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*The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*. Edited by Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison. London: Routledge, 2018. Pp. xxiv + 393.

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*The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* joins a growing list of scholarly books dedicated to the examination of material culture in the study of early Christianity. The book is divided into two sections: Part I, Media, and Part II, Themes. The lion's share of the book (Part I, fifteen chapters) deals with varying forms of media such as paintings, sarcophagi, mosaics, gems, textiles, silver and so forth; the remaining seven chapters (Part II) consider different themes such as how artworks function in ritual settings or artworks that address matters of identity. The book opens with an overview of early Christian art by noted theologian and art historian, Robin M. Jensen, which briefly discusses many of the media (textiles, silver, paintings etc.) taken up in greater depth by the contributors.

Part I opens with Norbert Zimmermann's "Catacomb Painting and the Rise of Christian Iconography in Funerary Art" (Chapter 2). Rome has roughly around 70 catacombs to date and 150 kilometers of catacomb galleries, which contain some of the most impressive early Christian funerary art such that found in the Via Latina catacomb. In his article, Zimmermann explores the developing role of catacomb art in both the pre- and post-Constantinian period. Christian art, or that which can specifically be called Christian as its provenance is often ambiguous, did not exist prior to the end of the second century, after which Christian art began to flourish in cemeteries.

Chapter 3 "Christian Sarcophagi from Rome," by Jutta Dresken-Weiland, remains in the funerary context but with special attention given to sarcophagi in Rome. Although a later arrival than

catacomb paintings, sarcophagi are important to the study of early Christianity partly because they survive in such large numbers and therefore provide a wide sample from which to examine the change in iconography. In Chapter 4, “Early Christian Sarcophagi Outside of Rome,” Guntram Koch examines the production of sarcophagi primarily from the East while noting the difference between those produced in Rome and those produced in Constantinople, for example. One of the main distinctions between the East and the West was that in Rome images on sarcophagi tended to be crowded, almost as if they were squeezed into the limited space, whereas in Constantinople only one theme was shown, with few persons, allowing for greater negative space.

Heidi J. Hornik’s, “Freestanding Sculpture” (Chapter 5), considers sculptures from 200–400 CE that were specifically Christian. The purpose of these objects was to aid the viewer in prayer and contemplation of the biblical narrative. Since the subjects depicted were often vague in their meaning, they were meant to be understood in relation to the text. Hornik cites four marble sculptures of Jonah. Although the function of the figures is still contested, it is possible they were commissioned by a wealthy Christian and formed a fountain in a domestic garden, spaces where meals were taken as well as the “focal point for piety in a variety of forms” (77).

Chapter 6 “Christian Wall Mosaics and the Creation of Sacred Space,” by Sean V. Leatherbury, examines the medium of wall mosaics, which were produced in large quantities in the early fourth century. Leatherbury notes that the rise in popularity of wall mosaics was in response to Constantine’s legalization of the Christian religion, which sparked the construction of monumental basilicas in the Roman Empire. These new interior spaces were adorned with decorative mosaics for the Christian liturgy. Chapter

7, “Christian Floor Mosaics: Modes of Study and Potential Meanings,” continues with the medium of mosaics but focuses on floor mosaics. Rina Talgam notes that floor mosaics are modest in their design when compared with wall mosaics. The artists who created floor mosaics possibly adopted a more limited selection of images since floors were where one walked. Talgam’s main focus is on mosaics that adorn religious structures and included themes such as floral patterns, animals, vines, crosses, or Noah’s ark surrounded with animals, but rarely human figures.

Chapter 8 by Susan Walker, “Gold-Glass in Late Antiquity,” looks at the significance of gold-glass found in pagan, Jewish, and Christian burial sites. Gold-glass vessels were typically given to the dead while gold-glass medallions and broken vessel bases were used as grave markers. One of the more interesting aspects of gold-glass is its use for burial portraits that were so exceptional in their design they rival the painted mummy-portraits from Egypt. Walker notes that although gold-glass medallions functioned as grave markers, they did not function as self-representation since they were not commissioned by the deceased.

Next, Jeffrey Spier looks at gems and amulets in “Engraved Gems and Amulets” (Chapter 9). According to Spier, the earliest Christian examples can be dated to the first half of the third century and as late as 500 CE. Gems, typically set in rings, were often used as personal seals that identified the individual or their religious beliefs. Aside from personal decoration, they were also used to seal documents and packages. Early engraved gems included inscriptions as well as symbols such as the fish, anchor, or the Good Shepherd. Although gems saw a decline after the middle of the third century, production was revived during the reign of Constantine and his son Constantius II.

In Chapter 10, “Reliquaries and the Cult of Relics in late Antiquity,” Erik Thunø discusses the importance of reliquaries for

the circulation and protection of relics. Thunø gives priority to the West since it provides the most abundant evidence, both written and material. Relics were of great spiritual value because even a simple bone or cloth from a martyr or saint was thought to be the same as if it was the actual martyr or saint, making them objects of devotion with great healing power. That such importance was placed on relics often meant they were placed in elaborate reliquaries with pictorial programs showing the power of God – for example, the Brescia casket made out of ivory was decorated with Old and New Testament scenes.

Chapter 11 “Ceramics in the Early Christian World,” by John J. Herrman and Annewies van den Hoek, looks at pottery not only for its abundance but also because it can provide invaluable evidence of daily life, especially of the artistic culture of early Christianity. Ceramics taken up by Herrman and van den Hoek include lamps, bowls, platters and amphorae. In Chapter 12, “Panel Painting and Early Christian Icons,” Katherine Marsengill focuses on the origins of Christian icons in Greco-Roman panel painting. These paintings are interesting as many of them are dedicated to portraiture, and, according to Marsengill, are where icons originated. Like many other materials discussed in this book, panel paintings are often found in Christian tombs where family and friends gathered to venerate the portrait of the deceased. The main source of panel painting comes from Egypt’s mummy portraits, which date to the first through third centuries. Panel paintings differed from other frescoes found in tombs or houses in that they were portable.

The next three chapters (13, 14, 15) examine ivories, textiles and silver. In Chapter 13, “Christian Ivories: Containment, Manipulation, and the Creation of Meaning,” Niamh Bhalla looks at ivory as medium for Christian art on pyxides, reliquaries, diptychs and book covers. The appeal of ivory was for its

durability, creamy white colour, and brilliance. Many Christian objects made out of ivory contained sacred objects such as the eucharist or sacred scripture. Chapter 14, “Textiles: The Emergence of a Christian Identity in Cloth,” examines a range of textiles, from simple textiles with geometric patterns to more complicated images which included icons of the Virgin and Child. The range of uses for textiles included curtains, cushions, and altar cloths for clergy. As with many mediums, such as ivory, silver, or frescoes, textiles signaled status. As a result, many early Christians used gold thread, silk, and rich dyes to decorate their homes or churches. Chapter 15, “Early Christian Silver: Sacred and Domestic,” focuses on artworks including chalices, dishes, spoons, lamps, and patens. Silver, like ivory, was popular among the wealthy as a marker of social status. Christians used silver for a variety of reasons. In churches silver vessels were utilized for administering communion and silver could be attached to walls and furniture function as a form of support. In the domestic sphere, silver spoons decorated with a chi-rho monogram were discovered in the fourth century.

In Chapter 16, “Early Christian Illuminated Manuscripts” – the last in Part I – Dorothy Verkerk examines a variety of illuminated manuscripts covering the Old Testament, the New Testament, secular books dealing with herbs, as well as Latin literary classics. The codices were often produced for wealthy Christians to help align them with Church teachings. According to Verkerk, the wealth and desire of the patron had a significant role in the production of the manuscript, thus suggesting that there was no set outcome for the book should look.

Part II opens with Chapter 17 – “Early Christian Art and Ritual” – by Michael Peppard, which considers the effects of ritual participation in artistic programs. Building on the work of Jás Elsner, Peppard notes that ritual processes prepared the viewer to “enact visual exegesis in typological, allegorical, and other

distinctly theological modes” (278). Context, he notes, plays an important role in interpreting the image as it influences the viewers’ understanding of the image. For example, Noah coming out of a box-like ark is often found in funerary settings and is thus interpreted as Noah being rescued from death.

Chapter 18, “Picturing the Passion,” by Felicity Harley-McGowan, describes the artistic expression of the Passion from the third to fifth century. Prior to the second century there are no known images of Jesus. Those images that began to appear in the third century were mostly concerned with Jesus as a teacher and healer, but not his passion. After the “conversion” of Constantine in the early fourth century, the artistic representation of Jesus’ passion garnered more interest from both the private and public spheres.

Chapter 19 by Lee M. Jefferson, “Miracles and Art,” focuses on the mediums and the categories of miracles that were depicted in early Christian art. According to Jefferson, miracle scenes – including healing scenes such as the healing of the paralytic and the raising of Lazarus, as well as nature miracles such as the changing of water into wine – provided comfort as well as education to the faithful who gazed upon them. Jefferson, however, neglects to point out the difference between miracles found in the synoptics and signs found in the Gospel of John, a distinction which might have affected how the viewer interacted with the images.

Mark D. Ellison’s essay, “‘Secular’ Portraits, Identity, and Christianization of the Roman Household” (Chapter 20), shows how Christian art of the third and fourth centuries contained portraits of individuals, couples and families. Secular portraits not only expressed social and religious identity, but also defined practices concerning marriage and familial relations. Pagan Roman portraits often featured the couple holding hands (*dextrarum iunctio*). The inclusion of Christian imagery in

portraiture provides a lens through which to view the Christianization of the Roman household.

The essay by Deborah Maukopf Deliyannis, “The Mosaics of Ravenna,” assesses the importance of Ravenna’s mosaics in the development of early Christian art. Ravenna has one of the largest collections of mosaics from the fifth and sixth centuries. This collection is significant not only because of its size, but also because Ravenna had cultural links with Constantinople and the East, which, for the city’s artists and architects, provided exposure to a wide range of styles. All of Ravenna’s extant mosaics are found in Christian religious buildings, with the picture of Christ being the most commonly depicted figure.

In Chapter 22, “Early Christian Art and Archeology in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Rome,” Janet Huskinson investigates the reuse of early Christian art in later centuries, focusing on marble sarcophagi. An example cited by Huskinson is the re-appropriation of sarcophagi from St. Peter’s basilica in Rome. During the construction of the new basilica many of the existing Christian burials were demolished in and around the old church, revealing a large number of sarcophagi. According to Antonio Bosio (1575–1629), the first Italian scholar to systematically study the catacombs, some were reused as tombs for leading clerics, while others went to private museums, houses, or the palazzi of cardinals and Roman nobility. According to Huskinson, the main impetus of the Church’s reuse of Christian antiquities was to counter Protestant claims that “religious images were products of later Catholic idolatry” (373). The re-discovery of catacomb art was significant to the Catholic argument that early Christians too utilized religious art.

In many academic books written on the subject of early Christian art, the tendency is to use terms such as “art”

or “Christian” without explaining their precise meaning or application. This is understandable, yet, as is demonstrated by the essay by Robert Couzin entitled “Early” “Christian” “Art,” these terms, when taken together, are not as self-evident as many would assume. There were many intersections between groups that render a precise definition, particularly in the early period, rather challenging (but not impossible). Couzin maintains that the most effective way to determine the religious identity of an object is “directly proportional to the complexity of its iconography” (387).

This collection of essays flows nicely from one essay to the next, often linking each chapter together. Its diversity of materials and themes will be beneficial to lay readers as well as textual scholars who are wary of venturing into the material world. For seasoned scholars teaching in the area of art and archeology, this handbook will be essential reading in the classroom. No book, however, is perfect. Art is meant to be gazed upon, with the expectation that this act of gazing will reveal the meaning behind the artwork. We want to let our eyes drift lazily over colours, lines, and shapes. As all gazing requires an embodied “gazer,” it would be helpful if the volume examined the gender of looking. Sadly, gender and the gaze are not addressed in this collection. Lastly, a note of contention with the book is the lack of colour images. While this reviewer understands that colour prints are expensive, a few colour plates would have been a wonderful addition to this collection of essays since much of the detail and brilliance is lost in the black and white photos.