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Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks, and Shrouds (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0hg2d8nt>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 30(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

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Publication Date

1999-10-01

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

Robin Cormack, *Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks, and Shrouds* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd. 1997) 248 pp.; 22 full-page color images; many black and white images; chronology.

Robin Cormack's book presents the reader with a history of perhaps the most enigmatic art object, the Byzantine icon. Concluding that we can never really understand the Byzantine world through the contemplation of the icon, Cormack offers us a picture of the icon as death mask (164). Contrary to the title of the book, this mask does not cover something deceased but reveals itself as an object constructed for and interacting with its audience. It is this interaction, or the response of the viewer, which is the central interest of Cormack's book.

Cormack begins by acknowledging the early work on icons by Hugo Buchthal and David Talbot Rice, which has established a chronology based on stylistic analysis. With this information, it is now possible to move beyond the formal qualities of the image to look at the surrounding historical and social context of an icon. Cormack refutes Hans Belting's proposal that the icon is not art and shows that the viewer experiences the icon aesthetically, religiously, and politically (23). He remains very much attuned to the object itself, including its worn, scratched, or repainted surface and its size, weight, and mobility. These elements of an icon act, for Cormack, as evidence of the object's interaction with an audience more than as indicators of date, location of production, or patron. He uses traditional methods of dating and attribution to identify the complex community of viewers and their responses to the icon and examines the function of this complex art object, often using an anthropological approach which includes Orthodox culture's interaction with icons today and the placement and use of visual imagery within these communities. At the same time, he balances modern practice with medieval textual evidence from the Byzantine Empire.

Other recent studies on the Byzantine icon present a stylistic and formal analysis of the icon without looking at the surrounding issues of function and belief. Cormack approaches icons in an entirely new way; he talks little of style. He examines iconography, such as the Hodigitria and the image of Christ, as they relate to the use of the object and a Byzantine understanding of imagery and presents the complexity of icons, carefully peeling away layers of multiple (mis)understandings of these paintings. Throughout the text, Cormack returns to the period of iconoclasm. Rather than viewing these years (726–843) as a tremendous break in the chronological consistency of icon production, he uses the crisis as a sounding board for diverse and contrasting opinions about imagery and its use in Byzantine culture. As Cormack explores these connections to piety, government, and popular culture in the first three chapters, one is confronted with an overwhelming number of questions and the sense that each in turn could be explored more deeply in its own volume. The book's major questions, however, apply generally to the analysis of imagery from cultures distant from our own by space, time, and technology. How should we speak about icons (or art generally)? Where and how do we see icons/images? How were and are icons used? What were and are the public and private responses to religious art?

The book is organized along a somewhat biological/chronological format. Chapter titles, however, are not as informative as one would like. The first chapter, "Conception," lays out the questions Cormack would like to pose and sets up a methodological strategy for unfolding the multiplicity of an icon. The clear approach and constant criticism of the author's and our own twentieth-century perceptions and current display of the images is valuable and can be applied elsewhere in art-historical discourse. The second chapter, "Birth," continues the methodological examination and defines the slippery term that "icon" has become and its even more slippery place in the study of Western art history. Here, and throughout the book, Cormack offers specific examples as case-studies of specific concepts. He looks particularly at the Hodigitria icon and its symbolic function, including its relationship to theories about the origins of the icon. The following chapter, entitled "God/Man," investigates the development of the image of the Panagia (virgin) and of Christ. These first few chapters give the impression of a give and take between questions and visual examples. The information is at times overwhelming and, while presented with an eye towards clarity, the pace is choppy. The last two chapters, however, in which ideas are tied together, give the reader a sense of accomplishment.

The fourth chapter, "Maturity and Identity," returns to the life-cycle framework of the book. New media are introduced, including manuscript imagery. Two formative influences on the icon are discussed, the emperor and his court and the monk and his monastery. Again in this chapter, Cormack questions our perceptions of icons and the analysis of imagery through style by asking if a Byzantine viewer perceived changes in style at all. Skipping the paradigm of death altogether, chapter five brings us "Rebirth." Although what is reborn and why is not clear, this chapter is exceptionally informative and offers new insight into the study of Crete and its relationship to the Italian Renaissance and to Byzantium. The chapter is organized differently from the four previous chapters, beginning with an introduction to Byzantium post-1204 and the collapse of the empire after invasions by crusaders and the Ottomans. Cormack gives a brief historical introduction to Crete and argues that imagery from this island is representative of change in the development of the icon. First he discusses the production of icons and the introduction of known artists, including Angelos Akotantos, Theophan Grek, and El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). Next, Cormack addresses the problem of the viewer and the complex issue of multiculturalism on an island that is predominantly Orthodox and politically Venetian. Finally, he ends the chapter with scattered notes on objects from other mixed cultures, including the Crusader East and Ethiopia. Despite this fragmented conclusion, the chapter does include many of the book's issues, particularly in its application of viewer-response methodology to a multivalent artist such as El Greco.

The chapter breakdown is the most ineffective aspect of the text. The chapter titles reveal little about their contents, nor do they consistently follow the biological framework suggested. The most insistent question is, where is death? The title of the book and the chapter entitled "Rebirth" imply the demise of someone or something. Cormack, on the contrary, outlines for us the history of a living image, the Byzantine icon, an object with many functions and a complex body. Cormack shows us that the icon was a participant in religious,

social, and political circles, interacting with Byzantine society. He reveals these interactions by carefully examining textual evidence from the medieval period and the physical evidence of the objects themselves.

The references at the back are listed by chapter and are a great source of works, particularly those published in English, on topics within the text. The bibliography at the back is organized by year of publication, a brief and effective historiography of icon studies. The list of illustrations is detailed and informative. The helpful chronology will aid any reader unfamiliar (and many already familiar) with the long and complex history of the Byzantine period. Three sections of very clear, high-quality color images are included, along with a variety of quality black-and-white photographs placed throughout the text. The variety of these images is paralleled by the diverse quotes prefacing each chapter; the sources range from Umberto Eco to an obituary of a contemporary artist to Rudyard Kipling, once again underlining the diversity of audience and response to icons.

A history of the complex image of the icon is a formidable undertaking. Cormack has presented his study clearly and with ample definitions, making the book accessible to undergraduates, lay readers, and scholars. He has uncovered the icon as an object to be experienced, moved, even touched. The icon also documents its own use by its shape and state of preservation. While presenting many of the functions of the icon and many of the viewers' responses to the art object, Cormack has left the topic open-ended. Much still can be done in the study of the Byzantine icon. Comparatively little has been written on icons, and the material evidence continues to grow. The study of Byzantine icons has been marginalized by history and placed outside of a Western art history. In an effort to show Byzantium as an important part of the Middle Ages and Europe as a whole, Cormack has laid out for us a strategy, or at least a network of questions, for continued investigation into the world of the icon.

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