

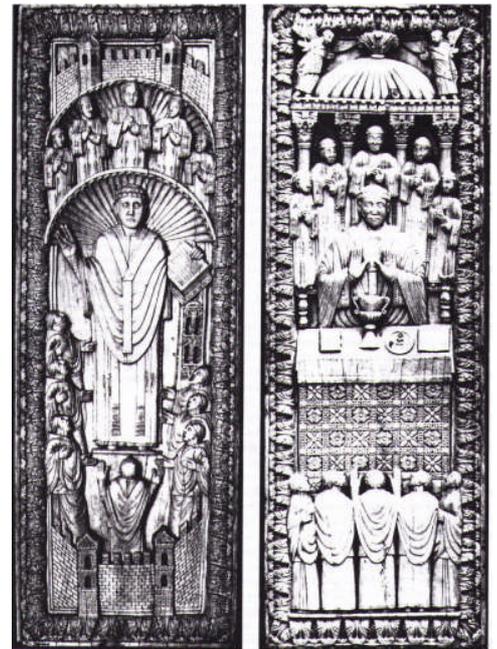
Ritual and Art in the Middle Ages

ARTH 533B Winter 2006 Term 1

Instructor: Carol Knicely



Gentile Bellini
Procession in St. Marks Square 1496



2
Clerics singing psalms.
Ivory, late Carolingian

31
Celebration of the Mass.
Ivory, late 10th century

Clerics singing Psalms 10th c Ivories
Celebration of Mass

This seminar will explore ritual theory in order to begin to judge the significance of ritual and its contexts for the production and reception of multiple forms of medieval art. Ironically, while anthropological and sociological literature on ritual is enormous with much interesting debate and development, there is not as much writing as one would think that specifically addresses the theory of objects and/or art in ritual. From the art historical point of view, while everyone generally recognizes the importance of ritual for medieval art, the number of studies that addresses its significance specifically are few and far between, but may be growing.¹ The objective of this seminar will be to

¹ I just received a call for papers for the Kalamazoo International Congress on Medieval Studies (May 2007) for a session "Movement and Meaning in Medieval Art and Architecture." The call begins, "In the

attempt to begin to bridge this gap with a goal for developing theory of art and ritual along with objective studies.

The difficulty with expanding definitions of ritual is that all art and reception of art can be deemed in some way to be ritual. The Middle Ages, of course, is considered particularly apt for ritual studies because the great majority of this art was made for religious purposes ripe with ritual. We are speaking here not just of manuscripts and liturgical objects of the mass, but even the whole fabric of churches, its division of spaces and movement around these spaces along with more ephemeral and intangible aspects of ritual like incense and music. Books of Hours made for lay patrons were prayer books as well as objects of display and status. Death, a major rite of passage, was a predominant concern throughout the Middle Ages and much art was developed in relation to this concern. Pilgrimage was hugely important in the Middle Ages motivating large expenditures on art while ritualizing viewers contact with sacred objects such as reliquaries. There have in fact been strong debates about theories of pilgrimage in relation to Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas*, which we will address in the seminar. One should not think, however, that ritual is strictly a religious affair. There are of course the highly ritualized movements and ceremonies of rulers, admittedly quasi religious, in the Middle Ages. Ernst Kantorowicz's seminal study, *The King's Two Bodies*, will be a focus of attention. Later Medieval Royal Entries and festivals were full of ephemeral art and highly ritualized in significant ways. One could, indeed, say that the whole chivalric mode of behaviour was ritualized enhanced by costume and gesture. Ceremonial weaponry and jewelry has produced some of the more spectacular works of art. Even concepts of love making and sexual behaviour were played out and represented through ritual metaphors like playing a game of chess.

To be sure, ritual begins to become all too pervasive. In the end, what will thinking about ritual gain for us in our understanding of medieval art? Does it help us understand visual forms and how visuality works? We can assume that ritual enhances impact and makes the experience of medieval art all the more powerful, but from our distance, how can we hope to judge this? Moreover, scholars on ritual argue that rituals

Middle Ages, buildings and works of art were often experienced through ritual actions involving movement of objects or through the viewer's own movements. Movement, thus, is a fundamental category for the interpretation of art."

are "never generic, and never repeatable." "Every single ritual that ever happened or ever will happen, is, was or will be unique."² While art historians love to explain the complex symbolism in art works, ritual theorists often say that participants very often do not understand (or have long forgotten) the meaning behind ritual symbolism and presumably complex meaning in art as well. Rituals and ritual actions seem to be powerful and tenacious, carried out often with little understanding as to why. Clearly also, some participants such as clerics might be more aware of symbolism than other lay participants. Rituals may even be esoteric precisely to empower a particular group of those in the know. What is more, from a scholarly point of view, Catherine Bell has pointed out that the "formal study of ritual is a relatively recent and localized phenomenon."³ The concept of ritual is a construction, one that has developed and changed significantly over a short time. It would be dangerous to think that it is in any way "universal." Significantly, the word ritual with our general sense of its meaning did not exist in the Middle Ages. Hopefully, by the end of the seminar we will be able to determine if there is any real value in the study of ritual and medieval art.

Required Books

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Cooke, Bernard and Gary Macy. *Christian Symbol and Ritual: An Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Other texts and articles will be made available on reserve or on WebCT

Evaluation

Assessment will be based on general participation, follow-up should tasks or exercises be assigned in class, performance as a discussant for readings (40%), research topic presentation (15%) and final written paper (45%).

² Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy, *Christian Symbol and Ritual: An Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) , 24

³ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) ix.