

NEH Barcelona 2015 Project Summary

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One of the challenges in teaching the medieval Mediterranean is the subject's resistance to easy categorization. Modern boundaries and the nationalism cultivated within those borders graft a narrative onto the Mediterranean that does little justice to the region's fluidity and complexity as exhibited in the source material. As Sharon Kinoshita has so eloquently pointed out, the traditional disciplines are ill-equipped to encompass the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Mediterranean, inherently requiring some form of interdisciplinary work on the part of the scholar to make any progress in the field. To counteract the weight of the modern nation-state and effectively communicate this complexity in the classroom, we have to move away from a simple, directly historical narrative in favor of a broader, interconnected picture of the Mediterranean. As an art historian I have found this shift to be particularly important in how we talk about Mediterranean objects, which often conceal as much as they reveal about their provenance, function and reception. While the historical narrative is important for the context of these objects, it is the distinctly Mediterranean themes they embody that I find more compelling, both in my own research and in what I want to teach my students.

The syllabus for the course entitled "Objects, Identity and Exchange in the Medieval Mediterranean" focuses on the Mediterranean between 1000-1500 CE, and is based on discussions about how objects and architecture shift in meaning based on varying perspectives through time and space. The same ivory pyxis crafted in Umayyad al-Andalus at the turn of the millennium does not signify the same thing as a reliquary in a Gothic cathedral in late medieval France. The object embodies both of these histories, and yet the lens through which we as scholars view it, not to mention the museum setting that categorizes it, often neglects to accommodate them. The geographic, temporal and cultural shift that enacts such a change in an object rarely serves as the focus of its examination at the undergraduate level, and so that is precisely what this course intends to do. Developed in conversation with scholars of the Mediterranean at the 2015 NEH Summer Institute in Barcelona, this course is aimed at sophomore

concentrators in art history and is designed to teach them critical skills in the field and more specifically with the Mediterranean. Students will learn to engage with the shifting nature of objects through time and context, with architecture as an object, and the legibility of nontextual material – a valuable skill-set for emerging art historians.

The syllabus is organized by themes split into two-week pairs, with the second week of each section challenging and responding to the themes addressed in the prior week. For example, no course on the Mediterranean would be complete without a discussion of the courtly culture of communication and gift-giving. After all, this is the context in which a number of the objects left to art historians today were created, including the pyxis mentioned above. The atmosphere of exchange created by the courtly context has led to a certain “mutual intelligibility,” a term Brian Catlos discussed and developed over the course of his NEH lectures, which allowed for cultural innovation across ethno-religious boundaries. Working in tandem with courtly culture, however, was the activity of traders and pirates in the Mediterranean. These systems variously enhanced or undermined the aesthetic cultivated among courtly circles and, by the end of the medieval period, largely replaced the court as the primary mode of exchange. By posing these two themes in conversation with one another, students will have the opportunity to explore formal acts of exchange at different levels of Mediterranean society.

Students will also focus on how these objects reflected the identities of those who created, owned, and adapted them. The constructedness and performative nature of identity in the medieval Mediterranean will serve as a central thread connecting discussions throughout the semester, be that identity religious, political, ethnic or gendered in nature. Very often a single object or site simultaneously expressed multiple identities, all of which can and should be considered by the scholar. This course aims to embrace the tumultuous fluidity of identities in the Mediterranean and, by doing so, allow for a conception of the Mediterranean that embraces the region's fundamental complexity.