



Introductory Materials: Visualizing Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages

Virginia Blanton, Jennifer Borland, Karen Overbey, Benjamin C. Tilghman, and Nancy M. Thompson

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Introduction to the Volume

A celebration of the work of Rachel Dressler, this volume presents new research that engages with feminist approaches in the fields of medieval art history and material culture studies. In keeping with Dressler's commitment to demonstrating the breadth and flexibility of feminist critique, the essays in this volume expand the way we look at gender and sexuality in the study of medieval visual culture. Though inspired by past accomplishments, they look resolutely to the present and future of medieval art history.

Quite frankly, the field of medieval art history would look much different without the extraordinary work of Rachel Dressler. Her contributions to the field include her ground-breaking study of the construction of masculinity in tomb sculpture, *Of Armor and Men in Medieval England: The Chivalric Rhetoric of Three English Knights' Effigies* (Ashgate 2004). She has also published essays on the iconography,

historiography, and materiality of tomb sculpture in a range of journals including *Medieval Encounters*, *Peregrinations*, *Studies in Iconography*, and *Studies in Medievalism*, as well as in edited volumes, including *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (1999, ed. Jacqueline Murray), which features her essay “Steel Corpse: Imaging the Knight in Death.” Known for her clear writing and teachable scholarship, Dressler has produced foundational work that extends discussions of the medieval construction of gender beyond images of women. [A bibliography of Dressler’s publications is included here.](#)

Her commitment to feminist approaches is exemplified through both her research and her role as a mentor and catalyst. She led a revival of the Medieval Feminist Art History Project, which organized several conference sessions and led to the essay “Artistic Representation: Women and/in Medieval Visual Culture,” included in *A Cultural History of Women* (2013) and co-authored with Marian Bleeke, Jennifer Borland, Martha Easton, and Elizabeth L’Estrange. Dressler’s leadership is also evident in the important essay published in *Medieval Feminist Forum* in 2007, “Continuing the Discourse: Feminist Scholarship and the Study of Medieval Visual Culture.” In this essay, she considers the relative absence of medieval art in feminist art history anthologies as well as the limited evidence of feminist scholarship in journals that were publishing on medieval art. That essay effectively demonstrated lingering resistance to feminist approaches and the continuing need for additional publishing venues to seek out scholarship on women and gender.

She is also a founding member of the Material Collective, particularly active in organizing conference panels and in the Collective’s advocacy for institutional transparency, including in publishing and peer review. Perhaps her most far-reaching and long-lasting impact has been as the founder and editor-in-chief of the journal *Different Visions*, an open-access journal devoted to progressive scholarship on medieval art. From the first issue in 2008, Dressler single-handedly led the journal for nearly a decade, anticipating the potential of online publishing while featuring cutting-edge research by both emerging and established scholars. We are thrilled to share this volume to honor Rachel Dressler’s leadership, scholarship, and mentorship, while publishing the sort of innovative and speculative work she has always fostered.

The essays in *Visualizing Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages* span a range of topics and a broad chronology, from thirteenth-century stained glass to a twentieth-century manuscript. In addition to a shared focus on gender and an indebtedness to feminist methodologies, the essays engage in various ways with a

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number of themes central to Dressler's work. We've gathered them into clusters to highlight some of these connections—'Masculinities,' 'Gendered Expectations,' and 'Subjects/Subjectivities'—but other concerns thread through the volume: materiality, especially in relationship to embodiment and agency; rhetorics of performance, theatricality, and display; medievalisms, both historical and modern; and an acknowledgment of the subjective, personal, and contingent nature of our work as historians and stewards of the medieval past.

Masculinities

Inspired by Dressler's research into the representation of gender—specifically masculinity—in English knight's effigies, [Marian Bleeke examines](#) a very different set of tombs to explore how they, too, constructed a vision of manliness. Transi tombs, which depict the deceased as a decaying cadaver, might seem at first glance to present the very opposite of the robust, virile knights in Dressler's studies. But Bleeke demonstrates that definitions of masculinity were both varied and highly socially contingent in this period, and reminds us of the power of the concept as a heuristic for examining artworks.

[Virginia Blanton and Jack Walton also consider](#) the constructions and conventions of manliness, here in an early twentieth-century manuscript created in a medievalist style: the Life of St. Didier, Bishop of Langres, by the artist Joseph Royer (1850-1941). Blanton and Walton argue that Royer reframes the city of Langres as a sanctified, communal space bounded by the virility of its patron saint, Didier. This essay is noteworthy as both formidable research on an understudied object from a local collection (the Spencer Art Reference Library at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City) and also as a highly successful collaboration between student and faculty, embodying the best in undergraduate research mentorship.

In a richly imagined and in many ways brave essay, [Karl Whittington explores](#) the experience of the sculptor of the famous Cluny Adam as they (most likely he) carved a mostly nude sculpture in the middle of the thirteenth century. Answering Eve Sedgwick's call for a "reparative" queer scholarship, Whittington contemplates the mixture of anxiety, desire, embarrassment, and other feelings that might have vexed and perhaps compelled the sculptor as he formed Adam's body. In working towards a queer account of artistic practice, Whittington directs our eyes and our haptic imaginations towards elements of the sculpture that had escaped traditional art historical commentary.

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Gendered Expectations

Maeve K. Doyle's essay focuses on two devotional manuscripts produced around 1300, the Aspremont-Kievraing Prayer Book and the Franciscan Psalter-Hours. Looking especially closely at clothing, gesture, and other attributes, Doyle argues that the emphatic gendering of owner portraits in these two books allows for devotional performances that traverse and even transcend the gender binary. Using the term "transgender reception" to describe the dynamic these representations produce when they interact with the experiences and identities of their viewers, she asserts that the multiplicity of transgender receptions available to the elite readers of these manuscripts situate personal devotional manuscripts as sites for exploring expansive concepts of gender identity in the later Middle Ages.

Reception is also the focus of Debra Higgs Strickland's study of the Hereford World Map (c. 1300). By tracing medieval narratives of the "feminine" traits of pride, disobedience, and lasciviousness in sermons, dramas, biblical exegesis, and moralizing literature, Strickland reveals the didactic utility of the Map's female figures, which include monstrous, mythical, and biblical women. She argues for the presence at Hereford of cathedral guides, who would have drawn on these varied sources to reaffirm women's *place* in medieval Christian society; indeed, the medium of the *mappemundi*, as Strickland demonstrates, activates these misogynist messages in particular through spatial relationships and cartographic placement.

Martha Easton analyzes medieval images depicting women being silenced, often violently so, because they were perceived as unruly and non-compliant. Easton examines the connections between these medieval silencings and twentieth-century images of the "headless woman." Easton argues that the prevalence of images of women being silenced indicates that in the medieval period, as well as today, women's words were perceived as powerful and potentially threatening. Ultimately, Easton asks us to see these silenced women as inspirational because they used their voices in a society that both threatened and used violence to silence them.

Diane Wolfthal's essay also concerns gendered violence, as she investigates the ideology of motherhood, drawing upon images of mothers who kill their infants (either as a form of protection or as a challenge to social expectation). Her readings of infanticide in the visual and historical record demonstrate the cracks in the social network for women who did not conform to the image of the ideal mother.

Subjects/Subjectivities

Taking a cue from Dressler's work on the intersection of iconography, materiality, and historiography, [Elizabeth Pastan reconsiders](#) the subject matter of the lost medieval motif of Notre Dame's rose window. While the modern image of a seated Virgin and Child is usually assumed to represent the original composition, Pastan carefully reviews the development of Marian imagery across media in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries to demonstrate the flexibility, inventiveness, and variety in visual devotion. Ultimately, she offers tantalizing possibilities for either a pictorial or allegorical rose window, and reminds us of the complexity of the beholder's experience of even the most familiar of monuments.

The beholder's material experience is also central to [Donna Sadler's investigation](#) of a collection of diorama depicting the physical environment of the convent cell fabricated by vowed religious women between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sadler argues that these self-presentations for patrons, donors, and family members are carefully crafted interior spaces that become physical extensions of the nun's body. These artifacts allow viewers to see and experience the nun's interiority, even as they operate as a locus of memory for absent family members.

[Ellen Shortell's essay](#) examines a stained-glass window depicting the blessed Oda of Rivreulle, a twelfth-century noblewoman, that was created between 1635 and 1644 for the cloister of Park Abbey, a male Premonstratensian house outside the city of Leuven. Shortell considers the window in light of: Oda of Rivreulle's biography, with a focus on her act of self-disfigurement to save herself from marriage; the interpretation and visualization of Oda's life for the window's seventeenth-century male audience; twentieth-century collection practices; and the significance that the image and Oda's self-disfigurement has for feminist audiences today.

[Linda Seidel revisits](#) Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) to consider not who the subject *was* but who the subject *became* in the afterlife of the painting, and especially what the painting may have meant to Margaret of Austria, whose collection held the painting in the sixteenth century. Margaret's life was peripatetic and tumultuous, and by exploring the network of relationships around the painting, Seidel suggests how the painting worked as a reminder of Margaret's Burgundian heritage. Seidel's essay also prods at the art historian's work itself: what histories might we write when we shift our gaze a bit, and take up our objects and subjects from different vantage points?

Refractions

In addition to these contributions by Dressler's colleagues and peers, this celebratory volume will include five shorter essays that we are calling Refractions: reflective essays, excerpts of works-in-progress, interdisciplinary studies, and visual analyses that suggest the wide influence of Dressler's work. The writers — KellyAnn Fitzpatrick, Dénia Lara, L. Michael McCloud, Zaina Siraj, and Karen S. Williams — demonstrate how Dressler's scholarship and mentorship have impacted their own research, their habits of thinking, and their engagement with medieval art. We see these contributions as part of an ongoing conversation about legacy, community, academic disciplines, and public scholarship, a conversation we trace back to the first issue of *Different Visions*.

Gratitude

We also express our gratitude to the many amazing people who have contributed to this volume. We include in this list most of the peer reviewers for the issue, whose generosity with their time and energy have made this an even stronger collection of essays. Peer reviewers rarely get public credit for their labor, and through their naming we aim to acknowledge their work and model a more transparent mode of journal publishing. (Reviewers were given the choice to remain anonymous or be included in this list.) This transparency is also resonant with some of the earliest goals for *Different Visions*, such as fostering new modes of academic publishing that center conversations among authors and editors. We would like to extend our appreciation to the following individuals, including those who have served on our advisory board, as reviewers of essays, and in other capacities: Andrea Myers Achi, Jessica Barker, Marian Bleeke, Elise Braggs, Bevin Butler, Lindsay Cook, Maeve Doyle, Martha Easton, Shirin Fozi, Ben Gottfried, Tracy Chapman Hamilton, Anne F. Harris, Alyce Jordan, Bryan C. Keene, Ellen Konowitz, Elizabeth Lastra, Elizabeth L'Estrange, Sherry Lindquist, Risham Majeed, Janet T. Marquardt, Sara McDougall, Robert Mills, Asa Simon Mittman, Mikael Muehlbauer, Dana Oswald, Cassidy Petrazzi, Mariah Proctor-Tiffany, Alexa Sand, Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, Christine Sciacca, Maggie Williams, and Karen A. Winstead.

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(PDFs of many of these works can be found on [Rachel Dressler's Academia.edu page](#).)

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Contributor Biographies: Visualizing Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages

Virginia Blanton

Virginia Blanton is University of Missouri Curators' Distinguished Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She is co-editor of the three-volume series *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe* (2013–2017) and author of *Signs of Devotion: The Cult of St. Æthelthryth in Medieval England, 695–1615* (2007). She is also co-founder of a multidisciplinary NEH-funded team, CODICES, which conducts optical, chemical, and computational analyses of manuscripts and early printed books: <http://daedalus.umkc.edu/CODICES/>.

Marian Bleeke

Marian Bleeke is Associate Professor of Art History and Director of General Education at Cleveland State University. Her scholarship has appeared in *Different Visions*, *Studies in Iconography*, *Women's Art Journal*, and multiple edited collections. Her first book, *Motherhood and Meaning in Medieval Sculpture: Representations from France, ca. 1100-1500* was published by Boydell & Brewer in 2017. While her work to date has focused on medieval European art and the lives and experiences of medieval women, she is currently working on a history of ivory as a material in the later Middle Ages and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Jennifer Borland

Jennifer Borland is Professor of Art History and Director of the Humanities Initiative at Oklahoma State University. She specializes in medieval European art, most

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recently focusing on medieval images of healthcare and medical manuscripts. Her work has also converged with a variety of other topics including feminism and gender, materiality, audience and reception, medievalism and collecting, and engaged art history and pedagogy. She is the author of *Visualizing Household Health: Medieval Women, Art, and Knowledge in the Régime du corps* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022). She is a managing co-editor of *Different Visions*, and a founding member of the Material Collective.

Maeve K. Doyle

Maeve K. Doyle is Assistant Professor of Art History at Eastern Connecticut State University. Her research to date has focused on the book arts of later medieval Europe, particularly on issues of gender and reception of owner portraits in devotional manuscripts and marginal illumination. She is also interested in computational approaches to art-historical research and is currently studying iconographic and artistic networks of manuscripts produced in France and neighboring territories. Her work, which has been supported by the Fulbright Commission and the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation, has appeared in *Getty Research Journal*, *Studies in Iconography* (forthcoming in 2022), and multiple edited volumes.

Martha Easton

Martha Easton is Assistant Professor of Art History at Saint Joseph's University, located in Philadelphia. She specializes in medieval art and architecture, with publications on various topics including illuminated manuscripts, hagiographic illustrations, gender issues in medieval art, medievalism, and the collecting of medieval art during later periods. More recently, she has worked on images of courtly love, especially as represented on fourteenth-century ivories, and on facsimiles and copies, especially plaster casts. Her work has appeared in *Gesta*, *Studies in Iconography*, *Journal of the History of Collections*, *Perspectives Médiévales*, and *Different Visions*, as well as in numerous edited volumes. She has been engaged in a long-term project about Hammond Castle, the eclectic revivalist home of the inventor and collector John Hays Hammond Jr., which was built in the 1920s on the coast of Gloucester, Massachusetts.

KellyAnn Fitzpatrick

KellyAnn Fitzpatrick pursues research and teaching interests in medievalism (the ways that post-medieval societies reimagine or appropriate the Middle Ages). Her

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recent book, *Neomedievalism, Popular Culture, and the Academy From Tolkien to Game of Thrones*, considers evolving forms of medievalism in both consumer culture and academic discourse, arguing that the field of medieval studies is itself a product and practice of medievalism. Through its analysis of the labor processes involved in the production of online games and electronic texts, KellyAnn's work with medievalism overlaps with her interest and experience in technical communication and software development.

Dénia Lara

Dénia Alejandra Lara is a museum professional and artist working in the Education department of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. She studies the material culture of the Normans, Migration Period art, Christian mysticism, and contemporary medievalisms. Born in rural Honduras, Dénia's academic interests are informed by the social and economic legacy of colonialism and the displacement of peoples and objects.

L. Michael (Mickey) McCloud

Mickey McCloud studies medieval knighthood, masculinity, and social structure as well as reflected through Romance literature. A lover of Middle English and Elizabethan literature, he uses what he styles "modern heroic texts" (such as comic books, graphic novels and fantasy literature) as comparative foils to explore how we continue to grapple with medieval thought that still underpins identity formation in the modern era. Mickey currently serves as Chief Academic Officer of Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas.

Karen Overbey

Karen Eileen Overbey studies the material culture of medieval Ireland and England, with a focus on portable and "decorative" objects like jewelry, reliquaries, and textiles. She is the author of *Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines, and Territory in Medieval Ireland* (2012) and co-editor of *The Bayeux Tapestry: New Interpretations* (2009) and *Transparent Things: A Cabinet* (2013). Her work has also appeared in *Studies in Iconography*, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, *Different Visions, postmedieval*, and a number of edited volumes. She is an Associate Professor Emeritus at Tufts University, and a founding member of the Material Collective.

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Elizabeth Pastan

Elizabeth Carson Pastan is Professor of Art History at Emory University and President of the American Committee of the Corpus Vitrearum, the international body of scholars who study medieval stained glass, her primary research interest. She is the author of *Les vitraux du choeur de la cathédrale de Troyes (XIIIe siècle)* (2006), and she is the only American to have been invited to publish in this French series. Pastan is the co-author with the historian Stephen D. White of *The Bayeux Tapestry and its Contexts: A Reassessment*, for which they received a Collaborative Research Grant in the Humanities from the American Council of Learned Societies (2009); and a co-editor with Brigitte Kurmann-Schwarz of *Investigations in Medieval Stained Glass: Materials, Methods, and Expressions* (2019). She is currently working on a book on rose windows.

Donna L. Sadler

Donna L. Sadler taught primarily at Agnes Scott College and her research focuses on medieval art ranging from Reims Cathedral to late medieval sculpture from Burgundy and Champagne. Her books include: *Reading the Reverse Façade of Reims Cathedral: Royalty and Ritual in 13th-century France* (Ashgate, 2012); *Stone, Flesh, Spirit: The Entombment of Christ in late medieval Burgundy and Champagne* (Brill, 2015); *Touching the Passion—Seeing Late Medieval Altarpieces through the Eyes of Faith* (Brill, 2018); and *The Nun's Cell: Mirror, Memoir, and Metaphor in Convent Art* (forthcoming).

Linda Seidel

Linda Seidel, Hanna Holborn Gray Professor Emerita in Art History at the University of Chicago, has published several articles on van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece in addition to a book on the Arnolfini Portrait. Her studies of sculpture in various parts of twelfth-century France and its historiography will soon include a book on the portal of Saint-Trophime, the pilgrimage to Compostela, and the city of Arles, forthcoming later this year from the University of Chicago Press.

Ellen Shortell

Ellen Shortell is Professor Emeritus of the History of Art at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. She specializes in the architecture and stained glass of medieval and early modern France and Belgium. Her publications have investigated the

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experience of images in space, architecture and the cult of saints, female patronage, and modern collecting and restoration of stained glass. She is currently completing a study of the glazed cloister of the Premonstratensian Abbey of Park, near Leuven. She is vice president of the International Board of the Corpus Vitrearum, advisor to the American Friends of Chartres, and former chair of publications for AVISTA.

Debra Higgs Strickland

Debra Higgs Strickland is Professor of Medieval Art History at the University of Glasgow with broad research interests revolving around animals, monsters, and representations of non-Christians in late medieval art. Her major publications include *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (1995); *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (2003); and *The Epiphany of Hieronymus Bosch: Imagining Antichrist and Others from the Middle Ages to the Reformation* (2016). She has published shorter studies in *Different Visions*, *Res, Gesta, Viator*, *Studies in Iconography*, and *Speculum*; and is currently editing an interdisciplinary volume for Brill on *Medieval Bestiaries: New Approaches* and writing a book for Reaktion on *Monsters in Medieval Cultures*.

Zaina Siraj

Zaina Siraj is a medical student at Albany Medical College. Her current interests in humanities include world history, with a focus on the Islamic Golden Era, and narrative medicine, which utilizes skills from the arts to improve clinician-patient relationships. Her creative work has been featured in *Datura Art Exhibit* (2020) and commissioned through her small business.

Benjamin C. Tilghman

Ben Tilghman is assistant professor of art history at Washington College and a member of the Material Collective, a collaborative working group of medieval art historians that explores innovative and more humane modes of scholarship. His scholarship has included studies on ornament in early medieval art, the visual nature of writing, codicology, and New Materialist approaches to art history. His current research focuses on ecocritical approaches to medieval art. He has also served as a curatorial fellow at the Walters Art Museum and is currently the chair of the Public Art Committee in Chestertown, Maryland.

Nancy M. Thompson

Nancy Thompson is Professor of Art History at St. Olaf College, where she teaches introductory and upper-level courses in Art History and Gender and Sexuality Studies. She has published several essays on medieval, Renaissance, and 19th-century stained glass, and is the co-author with Anne F. Harris of *Medieval Art 250-1450: Matter, Making, and Meaning* (Oxford 2021), a medieval art history textbook. She is currently working on a book on later medieval stained glass in central Italy. She is a managing co-editor of *Different Visions*, and a founding member of the Material Collective. and is the managing co-editor of *Different Visions*.

Jack Walton

Jack Walton is a graduate student in Library and Information Science at the University of Missouri. His creative work has appeared in *Variant Literature* (Fall 2019) and *Number One Magazine* (2020), and his academic and technical work ranges from Medieval Studies to Health Information Management. He occasionally serves as a library technician at the Kansas City Public Library.

Karl Whittington

Karl Whittington is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of History of Art at The Ohio State University. He is the author *Body-Worlds: Opicinus de Canistris and the Medieval Cartographic Imagination* (Pontifical Institute, 2014), and the co-editor with Bryan Keene of *New Horizons in Trecento Italian Art* (Brepols, 2021). His articles have appeared in *Gesta*, *Studies in Iconography*, *Mediaevalia*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *Different Visions*, and numerous edited volumes. His book, *Trecento Pictoriality: Diagrammatic Painting in Late Medieval Italy*, will be published in 2023.

Karen Williams

Karen Williams studies late medieval British drama, and is completing her dissertation, which examines the implications for audience understanding of the civic plays, comprised of the entire biblical cycle and often referred to as the Corpus Christi plays, as they were performed throughout the spaces of the city of York. She is currently at the University at Albany, primarily as an academic advisor, but occasionally as an instructor.

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Diane Wolfthal

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