
Book Review

The meanings of nudity in Medieval Art. Edited by Sherry C. M. Lindquist (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 356 pp.+ill, ISBN: 978-1-4094-2284-6

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FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, the volume is eye-catching by the intriguing title and the exceptional typographical quality. It becomes even more arresting once one starts reading the first pages and progressively discovers a well-rounded collective study, combining thirteen articles from twelve contributors.

Medieval sexuality is a much-debated topic in Western academic research, but nevertheless the medieval nude was only tangentially approached. Also, until recently, the subject failed to be completely relevant for art history scholars, very often being ignored, insufficiently discussed or stereotypically presented. This is perhaps the reason why editor Sherry Lindquist declares, in the closing of her introductory article, that the volume is intended to call attention to the significance of the medieval nude “as a category”.

But what makes the volume truly ambitious is not just its thematic intent, but also the potential to become a methodological model, as it configures not merely a subject matter, but also as historiographical approach: “The naked body, when it does appear in Western medieval art, must be understood as operating in a complex matrix of socially coded meanings: what is revealed is

more evident when studied in the context of what is not shown” (p. 27). Images compensate the structural and intentional limits of the written text, conveying what should not or cannot be verbally expressed. Since medieval art was predominantly religious, medieval iconographical nudity was, despite the apparent antagonism, religiously connected as well. Perhaps the most important examples are the biblical moments involving nudity, such as the before-sin Adam and Eve, Noah’s drunkenness or Christ’s baptism and crucifixion, essential in the theological discourse and therefore mandatory to be visually represented. This thematic register, consistently analyzed in the volume, included a general difficulty in representing altogether socially sensitive images and insufficiently detailed by the biblical text. Artists were required to make iconographical decisions, reinterpret the text and confer contextual significance.

By focusing on such elusive manifestations, in an effort to uncover the potential intentions of the art fabricant and the potential perception of the public, the volume is indeed, as the title suggests, not merely an investigation on nudity, but on its meanings. As a result, the volume, although disciplinary intended as an art history study, reveals itself to the reader as a concomitant cultural-historical survey of West-European society, prevailing in its medieval times.

With regard to this chronological context, the collective effort of the contributors is particularly substantial in covering the subject from late antiquity to fifteenth century – a period of time traditionally considered to be a hiatus of the nude as artistic genre –, thus proving that artistically represented nudity is a phenomenon preceding Renaissance. The authors succeed in demonstrating that nudity was still used in medieval art works, while providing a thorough argument that the classical nude was still referred to, studied, emulated or used as iconographical paradigm. It is surprising to discover that Venus, the nominal embodiment of the classical nude, was not reborn in Renaissance, but was perpetuated during the Middle Ages – visually and semantically – as erotic sign, as Jane C. Long so thoroughly demonstrates in her article.

As often in this volume, a decisive factor in understanding the semantic variations of visual nudity is a gender-focused approach. Different sexual identities of the male/female unclothed body could already signify different meanings, even antagonistic. For instance, nude feminine representations

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were generally perceived as being negative. Reminder of the primordial sinner, Eve, the feminine nude was also an embodiment of the sin. On the other hand, male nudity frequently suggested modesty or virtue. With regard to the Romanesque sculpture, Kirk Ambrose observed that “the male body was often deemed the most suitable vehicle for imagining the exemplary pursuit of the religious life” (p. 76). However, the reader will discover different variations, as one should keep in mind Sherry Lindquist’s advice, that there was no primary meaning of nudity in medieval art, but meanings.

A fair example of such variations can be found in Elizabeth Moore Hunt paper, discussing the entertainers – jugglers, jesters, minstrels and acrobats - in the margins of some manuscripts from northern France and Flanders, dating from the 13th and 14th Century. Mimicking profane gestures as far as performing sexual intercourse, the marginal naked jongleur was a multivalent signifier, perceived differently by the male public, in contrast to the mixed or feminine one.

An interesting approach on male nudity can be found in Madeline Caviness’ paper, proving, based on texts and pictures from 11th through the 14th centuries, that male nude representations were, to a certain extent, received with disquietude. *Virilophobia*, as the author denominates this attitude, led to acts of suppression and censorship. Focusing on the biblical episode when Noah is gazed upon naked by one of his sons – treated as a taboo, but also as a case –, Caviness manages to outline social concerns of artists and reactions of viewers, raising attention to a wide range of potential prejudices and anxieties.

In an examination of Jean, Duke of Berry’s prayer book, the *Belles Heures*, Martha Easton discusses the symbolism of nudity, in a beautiful parallel between the clothed body and the unclothed one. The beauty of the female body, whether chaste or sinful, can express powerful meanings even when not naked, as women’s clothes are as well sexually charged, becoming, in some cases, expression of the physical sin and instrument of corruption for the male gazer.

Several authors disclose fascinating cases of symbolic somatoscopy, unmasking different significances of different body elements. For instance, the absence or the presence of the body hair, as Penny Howell Jolly observed, implied different meanings. Although a superficial attribute, body hair allowed a complete reassessment of the human person, conferring positive or negative

roles, especially when correlated with the gender. In an analysis of representations of Adam and Eve by Jan van Eyck and Hugo van der Goes, Linda Seidel underlines the importance of human flesh, in a natural state and in a divinely set equilibrium with the natural world when uncovered.

Representing nudity implied inherent difficulties, since the artistic decisions of exhibiting, eliminating or covering the genitalia were not simple formal adjustments, but had profound ideological implications. Veronique Dalmasso approaches this issue, demonstrating how nudity (either explicit or elusive) becomes instrumental in dosing up sanctity or humanity in the bivalent nature of Jesus Christ. Debating on the same issue of the naked adult Christ and its iconographical rendering, Corine Schleif deconstructs “scopic regimes of covering and exposing”, with concomitant “performances of viewing and refusing to view”. These acts were not always guided by the principles of the established social hierarchy, but they even occasionally contested these hierarchies.

The reader will be surprised to discover also medieval artworks that under religious purposes conveyed sexual intimations, or even erotic artistic productions that came to be associated with religious environments. In an excellent article, Diane Wolfthal discusses the frontispiece of a Book of Hours – depicting a nude bather – as a paradigm and decoder of medieval erotica, insisting on a plausible concomitant reception: the image as reminder of sin, but also invitation of sexual pleasure. Similar scenes, as guise for arousing images, are also investigated by Paulla Nutall, in a paper that addresses nudity as pictorial choice and public spectacle and attests that the tradition of the nude existed in northern Europe prior to the Italian Renaissance and, to some degree, influenced the Venetian nude.

Despite its multi-author nature, the volume is an undivided report on iconographical nudity and an unflagging inquiry into the medieval social-artistic dynamics, examining equally artists, the commissioning clergy and gentry and, not least, audience. Although centred on the Western cultural horizon, the study proves to be, on account of the collected information and methodological approach, a beneficial support for any potential researcher of paralleled iconography in medieval Eastern Europe.