



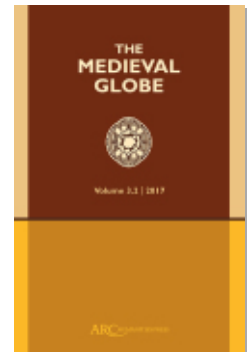
PROJECT MUSE®

Editor's Introduction: A World within Worlds?

Christina Normore

The Medieval Globe, Volume 3, Issue 2, 2017, pp. 1-10 (Article)

Published by Arc Humanities Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/758483>

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: A WORLD WITHIN WORLDS? REASSESSING THE GLOBAL TURN IN MEDIEVAL ART HISTORY

CHRISTINA NORMORE

If you would search [this volume] diligently, you will discover within it whatsoever kinds and mixtures of diverse colors Greece has; whatsoever techniques in enamel or varieties of niello Rus' knows; whatsoever work Arabia distinguishes by hammering, casting or intaglio; whatsoever of diverse vessels or gems or bones Italy adorns by sculpture with gold; whatsoever France loves in its precious variety of windows; whatsoever fine work ingenious Germany praises in gold, silver, copper, iron, woods and stones.¹

LIKELY WRITING FROM within the monastic walls of a Benedictine monastery in the Rhineland, the early twelfth-century author who chose to be known by the Greek pseudonym Theophilus imagined a world of art that was simultaneously distant and close to hand.² Geographically, he ranges from the Ukraine to Italy, France to the eastern Mediterranean; materially, he moves from wood to gold, bone to stained glass. Each region has its specialties, which differ from each other in kind, but not in quality. At the same time, Theophilus shows no interest in traversing the distances between these varied areas, understanding their differing ways or even collecting their signature products. Earlier in his prologue, he urges his reader to value things according to their merits rather than their pedigrees, and to prefer the local whenever possible: "If common vines were to produce myrrh, frankincense, and balsam for you ... is it possible that you would despise them as cheap and homely, and travel lands and seas to procure foreign things that are not better but possibly worse? This you would judge to be great

1 Theophilus, *De Diversis Artibus*, 4 (my translation). "Quam si diligentius perscruteris, illic inuenies quicquid in diuersorum colorum generibus et mixturis habet Graecia, quicquid in electrorum operositate seu nigelli uarietate nouit Ruscia, quicquid ductili uel fusili seu interasili opera distinguit Arabia, quicquid in uasorum diuersitate seu gemmarum ossiumue sculptura auro decorat Italia, quicquid in fenestrarum pretiosa uarietate diligit Francia, quicquid in auri, argenti, cupri et ferri lignorum lapidumque subtilitate sollers laudat Germania."

2 On the identity of Theophilus (with reference to previous literature), see Gerhaert, *Theophilus*, 3–7.

stupidity.³ Rather than indulge in such silliness, Theophilus suggests, the reader would be better off reading and implementing his own technical synthesis, conveniently located close to hand in the text that follows. His seemingly global interests are, ultimately, mustered in service of highly local claims to importance and expertise.

The mixed messages within Theophilus's prologue find echoes in the ways that art historians account for his world and its arts today. As one of the few surviving twelfth-century treatises on art making, Theophilus's text is a familiar source to most specialists in what is usually called, with any geographic qualifiers, medieval art history: that is, scholarship focused on Europe in the years stretching from the collapse of the Roman Empire to the late fifteenth century. Artistic production from within the borders of the modern nations of England, France, and Germany have traditionally been heavily privileged in this field; yet ever since the formation of the discipline in the late nineteenth century, a steady stream of scholars has drawn attention to wider artistic networks formed by pilgrimage, diplomacy, and conquest. Indeed, for some, such networks were fundamental to forming medieval art, its various styles, and iconographic forms.⁴ Similar, although not identical, patterns can be seen in the historiography of other subfields, such as Byzantine art history and African archaeology, which engage with the same temporal span and some of the same geographical areas.⁵

As was the case for Theophilus, the intent of early art historical studies was less to break down divisions, or treat all corners on equal terms, than to assert the importance of the scholar's own region of specialization. Like modern economic systems that assign greater value to sites of manufacture than to sources of raw materials, the teleology of these accounts often resulted in ascribing the most compelling invention, novelty, or synthetic skill to a single culture. True competency in multiple art historical subfields remains a rarity to this day, and conversations among practitioners are hampered by both the depth of knowledge required

3 Theophilus, *De Diversis Artibus*, 3. "Quod si tibi arbusta uilia myrram, thus et balsama producerent ... numquid his contemptis tanquam uilibus et domesticis ad extranea nec meliora sed fortassis uiliora comparanda circuire terras et maria? Et hoc te iudice grandis foret stultia."

4 For early examples, see Strzygowski, *Orient oder Rom*; Porter, *Romanesque Sculpture*.

5 For a historiographic review of the role of intercultural exchange in studies of Byzantine art, see Walker, *Emperor and the World*, 14–19. On the shifting debates surrounding cultural influence in sub-Saharan archaeology and their political implications, see Stahl, "Africa in the World."

to demonstrate field expertise and the different methodological approaches and assumptions that shape these subdisciplinary boundaries.⁶

This collection in *The Medieval Globe* grew out of an initial attempt to begin to consider the challenges of true cross-subfield research amongst art historians, as well as the potential gains of making such connections. Ironically, given its collaborative goals, it had its origins in a moment of division. In the spring of 2014, several of its contributors and I participated in “an interdisciplinary conference of new work in the fields of Byzantine, Islamic, and European medieval art history” whose stated aim was to “explore the disciplinary and interdisciplinary situation and stakes of the field.”⁷ In keeping with this ecumenical intent, the thematically organized panels were carefully structured to include work from multiple specializations. Yet it soon became clear that this seemingly united spirit of inquiry was at best an uneasy one. A real tension was already implicit in the language of the abstract, with its slippage between the avowedly separate “fields of Byzantine, Islamic, and European medieval” and the “stakes of the field.” After I had made a comment in a group discussion about the role of art historians teaching in smaller schools in which they are often the only medievalist, I was gently taken to task by colleagues in Byzantine and Islamic art history, who reminded me that their specialties are even less commonly represented—even in major research institutions. My weak defence—that I had been counting all the specialties represented at the conference as “medieval”—only increased their dissatisfaction: each insisted that her field was emphatically not “medieval.” Further discussions with others in all three of these subfields quickly revealed a wide range of views on our shared but divisive predicament, ranging from fears about the loss of area expertise (as specialists in one field began to teach and publish on others) to vociferous insistence that medieval art history had an obligation to broaden its purview.

Is there a field of medieval art history beyond (Christian) Europe? Should there be? The external pressure to produce such a field is clear, as job postings and funding agencies insistently declare their desire for global or cross-cultural research. But what is the place of the global in a time before sustained trans-Pacific

6 This has particularly hampered attempts to describe connections between regions with differing types and quantities of textual documentation. For a useful discussion of the problem in history more generally, see Feierman, “African Histories.”

7 “Medieval Art History after the Interdisciplinary Turn,” organized by Danielle Joyner and Aden Kumler at the University of Notre Dame, 27–29 March 2014: <http://artdept.nd.edu/news-and-events/events/2014/03/27/17078-medieval-art-history-after-the-interdisciplinary-turn/> [accessed 20 July 2017].

or trans-Atlantic interaction? What constitutes a “culture” and how exactly should we go about crossing it? And whose categories should be used to frame such investigations?

The papers gathered here stem from a two-day conference directed towards considering such problems, held at Northwestern University in June of 2015. It was made possible by Mellon Foundation funds awarded to my colleague Barbara Newman, who generously donated them to the larger medieval community at Northwestern. At her request the conference was explicitly framed as an attempt to foster dialogue among early career scholars, defined as those at the postdoctoral, assistant professor, or recently tenured level. The participants were trained in a range of art historical subfields but shared a sustained research interest in borders, exchanges, and conflicts between and within communities in the eastern hemisphere of the globe. The selection of scholars with this variety of expertise was deliberate, but hardly exhaustive of the possibilities: the absence of specialists in Indian Ocean and Baltic studies are only the most obvious of the many lacunae.⁸ While not defensible or desirable, such gaps reveal larger structural problems that hobble collaborative projects such as this one. Some of these have to do with training and funding. For example, the comparatively higher representation of scholars specializing in contacts within the Mediterranean basin and along the Silk Roads is reflective of the current priorities of academic art history in North America, which favours these two exchange routes as synecdoches for the larger problem of cross-cultural interaction.⁹ Other problems stem from the lack of sustained communication among art historians working in different subfields, which results in divisions that are importantly personal as well as informational. Groups of collaborators are inevitably limited by the organizer’s own networks: who is asked and who is willing to respond are twin factors that shape research in ways that have more to do with individual relationships than is usually acknowledged. Forging these contacts and bonds across current institutional divides is an integral part of the ongoing affective as well as intellectual work that collaboration requires; if we are to engage in truly honest exchanges, these must go beyond the superficial rhetoric of professional networking in order to forge the sustainable communities of mutual respect and understanding that will be vital to the future of this type of inquiry.

⁸ An article by another important contributor to this conference, Eric Ramírez-Weaver, will appear in a future issue of *The Medieval Globe*.

⁹ For example, the Getty Foundation Connecting Art Histories initiative will only award funding to research in three areas: Asia, the “Greater Mediterranean,” and Latin America. See www.getty.edu/foundation/initiatives/current/cah/cah_grantsawarded.html [accessed 31 August 2017].

Conference participants were given a deliberately vague brief: to engage, however they wished, with the idea of “reassessing the global turn in medieval art history.” Despite the pleas of many, no further direction was provided. Rather than dictate a program of research, my goal was to elicit a range of current approaches, aspirations, and concerns. It was in part for this reason that I chose to use the laden terms *medieval* and *global* in the formulation of the prompt. Periodization always entails an assertion that certain criteria are more decisive than others, whether these are political, religious, or environmental.¹⁰ However, the persistent (and justifiably resented) privileging of Western materials in art history make the use of categories like *medieval* and *modern* particularly fraught in the context of collaborative work across subfields today. The term *medieval* is further complicated by the troubled relationship between colonial power and the construction of the medieval as a historiographic category.¹¹ While simply supplying a date range, such as 300–1450 CE, might seem more innocuous, I felt it was important to confront the logic that would govern those dates head on. Though they might constitute a coherent epoch for western European and even Byzantine studies, these dates make little sense to scholars in other subfields. The fourth century has no special significance for Islamicists, who follow earlier Islamic chroniclers by marking a fundamental societal change at the time of Quranic revelation in the mid-seventh century;¹² nor is it particularly useful for the art histories of Asia or sub-Saharan Africa. End points erect similar barriers to cross-subdisciplinary cooperation. Scholars of Islamic and Byzantine history traditionally place great emphasis on the mid-thirteenth century as a moment of cultural rupture, just at the time when the conventional narratives of Western art history chart a smoothly continuous development of High Gothic style. Chinese specialists often place the break even earlier, noting that the advanced societal structure of the Song dynasty more closely resembles early modern than medieval Europe. Medieval, then, must remain a term to be interrogated.

In using *global* rather than the seemingly more generic *cross-cultural* I had three goals. First, following the lead of Alicia Walker, I wanted to foreground the issues raised by actual connections among geographically diverse groups, issues implied by the term *globalism*.¹³ Second, I wanted to provoke contributors to consider how the connections they had uncovered might compare to interactions deemed more characteristic of the years after 1492, since post-Columbian

10 Bentley, “Cross-Cultural Interaction,” 749–51.

11 Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*.

12 Donner, “Periodization as a Tool of the Historian,” 29. My thanks to Bilha Moor for alerting me to this article.

13 Walker, “Globalism.”

exchanges are regularly claimed to be not only more extensive but also fundamentally different in kind from those of the ancient or medieval worlds. Third, I remain uneasy about the terms *culture* and *cultural* as they are currently used in relation to this period; all too often, both are conflated with confessional affiliations (“cross-cultural” is often used interchangeably with “interfaith”) or anachronistically fixed national identities. While there are textual precedents for the assertion of such identities in the period—notably in the treatise of Theophilus with which I began—the material evidence of most concern to art historians regularly transgresses these supposed national and confessional divides.¹⁴

The contributors’ replies to these challenges, gathered here, offer a set of overlapping and (at times) competing approaches and visions that range from case studies to historiographic reflections. Each author sees value in viewing their materials in a global context, albeit to varying degrees. Despite their differences, the authors are united in their interest in *global* as a body of theoretical concepts and questions and their shared insistence on the necessity of retaining a sense of the local within the global. Indeed, most prioritize the local as the place where meanings and things are made, remade, and even refused. As such, they broadly share an approach that resonates with the work of scholars such as James Clifford and Arjun Appadurai, who have stressed the productive imbrication of multiple places and identities in any single site or community’s unending work of cultural formation.¹⁵

In addition to these theoretical challenges, practical needs have also shaped the following discussions. In order to include as many perspectives as possible in the space available, these essays are shorter than is typical of most specialized journals devoted to the subfields represented here. Moreover, in keeping with *The Medieval Globe’s* interdisciplinary scope, the authors have been asked to limit discussion of internal art historical debates within these subfields. These compromises are intended to make these essays broadly accessible, not only to art historians unfamiliar with the complex historiography of a given subfield, but also to any interested reader. There will never be a substitute for deeply informed scholarship, but there is an equal need for collaboration and mutual intelligibility.

In “A Camel’s Pace” Bonnie Cheng reflects on the global turn from her vantage point as a scholar of fifth- and sixth-century tomb art in what is now China. While critical of the ways in which Western art historians have deployed a stereotyped

14 The well-known similarities among objects produced in multiple locales along trade routes and at courts have led to theories of regional visual languages and elite cultures: see, for example, Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability.”

15 For example, Appadurai, “Production of Locality”; Clifford, “Traveling Cultures.”

China in their efforts to construct a world art history, she nevertheless sees the global turn as a useful occasion for reconsidering the ways in which nationalist discourses continue to reshape Chinese art history to a distorting effect. A similarly uneasy relationship to global discourses and approaches animates the essay that follows. Jennifer Pruitt's "The Fatimid Holy City" nuances the traditional view of Jerusalem as a world city, largely shaped by global concerns, by drawing attention to the importance of the Fatimid Empire's internal politics, as well as relations between local communities, in shaping imperial patronage within the city.

The following pair of essays trace networks of exchange rather than focusing on a single site or artifact. Cecily Hilsdale's "Worldliness in Byzantium and Beyond" considers how the concept of "worlding" might help to explicate the ways in which different societies translated the story of Barlaam and Ioasaph while constructing their own moral and material worlds with reference to that ubiquitous tale. Sarah Guérin tackles the difficult challenge of reconstructing the local desires that fuelled the interlocking trade routes from the forest regions of West Africa to northern Europe. In "Exchange of Sacrifices," she synthesizes the evidence of recent archaeological discoveries, revealing the diverse systems of value that rendered exchanges of ivory, gold, and copper mutually beneficial.

Renewed attention to the portable, precious objects once marginalized as the "decorative arts" has been a notable feature of the global turn, and it informs the remaining contributions to this collection. Alicia Walker's study of "The Beryozovo Cup" considers how the mixture of formal and iconographic elements usually associated with separate courtly traditions combine within a single drinking vessel, and how it might have been viewed and used by the varied audiences that mingled at Byzantine diplomatic dinners. In "Mobile Meanings," Heather Badamo examines the shared culture of violence and display evoked by the similarly mixed artistic forms of a ceremonial sword and sheath, whose meanings would have been equally intelligible to both Christian and Muslim elites. In "Global Medieval at the 'End of the Silk Road,'" Jun Hu considers a collection of many such precious objects, drawn from throughout Eurasia and housed in the Shōsō-in collection at the Tōdai-ji Monastery in Nara, Japan. While modern interpretations of the collection are dominated by nationalist and internationalist ideologies, Hu argues that its eighth-century formation and dedication must be understood as resulting from the entanglement of global networks (of faith, trade, and diplomacy) with local, even individual, soteriological and emotional concerns. In a final response, the early modern European specialists Jessica Keating and Lia Markey reconsider the validity of the division between the medieval and the early modern—frequently dated to 1492 and the emergence of the trans-Atlantic world—and the relationship between scholarship on the medieval and early modern eras today.

Considered together, these essays do not (and cannot) present a unified account of the thousand years they span, nor do they offer a set of universally applicable methods of the kind sought by many theorists of a world (art) history.¹⁶ To date, no such theory or narrative has gained significant traction, and perhaps for good reason. One of the great strengths of art history as a discipline is the sustained attention that it gives to individual objects and buildings as independent statements of human creativity and contemplation that are made and received within specific political, economic, and social contexts, but never wholly reducible to outside determinants. This care for specific cases alongside general trends opens up space to consider not only dominant narratives but also roads not taken, and to acknowledge shifting meanings as messages are encoded and decoded by individuals with varied life experiences. Rather than hunger for the sense of closure that an imagined, unified world might provide, all scholars of the medieval globe must think seriously about how our changing fields can embrace contingency and contestation, as much as intentions and traditions, as we continue to explore that world and the evidence that remains to us.

16 Recent considerations of this problem include Summers, *Real Spaces*; Onians, *The Atlas*; Elkins, *Is Art History Global?*; Carrier, *A World Art History*.

Bibliography

- Appadurai, Arjun. "The Production of Locality." In *Counterworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*, edited by Richard Fardon, 208–29. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Bentley, Jerry. "Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History." *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 749–70.
- Carrier, David. *A World Art History and Its Objects*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008.
- Clifford, James. "Traveling Cultures." In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 17–41. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Davis, Kathleen. *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Donner, Fred. "Periodization as a Tool of the Historian with Special Reference to Islamic History." *Der Islam* 91 (2014): 20–36.
- Elkins, James. *Is Art History Global?* New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Feierman, Steven. "African Histories and the Dissolution of World History." In *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities*, edited by Robert H. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Barr, 167–212. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Gerhaert, Heidi. *Theophilus and the Theory and Practice of Medieval Art*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.
- Hoffman, Eva. "Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century." *Art History* 24 (2001): 17–50.
- Onians, John. *The Atlas of World Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Porter, Arthur Kingsley. *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*. Boston: Marshall Jones, 1923.
- Stahl, Ann. "Africa in the World: (Re)centering African History through Archaeology." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 70 (2014): 5–33.
- Strzygowski, Josef. *Orient oder Rom: Beiträge zur Geschichte der spatantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst*. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs Buchhandlung, 1901.
- Summers, David. *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*. London: Phaidon Press, 2003.
- Theophilus, *De Diversis Artibus*. Edited and translated by C. R. Dodwell. London: Thomas Nelson, 1987.
- Walker, Alicia. *The Emperor and the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- . "Globalism." *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 183–96.

Christina Normore (c-normore@northwestern.edu) is an associate professor of medieval art history at Northwestern University. Her research centres on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century northwestern Europe, particularly the Valois Burgundian court. Her work is united by a concern with how medieval objects and aesthetic practices challenge current methodologies and reshape our understanding of period and geographical divisions.

Abstract This collection in *The Medieval Globe* aims to reassess the so-called global turn in medieval art history. Study of the migration of motifs, materials, personnel, and finished objects has a long pedigree within medieval art history, while the broadening attention to material culture has likewise been an integral factor in reshaping the current conception of a more interconnected medieval world. Yet despite these developments, numerous important problems remain to be addressed. In addition to debates concerning the concept of “the global,” these include the challenges to traditional art historical narratives, specializations, and scholarly training posed by the much more complex picture of Eurasian and African cross-cultural connections which has begun to emerge. Moreover, while these challenges affect Byzantine, Islamic, western European, and East Asian art histories alike, there has as yet been little sustained conversation among those working in these fields. Drawing together articles by specialists actively engaged in the reassessment of medieval art and material culture in a global context, this thematic issue features examples of cutting-edge scholarship and offers a starting point for future dialogues and cross-cultural research projects. This introduction describes the stakes and circumstances of *Reassessing the Global Turn in Medieval Art History* and offers a brief summary of its contents.

Keywords global turn, medieval art, periodization, historiography, interdisciplinary collaboration