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Carlee A. Bradbury
Michelle Moseley-Christian
Editors

Gender, Otherness, and Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Art

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Editors
Carlee A. Bradbury
Department of Art
Radford University
Radford, VA, USA

Michelle Moseley-Christian
School of Visual Arts
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, VA, USA

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Preface

This project initially grew from a panel at the Southeastern College Art Association held in the fall of 2012 in Greensboro, North Carolina. The session was originally conceptualized as "Gender and Otherness in Medieval Art," but following response to a call for papers, it quickly expanded to embrace a related early modern scope of inquiry. The range of studies we encountered both at the conference and from the authors who later joined the project as it developed, underscored to us how rich and varied the scholarly terrain remained in terms of examining gender as a state of "otherness." Despite the continued scholarly interest in intersections of gender and otherness as fertile interpretive territory amongst the recent growth of other humanistic studies in this realm, there is a lacuna regarding gender and sex as a mode of difference using a material-focused approach.

Thus, we bring together a range of contributing authors who focus on close readings of medieval and early modern material and visual culture, alongside historical textual counterparts, as ways to facilitate a greater understanding of the varied nature of premodern masculinities and femininities. The diverse methodologies used in this volume speak to how scholars might unpack the meanings of various media—reliquaries, illuminated manuscripts, paintings, prints, and sculpture—by questioning the semiotic language of iconography, form, theme, and display as elements that contributed to the construction of material markers of culture, tracking the entangled intersections between makers, objects and audience with works that were made for a varied constellation of patrons or viewers.

The struggle to conform to, or confound, culturally prescribed identities has been explored in a number of recent volumes. Most contributions that address a range of ways in which difference is culturally articulated focus on an historical or literary approach that primarily interprets texts as the point of entry into a richer understanding of medieval and early modern culture. For example, the *Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* provides a series of critical structures that reveal how expansive, and necessary, gender has become as a framework for the study of premodern culture. Recent publications that investigate various aspects of social and cultural difference from other disciplinary angles, notably Katherine Allen Smith and Scott Wells' volume *Negotiating Community and Difference in Medieval Europe*, as well as Cordelia Beattie and Kristen Fenton's volume *Intersections of Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages* take up the question of how social place and faith guides the formation of gender identity in personal reflection and in the make up of religious community. Likewise, Marianna G. Muraveya and Raisa Maria Toivo's collection *Gender In Late Medieval And Early Modern Europe* analyzes how social marginalization can exert a powerful influence on public expressions of gender.

Research in these areas has given a greater voice to the role of community acceptance and exclusion as critical forces in structuring various sacred and secular identities through the Middle Ages. By anchoring our study in the realm of the visual world, this volume aims to illuminate concepts of gender, difference, community, and self as indices of cultural ideology. In considering the role of the individual within the community, we encounter the slippages between shifting definitions of premodern subjectivities that scholars continue to debate. Ronald Ganze's "Medieval Sense of Self" adds a new dimension to the ongoing discussion of an early modern emergence of the "self," and the conscious "self-fashioning" of individual identity proposed by Stephen Greenblatt presents obstacles to theorizing the role of the "other" within scholarly frameworks. In taking a cue from these key questions that articulate gender and sex difference as one path by which the "other" is manifested, the essays follow trajectories of continuity and change, and trace established visual traditions as they cede territory to new, experimental ways of visually communicating gender and difference as modalities of otherness. While each author explores a particular facet of medieval or early modern visual culture, they collectively coalesce around each object's inherent

materiality to contribute to a new way of envisioning, constructing, or reinforcing premodern gendered identity.

The variety of visual evidence that is considered in the essays here argues for a rethinking of objects as signifiers of gender difference that made an imprint on social inclusions and exclusions, national identity, physical appearance, religious ideology, legal authority, poverty, and piety. That is to say, our approach to visual culture is not a study of objects as passive receptacles for cultural context, rather, non-verbal works can, and should, be comprehended as full participants in the constant negotiation and renegotiation of gender constructs over centuries of historical change. This essay collection in its parts and as a whole seeks to give authority to the material artifact by exploring the multiplicity of cultural reference points that intersect in the visual world.

Radford, Virginia, USA — Carlee A. Bradbury
Blacksburg, Virginia, USA — Michelle Moseley-Christian

Notes

1. The origin of the topic, and the pairing of gender and otherness, grew from thinking about the role of gender in terms of Cohen's seminal piece on "Monster Theory (Seven Theses)."
2. Poska, Couchman and McIver, eds., *Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*.
3. Smith and Wells, eds., *Negotiating Community and Difference in Medieval Europe*. Beattie and Fenton, eds., *Intersections of Gender, Religion, and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages*.
4. A global perspective on race, gender and religion as a framework for otherness from Baghdad to the British Isles is surveyed in the collected essays from Farmer and Pasternack, eds., *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*. Literary criticism has likewise probed the contours of gender and otherness in a more targeted fashion that has focused on concerns within specific national boundaries in medieval and early modern texts.
5. See Ganze, "The Medieval Sense of Self," 102–116, including his critique of Stephen Greenblatt's influential notion of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Goffman's sociological work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* has influenced a number of early modern studies on the subject. See also Smith, *Masks of Wedlock: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Marriage Portraiture* and Chapman, *Rembrandt's Self-Portraits: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Identity*.

6. See, for example, Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory*; Kapferer, ed., *Images of Power and the Power of Images: Control, Ownership and Public Space*, 1–8; For a discussion of "non-verbal" modes of communication, see Molyneaux, ed., *The Cultural Life of Images: Visual Representation in Archaeology*, 1–9.

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This volume is the result of fruitful collaboration amongst a wide variety of people. We are so thankful to all of the contributors to this volume for their excellent essays and dedication to this project.

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Editors and Contributors

About the Editors

Carlee A. Bradbury is an Associate Professor in the Art Department at Radford University. She has published in *Norfolk Archaeology* and the *Medieval Feminist Forum*.

Michelle Moseley-Christian is an Associate Professor of Art History in the School of Visual Arts at Virginia Tech. She has published studies on gender and print culture in the early modern Netherlands in *Sixteenth Century Studies Journal*, *Word & Image*, *Home Cultures*, *Journal of Art Historiography*, along with essays in *The Uses of Excess in Visual and Material Culture, 1700–2010* (Ashgate, 2014) and *Mary Magdalene: Iconographical Studies from the Middle Ages to the Baroque* (Brill, 2012). She is currently completing the final stages of a book length project on representations of the "wild woman" in northern European early modern visual and material culture.

Contributors

Marian Bleeke is Associate Professor of Art History and Chair of the Department of Art and Design at Cleveland State University. Her previous scholarship has appeared in the journals *Art History, Different Visions, Woman's Art Journal*, and *Studies in Iconography*. Her first book

Motherhood and Meaning in Medieval Sculpture: Representations from France, c. 1100–1500, is forthcoming from Boydell and Brewer.

John R. Decker is Chair, Department of the History of Art and Design at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY. He is a specialist in fifteenth-and sixteenth-century Northern European art and culture. His research interests include identity formation and performance, lay piety, monasticism, civic organizations, and the complex of intersections between individuals and social/religious institutions. He is the author of *The Technology of Salvation and the Art of Geertgen tot Sint Jans* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009) and co-editor of *Death, Torture, and the Broken Body in European Art, 1300–1650* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015).

Beth Fischer is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of art history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Holly Flora is Associate Professor of Art History at Tulane University. Her publications include *The Devout Belief of the Imagination: the Paris Meditationes Vitae Christi and Female Franciscan Spirituality in Trecento Italy*. She is a recent recipient of the Rome Prize (2010–2011) and a fellowship at Villa I Tatti (2015–2016).

Jessen Kelly is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Utah. She is currently completing a book manuscript on the material culture of games of chance in the early modern Netherlands.

Sherry C.M. Lindquist (Ph.D., Art History, Northwestern University) is Associate Professor, Western Illinois University and Dorothy Kayser Hohenberg Chair of Excellence in Art History at the University of Memphis, 2017–2018. She has published *Agency, Visuality and Society at the Chartreuse de Champmol* (Ashgate, 2008), and *Meanings of Nudity in Medieval Art* (Ashgate, 2012), and edited special issues of journals on artistic identity (*Gesta*, 2002) and representations of female sexuality in medieval art (*Different Visions*, 2014). She has contributed articles to *Gesta, Studies in Iconography, Winterthur Portfolio, Different Visions* and numerous anthologies. She is co-curator, with Asa Mittman, of the exhibit *Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, and Wonders* at the Morgan Library and Museum, New York (2018) and the Cleveland Museum of Art (2019).

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