
Editorial Introduction

This collection of essays has its origins in a session organized by Catherine Harding for the November 1997 annual meeting of the Universities Art Association of Canada, held in Vancouver, entitled “Intercultural Perspectives in Medieval and Renaissance Art.” The papers presented on that occasion explored a series of boundaries in European society, mostly shaped by religious practice, but always with political or social overtones. Since art historians in Canada are increasingly engaging with the complex issues involved in defining cultural exchange and cultural difference, a call for papers was issued for a special issue of *RACAR* that would take this topic as its theme.

Medieval societies, like all societies, defined themselves in terms not only of what they were, but also what they were not – and the lines of demarcation were expressed visibly in many aspects of their material production, from their buildings to their books. This topic would appear to have particular reference for a country like Canada, fractured by language and geography, that is similarly struggling to find an acceptable self-definition, and in the process having to confront not only its own historic past but also its current position with regard to its neighbours on an ever shrinking planet. As historians, we believe that the study of the past has relevance for contemporary issues. By exploring how boundaries were constructed, expressed and transgressed in the past, we can perhaps gain some new perspectives on similar practices in our own world.

The four articles which follow represent the *primi passi* in what we hope will be a long and fruitful dialogue. Each of the scholars represented here addresses, either explicitly or implic-

itly, the question of how we discern and communicate differences within or between social groupings. Their different accounts demonstrate that societies ascribe particular *values* to those differences. The boundaries in question range widely. Within the context of a single society, they can lie between two contemporary communities, as is the case with Carol Knicely’s exploration of the secular and monastic audiences for the Souillac portal; or between the past and the present, as in Michael Reed’s examination of the pagan antecedents for Scandinavian stave churches. Or they can cross between societies and their dominant religions, as in Deirdre Jackson’s examination of apotropaic images of the Virgin in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*; or Catherine Harding and Nancy Micklewright’s exploration of the contrasts between the late medieval cities of Venice and Cairo in their use of images representing, or materials appropriated from, the “other.” Although at first glance these papers may seem to address widely differing topics, they share this common underlying theme.

It is our hope that this volume will motivate others to add their voices to this discussion, bringing evidence to bear from other times and other places. As members of the UAAC, we find ourselves not merely scattered across five time zones, but increasingly in marginal positions within our individual academic “homes,” with the very existence of our discipline under constant threat. But the exploration of common themes is perhaps one way in which we can transcend our own intellectual boundaries, and in that process create a place of greater importance for the discipline of art history within the current discourse regarding the future of the “academy.”