

Book Reviews

Imagining the Divine: Exploring Art in Religions of Late Antiquity Across Eurasia. Edited by Jaś Elsner and Rachel Wood. London: British Museum, 2021. Pp. 200.

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Recent scholarship has begun to recognize the importance of material objects in the study of antiquity. No longer understood as “minor marginal notes” fated only to bolster textual sources, material objects are now understood as primary sources in their own right. *Imagining the Divine: Exploring Art in Religions of Late Antiquity Across Eurasia* is a book that addresses the importance of material objects, as it draws attention to the “materializations of religion in manufactured forms” (1). One of the book’s main objectives is to dispel the notion that the history of religions across Eurasia during late antiquity was dominated by a text-based theology. By shifting the focus from text-based evidence to material culture, the authors in this collection of essays focus on how “objects, visual culture and archeology” (1) create religious experience and construct religious space, whether it be, for example, the framing elements that decorate the body such as grapes (Platt) or the Buddha’s footprints (Elsner).

From October 2017 to February 2018, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, U.K. ran an exhibition titled *Imagining the Divine: Art and the Rise of World Religions*. The idea behind the exhibit was to highlight how religions across Eurasia “defined their religious identities through the creation of new kinds of imagery” (1). The new imagery, whether it be objects or sacred spaces, was not created in isolated environments but emerged as religions competed and contrasted with one another. The success of the exhibition

prompted a series of lectures and a major conference from which the papers in this volume were drawn.

The book has nine chapters, each of which is followed by a two-to-five-page response. The editors, Jaś Elsner and Rachel Wood, begin by providing a brief but comprehensive introduction that orientates the reader to the importance of studying images and objects for the “construction and experience of religion” (4), as well as outlining the specific contributions of each author. Elsner and Wood note that despite the title *Imagining the Divine*, the focus was to remain on the “analysis of things” (3) as opposed to a revelatory or visionary experience. Both authors acknowledge the limitations of this tapered approach, stressing “the enormous range of a field that this volume only begins to touch on” (3).

In chapter one, “The Materiality of the Divine: Aniconism, Iconoclasm and Iconography,” Salvatore Settis focuses on the complicated relationship between the level of the written word and images. He outlines how the reception of each, word and image, is often dependent on the antinomy between the word/image, levels of literacy, and how effective words or images can reference the divine prototype. Drawing attention to the complicated aspect of viewing the divine, Settis highlights how even the aniconic nature of writing can visually reference the divine by transforming words into images. This idea of “emphasized absence” (17), whereby the presence of God can be signalled in non-human form such as writing, an empty throne, or footprints, is taken up by Maria Lidova in her response to Settis. Lidova notes the importance of ritual and its role in evoking the presence of the divine, particularly when the god was not visually represented. A shift in ritual activity and viewer participation took place, however, once images of gods began to appear in temples.

In chapter two, “Bodies, Bases and Borders: Framing the Divine in Greco-Roman Antiquity,” Verity Platt parses the divine body, examining each of the elements that act as a frame around the

figure – elements in her mind that are all too easily dismissed as being supplemental. In doing so, Platt hopes to show how “‘parergonal’ elements that adorn the body turn out to be fundamental” (29) to the function of the statue, and when unpacked and read together, elements such as grapes, drapery, or a shield, shed light on the “theology of the sacred in antiquity” (19). In his response to Platt, Dominic Dalglish briefly extends Platt’s discussion by looking at the relationship between the “bodies of gods and the place and status of ‘idols’ for the existence of the divine” (38). Bringing gods to life and providing a space in which to contemplate them, he notes, differs depending on whether a god was depicted in a painting, in a dramatic performance, or gods in iconic form. It was this iconic form that was a central aspect of the exhibition.

Chapter three consists of two parts. The first, by Katherine Ross – “Comparing Material Texts” – serves as an introduction to the second part, “Kufa and Kells: The Illuminated Word as Sign and Presence in the Seventh-Ninth Centuries,” by U. Bongianino and B.C. Tilghman. While noting the importance of an “art-historical comparison [for] our understanding of 1st millennium religion” (41), Ross raises an interesting question regarding the performative value of the written word in society and how people interacted with it. She suggests that engaging in such questions would further broaden the investigation around the function of the “religious word as an object of study” that is equal to that of images of the divine (42). Applying a comparative art-historical approach, Bongianino and Tilghman investigate the manuscript traditions of Christianity and Islam between the seventh and ninth centuries. Rather than focus specifically on what these two traditions have in common, the authors examine the historical and ideological differences that underline the “superficial similarities of the two traditions” (45). For example, both traditions are similar in the way that they treat and use holy writ, yet they differ in format; the Qur’ān is often positioned horizontally,

while Christian page forms an upright rectangle format. A key aspect that emerged from this discussion was the complicated matter of how each tradition displayed its own notion of the divine in material form and, consequently, each tradition necessitates its own examination.

It has long been held by scholars that the Jewish tradition refrained from depicting God in anthropomorphic form. The fourth chapter, “The Jewish Image of God in Late Antiquity” by Martin Goodman, challenges this notion, suggesting that the image of the Helios figure found on the floor in Palestinian synagogues might represent the Jewish God. His claim is bolstered by the location of the figure in a place of worship, a space which lends itself to reading the image as the Jewish God. Hindy Najman’s and Jaś Elsner’s response attempts to push back the boundaries that Goodman challenges in his article. Rather than focus solely on the Helios god, the authors are interested in examining the various elements that are incorporated into floor mosaics, noting that none of the imagery is fixed in its meaning. Their examination challenges Goodman’s “triumphalist narrative” that it was the Jewish God depicted in these mosaics that viewers gazed upon.

In chapter five, “Empire and Faith: The Heterotopian Space of the Franks Casket,” Catherine E. Karkov discusses the elusive Franks casket from eighth century Northumbria. Although little is known of its origin or function, Karkov maintains that the casket discloses the lives of people, cultures, and religion in a way that presents a myriad of readings. Viewing the casket through a heterotopian lens is helpful she maintains, as it allows for multiple narratives to exist simultaneously without privileging one belief system or culture above the other. Katherine Cross responds to Karkov’s paper by addressing the perplexing history of the casket. Briefly outlining the deconstructive and reconstructive aspects of its development, she suggests that Karkov’s way forward is best suited

as there is no one single definition, no one single reading that sums up the meaning of the casket.

Returning to the idea of “emphasized absence” in chapter six, “Buddhapada: The Enlightened Being and the Limits of Representation at Amarāvātī,” Jaś Elsner examines the motif of the Buddha’s feet, which evokes the presence of the Buddha himself. Elsner is attentive to the way images reflect religious life “through their uses of the visual discourses they appropriated” (96). A fascinating point made by Elsner involves the direction of the Buddhapada and the implications for the viewer. The feet, he claims, are always depicted downwards at Amarāvātī, in a position which allows the viewer to engage “face-to-face” with the Buddha, presenting them with a visual theophany and defining the feet as a kind of surreal icon. Alice Casalini, in her response to Elsner’s paper, addresses the surrounding space in which the Buddhapada are found. She notes that more analysis is needed regarding the positionality of the feet since different viewpoints create different encounters and play an important role in viewer participation.

Chapter seven, “From Serapis to Christ to the Caliph: Faces as Re-Appropriation of the Past,” authors Ivan Foletti and Katharina Meinecke investigate the evolution of the bearded face and the standing male figure of the pagans, early Christians, and the Umayyad caliphate. Foletti and Meinecke are primarily interested in exploring how these two image-types were appropriated and reconfigured over time in order to convey ideas of power and authority. Nadia Ali in her response is concerned that the authors have cast their net too narrow in their use of typological borrowings. She extends the authors’ conversation to include alternative typological scenes such as the iconography of the reclining figure in Coptic Nativity scenes contrasted with that of the Umayyad reclining figure, noting the striking similarities between the two.

In chapter eight, Richard Hobbs continues the idea of cross-cultural comparison in his article “Use of Decorative Silver Plate in Imperial Rome and Sasanian Iran.” Covering a period from the third to seventh century, from Rome to Byzantium to the Sasanian empire, he examines decorative silver plates and how these objects depict religious belief. Using domestic, religious/ritual and social/political ways of thinking, this chapter draws attention to the shared iconography and use of these objects between cultures along with the problems associated with a gap in the archaeological record. Rachel Wood, in her response, reinforces the problems raised by Hobbs, and in turn suggests we broaden our scope of enquiry to include the study of other media in conjunction with silver plates.

The final chapter by Christopher Uehlinger, “Material Religion in Comparative Perspective: How Different is BCE from CE?” addresses the artificial categories of BCE and CE. Uehlinger argues that the distinction between these two timelines is best expressed using material and visual culture since the exclusive use of text-based data often “distorts the historian’s perception of ancient religion” (155). In order to articulate this distinction, Uehlinger cautiously employs the comparison of Type 1 and Type 2 religions, noting that a complete distinction between these categories does not exist in real-world settings, as religious identities were not static and often blurred the boundaries between one another. Building on Uehlinger’s argument, Stefanie Lenk responds with an example of a baptistry at Cuicul in North Africa. By examining the archaeological evidence and the rites of purification, she maintains that this site shows examples of traits found in both T1 and T2 categories, thus reinforcing the fluidity of these two timelines.

“Imagining the Divine” is an impressive volume, covering a wide-ranging development and interpretation of the divine in late antiquity. Although it is relatively easy to read, it is more accessible for those who have had some introduction to visual studies. On a

minor but still important note, the book is printed on high-quality paper, which lends itself well to the colour images and allows readers to engage with the material more fully. It is a delight to see how material and visual culture is coming to the foreground in the academic study of religion. It is this reviewer's hope that more scholars will embrace the role of images in illuminating ancient religious traditions.