons *per se*, but also with fresco painting and architectural and fully three-dimensional sculpture.

In her critique of the principles of 'reverse perspective', Antonova explains that her biggest criticism is not that it emphasised a mobile observer, a dynamic image, or the multiplicity of viewpoints. Rather it was that the pictorial evidence suggested that the viewpoints in Eastern icon painting do not converge, they intersect and exist on simultaneous planes, which signifies the transcendence of the divine, the timelessness of God, and the relationship between beholder and sacred image. This is only a problem if the hermeneutic mechanism is based on linear perspective, which in 'reverse perspective' it is. However, this should not devalue the process itself or the interpretive possibilities for visual analyses.

One of the many merits of Antonova's book is her meticulous introduction of these important theories and theorists into English. The brilliance of 'reverse perspective' is how it might account for other types of representations, for non-iconic images and their visible structure, especially in terms of an observer's spatio-temporal experience. In order to find a common ground on which to discuss spatial systems of differing media – icons, fresco paintings, architectural sculpture, liturgical, or ceremonial performances – one needs to look to analogous spaces between the observer and object that exist in each example. These spaces are both social and sacred. It is not so much

that the spatial system employed in architectural relief or icons is the 'reverse' of later pictorial systems. It is that the architectonics of holy site envelops the observer into the space of the representations due to the sacred nature of the narrative or the holy nature of the icon. There is constant movement by observers towards and away from these monuments and the pictorial systems compensate for this fact.

This is not a new concept in medieval art history, but it has not been given enough credence. In 1948 Otto Demus emphasised how the shared space of an observer and icon in monumental Byzantine painting was a determining factor in the spatial system employed, which he termed 'negative perspective'.³ And recently this kind of analysis has been given new life, particularly by Jacqueline Jung, Sharon Gerstel, and by a number of essayists in Gertsman's volume under review.⁴ In her essay, Christina Maranci deemphasises traditional structural methodologies associated with the study of medieval Syrian churches to foreground the performative and ritual use of monumental spaces. Maranci effectively wrestles with this dichotomy – between monument and performance – by analysing epigraphic, liturgical, and sculptural indices of past use. To take just one example, a critical piece of epigraphic evidence she found at a number of churches was an inscription encircling the structure. The format of these inscriptions, which would have been enchanted by the clergy during consecrations ceremonies, encourages movement from beholders. She contextualises the epigraphic evidence with liturgical texts that induce movement on the part of the clergy and their constituents during similar rites, importantly repeated annually.

The evidence clearly supports Maranci's hypothesis regarding the ritual circumambulation of the church space and its ritualistic meaning, and one can only imagine this type of liturgical practice taking place at many other churches. Maranci further concretises this experience by analysing a number of exterior reliefs, explaining how they 'played a dynamic role in the experience of the spectator' (p. 22). For example, the relief above the north portal at the church at Mren (c. 630) clearly depicts a liturgical act – two men flank a processional cross, one swings a censer – and is located above the door through which consecration ceremonies would process in and out of the church. The mimicry of the scene does not stop at the symbolic level, rather together with the epigraphic and liturgical evidence, a scene such as these points to a memorialisation of the act in stone.

Maranci's essay foregrounds a critical factor regarding medieval performance and the phenomenal experience of beholders: namely, the mediation of images, a topic a number of other authors embrace. Richard Emerson, for instance, provides a critical reading of the relationship between viewer/reader and manuscript in his analysis of scenes of the life of Saint John in the so-called Trinity Apocalypse from c. 1255 to 1260 (Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.16.2). In particular, Emerson demonstrates how 'performance' need not be public (though he speculates whether this and other analogous texts were read in social settings). In a particularly nuanced staging of

John's life through framing devices, 'performative' signage or *tituli*, and gesture, which all 'direct the eyes' of the viewer/reader, the miniaturist visually differentiated John's life from other figures, providing an exemplary model for the viewer/reader to follow in their own life. This theme resonates through many of the essays: one purpose of medieval performances, broadly defined, was for the edification of a specific audience. Pamela Sheingorn, Beverly Mayne Kienzle, and Carolyn Muessig – all elaborate this notion in their essays, a notion which is old hat in medieval studies: that images and liturgical performances were didactic. However, the authors in this volume revitalise these ideas by putting to use modern performance theory in effective ways. Emerson reaches his conclusion by reading the visual cues in the illuminations through the lens of Richard Schechner's concept of 'twice-behaved behaviour'. In Schechner's view a representation 'never shows actual behavior as it is being behaved', but rather 'restored behavior' – that is symbolic and reflexive behaviour that emphasises the repeatability or iterability of certain performances, gestures, and so on. For Emerson – and other essayist, in particular Gertsman in her own contribution – this understanding of 'twice-behaved behaviour', allows for undocumented and ephemeral visual or auditory performance to come to life, so to speak, through representation. In the Trinity Apocalypse, John's life is represented as 'a kind of ritual performance, a series of scripted and recurring actions' (p. 46).⁵

The notion that a viewer/reader would enliven themselves through an understanding of Saint John's life as a 'ritual performance', a performance worthy of repeating, points to a number of critical themes raised in this volume: first, how memory could be enriched by the repetition of ritual acts or ceremonies, be they communal or private, especially sacramental memory. Gertsman, for instance, foregrounds the repetitive nature of performance, Schechner's 'twice-behaved behaviour', to argue for a specifically somatic experience beholders had with Shrine Madonnas – statues of the Virgin Enthroned with Christ which split open to reveal painted and sculpted images, generally of Christ. Most of the year, these statues were placed on altars and closed, encouraging devotion to the Madonna as intercessor and mother. However, during special feasts days, they were utilised in liturgical and ceremonial rites related to the birth and death of Christ and inspired Eucharistic devotion based on movement: the opening and closing of the statue to reveal Christ, a type of birthing performance, forged a sacramental memory in the beholder: it was only during the performances, repeated annually, when beholders could witness the statue's insides and complete the story of the passion.

Gertsman's essay brings up the second important theme, namely how best to address the gaps between text and historical performance. In my view, and this is the view taken by most of the authors in this volume, this gap can effectively be closed by looking at the problem from different theoretical perspectives. Gertsman had to balance the fact that most Shrine Madonnas are no longer located in their original spaces: some have been destroyed, others

moved to museums, opened year long to reveal the depicted innards, and others, even if contained in their original location, lack a corresponding text explaining their precise use. However, by expertly weaving together the visual evidence with the few textual sources relating to Shrine Madonnas in general, she convincingly reconstructed a dynamic space in which beholder and object interacted; a space we can imagine occurring anywhere. This type of reconstruction is often necessary because, in Rebecca Zorach's words, 'we are left with objects, descriptions, depictions, and our impulse is to reconstruct, to reanimate the event... as a kind of Platonic idea' (pp. 223–4). Provided the theoretical arguments are balanced judiciously with historical evidence, and that we do not fall into the trap of idealising our version of the past, something Zorach warns against, medievalists can formulate what, in a brilliant turn of phrase, Kienzle calls an 'informed imagination' regarding past performances and relations between beholders and objects (p. 107). It is to Gertsman's and the authors of this volume's credit that they all reached such high standards in their contributions. As they collectively demonstrate, the notion of an 'informed imagination' as hermeneutic can reveal important operations regarding the self-hood and identity of medieval beholders in relation to images and performances and of ideological frameworks within which these operations occur.

Notes

1. See especially Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2002); Jacqueline E. Jung, 'The Tactile and the Visionary: Notes on the Place of Sculpture in the Medieval Religious Imagination', in Colum Hourihane (ed.), *Looking Beyond: Visions, Dreams, and Insights in Medieval Art & History* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2010): pp. 203–40; and Bissera Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (Penn State University Press: University Park, 2010).
2. Pavel Florensky, 'Reverse Perspective', in *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, trans. Wendy Salmond (Reaktion: London, 2002), p. 267.
3. See *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1948), pp. 13–14 and 30–35.
4. See especially Jacqueline E. Jung, 'Beyond the Barrier: The Unifying Role of the Choir Screen in Gothic Churches', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 82, 2000, pp. 622–57; and Sharon Gerstel (ed.), *Thresholds of the Sacred: Art Historical, Archaeological, Liturgical and Theological Views on Religious Screens, East and West* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2007).
5. See Richard Schechner, 'Restoration of Behavior', in *Between Theater & Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 35–116.

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Print and the Productivity of Death

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Christopher L.C.E. Witcombe, *Print Publishing in Sixteenth-Century Rome. Growth and Expansion, Rivalry and Murder* (Harvey Miller Publishers: London, 2008), 469 pp., 320 b&w illns., ISBN 9781905375141, 160

Christine Göttler, *Last Things. Art and the Religious Imagination in the Age of Reform* (Brepols: Turnhout, 2010), 437 pp., 156 b&w illns. 25 colour illns., ISBN 9782503523972, 130

The study of print and of print culture was once envisioned as coming together and contributing to each other's limitations. In the late 1980s, the work of Roger Chartier signalled a departure from the familiar divide between print as a new means of dissemination that increased access to texts and transformed European culture through the word, and print as a particular problem within art history, in which its status depended on overcoming associations with technology and reproduction.¹ Chartier argued not only for the necessary connection between object, reader, and institutions, but also for the importance of the production of meaning through readings that were contested, incomplete, and creative. By arguing that new kinds of actions and behaviours resulted from a new means of production, print culture opened up new opportunities for the reconsideration of images within art history as a whole. The advantage of studying images through the autonomous category of print is now less in evidence. Two recent books exemplify the diversity of purpose and methodology of studies that are nonetheless conjoined by their focus on printed materials. Christopher Witcombe's *Print Publishing in Sixteenth-Century Rome. Growth and Expansion, Rivalry and Murder* is a study of the publishing industry from the point of view of publishers and their production in one city over the course of one century. Christine Göttler's *Last Things. Art and the Religious Imagination in the Age of Reform* is a study of the remarkable transformation of the theme of the afterlife through the production and use of prints and other images of self examination. The first takes up a social network of production, especially the emergence, successes, and failures of individual business ventures; the other turns in on an inner self, but only to reveal the vast spaces, both pleasurable and dangerous, opened up by the visual imagination. Each of these books depends on a remarkable amount of archival research, but again towards very different ends. Witcombe's accumulates details from a vast array of the paperwork attached to early modern publishing houses and uses these to give the predictable cycle of beginnings and endings the appearance of unpredictability and intrigue. Göttler's marshals substantial and rich areas of research, drawing equally from German, English, and Italian sources, and follows unpredictable paths to form new connections and possibilities that informed the space of the imagination. In effect, *Print Publishing in Sixteenth-Century Rome* seeks to organise the voluminous and diverse materials that tend to accompany early modern print production into a coherent account, an aim exemplified by the reliance on chronological lists that turn complex relations into a clear sequence. *Last Things* follows many twists and turns, and attempts to interweave separate strands and forge unexpected connections but also reveals how these come apart or fail to connect in the first place.