

The Rhetorical Occasions of Gothic Sculpture

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Lately I have become interested in medieval sculpture, a medium of art which seems to open up an unusually wide range of issues appropriate to the heroic scope, if not exactly the intellectual interests, of Sophus Bugge. My concern is not so much the medium itself, as the intellectual predicament of its study. In this lecture I have chosen to focus on Gothic sculpture, of which many fine examples survive in wood in Scandinavia and especially Norway.¹ My concerns will not be stylistic, iconographic or technical. Instead I will consider the agency of sculpture, how its function relates to its purpose, and how that purpose is social. To shed light on these matters I propose to consider rhetorical engagement.

My lecture proceeds from some premises which should be stated succinctly, and which have wider applicability. First, ideally the arts must be understood together. This of course makes demands, sometimes severe demands, on scholars whose training may favour specialized knowledge of one medium. Art forms may have different agency; but the arts, including architecture, are often in conversation, and we must try to get a grip on all of them. Experience and belief have taught me to be slightly sceptical about the older empiricist model which favoured media-based specialization, and so in effect analysis not synthesis. The arts I think were in their own way 'social', and the narrative of their development can be understood as a social narrative.

Second, in regard to sociability and engagement, the spectator, the audience and the context of encounter are key: we have in effect three agencies to work with. When literary theorists of the post-war era spoke of the rise of the reader and the 'death' of the author, they were not always being sympathetic to human authorship.

But the agency of art is only comprehensible in terms of human experience and engagement. Engagement is intellectually and emotionally active: it is not a matter simply of passive 'reception'. It means that audiences take a 'stance towards' an artefact, an attitude. This is an 'affect', and its underlying principles were derived in the Middle Ages from Aristotle and the rhetoricians. Importantly, that stance or affect

¹ Blindheim 2004; for a range of polychrome woodwork see Nadolny 2006.

necessarily operates within a situation which itself will have agency. I will explore the idea of the active agency of situations in terms of the idea of ‘occasion’.²

Thirdly, while the discipline of anthropology (understood broadly) has in the last generation or so transformed the study of medieval art as a functional art, it strikes me as philosophically valuable to separate, where possible, the function of an artefact from its purpose: means and ends are not always the same, and it is not clear that an account of the function of a work of art (let us say, for instance, an altarpiece), will necessarily account fully for its purpose. An object such as an altarpiece functions in order to bring something about. Amongst the purposes or ends of such artefacts is the creation of experience, even – and this has become fashionable once more – an experience of beauty which is both sensory (i.e. aesthetic) and intellectual. To this economy of means and ends, the materials from which artefacts were made were subject. Present-day theories of materiality may occasionally create the impression that material usage is an aspect of the purpose of artefacts, not their means; that, as Marshall McLuhan (an important voice in the development of this thinking), said, “the medium is the message”.³

I am not convinced by this type of materialist determinism. Indeed I don’t think of a ‘savage’, materialist or animist Middle Ages, but of a *rhetorical* Middle Ages. Rhetorical engagement by its nature is both mindful and aesthetic. Recent work on rhetoric and the arts has shown how knowledge in the Middle Ages was profoundly embodied; but that *embodiment* was not de-coupled from reason. Mind and body work *together* by experience to persuade. The word ‘persuade’ stems from the Latin *suavis* – to ‘sweeten’ (Carruthers 2013: 102). If we are persuaded we are sweetened, and it is the role of the persuader to use rhetorical technique, the agency of words or art, to bring about conviction. Conviction is a balanced confident state of belief – an idea feels ‘right’ and if so can be translated into an end such as judgement or action. This I call the ‘conviction purpose’ of art. This is significantly different from early modern and modern idea of the aesthetic based on the thinking of Immanuel Kant, as a form of disinterested contemplation of a thing for its own beauty rather than some ulterior end such as pleasure or utility. It is also a social, not an individual idea, because conviction is aided by agreement. What it does not necessarily require are modern ideas of personality, interiority and psychology. We recognize these, of course, but we see that historically they are different, and it is the recognition of that difference that marks out the historical approach.

² The best introduction to this is Carruthers 2013: 13–14, 102 for rhetorical occasion.

³ Explored in McLuhan 1964.

Occasion, monumentality and affect

Let me swiftly set the scene by laying out some key ideas more or less as conclusions. We all know that between 1050 and 1300 a building boom in church construction brought into being the giant sculpted church facade. In understanding Romanesque and Gothic Spain, France, Germany and England where such facades are plentiful, I stress first the role of public monumentality.⁴ The great church facades are public monuments, not occasions for personal psychological engagement. Important to this is the public and rhetorical notion of occasion itself. We now think of an 'occasion' as something like a special event, an occurrence. The practices of rhetoric took this idea of occasion to mean the context or purpose for saying or writing something: some things are best said when a particular occasion, in the sense of opportunity, arises. The occasion itself gives us a sense of what is right or opportune to say or write: it guides our sense of appropriateness, in other words decorum. A doorway, whether in a church facade or penetrating through a screen within it, bringing us into the presence of Christ and his witnesses, the saints and prophets, may well favour us or not, as we deserve. But the door, as an occasion, is not simply a threshold or *limen* marking out moments of human crisis or transformation but a starting-point for a process: a large portal in encountered and gets things and us 'going', and through its artificial surfaces, it directs and gestures.⁵ The extraordinary concentrations of figurative and ornamental art framing church doorways, whether at the stave churches at Urnes or Fåberg or at Chartres cathedral, use conscious displays of artifice to structure and direct the experience of confronting and entering a building: artifice itself possesses agency, the force that Alfred Gell called – not entirely helpfully – 'enchantment'.⁶

The difficulty with the idea of enchantment, understood historically, is that as a quasi-magical force it implies an overruling of mindfulness. This was exactly not the case with the ancient and medieval concept of monumentality. Isidore of Seville reminds us in writing of the word 'tomb' (*Etymologies* XV.xi) that a monument is so named because it 'admonishes the mind' (*mentem monere*) to remember the deceased person... Thus both 'monument' and 'memory' are so called from 'the admonition of the mind' (*mentis admonitio*).⁷ Such facades may stand before us four-square and showily ornate like a Roman gate. They may, as at Lincoln cathedral, actually emulate the dimensions and so grandeur of Roman triumphal arches. The fact that these fa-

⁴ For those unfamiliar with the range of the Gothic material see Williamson 1995.

⁵ I refer to the celebrated theory of 'liminality', Van Gennep 1960.

⁶ For which see Gell 1992.

⁷ I use the edition by Barney 2006: 313.



1. Stave church portal, Fåberg church, Gudbrandsdal (Oppland), 12th century
(© Kulturhistorisk museum, UiO, lisens CC BY-SA 4.0)

cedes, as at that at Amiens are so thickly populated reminds us too of the major Christian tradition of likening the Church as a whole to a celestial city, in the tradition of Augustine and Beatus of Liebana.



2. Amiens Cathedral, west front portals, begun 1220 (author)

The point about such visions is not simply that their physical presence is city-like: their entire imaginary is social. What is personal psychology and mood in the face of the *ecclesia militans* and *ecclesia triumphans*, or the *ecclesia celestis*? These are not private but public, even political, thoughts and ambitions experienced at all times and in all conditions, and in whatever mood we ourselves may be in. Portals affect and create a sense of expectation; they promise something; they propose a certain 'style'. But above all they work in the first instance in the public, not the private domain. Portals

are a form of *locus communis*, which is to say a form of argument applicable to many cases not just one (Rubinelli 2009).

It follows from an emphasis on monumentality that something may be amiss with the recent tendency, emerging in part from within the history of the emotions, to examine the mimetic feats of Gothic sculpture as models of empathy, as plotting 'inward' reaction (Jung 2006; 2013). The passions or affects are fundamental to the persuasive and human function of art – to repeat, an idea must *feel* right to convince – but there is room for scepticism about modern empathy theory and the essentially naturalistic model of the emotions and their expression which accompanies it. In my view – and I have only time now to assert this rather than set it out fully – portals dramatize and exemplify ethical choice, but do not choose for us. Medieval works of this type do not clamp down meaning or response, but direct us to think. They do not, because they cannot, engage in emotional diktat. Once we understand this directive, but not conclusive, role an extraordinary liberation of possibilities results, not least for an art form, the church portal, which has always been seen as the active



3. Erfurt Cathedral, north portals, c. 1330 (author)

programmatically transmitter of dogma and doctrine to passive audiences. The truth, I think, was more interesting, more transactional.

Take the Wise and Foolish Virgins carved around 1330 on the unusual triangular portal on the north side of Erfurt Cathedral (Lehmann 1988; Scieurie 1993–94). The two outer faces of the wedge-shaped structure have portals which can be seen simultaneously directly from the north.

We choose our path accordingly. The north-eastern portal has a Crucifixion, Virgin and Child and Apostles, all calm and decorous. In marked contrast the south-eastern portal has the Wise and Foolish Virgins, Ecclesia and Synagoga. The Foolish Virgins are a compendium of theatrical gesture with discomposed and downcast facial features, hands raised to cheeks in despair and arms flung up and wrung together.



4. Erfurt cathedral, Foolish Virgins with Synagoga, c. 1330 with later restorations (author)

The Wise Virgins with *Ecclesia* are contrasting models of complacency. This is obvious rhetorical *synkrisis*, which is to say the comparison of the best and the worst, brought home by amplification from the Vulgate terms for wise and foolish, *prudentes* and *fatuae* in Matthew 25:2. These qualities are made fully present aesthetically, mimetically, in the dispositions or *schemata* of the figures. They have a thrusting quality and hence, to some eyes perhaps, a sort of forwardness or vulgarity.

But the point is this: whatever emotional narrative we might attribute to these contrasting and eloquent images of order and dissolution, it is not entirely evident what we ourselves should feel towards them. Are we to feel warm empathy, or just satisfaction at the natural outcome of the harsh workings of God's justice and mercy? To my mind the history of the representation (i.e. the crafting) of emotion should not be confused with a modern naturalist or 'hydraulic' theory of emotions which sees them as spontaneous emanations. The basically aristotelian regime of emotional understanding most common at this time would have understood immediately that emotions are things to be rationally governed, constrained and crafted, thereby conceding not their naturalism but their artificiality.⁸ That is why the term 'affect', implying an active stance or attitude towards something, may be less misleading than the modern language of empathy. We might add – though moral philosophers seem to adopt different positions on this – that there is no necessary connection between exciting emotion in people and making them more fraternal, sororal or charitable: empathy, as opposed (say) to anger or admiration, is not necessarily a constitutive precondition for positive moral judgement.⁹

In short, these affects should not necessarily be judged by modern ideas of emotion or morality. Like artworks, the more sophisticated emotions are artificial, are educable dispositions. This belief underwrote some of the most powerful pastoral and educational techniques of the Middle Ages.¹⁰ Engagement with an artefact is thus the meeting of two agencies under the conditions of an occasion. The *figurae* are demonstrative guides, means of indicating, colours, which purposively engender affects, which incline or bend our intentions. They are demonstrative acts. That which is striking, attractive or human-seeming is deployed as a technique to produce and guide thinking and felt responses according to a path, a narrative of understanding in the light of *evidentia*. The end of this creation of sensation is not calculated arousal of feelings because emotions are 'activities' on the way to something else: they are not themselves the outcome. One possible outcome of such direction is change of mind: *metanoia*, or repentance. To consider the figuration of Gothic portals is to encounter something very like the movement of characters in the dramatic tradition of Japanese Noh plays or English medieval morality plays which possess a set of stock characters immediately recognizable to the audience.¹¹ To imagine that the *purpose* of

⁸ Fortenbaugh 2002; the literature on medieval emotions is large: Rosenwein 2002, 2006 for an introduction.

⁹ See for example Bloom 2017.

¹⁰ For Aristotle and the 13th-century pastoral regime of the church, Binski 2004.

¹¹ An analogy drawn from MacIntyre 1984: 27–31.

such figures is to be expressive or to engender emotion is to think Romantically, not rhetorically. By thinking rhetorically, too, we also concede that the meeting of the agencies of subject, object and situation is also precarious. It is for this reason that art experience and aesthetic effect are in the full sense of the word occasional rather than normative.

Representation and materiality

This brings me to representation. So far I have outlined a rhetorical, social and public model of engagement in order to shape a critique of modern Gothic emotivism. My interest is in the artificiality of art, not its naturalism. This is why I think we can move through sculpture to ponder other models of criticism. I have in mind especially the kind of thinking proposed by Caroline Bynum in her book on *Christian Materiality* written under the influence of Hans Belting (Bynum 2011: 15–123). Few scholars have done more than Professor Bynum to excite interest in and knowledge of the relationship between art and belief in the Middle Ages, and for this reason the weight of her opinion matters. Here, I sketch in only a few caveats, but they are important ones. First, in my view the underlying sympathy of *Christian Materiality* is animistic. It is inclined to the view that when medieval people saw a statue of the Virgin Mary they may often have believed it *was* the Virgin Mary. Second, it attributes agency to the ‘materiality’ of art. Third, it couples together the animist and materialist in order to argue that medieval art is not primarily rational, but embodied. It is not an art of illusion or representation, but of materialist substitution. What this model does not formulate or account for adequately is human agency. In fact human agency and human crafting seem to be removed from the equation almost entirely both at the level of crafting and viewer engagement. The socio-rhetorical model as I have set it out here is quite different. Like the ‘materialist’ doctrine – which of course accompanies Theology as its dialectical opposite and companion – it stresses the absolute centrality of embodied experience. But it differs in stressing the way that mind and body are *linked*. Artifice (i.e. art) allows and accounts both of the function and the purpose of art, and engagement is vital.

My first objection to the materialist-theological position is that it takes little or no interest at all in crafting, artifice and the technical realities of material study, and seems to have no serious view of the role of aesthetic experience. In short, in my view it suffers from a limited critical method. Let me take a practical example near at hand in Oslo. The many very fine carved and painted Crucifixes remaining in Norway from the 13th and 14th centuries such as that from Tretten show that while oak



5. Crucifix, figure probably oak, cross probably pine, mid-late 13th century with 15th-century polychromy, from Tretten I, Øyer (Oppland) (Photo: Svein A. Wiik (© Kulturhistorisk museum, UiO, lisens CC BY-SA 4.0)

(*quercus*) tended to be used for the crucifix figure, pine (*pinus*) was used for the actual cross.¹²

Why? It is hard to point to a specific symbolism for such woods, but it is easy to give a practical account of their character. All carvers will know that stones work differently under the chisel, and are suited to different ends: marbles and freestones have different qualities and uses. So too with woods – the hardwoods like oak taking detail differently from softwoods such as pine or limewood, the latter characterized in a 14th-century English text as useless for building but excellent for carving. Oak is durable and takes finer detail than pine, and was probably thought more suitable for a detailed human figure such as Christ. Pine can take the vigorous ornamental carving proper to a Cross and is a lighter material than dense oak, so its use for the main structural element reduced the weight of an object that had to be raised or suspended. These issues were matters for methodical technical understanding, experience; read-

¹² Blindheim 2004 for examples.

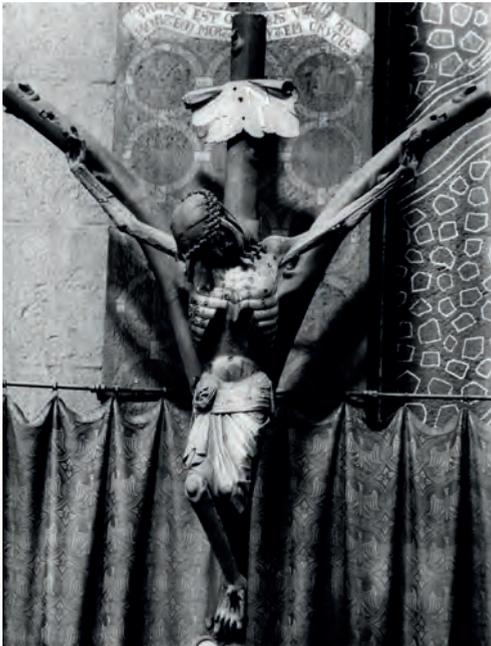
ing and going with the grain.¹³ Finally the Crosses were painted and gilding, so masking their underlying material character.

The first lesson in the study of any material is therefore to begin not with some theory about materiality, materiality being in effect a reification of substance, not the gritty reality. It is to consider a material's sourcing, its handling in a workshop, and its masking and manipulation by tradition and experience. It was 19th-century writers such as John Ruskin and E. E. Viollet-le-Duc who, as a matter of ideology, gave us the concept of the truth, the 'sincerity' of materials and the honest display of structure. To understand why this pure-minded, artsy-craftsy, loftiness is objectionable to an understanding of the Middle Ages, and why practicalities are foremost and not ancillary, we have to get our hands dirty and understand that medieval materiality is *relational*, not essential. Materials do not and cannot assert by themselves – they are good for some things, useless for others; they are part of a field, a network, which involves many factors, craft and signification included, but also recollection, inherited cultural practice, and the poetics of things. To put it another way, materials, like the arts and like their spectators, enjoyed a social life whether they liked it or not.

Experience and method aside, then, all materials form part of a prior representational or imaginative order of *relationships* which craft negotiates and judges. Wood in itself also spoke differently from other materials. Its liberating power as a medium in which to push form to its most *outré* extent, as in late-medieval German altarpiece and sacrament house-carving, needs no comment (Timmermann 2009; Kavalier 2012). Woodworking of this virtuosic type challenged the primacy of stone as an inventive medium and in some ways surpassed it. Stone spoke and speaks of the permanent, the monumental, that which, like a statue, 'stands'. Wood, in contrast, is a growing and mutating thing: to a greater extent than stone it is immanent, it 'tends' in certain directions through its grains and knots and curves. In all this it has much in common with other organic materials such as ivory, 'tending' towards the curved form of the tusk from which it is extracted. This tending or *intentio* was useful because it pointed to and affirmed a representational and metaphorical ordering that started in, but went beyond, a material's inherent character that skilled craftsmen could read and respect (Carruthers 2013: 167–172). Crafting an image is something done *in* a medium not *with* it – in fact the word 'medium', implying something which is merely a transparent vehicle which is not itself a force possessing agency, misleads us. We think 'in' wood as we talk or sing 'in' music. This is not a translation, because content and material become part of one phenomenon which, well handled, speaks in unison.

¹³ Plahter 2014 for a valuable survey of the data.

Take the issue of finish, surface. Finishes varied with the intention of the object. A key innovation was the emergence by about 1300 in Germany, Italy and Scandinavia of the so-called *Crucifixus dolorosus*, so to speak the agonized Crucifix: this was a deliberate intensification of the Gothic form of Crucifix, apparent from around 1260, in which Christ's feet were pinned high up beneath his thighs while his torso and head hung markedly downwards and forwards, so stretching the arms into a Y shape.¹⁴ With the change in profile arose a deliberate selection of alarming carved effects of theological import, Christ's grotesquely stretched and sinuous arms and bursting emaciated ribcage answered to the text 'they have numbered all my bones. And they have looked and stared upon me' in the so-called Passion Psalm (21:18), as shown on the cross at Cross at S. Maria im Kapitol in Cologne.



6. Crucifix, Sankt Maria im Kapitol, Cologne, c. 1304 (Bildarchiv Foto Marburg)

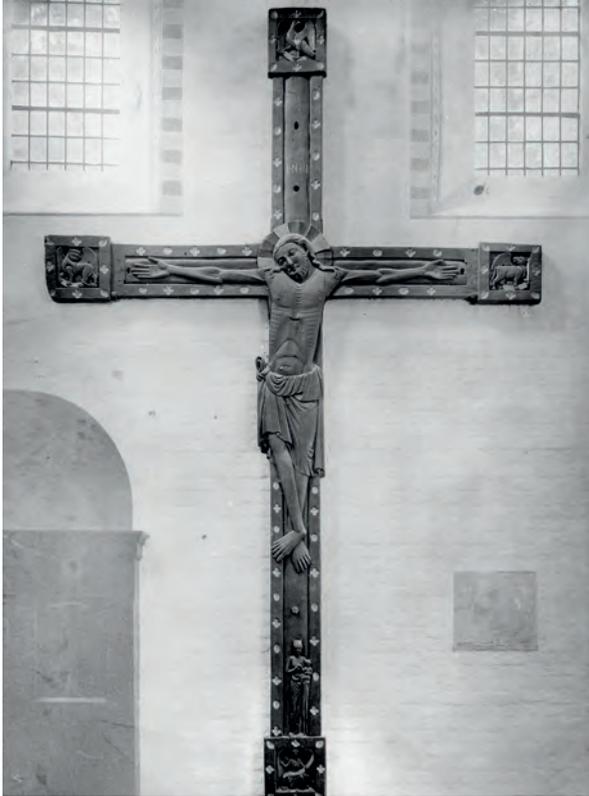
Importantly, all things concerning Christ and his abjection are worked into and onto the surface of his flayed skin, since, while before the later 13th century Christ's skin is generally fair, even delicate, the wounds marked yet circumscribed, in the Cruci-

¹⁴ The standard study remains De Francovich 1938.

fixus dolorosus his entire body is leprous, pocked and peppered with the bleeding holes of flagellation, the side-wound bursting outwards in great gouts of blood rendered in painted wood or plaster.

From one point of view the *Crucifixus dolorosus* troubles the idea of mimesis: such ghastly representations appear strange, archaic even in their vividness before the eyes; yet in the light of the foregoing it is clear that their intention and appearance must be understood dialectically, relationally. They are to be experienced and read *against* something else, for their nature – their aesthetic and ideological nature – is contrarian. Many texts and artworks perform by opposition, *oppositio*. Their contrary is the smooth courtly visual language of Gothic as established as an elegant *lingua franca* in the second half of the 13th century: to this new refinement, the refinement of the royal, aristocratic and clerical patrons, the horrible Crosses are a rebuke, so to speak an ‘anti-decorum’, an undoing. As the Cologne instance shows, their performative or occasional space was the contested urban milieu, the milieu that could at once produce the horrors of S. Maria im Kapitol and in the same years the smarmy, if elegant, swaying and beaming polychrome stone statuary around the choir of the cathedral church of Cologne (Williamson 1995: 196–197, figs. 293–294). The ugliness, deformity, falling-away of the dolorous Crosses embodied a skilled discipline, a calculated rhetoric of contrast, not a deficiency: being ‘uncrafted’ was itself an aspect of style. In the contrast of the rough and the smooth, the humble and the proud, the criminal and the fastidious, lay a fundamental and ancient difference in the register of speech: between roughness, rusticity or barbarity, *sermo rusticus*, and urbanity, *sermo urbanus* (Ramage 1961). That difference of speech had an important history and an important future, in the history of ‘style’ in western Europe. Yet it registered not primarily in the *stuff* of which things were made but rather in the workbench toolbox of eloquence and understanding.

That quite sophisticated ethical and visual calculation was involved in the making of artefacts in ideologically sensitive contexts – such as churches belonging to the Cistercian order – is apparent in the case of objects in the halfway house between fully-formed sculpture, and paint. The method in such cases was to create a subtle low relief image in wood, whose soft projecting surfaces were then tinted yet brought further forward, creating a delicate aesthetic of projection. In the case of the ‘legislative’ aesthetics of the Cistercian order, where clear prohibitions were repeatedly issued concerning sculpture and colours other than white, the preoccupation had always been far more with relationships of tone (white, grey) than hue. This not only provoked great ingenuity within the stated rules but created very fine powers of discrimination without hue, a sort of collective visual sensitivity. A fine and characteristically



7. Crucifix, polychromed oak, height 5.56 m, c. 1260, Sorø Church, Zealand, Denmark (Photo: Sofus Bengtsson © National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen)

large (5.56 m. tall) example is from the Cistercian abbey church of Sorø in Zealand, Denmark, dating to the mid 13th century (Nyborg 2006: 253 and fig. 10; Nyborg 2013).

It is executed not in full sculpture but in bas-relief with an extraordinarily pleasing play of tone and surface - as with many ivories or limewood carvings, polychromy is not essential to its effect, though discreetly coloured it originally was. The work hovers gracefully and slightly hauntingly between media, not least because reference beyond the Cross to anything precious is very markedly restrained, limited only to the sunk quatrefoils and ovals which run along the edges of the Cross.

A moment ago I used the word 'pleasing' of such effects. We might justifiably call the effect of the Sorø cross 'bland', i.e. mild or soothing. One can see how such effects were regarded as effects of intimate restraint, softened speech proper to an

enclosed monastic choir, still social but contrasting with the more frank, open, public speech of the horror-crosses of the period. The key point in such instances was somehow to strike a balance between flat, blank abstraction and the provision of just enough engaging detail to sustain the role of the image in providing *evidentia*.

None of this has to do with Romantic notions of honesty: it has to do with rhetorical and social notions of occasion, of decorum, as the contexts in which style is negotiated. Honesty was a matter for the marketplace, of ascertaining commodity value or loyal workmanship, and only thereby moral value. The evidence of the Parisian Book of Trades (*Livre des métiers*) compiled c. 1268 points up the numerous forms of sharp practice by statue-makers and those who sold *fausses oeuvres*, i.e. passed base things off as precious. There were trade regulations for image-makers from other parts of Europe, such as the Norwegian regulations for *líkneskjusmiðir* or 'image-smiths'.¹⁵ In Paris the regulations were certainly harder on the sculptors than on the painters, those two related branches of 'imaging'. Carvers were limited to one apprentice each, might not work at night and could not produce images speculatively for fear that they might be purchased for mischief. Painters could have as many apprentices as they wanted and could (and did) work by night. Perhaps those who made things susceptible to idolatry needed closer watching. There again, a painter or sculptor could only claim that a work was gilded if its gold was laid over silver rather than tin.

The point is this: medieval social regulation of this type indicates the extent to which the work of painters and sculptors was not 'honest', the extent to which it could puzzle, even cheat, as well as give pleasure. Some of the finest surviving artefacts we have from the court circles of Paris and London from the time of the *Livre des métiers* such as the great high altarpiece made for Westminster Abbey at the end of the reign of Henry III to the most exacting standards of the day, are miracles of the alchemical skill of craft which converted finely-carved oak – carved to tolerances within millimetre or two – plaster of Paris, paste, several different forms of gilding, stained glass, silver foil, linseed oil paint and varnishes - into a liturgical object which, for normal public scrutiny, looked like a blend of panel painting and truly precious metalwork.¹⁶

If this is not illusion, what is? As the *Livre des métiers* shows, it takes a trained eye, the eye of a connoisseur, a player who 'knows', to tell the real from the fake. And those who know, the experts, are unlikely to have been the public. The issue here is the deceitful character of materials not their assertiveness. The notion of sin-

¹⁵ Sears 2006 for Paris, Blindheim 1952: 87–108 for the Norwegian regulations.

¹⁶ Published in depth in Binski & Massing 2009.



8. Feeding of the Five Thousand, oil paint on oak with blue glass, oil mordant gilding, painted enamels under glass and glass gemstones, c. 1259-1269, detail of Westminster Retable, Westminster Abbey (© Hamilton Kerr Institute)

cerity, of the frank speech of materials in such instances of which many hundreds survive from the Middle Ages, fails us totally in regard to such shameless confections, such pleasurable and admirable triumphs of artful play. It is only the new forensic expertise of modern art history, after all, that has allowed us to know for certain what anything is made of at all.

At the heart of the last paragraph was the word ‘illusion’. Illusion is artful contrivance, a product of sensation. The word’s basis lies in the Latin noun for ‘play’, *ludus*, and its character as an experience of artefacts involves regard for fine, subtle and appealing workmanship, the ‘play’ of artificial effects (Carruthers 2013: 16–44). However, as I have said, there is a body of opinion which suggests that medieval art was not given to illusion or mimesis at all; according to it, illusion and mimesis were the preserve of Renaissance art that deliberately tried to trick the senses, while medieval artists stressed instead the objective or material character of art. Thus Bynum, in *Christian Materiality* states that while “Renaissance artists aimed for mimetic, illusionistic modes of representation that deliberately tried to trick the senses... In contrast, medieval artists expected viewers to notice and admire the stuff they employed *as stuff*... not as painterly illusion” (Bynum 2011: 53–54). This elision is problematical because it is founded precisely on the type of Renaissance value-system that the me-

dieval materialist argument seeks to clear away: it restates what L. B. Alberti has to say at the end of Book 2 of *Della Pittura*, namely we don't add real gold to pictures, we imitate its effect (Spencer 1977: 85). This dismissal of the illusionistic (and therefore rationalistic) intentions of medieval art is consistent with an emphasis on body, not mind. But it also misrepresents important aspects of medieval aesthetic activity.

First, it runs entirely against the evidence that enjoyable illusion, a play with subtlety, craft and mimesis, was an important concern with medieval art *tout court*. We are left with the choice of accepting and imposing a Renaissance model of illusion, or none. Second, it has the resultant effect of pressing medieval art into a materialist corner by applying to it a questionable theory of representation. Its body of beliefs



9. Madonna, polychrome oak, mid 13th century with contemporary polychromy, from Hedal (Oppland) (Photo: Eirik I. Johnsen © Kulturhistorisk museum, UiO, lisens CC BY-SA 4.0)

is founded on a 'Beltingite' anthropology of medieval images which indeed sees them as 'images' (defined functionally) before the era of 'art' (defined aesthetically) (Belting 1994). The ultimate charge against it is that it is reductive, and that in emphasizing the speech of materials it sidelines human facture and human imaginative faculty: hence the reification of 'stuff' as something living or savage and not mindful or shaped by human hands and intentions.

Let me take this one stage further by suggesting that medieval images did not create a representational order through their materiality: rather, that materiality presupposed a representational order. The image sanctified the object. That is why familiar images such as that of the Virgin Mary made from painted wood from Hedal in Norway might equally be rendered in a huge range of materials, from silver gilt to alabaster, to painted wood, ivory or stone.

The use of the materials could be explained as much by pragmatic or aesthetic reasons as theological or signficatory ones; but the materials could be exchanged without fundamentally undermining the character or function of the image. To put it in the familiar terms of aristotelian causality, their material cause can be exchanged in a way that their formal and final causes cannot. To learn, suddenly, that a gorgeously-fashioned image of Mary is, in fact, an image of Venus, would surely be radically to reframe any rememorative or symbolic character that the image and its materials might have. Recognition, prior belief and representation - human faculties - matter and matter fundamentally.

It follows that in order to understand the 'occasion' of materiality we have to have a theory of representation in place. So I take issue with the view that medieval images are reducible to their materiality. To show why representation is not substitution let's consider the representation of something that tests all artists, and yet which is (in theory) easily substitutable: hair. Hair is very difficult to represent and bothersome to carve. The single most extraordinary example of the eloquence of Gothic hair in this period is provided by the figure of St Mary Magdalen, one of a set of saints from the interior of the collegiate church at Ecouis in Normandy completed by about 1313.¹⁷

She is as astonishing a conception as any in Gothic art. Mary is barefooted and her pose studiedly hip-shot. Here surface acts as a *color*, an eloquent integument, for hair has become vestment. That the effect of this almost Ovidian metamorphosis is both direct and subtle is clear. The long tooled waves are at once strange and suggestive; a 14th-century word for them, from the Latin *undatus* for 'wavy', was 'oundy', from the heraldic term *undé*. The 'oundy' hair creates delight; but it also warns us by

¹⁷ For the church and its sculptures, Gillerman 1994.



10. St Mary Magdalen, sculpture from collegiate church of Écouis, Normandy, after 1311 (Gilles Berizzi and Thierry le Mage)

stirring mixed affects within us. We can understand what's at stake by thinking about our version of this mixture in the word 'kinky'. Hair is at one level frankly and unmistakably ascetic. But here the agency is more borderline; by its very appearance, the Ecouis figure explores moral-aesthetic wandering to the point of near error, from which Mary herself, in exile, is retrieving herself.

Mary is all hair, all image, and it is the image that carries and gets across the values. The point is that in a case such as this, a materialist substitution could not work. The vitality of the idea lies in the way hair is worked, represented, made eloquent. Actual substitution of hair could be effected, as it was on many late-medieval religious images in southern and eastern Germany.



11. *Pietà*, polychrome wood with attached hair, 15th century, detail, Freiberg Cathedral (Saxony) (author)

Andreas Wunhart, an early 15th-century sculptor in this region, commemorated his dead daughter, a nun, by using her own hair on a crucified Christ that he had made for her nunnery, in a truly ‘sponsorial’ gesture which understood the hair to be a relic.¹⁸ But, at the risk of *reductio ad absurdum*, an image of Mary Magdalen covered in a mass of transplanted body-length hair would be repellent, even comical. Part of the comedy would be the justifiable perception that in such a case substitution would be a product of idleness, as idle as applying a wig or hair-extensions, a cheat. In this sense it is correct to see the dressing-up in real clothes of images of the Virgin Mary as non-representational. Substitution adds less than representation because it is not mindful in the same way. A crafted representation is a thinking-through of an image, a considered reworking, not a dressing-up of it, which is really no more than presentation. So, I suggest, we need a theory of representation because the agency of the image lies not in its ontological status (whether or not the statue of the Magdalen ‘is’ the Magdalen) but in the way the image’s perceptible surfaces as an image, work.

¹⁸ Example drawn from Recht 2008: 214.

Ontology is not central to this issue, and empty aestheticism is not the alternative. What I want to get across is the importance of critical engagement as a product of full sensory, aesthetic and rhetorical engagement.

And consider materials themselves. The roots of materiality study lie in a seminal text of materiality study as cultural history, Michael Baxandall's *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (1980). The recent rise of materiality study has an open and elective affinity with a rebalancing of the senses away from sight to touch. It implies an entire epistemology of the senses, a rebalancing of agency away from human agency towards the agency or vibrancy of 'stuff'.¹⁹ I intend no disrespect to the environmentally aware in questioning the idea that in *artefactual* criticism (as opposed to ecotology) there is such a thing as a naturally vibrant materiality. The human imaginary is inescapable in the study of material culture. Materials come ready-freighted with signification because their usages are old, often traditional, and it is hard to see how their values could ever be separated from cultural understanding and so historical context. In this sense 'natural' meaning always has to contend with cultural superimposition. This was undoubtedly true of some of the most important language of materials in the Middle Ages, as in the ancient world. Materials were not necessarily seen as themselves but as things subjected to artifice which were 'seen as' something else. This is proved by the richness of Byzantine and western medieval ekphrasis. Paulus Silentarius's 6th-century description of the ambo and interior of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople is a case in point: each object in the church, such as the elaborate marbled ambo or pulpit, becomes the rhetorical occasion for a kind of associative venture, in which the polychromy of materials is 'seen as' eddying water, or boxwood, or bees-wax; or is seen to bloom like the flowers of the field, the white lilies mingling with roses, or anemone: we hear and then see by *enargeia* 'a rose bloom mingled with pallor', the stones having 'the fair brightness of human fingernails', being 'rosy with a tinge of white', or 'white with a tinge of fiery red', stones with 'veins' which together flush 'with purple, like the blood of the Laconian shell' (Mango 1972: 92–93; Barry 2007). Their appreciation involves a conjuration of other images, other materials. Romanesque church decoration of the sort in Saint-Hilaire in Poitiers makes great play with the conjuration of such effects in paint.

Ekphrasis, a rhetorical method, underscores my point that in critical method we must understand *relationships* – between materials, things and their consumers, the imaginatively 'engaged'. Things do not speak by themselves. This is what I mean by cultural superimposition. Experience does not stop at materials; it *starts* with them.

¹⁹ For 'vibrancy', Bennett 2010.



12. Imitation marbling, interior decoration of Saint-Hilaire, Poitiers, probably 11th century (author)

My lecture ends at this point because I hope I have said enough to sketch out what I mean by rhetorical engagement. My view is that rhetorical culture provides a powerful and, more importantly, authentic means of accessing the agency of what I will persist in calling medieval art. It creates a language for critical method which is based on language and ideas common to the ancient and medieval worlds. It allows us to take care when we speak generally of the emotions as if these things were not historically mediated. It comes to grips with artifice, and so human culture itself. It respects the idea that aesthetic experiences are in the first instance occasional, not normative. It respects human agency while understanding that natural things ‘tend’, like the beautiful curve of an ivory tusk. It understands that art objects – as in any social life, work with and against each other. It favours play and illusion as important dynamics. It is not necessarily or solely ‘theological’. And it also serves the purpose of shaking things up a bit. The old neoplatonic and intellectualist models of medieval aesthetics of the 20th century need supplementing. Of course, the use of rhetoric must never be

understood as a key, or as the 'end' of our encounter with the Middle Ages. It is a tool, it serves a purpose; its nature is not theoretical, but practical.

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