

NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES

EXPRESSION AND REPRESENTATION IN THE CHRISTIAN - JEWISH - MUSLIM MEDITERRANEAN

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Cecily Hilsdale (Faculty)

Biography:

Cecily Hilsdale is Associate Professor of Medieval Art and Architecture in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University in Montreal. Her research focuses on diplomacy and cultural exchange in the medieval Mediterranean, in particular the circulation of Byzantine luxury items as diplomatic gifts as well as the related dissemination of eastern styles, techniques, iconographies and ideologies of imperium. Her book, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy in an Age of Decline* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) questions how political decline re-figures the visual culture of empire in later Byzantium 1261-1452. Providing a nuanced account of medieval artistic cultural exchange this study reassesses the temporal dimensions of power and the changing fates of empires. Professor Hilsdale's work has appeared in the *Art Bulletin*, *Art History*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, *Studies in Iconography*, and *Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialog*, and has received support from the Medieval Academy of America, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society, the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, and the Fulbright Foundation. For her seminar, Professor Hilsdale will investigate how objects of exchange—gifts or portable things—negotiate medieval Mediterranean identities, how they index common elite desires and also serve as arbiters of cultural difference.



Lecture Abstract:

The Art of the Gift in the Medieval Mediterranean

Medieval texts of a diverse range of genres and languages expose the protocol for gift exchange throughout Mediterranean courts from Constantinople to Cordoba. They specify the strategic benefits and dangers of building relationships through the exchange of sumptuous silk, ivory, rock crystal and other rare and luxurious material. Despite such rich primary source material, very few surviving medieval objects can be securely located within a specific cross-cultural diplomatic context, one in which we understand the precise circumstances of their creation and donation. This talk examines the distinction between the kinds of objects that held cross-cultural appeal among elite audiences cross-culturally and the few extant gifts that were custom-created for specific diplomatic contexts. From this comparison, the notion of hierarchy emerges as the primary distinguishing feature: whereas generic luxury items put to use in the diplomatic arena indicated shared elite tastes, custom gifts more often included hierarchical messages embedded in their designs. By focusing on the mobilization of sumptuous art objects as they changed hands and crossed cultural and confessional lines, the talk will bring conceptual issues of exchange and translation to the concrete level of material culture.

Seminar Title, Abstract and Assigned Reading:

Cross-Cultural Diplomacy in the Medieval Mediterranean

This seminar examines the phenomenon of gift exchange in the medieval Mediterranean and the hierarchical valences of gifts deployed in the cross-cultural diplomatic arena. As a key diplomatic strategy, gift exchange created an image of munificence that masked shrewd strategy and self-interest. But the appearance of generosity was merely a pretence, as most medieval courts were acutely aware of the protocol for gifts and the hierarchical relations triggered by their exchange. This seminar will attend to the tension between generosity and self-interest through an overview of "gift" as a critical term rooted in anthropological scholarship and a selection of primary sources in translation that prescribe and describe the deployment of luxury items as gifts.

The material dimension of diplomatic engagement is treated most extensively in the Arabic *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, a compendium of gift exchanges from the Sassanid to Fatimid periods (7-11th centuries) that elaborates the ideological stakes of codes of prestation cross-culturally. Although there is no Greek or Latin equivalent, gifts emerge as key to sources dealing with imperial protocol. We will read excerpts of three Greek texts associated with emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (r. 913 to 959): (1) imperial advice for dealing with rapacious foreign tribes outlined in Chapter 13 of *De Administrando Imperio*; (2) a packing list of items that should accompany the emperor on military campaign appended to the *Book of Ceremonies*; and (3) the protocol for receiving foreign ambassador in Constantinople excerpted from Peter the Patrician (6th century) and included in the *Book of Ceremonies*. The Greek sources for ambassadorial receptions are complemented and complicated by Liudprand of Cremona's account of his experience in Constantinople as an ambassador for the Otto I. A contrast of this diverse range of sources illuminates the ideological import of material culture and gift giving protocol for diplomatic engagement in the cross-cultural arena throughout the medieval Mediterranean.

Seminar Reading:

- *Book of Gifts and Rarities (Kitab al-Hadaya wa al-Tubaf): Selections Compiled in the Fifteenth Century from an Eleventh-Century Manuscript on Gifts and Treasures*, tr. Ghada al Hijjawi al-Qaddumi (Cambridge, 1996), paragraphs 1-31, 69-74, 98-106.
- *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio*, tr. Gyula Moravcsik (Washington DC, 1985 [1967]), 67-77 (chapter 13)
- *Constantine Porphyrogenetos, The Book of Ceremonies: With the Greek edition of the Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae (Bonn, 1829)*, tr. Ann Moffatt and Maxene Tall (Canberra, 2012), 398-409 (Ch. 89-90, concerning the ambassador of the Persians) and 455-75 ("When the Emperor is About to Go on Campaign").
- *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona*, tr. Paolo Squatriti (Washington DC, 2007), 271-74.
- Cecily J. Hilsdale, "Gift," *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012), 171-82.

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