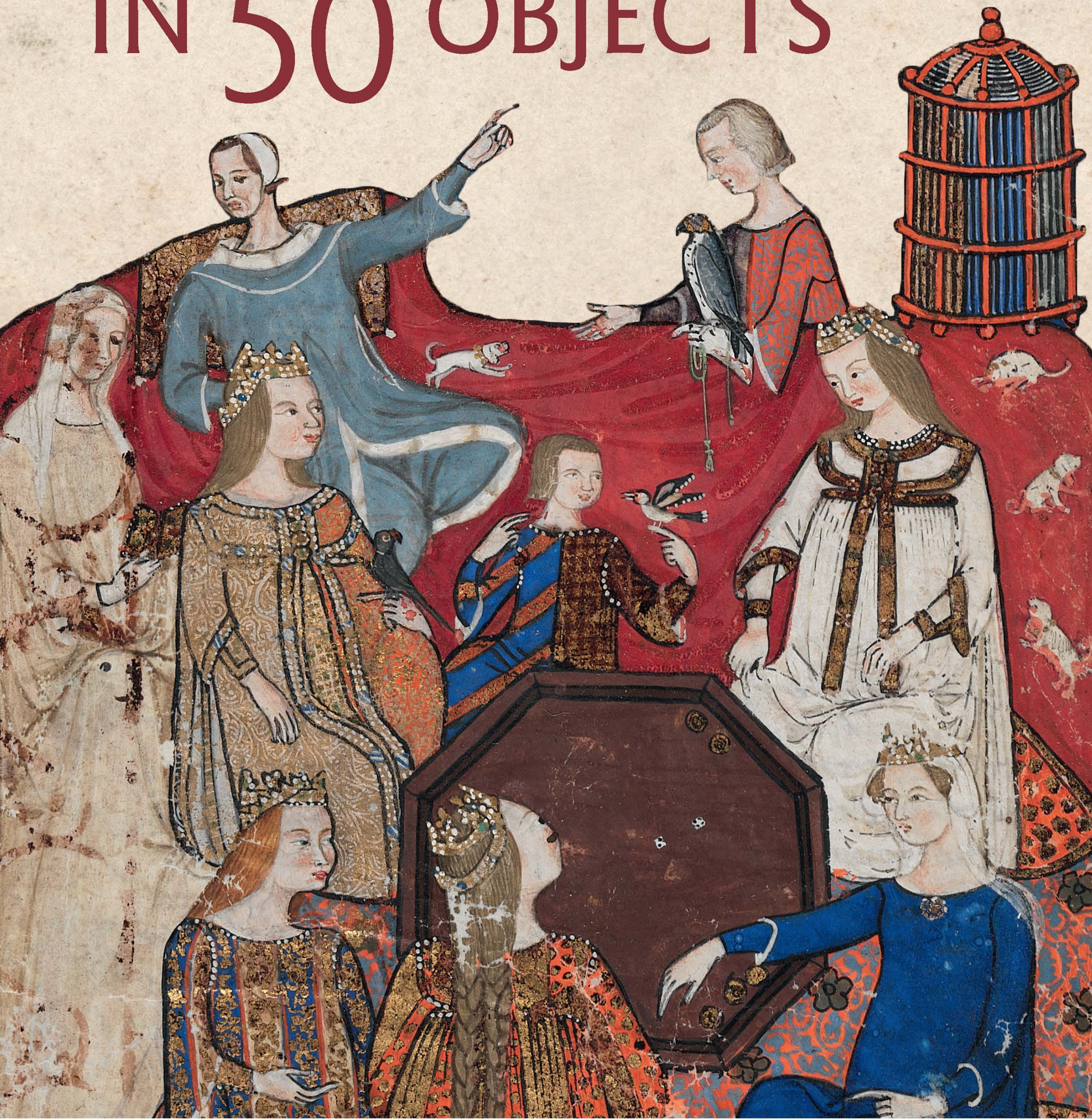
Elina Gertsman and Barbara H. Rosenwein

THE MIDDLE AGES IN 50 OBJECTS



The Middle Ages in 50 Objects will appeal to anyone with a passion for history and delight in things. Evocatively bringing the medieval world alive, it unearths buried weapons, de-codes enigmatic images, and rewards the curious with details of materials and makers, myths and movements. An outstanding resource for instructors and visual learners, this volume satisfies both the intellect and the senses.

Maureen C. Miller, University of California

The recent turn to "materiality" among medievalists has paid off handsomely in this informative and beautifully presented study. The book testifies to the added value of collaboration in scholarship and of the utility of integrating different scholarly approaches to the study of objects. The authors obviously experienced great joy in executing the project, and I experienced the same emotion in reading it.

William Chester Jordan, Princeton University

The luxury items and ordinary medieval artifacts this volume showcases range across the full chronological and geographical scope of the capacious Middle Ages. They comprise a splendid cabinet of curiosities, a wondrous collection of images and stories, wrapped in rich contextualizations, that allows the reader to assemble a complex, multifaceted image of the Middle Ages.

Asa Simon Mittman, Professor of Art History, California State University, Chico

With its focus on carefully selected objects and its attention to material culture, this book is both a masterpiece of methodology and a must-read volume for scholars, students, and interested public alike. Using the objects to address broad interdisciplinary questions concerning Islamic, Byzantine, and European societies, it brings the Middle Ages back to life in a sophisticated and intelligent way.

Claudia Bolgia, University of Edinburgh

The Middle Ages in 50 Objects, as its name suggests, places objects front and center in the telling of history. Using select works from the rich collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art, the authors present an admirably broad and diverse picture of the medieval era. Written in an engaging, approachable style, and with an authoritative erudition, this work will offer students an excellent introduction to the field.

Christina Maranci, Tufts University

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The Middle Ages in 50 Objects

The extraordinary array of images included in this volume reveals the full and rich history of the Middle Ages. Exploring material objects from the European, Byzantine, and Islamic worlds, the book casts a new light on the cultures that formed them, each culture illuminated by its treasures.

The objects are divided among four topics: The Holy and the Faithful; The Sinful and the Spectral; Daily Life and Its Fictions; and Death and Its Aftermath. Each section is organized chronologically, and every object is accompanied by a penetrating essay that focuses on its visual and cultural significance within the wider context in which the object was made and used. Spot maps add yet another way to visualize and consider the significance of the objects and the history that they reveal. Lavishly illustrated, this is an appealing and original guide to the cultural history of the Middle Ages.

Elina Gertsman is Professor of Medieval Art at Case Western Reserve University. She is the author of *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text, Performance* (2010) and *Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine Madonna* (2015), and editor of several books, including *Visualizing Medieval Performance: Perspectives, Histories, Contexts* (2008) and *Crying in the Middle Ages: Tears of History* (2011, 2013). Most recently, with Stephen Fliegel, she published a catalogue that accompanies the focus exhibition they co-curated at the Cleveland Museum of Art, *Myth and Mystique: Cleveland's Gothic Table Fountain* (2016).

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The Middle Ages in 50 Objects

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Introduction

Complex and varied, vibrant and intense, medieval objects demand to be examined closely, to be thought about deeply, to be approached kinesthetically. Extraordinary in the multiplicity of meanings that it harbors and engenders, the material culture of the Middle Ages offers its beholders a rich experience of looking, often multisensory, always rewarding. It offers, too, a glimpse of an equally rich society, or rather the many societies that were in constant flux and in intermittent conversations (and, at times, screaming matches) with one another. And yet, each object has its own history. So how do we write history *through* objects?

The premise of our book is that such history requires intense collaboration. Its predicate is a triumvirate of sorts: a nexus of art history, museology, and history. An art historian, perforce, will focus on images themselves, teasing out the network of associations they trigger, visual discourses they tap into, and viewing practices they suggest. A historian will concentrate on the larger context, proposing a set of situations and conditions spun around an object as if an intricate cocoon. Both will want to marshal a wide variety of sources—textual and visual, oral and aural—in order to understand not only the agency of men and women in the objects' creation, but also the objects themselves as active agents in the formation of history. Finally, the museum will serve both as a framework and a guiding force: enriching and constraining all writing efforts, suggesting how collecting practices shape our historical imagination.

Our choice of the collections is quite deliberate. The Cleveland Museum of Art is justly famous, boasting an extraordinarily wide-ranging compendium of medieval objects, acquired over the years for a variety of purposes, by a variety of curators, but always with the viewing public in mind. The collections—with their broad chronology and a geographical reach extending across Eurasia—allow us to glimpse the history of not only the European Middle Ages but also the Byzantine and Islamic worlds. It is true that the museum writes its own version of history through its holdings and display, through what it was willing and able to acquire. The CMA's Christian manuscripts are astonishing, for example, but it has no Jewish books as of yet: medieval Jewish art was scarce at the time of its creation and it is even scarcer now; Christian service books such as Missals greatly outnumbered Jewish service books such as Haggadot, and history was kinder to them. We considered this an appropriate challenge: to make present in word what is

absent in image. Medievalists are faced with the issue of lacunae all the time, even when they have the full run of every library in the world—our sources are often fragmentary, and we learn to make the most of what we have. Here, Judaism is made visible through a variety of objects, including the Jonah sculpture and the illuminated initial that depicts Isaac and Esau, while the threads of Jewish culture are woven into the fabric of many more essays.

And thus we set out to produce a full and rich history of the medieval world based on the 50 objects we chose for the purpose. Historians of every sort are increasingly interested in what material things can tell us about the past. Then, as now, people lived in relation to objects, and objects shaped their practices, ideas, and feelings. Every era tells us much about itself from the items that it creates, uses, prizes, and destroys. But the Middle Ages is particularly illuminated by its material objects because its culture was so attuned to the meanings of things as they were felt, seen, heard, tasted, and even smelled—the incense burning in a mosque, the gleam of light from a garnet brooch, the chanting in a synagogue, the touch of fingers to an ivory mirror, the Eucharistic wafer dissolving in the mouth.

We would like to think that our methods of inquiry are indebted to medieval thinkers who themselves drew on ancient books on rhetoric. In his commentary on the work of Roman rhetorician Martianus Capella, for example, the ninth-century monk Remigius of Auxerre wrote: "First to be considered are the seven topics, that is circumstances, which are established at the beginning of every authentic book: who, what, why, in what manner, where, when, by what faculties." These are the questions that guided us as we tackled each object in turn. For the sculpture of Christ and St. John, for example, there are two contexts: the one in which the Gospel narrative was written down and then another in which this sculpture was experienced. This brought us to the convent culture of late medieval Swabia, to the world of devotional objects and nuns that levitated before them, to the practices of meditation and to the culture of mystics, to the living sculptures and visionaries that beheld them. But we also wanted to explore the Rhineland more generally—its affluence and its politics—and then widen the horizon still further, to include the plague that swept the region along with the rest of Europe, and finally to come to the issues of reform and Reformation in this turbulent and spiritually vibrant world. To visualize this world and the place of the sculpture within it, we include a small map.

In this manner, each object serves as a point of reference whose significance opens out in ever wider circles, all important to explore. The object is in the first place of keen interest in itself; indeed, that is why it entered the museum's collection. In the second place, it suggests the tastes, concerns, beliefs, prejudices, and practical needs of whoever commissioned or purchased it. Finally, it is part of

a much larger whole: the people immediately interested in or touched by the object may be a minority living in a world largely indifferent to such an object; or they may represent a majority and thus speak for nearly an entire society. Medieval art may—it often does—represent the concerns of elites, for the objects made for the rich are frequently the things that were kept and cherished over time and subsequently purchased by museums. But we have made sure to include non-elite objects as well—a pilgrim's flask, a soldier's helmet—as well as objects seen and used by different classes concurrently. The marble altar front may have stood in a well-endowed church either in Constantinople (today Istanbul) or Ravenna, but the people who entered that church, who saw the altar and perhaps even touched it, came from various walks of life. Similarly, the feline incense burner perfumed the air of a mosque in Khurasan, Iran, that was open to believers of many estates.

The choice of objects was particularly difficult because we wanted to present them in the compass of a compact, rather than dauntingly long, book. We opted for a mix of well-known pieces and those less published to ensure coverage of many, though admittedly not all, important cultural themes of the Middle Ages; the sum total thus adds up to more than the book's four parts. In the first part, "The Holy and the Faithful," we tackle the notion of the sacred. The reader will encounter Jewish prophets and Christian martyrs; the Hebrew scriptures, the New Testament, and the Qur'an; liturgical implements of various kinds; indignant monks and earnest pilgrims; images of the divine and body parts of saints. But then we endeavored to knit entire worlds around those topics: a blood jasper calyx occasions a discussion of medicine and magic as well as of the Eucharist, while an alabaster panel with the Carrying of the Cross provides an avenue for talking about medieval drama and performance. The famous Jonah sculpture lends itself to the discussion of the Old Testament story, to be sure, but also to the brief exploration of the nascent Christian community of the pre-Christian Roman Empire, still intact and seething with religious ferment. The Khurasan incense burner sparks not only engagement with religious culture but also with literary discourses of the rapidly expanding Muslim world. Emperors and noblemen, merchants and bureaucrats make their entrance, too—for there can be no discussion of devotional behaviors without politics, or religious worship without economy. Here, as elsewhere, we engage with a dazzling array of materials: marble and ivory, parchment and silver, wood and terracotta.

Sacred figures reappear in Part II, "The Sinful and the Spectral," but in some very different roles. We see Christ beaten by disfigured and distorted sinners; we see the Virgin Mary in resounding triumph over Original Sin. But we also see Adam and Eve committing this very sin, and, indeed, an entire set of personified sins arrayed on a metal bowl: Pride, Anger, Envy, and Lust. On an illuminated

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page, Acedia, or Sloth, sits stewing in her own boredom, ignoring her lively court. In the well-Islamicized world of fifteenth-century Eurasia, Persian-inspired monstrous demons grimace in their chains on striking album leaves. Monstrosity unravels into the spectral, as beasts and hybrids invade the viewing space: grotesques cavort on manuscript pages, and a basilisk colludes with a lion on a carved column capital. This, too, is a world unto itself, which nonetheless often takes potent social commentary as its subject. The otherness of Christ's tormentors identifies them as the Jews: the image comes from fourteenth-century Venice—that is, a time and place that witnessed mendicant Franciscan preachers vilifying the Jews on Italian city streets. Acedia, in turn, was used to warn a young Genoese heir to a merchant's fortune against the temptations of laziness, which would be directly detrimental to his family occupation.

And so the echoes of the everyday, which whisper across the pages of the first half of the book, come to the fore in Part III. Entitled "Daily Life and Its Fictions," this section gathers objects that allow us to talk not only about the quotidian existence of medieval women and men, but also about the ways that this existence was presented, subverted, and fictionalized. The Parisian ivory mirror purports to be a courtly scene—a game of chess—but just as courtly love was an imaginary construct, so did the game signify much more than an innocent pastime, representing that which could not be represented. Similarly, the Kashan tile exalts love, or rather fictions of love, inscribed with erotic poetry that likens lips to precious stones, black curls to vipers, and gardens to paradise. A gorgeous Gothic fountain, an automaton meant to titillate the senses, not only stands witness to a real entertainment at court, but also appeals to literary tastes, alluding to the magic springs and pure streams that played such a great role in the medieval imaginary. From Frankish noblemen to Venetian warriors, from Byzantine dignitaries to Italian doctors, from Parisian law men to Carolingian monastics—this section of the book casts its net widely, to explore life in Islamic, Byzantine, and European societies. We look at courts and commerce; industry and coinage; power and law; war and conquest; schools and universities. But we know that many of these themes as seen through visual representation are temporally complicated and ideologically fraught—and so we tried to be cognizant of the very nature of the representation and the fictions that it imposes.

Finally, and perhaps inevitably, we come to the subject of death in the last section of the book, "Death and Its Aftermath." Here, we look at the so-called Last Four Things—death, judgment, heaven, and hell—and all sorts of things that cohere around these topics. We explore instruments of death, such as a knife-like sword called a scramasax; mourning and burial rituals, both Jewish and Christian; grave markers, European and Islamic; representations of dying and

death and of the Last Judgment; conceptualizations of Death as a personified force; and visions of afterlife—the joys of heaven, the torments of hell, and the uncertainties of purgatory. From the scene of Saint Lawrence roasting on an open-fire grill to the grinning skeletons who have come to collect the Pope, the landscape of life's end unfolds across the long Middle Ages, always terrifying, sometimes hopeful, always inevitable. Here, as in the other parts of the book, the themes that we chose have the advantage of cutting across time periods and geographical boundaries. The objects included reveal people's hopes, fears, joys, and pretensions; their rules, tastes, customs, and habits; their myths, stories, beliefs, and value systems—all treated within the hard facts of political and social developments, and the always abundant, exquisite, and stupendous material culture.

Organized chronologically, each section of the book offers a microcosm for contrast and comparison. The vision of the Middle Ages offered here is lively, active, bustling. Like exquisite treasures in a coffer, the objects presented here are arranged to be rummaged through, to be admired, to be thought about. Readers will no doubt use the book in two main ways. Those wishing to be systematic will start from the beginning and read to the end. Even in that case, they will find themselves whizzing across Europe, landing in Iran, and drawn back again through Constantinople. Those who wish to dip into the book here and there will create their own sort of disorientation, but they will find some bearings in the running heads, which signal both the part they are in and the names of the objects. We imagine readers finding answers to some of their questions, questioning some of our answers, and being propelled to ask still new questions—to set out on all manner of new intellectual explorations, look closely at the images on offer, and seek out others. It is our hope that this book helps its readers to form a rich picture of the medieval world—a world astonishing and frustrating, foreign and familiar, and always laced with wonder and contradiction.

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