

Book Review

Of Liturgical Straws and Spiritual Breadboxes:
a review of Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian
Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval
Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011) and Mary
Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle
Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

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Caroline Walker Bynum and Mary Carruthers have written rich, generous books that engage two fervent questions left to us from the Middle Ages: “What is the character of holy matter in an earthly realm?” and “How is the experience of beauty mediated by human sensations?” Medieval works of art exist at the intersection of these two questions: they can be channels for (or themselves become) holy matter, and they rouse our sensations to the experience of beauty. These books promote shifts in the definition of matter and beauty that have far-reaching repercussions for art history’s endeavors to understand both the production and the perception of medieval art, especially in their assertion of the *agency* of art: its actions, behaviors, and being.

Though they do not engage with her work, Bynum and Carruthers put Jane Bennett’s call to “shift from the language of epistemology to that of ontology,” announced in *Vibrant Matter*,¹ into action. Bynum does so by

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delineating the theological consequences of holy matter and its paradoxes of change for medieval practitioners of Christianity, and Carruthers by tracing the rhetorical operations of human-made medieval arts as these affect and persuade their viewers through an appeal to the senses. An important conversation opens up for readers between Bynum’s emphasis on theology and Carruthers’s on rhetoric in the interpretation of medieval materiality. Especially provocative is Carruthers’s isolation of “a criticism of medieval arts that has become over-theologized and over-moralized” (8). Both authors, however, meet in the realm of *experience*, and provide art historians with a welcome opportunity to re-negotiate the frameworks of theology and rhetoric in direct correlation to the medieval experience of works of art.

Both authors liberate medieval art from obligations of mimesis in favor of material sensation. Rather than citing iconographers in connections with specific works of art, Bynum and Carruthers cite those art historians who established the study of the experience of medieval art (e.g. Baxandall, Camille, Hamburger, Kessler, Schapiro), and introduce critiques that will make for lively debates: Bynum challenges Baxandall’s notion of a “pure object” articulated in his considerations of materials in *The Limewood Sculptors*² (299), and Carruthers cites Hamburger’s distinction of theological and aesthetic “realms of discourse”³ in warning that “one must be careful as well not to introduce a falsely rigid ‘ring-fence’ between the two discourses” (8).

An unspoken “ring-fence” does gird both books, however, on the matter of secular art, which is for the large part kept out of the discussion. The frameworks

used to prioritize religious art, but the brief explorations of the *Roman de la Rose* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* made me wonder about how more analysis of secular art might have tested the theories of paradox and sensation and benefitted from them. To do so would continue the important conversation begun by Alicia Walker and Amanda Luyster in their anthology, *Negotiating Secular and Sacred in Medieval Art*, and the Boston College 2006 exhibition, *Sacred Secular*.⁴ Barbara Newman's recent work in medieval literature perceives a practice of intermingling of "pagan *matiere* [and] *Christan sens*" to create what she calls "secular *conjointure*." This approach allows her to treat "Knights of Arthur, Knights of Christ" in Arthurian legend, as well as the literary traditions and genres active in the writing of Marguerite Porete.⁵ Carruthers's call to not over-theologize should motivate readers to open up more secular venues of interpretation.

Nonetheless, the wealth of materials and analysis that Bynum brings to bear on the issues of flux, paradox, and change, significantly re-conceptualize matter with far-reaching consequences for both religious and secular considerations. The first chapter, "Visual Matter" focuses on devotional objects identified as *Andachtsbilder* in order to examine the physicality of medieval works of art that conflate "object and image, body and matter, representation/reproduction and numinous thing" (120). This conflation is never stable, and instills both possibility and flux in medieval images as these convey holy matter. The claim that medieval craftsmen purposefully used materials that called attention to their own materiality (38) will certainly interest the authors

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and readers of this volume, and builds upon the fascinating work of Jacqueline Jung about medieval sculptures' ability to elicit tactile as well as visionary responses through their materiality.⁶ “The Power of Objects” provides the conceptual prequel of any medieval image by considering how the process of materialization is also one of animation (125). Here, miraculous appearances known as *Dauerwunder* (“miracles of metamorphosis” in Bynum’s wonderful phrase, 128) set the stage, especially as they call attention to the transformation of holy matter. Relics, visions, sacramentals, and blessings demonstrate the volatility of holy matter that, by the end of the chapter’s discussion of anti-Jewish libels, is understood as “tool in both the deployment and the questioning of ecclesiastical and social power” (175).

Bynum announces a shift “from politics to ontology” in her third chapter, “Holy Pieces.” Less concerned here with the reception (and thus politics) of *Andachtsbilder* and *Dauerwunder*, Bynum studies what happens when things fall apart. Decay, putrefaction, and fragmentation promised both proliferation *and* degeneration. In the category collapse of holy matter, bodies, and objects, all experience the dynamics of decay: what might art historians do with damaged, rotten, fallen, or broken works of art? What are the possibilities of interpretation for re-used artworks, and salvaged images? The theological payoff of the chapter is a discussion of concomitance, a theory of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist elegantly explained by Bynum as “with Christ, part is whole” (208). This chapter’s elisions between bodies and objects create an opportunity for art historians to rethink the animate matter of medieval works of art: all medieval

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images made by human hands are regenerated fragments of other materials: asking about what dangers and possibilities flourish in these re-assemblies can provoke a reconsideration of the volatile status of art objects in the Middle Ages. Bynum's final chapter, "Matter and Miracles," grapples with holy matter through the writings of natural philosophers and theologians. Of special interest to art historians will be Isidore of Seville's etymology of matter (housed in his discussion of wood and woodworkers) as it expands on the Latin definition of the word *materia* meaning timber. Bynum quotes the especially revealing idea: "All wood is called matter because from it something is made, so if you refer to a door or a statue, it will be matter" (231). This organic quality of matter, with its etymological and physical roots in wood, animates artistic production in any medium (think of the egg yolks of tempera paint, the powerful stones of reliquaries, the badger hair recommended by Theophilus for painting on stained glass). The ontological volatility of the trajectory from tree to wood to cross, or stone to statue awaits demarcation and discussion. The paradox, flux, change, volatility, danger, and possibility of holy matter were enervated by the need to consistently (and correctly?) renew holy matter. So intense was this need that, Bynum claims, "material re-creation was a miracle paralleling material creation" (264). Bynum leaves us with matter/s writhing with possibilities both fantastic and corrosive, and ever-contested.

Where Bynum's book uncovers the anxieties of the re-creation of matter, Carruthers revels in the play of human sensations in response to the material world—its recreation, in the ludic sense. Through revelry and revelation,

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Carruthers reframes human-made medieval arts. Materiality is manifest here not, as it is for Bynum, in the matter of the works of art, but in the human sensations which apprehend them and understand them as beauty. Carruthers is bold in her assertion that “medieval aesthetic experience is bound into human sensation and that human knowledge is sense-derived, the agents of which are all corporeal” (8). By calling for a shift from theology to rhetoric in the experience of beauty, she distinguishes her work from the theological conception of beauty first articulated by Edgar De Bruyne in 1946 and perpetuated by Umberto Eco (8). She prizes human sensation, so often feared and denigrated, as the conduit to beauty. But this conduit must be carefully guided and even guarded, and Carruthers’s book identifies and exercises the rhetorical principles and strategies that provide that guidance.

Each chapter of *The Experience of Beauty* presents a different ability of beauty to persuade through its appeal to human sensation. These rhetorics of beauty are anything but mutually exclusive, and culminate in “a variously sensory, complex aesthetic experience” (39). They suggest the possibility for interpretations of medieval works of art based on sensation as much as Scripture.

“Artful Play” explores the connection between humor and play, and *the* humors and well-being, gathering writings as disparate as Bernardino Gómez Miedes’s 1572/9 *Commentaries on Salt*⁷ and the Anglo-Saxon *Dream of the Rood* to illustrate the ludic vibrancy of sensation. “Sensory Complexion and Style” presents *ductus*, the “intended movement” (79) of a work of art as exercised through its style—a rhetorical term understood in this chapter through texts, but

with multiple possibilities for art historians to reconsider visual style as one of the agentic and persuasive elements of a work of art.⁸ *Dulcis* and *suavis* are the pursuit in “Taking the Bitter with the Sweet,” pausing on our paradoxical knowledge of sweetness through bitterness, and intertwining the orator’s skill with that of the physician’s: both must know how to dispense sweetness for its persuasive/curative properties to take effect. In controversy with those who maintain that the senses must be transcended in order to reach God, Carruthers defines *sapientia* as “intelligent belief based upon experience of the world” (99). Sweetness is rational, not only sensual. In “Taste and Good Taste” Carruthers argues that the impetus for associating the gustatory sense of taste with the aesthetic category of “good taste” was first developed in the Middle Ages. This chapter holds the wonderful pursuit of an “honest finial,” a phrase from a 1433 building commission that piqued Carruthers’s curiosity. Through deft lexical work, Carruthers aligns *honestus* with *utilis*: an honest finial is one that is fitting and proper (resonating with the modern aesthetic of “form follows function”). Cicero’s *On Friendship* reconnects with taste through its association of honesty and sweetness, joining mastication and meditation.⁹

The chapter “Varietas” might be the most gripping for art historians as it offers a radical rethinking of Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Apologia* by moving his much-maligned monsters from the realm of imagination (where they distract) to that of sensation (where they shock the monk out of *taedium*). “They do not represent a *possible* demonic struggle,” Carruthers argues, “They immediately relieve an *actual* one” (148). Art is not a stepping stone or trigger to dangerous

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and beneficial ideas, it is a locus of relief, an attractive force, for them. The multiplicity of images initiated by monsters is expanded into a greater way of seeing that Carruthers dubs “polyfocal perspective” (151). One of the most pleasurable temptations of this book is to apply the terms Carruthers isolates to a wider variety of works of art than she discusses: how is the wound of Christ sweet and honest? How might images of Arthurian legend display their *ductus*? “Ordinary Beauty” is less a culmination than a final exploration of the sensations associated with the rhetorical term *pulchritudo*. The English language retains the directionality of beauty by finding a work of art “moving” and this final chapter starts our eye moving over surfaces, a fundamental emphasis of *pulchritudo*. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Julian of Norwich, and Glorieuse Achevissance (“wonderful completion”) are all enlisted in a study of surface and scale. *Brevitas* and *amplificatio* scale the representational field of beauty, and wonder enters the picture through *subtilitas* and *trompe l’oeil*. In Carruthers’s book, the experience of beauty is the pleasure of persuasion, whose final goal is as close to an understanding of the divine as we might reach through our senses.

Together, *Christian Materiality* and *The Experience of Beauty* provide a wealth of “stuff” (texts, images, substances, sensations) for medieval art history motivated by the renewed interest in matter and physicality found in New Materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology, and Actor-Network Theory. None of these theoretical frameworks are formative to Bynum’s and Carruthers’s arguments, however. Carruthers makes no mention of them, and Bynum repeatedly distances her work from theirs through historical specificity. There is

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no obligation of course to work with, or even mention, theory, but the “specificity of the medieval situation” (Bynum, 32) does not have to cut it off from contemporary discourse. Bynum’s footnotes reveal a good deal of thinking about where to position contemporary theories such as Actor-Network Theory that are so powerfully resonant with the agency of medieval materials that she analyzes: “I am, after all,” she says “modern and would not be able to ask questions about difference at all without modern theories to think with” (284). In the end, however, she considers the divides that medieval and modern materiality struggle over too different to align. Modern theory’s inapplicability to medieval circumstances keeps the two periods at bay.¹⁰ But what of medieval theory’s applicability, indeed critique, of modern circumstances?¹¹ Bynum hints at this idea by suggesting that “acquaintance with medieval assumptions... unsettles some modern theorizing” (284), but I would more vigorously open this to an invitation. Many of the revelations of agency and materiality being developed in contemporary theory were active in the Middle Ages, and medievalists have much to share with modern thinkers struggling through the economic, ethical, and social problems of inert materiality and deadened physicality. Bynum’s generative fragment can meet Jane Bennett’s vital materialism *and further her critique* of modernity’s stilling of matter; Carruthers’s *ductus* can meet Ian Bogost’s unit operations *and expand his definition* of objects’ intentions. I would recommend *Christian Materiality* to both neuroscientists and politicians for the book’s explanation of the crucial role of materiality in re-presenting abstract forces, and I would share Carruthers’s book with video game designers and

endocrinologists for its explanation of how human sensations are quickened and persuaded. These are perhaps utopic reading and thinking partners, but I am emboldened to think of the medievalist implicated in the modern world by these two marvelous books.

¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter; A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

² Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany, 1475-1525: Images and Circumstances* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1980), 90.

³ *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, eds. Jeffrey Hamburger and A. M. Bouché (Princeton: Princeton, University Press, 2005), 11.

⁴ *Negotiation Secular and Sacred in Medieval Art; Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist*, eds. Alicia Walker and Amanda Luyster (London: Ashgate, 2009); *Secular/Sacred 11th-16th Century: Works from the Boston Public Library and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, ed. Nancy Netzer (Boston College: McMullen Museum of Art, 2006).

⁵ Barbara Newman, *Medieval Crossover; Reading the Secular against the Sacred* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

⁶ Jacqueline Jung, "The Tactile and the Visionary: Notes on the Place of Sculpture in the Medieval Religious Imagination," in *Looking Beyond: Visions, Dreams, and Insights in Medieval Art and History*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton: Index of Christian Art, 2010), 203-240.

⁷ Gómez Miedes produced two editions of the work, one in 1572, and an expanded version in 1579. The 1572 edition is available on-line through the *Making of the Modern World* database, and the 1579 edition is available in a critical edition and Spanish translation compiled by Romas Maldonado. (Carruthers, 30).

⁸ Carruthers's work is amplified here, especially on the issue of auditory sensation and music, by Beth Samways Williamson, "Sensory Experience in Medieval Devotion: Sound and Vision, Invisibility and Silence," *Speculum* 88:1 (January 2013): 1-43.

⁹ This passage should elicit re-readings of Michael Camille, “Mouths and Meanings: Towards an Anti-Iconography of Medieval Art,” in *Iconography at the Crossroads*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton University Press, 1993), 43-58.

¹⁰ Moments of modern intervention appear only in footnotes, where Bynum mentions Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko and Carruthers cites Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. D. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003).

¹¹ Amy Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2011) and Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012) put modern and medieval works of art together on issues such as broken bodies (Powell: Rogier van der Weyden’s *Deposition* and Hans Belmer’s dolls) and “Airplanes and Altarpieces” (the title of one of Nagel’s chapters). Part of the point in these innovative books is to acknowledge the compressed temporality of the contemporary viewing experience: one afternoon in a museum has every chance of yielding both medieval and modern art and these books seek an interpretive model for that experience. They also draw attention to material continuity beyond the time of creation, to that of contemporary re/creation. Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) examines the medieval underpinning of the modern theories of French philosophers George Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes.