

Rebecca BLOCKSOME

## Image, Essence, Reality: Abstraction and Representation in Mediæval Art

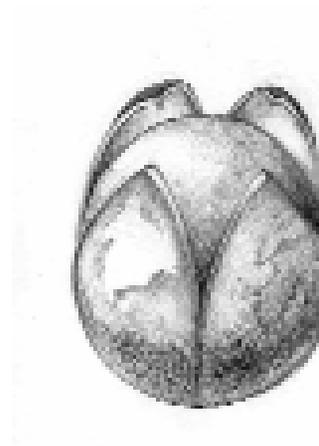
*Wandering through the halls of mediæval art collections in Central Europe and elsewhere, we might marvel at the liberties artists took with their renderings of the natural world—bodies morph into elongated forms with over- or undersize appendages; architectural elements shrink and recede into space with no consistent perspective; lines dissolve into patterns and light radiates from impossible sources.*

*Of course, in the modern era of “art for art’s sake,” such liberties are no longer anything to marvel at. Art now regularly departs from naturalistic depictions, to the extent that mediæval deviations seem slight in comparison. The autonomy of art from nature is a well-established principle, and we no longer necessarily expect a dependant relationship between ‘depiction’ and ‘depicted’—if indeed those categories still have meaning.*

*But if we are not too conditioned by the past hundred-odd years of art history to remember that historically, representation was considered the prime function of art, we well might puzzle about how artists in the Middle Ages came up with such ‘modern’ formulations a thousand years ahead of their time. How was mediæval imagery freed from the bonds of nature and reality?*

### Nature/Reality

This conundrum is especially compelling if we take into consideration that art in the mediæval era had a very narrowly defined role. Its purpose was wholly didactic in nature—to instruct and inform the masses, specifically in the realm of things spiritual. The Church’s complete domination over all aspects of



life ensured that the value of art, as of any human endeavour, was measured solely with respect to its furtherance of the Reign of God.

Clearly, no “frivolous” or un-edifying art would officially be tolerated in this atmosphere; and furthermore, artistic expression as a whole was taking on an unprecedented importance and seriousness as the Church assimilated the idea of God’s incarnation as a sanctifying act in the tangible world.

Early Christian writers such as CYRUS of Jerusalem suggested that in a broader interpretation of the incarnation, God is revealed throughout the whole of Creation, not merely in the person of Jesus Christ or in humankind in general. This opened the door to a new respect for the physical environment—“What had once been inaudible would now be heard; what had once been invisible could now be seen.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> FRANK Georgia, *The Pilgrim’s Gaze in the Age before Icons*. In NELSON Robert S. (ed.), *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance*. Cambridge, 2000. 102.

But then, how shall we explain the apparent contradiction between an official philosophy of respect for the natural world, and an official art which rejects naturalism? It seems clear that the mediæval understanding of naturalism differed somehow from our own, so that an abstract style of art was not incompatible with an accent on material reality.

The paradox was succinctly laid out by Byzantine scholar Cyril MANGO in his 1963 work, *Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder*: “Our own appreciation of Byzantine art stems largely from the fact that this art is not naturalistic; yet the Byzantines themselves, judging by their extant statements, regarded it as being highly naturalistic and as being directly in the tradition of PHIDIAS, APHELLES, and ZEUXIS.”<sup>2</sup>

MANGO, however, overlooked a key point: the Byzantines had no such category as ‘naturalistic.’ They described their art as ‘life-like,’ in terms relating it not to nature but to reality.<sup>3</sup> Although the two terms have become essentially synonymous in the modern era, by following the train of mediæval philosophy we can understand their conception of reality, allowing us to draw a fruitful distinction between the two.

## Seeing Is Believing

According to early mediæval epistemology, corporeal things—the things of this world—have no meaningful existence in and of themselves, but rather serve merely as indicators of the Divine.<sup>4</sup>

As John Scotus ERIGENA wrote in his IX<sup>th</sup>-century treatise, *On the Division of Nature*: “In my judgment, there is nothing among visible and corporeal things which does not signify something incorporeal and intelligible.”<sup>5</sup>

This should not, however, be interpreted as a de-emphasis of the importance of material reality. Quite the contrary; mediæval philosophers and theologians realised that it was only through our thoughtful experience of our tangible environment that we could ever hope to gain awareness of the supernatural things which constitute ultimate reality.

<sup>2</sup> NELSON Robert S., *To Say and to See: Ekphrasis and Vision in Byzantium*. In NELSON, 143–144. “MANGO’s paradox,” as it has come to be known, refers specifically to Byzantine art; yet his comments can be more broadly interpreted as referring to the entire genre of mediæval art. While the degree and variety of abstraction differed between the empires of Rome and Byzantium, abstraction in the sense of non-pictorial representation remains a defining characteristic of mediæval art when taken as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* / <sup>4</sup> HAHN Cynthia, *Visio Dei: Changes in Medieval Visuality*. In NELSON, 178.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Eco Umberto, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. London, 1986. 57.

Particularly the visual environment played a leading role in this process of supernatural awareness; as indeed, sight occupied the position of prime importance among the five senses beginning in Hellenistic times. The Jewish philosopher, PHILO of Alexandria, wrote then: “Special precedence must be given to the sight, for God made it the queen of the other senses and ... has associated it most closely with the soul.”<sup>6</sup>

By mediæval times, visual experience was clearly established in the culture as the crucial element in cognition. Knowing proceeded by imaging—verbal information could not be directly comprehended until “mental pictures” were formed and stored away in the mind. In fact, in the writings of the Church father St. Thomas AQUINAS, *visio* is treated as an equivalent term to *apprehensio*.<sup>7</sup>

Further elaborating this idea, the Polish natural philosopher Erazm Ciolek WITTELO in 1270 sketched out two kinds of visual perception in his *De Perspectiva*: the grasp of visible forms through intuition (direct perception) alone—“seeing” in the most basic sense; and the perception through intuition with preceding knowledge—a combination of visible sensation plus memory plus imagination plus reason.<sup>8</sup>

It is this second type of perception that most concerned the mediævals as they pursued their quest for the *visio Dei*, the vision of God. The question of how exactly this process worked—how seeing an image on an altarpiece could give insight into the nature of God—was one of the major problems which preoccupied philosopher–theologians throughout the Middle Ages; and their solutions to it shed some light on the specific development of mediæval imagery.

## Universal Questions

Simply stated, the dilemma was: how can human beings conceive of universal entities, given that our experience is strictly limited to particular (i.e. tangible) entities? Known as the “problem of universals,” this question actually arose from PLATO; but it took on a special urgency for mediæval philosophers, as many of the divine qualities with which they were most concerned—e.g. *being*, *unity*, *goodness*, *truth*—were universal in nature.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in FRANK, 106. / <sup>7</sup> Eco, 68–69. / <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

PLATO originally posited that universal entities have actual existence, eternal and independent from the (individual human) mind; he called these entities *Forms* or *Ideas*. Numerous mediæval thinkers recognised the potential of the Platonic concept of Forms/Ideas and embraced the theory of universals as *Divine Ideas* eternally existing in the mind of God.<sup>9</sup>

In one of the most prominent efforts to develop PLATO's *Ideas*, St. AUGUSTINE of Hippo proposed a doctrine of *Divine illumination*, which stated that knowledge of universals was impossible based on direct experience; therefore, our only knowledge of Divine Ideas could come from a supernatural revelation by the grace of God. This conception, however, tended to strongly de-emphasise the natural world; thus St. Thomas AQUINAS developed a counter-theory, that of *abstraction*.<sup>10</sup>

AQUINAS, who was influenced by ARISTOTLE's critique of PLATO's ideas, further elaborated the theory of the capability of human intellect to process information acquired by the senses. The specific act of processing necessary for universal cognizance—that of recognising and extracting the essence of a thing, of separating in the mind what cannot be separated in reality—is abstraction.<sup>11</sup>

These two theories of abstraction and Divine illumination set up the framework for all other mediæval philosophers tackling this question; but they were considered rather as two endpoints on a continuum than as two antithetical positions. By the end of the XIII<sup>th</sup> century, the Thomistic–Aristotelian view seemed to be prevailing, and abstraction was solidly established as the mode of perceiving the universal in the particular.

Thenceforth the argument shifted from whether or not abstraction occurs to various aspects of *how* it occurs, particularly discussions about what exactly the universals abstracted are, what part they play in constituting knowledge, and how they factor into the encoding and communication of knowledge through the medium of language.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> KIJMA Gyula, *The Medieval Problem of Universals*. In ZALTA Edward N. (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. 2004. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2004/entries/universals-medieval>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* / <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* / <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* / <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* / <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> SPADE Paul Vincent, *Thoughts, Words and Things: An Introduction to Late Mediæval Logic and Semantic Theory*. 2002. 63–66. [http://www.pvspade.com/Logic/docs/thoughts1\\_1a.pdf](http://www.pvspade.com/Logic/docs/thoughts1_1a.pdf)

## Semiotics and Significance

It was the philosopher Peter ABÆLARD (PETRUS ABÆLARDUS) who first explicitly added language into the problem of universals. In his XII<sup>th</sup>-century *Logica Ingredientibus*, he speculates that according to ARISTOTLE's definition of a universal—that which can be predicated of several things—the only truly existing universals are, in fact, *words*. This recognition broadened the scope of enquiry, from the relationship between mind and reality; to the relationships between mind, *language* and reality.<sup>13</sup>

From the original source for this argument, ARISTOTLE's *On Interpretation*, he notes that words have meaning only to the extent that they signify concepts in the mind; thus a *semantic* aspect is added into the equation. A whole new set of issues arose with this addition, centring on the mode(s) of signification—what the relationship is between a word and its meaning, the thing it 'represents'.<sup>14</sup>

Strictly speaking, the word *significatio* to mediæval readers did not mean “meaning”; rather, it meant “to establish the understanding of a thing,” and even more specifically, to establish the understanding of a thing which was not itself. In other words, a sign signified that which it brought into mind *other than the direct impression it itself made on the senses*.<sup>15</sup> Thus a possible link was established between the intangible world of universals and the mundane everyday world of particulars, mediated through language in the act of representing something other than itself.

Complex relationships were charted, e.g. by the French philosopher John BURIDAN, between written language, spoken language, universal concepts, and particular things. Generally it took the form that the written word *human* immediately signified the spoken word *human*, which in turn immediately signified the universal concept *human*. Only this universal concept *human* could immediately signify an actual (physically existing) *human*.

Thus the written word *human* or spoken word *human* could only signify a particular actual human through an act of mediate signification, moving first through the universal concept of *human*. The important point is this: in mediæval thought, each and every sign primarily signifies not other actual entities (particulars), but rather universal concepts, which then in turn signify particulars. Between the sign of a thing, then, and the thing itself, there are always at least two steps.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–71.

In practical terms this means, at least so far as language is concerned, that there was no such thing as a direct representation of nature. Words were neither intended nor perceived as principally evoking the ephemera of the material world; they were conceived primarily as a means of communicating—and therefore in some sense embodying or manifesting—the otherwise incomprehensible world of abstractions.

## Images as Words

Although it might not appear so at first glance, this insight into the mediæval conception of signs and signification, as operative in language, is invaluable to our examination of the nature of mediæval imagery. To be more precise, exact parallels can be drawn between words and images as signifiers, because the mediæval mind conceived of them as *one and the same*. Surprising as this conclusion may seem, there is ample evidence to back it up. Mediæval art historian Michael CAMILLE remarks:

“Optics and semantics were intimately associated in both theory and practice, in models and in making images. Seeing and reading, within the theoretical system described here, are presented as synonymous. This is the most radical idea for art history, that our dichotomies of ‘text and image,’ ‘word and image,’ even our bifurcated semiotics, is based upon thinking that would have been alien to the XIV<sup>th</sup> century, when seeing and reading were part of the same bodily operation, involving perception and cognition in the search for knowledge.”<sup>17</sup>

It is already a well-known trope that the elaborate scenes painted inside mediæval churches served as a “Bible for the illiterate.” The term “literature of the laity” (*laicorum literatura*) first appears in the *Gemma Anima* from the XII<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> It is, however, generally understood in the most simplistic terms—that the images depict scenes from Bible stories, thereby allowing pious viewers to acquaint themselves with the content of those stories, even if they could not read the words on a printed page.

There could, though, be another understanding of this phrase—that the pictures served the same function as the words of the Bible did, because they *stood in the same relation* to ultimate

<sup>17</sup> CAMILLE Michael, *Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing*. In NELSON, 216.

<sup>18</sup> Possibly by HONORIUS of Autun. In CARRUTHERS Mary J., *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. Cambridge, 1990. 222.

reality. If the pictures were meant to be ‘read’ in the same way that the words of the Bible were read, they should bring to mind the universal concepts or Divine Ideas which underpin all of Creation, rather than focusing attention on Creation herself.

Some indication of this is given already in the writings of Pope GREGORY the Great in the late VI<sup>th</sup> century. He maintained that letters (*literatura*) are signs of sounds, which in turn signify things, just as we have seen above. But he goes further to assert that images are a form of *literatura* as well; and he even provides support for this idea by noting that manuscript scribes are commonly listed as painters, proving the artisans themselves made no distinction between the two.<sup>19</sup>

Gilbert CRISPIN, the Abbot of Westminster, confirmed the textual function of imagery and took the argument even a step further, in his XI<sup>th</sup> century writings. Like Pope GREGORY the Great, he conceived of letters as signs of spoken words. But instead of pictures being simple substitutes for letters, he understood images as signs of writing—in other words, adding yet another abstraction into the chain: *picture—written word—spoken word—universal concept—particular object*.<sup>20</sup>

By this understanding, the important thing was not so much the content of the pictures, as it was their *signifying function*. As long as they were able to mediate between the human mind and the Divine Ideas, their representation of physical reality was secondary. It was understood by creator and viewer alike that the images were to serve only as a starting point, for visual perception to spark the mental processes leading to cognition.

## Memory and (Re)presentation

Returning to WITELLO’s description of higher perception, any act of cognition is constituted by visible sensation plus memory plus imagination plus reason. Having analysed the first and last ingredients in this mixture—visible sensation as the catalyst, and reason as the ultimate process of abstraction from particular to universal—we turn now to the intermediate steps in the process.

While clearly the mere sight of an element in the visible world made a strong sensory impact, particularly to a culture which placed such an emphasis on vision as the primary sense, the true

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 224. / <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

impact of an image was felt beyond the level of direct perception, at the point where it intersected with memory. Memory likewise was considered a “sense” of crucial importance in mediæval culture, and it played a central role in the process of cognition.

As words and images were identified with each other in mediæval thought, so too were the associated processes of reading and picturing. They were both understood as rhetorical activities which referred directly not to objects but to texts and were thus subject to the human memorative processes of reading and composition. The first component, reading, was subdivided into two phases: *lectio*, the direct presentation of the text; and *meditatio*, the creation of a representation of the text in the memory.<sup>21</sup>

According to the concomitant theory of representation, signs do not reproduce an entity in the objective sense; but rather they make it present to the mind by acting on the memory. The Latin word *repræsentare* derives from *præsens*, meaning “present in time.” Thus representation was understood not as mimetic, but as temporal—it made the perceived object literally present by recalling it into the mind.<sup>22</sup> Engraved there, the image could continually serve as a basis for *meditatio*—“not ... as a reminiscence, but as a constitutive force of character.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus the primary requirement for a representative image, a *depiction*, was not that it should somehow bolster the memory by supplying an accurate likeness of the depicted object existing independently of the mind, which was limited by its human frailties; and of the object itself, which was limited by its temporality. Instead, a depiction’s sole requisite was that it should evoke the depicted object in the memory, giving it *real existence* in the mind of the viewer.

As images, though, primarily depicted not so much objects as concepts—abstract entities with no tangible, perceivable existence—they could not take on a universally normative form. Rather, they were exemplary, constructed to embody one specific conception (the artist’s) from which the viewer-reader could develop a variety of associations to make it personal.<sup>24</sup> In this way the second component of remembering, *composition*, came into play.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* / <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> HAIN, 177. / <sup>24</sup> CARRUTHERS, 234.

## Imaginative Analysis

Composition is the point where the viewer-reader changes from a passive to an active role. Beyond the simple absorption of material from an outside source, composition requires that the perceiver become the author, creating a personal representation of the material either in the mind (memory)—or, as in the case of writers and artists, in another tangible expression, a creation, which itself then entered the world of physical reality as an object to be perceived.

In this sense, composition is equivalent to *imagination*, the third ingredient in WITTELO’s account of higher perception. The act of imagination—literally, the making of an image—is the act in which the perceiver departs from the image provided to her or him and constructs a new one, based on but not identical to the one which she or he has already perceived. In other words, the act of imagining necessitates the active mental engagement of the viewer—a prerequisite for the process of abstraction.

Significantly, this act of construction proceeds from a prior act of *deconstruction*, occurring in the *meditatio* phase—the analysis of the thing being represented into its constituent parts, in order to recognise those which are essential and those which are accidental. More than a mere distillation process, this deconstructing-to-construct serves to doubly engrave the object-concept on the memory in both the acts of analysis and synthesis.

Upon completion of the analytical phase, the *accidental* elements—those which belong to the particular existence of an object, such as its size, shape, colour, etc.—can be discarded, while the *essential* elements—those belonging to its universal nature—must be retained and incorporated into the new image synthesised by the imagination, in order for the representation to be true.

Thus the mediæval understanding of imagery and imagination was simultaneously emancipative and restrictive. On the one hand, it was tremendously liberating as it legitimised artists’ personal “visions” of reality due to the crucial act of imagination; but on the other, images were still bound by the necessary correlation between image and essence—a relation divinely established, and therefore not only impermissible but also impossible to violate.

Art, though, was also limited by another criterion, universally acknowledged at the time: the need for art to be didactic, to teach or to edify its viewers in some way. So the challenge for mediæval artists, then, was how best to combine these freedoms and limitations inherent to their art, in order to create images of a type which would most benefit human understanding of the Divine.

### Reality in the Abstract

In order for viewers to comprehend the Divine Ideas underlying all of reality, a corresponding act of the imagination was necessary in them, whereby they recognised the essences signified by elements of their visual environment and created *personal* analogous images in their own minds. It was necessary to remind them, through imagery, that the things they saw were not ends unto themselves, but rather indicators of a higher truth.

Abstraction—the deliberate distortion of natural phenomena into “non-naturalistic” imagery—perfectly fitted this requirement; thus it took root and flourished as the predominant style in mediæval art. As it emphasised the falsity of all things visual, it pointed to the non-temporal and intangible entities which constituted ultimate reality. Thus, paradoxically, *ambiguity became the clearest method of communicating truth*; the falseness of art proved its existential relation with the falseness of nature.

Interestingly, though, to some degree both art and nature had equal roles as testimonials to the Divine, as all things corporeal were considered indicators of the incorporeal. *Art and nature, fundamentally, stood in exactly the same relationship to reality*. In fact, it would seem that images created by human artists were actually at a disadvantage, as they were products of mere mortal imagination, while nature existed by virtue of, and in, the imagination of God.

Indeed, mediæval artists recognised this precedence of nature; this is why their abstractive tendencies were carefully moderated and never fully developed into a non-objective art with no reference to reality—even though theoretically this should have been possible, as the critical value of images resided not in their subject matter, but in the thought processes they evoked.

But images produced by humans also had an advantage the

naturally-occurring images did not: they could be manipulated to emphasise certain aspects, making obvious whichever divine truths the artist particularly wanted to focus attention on, according to the specific sensibilities of the human mind. They had the advantage of being fresh, new and individual, contrasted with the timelessness and objectivity of nature.

And while timelessness and objectivity are perhaps more suitable to signifying the eternally existing Divine Ideas, subjectivity and temporality—re-presentation in the present moment—in the same way can be conceived as being a more suitable medium for those truths to be transmitted to humans, who share the same “limitations.”

In this way the qualities inherent to both art and nature could be understood and respected; relationships of opposition and dominance could be redefined, so that there was no longer a question of autonomy by one or the other, but only the acknowledgement of their varied and complex interrelationships in mutual subservience to the Ultimate Reality of God.

#### Suggested Reading

CARRUTHERS Mary J., *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. Cambridge, 1990.

ECO Umberto, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*. London, 1986.

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Rebecca BLOCKSOME graduated in 2002 with a degree in art from Fort Hays State University, Hays, Kansas, U.S.A. She currently lives and works in Budapest, Hungary, as the coordinator of the WSCF Central European Subregion (CESR) and the publications intern for the Europe Region. She is an editor of *Student World and Mosaic*. She is American Baptist; her email address is [rblocksome@yahoo.com](mailto:rblocksome@yahoo.com).