# Medieval 'mise-en-abyme': the object depicted within itself

**16th of February 2009, 2.00-6.00 pm.**



## Papers and abstracts:

**Stuart Whatling, (Courtauld Institute of Art):**
*Putting Mise-en-abyme in its (medieval) place*

In the curious language of heraldry, the *abyme* or *fess-point* is the exact centre of an escutcheon. To place something *en abyme* simply means to depict it in the middle of the shield. The term was usually reserved however for the practice of placing at that central spot a smaller shield with its own bearings, which in some way modified the meaning of the bearings on the main shield.

Fig. 1 - The Arms of George III (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:UK_Arms_1801.svg)

For example, the bearings proper of King George III (Fig. 1), comprised the arms of England, Scotland and Ireland, with, *en abyme*, the escutcheon of Hanover, which itself has placed *en abyme* the crown of Charlemagne.

The expression '*mise en abyme*' might well have remained an obscure *terminus technicus* of the heralds, had not André Gide, himself a keen student of heraldry, used it to describe a form of self-reflexive embedding found in various art-forms. As Gide explained in his journal; "In a work of art I rather like to find transposed, on the scale of the characters, the very subject of that work. Thus in paintings by Memling or Quentin Metzys, a small dark convex mirror reflects the interior of the room in which the action of the painting takes place. Likewise in Velázquez's painting of the *Meniñas* ... in the play scene in *Hamlet* and in many other plays. None of these is altogether exact. What would explain better what I'd wanted to do in my *Cahiers*, in *Narcise* and in *La Tentative*, would be a comparison with the device from heraldry that involves putting a second representation of the original shield '*en abyme*' within it".

Gide's use of this term '*mise en abyme*' was picked up by Magny in his history of the French novel and it gradually became part of the analytical lexicon of literary scholars, particular after the publication in 1977 of Lucien Dällenbach's book '*Le récit spéculaire*, which was the first comprehensive attempt at exploring the poetics of *mise en abyme*. The term subsequently entered the discourses of art-history as well, particularly amongst those working on the early-modern period, who saw in its inherent self-reflexivity an index of artistic 'self-awareness'. The phenomenon has however been largely ignored by medievalists, despite its frequent occurrence in presentation scenes, author

portraits and many other contexts. This professional disinterest may in part be due to a lack of awareness of or interest in such discourses, and in part due to an innate distrust of theory in general. The question which underlies today's session is whether the exploration of *mise en abyme* as a distinct artistic phenomenon has anything to offer us, or would such a discourse be an empty exercise in theory for theory's sake.

From Gide's point of view, what mattered was not the mere presence of an embedded image or narrative within a larger whole but the fact that the thing thus contained resembled that which contained it - and more importantly that this resemblance in some way informed the viewer or reader about the form or meaning of the whole (which, as anyone who has read his more self-reflexive works will realise, was precisely the effect for which he was striving). Thus in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the Prince has the players perform '*The Murder of Gonzago*' (the plot of which resembles his own story) that it might *"...prick the conscience of the King"* and thereby provoke the latter into revealing his guilt.

Similarly in *Las Meniñas*, Velasquez includes the King and Queen as reflections in the mirror at the back of the painter's studio - a reflection of what is outside the picture, which helps to contextualise and explain what is within it (although to judge by much of the recent historiography, it serves rather to problematize matters).

It is this *meta*-narrative function of *mise en abyme* which interests me when considering its uses in medieval art - that is to say the ways in which the use of the device contributes to a viewer's reception of the narrative context in which it occurs.

Fig. 2 - The Hartker Antiphonary (see: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gregory_I_-_Antiphonary_of_Hartker_of_Sankt_Gallen.jpg)

One of the main contexts in which *mise en abyme* occurs in medieval art is in the *narrativising* of some key event in the life of the object. Of such events, the most important were normally creation and donation.

Fig. 2, for example, shows a typical author-portrait showing the birth of the Gregorian Mass. To depict upon an object a scene showing either the origin or the purpose of its own existence reifies its foundation-myth in a manner that makes it inseparable from the object itself. Visualising the story in this way helps to embed it in the viewer's repertoire of remembered narratives in a far more potent way than traditional prosopopoeic inscriptions of the so-and-so *"me fecit"* form.

Before considering the functions of *mise en abyme* in more detail, there are two theoretical problems to address concerning iconicity, that is to say the manner in which the thing contained *resembles* its container. All of the examples discussed here can be said to be 'iconic' (in the Peircean typology of the sign) but the nature of the visual resemblance and the issue of what exactly constitutes the object of that resemblance is often far from clear.

Fig. 3 - The Parma Ilefonsus [image removed for copyright reasons]

Dealing with the second of these problems first, I would like to examine some images of books that appear within a randomly chosen manuscript, the Parma Ildefonsus, and consider what they might represent. Of the 35 miniatures in the Parma codex, codices are depicted in no less than 15. All of these "books portrayed within a book" might potentially be considered as *mises en abyme*, since they are images of an object which appear inside an object of the same type. Here for example (Fig. 3), we see a standard author portrait in which the 7th century monk Ildefonsus is writing the autograph copy of his polemic in defence of the Virgin birth. Clearly the book depicted in the illumination is not the same physical codex which contains it, since that was made some 400 years after the author's death. Nevertheless, the codex depicted can be seen either as the prototype of the present manuscript, as its causative agent, or simply as a metonym for the words of Ildefonsus. [and for anyone whose classical rhetoric is a bit rusty, metonymy is simply the substitution of some attribute or characteristic of a thing for the thing itself]

Fig. 4 - Parma Ildefonsus, f.9v [Image removed for copyright reasons]

But what about the book held by the Virgin in folio 9 verso (Fig. 4)? Is this a symbolic representation of Mary accepting the words of Ildefonsus' book in Her honour? Or is it showing Her agency as the divine inspiration of those words?

Fig. 5 - Parma Ildefonsus, f.44v [Image removed for copyright reasons]

And here we have three books. The ones held by Mark and Luke at the bottom are easy - these are metonyms for the words of their respective Gospels. But what about the one held by Christ? Is it the book of judgement? (probably not since it doesn't have seven seals) Is it instead a metonym for Christian theology as a whole? Or is it a conventional symbol of the divine Logos (in which case the book is a much a Portrait of Christ as is the figure of the man who holds it)?

Fig. 6 - Parma Ildefonsus, f.36r [Image removed for copyright reasons]

And finally (Fig. 6) we have a firm case for the book as metonym for the words of its author - here an Old Testament book of Prophecy which appears as part of a three-fold representation of Malachi verse 3, made up of the rubricator's "Dicit Malachi" above the picture, Malachi's words "Veniet ad templum..." beneath it, plus the image of Malachi himself speaking these words and his auditors preparing to obey him.

Interestingly, the one mode of signification that does *not* appear in the Parma manuscript is the truest sense of mise en abyme, in which the physical codex depicted is the same one that contains it.

Fig. 7 - Oxford Bodleian Library MS. Bodley 717, f.287v (see

http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval/jpegs/imagecat/500/imac0968.jpg)

Precisely this kind of self-reflexive images do appear however in various manuscripts as a 'visual colophon', such as the scribal self-portrait of 'Hugo pictor' at the end of Oxford ms. Bodley 717 (Fig. 7), which, as the rubric tells us, shows the illustrator of "this work". Thus, by implication, the colourful manuscript shown on Hugo's desk is the same one held in the reader's own hands as he views this image.

So when considering the question of "what exactly constitutes the object of the resemblance in a mise en abyme", we find a continuum of sorts, ranging from the purely generic (a type of object) to the very particular (a specific physical instance of that type which contains its own image).

If these distinctions all seem overly pedantic, it is worth noting that they fit rather neatly into medieval scholastic distinctions between *quidditas* and *haeccaetas*, between 'what-ness' and 'this-ness'. An image of a codex, as a sign, may signify the Platonic 'idea' of 'book-ness', or it may signify a specific instance of 'book'. Similarly, the idea that 'the thing contained' might reveal clues about the nature of 'the thing that contains it' parallels rather nicely the debates about the relationship between Microcosm and Macrocosm, which exercised writers from Pseudo-Dionysius to Aquinas and beyond.

As well as asking what exactly the depicted object depicts, one might also consider the manner of its depiction - the way in which it resembles its object. In terms of the debates about the semiotic nature of art, the various depictions of codices in the preceding slides are all firmly at the schematic/conventional end of the spectrum. One would not necessarily read the object depicted on Hugo's desk as 'a book' without at least some familiarity with the conventions of Romanesque painting.

At the opposite end of the iconicity spectrum is the presentation miniature in the *Chroniques de Hainaut* attributed to Rogier Van der Weyden. Here, the volume being presented to Philip the Good is depicted with such precision and naturalism that one would feel quite confident about being able to pick it out from amongst its peers in the Ducal Library (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8 - Detail of Presentation scene from the Chroniques de Hainaut (see

http://images.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/aa/Van_der_weyden_miniature_Charles.jpg&imgrefurl=http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Van_der_weyden_miniature_Charles.jpg&usg=__Q97A5UBd24HTVZuaKqdXTMc3wG0=&h=761&w=316&sz=452&hl=en&start=3&um=1&tbnid=a4LCTDB9mjoCmM:&tbnh=142&tbnw=59&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dchroniques%2Bhainault%26hl%3Den%26rlz%3D1T4HPEB_en-GBGB279GB280%26sa%3DN%26um%3D1)

Yet we can be equally confident that the tanned and tooled leather binding depicted in the miniature looks nothing like the actual binding that originally contained it, since the latter was described in an early inventory as being bound in figured black satin. The lack of accurate resemblance of the object in presentation scenes should come as no surprise since on a narrative level they are always proleptic, by which I mean they prefigure a future event. For purely practical reasons, presentations miniatures had to be painted before the book was bound and hence before its presentation. In this, as in most other cases, it is not a detailed physical resemblance that identifies the depicted object with the object containing the depiction but the combination of a generic resemblance and the context in which it is depicted.

Notwithstanding this caveat, there are various cases where the artist has included information to emphasise the particular relationship between the depicted object and its container.
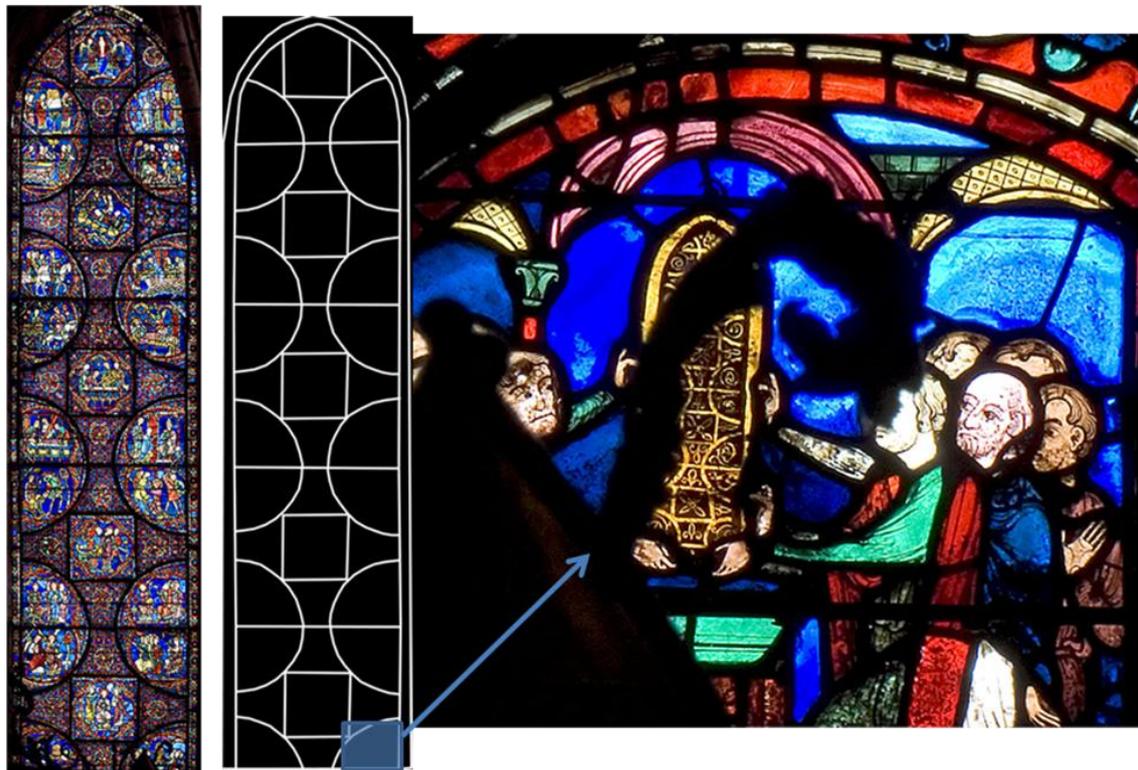

Fig. 9 - Chartres, Bay 13 (St Stephen Window)

For example in the donor panel at the bottom right of the Relics of St Stephen window at Chartres (Fig. 9), the window which is being offered to the Church by the *Cordonniers* has a carefully drawn armature pattern which perfectly matches the armature of the actual window that contains it. The pictorial contents of the miniaturised panels are elided but the 'quotation' does not have to be exact for it to be instantly recognisable - and this is the only window at Chartres which employs this particular pattern.

Fig. 10 - Le Mans Cathedral, Bay 109, Panel C1

One may contrast this example with various windows appearing in donation scenes in the surviving 13<sup>th</sup>-century glass at Le Mans cathedral. In most cases, the offered panel is depicted without any internal detail, as in this example from bay 109 (Fig. 10), made around 1250.
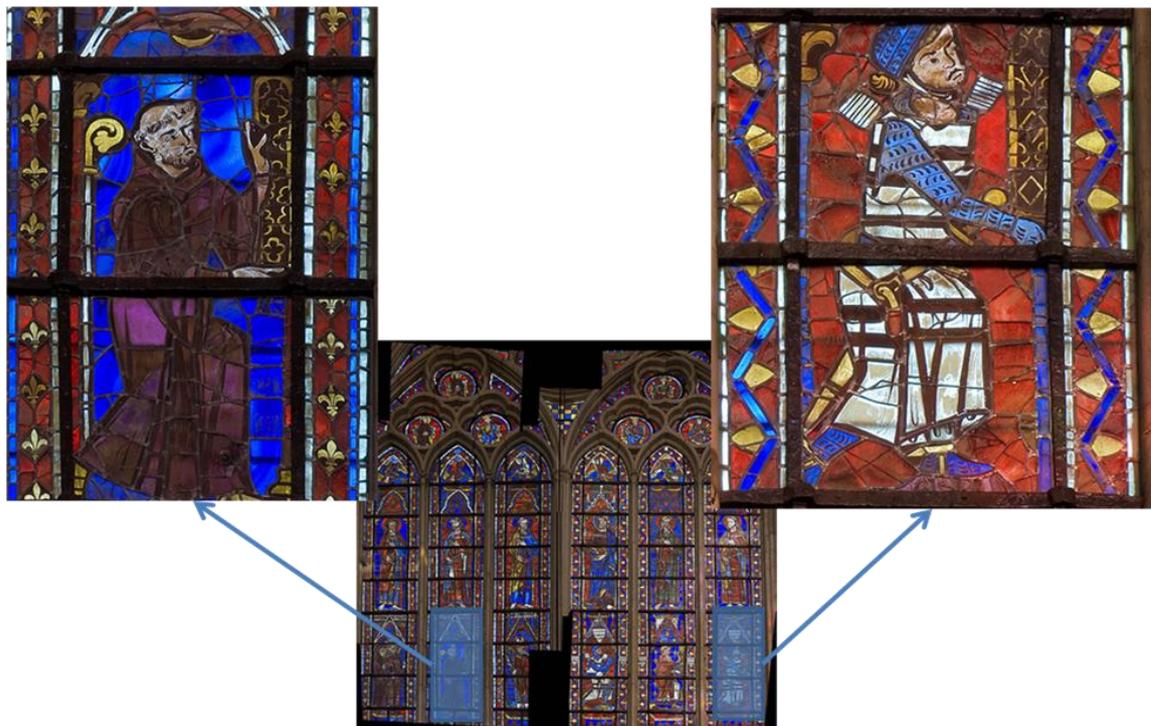


Fig. 11 - Le Mans Cathedral, Bay 207

Even more interesting however are the donor panels in another of these clerestory Windows, that of the de Cormes family in bay 207 (Fig. 11). These two donors each hold up lancets with clearly indicated medallions; yet in both cases these patterns of quatrefoils and lozenges are of a type characteristic of windows made some 30-50 years earlier, such as those of Chartres, or from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century radiating chapels here at Le Mans. By using such outmoded patterns the artist was not suggesting that either of these donors were responsible for some other, earlier windows. Instead he was simply

adopting an iconic form that was more familiar to contemporary audiences and hence more easily recognised as windows when viewed from a distance.

Fig. 12 - BL. Royal MS 10.A.XIII, f.2v [Image removed for copyright reasons]

With manuscripts, the simplest way of foregrounding the specific relationship between a particular codex and its image in an authorial or scribal portrait is to show the opening words of the associated text in the process of being written, as in this copy of the Rule of St Benedict from Canterbury (Fig. 12). Although this particular manuscript was made around 1180, long after the death of St Dunstan, his inclusion in the frontispiece is a way of asserting that the text that follows is an accurate copy of his own transcription of the Rule. In an age when there could be considerable variation between manuscript copies derived from a common prototype, the appeal of such modality markers is obvious.

Images like this one often find a new life in the historiography of manuscript illumination as depictions of the working practices of scribes, despite obvious inaccuracies, such as the fact that the scribes are shown writing in bound codices, rather than on loose sheets as would normally have been the case. From the viewpoint of the original audiences (if not the art historian), instead of devaluing the narrative truth-claim of the image, such 'modifications' enhance it by emphasising the author's agency and hence the relationship between the depicted act of writing and the book that contains it.

Authorial portraits could also be enhanced to make additional claims for the truth-value of the associated text by suggesting divine inspiration. This was particularly common for the Evangelists and the Fathers of the Church. Thus the frontispiece of the Hartker Antiphonary (Fig. 2) shows the nimbed Pope Gregory I, dictating to a seated scribe, while the Holy Ghost, in the form of a dove, whispers in his ear.

Fig. 13 - Hagia Sophia, Istanbul; Presentation mosaic (see

http://travellingcam.files.wordpress.com/2006/09/mosaic-at-the-hagia-sophia.jpg)

Apart from author portraits, presentation scenes are perhaps the most widespread forms of *mise en abyme*, both in their frequency and in the diversity of object on which they appear. The giving of gifts was an essential part of medieval life, in secular and religious spheres alike, and the acceptance of a gift generally implied the acceptance of some reciprocal obligation towards the giver. Within such gift-oriented communities, to have an act of giving permanently inscribed upon the gift itself had obvious benefits, not only in the short term but also as a reminder to future generations of the benefactor's piety and generosity. I'm not going to talk about the famous Hagia Sophia mosaic (Fig. 13) since there are others here who know this work far better than I - but I will just point out that we have here a double mise-en-abyme, since it shows Justinian with a model of the church in which this mosaic is located and Constantine holding a miniature version of the city which contains that church.

Fig. 14 - Portable Altar slab, Louvre (ex. LeRoy Collection) (see:

http://www.photo.rmn.fr/cf/htm/CSearchZ.aspx?o=&Total=339&FP=20272075&E=2K1KTS6C
G2IYT&SID=2K1KTS6CG2IYT&New=T&Pic=133&SubE=2C6NU07E4E4E)

On a slightly smaller scale, the object in Fig. 14 is all that survives of a portable altar made in northern Germany around the end of the eleventh century. It has lost its box-like base, but the upper part consists of a rectangular slab of serpentine marble, surrounded by a border of silver gilt. The lower border is inscribed with the Virgin enthroned, flanked by six highly animated apostles. Near the very bottom of this border is the prostrate figure of a tonsured monk, who places an object beneath the Virgin's right foot. The original catalogue entry cautiously described this object as "*an open book (?)*". However careful examination suggests it is not a book at all but an oblong-shaped object with a slightly overhanging top face, just as this portable altar would have been before it lost its base. Limitations of the medium and style make it difficult to be absolute in this identification, but a comparison between the presented object and the books held by various other figures is revealing. (Those who still prefer to see it as an book would also need to find some other explanation for why the donor of an altar should be placing an open book under the Virgin's foot). The implication that the prostrate monk is depicted as presenting *this* portable altar to the Mother of God is strengthened by both the content and the alignment of the dedicatory inscription which runs clockwise around the altar. This starts beneath the donor and ends in the middle of the bottom margin, directly beneath the act of donation that it records, with the words "accept this gift from your servant Rudolfus" [*RVODOLFI FAMULI SUSCIPE DONATI*]. Showing the altar itself being offered to, and accepted by, the Virgin makes potent claims about the merit due to the object and also to its giver. As Joanna Cannon has pointed out, placing oneself beneath the foot of a ruler was an age-old sign of fealty and the depiction of such an act here serves to indicate Mary's acceptance of Rudolfus' vassalage. That the Virgin's foot is resting on the portable altar also sets in train a sequence of metaphors concerning Mary as "the altar that bore Christ" - here herself born on an altar tablet that will bear the transubstantiated body of her son each time it is used. By inscribing the altar tablet with its own 'autobiography', both verbal and visual, Rudolfus has staked a powerful claim for a place in the memories (and intercessory prayers) of all the priests who would use it after his death.

Another example of a presentation-scene, one which takes *mise en abyme* to a second level of embedding, can be found on an orphrey in the Musée de Cluny, that once decorated the back of a chasuble made around the end of the 13th-century (Fig. 15).

Fig. 15 - The 'Manasses' Orphrey (Musee de Cluny) (see:

http://www.photo.rmn.fr/cf/htm/CSearchZ.aspx?o=&Total=4&FP=20275612&E=2K1KTS6CG
NYHL&SID=2K1KTS6CGNYHL&New=T&Pic=4&SubE=2C6NU0SUQTLD)

The orphrey is divided into three rectangular fields, each with detailed captions. In the upper panel is a conventional iconic/hieratic scene of the Virgin and Child enthroned, flanked by Saints Viventius and Peter. The middle panel shows a tonsured and bearded monk kneeling in front of an altar, towards which he holds out a chasuble. The scene is set within a fictive architectural frame representing a transverse section through a basilica, through the upper parts of which are threaded the inscription; "Before the altar, Brother Peter offers this complete sacerdotal vestment". Beneath this scene, in the lowest register, are two kneeling secular figures, also clearly identified by an inscription as the monastery's 10th century founders. It reads; "Count Manasses and Countess Ermengarde, founders of the monastery known as *Vergy*, offer it to God, to Saint Viventius, to the Blessed Virgin and to Saint Peter". These kneeling figures, who are not themselves contained within a microarchitectural frame, are shown with their hands raised aloft, not in conventional attitudes of prayer but actively supporting the architectural stage-set within which 'Brother Peter' is making his own offering.

There is thus a double *mise en abyme* here - the presentation of a chasuble is recorded on the back of the garment itself, within an image of the church where that presentation was made and where it would subsequently be used. In terms of a conscious strategy of narrativising the gift, this image thus has a twofold function. Firstly, the 'conventional' *mise en abyme* of the garment shown within itself trumpets to posterity that one 'Brother Peter' personally presented it to the church. Secondly, it situates Brother Peter's act of generosity within the broader narrative of 'pious giving', both in general and specifically within the monastic community at Vergy, positioning the donor within the chain that leads from the first founders up to their ultimate dedicatees; God, Saint Viventius, the Blessed Virgin and Saint Peter. Indeed, when one looks at the orphrey as a whole, it is as if Manasses and Ermengarde are lifting Brother Peter upwards to help him reach their mutual celestial patrons. If not standing on the shoulders of giants, Brother Peter is at least raised up by the hands of the *primi fundatores*. It is true that the chasuble being presented by Brother Peter does not closely resemble the one on which it was mounted, nor does the church seen in cross section resemble what is known about the Romanesque structure built at Vergy in the early twelfth century. These mismatches however simply serve to emphasise how little accurate resemblance mattered in constructing an image to be read as *mise en abyme*, since the use of the deictic pronoun 'this' in both embroidered inscriptions make the identification explicit.

 As well as helping to visualise its own narratives of creation and consumption, *mise en abyme* could also serve to contextualise other visual narratives depicted upon an object by including in the image an object of the same type. There are many examples I could have shown of this but since time is pressing, I will end this brief thread with some more embroidery.

Fig.  16 - Opus Anglicanum mitre with Becket's martyrdom (Namur) [Image removed for copyright reasons].

There are at least three surviving *Opus Anglicanum* mitres embroidered with the martyrdom of Thomas Becket (Fig. 16). Each carries a conventional scene of the 'murder in the cathedral' - Thomas by the altar on the right with three heavily armoured knights approaching from the left, one of whom strikes the Bishop's head with his sword. The Munich and Sens mitres both show the broken sword tip, an element of the narrative that appears in various media, but all three also include the rare detail of Becket's own mitre, knocked from his head by the first sword blow and now lying on the floor beneath his falling body. In this respect, these images of Becket's martyrdom differ from the versions in other media, such as on enamelled reliquary chests or in stained glass which, although they often show a mitre on the Archbishop's head, never depict it lying at his feet. The Namur mitre retains its lappets, from which we can tell that the scene of Becket's martyrdom was on the back. Thus the participants in the masses when this mitre was worn would have enjoyed a ring-side view of Becket's martyrdom clearly displayed on the back of their own bishop's head. For this select audience, the small but clearly visible detail on the back of the mitre showing Becket's own mitre violently dashed to the ground must have added a certain piquancy to events especially on December 29th when his feast was celebrated and the story was fresher than ever in people's minds.

Earlier I posed the question of whether the exploration of *mise en abyme* as a distinct artistic phenomenon has anything to offer us as medievalists. I hope these few simple examples, along with many more in the papers that follow, will show that this is indeed a discourse worth pursuing, not least for the ways in which it can help us think about the original reception of medieval visual culture.
(stuart.whatling@courtauld.ac.uk)

**Eileen Rubery (The Courtauld Institute of Art):**
***The holy space as a gift to God: images of Papal donations in Byzantine Rome***

There are many Images of Popes offering models of churches to Christ or the Mother of God in Byzantine Rome, but they have not been studied in any systematic fashion. When does a Pope decide to insert an image of himself into the decoration of a church, and what might then persuade him to add a representation of the building he has built or renovated? Do the images of the church used vary depending on the nature of the actual offering being made to Christ? How closely does the model offered resemble the actual building, and does this affect the purpose of the image? Does the proposed site of the image of the Pope offering his gift within the holy space affect its attributes? What other objects do the Popes offer in similar contexts?

The paper will start with a survey of examples of such 'mise-en- abyme' in Rome between 550 and 850 AD and make some preliminary suggestions for further study based upon the results of the survey.
(edr1001@hermes.cam.ac.uk)

**Hanna Wimmer (The Warburg Institute / University of Hamburg):**
***Ad templi normam*: Frederick Barbarossa's candelabrum and the Palatine Chapel in Aachen**

In my paper, I will take the concept of the mise-en-abyme as a point of departure to look afresh at a monument of considerable historical and art-historical importance in relation to one of its most prominent liturgical objects: Charlemagne's Palatine Chapel in Aachen and Frederick the Great's light-crown suspended from the centre of the church.

Throughout the middle ages, the Palatine Chapel in Aachen remained a significant site for the Franconian kings, who regarded themselves as Charlemagne's successors. The majority of them chose it as their coronation church, lavishing gifts on it and making it an important place of imperial ritual and representation.

Frederick the Great, the first of the Hohenstauffen kings, was no exception. Among his gifts to the church is the corona, a representation of the Vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, represented metonymically by its city walls, descending from the heavens, as described in the Book of Revelation. The commission was undoubtedly part of Frederick's ambitious campaign to define his place in the line of Franconian kings, establishing himself as a follower in the footsteps of Charlemagne himself. He had the emperor canonized in 1165, striving to make the Palatine Chapel, Charlemagne's burial place, the centre of the new saint's cult.

In its formal qualities, the corona was carefully modelled on the architecture that surrounds it, a fact which is emphasized by the inscription on the corona. Its octagonal shape with 16 turrets follows not the biblical description, but the ground plan of the Palatine chapel with its central octagon and sixteen-sided ambulatory, or ring of chapels; the diameter of the corona being exactly one fourth of that of the central octagon. The symbolism of the chandelier, too, echoes that of its architectural setting: the church itself, as indicated by its dedicatory inscription, is the image and likeness of the community of Christians as the living stones of the living church. The metaphor is given a strong eschatological reference by the dome mosaic in the octagon, which depicted the Christ of the Second Coming. Implicit in the juxtaposition of the Christian king, enthroned on the Western side of the gallery, and the enthroned Christ in the East of the cupola, as well as in the octagonal shape of the church and, by proxy, the corona, are medieval notions about the Christian king as the representative of God and protector of the Church on earth.

The significance of these analogies between the corona and its surrounding architecture for the interpretation of the corona's complex iconographic program has long been recognized by scholars. In my paper, however, I propose that this relationship is not as one-sided as has often been suggested. Rather than merely appropriating the symbolism of the revered imperial chapel for itself, the corona in turn modifies the perception of the interior space and the symbolism of the Palatine chapel. This modification is part of the changes introduced by Frederick which marked a significant

change in the function of the church, which was transformed into the site of the cult of the newly-sainted Charlemagne.

The addition of the corona, whose turrets were originally populated by figures representing the inhabitants of the post-apocalyptic City, does not merely duplicate the image of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Rather, it makes the two levels of the allegorical meaning of the building more explicit. The viewer, knowing himself to be one of the living stones of the living church is shown, in the shape of the vision of the Book of Revelation, the promise of the transformation of this community of faithful mortals into an immortal community of saints and the blessed.

The renewed emphasis on the dialectical aspect of the image of the Heavenly Jerusalem, analogous to yet not identical with the earthly Church, would also have resonated with the living king who, while in the church, was in the presence of his revered predecessor's relics. The Heavenly City, represented by the corona, was the kingdom in which Charlemagne, by embodying the ideal of the Christian ruler and protector of the Church, had already been rewarded with citizenship. The living king, by following in his predecessor's footsteps, sought to gain this same reward.
([hanna.wimmer@sas.ac.uk](mailto:hanna.wimmer@sas.ac.uk))

**Margaret Graves (University of Edinburgh):**
***Architecture and its representations: two ways of viewing mise-en-abyme in the medieval Middle East***

The concept of *mise-en-abyme* plays an interesting, and somewhat problematic, role within medieval Islamic representations of architecture. There are a number of three-dimensional architectural or quasi-architectural representations from the medieval Middle East that put *mise-en-abyme* into play through their incorporation within full-size building programmes, or more obliquely through their construction from building materials. A potentially illuminating comparison can be made between two rather different types of object, which despite their similar materials, and historical associations with the same city, facilitate two rather different interpretations of the *mise-en-abyme* construct within architectural contexts.

The first of these is a unique object, a small, four-sided relief-carved marble colonette bearing representations of buildings, situated within the entrance portal of the fourteenth-century mosque of Sultan Hasan in Cairo. The Sultan Hasan colonette is of a representational type that is familiar to western eyes: the alignment of the carving with medieval European visual tropes is unsurprising given that it is now universally agreed that this piece is of crusader origin. Over time there has been much speculation on the possible identity of the three buildings illustrated: a strong case has been put forward for reading the striking central image as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

The identity of this image with one of the most contested religious monuments in the world creates an intriguing problem for the art historian: to what extent would the Mamluk patrons and users of the monument have been aware of

the significance of this very small image from an earlier era? If, as several scholars have asserted, this image should be read as a representation of the Dome of the Rock, it must be remembered that this would then be a depiction of one of the holiest sites in Islam, probably carved by Christians and illustrative of a period in that building's history when it had been converted to a church. By assigning this image a viewable but far from prominent position within the massive portal of a Mamluk building (built long after the re-sanctification of the Dome of the Rock to Islam), the creators of the Sultan Hasan portal have embedded the image of one sacred architecture within another: whether this confers sanctity, or represents a visual staking of the claims of Islam over Christianity, remains open to debate.

The putative iconographic specificity of the architectural representations on the Sultan Hasan colonette allows that piece to function quite differently from a group of earlier objects also from Cairo: these latter are jar stands (known as *kilgas*) of quasi- or overtly architectural form, created from architectural spolia and apparently originally employed within mosques or large private homes. As regards the jar stands, the issue of *mise-en-abyme* is less straightforward and perhaps more interesting. At their most explicit, these objects reference through both design and decoration a type of Islamic water architecture called a *salsabil*, while also performing a very basic hydraulic function that recreates in a weakened miniature form the gushing of water through a full-size *salsabil*. Given that they are miniature representations of architecture, made from architectural materials and housed in architectural contexts, I would also propose these as examples of *mise-en-abyme*: by their very nature, they embed a type of miniature architecture within true architecture. In this case, unlike the Sultan Hassan images, the qualities that denote the architecture-within-architecture are both representational and functional, and thus move the articulation of *mise-en-abyme* into new realms. (m.s.graves@sms.ed.ac.uk)

**Laura Cleaver (The Courtauld Institute of Art):**
***Author, reader and manuscript maker: putting books into books c.1150-c.1250***

When the artists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries came to represent authors in manuscripts they drew on a tradition of images most closely associated with the Evangelists.  The Gospel writers, often shown seated before a desk in three-quarter profile, were figures of authority setting down sacred text.  The work before them was usually blank, or sometimes covered with illegible marks, but in either case it might be assumed to represent the text which followed.  Thus in such images the form of a book signified the idealised book of Scripture, closely allied to the volumes in which the images were situated.  From the twelfth century artists began to represent contemporary or near-contemporary figures in luxury volumes of their works, and some of these images included sections of the text within which the authors were placed.  My paper concentrates on these representations of twelfth-century authors at work on a text-within-a-text to explore whether they might be considered as examples of *mise-en-abyme,* and what this phenomenon may have meant to contemporaries.  I argue that images of

authors such as Gilbert of Poitiers, Peter Lombard and Hugh of Saint Victor were part of a widespread interest in the process of the transmission of knowledge on the part of those making or commissioning books. The content of the book before the reader had originally been penned by an author, but had since been transferred via other scribes to new students who might be geographically and chronologically far distant. The books-within-books could thus simultaneously stand for the book before the reader and that produced by the author. Whilst the images of authors purport to represent individuals, the frequent use of a standard arrangement of a writer at a desk which helps to locate them in a canon of authors also reveals that the scenes are fictitious. The images thus create a sense of both familiarity and unease. They draw the viewer in, but at the same time they present him with scenes of the impossible. A drawing of a man cannot write a text, and a painted figure cannot paint an image. Thus these scenes disguise the role of the scribe and artist, whilst simultaneously drawing attention to it. They certainly require the viewer to pause and reflect upon what is being shown. (laura.cleaver@courtauld.ac.uk)

**Anthony McGrath (University of Sussex):**
***Books in Books: The Virgin's Book in a Book of Hours***

(Slide 1)

I begin with an image of a book. (Slide 2) The book appears to have a simple medieval binding and is held in the cloaked hand of a seated, veiled woman. The woman appears to be studying the book and holds her right hand out with the first finger touching the thumb.

We do not know who the woman is, nor do we know what the book is but we can surmise from the cloaked hand that this is a religious book. The gesture of the right hand is also not clear. Today it might mean 'OK' but the meaning may well have been different in the past. A sign of discourse, perhaps. So, does this gesture mean that the woman is reading aloud from the book? Thus, I start with an image of a book and a number of unknowns, a number which will grow.

As you would expect, this image of a book is a detail of a more elaborate page and is contained within a book. This is that page (Slide 3) and the book is the Visconti Hours.[1] It was commissioned by Gian Galeazzo Visconti, then a Count, later to become a Duke and throughout the ruler of Milan. It is uncertain when the commission was started or who it was for. Although a date of 1370 appears in one illumination[2] it is thought more probable that it was commissioned either to mark the ratification in 1387 of the marriage of Gian Galeazzo's daughter, Valentina, to Louis of Valois, brother of King Charles VI of France, or to celebrate the birth of a son and heir to the Duke in 1388. The manuscript was written by a Father Amadeus, who signed his name, however the identity of the illuminators has been the matter of attribution. It is generally

---

[1] Millard Meiss and Edith W Kirsch, *The Visconti Hours: Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972).
[2] On folio BR2 but is very hard to discern.

accepted that the first period of illumination was carried out by Giovannino dei Grassi and his associates in the period up to around 1395. Work then paused as Grassi was engaged by the Visconti to work on Milan Cathedral and then died in 1398 to be followed soon after by Duke Visconti himself. Possibly as much as thirty years were to elapse before Duke Filippo Maria Visconti commissioned the completion of the Hours by Belbello da Pavia.

As for whom the Book of Hours was intended is not known. Was it merely to be added to the Duke's library at Pavia? Was it intended as a gift for his daughter Valentina and the House of Valois? Or was it a gift for his second wife Caterina in recognition of a vow he had made to dedicate any sons she bore to the Virgin Mary? We don't know.

Turning back to the image we see the lady with the book at the foot of a page that shows God in Majesty giving a blessing with his right hand and holding two, seemingly interlocked keys with his left. These keys identify him as the God of John's Revelation holding the keys of Death and Death's Domain. He is attended by angels, the three Theological Virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity, and the four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance. It was suggested by Millard Meiss and Edith Kirsch that the veiled woman is Humility, the root from which all other virtues grow. However the iconography is unusual. There are a few examples of Humility as a virtue appearing in Trecento art (there is one in a fresco in the Lower Church at Assisi and another in the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce) and the attributes are an hexagonal halo and a candle. Here there is no halo, the attribute is a book and the attitude of the woman is not obviously one of humility although her position on the page and being seated on the ground could be seen as suggestive of humility.

Other possibilities are that this is another virtue, or a representation of a human reader, or, given that this folio is the first page of the Hours of the Virgin, a figure associated with the Virgin. But given the importance that Gian Galeazzo Visconti attached to the Virgin the idea that this ambiguous image is some representation of the Virgin is unconvincing and can, I believe, be dismissed.

(Slide 3b) If it is a virtue, I would like to propose that it is not humility but wisdom. In this regard I believe the gesture with first finger and thumb touching to form an 'O' is important. Edith Kirsch proposed that it was a symbol of the Trinity rather than a simple gesture of discourse but I find this unconvincing.[3] An alternative interpretation could be drawn from the Roman orator Quintilian who describes this precise gesture as indicating a speaker giving a narration or expressing approbation or making a distinction.[4] While I think this makes more sense, there is no certainty of interpretation and as

---

[3] Edith W Kirsch, *Five Illuminated Manuscripts of Giangaleazzo Visconti* (University park: Published for College Art Association by the Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991). See also Anne D Hedeman, "Review: Five Illuminated Manuscripts of Giangaleazzo Visconti by Edith W Kirsch," *Speculum* 69, no. 1 (1994). Who also found it unconvincing. Part of the problem with Edith Kirsch's analysis is that she misreads some of the gestures, especially those involving thumb and second finger.
[4] Quintilian, "Institutio Oratorio," (Iowa State University, 95). Book 11, Chapter 3.

Michael Baxandall observed 'if we mistake the gesture' we will 'miss the point of the picture'.[5] However, it is a gesture that appears elsewhere in the Visconti Hours and in another manuscript owned by Gian Galeazzo Visconti.[6] Apart from our mystery figure, those that make the gesture are God, a prophet, St Catherine, known for her knowledge and learning,[7] and the Virgin. Even if we cannot interpret the gesture, the makers of the gesture indicate an association with wisdom, rather than humility.

So this figure could be a Virtue –possibly wisdom - or alternatively a representation of a human figure, reading a book.

This is the double-page spread. (Slide 4) On the right is a militant scene with the expulsion of Lucifer from Heaven and a clutch of Fallen Angels propelled down to hell.

But to revert to the book (Slide 5): Is this an example of *mise-en-abyme* and if so what does it tell us?

My, admittedly limited, reading on the concept of mise-en-abyme suggests that there is a requirement that the 'image within' represents the 'whole'. It is equivalent to a mirror within a painting. Furthermore, the image within should contribute to the intelligibility of the whole. If the first of these requirements was to apply to this example, the book held by the veiled woman should be the book of hours itself. And the woman should be the intended recipient of the book. This latter point raises one possibility that the figure is, say, Valentina, the Duke's daughter.

But the problem, as with dealing with so much of medieval art, is that there is a lack of surviving documentation so although we can suggest meanings and associations we often do not know. I am reminded of the words of Richard Gameson in his study of the role of art in the late Anglo-Saxon Church:

> 'it is not unlike trying to reconstruct the effect of an opera in a particular theatre without direct access to the building, the scenery, the cast, and the orchestra – and sometimes without the score as well. We have a few of the props (some of which are broken) and a limited amount of information about the singers and the audience. The task is certainly daunting.'[8]

There is nothing that overtly signals that this image is intended to be a reflection. Thus the book could be the Book of Hours, but could equally be a missal, or the Gospels, or the Book of Wisdom to name just three possibilities. And the woman could just be a representation of a virtue, whether humility or wisdom. There is always a danger of reading too much into a picture but, if this detail was intended as a *mise-en-abyme*, then what further conclusions can we draw from it?

---

[5] Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style.*, Second ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 70.
[6] Smith-Lesouëf 22, fol 15, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
[7] As described in the Golden Legend.
[8] Richard Gameson, *The Role of Art in the Late Anglo-Saxon Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 4.

One would be that this is an example of personalisation, the inclusion of figures from the sponsor's family in a religious setting. There are plenty of examples in panel paintings and frescoes where patrons and their relatives appear as either votive figures or participants in narrative scenes. And there is no reason why an illuminated manuscript should be any different. Georges Duby wrote that the private prayer book was: 'in itself, a sort of chapel, the most intimate, the most everyday and the chief instrument of an encounter, a personal interview, with the Almighty'.[9] By including images that the reader can identify with, that 'personal interview' becomes even more intimate.

In terms of personalisation, I want to distinguish between the customary adornment of a work of art with family crests and symbols, of which there are many in the Visconti Hours, and images that seek to engage with the religious content. So here is a second example, one which is possibly more straightforward. (Slide 6) This is another double page spread with the scene of the Annunciation on the left and the Trinity on the right. Below the Trinity is a bust of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, gazing up and across to the Annunciation scene, a sophisticated three-quarter view as a witness to the Annunciation. So this could be intended as a reflection of the action of the reader, if it is Gian Galeazzo himself, or as a reminder to another reader of Gian Galeazzo's devotion to the Virgin.

There are three books visible in this image. Two are in the illumination of the letter D. (Slide 7) Father and Son sit side by side in apparent discussion. They both hold books, open to the viewer. I interpret them as symbolic of the Word. The Father (or is it the Son?) makes the same gesture as we saw before, but with his left hand.

The third book is in the Annunciation scene. (Slide 8) It is open on a table before the Virgin. It is sufficiently detailed to show the fastening straps but its main feature is its size. It is noticeably smaller than other books. It is not unusual for the Virgin to have a small book in Annunciation scenes. I have three examples: the first is a panel by Ambrogio Lorenzetti dated to shortly before he died in 1348. (Slides 9 & 10) The second is a miniature attributed to Don Silvestro dei Gheraducci from a Florentine Gradual of about 1375.[10] (Slide 11 & 12). And the third is from a mid 14th century Italian Book of Hours showing the Virgin clutching her book to her breast.[11] (Slide 13 & 14)

The tradition that is being portrayed here is one that is often attributed to St Bernard, namely that when the angel Gabriel appeared, the Virgin was reading the prophecy of Isaiah 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and she will bear a son…'. The earliest large-scale picture of the Annunciation using this iconography appears to be a mosaic by Pietro Cavallini in Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome, dated to about 1290. There are earlier sculptures from

---

[9] Georges Duby, *Art and Society in the Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 176.

[10] British Library, Add. 35254 C. Gradual of Santa Maria degli Angeli.

[11] British Library, Add. 15265 f.10v. Book of Hours.

cathedrals in France and England that use this iconography[12] but the earliest surviving images appear to be in illuminated manuscripts. Indeed, the earliest that I have found so far is in a Benedictional now in the British Library that is dated to about 980, (Slide 15 & 16) so predating St Bernard by at least a hundred years.[13] So the iconography is old and the problem for succeeding generations of artists was to conceive what the Virgin was reading from? A scroll, as befits the Old Testament? A Bible? Or a Book of Hours - which contains the passage from Isaiah in the Hours of the Virgin and is small and suited to a woman's use?

Again, we do not know. (Slide 17) But the imagery strongly indicates that the representation of the Virgin's book here is particularly appropriate for a Book of Hours, would have been interpreted as a Book of Hours and would have significance as such to a reader of the book.

And there is a final image from the Visconti Hours that fits with this interpretation. (Slide 18) The Visitation scene, contained in the letter M, shows the Virgin holding St John, and St Elizabeth holding a small book.

What I am suggesting is that in these cases the 'image within' has an identity with the whole and thus could be considered as examples of *mise-en-abyme*. But this linkage is not overt, like a mirror on the wall or a play within a play, and the question remains whether the links are solely the product of my over-inquisitive imagination, or were actually part of the artist's intention. (Slide 19)

I believe that there are two observations that I can draw from this case study.

It is a commonplace that in the medieval period people were skilled at reading images for their meaning and that artists used devices to convey meanings. The image within itself was one of those devices and the picture of the Arena Chapel being donated by Enrico Scrovegni in the *Last Judgement* fresco in that chapel is an example of such an overt device. In consequence it is almost certain that less overt links were also included in compositions to give layers of interpretation and meaning. Illuminated manuscripts, with their scope for greater freedom of expression and wider use of symbolism than in more public forms of art, is one area where examples of such links may be found, a self-referencing of books both to enhance the authority of the book and to reassure and involve the reader. But trying to decode these links and meanings will often be challenging and without certainty.

My other observation is that seeking an identity between the image and the object helps here to plot the growing degree of involvement, indeed immersion, that the owners of religious books sought in their daily round of prayer. Something that became even more apparent in the illuminations of the fifteenth century.

---

[12] Such as Amiens (c. 1225) and Westminster Abbey (c. 1253).
[13] British Library, Add. 49598, f.5v. The Benedictional of St Aethelwold.

Finally and in a lighter vein, in an article on the subject of 'mise-en-abyme' the author Moshe Ron gives the term 'escutcheon' as an English equivalent to the French phrase.[14] I know that escutcheon is a heraldic term but it is also the name given to the little plate that surrounds a keyhole. (Slide 20) So perhaps mise-en-abyme is a keyhole through which we can peer and gain a little more understanding of the past. (Slide 21)

List of slides

1. The Visconti Hours f. LF 11v detail of figure reading book
2. The Visconti Hours f. LF 11v. *The Celestial Court*.
3. As slide 1.
4. The Visconti Hours ff. LF 11v & 12. *The Celestial Court and the Fall of the Rebel Angels*.
5. As slide 1
6. The Visconti Hours ff. BR 104v & 105 *The Annunciation* and *The Trinity* with head of *Gian Galeazzo Visconti.*
7. The Visconti Hours ff. BR 105 detail of *Trinity*
8. The Visconti Hours ff. BR 104v detail of *Annunciation*
9. *The Annunciation*, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, c1348, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.
10. Detail of 9.
11. Illumination: *The Annunciation*, Don Silvestro dei Gheraducci, c 1375, Gradual of Santa Maria degli Angeli, British Library, Add. 35254 C.
12. Detail of 11.
13. Illumination: *The Annunciation*, Italian Book of Hours, mid 14th century, British Library, Add. 15265 f.10v.
14. Detail of 13.
15. Illumination: *The Annunciation*, The Benedictional of St Athelwold, British Library, Add. 49598, f.5v.
16. Detail of 15.
17. As slide 10.
18. The Visconti Hours ff. BR 147v. *The Virgin with St John and St Elizabeth*.
19. Detail of 18 and 8.
20. Image of an escutcheon.

(a.mcgrath@sussex.ac.uk)

**Joanna Milk (The Courtauld Institute of Art):**
*Giovanni di Paolo's St. Catherine of Siena Series*

As sacred images assumed an increasingly vital role in cultivating visionary experience, accounts of miraculous visions often conflated divine apparitions and the objects that were believed to have precipitated them. Similarly, the creators of pictorial narratives conveying these same miracles often employed artistic devices eliding the differences between fictive depictions of devotional

---

[14] Moshe Ron, "The Restricted Abyss: Nine Problems in the Theory of Mise En Abyme," *Poetics Today* 8, no. 2 (1987).

objects and the content of incorporeal visions.  As a result, examples of *mise-en-abyme* are difficult to identify and interpret in visual hagiography of the period.  In this sense, a set of ten panels by Giovanni di Paolo(1400-82) portraying the life of St. Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) dating to the 1460s and thought to form the predella to an altarpiece represents an emphatic exception to the rule. Although physical evidence indicates at least two panels are missing from the set, it is remarkable that no less than eight of the ten scenes depict a miraculous vision of Catherine, five of which include a devotional object *in addition to* apparitions of Christ or his messengers. In each case, the object is carefully positioned in order to suggest a meaningful relationship between the image-as-object and the image-as-image.

In his rendering of *Saint Catherine Receiving the Stigmata*, for example, the artist departs from the standard iconography of showing Catherine receiving the stigmata from the crucifix of the altar in front of which she kneels – a formula employed even by later examples influenced by Giovanni's version. Instead, the kneeling saint imitates the gesture of a hovering apparition of Christ Crucified while golden rays emanating from His feet fall onto a gilded cross on the altar. This seems to articulate difference while suggesting equivalence between the cross and Christ Crucified.

A key to the series' preoccupation with objects lies in one of the culminating scenes, *The Miraculous Communion of St. Catherine*. On one side of the painting, Catherine's confessor stands before an altarpiece of the Madonna and Child lifting up the Host at the moment of consecration. At the other end, turned away from him, Catherine receives Communion from Christ Himself, who appears above the altar surrounded in seraphs and golden rays of glory that seem to eclipse a corresponding altarpiece. The two altars in the scene thus mirror each other, explicitly comparing the miraculous apparition of Christ with the real presence of Christ on the altar in the host. In a seemingly endless sequence of mirroring, the viewer would have seen the same ineffable miracle – the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ – occurring before this very panel. Seen in this light, the scene lends a liturgical meaning to the predella's explorations of the relationship between sign and signified by casting them in terms of their ultimate reconciliation: the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ, perennially re-enacted in the Eucharist.
([joanna.milk@courtauld.ac.uk](mailto:joanna.milk@courtauld.ac.uk))


**Peter Bokody (Central European University, Budapest):**
***Between Art and Iconography: Representation-within-Representation in Assisi***

The aim of the paper is to evaluate two possible general modes of depicting one figurative work within another in Italian painting around the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. I argue that representations-within-representations, by the virtue of being a manifestation of a concern for the act of representing itself, are important moments in pictorial reflexivity. They signal the moment when the master (or artist) turns the self-evident practice of representing into a

problematic one by depicting a figurative representation within another. In parallel, these representations permit the development of composite iconographic structures since duplication in this period at least, meant the embedding of a distinct iconographic content. Thus, the embedded detail, since it had content, could interact with the main content of the work itself. In this sense the representation-within-representation could have a role in the meaning-structure of the work. I argue that not only is the phenomenon simultaneously open to pictorial and iconographic implications, but that in this period at least, their linked presence could be understood as a sign of a close cooperation between the executing masters and the donor/advisor of the program. Using the specific example from Assisi I show how the pictorial and the iconographic tailoring of a representation-within-representation could be brought together.
([bokody.peter@gmail.com](mailto:bokody.peter@gmail.com))

**Jim Harris (The Courtauld Institute of Art):**
***Intelligibility, Invisibility and Relations of Similarity: Donatello and the Essential Property of Wood***

The cross of Donatello's *Bardi Crucifix* in Santa Croce, Florence, is painted, like many others of this and earlier periods, with a woodgrain pattern.  This use of polychromy to accentuate its material, emphasising that the wood we see is indeed wood, is a practice which might usefully be considered within the discourse around *mise-en-abyme*.  The 'object represented within itself' is here a medium represented *on* itself so as to render the object it has been used to construct all the more emphatically material.  Dällenbach's second observation concerning *mise-en-abyme* is that, 'Its essential property consists of bringing out the intelligibility […] of the work'.  In this case, the heightened materiality engendered by the polychromy, where the wood is made to appear more like wood, does precisely this, bringing out the intelligibility of the work even as it renders it invisible, by covering it with a skin that tells us what it is. This, in turn, serves the important diegetic function of recalling and activating narratives of the Cross beyond its central role in the Passion of Christ, and thereby involving the viewer in stories encompassing the whole meta-narrative of salvific history from the Garden of Eden to the rediscovery of the True Cross and the growth of its cult.
([jim.harris@courtauld.ac.uk](mailto:jim.harris@courtauld.ac.uk))